



Nebraska History posts materials online for your personal use. Please remember that the contents of *Nebraska History* are copyrighted by the Nebraska State Historical Society (except for materials credited to other institutions). The NSHS retains its copyrights even to materials it posts on the web.

For permission to re-use materials or for photo ordering information, please see:

<http://www.nebraskahistory.org/magazine/permission.htm>

Nebraska State Historical Society members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* and four issues of *Nebraska History News* annually. For membership information, see:

<http://nebraskahistory.org/admin/members/index.htm>

Article Title: Nebraska Cave Lore

Full Citation: Louise Pound, "Nebraska Cave Lore," *Nebraska History* 29 (1948): 299-323

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1948CaveLore.pdf>

Date: 4/10/2017

Article Summary: Caves do not figure prominently in folklore. Pound provides interesting details and tall tales about Nebraska's caves in an effort to preserve the historic facts about them that were known in her time.

Scroll Down for complete article.

Cataloging Information:

Names: M R Gilmore, Luther North, John Brown, Allen B Mayhew, John Henry Kagi, Edward D Bartling, Mari Sandoz, Jesse James, David C (Doc) Middleton

Caves Discussed: Pahuk Cave, Lincoln Cave, John Brown's Cabin and Cave, Buffalo Springs Cave, Road Agent's or Fly Speck Billy's Cave, Big Bear Hollow, Barada Cave, Robbers' Cave, Dripping Fork Cave, Ponca Cave, shelter caves

Keywords: Pawnee Indians, Mari Sandoz, Coxeys' Army

Nebraska Cave Lore¹

By Louise Pound

I

SUPERSTITIONS, legends and fairy stories have always clustered about caves. Yet there seems to have been less special collection of such lore than of other phases of folklore. In the mass of studies turned out, on innumerable topics in so many fields, collectanea of cave lore have played a minor role. There appears to be less of it than that of seas, streams, fountains and woods. It belongs, in any case, to local rather than to general lore and it has its own special interest and deserves its own recording. Nearly every striking or picturesque cave develops its individual story or stories, and its discoverer too deserves chronicling when he can be determined. There are holes all over the earth, caverns of various shapes, large and small, some amazingly beautiful, others drab and dull. In general legend, these have been inhabited by all sorts of strange creatures, giants, ogres, monsters; in German story typically by dwarfs. Polyphemus, the one-eyed giant being from whom Ulysses saved himself, lived in a cave near Mount Aetna. There is a cave in which winds were restrained in the first book of Virgil's *Aeneid*. In *Beowulf* Grendel's mother has a subterranean dwelling and the dragon guarding the hidden treasure issued from a cave. Hartley Alexander records a Haitian legend telling of the origin of man in a cave² and another telling that the sun and moon were born in caves. Water too issued from caves. Coleridge's Alph, the sacred river, "ran Through caverns mea-

¹Read in part before the Western Folklore Conference at the University of Denver, July 15, 1948.

²Hartley Burr Alexander, *Latin American Mythology*. The Mythology of All Races Series, XI (Boston, 1920), 28.

sureless to man Down to a sunless sea." In the American West, giants and ogres and dwarfs are replaced by Indians, train robbers, and horse-thieves in need of hideouts, and by men concealing or looking for buried treasure. In older days, no doubt, legends would have arisen concerning the government gold underground in Kentucky. They may, indeed, yet appear if they have not done so already.

Caves are not often associated with Nebraska, a region of prairie and hill and rather sparse woodland. Its caves are not numerous nor are they famous. Yet for just these reasons it may well have initial treatment in an article that is not of geological or mineralogical or archaeological stimulus, or merely an uninquiring popular presentation of legends and factual narrations, but is devoted to the folklore of caves of a single state.

Nebraska has no large caves that are nationally known and sought out, and hence sometimes commercially profitable. There are no Mammoth Caves such as Kentucky's with its 150 miles so far explored, no Cave of the Winds such as that at Manitou, Colorado, or that at Hot Springs, South Dakota, where a strong current blows in and out alternately. It has no ice caves such as exist in Montana and Colorado; no amazing Carlsbad Caverns such as Arizona's, of which nearly 40 miles have now been explored. It has no caverns such as those of the Yellowstone region or the Black Hills or the Ozarks. Nor are any of similar well-deserved celebrity likely to be discovered here in the future. Nebraska's caves do not abound in crystals, stalactites, stalagmites and fossils and they have no glamorous reds, yellows, purples and pastel shades to excite the wonder of visitors. Two (those at Nebraska City and Lincoln) are electrically lighted in a minor way, but no elevators are needed nor guides for visitors. Yet search reveals more interesting caves in Nebraska than might be expected and more lore concerning them. Surely such lore deserves chronicling before historic fact has been utterly lost and before dates and personages become yet more confused and tall tales taller.

Following is a survey of the Nebraska caves with which I am yet acquainted, those that are best known. Some are the work of natural forces in the past and some have been excavated or tampered with by man.

II

THREE EASTERN NEBRASKA CAVES

Pahuk Cave

In a discussion of Nebraska caves, leading place should go, it seems to me, to Pahuk (Pahook, Pah-huk, Pawhuk, Pohuk) Cave on the Platte River near Fremont, known in the past among the inhabitants of the region as Elephant Cave. It has loomed large in Pawnee Indian lore. Unusual mystery and legend have gathered about it, though all that remains of it now is a gash in a clay bank at the side of a road along the Platte. The road was opened up or at least widened in recent times. It runs between Fremont in Dodge County and Cedar Bluffs in Saunders County. The gash is easily seen from the road but is pretty much dirt filled. Even for one on hands and knees progress is blocked. Few persons in Fremont remember much about Pahuk Bluff or the cave below it. Possibly the slit in the bank reveals the original entrance; just as possibly it does not. According to Dr. Gilbert C. Lueninghoener, geologist at Midland College, Fremont, the cave was one big chamber only. Externally the opening in the bank and the near-by bluff, which is 60 feet high above the Platte, seem uninteresting; but in the light of their role in Indian days they are not. In 1927 no little effort was made before the Chamber of Commerce of Saunders County to have Pahuk Bluff marked as an historic spot. Among those urging this were Dr. A. E. Sheldon, Secretary of the Nebraska State Historical Society, and Captain Luther H. North, pioneer scout and frontiersman of Columbus.

