



## Roadside Attraction

# Inca Cave and Tarbell Planetarium

*An article about Maxey/Inca Cave and E. D. Tarbell's planetarium first appeared in the pages of the Gazette twenty-five years ago (available online at [www.OldStagecoachStop.org](http://www.OldStagecoachStop.org)). The words in italics are those of E. D. Tarbell from an unpublished memoir, first printed in that 1987 article. In this article, we reprise part of that information and add additional images and information from conversations with Margaret Tarbell Wehmeyer.*

Maxey Cave has appeared several times in our feature of news from one hundred years past. The name derives from early settlers in the area near present day Laquey. James G. Maxey came with his parents, William and Sarah Nelson Maxey, to Pulaski County in 1836 when he was nine years old. The family acquired 160 acres by preemption in Colley Hollow. James became a farmer, too, cultivating land on Roubidoux Creek, which included a large cave. In 1873, during a dispute about a mule, James shot and killed neighbor Samuel White. He was found guilty of second degree murder and served seven years of a ten year sentence. The cave passed out of the family but was locally known as Maxey Cave and became a favorite location for picnics, Easter egg roasts, and spelunking.

The Tarbells had been coming from Kansas City in the summers to visit

Mrs. Tarbell's parents, Thomas and Matilda Hunter in Devil's Elbow, since at least the early 1920s. E. D. Tarbell encountered Maxey Cave for the first time in 1937 when he met C. C. "Uncle Cummy" Smith, who lived near the cave in a log cabin. *[Uncle Cummy outside his log cabin is pictured in center of page. For a profile of Uncle Cummy, see the Old Settlers Gazette, 2008.]* Mr. Tarbell wrote an account of that first meeting as they walked a path down the bluff from Uncle Cummy's cabin to the cave.

*Uncle Cummy described all the wonders of the cave and of ancient artifacts he had found while digging in the mouth of the cave. As yet, we couldn't see the cave entrance hidden by the rock ledge until we crossed the ravine, then a blast of cool air swept over us and ahead loomed a great maw, the largest mouth of any cave we had ever seen! We followed the old man into the cave and listened in rapt awe as he told of the ape-like skeletons he had found under a pile of huge rock slabs that had fallen from the ceiling in the prehistoric past. After passing through the four hundred foot entrance, we went through a narrow passage into a great room which Uncle Cummy called the "Cathedral Room," much bigger and higher than the entrance room. This high vaulted dome was circled with many fantastic onyx forma-*

*tions and clusters of bats. We walked over beside a great fluted stalagmite and looked down into Devil's Kitchen, sawtoothed with many folded stalagmites, hanging like colored draperies from the ceiling. Two wings forked away from the Cathedral Room, one going along Lost River, and the other up into Bat Heaven and beyond. The cave was truly marvelous and was later destined to play an important role in our lives.*

The cave did, indeed, come to play an important part in their lives, becoming a "member" of the family. On one of those summer trips in 1944, two of Tarbell's daughters, Marjorie and Margaret, bought the cave. Shortly thereafter, Marjorie married and moved to South America after making one payment. Margaret repaid Marjorie that payment and became sole owner of the cave at the age of eighteen, paying it off in 1948.

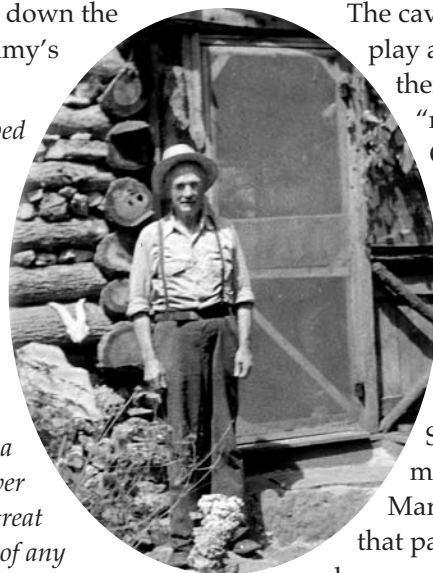
Mr. Tarbell was an architect in Kansas City and an accomplished amateur astronomer. He had formed an astronomy club but it languished during WWII. In 1944, he started constructing an observatory building. Completed in 1947, it revived local interest and the Kansas City Astronomy Club was formed. Two years later, Tarbell retired, sold the Kansas City house, and

arranged to have the observatory moved to Devil's Elbow within 60 days.

