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Front Cover

Tourists in Floyd Collins Crystal Cave pose by Floyd’s coffin on September 13, 1941.

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The Journal of Spelean History

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THE EARLY FLOYD COLLINS BALLADS

David N. Brison

In the four years immediately following the tragic death of Floyd Collins as many as six different ballads were composed and recorded in his honor. More powerfully than anything else these ballads show us how deeply the Collins tragedy affected the average American.

The ballads have little to do with the grisly details surrounding Floyd's ordeal. They went beyond the facts and became musical editorials. The emphasis here is on commemorating the sad death of an extraordinary person. People that felt trapped in their personal lives could relate to Floyd who had been trapped in a far worse predicament than they. His courage and stamina went far to inspire songs of praise for a brave man.

These Floyd Collins ballads perpetuate a long tradition of event ballads, songs about recent newsworthy events, which began with the broadside ballads in Europe several centuries before. Broadside ballads could only be preserved on printed leaflets or, by passing into the oral tradition, kept alive in the memories of folk singers. With the invention of the phonograph in 1877 and the first commercial recordings of old time country music in 1923, it now became possible to disseminate event ballads on records.¹

The first and by far the most popular ballad about Floyd was The Death of Floyd Collins, composed by Andrew Jenkins (1885-1957) in mid-February 1925, just after the event. Jenkins, a partially blind newsboy, evangelist, and musician in Atlanta, Georgia, was commissioned to write a ballad by Polk Brockman (1898-?), the local Okeh record distributor and talent scout.²

Jenkins recalled that, "immediately upon receiving the wire [from Brockman] I went to the piano and in three hours the song was completed."³ He told another writer, "A perfect line ran through my mind, 'His body now lies sleeping alone in the sandstone cave.' I sat down at the piano and picked out the tune to swing with the words as they came to me."⁴

His stepdaughter, Irene Spain, sat beside him and transcribed the music and lyrics. She stated, in 1965, that, "We made [The Death of Floyd Collins] with 12 verses with the music and all in forty-five minutes and had it in the mails."⁵ Only nine of these original 12 stanzas were copyrighted in August, 1925 and published by J. K. Polk Inc. in Atlanta.⁶ The close similarity between the last four verses of stanzas 4 and 5 suggests that some tampering was done with the lyrics before publication. When Jenkins himself recorded the song he left out these two stanzas.

Less than two months after Floyd was found dead, the first recording of the Jenkins ballad was made by a well-known Atlanta performer, Fiddlin' John Carson (1873 or 1874-1949), a major personality on the early country music scene. Due to the three-minute average playing time of a ten-inch 78 rpm record, Carson could only sing six stanzas. He also made a few
wording changes and accompanying himself, using one of his own simple tunes for the fiddle breaks, played in his usual discordant, eccentric style.

Brockman thought the song could do better so he sent it to the Columbia Phonograph Company in New York where, on May 27, it was recorded by the light opera tenor, Vernon Dalhart (under the pseudonym of Al Craver)(1883-1948). Since making a career decision to switch to singing country music, Dalhart had his second big hit with the Jenkins ballad and went on to become the most successful recording star of early country music. From September 1925 to February 1926 and again in May 1928, he proceeded to cut seven more masters of the song for all the major record companies who released them (under his usual stage name) on 23 different labels (see appendix 2).

In February 1926, the popular success of Dalhart’s rendition prompted five of the major companies to have him record string band versions of the ballad, now entitled The Floyd Collins Waltz, where he only sings the first stanza.

All together Dalhart is said to have sold over a million copies of this ballad primarily on the Columbia and Victor labels which were the most widely distributed nationwide. Along with The Prisoner’s Song, from the year before, it thus became one of the first big hits in the history of recorded country music.

Andrew Jenkins and his step daughter Irene Spain.  

The first recording of Jenkins’ first ballad. (Photo D Brison)
In the summer of 1925 the ballad writer himself, Blind "Andy" Jenkins, cut the third version of the ballad. However, he titled it *Floyd Collins In Sand Cave*, which suggests that this was his original title and the more common title was assigned by someone else. When one compares the text that Jenkins sings here with the copyrighted sheet music many variants appear and certain verses ring truer, conform better to the facts, and seem closer to what the author probably wrote originally. Jenkins also sings an additional stanza telling how the "mining experts" struggled and succeeded in recovering Floyd's body. Clearly written after April 23 when the corpse was removed, this stanza appears to be a revised variant of an earlier unpublished stanza (which resurfaced only recently) 10 telling how the "cave that swallowed Floyd would never let him out." This modified additional stanza together with the six last lines of stanza 7 as sung here by Blind "Andy" probably represent fragments of the three missing stanzas from the original 12 mentioned above (see appendix 1).

Another significant difference in this rendition is the way Blind "Andy" retains his original melody but prolongs the syllables in the last verse of each stanza. No one else ever sang the ballad like this but no doubt this is the way the composer wanted it to be sung.

Three other artists recorded the first Jenkins ballad in the 20s: Charlie Oaks (ca1870-71), a blind minstrel in Knoxville, Tennessee, 11 Gloria Geer, also known as Vaughn DeLeath, who was a popular singer, and Harry Smith, who played the pipe organ and only sang two stanzas. At least seven pianists, for the most part using aliases, recorded instrumental versions of the tune on mechanical piano rolls.

The ballad then, by way of the phonograph record and the radio, passed into the oral folk song tradition and in the 30s and 40s the Archive of Folk Song at the Library of Congress collected it from three singers on non-commercial field recordings. Two of these performers were from North Carolina: Bascom Lamar Lunsford (1882-1973), a renowned collector of American folk songs, and H. J. Beecker, a faculty member at the Appalachian State Teachers College. The third non-commercial recording, made at the Archive in Washington, D.C., was by L. Parker Temple (aka Pick Temple) (1911-1991), who had first heard one of the Dalhart versions at a little store on the outskirts of Baltimore. 12

Two pioneering folk music labels revived commercial recordings of the ballad: Musicraft in 1944 with "Red River Dave" McEnery's (1914-) version and the distinguished Folkways label in 1957 with a version by Paul Clayton, who sings all nine stanzas collected from sources in Virginia and North Carolina, yet closely conforming to the wording of the printed sheet music.

Since then eight other performers have recorded the Jenkins ballad singing in a variety of styles ranging from country to unaccompanied traditional hymn to bluegrass. The Ronnie Hawkins (1935-) version in 1959 changed the title, gave composer credit to Hawkins, made unfortunate text changes, and, worst of all, used the fourth stanza as chorus which violated the true narrative ballad form by interrupting the listener's emotional involvement in the song's story.

In 1961 Pick Temple came back and did a commercial recording, this time replacing stanza 3 with stanza 6 and changing the last four verses to:
And how the people waited
For all the news they gave
About the brave explorer
Trapped in that awful cave.

Pick Temple had his own radio show starting in 1948 and later a 15-minute television show in the Washington, D.C. area that ran for several years where he occasionally sang the Jenkins ballad. He had developed a special side interest in the Floyd Collins story and together with another writer, John Johnson, conducted considerable research for a book to be entitled *Nor All Your Tears: The Tragic Fate of Floyd Collins*. However, when Murray and Brucker's book came out they abandoned their project.

Two versions in 1976 were by handicapped singers: a street preacher, Reverend Baybie Hoover (1915 or 1916–?), the third blind singer to record the ballad, and a Kentucky coal miner and black lung disease victim George Tucker (1917–?), who learned the lyrics from the Fiddlin' John Carson 78 and cut a particularly moving version where his raspy voice fails him on certain notes.

The most recent known version by Phil Alvin in 1986 has a rousing fiddle arrangement with bluegrass licks done up by Richard Greene which may not please the purists but which, in its own way, rekindles all the heart-rending emotion of the original.

Jenkins' own recording of his first ballad. (Photo D. Brison) Piano roll recordings of Jenkins' first ballad. (Photo D. Brison)
Since the 1920s the ballad passed into the oral tradition principally by means of the 78 rpm phonograph record. In the decades that followed folklore collectors would rediscover it on field trips, transcribe it, and publish it in collections of American folk songs. From Detroit, Michigan\textsuperscript{15} to Parch Corn Hollow, Tennessee\textsuperscript{16} the Jenkins ballad, not credited or miscredited, comprising nearly always the first three and last three stanzas, appeared in over 15 different scholarly folk song treatises. Most recently in 1975, the nine original stanzas were credited to Jenkins and Spain and printed along with an additional stanza including four verses never before seen or heard.\textsuperscript{17}

Today the ballad lives on in the oral tradition kept alive by American cavers around campsites at NSS Conventions, Old Timers’ Reunions, and regional meets across the country. As long as Floyd is remembered this ballad will stand.