The central seats of the Pawnee Indians when the white man first came to Nebraska were along the Platte and Loup rivers. There was an Indian village on the summit of Pahuk Bluff. General John M. Thayer, later Governor of Nebraska (1887 through 1890), held council with the Pawnee there in 1854. When the Indians were moved elsewhere, their village was burned, perhaps by them, perhaps by others. Pahuk Bluff was selected as the site of "Neapolis," the projected capital of Nebraska, by an act of the Territorial Legislature of 1858, an act later declared void. The Pawnee tribe was that most advanced in culture of the Indian tribes in Nebraska. Their legends have been gathered by several scholars, notably George A. Dorsey.³ Some of the Pawnee tales, too, are remembered by Mari Sandoz from her talks with an old Pawnee. Pahuk, it seems well established, was the sacred or holy place of the Pawnee. It was to them, said A. E. Sheldon in an address,⁴ what Mecca was to the Mohammedans and Mount Sinai to the Christians. The site of Pahuk has been definitely fixed as the bluff across the Platte from Fremont. It may be seen clearly from the roadway of the Union Pacific or from the bridge of the Northwestern Railway crossing the Platte. The bluff rises abruptly on the south bank of the river a short distance east of the bridge. The ethnologist, M. R. Gilmore, then Curator of the Nebraska State Historical Society Museum, later Curator of Ethnology, Museum of Anthropology of the University of Michigan, went there in August, 1914, with Chief White Eagle of the Skidi Tribe of Pawnee,

³George A. Dorsey, *Pawnee Mythology*, Vol. 1 (Carnegie Institute, Washington, 1906) and his *Traditions of the Skidi Pawnee*, *Memoirs of the American Folklore Society*, VIII, 1904.

⁴Letter, A. E. Sheldon to the Board of Commissioners of Saunders County at Wahoo, Nebraska, June 17, 1927. See also his address "The Pawnee Nation and the Battle of Battle Creek" given at a meeting of the Chamber of Commerce, Battle Creek, Nebraska, November 16, 1939. Typed MSS., Nebraska State Historical Society.

who pointed out the place to him.⁵ Others made the same identification.

In the Pawnee religion, only less powerful than their main deity Tirawa and the gods of the heavens were those of the earth. These were ruled over by lodges of Nahurak or Animals, of which *loci* there were about five. Here the animals gathered together in council to promote or to harm the fortunes of human beings. The animals had many powers, such as that of changing men to animals or birds or the converse. Under their tutelage the favored persons were enabled to fly like eagles, swim like turtles, live like the coyote, and perform sleight of hand. In these lodges of the Pawnee the young aspirants for the supernatural powers of the medicine men were guided and there were taught by leaders or errand men or messengers who served as liaison beings between the gods and men. Supreme among the Pawnee lodges was Pahuk. In its underground chamber were learned from the wild animals and birds their mysteries and magical powers and the virtues of different roots and herbs. The aspirants thus favored took back to their people the wisdom and the healing gifts they learned there. An illustrative sentence showing the high status of Pahuk is the following, from a story told by Beaver Kitkehahki, who inherited it from his father, who was keeper of the Beaver medicine, the origin of which the story explains:

They [the medicine men, the animals] sent the Magpie to all the lodges and went to Pahuk last, for there was the lodge that was really the head of all the other lodges.⁶

⁵Gilmore gives the site at "½ of n. e. of sec 22 and west ½ of n.w. ¼ sec. 23, twnp 17 north range east." See M. R. Gilmore, "The Legend of Pahuk." Typed MS., Nebraska State Historical Society.

⁶From "The Medicine Child and the Beaver," Tale 77 in Dorsey's *Pawnee Mythology*, pp. 241-54. Other references to Pahuk may be found in Tales 78, 85, 86, 89. See also in *Traditions of the Skidi Pawnee*, Tale 59, "Scabby Bull and the Wonderful Medicine Man," p. 231.

The name Pahuk, according to Dr. Gilmore, literally means headland or promontory but sometimes the Pawnee spoke of it as Nahura Waruksti, Sacred Ground or Wonderful Ground, because of the mystery and awe with which the place was invested in their minds. The statement has been made that Pahuk was to the Pawnee the center of the universe and the place of the origin of man. Mari Sandoz is one of those recalling this from a Pawnee source.

A recurrent legend concerning Pahuk was summarized by Dr. Gilmore who says of it, "From White Eagle I obtained the narrative which I here set forth in as good a rendering as possible in English of his version of the myth." The translation was made, at the time of establishing the site of Pahuk, by a young Pawnee named Charles Knifechief. He adds, "There are other versions extant as told by other narrators but differing in no essentials." Dr. Gilmore's summary runs as follows:

A young son is killed by his father and his body thrown into the Platte. He is finally restored to life by the decision of the animals. Each animal taught his particular remedy and all the songs pertaining to the ritual of healing. He returned to his people, having been told to use these remedies given him by the great powers of Heaven.

