

Part II (Conclusion):

Justice Family Holds Carter Caves Close To Their Hearts

A Look At Carter Caves State Resort Park's Early Development

Editor's Note: Last month, Lydia Justice-Edwards of Donnelly, Idaho, shared some very interesting facts concerning the early development of the Carter Caves State Resort Park. As her article continues this month, you will enjoy the interviews, research, and legends of the Justice family of Carter County, Kentucky.

By Lydia Justice-Edwards - 2003

The salt industry and tobacco crops had anchored the economy of Carter County since the early 1880s. Tobacco was still king but subject to the vagaries of state allotment, price control, and soil depletion. Timber and mining jobs were petering out. The magnificent hardwood trees had been decimated. Desperate and clever farmers decided the better economic use of corn they grew was to distill it into "shine". Some caves in the remote hollows served more than scenic purposes. Local sages pointed out that a mule could carry four bushels of corn, raw; or 24 bushels of corn, distilled. One story involves a wood casket nailed to a mule-sled. Inside the casket was pink, silk cloth covering the mason jars.

Only last summer members of our Justice family discovered the perfect moonshine cave that our father used to augment family income. A perfect moonshine cave has two openings, and both are too small to walk through.

Hundreds of scenic acres comprised the Carter Caves property. Many still laid fallow, with no income to represent them, when J. F. Lewis died in 1937 leaving his son, Ollie, to follow through.

Like his father, Ollie knew he needed a boost. He had a vision, so he designed a plan to advertise and promote the Carter Caves as equal to the famous Mammoth Caves. Lewis was undaunted when some wags held out that they were not.

Ollie formed the Carter Caves Company. Not only did

he award stock as a draw to prominent businessmen, he sought cash investments from Wick Strother, Thornton Kennard, W. M. Tabor, R. M. Bagby, Dr. J. Watts Stovall, Thomas S. Yates, John M. Rose, and J. A. Bagby; along with his own Lewis family members. This infusion of energy and money advanced J. F.'s plan to develop the Carter Caves.

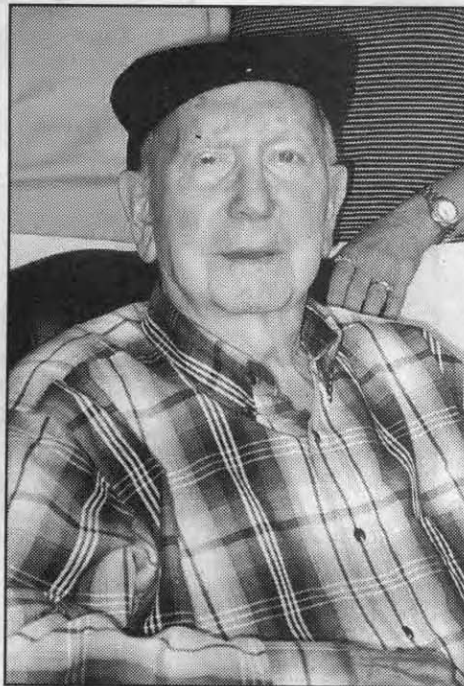
His new partners inspired local people to take ownership of what they loved: the caves, the trees, and the pristine rock formations of the Natural Bridge. They wanted to become partners in managing the resources they could preserve, and they took to the roads to educate other people of respect and influence. Their message was clear that if this cave land was converted to a public park, it would be

preserved, a new road would be built, and electricity would be brought in. They used their political influence in Frankfort with Governor Simeon Willis to back up their promises. Their message advanced under the leadership of Judge R. C. Littleton, who was president of the Grayson Rotary in 1946. The Olive Hill Rotary members also joined the cause, soon followed by the Ashland Chamber of Commerce.

A committee was certified to accept donations to buy the Carter Caves land from the Carter Cave Company to donate to the state of Kentucky. Local people pitched in.

