

TARBELL PLANETARIUM AND MAXEY CAVE!

by E. D. Tarbell

(Courtesy of
Margaret
(Tarbell)
Wehmeyer)
Additional
material
by
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Inca Cave and Tarbell Planetarium were two tourist attractions in Pulaski County. In an unpublished book written by E. D. Tarbell, he described his dreams of building a planetarium not connected with a museum or university. For the first time in public, we present his words...

(Maxey Cave) 1937

After driving west on Highway 66 about ten miles, we turned off onto a gravel road. The road led past an old deserted log house, with a long rickety porch at the first and second stories. John Harlan called it "the old haunted house." While I didn't see any 'ha'nts' around, the title could easily apply. A mile beyond it, we turned sharply to the left up a steep winding road through the timber. A quarter of a mile further, the road led beside a wooded section, then turned left again into a narrow lane through the woods. After passing three small cabins, we went through a gate and parked at the end of the road. From here, we took out afoot down a steep path to a little log cabin with a handmade shingle roof...this was the home of an old fellow known as Uncle Cummy. Harlan knew him well and said, "Hi, Uncle Cummy, we came to do a little exploring in the cave and brought some friends with us. Would you go with us? I want to show them a real cave!"

Uncle Cummy got gasoline lanterns and some flashlights. While he busied himself with his lights on the porch, we looked around. The cabin was built on a rock ledge projecting over a little ravine leading to the mouth of the cave, but from where we stood, bushes and trees concealed the cavern. We started out single-file on the narrow path along the ledge, turned down among some huge boulders and passed under the ledge supporting the cabin. Uncle Cummy described all the wonders of the cave and of



The spectacular cave mouth of Great Spirit Cave stands like an open maw ready to swallow all who enter. Feb. 7th, 1950 (l to r) Mrs. Frank Thomas and Margaret Tarbell.
(Photos courtesy of Margaret Tarbell Wehmeyer)

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 formations 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.

E. D. Tarbell placed a "Time Capsule" in the concrete base of the permanent location for the building location of an observatory at his Kansas City home. An old sample wall safe that had been kicked around for years was prepared with pic-

tures, a 16 page letter to the future, a copy of the morning Kansas City Times, a Bible and a lot of other items. Tarbell dried the contents thoroughly before screwing the lid on tight, then covered the entire box with a heavy coat of pitch. Whoever attempts to dig out that box...if and when it ever happens, will have a tough job because Tarbell reinforced the concrete around it like a vault. The concrete was to be the future base for his telescope. Tarbell carved the words, "Copper Box Inside," in the clay at the bottom of the hole before pouring the concrete hoping that some future treasure hunter, seeing those words, would be surprised. The cornerstone ceremony took place on February 24, 1944. Tar-

bell's first astronomy club had died at the beginning of World War II, in Kansas City, but interest sprang up at Tarbell's Observatory. Shortly after finishing the steel dome in 1947, a group met at Tarbell's house to form a new club, and took the name "Kansas City Astronomy Club." In selling their Kansas City Home, Tarbell made arrangements to move the observatory within 60 days, to the new home they would make in Laquey.

Tarbell Planetarium

At dusk one evening in the fall of 1952, two men drove into our driveway at the lodge 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 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 planetarium instead. 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

sweat with his concrete block work through the summer and Tarbell sweat making the wooden ribs of the dome in his 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 6, 1954, we dedicated 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 to be 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.