After his first composition, Andrew Jenkins became very prolific. At the end of his life he had written over 300 topical and 500 gospel songs\textsuperscript{18} including at least one other Floyd Collins ballad. In May 1926, again probably encouraged by Polk Brockman, Jenkins composed an overly sweet, sentimental ballad of six short stanzas entitled, "Floyd Collins’ Dream." Recorded on the Okeh label by Vernon Dalhart, its lyrics reflected the contemporary trends in love ballads and only mentioned the tragedy in one line of each stanza.

Two years later another ballad, "Memories of Floyd Collins," was released by two different groups, the Ozark Warblers and Clarence & Claude Gamus. On the labels, Polk "Brockman," was credited as the songwriter but the style, stanza structure, meter, and moral ending closely resembled Jenkins first ballad. Five distinct lines correspond almost word for word with lines in that initial ballad. One strongly suspects that Jenkins was the true composer here.\textsuperscript{19}

Late in life Jenkins himself recorded this "Memories" ballad coupled with another of his own topical ballads, "Little Kathy." His stepdaughter, Irene Spain, tells about this 78 record, "the last ‘tragic’ song daddy and I made was about the little girl who fell in the well [in California in 1949] – ‘Little Kathie Fiscus.’ I was looking at the record a few days ago and it has Brockman as composer and owner. I only know we never received a dime for the writing of it."\textsuperscript{20} As so often has happened in the music business, Jenkins apparently was the victim of dishonest practices where a record producer attached his own name to a song to profit from the royalties.

The lyrics here compare the Collins tragedy with other tragic events which occurred in the latter half of the 1920s, events ranging from a Miami hurricane to the deaths of pioneer aviators, all of which were duly celebrated by event ballads performed by Vernon Dalhart and others. Andrew Jenkins, a sidewalk newsvendor and avid radio listener would remember well all these events.

Strangely, the message given in stanzas 2 and 3 is that "the saddest of all memories" was Floyd’s entrapment. Now it hardly seems excusable to claim that Floyd’s death was sadder or more tragic than the death of hundreds. One needs to realize that the Collins story was front page news for over two weeks and it became not only the first "media event" of the 1920s but also one of the most publicized news events involving one individual in that decade, taking second place behind Lindbergh’s solo flight across the Atlantic.
The second ballad writer to be inspired by the Collins drama was George Hunt. His 7-stanza ballad entitled *Sand Cave*, was recorded around April 30, 1925 by George Ake with guitar, fiddle, and banjo accompaniment at the studios of Gennett Records in Richmond, Indiana. This master was released on three different labels: the 75-cent Gennett label, and the budget, half-price labels Silvertone and Champion. For the latter, separate pseudonyms John Fergus and Edward Johnson were used to hide the fact that identical material was being issued on the more expensive Gennett label.

The lyrics of the Hunt ballad convey a strong message of courage and endurance. These feelings are reinforced through the use of three stirring quotes from Floyd; pure devices, which appear nowhere in Murray and Brucker’s carefully researched book *Trapped*, where all dialogue was authenticated through eye-witness accounts and court hearing reports. Within the long-established conventions of the folk ballad, fabricated quotes were employed to make a more personal statement charged with emotion.

Scattered throughout the ballad are rich details relating to the event, some not too accurate: Floyd was around 55 vertical feet down, not “80 feet” down. There is the typical mining expression, “the floor was a’ swellin’,” referring to the unstable situation following a blast where the weakened passage walls allow hydraulic pressure to force the floor up to the ceiling. What actually happened was that the cave passage started to deteriorate due to constant body traffic, seeping ground water, and rising cave temperatures.

![Pick Temple in Phoenix, AZ in 1984. (Photo D. Brison)](image1)

![The 1928 version by the Ozark Warblers. (Photo D. Brison)](image2)
Nothing is known about the ballad writer George Hunt, but stanza 3 starts out, “We dug like mad ...,” suggesting that he was part of the rescue crew. The miner who organized the recovery of Floyd’s body in April 1925 was W.H. Hunt.²⁵ So it’s tempting to speculate that they may have been related but the last stanza here makes it clear that the ballad was written before the recovery effort when Floyd was still “layin’ down yonder all alone” in the cave until “the angels come an’ roll away the stone.”

Again in 1925, a third ballad writer, Al Eggers, was moved to compose yet another song, *Floyd Collins’ Fate*. This 4-stanza work somewhat resembles the structure and content of Jenkins’ first ballad. The same sentimental mood is created by the references to Floyd’s family and it ends in a familiar manner with a moral message.

Two distinct renditions of the Eggers ballad were recorded, each with different instrumental backing and with slight changes in the text involving no more than four words. The singer on both versions was Vernon Dalhart hiding behind two of his many pseudonyms. The first performance with clarinet and pump organ accompaniment was credited to Bob Thomas and released in late 1925²⁶ on the Grey Gull label and on its subsidiary label, Radiex. The second version has Dalhart singing in a different key with a less formal affected style than usual, backed by violin and pump organ. This was released in early 1926 on the Emerson label as by James Hunter and on the Supreme label as by Bob Thomas.
In March 1939, while on an extensive field recording trip in the south for the Library of Congress and the Folk Arts Committee of the Work Projects Administration, Herbert Halpert recorded seven songs sung by G. W. Blevins, a preacher in Wise, Virginia. Blevins had composed one of these, entitled *Floyd Collins*, sometime back in 1925. Again, as with the Hunt ballad, it is very tempting to speculate that the songwriter Blevins was related in some way to Albert B. Blevins of Louisville, a prominent member of the rescue crew, who worked in the shaft-tunnel and was one of the three to finally reach Floyd.  

In the recorded interview conducted by Halpert, Blevins says he had never heard “that other Floyd Collins song,” referring, no doubt, to the best-known Jenkins ballad. When asked how he made up his ballad, Blevins said, “Well, I dug the writing of it, the way it come in the papers an’ I made it up. I dug the items. The truth if there was any. That’s the reason I made it.”

Clearly Blevins was strongly affected by the Collins rescue effort and moved to compose eight short stanzas for his family and friends, or perhaps he wrote “simply to gain relief from the inner tension by the cathartic process of creating a song.” In stanza 7 he writes in the style of a banner news headline, “Brought Floyd to the Top,” indicating that the ballad was completed in late April or early May 1925 after Floyd’s body had been removed from the cave.

The root influences here seem to come straight out of the long and worthy tradition of the miner’s complaint ballad. The main emphasis of the lyrics is not on Floyd’s personal ordeal as in the other ballads but rather more importance is given to the struggle of the rescue crews and miners who tried to save Collins and later brought his body out for burial. As for the melody, the first line of each stanza ends with a long, high wail bringing to mind elements that would appear frequently in bluegrass music.

Unfortunately Halpert’s field recording techniques were sorely lacking: the amplifier levels were saturated and Blevins’ voice was frequently off-mike during the interview and, most annoying of all, throughout the recording, we hear a ground noise or humming sound due to a bad connection in the microphone cable. But these 78rpm acetate phonodiscs were made solely for the Archive of Folk Song and were never intended for commercial release. Given a good arrangement and a decent recording the Blevins ballad could easily find its rightful place as one of the finest Floyd Collins ballads ever written.

Since the late 1920s when these six ballads were composed no further songs about Floyd either appeared or were recorded for over 40 years until the creation of the NSS Ballad Competition in the 1970s. Here the musical creative process came full circle and cavers themselves started to write songs about Floyd. More recently a stage musical *Floyd Collins*, which includes a 14-stanza ballad was premiered in 1994 in Philadelphia and later had a short run in a New York theater.

Of the six early Floyd Collins ballads, which were recorded, only Jenkins’ first ballad was known in caving circles. Hopefully, the best of the forgotten ballads, Hunt’s *Sand Cave* and Blevins’ *Floyd Collins*, will be picked up and performed by cavers and thus finally enter the oral tradition after all these years of neglect.
Consolation is one of the most powerful functions of the folk song,\textsuperscript{32} healing solace in times of sorrow and loss. The early ballad writers discussed here were not cavers but they were clearly inspired by the courage, endurance, and sheer greatness of Floyd and were moved to console their listening public on the loss of a heroic man.

Music not only heals but can also be an effective liberating force. Among the many ways that the American caving community honors one of its finest members is a simple bumper sticker reading, “Free Floyd Collins”. In the late 1920s those who heard these ballads and were moved by them could allow Floyd’s spirit to run free and live on in their hearts. He was finally freed from the rock that pinned him in that cave.

