

Part I Of A Series Of II:

# The Early Development Of Carter Caves State Resort Park

## Justice Family Holds Carter Caves Close To Their Heart And Still Search For The Ancient Hole In The Streambed

*Editor's Note: Lydia Justice-Edwards of Donnelly, Idaho, presents this factual view of the early development of the Carter Caves State Resort Park. It is also a collection of interviews, research, and legends of the Justice family of Carter County, Kentucky. Due to the length of this article it is being presented in a two-part series.*

By Lydia Justice-Edwards - 2003

### Who Really Owns the Carter Caves?

There are 17 state resort parks in Kentucky. Each one offers up its unique feature, but when the Carter Caves State Park came into the park system it brought its own special dowry of passion and love, because it was paid for by private donations from Carter County people and their friends and was a gift decided to the state.

Soon after WWII state ownership of 1,000 acres was executed by deed dated July 31, 1946, with deeds that transferred eight tracts of ground from the Carter Caves Company to the state of Kentucky in consideration of \$1. The state of Kentucky accepted the responsibility and honor with this wonderful gift from the public-spirited citizens of Carter County. The Carter Caves Company had already been paid by the donations of tobacco farmers and other friends of Carter Caves and its magnificent trees. The state of Kentucky Department of Parks took over fully in 1949. Now in 2003 the park territory stands at 1,850 acres.

Horn Hollow was included in this purchase, not only to augment the park territory, but to also protect the watershed for Cave Branch and the exotic flora that remain to this day, another of Horn Hollow's many secrets. In its early history there was always fresh water in Horn Hollow for the animals. Even in dry spells pure, clear water seeped through layers of rock faces,

trickling into gullies to feed Cave Branch and flow past the Laurel Cave.

The caverns of Eastern Kentucky are mysterious. Once seen and experienced they never let us go. People of Carter County were worried whether the same economic fate that befell the giant hardwood trees would lead to desecration of the caves when, by the early 1940s in wide spread fervor, the century-old oak trees and other large hardwoods in Carter County had been butchered and nearly obliterated, including many of the trees on Carter Cave property. Even surviving chestnut trees that had endured the blight during the early 1900s were cut, thus eliminating any chance of their recovery.

At great personal sacrifice citizens gave their crop money and their savings. The Charles and Stella Maggard family gave \$500. My parents, Chead and Velva Justice, donated profits from their tobacco crop one year, and there were many other small gifts.

Like its pioneer citizens Carter County has a robust and rugged character. The terrain is rife with hollows and hills, but the elevation in Carter County is not spectacular, ranging from 542 feet to 1300 feet above sea level. However, Chead Justice, my father, who was born and lived his life on farms that became part of the resort park, believed the inner depth of the caves that he discovered and explored, below sea level, may well exceed the elevation of any exterior pinnacle.

In 1936 Chead and our mother, Velva, lived near Wolf Pen at the head of Horn Hollow, now called Wolf, on the east side of the park. She often told her story.

Their log cabin, with its lean-to kitchen, stood on a knoll not far from the rim of Horn Hollow. At noon-day she worked to prepare dinner for Chead. As the clip-clop steps of his mule team pounded into a loud drumbeat, it set off a vibration under her feet at the stove. She knew just when he



Chead and Velva Kinney Justice  
(Photo courtesy of Lydia Edwards-Justice.)

That man who has never been in danger cannot answer for his courage. --La Rochefoucauld



A 1930-1931 scene at Carter Caves near the pavilion, a very popular location, where dances were held.

(Photo courtesy of Lydia Justice-Edwards.)

reached a certain spot in the haul road from the upper tobacco patch. It was her signal to get dinner on the table. Chead always thought she had perfect timing. She believed there was a magic spot that was the top of a cavern covered by thin topsoil. When she walked that road she stepped carefully around that spot.

According to state surveys there are over 20 caves that we know about, some explored and some not yet chartered, that wind their ancient limestone paths beneath the forested hills of Carter County in Eastern Kentucky.