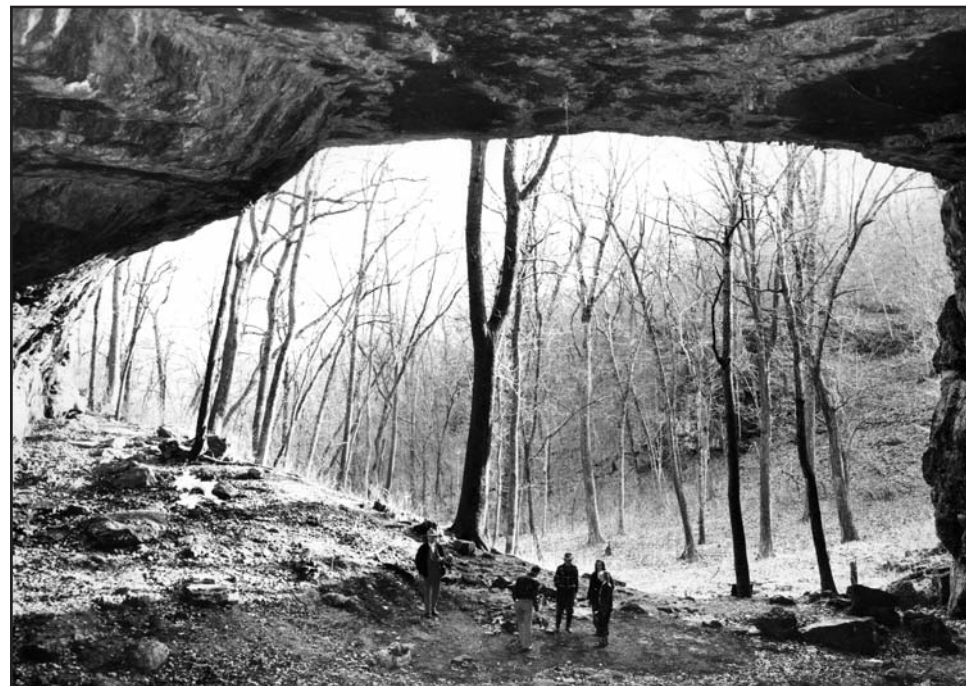
*At dusk one evening in the fall of 1952, two men drove into our driveway at the lodge [Hiawatha Lodge in Devil's Elbow] and introduced themselves as Mr. Hammit and Mr. Sweet. Hammit owned the Stark Caverns near Eldon and Ken Sweet was his son-in-law. Hammit suggested the possibilities of commercializing Maxey Cave. After visiting Stark Cavern, Hammit and Sweet inspected Maxey Cave and wanted to talk about a lease. After agreeing on a twenty year lease, Hammit furnished the money and began at once to build walkways and string lights...but instead of building a road down the steep hill to the cave entrance, they installed a tramway...two cars pulled up and down by winch and cables with rails laid on ties. They also built a good gravel road from the state road [Highway NN] in to their souvenir building and ticket office at the upper end of the tramway. Instead of using the name Maxey Cave, Mr. Sweet renamed it "Inca Cave," a switch we hadn't foreseen in leasing it to him.*

*As time passed, many people asked us why, explaining that the Incas were South Americans. "Whoever heard of Incas in North America?" they complained.*