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The 1926 version by James Hunter (aka Vernon Dalhart). (Photo D. Brison)
APPENDIX 1: BALLAD TRANSCRIPTIONS

All the following ballads with the exception of the first Jenkins ballad The Death of Floyd Collins, were transcribed directly from the phonodiscs by the author and any errors are his.

______________________________

THE DEATH OF FLOYD COLLINS

Music & Lyrics: Andrew Jenkins (1)
Music Transcription: Irene Spain
Publishing Rights: James K. Polk Inc., 1925 and Shapiro, Bernstein & Co., 1925

1. Oh, come all you young people
   And listen while I tell;
The fate of Floyd Collins,
A lad we all knew well;
His face was fair and handsome,
His heart was true and brave;
His body now lies sleeping
In a lonely sandstone cave.

2. How sad, how sad the story,
   It fills our eyes with tears;
Its memories too will linger
For many, many years;
A broken-hearted father,
Who tried his boy to save;
Will now weep tears of sorrow
At the door of Floyd's cave.

3. Oh! Mother, don't you worry;
   Dear father, don't be sad;
I'll tell you all my troubles
In an awful dream I had;
I dreamed I was pris'ner,
My life I could not save;
I cried, "Oh, must I perish
Within this silent cave."

4. "Oh! Floyd," cried his mother,
   "Don't go, my son, don't go
'Twould leave us broken-hearted
If this should happen so."
Tho' Floyd did not listen,
Advice his mother gave
So his body now lies sleeping
In a lonely sandstone cave.

5. His father often warned him
   From follies to desist
He told him of the danger
And of the awful risk
But Floyd would not listen
To the oft advice he gave
So his body now lies sleeping
In a lonely sandstone cave.

6. Oh! How the news did travel
   Oh! How the news did go
It traveled thru the papers
And over the radio
A rescue party gathered
His life they tried to save
But his body now lies sleeping
In a lonely sandstone cave.

7. The rescue party labored,
   They worked both night and day
To move the mighty barrier
That stood within the way
To rescue Floyd Collins,
This was their battle cry
"We'll never, no, we'll never
Let Floyd Collins die."

8. But on that fatal morning
   The sun rose in the sky
The workers still were busy
We'll save him by and by
But, oh! How sad the ending
His life could not be saved
His body then lies sleeping
In a lonely sandstone cave.
9. Young people, oh, take warning
   From Floyd Collins' fate
   And get right with your maker
   Before it is too late;
   It may not be a sand cave
   In which we find our tomb
   But at the bar of judgement
   We too must meet our doom.

   Additional Stanza (3)
   (This stanza should be placed between
   stanzas 6 and 7)

   The mining experts gathered,
   They sought to find a plan
   To lift poor Floyd's body
   From far beneath the sand
   And oh, how they did struggle
   With hearts brave and stout
   But the cave that swallowed Collins
   Would never let him out.

   Variant Stanza 7 (2)
   (As performed by Jenkins)

   That rescue party labored
   They toiled night and day
   To rescue Floyd Collins
   His body still then lay;
   They worked all night 'til morning
   But the stone they could not move
   So now we stand around him
   And mourn in deepest love.

   Modified Additional Stanza (2)
   (Written in April 1925, this stanza should
   be placed between stanzas 8 and 9)

   The mining experts gathered
   They sought to find a plan
   To move poor Floyd's body
   From far beneath the sand.
   It seemed a mighty struggle
   But with hearts brave and stout
   They finally, overcoming,
   Pulled Floyd's body out.

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2. Blind "Andy" (Andrew Jenkins) Version of this ballad on 78 phonodisc, Okeh
   40393, Stanzas 5 & 7, 1925
   Foundation Press; Nashville, TN, p. 77
MEMORIES OF FLOYD COLLINS

Written by (Credited to "Brockman")
Probable author: Andrew Jenkins
Pub. Rights: George Buck; Decatur, Georgia
Performing Artists: Ozark Warblers

1. How well we all remember
   Not many years ago
   How the great ship Shenandoah
   Met an awful overthrow;
   And the wreck of 97
   With the engineer so brave;
   And the hero Floyd Collins
   In the lonely sandstone cave.

2. Remember the storm of Florida
   And the many lives there lost;
   And the Mississippi Valley
   Where hundreds paid the cost.
   But the saddest of all memories
   Though they tried so hard to save
   Is the memory of a boy still sleeping
   In a lonely sandstone cave.

3. Our heroes in their aeroplanes
   Tried to span the ocean's breast;
   They tried for glory and for fame
   And gladly pay with death.
   But sadder still than the story
   Of an end they could avoid
   Is the tale down in Kentucky
   Of a poor young hero Floyd.

4. Good people, now take warning
   All over this fair land
   And get right with your Maker
   For before Him you must stand.
   Be in air, or plain, or ocean
   Wherever you may roam
   Just like poor Floyd Collins
   The call to you will come.
FLOYD COLLINS' DREAM

Written by Andrew Jenkins
Pub. Rights: (Unknown)
Performing Artist: Vernon Dalhart

1. I wish I had someone to love me
   Someone to say a last good-bye;
   I know, my darling, that you will miss me
   When deep beneath these rocks I lie.

2. I wish, my darling, that you are near me
   Then I would not feel so alone;
   I wish your smile was here to cheer me
   Beneath this heavy weight of stone.

3. I know, my darling, that you do love me
   And that our love you'll always reap,
   But if I thought you loved another
   Within this cave I'd rather sleep.

4. Now far beneath these rocks I'm lying
   No pillow for my aching head;
   Oh God, I know I must be dying
   Far from my home and childhood bed.

5. In childhood days, happy I wandered
   With those in life I loved the best
   But in this cave of silent wonders
   My aching heart will soon find rest.

6. Farewell, dear father, farewell, dear mother,
   Goodbye to all my sweet loves too
   My silent prayer at this sad parting
   May heaven bless and comfort you.
SAND CAVE

Written by George Hunt
Pub. Rights: (Unknown)
Performing Artist: George Ake (aka John Fergus or Edward Johnson)

1. When you're singing songs of men who dared,
   When you're tellin' tales of souls unscared,
   Don't forget wherein Floyd Collins
   When Sand Cave fell upon him
   For he never flinched a moment or despaired.

2. He was eighty feet down in the gloom
   And the rocks fall in like the crack of doom
   But he said, "Don't you worry,
   Just do your best an' hurry,
   Tell the boys that (I'm off?) singing in my tomb."

3. We dug like mad but all in vain
   For the rocks fell upon him once again,
   The floor was a' swellin'
   An' our sad tears up-wellin',
   But he never thought a moment to complain.

4. He went in where no man had ever been
   And he saw what no man had ever seen
   But he murmured with a smile,
   "If I die, it's been worthwhile."
   He's the gamest man that I have ever seen.

5. Yes, he's layin' down there in the cold
   But he faced death unafraid and bold
   You could hear him a' prayin'
   An' here's what he was sayin',
   "Lord above me, won't you give me strength to hold."

6. He laid there for seventeen long days
   And death won a long an' (troublesome?) race.
   Though the rock held him fast
   He was game 'til the last
   For they found him with a smile upon his face.

7. Yes, he's layin' down yonder all alone
   With his work here on earth forever done
   In his tomb he shall lay
   'Til the great Judgement Day
   When the angels come an' roll away the stone.
FLOYD COLLINS' FATE

Written by Al Eggers
Pub Rights: (Unknown)
Performing Artist: James Hunter (aka Vernon Dalhart)

1. Now listen, friends and brothers,
To what I have to state
About a man Floyd Collins
And how he met his fate.
A man of mighty courage
Who went to meet his doom
In the hills of old Kentucky
In a dreary, living tomb.

2. He left his dad and mother
With courage in his eye;
His happy family never knew
This was their last good-bye.
He wandered through the mountain
To parts that were unknown
And caught his strong and sturdy leg
Beneath a heavy stone.

3. His cries and groans were all in vain
But still his heart was brave;
Down there he lay for many days
In that cruel and sandy cave.
His father tried to save his boy
With friends and neighbors all,
But 'ere they broke the barrier down
He heard his Master's call.

4. God, forbid that anymore
Should meet this awful fate;
So take a lesson from this tale
Before it is too late.
Remember that the golden rule
Is a thing we all should learn,
For when you leave your happy home
You may ne'er again return.
FLOYD COLLINS

Written by G. W. Blevens
Pub. Rights: Archives of Folk Culture; Library of Congress
Performing Artist: G. W. Blevens

1. Those men they labored hard
   There life they tried to save
   The poor ole Floyd Collins
   In the sandstone cave.

2. But the shaft it gave them trouble
   The logs were falling in
   An’ (bent in ?) the lives of all
   Those hard-workin’ men.

