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Old Newspaper Article on Schoharie Caves Raises Questions

Jackie Turnquist

The following reprint of a fascinating newspaper article from 1886 was sent to me from Chuck Porter of the Northeastern Cave Conservancy. He has made several comments (in brackets) throughout the article and needs help clarifying some of his questions. Can any of you help him?

The Sun, New York, N.Y., 12 Dec. 1886, page 6
THE CAVES OF SCHOHARIE

A county full of curious caverns in central New York
The Wonders of Ball's Cavern,
which Only a Dozen Persons Have Ever Explored—
The Perils of McFlail's Cave—
Bottomless Pits.

[Chuck Porter's note: Original spelling has been retained, but the account has been broken into extra paragraphs. My comments are italicized in brackets.]

CARLISLE, Schoharie county, Dec. 8.—It is doubtful whether there is another county in the Union which possesses so many natural curiosities in the way of caverns as the county of Schoharie, New York. The geological composition of the county is of the more recent formations, limestone strata predominating. These soft strata, having been subjected for ages to the disintegrating action of the numerous streams of water that abound in the region, have entirely disappeared in many localities, leaving in their places caverns miles in extent, steep and narrow fissures that lead no one knows whither, and curiously formed and fathomless openings yawning in the ground. The beginnings and endings of the many streams that have hewn the caverns in the subterranean rocks are shrouded in impenetrable mystery. There are probably a hundred of these great cavities in the county, to explore which no attempt has ever been made, while there are many others whose interiors are familiar to the more courageous and adventurous of the dwellers in their vicinity. One of these at least—Howe's Cave, in Schoharie township—has a world-wide fame. This great subterranean curiosity is so well known, in fact, that no newspaper description of it is necessary. Its original name was Otsgaragee Cavern, and since its first exploration by Lester Howe, in 1842, entrance to it has been made easy, and its depths have

been lighted by gas. A more wonderful cave than Howe's is Ball's, called by some Gebhardt's Cavern. It is four miles east of Schoharie village, and was discovered by Simeon Ball in 1831. It was not explored for some months afterward, and the descent to it was so difficult and dangerous that but comparatively few persons have ever visited its depths.

The entrance to Ball's Cave is first by a perpendicular descent through the rocks for a distance of seventy-five feet. Then a more gradual descent of thirty feet brings the visitor to the shore of a rather sluggish stream. The descent thus far is made by ropes.

The remainder of the journey into the cave is by boat. The stream is about four feet wide and two feet deep at the start, but as it gets further in the earth it widens into lakes, some of them thirty feet wide, and showing soundings in places fully as deep as the lakes are wide. There are fourteen of these lakes. They are formed by the projection into the stream at intervals of circular dams or walls of soft calcareous rock. The water breaks over the dams by falls that fill the chambers with weird sounds, and by a continuous and rapid descent the stream leads to a distance of two miles from the entrance of the cave and to a depth of two hundred feet from the surface. The cavern is made up of small apartments, the lofty ceilings of which are hung with magnificent stalactitic specimens. These are especially beautiful in the amphitheatre, where the explorable portions of the cave terminate—a large apartment, with the floors depressed in the centre and walls 100 feet high. The stream continues from this grand amphitheatre through low, narrow passageways, which no one has yet been bold enough to follow.

The first persons who ever undertook to explore this dangerous cavern were John Gebhardt, Wm. Hubbard, and John Branch. Finding that thorough exploration could not be made without boats, Gebhardt had two made for the purpose, and lowered them into the depths. Several prominent citizens of the county accompanied him on this trip to the unknown region. They found the walls covered with a material resembling whitewash. The geological specimens they brought back with them are among the rarest known to science. Probably not more than a dozen persons have visited this curious cavern since the pioneer exploration. [See an account of the 1831 exploration of Balls (now Gage) Cave in the December 2003 Caver.]