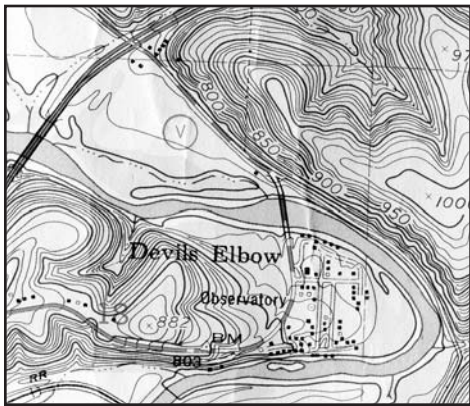
In the spring of 1953 came the grand opening. The idea of putting a planetarium inside the cave came up but the dampness would harm the delicate instruments needed for such a project. Tarbell looked into building his own



Maxey Cave opens with a huge cave mouth facing southward into the Roubidoux Creek valley. The opening is 30 feet high and 70 feet wide. Lending scale to the image is Mrs. Frank Thomas (l) and Margaret Tarbell. This picture was taken in February of 1950. All pictures courtesy of Margaret Tarbell Wehmeyer.



The view looking out is equally impressive. The large opening and southern exposure allows for unusually deep penetration by sunlight, particularly in the winter. This offered prehistoric inhabitants excellent shelter. Pictured (l-r) are Frank Thomas, Dale Tarbell, Uncle Cummy, and Mrs. Wilson.



E. D. Tarbell's observatory is noted on this 1954 topographic map of Devil's Elbow. He built the 12 inch telescope while living in Kansas City and reconstructed the observatory after moving to Devil's Elbow in 1949.

planetarium instead. He had long envisioned such an installation not connected with a university that would attract school groups and the general public.

*The dome must be 24 feet in diameter, and there must be smaller rooms, an entrance, an exhibition room, rest rooms, fan room, and a small work room. Howard Terry came by and became interested. Terry had built many concrete block buildings in the booming area since the Fort was built. He knew our hardware stock was for sale and said, "I may just build it for your hardware stock, let me take your sketches and figure on it."*

*Delivery of the planetarium came months before we needed it. Terry sweated with his concrete block work through the summer and I sweated making the wooden ribs of the dome in my garage at Devil's Elbow.*

*By the time I had the ribs of the dome finished, Terry had the roof on, with a circular hole 25 feet across in its proper place. I got busy on a construction tower in the center of the hole and began erection of the dome.*

*By November, the insulated dome was finished, covered with sheet aluminum inside and out. On June 4, 1954, we dedi-*



The Tarbell's operated a small hardware store for a short time on the first floor of Hiawatha Lodge. The observatory was behind and to the left of the lodge. The rock castle in the foreground was built by Uncle Cummy after he moved to Devil's Elbow with the Tarbells.

*cated the place with a formal opening. About a hundred friends came out including those from my old astronomy club in Kansas City. We could only seat 52 people, so the first presentation was done in two demonstrations.*

*During construction, a big speaker was installed at the apex of the star dome to be noisy when we wanted it, but invisible. Quiet music, mostly classical, played throughout the show but we needed something more. A short storm seemed the answer. For thunder, a big sheet of iron was hung in the fan room. When shaken, it had a resemblance to distant thunder. Lightning was easy to simulate from the planetarium's console.*

*During the show, I turned down the stars gradually and lightning played along the distant horizon, then came a bright flash, lighting up the entire sky. Eventually, a tape recorder of thunder recorded echoing against the bluff across the river at Devil's Elbow was used. In the spring after opening the planetarium, we moved the observatory up on the hilltop a few feet north of our building, taking care to line up the two domes to true North - South. Observing was important to the planetarium shows,*