The corresponding Pawnee tales told by Dorsey are all very long and detailed.⁷ At this point a letter from Captain Luther North may be cited:

The Hill, Pahuk Bluff, which he [A. E. Sheldon] recommends marking as a historic site is according to a legend of the Pawnee the home of Nah-hoo-nack and the ghost animals. Their home is deep down in the hill and the entrance is from below the water of the river. There is a long tunnel to go through before you come to the opening of the house and at the door as Guards are a huge rattlesnake and a gigantic grizzly bear. Any one entering must pass between them and if they show the least sign of fear they would never be heard from again.

I know a very good story of a young Pawnee who was supposed to have been in this house.⁸

⁷Dorsey, *Pawnee Mythology* I, section III, "The Origin of Medicine Ceremonies of Power."

⁸Preserved in the Library of the State Historical Society, Lincoln.

Captain North added that the story was too long for him to try to tell it in his letter. It seems probable that it was a variant of that known to Dr. Gilmore and those recorded by Dr. Dorsey.

In June, 1948, Althea Marr Witte of Fremont gave me this information as told to her by Dr. G. C. Lueninghoener of Midland College:

The cave, which is nothing but a small slit now, was of clay and had only one large chamber. The only legend I know is of Chief Pohuk. The story goes that the parents of their baby who later was Chief Pohuk threw him into the Platte river and abandoned him because he was such a small, weak and sickly baby. The animals such as the beavers, woodchucks, squirrels and turtles rescued him and cared for him. They nursed him to health, brought him food, and taught him many things. Because he was so close to nature he grew to be very wise and strong and in time became one of the greatest chiefs of the Pawnee tribe.

The latest tale I have heard concerning Pahuk cave was from a woman living in a shack on the low ground between the bluff and the river. She said she had heard that two boys "had been caught in it and as a result it was dynamited." She said she did not know whether this was true, being herself relatively a newcomer, and so far no one has verified her story to me.

Lincoln Cave

The conspicuous sign on the high ground that is the site of the Lincoln cave reads on one side "Notorious Old Cave" and on the other "Robbers' Cave." The cave is described as follows in the entry concerning Lincoln in the Federal Writer's Project *Guide to Nebraska*:

The Cave, 11th and High Streets . . . is a series of caverns and winding passages in an outcrop of Dakota sandstone. The walls scratched with names, initials and dates, are streaked in ocherous yellow and hematite reds and browns.

In Pawnee legend it was in the "Nahurac" spirits' cave that medicine men held mystic sacred rites, and neophytes were proven and initiated. A snowbound wagon train used its protection; and after the Indian scare of 1862, settlers lived

in it all winter. In 1863, when a stone quarry was started by three men who had acquired the title to the land from the Government, the removal of the cap rock destroyed the original entrance to the cave. In 1906 when the caverns were being cleared of debris so as to be used as a mushroom garden, stories of hidden treasure brought so many visitors to the place that plans were changed and the cave was kept open for sightseers and picnics.⁹

This information in the *Guide* probably derives mainly from the present owners of the place who came to Lincoln in the 1880's.

The Lincoln cave had no doubt the usual origin of caves, through the action of water on sandstone or limestone. It may have been one of the five *loci* that were sacred to the Pawnee. Indian knowledge and utilization of the cave for certain rites is quite possible. But I have found no references to it in Pawnee lore, as I did for Pahuk. There were Indians of the Pawnee, Otoe, and Omaha tribes about in Lancaster County in early days; but I know of no traces of an Indian village or burial mounds in the vicinity. It is quite possible, for that matter, that the starting of a little quarrying (little is all there could have been) on the site opened up the cave for discovery. Nor can I find sources for the story of the snowbound wagon train nor for the story that settlers lived in it all the winter of 1862 during an Indian scare. There were mild Indian scares from time to time in Lancaster county in the late '50's and early '60's, but none of special interest in 1862 or in other of these years unless 1864. The cave had but one chamber then and that none too large. It would have been a dusty, unpleasant and, indeed, dangerous place, not easy to enter and quite dark. Removal nearer other settlers and nearer water would have been wiser.

My father came to Lincoln in 1867 and my mother in 1869. They knew the region well and its history; yet they were silent as to Indian knowledge of or use of the cave and as to the refuge of settlers there, so close to

⁹Federal Writers Project, *Nebraska: A Guide to the Cornhusker State* (New York, 1939), p. 197.

their own day. The cave had little celebrity until after 1906. The stories about it as a hideout of robbers and horse-thieves in the '70's and '80's, mentioned in the *Federal Guide to the City of Lincoln* (1937) always amused my mother. She said it was used as a beer cellar by a near-by brewery of her time. Among others, Pearl J. Cosgrave, daughter of Judge P. J. Cosgrave, testifies that her mother too was amused by the stories of robbers and horse-thieves associated with the cave. The *Federal Guide to Nebraska* says nothing of the use of the cave for storage by brewers; but that it was so used is stated by the present owner and is entered in the *Lincoln Guide*. This seems well established. In 1869 two brewers bought the site and hired a laborer to enlarge the cave for the purpose of storing beer and malt underground, in old-world fashion. A laborer is said to have spent three years off and on digging the chambers and passages out of sandstone with pick and shovel and wheelbarrow. The caverns are fairly large now. Some of the enlarging was done after 1906 when debris was cleared out and the place made accessible as a picnic grounds. In 1873 the brewers became bankrupt in the financial collapse and the cave was given up.