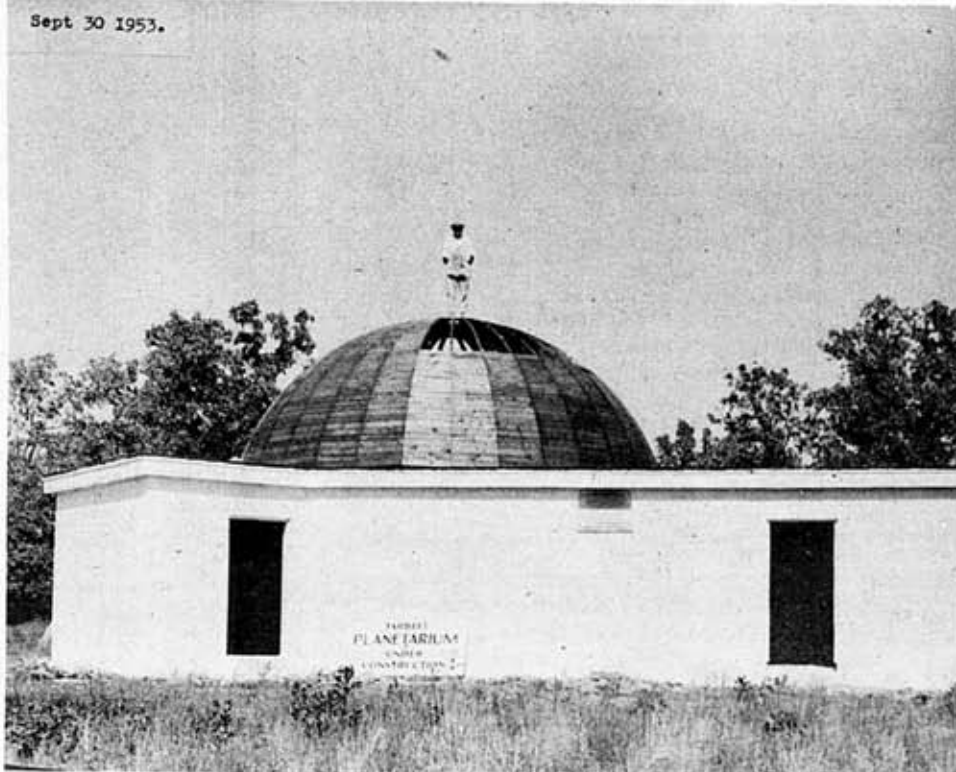
During the show, I turned down the stars gradually and lightning played along the distant horizon, then came a bright flash, lighting up the entire sky. Eventually, a tape recording of thunder recorded echoing against the bluff across the river at Devil's Elbow was used. In the spring after opening the 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, 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.

Ken Sweet kept his lease on the Inca Cave for nine years, then gave it up. Since 1961, the cave has reverted back to primitive Maxey Cave.

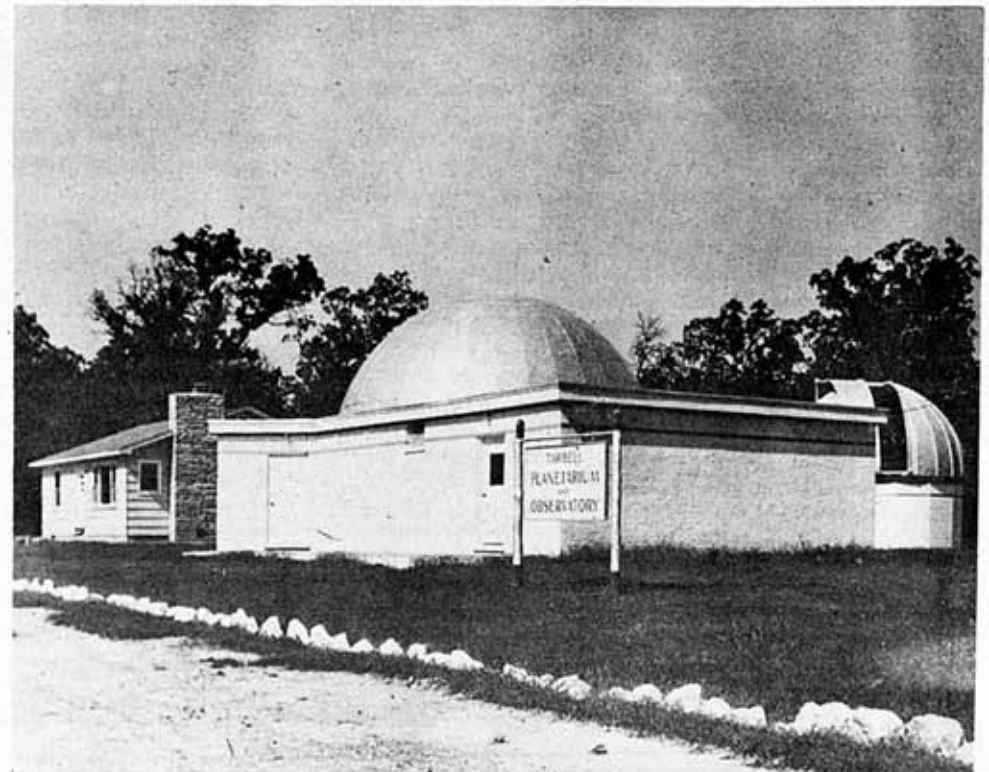


Pictured are Frank Thomas, Dale Tarbell, Uncle Cummy, Margaret Tarbell and a Mrs. Wilson.

Sept 30 1953.



Tarbell stands atop the dome during construction of the planetarium in Laquey on September 30th, 1953.



Tarbell Planetarium in its heyday. Notice the Observatory behind the planetarium building.