3. “We’ll take chances on Our Lord,”
   All the workers said
   But when they found poor Floyd
   His number drifted in.

4. We’ll seal him up forever
   Until the Judgement Day
   When God will send his angels
   An’ roll the stone away.

5. The people began to murmur
   They said, “Take him from the cave
   And have his funeral preached
   And prepare him for the grave.”

6. One poor miner said,
   “I’ll take chances on my life
   I’ll take him from the cave
   To satisfy his wife.”

7. So the story broke away,
   “Brought Floyd to the top,”
   While the people gathered ‘round
   That sad and lonely spot.

8. Poor Floyd roamed the mountains
   To find an openin’ in the ground
   But this one that he entered
   Was the last one that he found.

-20-
APPENDIX 2: DISCOGRAPHY OF THE EARLY FLOYD COLLINS BALLADS

1. THE DEATH OF FLOYD COLLINS
   Music & Lyrics: Andrew Jenkins
   Music Transcription: Irene Spain
   Publishing Rights: James K. Polk Inc., 1925 and Shapiro, Bernstein & Co., 1925

Alternate Titles: FLOYD COLLINS IN SAND CAVE; FLOYD COLLINS WALTZ;
THE TALE OF FLOYD COLLINS; FLOYD COLLINS;
COLLINS CAVE

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The Journal of Spelean History -21-
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**PIANO ROLL RECORDINGS**

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2. **FLOYD COLLINS’ DREAM**

Written by Andrew Jenkins

Vernon Dalhart                     | Okeh        | 40623-B    | May 1926   

*The Journal of Spelean History*
3. MEMORIES OF FLOYD COLLINS  
Credited on label to "Brockman"S -- Probable Author: Andrew Jenkins

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<td>Clarence &amp; Claude Ganus</td>
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4. SAND CAVE  
Written by George Hunt

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5. FLOYD COLLINS'S FATE  
Written by Al Eggers

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6. FLOYD COLLINS  
Written by G. W. Blevins

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REFERENCES:
1. (For V. Dalhart & J. Carson)
2. (For other recording and release dates)
   Barr, Steven 1992, *The Almost Complete 78rpm Record Dating Guide (II)*, Yesterday Once Again; Huntington Beach, CA

-24-
VERNON DALHART AND *THE DEATH OF FLOYD COLLINS*

Dale R. Ibberson

Many who have heard Vernon Dalhart sing *The Death of Floyd Collins* probably regard him as a hillbilly singer. But the truth is that he had professional voice training at an early age, and could sing a wide range of music equally well. He started out singing church music, then opera, then popular music, and finally country music in 1924. He was the first big star to popularize country music, taking it from a local level to a national stage. Of the more than 1600 songs he recorded on over 3000 different records, two-thirds of them can be classified as country, and many of them sold millions of copies. In short, he was the Elvis Presley of his day.

Vernon Dalhart was born Marion Try Slaughter on April 6, 1883, on a 500-acre ranch in Jefferson, Texas, the only child of Robert Marion and Mary Jane (Castleberry) Slaughter. The Slaughter family was prone to violence, which resulted in Marion’s father being killed in a saloon by brother-in-law Bob Castleberry when Marion was but 10 years old. His mother was a pretty and gentle woman who encouraged his musical talent at an early age. Young Marion learned to play the harmonica, Jew’s harp, and kazoo— instruments he would play on later recordings. As a teenager he worked as a ranch-hand before moving to Dallas with his mother. There he studied at the Dallas Conservatory of Music while working odd jobs at a hardware store, a piano store, and as a paid church soloist.

Vernon Dalhart (1883-1948) was the most successful recording artist of early country music. (D. Ibberson photo)

Dalhart’s Edison record of *The Death of Floyd Collins*. (D. Ibberson photo)
In 1902 he married Sadie Lee Moore-Livingston. A daughter, Janice, was born in 1903 and a son, Marion Try Jr. was born in 1904. Marion moved his family to New York in 1910 to study opera and to try to break into the music business. He worked at a piano store and warehouse during the day and studied at night, picking up extra money singing at churches and funerals.

His first break came in 1912 when he got a minor stage role in Puccini's *Girl of the Golden West*. This was the first time he used the stage name Vernon Dalhart, which he derived from two Texas towns he had worked near as a cowboy. A major role came to him in 1914 when he was cast as the leading tenor in Gilbert and Sullivan’s *HMS Pinafore*.

Vernon Dalhart (notice that I've started using his stage name) had been trying to get an interview with Edison Records for years to no avail. Finally, in 1916, he passed an audition and was asked to sing for Thomas Edison himself. Edison was nearly deaf by this time so Dalhart had to sing directly into his “ear trumpet.” Edison thought he had a wonderful voice but it was another two years before a recording session took place. Dalhart eventually recorded over 200 songs for Edison Records. Luckily, he did not wait for Edison but instead made his first recording for Columbia on September 13, 1916, with a song entitled *Just a Word of Sympathy*. From 1916 to 1924 Dalhart recorded over 400 songs for various record companies and many of them were moderately successful.

In 1924 Dalhart talked Edison Records into letting him record *The Wreck of the Southern Old 97*, stating it was in the public domain so no royalties would need to be paid. It sold well despite an inappropriate racial song by another artist on the B-side. He then approached Victor Records about recording it. Apparently it was a common practice to record with as many companies as possible. The companies themselves would also release the same record under many subsidiary labels. Was this “market saturation” or “everybody gets a piece of the pie?” Anyway, Victor dropped “Southern” from the title and agreed to record it if Dalhart could come up with a suitable song for the B-side. The result was *The Prisoner’s Song*, which was surrounded by controversy. Apparently the words were written by Dalhart’s cousin, Guy Massey, and Victor musical director Nathaniel Shilkret added the music. Dalhart copyrighted the song in his cousin’s name but Dalhart himself received most of the royalties. One writer has stated that *The Prisoner’s Song* eventually sold over 25 million copies to make it the best selling country song ever. As for *The Wreck of the Old 97* being in the public domain, 50 persons came forward to claim authorship. Two lawsuits eventually reached the U.S. Supreme Court and were not settled for 15 years.

The success of this record propelled Vernon Dalhart to the top of the growing list of nationally known country performers, making him very much in demand by record producers. So, following the Floyd Collins tragedy the next year, Dalhart was the logical choice to record the Jenkins-Spain ballad, even though a rival artist, Fiddlin’ John Carson, had already recorded it. The first Dalhart release was issued by Columbia Records using the alias of Al Craver. This was one of at least 110 pseudonyms used by Dalhart or his record companies during his career. This is another marketing ploy I fail to understand; and this tactic had to be very confusing to the public. Even his friends would occasionally warn him with a comment like, “Watch out for that new guy, Al Craver-- He’s imitating you and sounds just like you!” A few months later it was released by
Victor Records under the Vernon Dalhart name. Over the next year or two this ballad was re-recorded and re-issued under many labels, about half of which I have in my collection. A paper by my good friend Dave Brison elsewhere in this publication will give additional information on these many releases.

*The Death of Floyd Collins* also sold over a million copies, making Dalhart quite wealthy. He had bought a mansion in suburban Mamaroneck, New York, complete with an underground garage for his Cadillacs. For a high school graduation present his son received a new Stutz Bearcat automobile. Unfortunately, Dalhart had invested heavily in the stock market. The crash of 1929 and the depression which followed had a profound effect on his career. Most record companies went out of business as record sales slumped. His popularity also declined as other artists such as Gene Autrey took his place. He was forced to sell his mansion and move to smaller quarters. After selling an estimated 70 million records, his final new release occurred in 1938 and was a dismal failure.

Vernon Dalhart’s grave is in Bridgeport, Connecticut. (D. Snyder photo)
In 1942, being almost 60 years old, he found employment as a night watchman with the Bullard Company in Bridgeport, Connecticut. "War Work," he called it. He then worked for the Harry Hawley Voice Studio in Bridgeport but had few students. His final job was as the night clerk at the fashionable Barnum Hotel in Bridgeport. After two heart attacks he died in Bridgeport Hospital on September 14, 1948; his past accomplishments all but forgotten. He was buried at Mountain Grove Cemetery in Bridgeport, beside his son who had died previously and near P. T. Barnum and Tom Thumb.

Vernon Dalhart was posthumously inducted into The Country Music Hall of Fame in 1981.