As for the robbers and horse-thieves said to have occupied the cave in the late '70's and the '80's, their presence there is very doubtful; their origin probably commercial. Members of the Pound family were all on hand then and never heard of them. Horses could not well be concealed in or outside the cave. So near the thriving Lincoln of those days, with its growing university, the presence of horse-thieves and robbers and their use of the brewers' old storage cave would have been known. Trouble would have arisen concerning them. My father was a judge and, of all persons, would have been likely to hear of their operations. Dwellers in a house on the site or near it were known to us, and never reported robbers in the neighborhood.

In summary, the Indian rites supposed to have been held in the cave, though possible, are unauthenticated.

The stories of hidden treasure there have never been accepted as having a basis in fact. Belief in the use of the cave as a dwelling place for safety in winter by pioneer settlers, or use of it as a hideout of Jesse James (he has been assigned several such hideouts in Nebraska), and a later tale stating that a portion of Coxeys' Army found lodging there in the winter of '93-'94 (mentioned in the *Lincoln Guide*), all these belong no doubt to folklore. Members of Coxeys' Army crossed Nebraska in 1894, but there is no record of the stay of a group in Lincoln; and if there was, the cave would have been a hopelessly cramped and unpleasant lodging. The present owner who "arrived in the '80's" said nothing of it when I heard him recount the history of the cave. Possibly one or two of the Coxeys' itinerants were about the place but the "Army" did not lodge there. The utilization and enlargement of the cave by brewers is the only story connected with it that can be established.

At its lowest point the cave is said to go to a depth of about 82 feet from the top of the bit of high ground that is its location. It may cover in all its passages and chambers perhaps 700 feet, said the owner. It is worth visiting as it winds through sandstone walls into its present five chambers. High School picnics, college initiations and various other events have been held in it. It is lighted here and there by mild electric bulbs, and its depth and irregularity make it a weird though dusky and dusty setting for those wishing something of the sort. That legends of various types should have arisen about it seems inevitable and, to me, not regrettable.

John Brown's Cabin and Cave

The most publicized of Nebraska's caves is the so-called John Brown's Cave, or Cabin and Cave, at Nebraska City. It is over a mile from the Missouri River at the right of State Highway 2 leading to the city and the river. Nebraska City was incorporated December 20, 1857; it was

on the edge of free territory and in steamboat days was the busiest and most important city in the area. The river was crossed at Brownville and at Nebraska City, usually the latter. Nebraska City served as a second stop after Nemaha City on the underground railway when fugitive slaves were brought from Missouri through Kansas to be ferried over or carried over the ice from Nebraska to Iowa. From about 1854 to 1861 or a little later it was an important station in the successive hiding places in which the freed slaves and their convoys might rest in comparative safety. There are supposed to have been several of these hiding places in Nebraska City, a barn, for example, and a cave in a pasture, these perhaps changed from time to time for safety.

However dubious may be Brown's connection with the John Brown Cabin and however few or numerous the slaves he brought there, it is beyond question that he was in Nebraska City many times, passing through it on his journeys from the east by way of Chicago to Kansas and return. An interesting paragraph from the *Nebraska City News* of February 12, 1859, tells of what proved to be Brown's last appearance in Nebraska City. More will be said of this, a unique expedition in his midwestern years, later:

John Brown, Captain John Brown, of Osawatomie . . . passed through this city late last Friday evening at the head of a herd of stolen niggers taken from Southern Missouri, accompanied with a gang of horsethieves of the most desperate character. They had a large number of stolen horses in their possession—two of which were taken and are now held by the deputy sheriff of this County.

There is an appropriateness and fitness in nigger stealing being associated with horsethieves that the rankest black republican cannot fail to appreciate.

The so-called Brown cabin is now a small museum free to the public. It is advertised as the "oldest wooden structure now in Nebraska." It is of brown cottonwood logs and according to its historian and late owner, Edward D. Bartling,¹⁰ it was built by Allen B. Mayhew, its first

¹⁰Edward D. Bartling, *John Henry Kagi and the Old Log Cabin Home* (Published by author, Nebraska City, 1938, 1940, 1943.)

occupant, in 1851. When the state highway was put through in recent times, the cabin was moved about 25 feet to the north, was placed on a foundation of natural limestone and was somewhat changed or restored by Bartling in minor ways. An earthen cave for storage was excavated near it, as is sometimes the practice nowadays, though refrigeration has done much to end such caves. Bartling says that when the house was moved it was placed over the original cave site. The "cave" is now much like a 10 x 12 cellar to the cabin. The entrance (or perhaps it was the outlet), now just outside to the east, was originally, it is stated, in a ravine about 75 feet west of the cabin and hidden in the underbrush; traces of it are supposedly still to be seen there. Accounts vary. Those knowing the early days have affirmed that there was originally no connection between the cabin and the cave;¹¹ others state that the cave was a tunnel running directly under the Mayhew home and entered by a trap door in the cabin;¹² others that a cistern was enlarged to form the cave.¹³ Since the cabin was moved in recent times and is said to be now over the original cave site, it could not have been over it originally. The cistern testimony is probably erroneous too.

Brown's best biographer, Oswald Garrison Villard, stated the following concerning the last appearance of Brown in Nebraska City, that told in the newspaper item of 1859 quoted above. The last lines deserve special attention.

On the 19th of December, 1858, began one of the most picturesque incidents in John Brown's life . . . his incursion into Missouri and his liberation of slaves by force of arms. While as already recorded Brown had taken two slaves out of Kansas to freedom before this wholesale liberation and was throughout his life an ever-ready agent of the Underground Railroad,

¹¹N. C. Abbott, *Omaha World-Herald*, October 27, 1929.

¹²*Nebraska City News*, November 14, 1874.