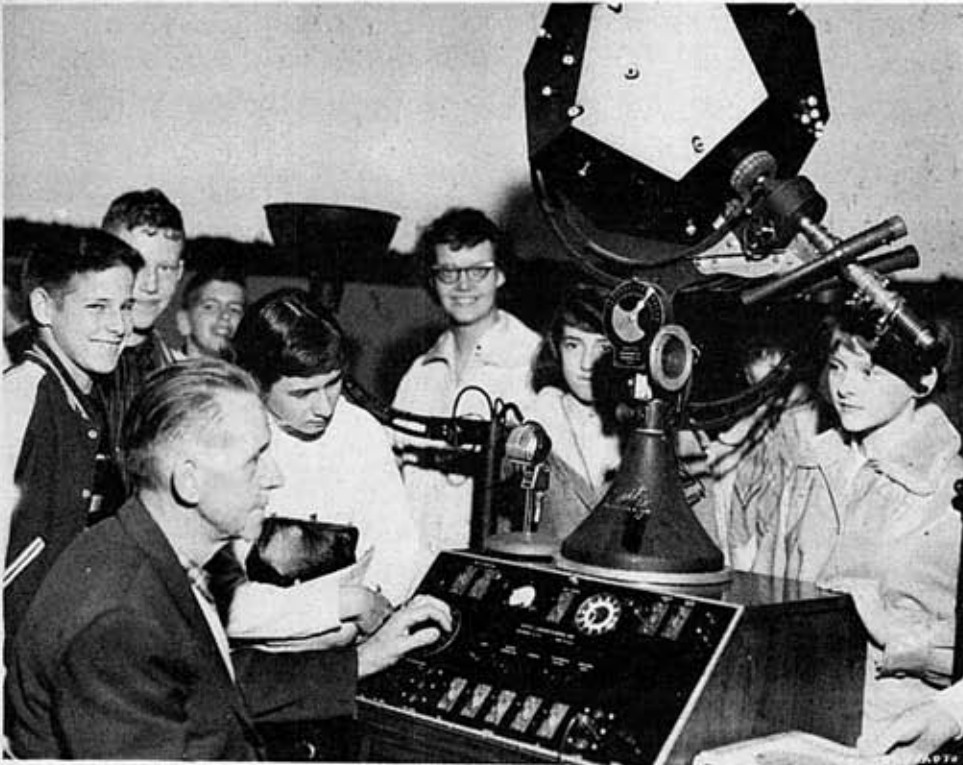
HISTORIC SITES IN LAQUEY!

According to Pulaski County Conservation agent Terry Roberson, the cave is now known as Great Spirit Cave, renamed according to Indian legend that states the cave was once a sacred place for the Indians. The cave was purchased by the Conservation Department in 1980 and is now closed to the public. The cave is a hibernaculum for

live there during winter months. Due to the low population of the endangered species, the Conservation Department even limits access to the cave to their own biologists to keep down disturbance. According to Natural History Administrator Jim Wilson at the Conservation offices in Jefferson City, the 15 acres around the cave is known as Great

Missouri."

A huge chain link fence, eight feet tall with three strands of barb wire on top, now covers the mouth entrance to the cave and trespassers could face federal charges of endangering the bat species and the protected antiquities act and state charges of refuge trespass and unauthorized artifact digging if they are caught



School children came from near and far to planetarium effects such as nightfall, sunset, lightning and the stars. Tarbell sits at the controls.

Federally protected bats. Both the Grey bat and Indiana bat make their home in the cave along with other cave life. Grey bats take up residence in summer while Indiana bats

Spirit State Forest and is managed by the Forestry Division of the department. "At one time," Wilson said, "the cave had one of the largest bat populations in the entire state of