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Special thanks to Judi Stack, Bill Karpowicz, Dean Snyder, and Rich Rosevear.
THE ROLE OF MALCOLM BLACK IN THE FLOYD COLLINS SAGA

William R. Halliday

Introduction

To most students of the Floyd Collins saga, the name of Malcolm Black is barely known, if at all. Aside from his family and a few close friends in Glasgow, Kentucky, most of the world is unaware that he was an eyewitness to some of its most controversial journalistic events. Some of his retrospective accounts lend special insight into the character and behavior of Chicago Tribune reporter Tom Killian. "Killian really taught me the fundamentals of creating news when there was little development," Black asserted in the twilight of his life.

Brief Biography of Malcolm Black

Malcolm Black was one of Glasgow's own, born less than five miles from town. He went to school in Louisville, however. While in school there, he had a job as a night sports reporter of the Louisville Herald (which later became the Herald-Post)— "just a little freckled faced kid," he described himself 40 years later. Here he worked briefly but unforgettabley with young Skeets Miller. Ultimately Black spent 22 years as a journalist; five years with the Herald, two years with the Courier-Journal, and 15 years as associate editor of the Glasgow Times. During World War II, he also was a journalist, writing for the Stars and Stripes with an especially notable assignment with General Eisenhower's forces beginning on D+6 Day. While in the Army he became acquainted with Ernie Pyle before Pyle moved on to the Pacific Theater and his bizarre death. Ultimately he retired to become Superintendent of the Kentucky State Tuberculosis Hospital in Glasgow. Even here he could not shed his journalistic mindset, regularly writing articles for Scoop, the hospital's monthly publication.

Malcolm Black at Sand Cave

When the Floyd Collins story became big news, "Blackie" asked to be assigned to it. Since he knew and was known by many of those involved in the rescue attempt, he was a "natural." By the time he arrived, however, the coming of the National Guard had brought a lull to the drama. After "talking around" at the rescue site, Black headed home for the night. Perhaps coincidentally, a stranger offered him a ride. "Two miles out of town," Black recalled many years later, he introduced himself to ace reporter Tom Killian of the Chicago Tribune, who knew a good source when he met one.

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According to Black, Killian suspected foul play in the cave and was trying to find a channel to a Commonwealth attorney about convening a Court of Inquiry. But he felt he was getting a classical run around. To the fast paced Chicago reporter, the slow paced, indefinite speech patterns of rural Kentuckian sounded like double talk. Ironically, when the Court of Inquiry ultimately was convened, it investigated Killian as much as anyone.

Black’s personal perception was that everyone at the scene was discouraged but all were cooperating in the rescue attempt, “except one man.” “Who was that?” I asked him 40 years later. “Johnny Geralds,” he responded simply.

Ultimately Black covered the Court of Inquiry proceedings for the Herald. Until then, there wasn’t much action to justify the presence of any of the horde of reporters at the scene. But Tom Killian showed Black that he was a master of such moments.

“Once when nothing else was doing, Tom Killian and I drove into the hills and got a picture of Alma Clark,” he grinned. “She was kind of a simpleton, it was easy to put words into her mouth, that they would be married on Floyd’s discovery of a wonder cave.” It seems that payment of $5 and a promise of getting her picture in the paper was all that was needed for one of Killian’s most noted scoops. The “little freckled faced kid” was mighty impressed.

Matters continued to lag, so Killian’s fertile imagination again went into high gear. “We’ll kill’em again!” he told Black. They walked over to the tent city located by the incomplete rescue shaft. Predictably, an old dog was sound asleep atop a pile of brush. Killian photographed it and gleefully announced that it was Floyd’s dog, refusing to eat because its master was in such peril. Again, syndicated newspapers duly spread the news across America. Black was even more impressed.

But Black lacked Killian’s skillful imagination. Other controversial scoops soon caused Killian’s recall to Chicago, and after the Court of Inquiry, “the freckled faced kid” couldn’t think of anything else to report. He returned to Louisville, but avidly followed later developments. “J. Ward Vance, who had been a reporter for four years, took Floyd’s father to Louisville and signed him up for a road tour,” he recalled as if it had been yesterday. “Lee wore a red sweater and brown corduroy trousers. I saw him at the Gayety Burlesque Theater. There were mud replicas on stage. He crossed his legs, acted homespun and talked and talked. He was trying to make money for a monument to Floyd. He was a great orator.” Contemporary fellow journalists evidently stressed the burlesque angle.

Malcolm Black and Skeets Miller

On February 16, 1965, a 40-year old followup article by Skeets Miller appeared in the Louisville Courier-Journal. Black sent a note to Skeets, then followed with a letter as one former cub reporter to another: “(I) worked with you two nights on the police news beat...Since I was a
native of Barren County where the Sand Cave tragedy occurred, I was assigned to this story...to assist Warren Tobin, Buck Weaver, Manning and Howard Hartley...As you may recall, I was responsible for working up the story on the Court of Inquiry that was held in Cave City...Killian, the Chicago Tribune reporter, helped me work up the story and as you may recall, he was quite a news hound...(I remember well) your heroic gestures in interviewing and trying to rescue Collins...The only discrepancy in the Courier-Journal story was that Collins’ body was sealed in the cave...The shaft was later opened and his body put on display in another nearby cave, then it was stolen, and later recovered...Skeets, when you find time (l) would appreciate you sitting down and writing me a long letter, telling me all about your experiences since the Sand Cave tragedy...there are very few of the old newspaper buddies left in Louisville...As ever, your friend.” Skeets wrote back in similar vein-- a hastily typed, very personal letter on newspaper copy paper with a few scribbled additions. He recounted that he had stayed with the Courier until the New York World offered him a job. “At about that time they recruiting a full staff of Pulitzer Prize winners,” he recalled. He worked for the World for two years, then for NBC for 35 years, finally becoming its Night Executive Officer-- a position he deprecated. In 1961, he resigned to move to Rutland, Vermont, where he served as Associate Editor of the local newspaper. About the Floyd Collins saga he wrote as if he did not consider himself a special figure: ”There have been many magazine articles and in 1935 the AP sent me their files and asked me to condense them... I did so and am at a loss why they asked me to do another story last February when they had it all in their files.”

This correspondence was at the time of a lawsuit against the American Legion Magazine because of an article which allegedly slandered some members of Floyd’s family. “Both sides have been after me to swear that their statements are true,” Skeets wrote. “I only know that pals on the Courier thought me loco when I turned down a guarantee of $50,000 for a chatauqua six month tour in 1925. Judge Burke was so proud of me for not accepting the offer that he gave me a banquet and a check for $1000...The boys later wrote me in New York that I had proved a greater chump since Homer and another brother had taken the burleque (sic) route and that there was a casket with something in it that they thought was a wax dummy.” Skeets thus evidently believed that “the Legion author” had been misled by local articles to this effect but also assumed that the tour manager had trumped up a casket “for dramatic effect.” He was confident, however, that Floyd’s body had never been on tour and was still in Crystal Cave.

In addition, Skeets mentioned the C-3 Expedition in rather straightforward style, adding that, “It was thought then that, perhaps Crystal Cave was but another avenue of Mammoth Cave.” Neither followed up on the correspondence, and Malcolm Black’s part in the saga of Floyd Collins came to an end. I am deeply grateful to him for sharing his recollections and his correspondence with me. They contributed significantly to my account in Depths of the Earth.
UNCOVERING THE TRUTH ABOUT FLOYD COLLINS

Roger W. Brucker

When caver Floyd Collins was trapped in Sand Cave, Kentucky in 1925, his predicament and subsequent attempts to rescue him terrified the nation for more than two weeks. The facts were few in number and relatively uncomplicated: Man enters cave. Man gets trapped and can’t get out. Rescue attempts fail. Man dies. Despite the media frenzy and an abundance of reporters, the truth was nevertheless hard to find.

The cave is a metaphor for mysterious ambiguity, false or conflicting clues, and hidden truths. Numerous errors were reported about Floyd’s vital statistics, his circumstances, and the rescue efforts. Wild claims were reported as fact about Floyd’s romantic life, his “real” whereabouts, and about the motives of various rescue workers. The problem in discovering the truth about Floyd Collins is the same problem most historians face when investigating any event: sources conflict, some may be inventions, some exaggerate the importance of one person to the detriment of others.

To unlock the Floyd Collins story and learn more of the truth, Robert K. Murray and Roger W. Brucker used a variety of research tools to get as close to original sources as possible in their book *Trapped! The Story of Floyd Collins*, University Press of Kentucky, 1979. These tools are characterized as: 1) Measurement and description of the cave itself, 2) Interviews with those who knew Floyd and witnessed the rescue attempt, and 3) Continuing investigation and reporting as new information is discovered.