The towns of this county especially noted for the possession of these remarkable caverns are Carlisle, Schoharie, and Cobleskill. Not a few of the caves are natural ice houses, wherein ice has been preserved through all seasons for centuries. One of these is the "Ice Hole," near Grosvern's Corners. This is an isolated cavern, where the temperature never rises above the freezing point. The low temperature makes extended exploration extremely inconvenient, but venturesome persons have entered it a long distance and discovered a frozen lake with a surface like glass, and deep, icy chasms, apparently fathomless. There are several of these ice caverns in Carlisle township. [Reports of an extensive cave and underground lake (but no ice) near Grosvenors Corners are in the Van Voris manuscript and the 1958 Schoharie Guide.]

Not far from Carlisle village, south of it, is a curious cave known as the "Rock House." This is easy of access. It is about forty feet square. A turbulent stream flows through it and disappears in a number of dark openings which have never been explored. The roof of this cavern is apparently a stratum of slate, and light is let into the cave through several large fissures in it. Many stone implements, rude earthen jars, and warlike weapons were found in the Rock House by its early explorers. When the Indians still held possession of this region the cave was a favorite retreat to them, and long after the Revolution human skeletons were found in its depths. [In 1989 and '90 John Schweyen and others dove through several sumps and traveled 1200 feet towards Levys Cave. They found a 30-foot drop and high canyon passage, but turned back at the fourth sump, a cramped but continuing zero-visibility slot. No survey was ever made. Some 1940s pictures of Rockhouse Cave are in the December 2008 Caver.] Not far from the Rock House is Sellick's Cave, named after a man who was the first to enter it many years ago. This cavern is composed of a number of square chambers, with very high walls and

jagged ceilings. These chambers are connected with each other by openings in the walls. In one of them the floor is hollowed out like a basin, and during rainy seasons this basin becomes a pool of water from five to eight feet deep. The water rises and disappears gradually. Sellick's Cave is easily entered and its exploration is attended with no danger. [The entrance is no longer very easy.]

Such is not the case, however, with McFlail's Cave, near Carlisle Centre. This is rarely if ever visited, owing to the peril of its exploration. Its discovery and the first attempt at exploration was attended by a tragedy—Alexander McFlail, a venturesome Scotchman, its discoverer, losing his life in it in 1854 by falling from a jutting rock, on which he was creeping to get around an obstruction in a chamber he was exploring. He was alone in the cavern, and, being absent a day and a night, some courageous young men went in to look for him. His dead body was found lying on the edge of a pool of water at the foot of the high ledge. One of the young men was let down with ropes, and the body was hoisted out of the pool. [This differs from 1854 newspaper accounts, as well as from the usually accepted name of Thomas McFail. There are several versions of McFail's death.] McFlail's Cave is a series of narrow passages opening into irregularly-shaped chambers, and coursed by rapid streams, with here and there a small lake, fathomless pits, and steep, ragged descents. Not a few credulous natives declare that the lake is haunted, and those who have ventured into its depths say that the weird responses a shout awakens among its damp aisles and openings might easily be taken for the voices of unearthly dwellers.

Two miles from the village of Schoharie is a cave which was discovered by James Nethaway in 1836. It is of large extent, abounds in streams and lakes and numerous apartments; but as it cannot be reached except by a dangerous perpendicular descent, only very few persons have ever visited it. It has never been explored for any distance except once, and that was soon after its discovery in 1836, when John Gebhardt and John E. Bonney followed its intricate and perilous tunnels and passageways for nearly a mile. Neither of these explorers would ever enter the cave again. [This may be a conflation of reports on Balls Cave and Veenfliets Cave, both in town of Schoharie. Or is it Lasells Hellhole on Terrace Mtn?]

In hundreds of places in the upper and central portion of Schoharie county wagons passing along the roads or blows struck upon the ground produce cavernous sounds similar to that given forth by blows on an empty hogshead. The Lutheran church at Lawyersville, the Union Church at Schultz's Corners, and several schoolhouses in the vicinity stand on flat rocks, beneath which the earth is hollow.