¹³Wayne Overturf, "John Brown's Cabin at Nebraska City," *Nebraska History Magazine*, XXI (April-June, 1940), 93-97 "After the battle of Osawatomie the cistern at the Mayhew cabin was converted into a cave." See also a letter from Eugenia Rowan (aged 80) in 1938, mentioned by Bartling, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

he was at no time especially interested in this piecemeal method of weakening slavery. It was to his mind wasting time, when a bold attack might liberate five hundred or a thousand slaves.¹⁴

Whether or not Brown had previously taken more than two or three slaves out of Kansas to freedom,¹⁵ his arrival with the group of Missouri slaves chronicled in the Nebraska City newspaper of February 12, 1859, was his only expedition of the kind. The operations of the Underground may have been pretty steady before, during, and after his coming to Kansas; but Brown himself devoted his activities to other matters than "piecemeal" rescues. After reaching Canada with his group of freed slaves in 1859 he planned the Harper's Ferry debacle in which his leading men were killed and he himself was captured and, on December 2 of that year, was hanged.

Villard's biography supplies a chronology of Brown's movements from his departure for Kansas till his death.¹⁶ It is important to note from it his visits to Nebraska City, when they occurred, and who was with him. He first arrived in Kansas October 7, 1855. The probable date of his leaving Topeka for Nebraska is July 23, 1856. He reached Nebraska City soon thereafter. Those in his party are enumerated by Villard.¹⁷ No fugitive slaves were with him on this trip. He arrived at Topeka on his return journey, August 10. On October 8 after the battle of Osawatomie, he narrowly escaped capture by Lieutenant Cooke near Nebraska City and went on to Tabor and Chicago. This time a fugitive slave was along. A. B. Keim places this liberation in 1855,¹⁸ but Brown did not leave Kansas for Nebraska in that year. Brown's son, Jason, gave the following account:

¹⁴Oswald Garrison Villard, *John Brown: A Biography Fifty Years After* (Boston, 1910), p. 367.

¹⁵Villard notes that Brown's son, John Brown, Jr., freed two slaves in 1856, but they were returned to their masters. *Ibid.*, pp. 150-151.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 672.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 222.

¹⁸A. B. Keim, "John Brown in Richardson County," *Transactions and Reports of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, II, 109-13. Keim tells of Brown's headquarters in Falls City but says nothing of the Nebraska City cave in Otoe County.

We crossed the river at Topeka. We had a one-mule team and a one-horse covered wagon. The mule team was full of arms and ammunition that father was taking out to Tabor . . . In the covered one-horse team was a fugitive slave covered with hay, father lying sick, Owen, John and I. Owen, John and I walked all we could to save the horse . . . We finally got both wagons together at the ferry at Nebraska City and camped. Next morning we crossed the river by rope ferry, into the southeast corner of Iowa. When we landed we let the contraband out of the hay, fixed him up as best we could, and traveled on to Tabor. There Owen stopped and the Negro there found work.¹⁹

Note the word *camped* in Jason Brown's account of their stay at Nebraska City. Brown started back to Tabor about October 27, 1856, but did not return to Nebraska and Kansas. Instead he went again to Chicago and on east. In the fall of 1857 he again reached Nebraska and proceeded to Topeka where he stayed a few days, then started back to Nebraska City on November 17. Again there were no fugitive slaves in the party.²⁰ He arrived at Tabor about November 22 and journeyed east again. During his brief stay in Tabor Brown offered to take his men, go to Nebraska City and rescue from jail a slave who had run away and had lost his arm when captured, if the Tabor people would pay his actual expenses. He promised to put the slave in their hands, but they were afraid of the consequences and did not give him the means.²¹ Brown left Boston on the last of his journeys to Kansas on June 3, 1859, and was in Lawrence on June 26. On December 20, 1858, came his raid into Missouri described by Villard. He entered Nebraska February, 1859 (this was his last day in Kansas), crossed the Missouri River at Nebraska City, reached Tabor with his slaves on February 4, and on March 12 saw them ferried over to Windsor, Canada.

Of much interest and special pertinence is a letter from Belpre, Kansas by E. F. Mayhew, son of Allen B. Mayhew who built the cabin. It was written in 1925 in response to an inquiry from N. C. Abbott of Nebraska City.

¹⁹Villard, *op. cit.*, p. 262.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 308.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 311.

The cave you speak of on my father's farm was dug in the fall of 1856 and used for storing potatoes. It was later enlarged to three rooms and used for storing wine only one season. . . . There was never a Negro in it while my father owned it that we know of. However, there was a Negro woman at our house one night on her way north. She and the ones instrumental in bringing her there had been directed by John Kagy. At another time Kagy brought 14 Negroes there for breakfast one morning. It was at this time that the officers and some men from Missouri came to the house after him. Although my father told them he was upstairs they were afraid to go after him, knowing he was armed. . . My father told them not to bring any more Negroes there, as it was only making trouble. . . I lived in the log house from the time I was about 6 until I was about 12 years old. We moved into another about 1860.²²

This testimony accounts for the cabin and the cave till 1860 or perhaps 1859 or possibly, if Mayhew's date is *very* vaguely given, till 1857. The Mayhew son should know whereof he writes. Any of the three Pound children, brought up like the Mayhews, in or near a small prairie town, would have explored a cave so close to their home and would have known of the goings on there, whether in the daytime or night, this when they were between the ages of six and twelve.