Every caver has heard of Floyd Collins, and many non-cavers know that Floyd was trapped in Sand Cave in 1925. He was found dead after more than two weeks of rescue attempts, he became a household word because of an unprecedented media blitz, and he has served as poster boy of unsafe caving.

His story has been told many times before, comprehensively in *Trapped! The Story of Floyd Collins*, by Robert K. Murray and Roger W. Brucker, University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, KY, 1979, 1982, Revised edition 1999, 347 pp. The most recent telling of the story is a book that was published in July, 2001, by Cave Books: *The Life and Death of Floyd Collins*, by his brother Homer Collins, as told to Jack Lehrberger in 1955. Perhaps more than any other cave story, Floyd Collins presents the largest challenge to the historian to learn the truth.

The truth is illusive because the story was surrounded by ambiguity. Written accounts of Floyd’s first 36 years were almost entirely anecdotes of visitors to Floyd Collins’ Crystal Cave, and the memoir manuscript of his brother, Homer. A mountain of reports about Floyd flowed over the newswires during his entrapment, but William Burke “Skeets” Miller’s first person reports and Homer Collins’ later memoir are primary sources. Indeed, the news accounts and testimony of rescue workers are not just secondary materials, but in many instances were the sources of erroneous or downright fabrications. Of course, some rescue workers’ testimony is the truth, and therefore is original material.
How is the historian to arrive at the nearest approximation of the truth, without engaging in a postmodernist historical approach where “everybody is right?” We will show how three approaches were valuable to resolving controversies, focusing the story on the truth, and continuing the investigation to increase the probability that the history becomes more comprehensive and accurate.

Floyd Collins Trapped in Sand Cave

On Friday morning, January 30, 1925, Floyd Collins became trapped in Sand Cave. On February 1 the first newspaper report appeared, telephoned in by a local correspondent to the Louisville-Courier Journal. The lead paragraph is an astounding piece of journalism. It packs thirteen separate statements of information in one sentence. The problem of inaccurate information surfaced in this news story. Of the 13 statements, two are inaccurate. Floyd was not “pinned under several tons of fallen rock,” and he was 37 years old, not 35.

CAVE-IN PIN MAN SUPINE IN CAVERN
Explorer - 35 - Trapped and Helpless Under Tons of Rock Near Glasgow.
BOY CRAWLS IN HOLE WITH COVER
Rescuers Reach Victim After More Than Thirty-six Hours’ Suffering

Special to The Courier-Journal

Glasgow, Ky. Jan. 31 - On his back, with both feet pinned under several tons of fallen rock, and lying in mud and water, Floyd Collins, 35 years old, son of Lee Collins, one of the owners of Crystal Cave, six miles from Cave City, has lain since 10 o’clock yesterday morning, within calling distance of rescuers, but still a helpless prisoner in a cavern on the farm of B. Doyle.

This first news story sets the high tone for much of the subsequent reporting, in which interesting copy and speculation often replaced facts.

Measurement and Description of the Cave Itself

Early in the investigation of the Floyd Collins story we obtained extraordinary permission from the Superintendent of Mammoth Cave National Park, Amos Hawkins, to enter Sand Cave. We thought seeing the cave itself through the eyes of experienced cave explorers might give us original insight on many puzzling aspects of the story. We were aware that Roy B. Anderson, a civil engineer, had led the 10-station survey on February 5, 1925, after a collapse of rocks blocked access to Floyd by workers inside the cave. We had a copy of his line map showing bearings and distances, but not cave passage cross-sections.

Our own survey in 1977 extended 15 stations into the cave, two stations beyond the original survey.
When we overlaid our map with Anderson’s map, we saw two important relationships. First, Anderson’s map stopped short of the location of Floyd Collins, but ours did reach Floyd’s location. Second, our map showed the passage configuration in detail, while Anderson’s was a single line plot of the raw survey data. We immediately could see the origin of several elements of the story identified as controversial as the story unfolded.

Henry Carmichael, the superintendent of the rescue shaft project, ordered the survey immediately after the alleged collapse of rocks. Anderson said his survey reached the collapse, but no farther. We concluded that his final two stations were estimated by peeking at the light bulb through cracks. After two weeks of digging the shaft and its lateral tunnel reached Floyd. Carmichael said the encounter confirmed the survey was accurate and Floyd was found exactly where expected.

Unfortunately, the truth is the shaft encountered Floyd at the exact place that rescuers had reached, rather than behind and beneath him where he might have been rescued had he been reached in time. Was Carmichael lying?

Subsequent investigation revealed that Carmichael located the shaft exactly where his hoisting works would have a direct upward pull of the wire cable just clearing the lip of the rock shelter. From a practical engineering standpoint, Carmichael made a quick decision to locate the shaft where it was easiest to dig, about 15 feet NNE of where the intercept would have allowed removal of the rock that trapped Floyd’s leg.

As our investigation continued, our comprehensive survey of Sand Cave proved to be the “Rosetta Stone” to unlock the truth of rescue workers’ testimony. The Rosetta Stone, discovered in 1845, contained one message in several ancient languages, and its translation was the key to deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphics. By the same token, our survey helped us decipher truth that anyone who claimed to “walk” in Sand Cave was lying. Samuel Matlack, the man who wanted to apply the acetylene torch to melt the rock, claimed to go 84 feet after the first collapse in Sand Cave (Murray, p. 186-187). Walking upright was impossible anywhere in this low cave. Some would-be rescue workers claimed to have gone several hundred feet into the cave, a physical impossibility given its 80-foot total length.

On the other hand, the survey and our experience making it told who was telling the truth. Lyman Cuthiff, for example, told the whole truth in his account of a trip part way to Floyd (Murray, p. 61).

*Interviews With Those Who Knew Floyd and Witnessed the Rescue Attempt*

While investigating the Floyd Collins Story, Bob Murray and I interviewed many people who had first hand knowledge of the subject. As in any history project, as we neared the end of interviewing we became sophisticated about assessing the value of the interview based on cross-checking and knowledge of the cave. Sometimes we were fooled, and sometimes we detected errors.
For example, Ellis Jones was an unstoppable waterfall of information. As an early person on the Sand Cave scene with a mechanical bent from his education at Emery-Riddle School of Aviation, he knew details about things nobody else had recorded. He "knew" technical details about the engine in Charles Lindberg's Jenny trainer aircraft. We were inclined to believe the information until one day he produced a manuscript of a book that he was writing. It was a verbatim copy of parts of Howard Hartley's *The Tragedy of Sand Cave*, rushed into print less than two weeks after the shaft was closed. Thereafter, we tried to check everything Mr. Jones told us.

Marshall Collins, Floyd's brother gave us a lengthy interview about his part in the rescue attempt. We visited his home in Horse Cave and knocked on the screen door. His wife came to the door. We explained that we wanted to talk to Marshall about his role in the rescue attempt. She was sorry, but Marshall had been feeling poorly. In fact, she said, he was so sick he could not spade the garden. At this we saw through the screen door a figure rise from the sofa. It was Marshall, and he shuffled out the door to sit and talk with us for an hour and a half. He certainly seemed healthy. Then it hit us: Marshall had taken sick shortly after his first trip part way into Sand Cave in 1925, and remained incapacitated throughout the rescue attempt. Was this a person who gets sick when there's work to do? The Army calls it malingering.

Homer Collins was dead by the time we began to write our book. But we did gain access to the manuscript of his memoir which has just been published. Homer's memoir is silent about the ill-will between Floyd and his father, Lee Collins. Homer describes the entombment of Floyd's casket in the Grand Canyon of Crystal Cave as if there was no animosity toward his father, Lee, who championed the idea, was disliked by Homer and his brothers. Homer was actually a party to two lawsuits, one to have Lee set aside as administrator of Floyd's estate, and the second to try to undo Floyd's exhumation and reburial in Crystal Cave. The cross-checking of historical material, we learned, was essential to getting close to the truth in the Floyd Collins story.

*Continuing Investigation and Reporting of New Information.*

The publisher of *Trapped!* wanted to issue a revised edition of the book, so we updated the story in an Epilogue in 1999. We added more recent findings from several sources. Some information didn't make it into the revised epilogue.

For example, on page 43 of *Trapped!* we described the traditional tale of Floyd's discovery of Crystal Cave by following a trap line and encountering a missing trap in a sinkhole. Homer tells the real story. Homer and Floyd had climbed up from the Green River and headed in a beeline toward home. This route would bring them over a saddle into a sinkhole that is today located about 100 feet north of the present entrance to Crystal Cave. Near the present entrance, but closer to the bottom of a sinkhole, Floyd felt air moving from a crevice between two large rocks. He cleared away the breakdown that restricted entry and found himself in a short stub of a cave with three-foot scallop marks on golden brown walls. The cave ended in a low breakdown. Floyd stored several hushels of apples in the new cave. When he came back later, he discovered many were missing and a trail of apple skins suggested that cave rats had helped themselves.