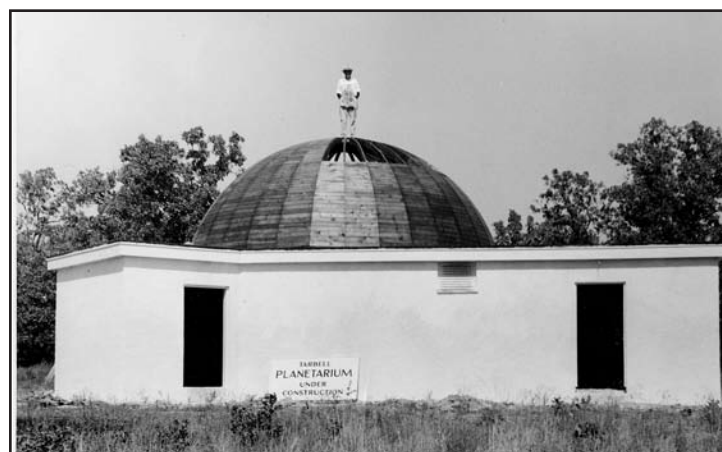


E. D. Tarbell

*especially to school and Boy Scout groups. Many school classes came by appointment. One class came from Jefferson City but didn't know where to write. To find the place, they hired an airplane and spotted the dome from the air.*

E. D. Tarbell was a man with passion and vision. His passion for astronomy led him to build a twelve inch viewing telescope. His vision included building a planetarium to share that passion with students and the general public. Inside his brochure (the front is pictured at right) he states, "Did you know there is a planetarium that is not connected with a Museum or University, open to the public?" Tarbell opened his planetarium nine years before the McDonnell Planetarium in St. Louis' Forest Park admitted its first visitor.

The planetarium and observatory were part of Inca Park and advertised along with the cave on Route 66, four miles away. Ken Sweet gave up the lease on the cave in 1961, after nine years of operating the show cave. Mr. Tarbell kept the observatory and planetarium open until his death in 1968.

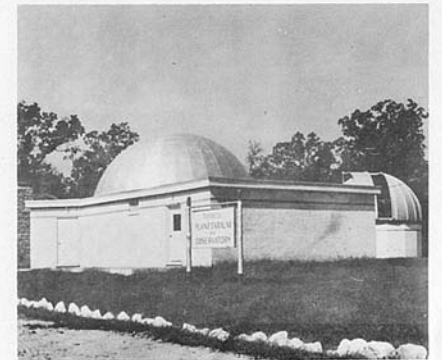


E. D. Tarbell pauses for the camera while sheathing the dome, prior to covering it with aluminum. Howard Terry constructed the concrete block building. The snapshot was taken on September 30, 1953. All pictures on this page courtesy of Margaret Tarbell Wehmeyer.



E. D. Tarbell operates his planetarium machine during one of the sky shows for a group of students. The stars moved across the sky from dusk to dawn, all within half an hour. The show also featured a violent thunderstorm.

## TARBELL PLANETARIUM INCA CAVE PARK LAQUEY, MISSOURI



*The space age is here!*

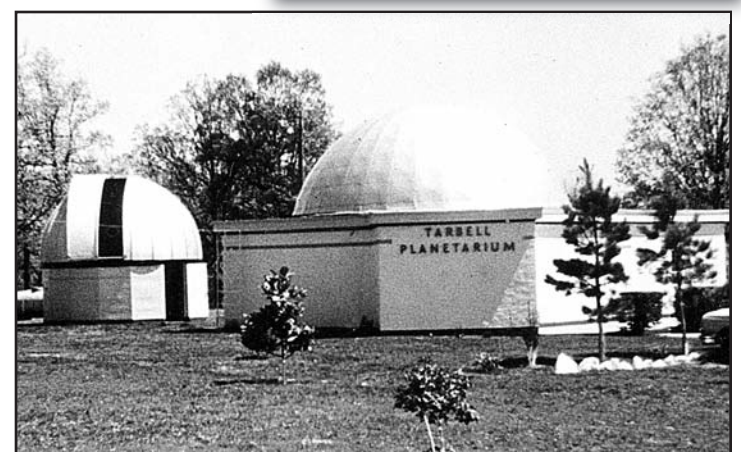
MAN MADE SATELLITES ARE CIRCLING OUR PLANET THIS VERY MINUTE

Soon Man Will Fly Into Outer Space and Return Safely

The Planetarium Is the Most Natural Medium for Showing the Night Sky So Far Invented.