If Allen B. Mayhew helped by his father-in-law Abraham Kagy, dug the cave and the Mayhews lived in the cabin from 1851 till 1860 or thereabouts, it would seem that if the cave was ever a hiding place for freed slaves it must have been after John Brown's death. The Kagys were strong abolitionists. John Henry Kagi (he preferred to respell the name in the Swiss way), brother of Mayhew's wife, was an exceptionally able young man. At one time he was the Kansas correspondent for the New York *Herald Tribune*, and he was one of John Brown's chief advisers and assistants. He surely visited his sister at the cabin more than the one time when he brought the slaves to be fed and was asked not to do so again. Kagi was killed, however, at Harper's Ferry at the age of twenty-four. This link between the cabin and freed slaves did not exist after 1859. John Brown may have been with Kagi

²²Omaha *World-Herald*, October 22, 1927.

several times; but the cabin was never his headquarters and it is not probable that he ever led slaves there, in view of the younger Mayhew's statement and of Villard's records of Brown's movements.

There was, then, a cave near the log cabin in the years between the Osawatomie event in the spring of 1856 and Brown's last visit to Nebraska in February, 1859, the year of his Harper's Ferry disaster. That he was ever in the cabin more than casually, if that, or that Negroes were hidden in the cave in his lifetime has not been established.

A puzzling testimony at variance with that of E. F. Mayhew is that of John H. Blue, editor of a Nebraska City newspaper, the *Chronicle*. Blue wrote on October 27, 1874, that is, fifteen years after Brown's death:

The Nebraska City cave was dug after the battle of Osawatomie, in which John Brown lost a son, and he reverted to more secretive methods of removing slaves from the south. Bands of renegades were organized at strategic points and friends of Brown in Nebraska City organized a "Vegetarian Society" under which guise they drew in the more fanatical abolitionists. The Vegetarian Society members lived up to the name of their organization, so to speak, by declaring that the cave was dug in which to store fruits and vegetables for winter use. The cave, however, never harbored food until long after the Civil War and people other than the slave runners moved on the land.

This seems inaccurate since the cave was dug in Allen Mayhew's day and, if the Vegetarian Society used it, it must have been after the Mayhews had moved and after Brown's death in 1859. Doubtless, however, the Underground was still operating after Brown and J. H. Kagi died.

Mrs. Lena Linhoff who lived in the cabin in 1886 said that on the door casing in the basement leading to the cave were written not fewer than fifteen names of Negroes. This is hardly of help in determining whether, if ever, Negroes were in the cave while John Brown was alive. And one wonders how she determined certainly, so many

years after the Civil War, that the names were those of Negroes.²³

Finally, here is contemporary lore of the cave as familiar to Robert Brust, a student from Nebraska City attending the University of Nebraska in 1948:

Perhaps the most interesting legend centers around an old log cabin which is built over an underground tunnel. The cabin and cave are called Tom Brown's [*sic*] Cave. During the Civil War the cave was used as a part of an Underground Railroad system which smuggled slaves to Canada and freedom.

Many people that have visited the cave have sworn that they have heard the joyous singing of the slaves. The singing is caused by the wind blowing through the crevices of the tunnel and it caused a low moaning sound which gives the effects of Negro singing.

Whatever is or is not the "historicity" of the John Brown Cabin and Cave, it is clear that considerable folklore has sprung up about them. The cabin was owned by Edward D. Bartling, recently deceased, from the 1880's till 1948. In his pamphlet history of it, *John Henry Kagi and the Old Log Cabin Home* (1938, 1940, 1943), he gives many facts but there are many omissions and he is vague concerning essentials. The cabin may fairly be called John Brown's Cabin in these days, I suppose, for it is now a small John Brown Museum; but John Brown never lived in it nor controlled it, may never have visited it, and it seems unlikely that slaves were ever in it during his lifetime. If they were it could have been but once, that in the expedition of the year of Harper's Ferry, 1859, provided the Mayhews had left it by that time. Even if the Mayhews were no longer occupants as early as 1857, Brown had no fugitive slaves with him to house there in his Nebraska visit of that year. It seems certain that no reliance may be placed on statements such as that in the *Federal Guide to Nebraska* ("Here John Brown of Ossawatimie had runaway slaves . . . A score of fugitive slaves at a time were secreted in the dungeon rooms,") or

²³Bartling, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

that in Bartling's pamphlet ("During the troublesome days following the Missouri Compromise John Brown and his followers aided hundreds of slaves to escape from Missouri," or that of N. C. Abbott in his sympathetic and well written newspaper article ("There is no doubt that John Brown brought hundreds of slaves to Nebraska on their way north").

III

CAVES OF THE NIOBRARA REGION

The upper Niobrara river of northeast Nebraska, called *L'Eau Qui Court*, "Running Water" by early French explorers and traders, flows onward through the sandhill region beyond Valentine in Cherry County till it reaches the Missouri in Knox County on the border of South Dakota. Mari Sandoz, native and laureate of the sandhill country, has supplied lore of several caves of the so-called Nebraska Panhandle and eastward. The caves of the region are usually of sandstone with strong limestone characteristics and soft formations beneath. Buffalo Springs Cave and Fly Speck Billy's Cave, for instance, are in sandstone.

Buffalo Springs Cave

Miss Sandoz has given me the following account of this cave. She recalls mention of it, she says, somewhere in anthropological literature of the Sioux, but we are unable to identify the place.

"Old timers used to tell of seeing buffalo herds hit the dry bed of the Platte in late summer looking for water. Finding no water but smelling it underground, the great herds milled around on the sandbars until it welled up around their hoofs. These buffalo springs, as they were called there, were common and temporary, but Deer

Creek which flows north of the sandhills into the Niobrara river, starts in a cave that the Indians say was made by the buffalo. It seems that in the Great Dry Time, long before the White Man came, there had been no rain for so many moons that the people were dying of thirst and hunger, the rivers just dusty gullies and the thirsty buffalo gaunt as the empty parfleches in the tipis. When it seemed as if everything but the buzzards must die, an old buffalo cow threw up her head as though she smelled something, and led off into sandhills, the weak herds struggling after as fast as they could; the Indians too. At a sandy spot against a big hill, the cow stopped and the herds milled around her, bellowing and pawing, until suddenly water came up around their hoofs. By the next morning the buffalo spring had washed back under the hill, making a cave, the water boiling up strong and clear and cold and flowing away in a creek that found its way to the dry bed of the river, the first water there for months.