It was apparent that neighbors from miles around cared about the mysterious Carter Caves. They wanted the Caves preserved for future generations. They were disillusioned about the disappearance of the giant trees. The groundswell of support was strongest with local folk, they donated what they could.

Of course, these plucky pioneer families who had settled the area, and who worked to keep their farms viable, also recognized the conveniences and prosperity this might mean. As they came of age their young sons were lost to the industrial plants in Ohio and Michigan. Many never came home to the farms.



John Fielding Lewis II, in July 2001.
(Photo courtesy of Lydia Justice-Edwards.)

The late Charles "Junior" Maggard with his colorful descriptions of hardship, also recounted how difficult it was to drive a car from his farm at Wolf, using the muddy, rutted Carter Caves road that had once been a buffalo path to water. The road first ran up a steep, long grade from the Wolf Post Office, to solid ground at the peak just in front of the Jim Burton home, and then it ground into a quagmire for several hundred yards as it passed the old Underwood place and reached the limestone streambed of a branch to finally snake across the



The J. F. (John Fielding) Lewis and Company Furniture Store at Carter, Carter County, Kentucky, in July 2001. (Photo courtesy of Lydia Justice-Edwards.)

Natural Bridge. It passed the Caves' headquarters to take up a dirt road that followed Cave Branch down to the old iron bridge across Tygart.

"If we wanted to go someplace we had to hook up our horse in harnesses with a single tree to pull the car. Then when we got the car past the headquarters building, at the Caves, we hung the chain on the horse collar and slapped its rump. Our horse had pulled so many cars, he knew just how to work. When the car wheels spun he pulled harder. We never had to speak to the horse. He also knew how to find his way back home, alone."

Within a startling 60 days public-spirited citizens of Carter County and civic organizations met the price of the shareholders of the Carter Cave Company. The Carter Caves would no longer be in private ownership. They would belong to all people for a public park. With their extraordinary gift they had negotiated a commitment from the state of Kentucky to make certain improvements including a new road within five years from the "Y" on the Midland Trail, now US 60, directly to the Caves' headquarters ticket building. Travelers had followed the Cave Branch streambed until it forged with Tygart. Then they followed muddy ruts.

When work to rebuild this road began, my brother, Cletus, just a young teenager, was thrilled by the loud blasts of dynamite as he worked in his cornfields not far away. He also recorded the unofficial number of copperhead snakes the workmen killed each day, a total of 96 for the entire project.

For a time Ollie managed the Caves with the help of several excellent managers, two of whom were concession-

aires, Ersel and Irene Bush.

In 1940 Glendal Plummer was a freshman at Carter High School, and barely age 13, when Manager Ersel Bush hired him.

"Five dollars was a lot of money to me, but it was a long, hard work day. My favorite job, though, was to guide cave tours through the "X" Cave and the Salt Petre. Most visitors respected the beauty of the caves, but once in a while a rowdy bunch lined up for my tour. If they insisted upon defacing the cave or did not listen to my safety instructions, I led them into the interior and turned out the lights!" Glendal laughed.

Glendal's job was defined by the press of early tourism as interpreted by his manager, Irene Bush.

"She was the brain of our operation. Her husband, Ersle signed the contracts, but he had an outside job hauling coal. Ersle was a real ambassador for the Carter Caves. He sold concessions on a percentage basis under his contract with Mr. Lewis. He handed out flyers and invited people to come, but the day to day operation was managed by his wife, Irene."

However, on June 13, 1948, it was Ersle who led the large tour to the "X" Cave when the old wood trestle collapsed. Twenty people were injured. One woman was crippled for life. Before the collapse Ersle had warned the new state owners about the rotting underpinnings. Ersle's daughter, Anna Bush Balch, recalls how her father found himself under layers of people. At the bottom of the ditch a five-year-old girl struggled. Ersle, with a broken nose and sprained ankle, wedged himself between her and five people

who had fallen across his back.

"Dad was strong and he kept the tiny girl from being crushed." Anna recounted.