The cave that sparked talk in our family is now a legend and is located farther down into Horn Hollow. The opening to this cave was visible then. Chead had traded farms with his brother, Bill, in 1935. Their trade predated crop rotation and our father soon discovered the fields of his new farm had been depleted with tobacco crops. He searched for a new watermelon patch. With his mule he scouted for rich loam to clear on the acres that draped over into the wide rim of Horn Hollow.

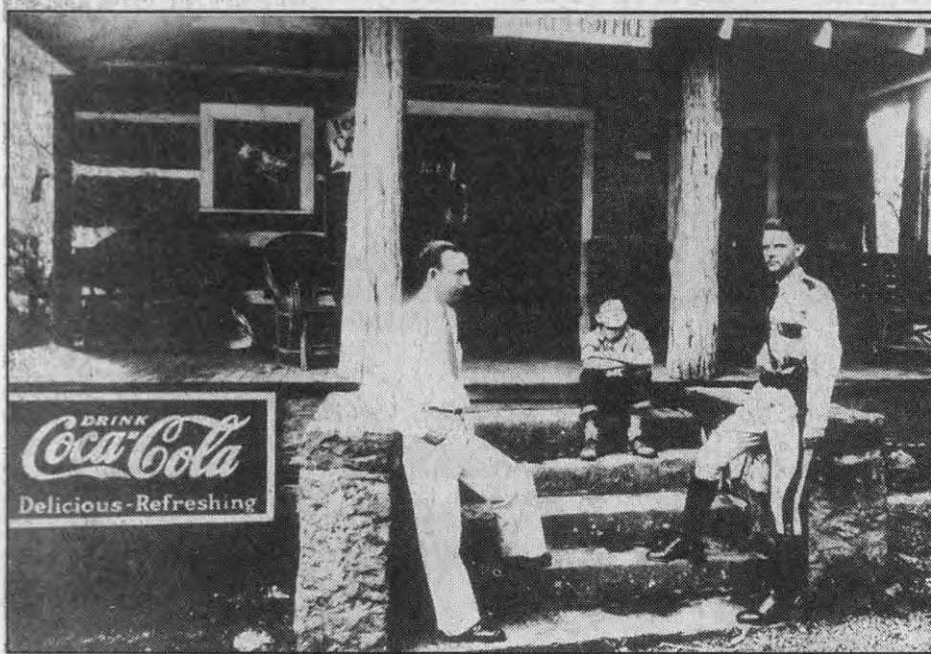
Near the rim he chose a section flat enough for his mule to stand up straight in the furrows. He began to cut and haul away the brush and trees. At mid-afternoon he hiked into the trees to sip the cool water. He leaped over a narrow streambed and landed on the edge of an exposed, dark fissure. Good thing he could jump. The cavity of the cave was nestled in the bottom of a limestone streambed high up in one of the wide-mouth feeder gullies. Chead stopped work to sound out his discovery. He measured with his hands its

gaping face spread of 18 inches. He dropped several stones into the blackness and listened for a crack against a rock or a splatter of water inside the hole. He chose larger stones. There was no sound that he could hear.

Chead died in 1965, but as long as he lived he marveled over the possible depth of this cave to anyone who would listen. His story of this cave, that was too deep to sound out with a rock, added to cave mystique. He knew he had discovered a new cavern system. He could only guess how it was connected to the hollow sounds of the mule's hooves that Velva heard each noon-day at her kitchen stove.

Long after Horn Hollow was taken into the state park territory, and after our father died in 1965, my brother, Cletus, returned to enjoy those woods of his youth. He checked on his favorite beech tree where, in 1936 at age 15, he carved his initials and those of his young sweetheart, Laverne Maggard. It was no trouble to find the beech tree, but he had lost the memory of how to scout out our father's legendary hole in the top of the cavern. Vegetation had matured and the terrain looked different. Our father had taken the secret of his cave location with him. In recent years, undaunted, Cletus still searches for our father's elusive cave.