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He began to think about how the cave rats came in when he felt another breeze. This time he followed it, moving rocks for several hundred feet. At last, he walked into the Grand Canyon of Crystal Cave. The rest of the well known story is how the family developed the cave.

Starting in 1987 a collapse occurred on the terrace in front of the historic entrance to Crystal Cave. Little by little the ceiling of a cave passage gave way, revealing the same golden brown undulating walls found earlier. By 2001 the collapse was 15 feet wide by 45 feet long, and pointed toward the sinkhole bottom. We can now reconstruct Homer’s discovery story, the apple storage cave was the northward extension of Grand Canyon Avenue. And the present entrance, with its moss-covered stairs, was constructed later to bring it closer to the stronger sandstone rock. The trap story, like so many others, was probably showmanship.

The main lines of the Floyd Collins story do not change much, even as small details come to light. The physical cave tells much of the story as the survivors of 1925 have gone to their rest. The big mystery remains: What did Floyd find? It is good we do not know all the answers, else the cave would cease to be ambiguous and mysterious.

FLOYD COLLINS’ PRESENCE IN THE MAMMOTH CAVE AREA TODAY

John Benton

It has been over 75 years since the tragedy at Sand Cave that eventually claimed the life of Floyd Collins, in what is now part of Mammoth Cave National Park in south-central Kentucky. Floyd Collins has been embellished in the history and culture of the Mammoth Cave area. Probably the area’s most “famous son,” Floyd Collins’ presence is still apparent there today. Nearly everyone in the Mammoth Cave region knows who Floyd was, and quite a few have their own Floyd stories or tales.

There have been three books published about Collins in recent times, all by cavers. Roger Brucker and Robert Murray’s Trapped gives an excellent historical account of the rescue attempt. William “Bill” Halliday has penned Floyd Collins of Sand Cave with several never before published photographs. Just out last summer was The Life and Death of Floyd Collins by Jack Lehrberger as told to him by Homer Collins, one of Floyd’s brothers.
In 1999, a video about Floyd Collins was filmed featuring reenactment scenes of the rescue attempt as well as actual black and white film footage from 1925. This video may well show up on cable television one day. A musical about Collins has been making the rounds in major cities such as New York, Philadelphia, St. Louis, and recently Lexington and Louisville, Kentucky.

Today the Sand Cave site sits at the edge of the Mammoth Cave National Park boundary. The National Park Service has a short trail to the site that has been taken over by nature for the most part. The small gated entrance to Sand Cave is underneath the sandstone rim of a large sinkhole. For pictures of the region today, one can go to www.floydcollins.com which is maintained by caver Jon Hagee of Lexington, Kentucky. There are excellent Floyd links and information on this website. Just southeast of the Sand Cave site sits the old Sand Cave ticket office on the old Bee Doyle farm. The ticket office is on private property but can be viewed from the road. Around the bend is the Wayfarer Bed and Breakfast with its Floyd Collins Museum, run by innkeepers Becky and Larry Bull. They have an excellent re-creation of some of the events surrounding the tragedy, as well as old pictures, clippings, and even a bust of Floyd! Displays of Floyd Collins can also be seen at the American Cave Museum in downtown Horse Cave, Kentucky, and in the dental office of Dr. Tim Donley of Bowling Green, Kentucky.

Today, Floyd Collins rests in the Mammoth Cave Baptist Church Cemetery inside Mammoth Cave National Park on Flint Ridge, not far from the former Collins family farm where Floyd Collins Crystal Cave is located. A usually gated gravel lane winds for over a mile to the old

The old Sand Cave Ticket Office as it appears today. (John Benton photo)
Collins homestead, where the Collins house still stands, as well as the ticket office building formerly used for Crystal Cave. Both buildings are now empty but considered historical by the NPS, since they are over 50 years old. The grave site of Floyd's father, Lee Collins, is close by in the small Daniel's Cemetery, just east of the buildings, but obscured by trees. A drive or hike out to this beautiful but desolate farm reveals how hard it would have been in 1925 to attract tourists to this location. No wonder Floyd was looking for a show cave closer to the main road for Mammoth Cave, where tourists were already flocking.

A local group in Brownsville, Kentucky, have staged a summer outdoor play about Collins. The town of Cave City features "Floyd Collins Good Ole Days" in late summer, complete with crafts, vendors, parade, beauty contests, tractor pulls and the like. The only known photo of Floyd with a caving helmet (with an electric light!) is depicted on a monument at the entrance to the Cave City Convention Center. Authentic Floyd Collins signatures exist in Salts Cave, dated 1912, and inside Crystal Cave, dated 1917, which is the year Floyd discovered this cave. Both are off today's tourist routes. The two signatures are in script, as Floyd could not write in block letters. Cave historian Dr. Stan Sides relates that Collins only attended school for a few years, as did most of the locals in that time period. There is a very faded block inscription outside the entrance to Crystal Cave that reads "Great Crystal Cave, Discovered Jan. 1917 by Floyd Collins." Some believe that Floyd himself wrote this but I rather doubt it. It was probably added by the Collins family or Crystal Cave management to promote the cave after Floyd became "famous."

Becky Bull stands at the entrance to the Floyd Collins Museum at the Wayfarer Bed and Breakfast. (John Benton photo)
The dental chair of Dr. Thomas is now owned by Dr. Tim Donley of Bowling Green, Kentucky. (John Benton photo)

Fading into memory are items such as the Floyd Collins monument that was formerly in Horse Cave, just off Highway 31W. But after at least three trucks wrecked into it, the monument was never rebuilt after 1965. Also the old capper booths, where competing show caves would hawk their caves or steer one away from a rival cave are all but gone. Businesses such as Collins Rock Shop, run by Floyd’s niece, have come and gone. The Collins Hardware store in Horse Cave is also gone; it was owned by Floyd’s great nephew, Donnie Collins. Many souvenir items are sought after by collectors such as records, postcards, brochures and pennants, which depicted the Sand Cave ordeal or Floyd Collins Crystal Cave.

The 27-pound rock that pinned Collins is today privately owned by Park Service employee Billy Cassady, who is a grandson to Bee Doyle on whose farm Sand Cave was located. A lot remains in the area today to remind one of Floyd Collins. Some of the events are current, some recent and some faded. All because Floyd pursued a dream that eventually took his life, but gripped the nation in doing so.

Look up any newspaper from any United States town that published in 1925. Find the dates from late January to around mid-February; I assure you that the headlines will scream news (not all of it accurate) of Collins and the rescue attempt that went on for over two weeks.
THE FLOYD COLLINS - SAND CAVE RESCUE POSTCARDS

Dean H. Snyder

Disasters were a frequent topic seen on postcards during the first few decades of the twentieth century. It seems that every flood, storm, train wreck, or tornado was captured by photographers and turned into postcards. In an era before television, these postcards permitted a curious public an opportunity to witness events that they couldn’t see in any other way.

Despite being one of the most sensationalized news stories between the two world wars, and covered by dozens of photographers, relatively few postcards of the Floyd Collins tragedy were published. These cards can be divided into three categories: those published by Wade H. Hightbaugh, a series of two cards published by the Auburn Post Card Manufacturing Company, and a small group of miscellaneous cards. All of them are difficult to find today and are highly prized by cave postcard collectors. Any additions or corrections to this list would be appreciated by the author.

Postcards by Wade H. Hightbaugh

Wade H. Hightbaugh, the official photographer at Mammoth Cave, was working for the Evening Post at the time of the Collins tragedy. Hightbaugh published several different postcards showing the activities at the entrance to Sand Cave during the rescue attempts, and also returned to the site four months later to document the removal of Floyd’s body.

All postcards are real photos without borders. The backs are printed in black ink with the words “POST CARD” in outlined print centered across the top. The stamp box is framed on each side by “AZO” and contains small black squares or triangles in each corner. The words “CORRESPONDENCE” and “ADDRESS” appear on the same line as the bottom line of the stamp box.

Rescue Titled Series

All postcards include the citation “(PHOTO BY WADE H. HIGHTBAUGH.)”

◊ “Floyd Collins, age 37.”
Vertical format photo of Floyd Collins from the waist up, obviously taken before Floyd was trapped in Sand Cave. Floyd appears to be seated. The photo is taken outdoors as foliage is in the background. Floyd is wearing a dark suit with a triangular ribbon on his left lapel that says “Great Crystal Cave,” although this is not always visible on every card. Citation is offset slightly to the right. The type for “Floyd Collins, age. 37.” is larger than that of other cards published by Highbaugh. Citation “PHOTO BY WADE H. HIGBAAUGH” is surrounded by a symbol rather than a parenthesis. (Postcard #1)

(Postcard #1) Floyd Collins postcard taken by Highbaugh.
"Scenes at Sand Cave, Ky. where Floyd Collins age 37, was trapped."