As new owner of the Carter Caves the state of Kentucky was about to experience its first lawsuit. They took another look at their mission statement to interpret, preserve, and create a safe outdoor park for the public-spirited citizens of Carter County.

Glendal Plummer, recalls, "The very first cave guide, Tommy P. Vicars, began his work career at the Carter Caves, as did Johnny Morgan and his sister, Jean. Carter County youths continue this tradition to help pay for college. The pay is low, but the jobs are rich in learning and responsibility for preserving a beautiful place, and, besides, the uniforms are handsome."

Anna Bush Balch is the only baby of record born at the Carter Caves. Anna recalls, "Our parents liked managing the Caves. Mother was very organized. We lived right on the property in a small green house near the X Cave. We lived there twice. Dad was drafted into the Army infantry. He fought at the invasion of Iwo Jima. Mother and I had to move. Then my sister Ersel Lene was born while he was fighting. She was nine months old when he got back home. Then we moved back to the little green house to manage the Caves. That house burned though, and the only item our mother could save was our photo album."

Anna remembers her life growing up on the Cave property, as one of mystery and delight. She said, "Our mother seemed to be everywhere greeting visitors, managing operations, and watching Ersel Lene and me. She was a pioneer woman, well ahead of her time. She was bright and capable, working right alongside our dad. She didn't always have help. Rather than disappoint visitors to the Caves, she would hand the keys over to them and ask them to just stick them in the lock when they left. It was my job to retrieve the keys before dark! This was a scary job. Mother was always concerned that someone might still be in the cave."

When the state of Kentucky took over ownership, they began to make changes. The old road that ran from the Wolf Post Office through the Burton and Underwood farms was closed at the edge of park property, no longer would the park be cut in two with a road.

Plans to pave the muddy, rutted road up the Plummer grade and out Oakland Ridge began to take form as well. This would improve connections from Route # 2 at Buffalo and Carter City and the new road from the Midland Trail to the state park. Kentucky state road #182, now named the Carter Cave Road, was surveyed for construction starting with the Plummer grade. It was engineered to course through farms owned by the Haneys and the Burchetts. Then it cut through three farms owned by brothers, Jim and Woodrow Maggard, and their father, Charles W. Maggard.



Cletus Justice stands next to the tree where he carved his initials next to those of LaVerne Maggard. (Photo courtesy of Lydia Justice-Edwards.)

Walt Kiser, Earl Frazier, George Holbrook, Herman Kiser, and Lonnie Burton were next on its route that followed Oakland Ridge past the Oakland school and the Oakland church. It continued through the Lou Counts farm to drop over the end of the ridge into the community of Buffalo. It ended at the corner of the Virgil McGlone farm. Route #2 was a gravel road at that time, but it soon received improvements as a feeder route to the new Carter Cave Road.

The new road right-of-way avoided involvement with dwellings, but it did plough through the small grocery store and post office at Wolf, owned by Charles W. and Stella Counts Maggard. It managed not to disturb the limestone cliff just below the old post office site, where Native American markings intrigued me as a child and still do.

Charlie and Stellie, as we affectionately called them, dissolved their store and passed the post office to their close neighbors, Bert and Naomi Kiser. Howard Meenix took over management next, a short time after that the Wolf Post Office was discontinued.

Across the park, on the south side, our father had purchased another farm for taxes in 1935, when his brother-in-law, Daniel Johnson, gave up trying to grow anything on it, bundled up his family and took the Lincoln Highway to pick fruit in California. It bordered Smokey Creek where it joined Tygart. The picturesque bouquet of this hardscrabble farm was the Dark Hollow.