The history of the Carter Caves precedes formation of Carter County in 1832, when pioneer settlers explored the Tygart and Smokey Valley region for flat ground to settle as early as 1785. They soon discovered it would be a hard 'go' to farm here. They did not linger.



Tommy P. Vicars, first cave guide at Carter Caves, and Charles Hackett, in uniform, on the front steps of the headquarters building in 1940. The boy sitting on the steps is unknown (Photo courtesy of Lydia Justice-Edwards.).

In their story of the development of the Carter Caves State Park, Ruth Kemper and Mary Bolt state, "The old pioneer and Indian fighter, Simon Kenton, operated a salt well near Carter Caves at a very early date." They also mention land grants to John Maylan, Richard Graham, and William Grayson on a common corner at the mouth of Cave Branch on Tygart's Creek. Originally, Carter County was part of Fayette County, Virginia. The first white woman to explore Eastern Kentucky may have been Mary Ingles, who was captured by the Shawnee.

First recorded deeds indicate Colonel John T. Ratcliff, a Kentucky state representative who later served as an officer in the Confederate Army, purchased Carter Caves in 1856. A clever businessman, apparently Colonel Ratcliff, reserved the mineral rights when he began to sell off parcels. Later owners were S. P. and Taylor Warnock, who were Ratcliff's kin.

Prospectors admired and respected its rugged beauty, but the steep hillsides and large boulders, thin soil, and the primitive nature of the area discouraged early settlement. This is the main reason the area remained unspoiled. There was also speculation about hard-rock minerals, including gold and silver that often follow quartz veins, but none has been found.

A story best told by the late Charles W. Maggard, Jr., whose family still lives on the original Maggard land at Wolf and is backed up by ancient recorded deeds, described Colonel Ratcliff's passion for silver and speculation.

In 1894 Ratcliff traded 500 acres of his tillable landholdings, centered at Wolf in Carter County, for a small farm in Elliott County owned by Silas and Sabra Maggard. It was not an even swap in acres or in quality for Ratcliff, but his zeal for silver lodes in lost mines, that he believed were

hidden on the Maggard land, was enough to balance the lopsided deal for Ratcliff.

In Elliott County Ratcliff plowed up hollows with oxen and blew up limestone gullies in search of the mother lode. This legend is echoed by modern-day speculators who still search for the lost silver mine near Bruin in Elliott County.

This land trade between Ratcliff and Maggard triggered the migration of the Silas Maggard family to Carter County. Silas's son, Charles W., was age eight in 1895 when he drove a wagon filled with furniture with his family to settle at Wolf Pen, now simply referred to as Wolf.

Silas Maggard divided his windfall of 500 acres between his sons: Jim, Lige, Edward, John and Charles; and his only daughter, Allie, who married Harm Kiser. He then sold parcels to neighbors, Underwood and Burton and to Frazier, Holbrook, and Kiser.

For many years, later on in the development of this land, my father,

Chead, was owner and farmed both the Burton and Underwood farms as well as the Justice farm, where father discovered his legendary "hole in the ground" cave. Parts of all these farms have been taken into the park system.

The formation and development of the Carter Caves is legendary as directed by men of vision. According to an article printed in *The Ashland Independent* by 1882 Andrew J. Brown and Company of Buffalo, New York, had purchased the Carter Caves. He employed John Frank as manager and agent. Mr. Frank set about building a hotel. It was a handsome, frame building with an extended kitchen built of logs.

The hotel had burned and ownership changed by 1924 when entrepreneur J. F. Lewis purchased 1,000 acres of Carter Caves territory for the virgin timber from Mrs. Jessie Timmons. The Timmonses had owned the Caves property since 1902.

*This article will continue in the March 2003 edition.*

*Lydia Justice-Edwards, P. O. Box 35, Donnelly, ID 83616, shares this article with our readers.*

-- A New Column To Begin Soon --

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