

Uncle Cummy

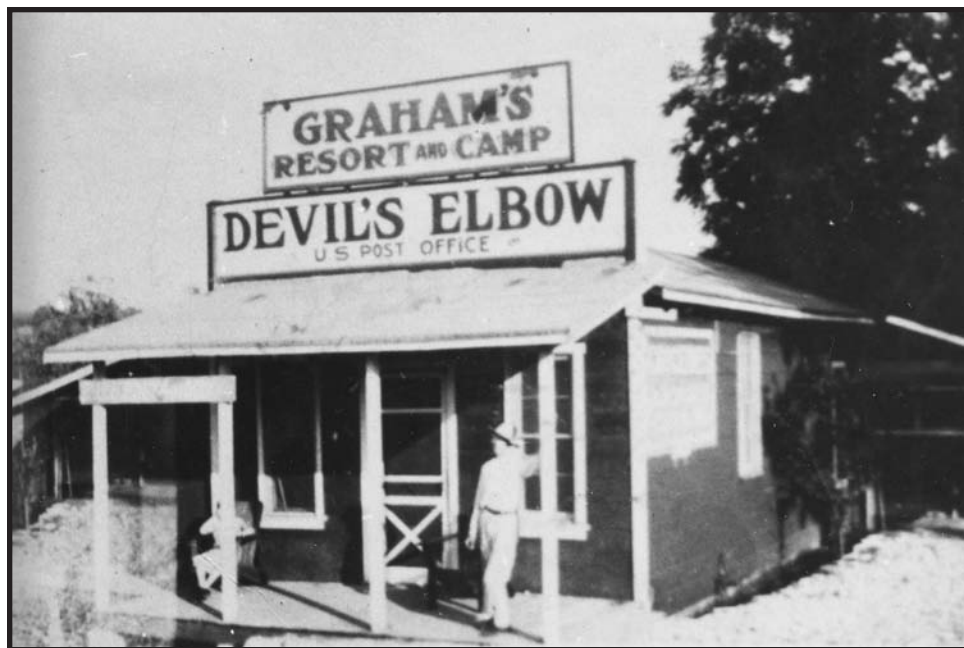
by Margaret Tarbell Wehmeyer

as told to Terry Primas

Margaret Tarbell grew up in Kansas City where her father, E. D. Tarbell, was an architect. The Tarbell family visited the Ozarks every summer, staying in Devil's Elbow where Mrs. Katie Tarbell grew up. Margaret fell in love with the hills and rivers of Pulaski County. When Margaret was eighteen in 1944, she and her sister, Marjorie, bought Maxey Cave (see picture on page 17). Marjorie got married after one payment, and moved to South America. Margaret took on sole ownership of the cave and paid it off in 1948. The cave became a roadside attraction on Highway 66 and will be a subject of a future Gazette article.

On one of her early visits to her grandparents, she met an unforgettable man named C. C. Smith, affectionately known as Uncle Cummy. Uncle Cummy had come to Missouri on the flip of a coin. Mrs. Wehmeyer shares some of her memories of Devil's Elbow and an unusual man.

I'd been coming down to Devil's Elbow all my life, since the twenties. I was born in 1924. My [maternal] grandmother had Hiawatha Lodge. When the rafters used to raft their logs down the river years ago, grandma and grandpa had Hiawatha Lodge there and they would feed the men coming down with the rafts. They were Tom and Matilda Hunter. They had cabins that they'd rent to them at the time. Grandpa died in 1923. Grandma and Grandpa had boats, too, to take people across the river. [Grandma and Grandpa were friends with Squire and Anna Wells [see page 55 for story about the Wells family.] Squire stood up with Grandpa when they got married. That was before anything was built down there and my mom said



Graham's store, 1927, was located on the hill heading west out of Devil's Elbow on old Route 66. This was also the Elbow's first post office. Walter Graham was postmaster from 1927 until 1933. Photo above, courtesy of John Bradbury. All other photos courtesy of Margaret Wehmeyer.