"After that other springs appeared and soon it was raining again, the Dry Time almost forgotten. But the Indian youths went over to that hill for their puberty fastings that were to bring them the guiding vision if they lay long enough on the blown-out top in sun and darkness. Afterward they came down and drank the water from the cave and made their sweat lodge with the scrub willows that had sprung up. The Indians brought their sick and injured here too, for the medicine water from the cave. My father used to tell us of hunting deer with one of his old Ogalalla Sioux friends who wouldn't let him shoot any deer they found drinking at the little stream where it left the cave or resting in the buck brush near by. Not even if they were short of meat.

"There is a story that when Conquering Bear was shot in the Grattan fight down on the Platte river in 1854, the Indians tried to get him to Buffalo Springs Cave, certain that he would not die if he could be bathed in the river. They reached the Niobrara and moved down it as fast as their gravely wounded chief could endure, but when they were within a day's travoix travel, the old man could go no farther."

Road Agent's or Fly Speck Billy's Cave

According to Mari Sandoz pretty much the whole Panhandle country of Northwest Nebraska has been searched over and dug into for hidden gold stolen from Black Hills stages back in the '70's and '80's by road agents, or, as easterners would call them, highwaymen. "Usually," she says, "the amount named for the buried caches is \$300,000, and sometimes the thieves were said to have been three men, perhaps including a not very heroic robber called Fly Speck Billy. They were said to have hidden out in a cave in the Niobrara bluffs and to have fallen to quarreling among themselves over the division of the gold. Sometimes one or two, or even all three of the men died, it was said, from the shooting resulting from the quarrel. In any case the gold was always assumed to be buried a short distance from the cave, either before the fight or afterward by the surviving. The marker by which the place could be recognized later was a line of three small pine trees standing like horsebackers along the top of the bluff above. There were three such trees not far from the place Old Jules homesteaded in 1884. By then there had been regular invasions of treasure hunters. After two of the three trees had been cut down, perhaps by some settler needing the poles, the substantial stumps and the remaining tree seemed to serve very well as a lure for the shovel men.

"There was a cave too within half a mile of our place and this was supposedly the place of the quarrel. Mostly the digging was between the cave and the trees, not on our land. But my father used to go up to watch a while, with his Winchester along, of course, since he never left the house without it. Usually the men reached nervously for their revolvers when he suddenly appeared beside them. He used to tell of these encounters and laugh so hard he choked. 'Hell, go ahead. People have been digging here ever since I came to the country,' he usually told them. But not once did any of them take him up on his invitation to come down to the house for supper.

"The diggings usually blew in before many months, or, if they were deep enough to endanger stock, somebody would go up and throw enough dirt into them to make them safe. But the cave was cool and moist and a fine place for the boys of the region to explore, and for picnickers to go to or to flee to in a shower. Often at night there were lights there; matches struck, or even a fire started that was shielded inside but somehow reflected a little into the dark. The more superstitious and fanciful saw ghosts around there late at night, from the road of course. The dead men haunting their booty, it was said. Several times men talked of utilizing them in the search for the \$300,000, but it didn't work out. Several times, too, fleeing bad men were said to be hiding there, and the local joke for a time was to elect the most timid man of the community constable and then tell him to go arrest the hideouts in Billy's cave. For a while a local chicken thief used the cave to hide his loot, and for several years afterward the cave stank in bad weather and was full of chicken feathers. As late as 1942 I received letters from people still hopeful about Fly Speck Billy's Cave as the key to the lost gold. I often wondered how anyone could be certain that, if the treasure ever was there, it hadn't been dug up and carried away, say, by the two men who came poling a raft down the river, with maps and compass, a big bull dog, and two 30-30 rifles.

"The last time I saw the cave was in 1931. It had fallen in, making a washed gully, but there were some rather recent diggings around it, with a lot of wind-exposed potsherds scattered over the turned-up earth; evidence of a much earlier occupancy than Fly-Speck Billy's or anybody else's with \$300,000 of Black Hills gold."

There are stories of the cave where the body of Crazy Horse, the Sioux chief was said to have been hidden for about a month after he was killed at Fort Robinson in September, 1877. Memory of the site of this cave, if there was one, has been lost. In the Crawford and Crow Butte regions in Sioux County are several caves said to be Indian hideouts. Doc Middleton's cave, supposedly his

secret headquarters, is in the Niobrara river canyons north of O'Neill. Doc (David C.) Middleton was a cattle rustler, gambler, ex-convict, and performer in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. He died in a county jail in Wyoming where he was confined for bootlegging. And of course there is a Jesse James cave farther east in Knox County, beyond the mouth of the Niobrara, where he is said to have concealed himself when he lived there with Indians. This is probably to be associated with Devil's Nest near Crofton. This region of rough meadow and woodland was described in the journal of Lewis and Clark who camped here in 1804. Calvin Ravenscroft of Kennedy in Cherry County reports that on the Snake river where it flows into the Niobrara is a cave, now cemented over to some extent, in which was said to live a man who thought he had discovered perpetual motion. He shut himself in the cave to try to perfect his machine.