We Welcome School Classes, Boy Scouts and Other Groups of Young People by Appointment.

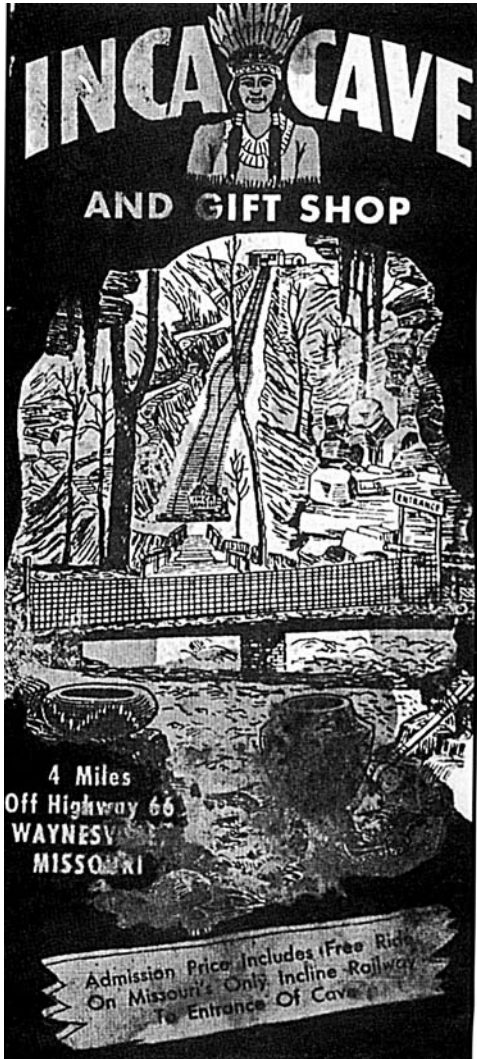
AT LOW ADMISSION PRICES



The finished planetarium, which was originally called the "Theater of the Sky," stands next to the observatory housing Tarbell's handmade 12 inch telescope, which was moved to the site from Devil's Elbow.