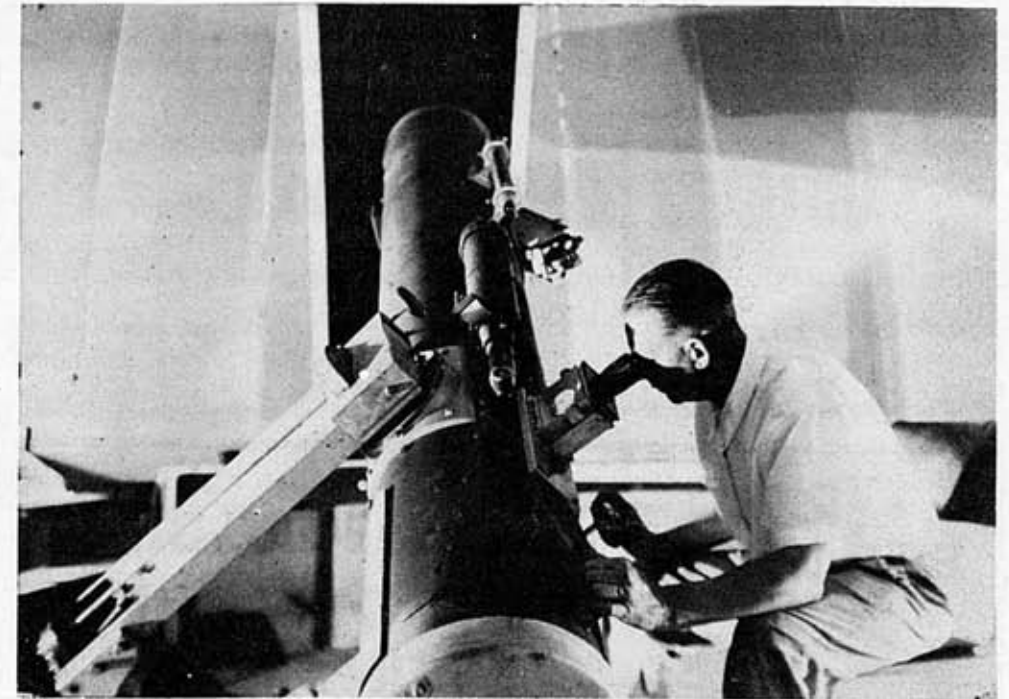
on the property. There is no public access road now available leading to the area to keep the land under protection.



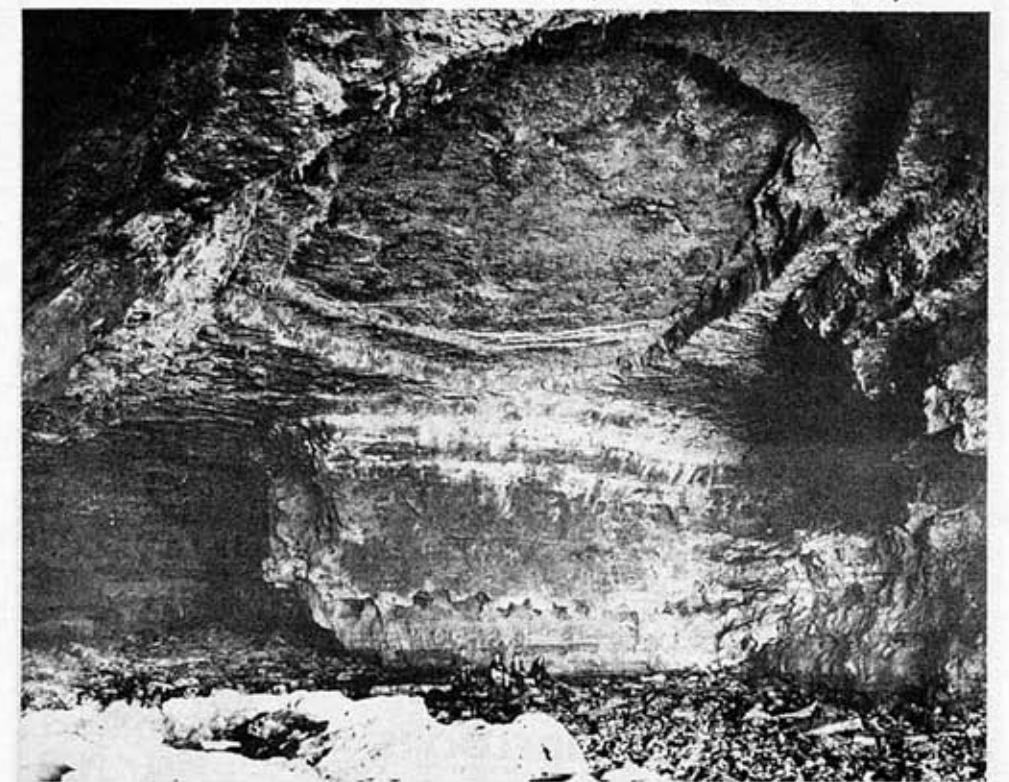
Lights added by developers give the Great Spirit Cave an unearthly glow in the Cathedral Room.



Tarbell Planetarium was originally called the "Theatre of the Sky" and opened to the public on June 6th, 1954.



E.D. Tarbell at the homemade telescope inside his observatory.



CAVE MOUTH INSIDE VIEW:

The opening of the cave mouth leads visitors into even vaster chambers carved by nature.