◊ Version 1 - Horizontal format photo of the entrance to Sand Cave shows a large fallen tree extending from the top left to the bottom right. No people are seen in the photo. Citation is printed from the middle of the photo to the extreme right, with the top line indented to the right.

◊ Version 2 - Horizontal format photo shows the entrance to Sand Cave with a large fallen tree extending from the top left to the bottom right. Several people are in the middle and right portions of the photo. One man on the right appears to be running as he is blurred. Citation, with its first line centered, is slightly to the right of the card’s center. (Postcard #2)

◊ Version 3 - Horizontal format photo show the close-up entrance to Sand Cave on the left with a tree trunk extending from top middle of the card to the center of the card. Several people are shown. A man in the foreground and right is wearing a hat and a coat. A derrick is in the center of the card. Citation begins almost at the extreme left and extends just past the center of the card.

◊ Version 4 - Horizontal format photo shows a tent in the woods. No people are visible. Large trees are seen on the left. Citation is centered on the bottom margin, with the first line slightly indented.

◊ "Shaft at Sand Cave, Ky. where Floyd Collins age 37, was trapped."

Horizontal format photo shows wooden boards surrounding the shaft with three men on top of the shaft. One man is standing partially inside the shaft which was dug to free Collins. First line of the citation is centered above the second line, which extends to the extreme right. (Postcard #3)

Untitled Post Rescue Series

A series of three cards taken on April 23, 1925. They are all real photo postcards without borders in a horizontal format. The backs are printed in black ink with the words "POST CARD" in outline print centered across the top. A stamp box is framed on each side by "AZO" and contains small black squares in each corner. The words "CORRESPONDENCE" and "ADDRESS" appear on the same line as the bottom line of the stamp box.

Oddly, the cards have no citations, and have been mis-identified by postcard dealers as depicting the results of a mine disaster or a "mummy."
(Postcard #2) Sand Cave entrance postcard taken by Highbaugh.

(Postcard #3) Shaft at Sand Cave postcard by Highbaugh.
(Raising Floyd's body from Sand Cave)

Reverend R.B. Neel, holding a Bible in his right hand, is standing on the far left. Next to him are the seven miners who brought Floyd's body to the surface. Superintendent H.W. Hunt is just to the left of Floyd's body, which is wrapped in rags as it is being hoisted from the shaft. (Postcard #4)

(Paying last respects to Floyd at Sand Cave)

Reverend R.B. Neel, on the left, is holding a Bible. Next to him and kneeling are H.W. Hunt and the miners who brought Floyd's body to the surface. Floyd's body is in the foreground and is wrapped in rags.

(Floyd's body on undertaker J.T. Gerald's table)

Floyd's body is seen on the undertaker's preparation table. Another table with supplies is seen in the background. This photograph was taken on April 24, 1925.

W. H. Hunt Series

A rare set of postcards all showing W.H. Hunt of Central City, Kentucky. Some of these postcards also exist as photos; some include handwritten captions. All postcards are real photos without borders.

(W.H. Hunt Standing by Boom at Sand Cave)

Two men wearing hats, including W.H. Hunt, are standing in the middle of the postcard. A tree trunk extends from the center of the card at the top to the right hand margin. A man on the left has his hand on the bucket used to carry spoils from the shaft. Two other people are seen on the far left. Timbers are seen on the bottom right corner of the photo. There is no citation.

The Remains of Floyd Collins Just Removed from Hearse. W.H. Hunt Holding Wreath, Copyrighted

Pallbearers carrying the casket of Floyd Collins. The bearers are wearing large triangular sashes on their left sleeves reading “SAND CAVE.” In the background is the Floyd Collins Crystal Cave ticket office. W. H. Hunt is hold a wreath of flowers. He is standing on the left next to a minister who is holding a Bible. The back has “POST CARD” in fancy outline print centered on the card. In smaller capital letters “MESSAGE” and “ADDRESS” are on the left and right side of the card. A one inch vertical line is in the center of the card.
(Postcard #4) Raising Floyd’s Body from Sand Cave, taken by Highbaugh.

(Postcard #5) Placing the first dirt on the remains of Floyd Collins, taken by Highbaugh.
W.H. Hunt. Central City, Ky Who did the impossible, placing the first dirt on the remains of Floyd Collins. Apr 26 Copyrighted S6.

Hunt is seen on the right shoveling dirt into Floyd's grave. A group of men are seen on the right. The citation is seen across the right bottom on five lines and is handwritten. The back of the card is the same as the previous postcard. (Postcard #5)

Auburn Post Card Manufacturing Company Series

A series of two cards published by the Auburn Post Card Manufacturing Company of Auburn, Indiana, both are printed photo cards in the horizontal format. A white margin extends all around the card with the citation centered at the bottom. The back of the cards contain the words "Post Card" centered across the top, with a double line is printed below it. Printed vertically are "Auburn Post Card Mfg. Co., Auburn, Ind." on the far left and "----- Made in the U. S. A. -----" down the center. The words "FOR CORRESPONDENCE" is below the double line on the left, and three staggered lines are on the right for the address. In the upper right hand corner the words "PLACE STAMP HERE" are on three lines, but there is no box around the words.

"Guards Tent, Sand Cave."

Horizontal format printed postcard shows uniformed guard with cap standing at a tent pole looking at papers. Boxes are seen in the back of the tent. (Postcard #6)

"Rescuing Floyd Collins, Sand Cave."

Horizontal format printed postcard showing tarps in the middle of a woods. A tent is seen on the right.

Miscellaneous and Unattributed Postcards

"Only picture of Collins after death showing large rock resting on him."

An obvious fake photo of Floyd Collins. Floyd is on his back with his head on the right side of the postcard. Most of the photo is blurred or fuzzy. In the lower right corner is "P & A PHOTO". (Postcard #7)

(Postcard #7) A fake photo postcard of Floyd Collins in Sand Cave.
◊ (Carnival Side-Show)

This is a real photo showing three men standing in front of a carnival side show tent. A large rectangular banner that says “COLLINS TRAPPED” is hung between two poles. Three signs that say “NO ADMISSION CHARGES”, “EVERY BODY WELCOME”, “ENTRANCE”, and “CHILDREN MUST BE ACCOMPANIED BY THEIR PARENTS” are seen on the tent. The three men are standing; the middle one has his foot resting on a tent peg. Four newspapers are resting on the grass, being held up by tent posts. The back of the postcard is printed in black ink with words “POST CARD” in outline print on the left side. The stamp box is framed on each side by “AZO” and contains the words “PLACE STAMP HERE”. Words “CORRESPONDENCE” and “ADDRESS” are printed just slightly above the bottom line of the stamp box. (Postcard # 8)

◊ (Man Peering Out of Shaft)

A man is seen in the upper left part of the shaft which was dug in the attempt to free Collins. “Sand Cave Ky” is handwritten across the upper middle part of the card across a large rock. To the right is what appears to be a piece of timber used to shore the shaft.

◊ (Lee Collins)

A real photo postcard of Lee Collins, father of Floyd Collins. He appears to be seated. The photo is taken from the waist up. Lee is wearing a dark shirt which is buttoned all the way to the collar. He is wearing light colored suspenders. This might be a Wade Hightbaugh photo. There is no citation.

◊ (Entrance of Sand Cave with People)

A real photo postcard of the Sand Cave entrance with a group of people standing in the foreground. A young girl wearing a hat has her right hand on a dog. The shaft is seen in the center of the postcard. The back has “POST CARD” in outline print on the left side. “CORRESPONDENCE” and “NAME AND ADDRESS” is in smaller capital letters on a second line. “PLACE POSTAGE STAMP HERE” is in four lines where the stamp box belongs. The first two words are separated by a fancy scroll “CK” by the last two words.

◊ (Entrance of Sand Cave Showing Icicles and Boom)

A view of large icicles at the entrance to Sand Cave. A boom is seen on the right hand portion of the real photo postcard. There is no citation on the card. The back of the card is an AZO with blocks in the postage box.
(Postcard #8) The Floyd Collins Carnival postcard, photographer unknown.

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THE ROCK THAT TRAPPED FLOYD COLLINS

Billy Cassidy holds the 26 1/2 pound rock that trapped the foot of Floyd Collins. (Photo by Gary Soule on February 15, 1995.)

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