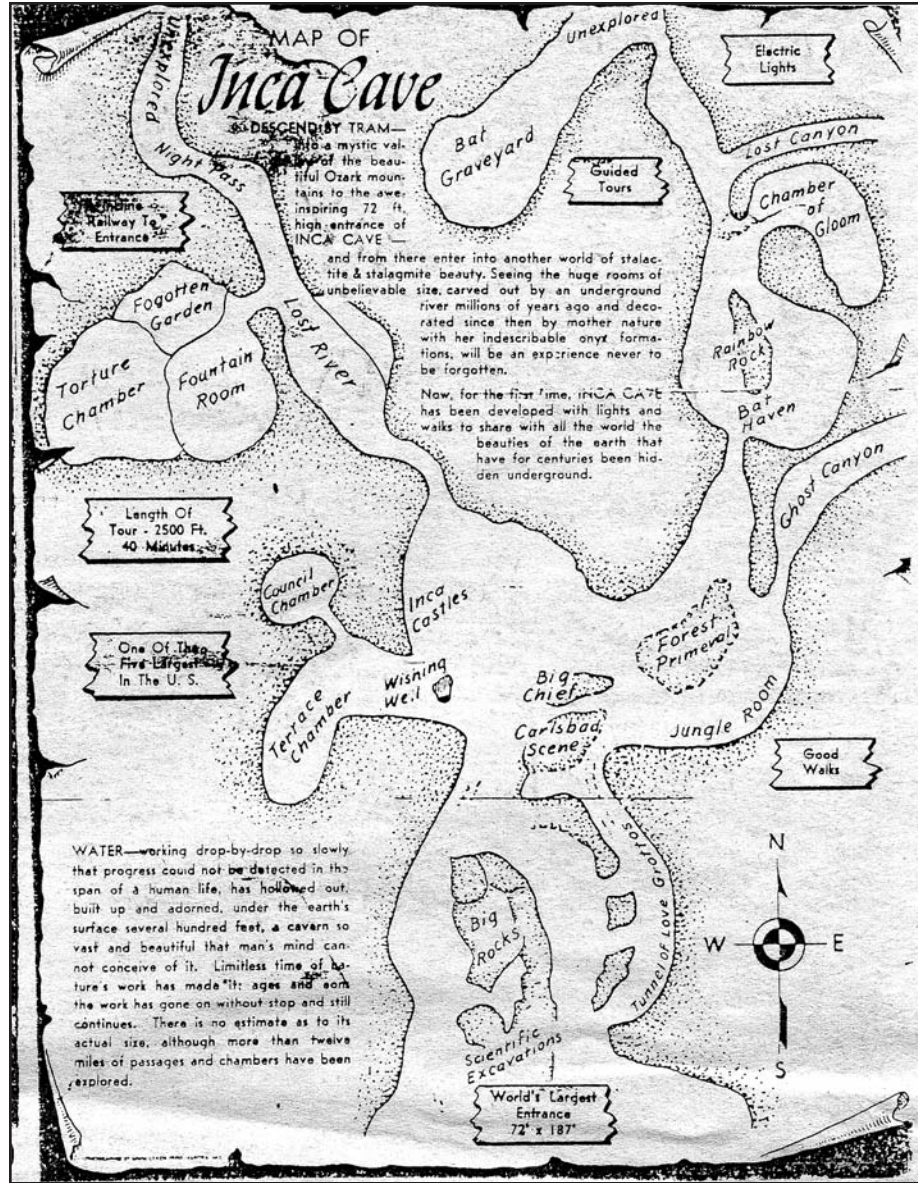


This group of students, noticeably all boys, from Crocker visited the Tarbell Planetarium on March 16, 1955. We do not know if this was a trip for a certain class nor do we know any of the names. Maybe a reader can provide details.



Inca Cave was not the first commercial cave in Pulaski County. B. F. Scott began development of Pike's Peak Cave (aka Indian, Kraft, Roubidoux) in the very early 1900s. It was located on Highway 17, two miles north of Waynesville at the confluence of Roubidoux Creek with the Gasconade River. However, its main attraction wasn't the cave as much as the dance hall and saloon constructed in its large entrance room. A resort developed on the grounds around Onyx Cave in eastern Pulaski County on the Gasconade, near Route 66 and Highway J, by the 1920s. The cave was touted as an attraction in addition to the accommodations, fishing, and swimming. Apparently, guests were provided lamps and allowed to wander at leisure through the cave.

Inca was a show cave in the modern sense with tours, electric lights, and fanciful names for formations. Signs were posted along Route 66 advertising the cave, emulating Lester Dill's highly successful promotion of Meramec Caverns. F. L. Hammit and Ken Sweet were also operating Stark Caverns. The days of leisurely trips on old Route 66 which allowed for sidetrips were about over. The new four-lane bypassed the Buckhorn-Laquey section by 1960, moving cars faster and farther from the State Route NN turnoff. The coming Interstate 44 would not slow the traffic. Hammit and Sweet let the lease on the Inca Cave site expire in 1961 and went out of the cave business entirely, selling Stark Caverns in the mid-1960s.