IV

OTHER CAVES

Big Bear Hollow

East of Winnebago and near the northern end of Memorial Park in Thurston County is a wooded indentation of special interest discussed in 1934 by Ora Russell of Decatur.²⁴ It is surrounded by hills and sheer cliffs of white Dakota sandstone. According to a fairly well-known legend, in a cave in one of these hills lived Big Bear, a mysterious creature half man and half bear, given to descending on Indian villages and carrying away women folk through magic power. Big Bear was protected by other black bears invested with magic against which the arrows of the Indians were futile. Once he stole an Indian girl who was on her honeymoon with her husband. The latter trained two young bears as ferocious fighters. Against these, Big Bear's protectors lost their magic. Big Bear

²⁴Lincoln *Journal and Star*, December 9, 1934.

himself was killed by the Indian and Indians again hunted in the hollow.

Barada Cave and Robbers' Cave

Barada Cave not far from Falls City is a hollowed out place under a limestone cliff, made by the action of water. Tradition has it that this cave sheltered horse-thieves. Its name comes from the small town of Barada which was named from an early settler, Antoine Barada (1807-1887), about whom legends and tall tales of his great strength have grown up. Robbers' Cave is on this side of Holy Fireplace Point near the Winnebago Indian agency in Thurston County. It is now only a small recess in the bluff overlooking the Missouri river. The *Federal Guide to Nebraska* describes it as once the hideout of river bandits: "When an unsuspecting trapper was seen floating his season's catch down the river, the bandits would assail him and take his furs. At one time the opening of the cave formed a right angle and it was necessary to crawl on hands and knees to enter it. Now erosion and the destructive work of vandals have changed it. The James brothers are said to have evaded capture on one occasion by hiding in this cave after attempting to rob a bank in Northfield, Minnesota."²⁵

Dripping Fork Cave

Dripping Fork Cave, on the Platte, mentioned in John D. Hunter's *Manners and Customs of Several Indian Tribes West of the Mississippi* (Philadelphia, 1823), may not have been in Nebraska. No records or traces of it are now to be found. Despite its picturesque name, Hunter's reference to it is the only one that remains.

Ponca Cave

The so-called Ponca Cave, the creation of two imaginative newspaper men, has been given considerable

²⁵Federal Writers Project, *op. cit.*, p. 263.

space in the Nebraska press. There were a few columns about it in the Lincoln *Sunday Star* of July 5, 1925, under the heading "Ponca Residents Recall Discovery of Cave of Prehistoric Beasts and Plants." The authors were Harry I. Peterson and William Huse, the latter the historian of Dixon County of which Ponca is the county seat. Their tall tale was repeated in the Lincoln *Sunday Journal and Star*, March 28, 1948, twenty-three years later.

Ponca is in northeast Nebraska, near where the Missouri river rounds the corner bordering South Dakota and Iowa. About 1915 fossil remains such as shark teeth and turtle shells were uncovered there, and a large fossil fish, now in a Chicago Museum, was blasted from the bluffs along the river. Local legends and tales seem to have started up after this event; Messrs Huse and Peterson's tale is the tallest. They associated their story with no specific site at Ponca but claimed that it had been lost. Their yarn tells of vast caverns, prehistoric skeletons and gigantic fossilized animals beneath the northern part of Dixon County. It narrates the marvelous subterranean travels of "Professor Jermiah Perrigoue, who liked geology and liked to dig along the bluffs for fossils, minerals and petrifications."

In 1876, Perrigoue found a great hole or an abandoned mine shaft 85 feet deep. He went through a fissure in the rock about 150 yards, then turned sharply to the left. Below him he saw to his amazement a gigantic cavern, a room supported by enormous trees reaching to 300 feet, their leaves turned into a canopy of stone. In this ancient forest he found petrified worms, a gigantic bird, terrible reptiles, a pherodactyl, dinotherium, megatherium, plesiosaur, ichthyosaurus, and paleotherium. Some of these creatures seemed to have been engaged in a death struggle before their demise. Other features of the great cavern were a subterranean river and a waterfall. Perrigoue penetrated more than two miles from the entrance and spent more than two days before retracing his steps. Finally, "Near the entrance where he had enlarged the fissure he encountered the dread fire-damp, and to his utter horror

he saw the gauze of his miner's lamp had taken fire and was shooting up flames. In desperation he tried to extinguish them and finding it impossible he hurled the lamp far from him and scrambled up the shaft. He had barely reached the upper world before a terrible explosion heaved the ground, the shaft disappeared and this extraordinary sarcophagus was eternally sealed."

Shelter Caves

Shelter caves, the once-inhabited homes of subterranean earth-lodge dwellers, have been found in many parts of the country, in the Ozarks, for instance, and in West Texas. Dr. Earl H. Bell, formerly anthropologist at the University of Nebraska, discovered a number of these in the 1930's in Cheyenne and Morrill counties, and there are shelter caves along the Platte and the Republican rivers also. These have been little individualized, have had little prominence, and little lore has arisen about them. They have not been taken into account in this paper, a paper intended to emphasize folklore rather than archaeology, geology, or tribal history.

This ends my present list of Nebraska caves and my account of the lore associated with them. It is not intended to be exhaustive even if my space permitted it. No doubt there are more caves than those noted here that deserve recording, but they have had little publicity, or only local publicity. I have tried to include all those that are best known.

Cave lore seems to me a timely subject just now, when we are reminded daily that we live in the atomic age and may all eventually have to take shelter underground and become cave dwellers.²⁶

²⁶A National Speleological Society was established in 1939, to stimulate interest in caves and to record the findings of explorers and scientists within and without the Society. Properly enough it subordinates folklore to adventure, discovery and scientific findings. Its tenth Bulletin, 1948, initiates in its 136 pages the treatment of the caves of a single state, Texas, a state peculiarly rich in caves of special interest and importance which has had less attention hitherto than it deserves.