Most of Daniel's old farm was flooded in 1954 when the Dam was built to form the lake, but it did not fill up the Dark Hollow. This well-named sprawling medley of boulders still glistens with clear, cold water. It can be enjoyed from the hikers' trail. Also, on the present day hiking trail, the core

of the Johnson homestead is marked near a beautiful rock overhang. Patrick Johnson bought the farm from a fast talker who represented it as a farm. Compared to Floyd County terrain where Patrick lived, it seemed to be. But, when Patrick moved his family to take possession, he found the seller who had taken his money, did not actually own the land. Patrick paid for the farm twice. This time he paid Mrs. Timmons, who did own the land. Later he divided up his farm to all his sons. Daniel drew the section next to Smokey Creek that included the Dark Hollow.

Like other local farmers he was used to farming fields that stood on their edges. During the course of grubbing for a new cornfield, high on the steep hillsides, his plow mule skittered away from the rush of cool air from the earth's interior. He surveyed the area with caution and found two gaping caves.

As a skinny girl of eight I learned to love spelunking that day when Dad held my ankles to look down into his new cave discoveries. I trusted my father completely. I described the stalactites and stalagmites that I could see. My curiosity for these cave adventures gave pause for a new level of education for me, because I learned what to call them many years later. This area is just above the boat ramp.

No doubt other families will want to add their legends to my personal story.

Going to the Caves on the fourth of July is a standing tradition for us. To honor our generational love for these special places, where our ancestors lived and worked, we hold our annual Justice Cousins Reunion on the spot that was once our cornfield, near the public pool. It was one of the few plateaus suitable for farming. It is now a nine-hole golf course.

Smokey Bottom Creek was a small meandering stream when our father grew up there. He married Lydia Harris. Their children, Mary and Bill, were soon orphaned when their mother's quick consumption got the better of her. Then in 1921 Dad met Velva Kinney. Smokey Lake now covers the home of her parents, Hatfield and Haley Kinney, just under the hill below the public pool area at the mouth of the Dark Hollow.

This area near the Dark Hollow retains much of its original mysterious beauty. However, that end of the Smokey Lake has silted in and cattails have replaced the rose bushes and fruit trees and the sassafras and papaw bushes they nurtured.

In what seems to be an endless stream limestone, sweet, cold water still cascades over the same worn-smooth round rocks where my mother, Velva, scrambled barefoot as a girl, to lodge the ironstone milk pitcher in the natural refrigerator of clear, cold water. I still have her white pitcher.

Snapshots of their home at the mouth of the Dark Hollow exhibit a purple martin bird box perched on a tall sapling pole in the yard. This home was burned when the dam was built to form Smokey Lake in 1954.

Carter Caves is the land of all our ancestors now enveloped by state laws and environmental regulations and defined by the official borders of the park. This umbrella protects the things we love, the sentimental initial tree that Cletus carved in 1936; the flora of rare ginseng, yellow root

and cohosh, to name a few; and the fauna of copperheads, peeper tree frogs, the sweet song of the wren, and, of course, the gray and fox squirrels that were on the menus of early hunters. Protected also is the myriad of caves, yet to be explored, and the precious watershed in Horn Hollow; its tributaries that feed Cave Branch and Tygart, just as our forefathers envisioned.

Brother Cletus is age 80, and I am 66, but we continue to tramp through the gullies in Horn Hollow in search of the ancient hole in the streambed. Even if we don't rediscover this legendary cave that mystified our father, we know that all special and secret places enjoyed by our Native American ancestors will be protected forever, including our own infant cousin, Erie May Johnson, who in 1922, was buried on the Johnson homestead. Her grave is marked with gleaming blue and yellow shards of broken dishes and a hand scratched golden-sandstone rock.

Lydia Justice-Edwards, P. O. Box 35, Donnelly, Idaho 83615; justiceedwards@ctcweb.net, shares this article with our readers.



Carter Caves Park Superintendent, James Gourley, explains to Elizabeth Cassilly and Lucille Handy, touring counselors of the Louisville Automobile Club and the Bluegrass Automobile Club of Lexington, respectively, the formations in the cave. These ladies were on a 1,200 mile inspection tour of Kentucky's state parks in 1951.
(*In Kentucky Magazine, 1951.*)