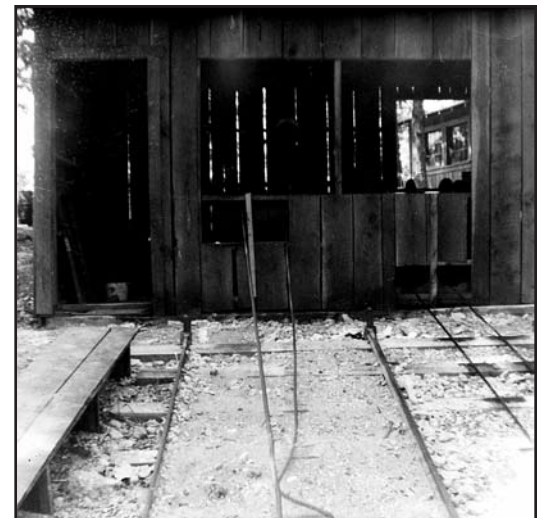
Inca Cave brochure courtesy of Van Beydler, printed in the *Old Settlers Gazette*, 1991.



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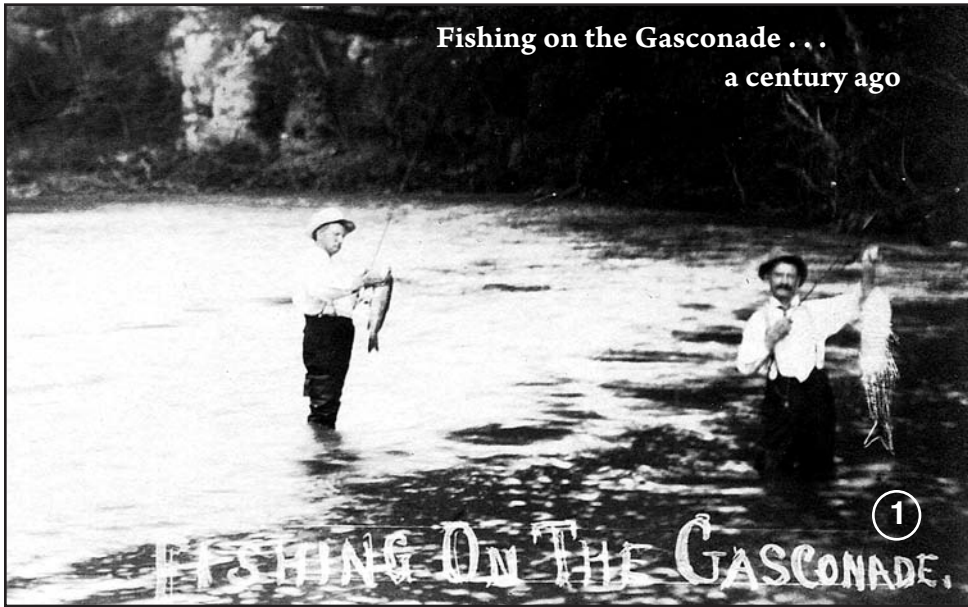


Show cave visitorship peaked in the 1950s-1960s. To be competitive, a cave needed a unique feature (or more) to set it apart from the others. Inca touted its cable car ride which descended the bluff 150 feet to the cave entrance. Visitors rode in small cars on the "Inca Express" (left). The cogwheel motor house is at right. Courtesy of Margaret Tarbell Wehmeyer.



One of the first features encountered inside was the speleothem "Big Chief," (left) so named to fit the Inca theme. After a 36 year ownership, Margaret Tarbell Wehmeyer sold the cave and 15 buffering acres to the Missouri Department of Conservation, as her wish was that the cave would not become further degraded. The Department of Conservation promptly renamed it Great Spirit Cave. MDC erected a chain link fence topped by barbed wire and later a huge bat gate. The cave is no longer accessible to the public and is managed habitat for two endangered species, the Grey and Indiana bats.

Photo at left by Gerald Massie, courtesy of the Missouri State Archives.




Fishing on the Gasconade . . .  
a century ago



If your fishing has been slow, take these hints: (1) if your fish is too small, get a photographer to draw in more fish; (2) dress for success with hat, tie, coat, and a twelve foot pole; (3) if you catch nine catfish, nail them to the wall for proof; and (4) if the fishing is no good, collect driftwood and tip your skimmer.



Pictures courtesy of Jan and Terry Primas.



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