There are many caverns in the neighborhood of Carlisle, to enter which it is necessary for the visitor to let himself down by ropes through perpendicular openings from 20 to 100 feet deep. Some of these approaches to subterranean depths have straight walls from top to bottom, while others are funnel shaped, and others still formed like an immense hour-glass contracted in the centre and with funnel-shaped openings on the surface and in the cave. A striking peculiarity of these deep caverns is the noise of falling water that is heard coming through openings in the rocky walls from localities it is impossible to reach. There are passageways leading from chamber to chamber, which can only be followed by crawling on hands and knees. In one of these caves a stream of water spouts out of a circular opening in the rock ten feet from the floor and six inches in diameter. It tumbles down the rough side of the cave, a miniature waterfall, and joins the stream that flows through the cavern. This curious spouting of water, it is supposed, comes from a subterranean creek, which has a bed several feet higher than the one in the cavern. [Where is this? Bensons Cave?]

Another strange feature of these underground recesses are the bottomless pits that abound. These are openings in the floor, some of them ten feet across, and as round as though they had been bored in the rock with a huge drill. Many of them are fathomless. Some are filled up with water, others are dry. Corridors, narrow and low, run in all directions, and in their labyrinth lies great danger to the explorer, and an insuperable obstacle to thorough investigation of the mysteries of these caves. A man named Samuel or Lemuel Pool was lost in one

of these dangerous hour-glass caverns in 1838. He visited the cave with two companions. They carried five torches, and holding one of these in his hand, Pool crept into one of the narrow and crooked passageways for the purpose of reaching an invisible waterfall, the roar of which could be heard as though just beyond the mouth of the passage. His companions saw his torch gradually disappear in the aperture, and waited for hours for his return. He never came back, and nothing was ever heard of him again. [This could be the basis of a rumor, still extant in the 1940s, of a young farm worker who had once swung down into Hanors Cave on a rope and was never seen again.]

The openings of these surface entrances to caverns being in the fields, and in some instances near the houses of farmers, they are enclosed with strong fences, for many horses and cattle were formerly lost by falling into the pits. Some of the openings are seventy-five feet in diameter. In times of big freshets the streams running through the underlying channels are frequently swollen to such proportions that they not only fill the caves, but overflow at the surface entrances and flood hundreds of acres of surrounding country, forming lakes that are sometimes months in subsiding. Farm houses originally built near these vents for subterranean floods have had to be The Carlisle Historical Society Page 11 of 12 removed to safer places to escape the water. One family living in close proximity to a cave of this kind in 1869 was forced to fly to the second story of the house to escape the rapid rise of water from the earth, and were removed from their dangerous situation in boats.

In the lower part of Carlisle township a stream large enough to run several mills comes out of the rocks. After a rapid course of two miles it disappears in the surface opening of one of these caves. The first settlers who came into this region thought that this stream fed some underground lake, and did not appear again. An immense spring of clear cold water, its outlet being a good-sized brook, was another wonder those settlers found three miles distant from the spot where the stream so suddenly dropped into the earth. The spring is now in the town of Cobleskill, on the old Becker farm. [Now known as Doc Shauls Spring]

Soon after the country about here was settled a sawmill was built on Sinking Creek, and people who lived near the Great Spring began to notice that quantities of sawdust and pieces of wood appeared in the spring. This led to the reasonable theory that the spring was formed by the lost water of the creek, or had some connection with it. All doubt as to the correctness of this theory was removed one day in a remarkable manner. A woman had hung out her wash in a yard not far from the spot where the creek entered the ground. The day was windy, and two or three garments were blown from the line, and were carried into the stream. Before they could be reached they were swept out of sight in the entrance to the cavern. A few days afterward these same garments were found in Becker's spring. [Both Cave Mistake and the clogged insurgence near Lawyersville are 3 miles from Doc Shauls and have 2-mile feeders. But the Lawyersville stream doesn't rise in Carlisle. Doolittles Cave does, but it has a short infeeder. Where does such a large stream emerge?]

By similar means it was found that other streams in the neighborhood, whose waters disappeared in the same way, reappeared in other localities, one having an underground course of seven miles. Another stream, which rises in Howe's Cave, widens into a large lake, and, flowing a hundred yards or so further in the cave, drops out of sight in an opening in the floor. Half a mile from the cave its waters come to the light of day, and, flowing for a mile, empty into Schoharie Creek.

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