The Mark Twain Cave

Virtual Tour  by Samuel Weitzman, age 11

Approximately 100 million years ago, during the Jurassic period, when dinosaurs roamed the earth, there was an inland sea that covered part of what today is Missouri. Acids carved caverns and tunnels into a solid limestone rock, and water smoothed it out. This formation has been known as McDougal's Cave, McDowell's Cave, or most recently as the Mark Twain Cave, named after the author who immortalized the cave in The Adventures of Tom Sawyer.

Before entering the cave, it's a good idea to know about its history. In 1819 it was discovered by a man named Jack Sims when his dog chased a rabbit into the cave. Around 1840, a scientist named Joseph McDougal purchased the cave. In it he performed many experiments, with the most extreme one taking place when he placed his dead daughter in alcohol to preserve her. Locals were not happy about this and insisted that the doctor remove the body from the cave where the town's children played. In 1886, John East bought the cave and made it the first show cave in the state of Missouri. East gave tours, but they cost a dime (which was worth much more back in the 1890s), and the quality of his tours depended on his mood. Many other people owned the cave after him, and in 1972 it was named a National Park Cave. Today it is privately owned by Jim and Linda Coleberd.

The cave, made of Louisiana limestone (because it is only found between Hannibal and Louisiana, MO), has four entrances and about 260 passageways. In The Adventures of Tom Sawyer Mark Twain wrote, “The cave was but a labyrinth of crooked aisles that ran into each other and out again and led nowhere. It was said that one might wander days and nights together through its intricate tangle of rifts and chasms and never find the end of the cave.”

In order to enter the cave, the rusty gate that blocks the present-day entrance must be unlatched, opened, and then latched again by the last to come in. Upon entering, the temperature immediately drops to about 54° Fahrenheit, or 12° Celsius (the average for the entire struc-
“A bat is beautifully soft and silky.”
~Mark Twain (in his autobiography)

There are more than 250,000 counted signatures in the cave.

Visitors to Mark Twain Cave view a map of the passageways before beginning their tour.

A sleeping bat in the Mark Twain Cave

There are approximately 9 centimeters), and have a wingspan of 11 inches (about 30 centimeters), flutter overhead. They can be hard to see in the darkness, and can scare people when they fly overhead. Said Mark Twain himself in his autobiography, “A bat is beautifully soft and silky; I do not know any creature that is pleasant to the touch or is more grateful for caressings, if offered in the right spirit. I know all about these coleoptera, because our great cave, three miles below Hannibal, was multitudinously stocked with them, and often I brought them home to amuse my mother with.”

Throughout the cave are places that are recognizable from the book, when Tom Sawyer and his girlfriend, Becky Thatcher, were lost in the cave. One memorable feature is the names on the walls. There are more than 250,000 counted signatures in the cave, along with many drawings. They are burnt on from the candle smoke, carved, or painted on with berry juice. However, the signature that is described in The Adventures of Tom Sawyer - “Becky + Tom”, or even Sam Clemens’ name itself, has not ever been found.

Throughout the cave are many landmarks from the book, such as Aladdin’s Palace, which was actually named by Sam Clemens, the Lover’s Bench, the entrance that Tom Sawyer would have used (which is not used today), and the place where the chest of gold would have been hidden by Injun Joe. There are many stories and tales that describe the adventures that took place within its smooth limestone walls. One is about the painter Nor-
couples have exchanged wedding vows. Some tour guides might joke that the groom had “cold feet” but “he was between a rock and a hard place.”

Finally, the cave rises slightly and arrives at the exit. The bright light from the outside world returns, washing away the darkness like a sponge on a dirty plate. What the light cannot take, however, are the memories of the cave that will be treasured forever.

~S.W.

Various stories are related to visitors as they enjoy one of the most pleasant hours one can spend in the dark. Tourists can count on hearing about Jesse James’ hideout in the cave and even see the sight where several man Rockwell when he went to the cave to sketch it for a specially illustrated edition of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. His guide had to leave the acclaimed painter alone for about one hour, and Rockwell was reportedly scared out of his wits by the time the man returned to let him out.

“Who’s ready for the cave?”

“Everybody was. Bundles of candles were procured, and straightway there was a general scamper up the hill. The mouth of the cave was up the hillside - an opening shaped like a letter A. Its massive oaken door stood unbarred. Within was a small chamber, chilly as an ice-house, and walled by Nature with solid limestone that was dewy with a cold sweat.”

*From The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*

This virtual tour of the Mark Twain Cave in Hannibal, Missouri was written by Samuel Weitzman from Chagrin Falls, Ohio as a project for the 2nd Annual Mark Twain Young Authors Workshop.