Above, Uncle Cummy's cabin perched on a ledge. Maxey Cave is in a hollow to the right of the cabin site. Below, a closeup of the cabin shows the logs were chinked with various sizes of rocks.



she used to help her dad plant beans all over the property. It's probably the oldest building in Devil's Elbow. There was Walter Graham's store and there was his daughter Jane, whom I played with when I was a little girl. It was a grocery store made out of wood. When my mom was a kid, she lived in Devil's Elbow when she was a little girl. She said that right about where Walter Graham's store was there used to be a gravestone and the name on it was Orpha Hamm. When mom was little a girl she used to walk up there and take flowers and put on it.

We first met Uncle Cummy in 1937. I was 12 or 13 years old. When we first met him, out in front of the cave, he had dammed himself up a little spot and he had some goldfish in it. He had lived in Minnesota for a while and he lived in Correctionsville, Iowa for a time, too.

Uncle Cummy's full name was Christopher Charles Smith. The reason he got the name Cummy was that when he was a little kid, Christopher Columbus was his favorite person. He couldn't say Columbus so he'd say Cummy. That's how he got his nickname.

Mrs. McShee owned the property, Maxey Cave and 80 acres, and she moved here from Correctionsville, Iowa. Her husband was ill and they needed to move south, but he died before they could move. She had bought the property so she moved here by herself. Uncle Cummy came here in 1932. When he was in Iowa, he and a friend were trying to decide where they were going to go, to Missouri or some other state. They flipped a coin and they came to Missouri. I don't know how come he came



Uncle Cummy with part of his collection of Native American projectile points, scrapers, and drills. He found many artifacts in and around Maxey Cave but also in local farm fields.

over to the cave but he fell in love with it and I guess Mrs. McShee, who became Mrs. Mott later, said he could build a cabin on her property.

He liked to explore the cave and spent hours in it. When he was a kid he lived in Kansas and some Indian kids showed him how to make arrowheads. He found a lot of arrowheads in and around the cave. He use to find them in the old Nickels field, too.

One time when he was way back in the cave, he dropped his lantern into a crevice. He knew that the water flowed out the mouth of the cave. He got down on the floor and felt which way the water was running. The next morning, the owner of a store up the road missed Uncle Cummy who came in every morning. He was worried so he sent someone to Uncle Cummy's cabin. Uncle Cummy



Mr. Tarbell had a hardware store on the first floor of Hiawatha Lodge in Devil's Elbow for a short time. In the foreground is Uncle Cummy's rock castle under construction.

had left a note on the door that he was in the cave. They were getting ready to go in and look for him when Uncle Cummy emerged from the darkness. He had been in the cave for 36 hours.

One time when he was back in Minnesota visiting his children, his cabin burned. He and a friend bought a little building up on Highway 66.

I was working in Kansas City

during the war. I started working for a glider factory when I was 18. They put me on nights and we lived way out, several miles out of town in the east and the factory was on the Kansas side and an 18 year old on the streetcar at night, well, I didn't work there very long. Then I went to work for Russell Stover and I worked there for four or five years.

In 1949 when we moved down



Uncle Cummy with Marjorie (left) and Margaret Tarbell about 1949. They are standing near a cabin remodeled and used by the Tarbells in Devil's Elbow. It was destroyed in the 1982 flood.



This small log cabin was part of the Hiawatha Lodge grounds. Uncle Cummy lived here until he died in 1954 at 88 years of age.

here for good [from Kansas City], Uncle Cummy was living in the Baker Hotel and looked so sad, just laying in his bed, looking kind of down, and Mom and Dad said, "Do you want to come to Devil's Elbow and live with us?" He quickly packed up what few belongings he had into a little suitcase and he was ready. He moved into that little cabin next to Hiawatha Lodge. Uncle Cummy came to live with us not long after we moved to Devil's Elbow in September of 1949.

Oh, he loved doing the rock work and he got so much enjoyment out of building that castle. I'm sorry it's all gone now but I guess whoever bought it didn't want it.

He came down to Devil's Elbow with us in 1949 and he died in 1954. He was 88 years old when he died. He was a great old fella.

Right, Uncle Cummy with his completed rock castle. In the background is the Jiggs Miller house.

