

Kid's KOrner

Early Indian farmers leave glyphs in Tennessee cave

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. — Come explore Mud Glyph Cave.

First, slide down the entrance hole for about eight feet at a 45-degree angle. Take a good look at that slide; it's not just the only way in, it's the only way out.

With belly down, crawl a few feet to the first "room." Crawl through a tiny hole in a wall barely big enough for a human body, wade through an underground stream, walk bent-over beneath an overhanging rock ledge, squeeze through a second hole, and slither belly-down again to enter a room large enough to stand up in.

Now look up. There, incised on both walls of a long, narrow corridor that extends for about 100 yards, are drawings, hundreds of them. There are human stick figures and more sophisticated

human faces, pictures of birds and serpents and turtles, geometric designs, and drawings that look like simple squiggles.

Those squiggles are meaningless to modern Americans, but they may have had some significance to the earlier Americans who put all these glyphs here: Indians who lived in the vicinity of this east Tennessee cave from the 12th through the 16th centuries.

"Picture yourself as an Indian, barefoot and naked except for your loincloth, carrying cane torches and crawling in here for the purpose of putting these drawings here," says Bill Deane.

Deane is a professional photographer and a caving veteran who has been photographing the glyphs as part of a research team.

Charles H. Faulkner, a professor of anthropology at the University

of Tennessee here, is leader of the team, which is funded by the National Geographic Society. He says the cave is unique, that scientists know of no other cave that Indians entered solely to carry out ritual.

The medium, too, is unique: the glyphs were made using either a finger or a sharp stick, and incised into the soft, damp mud clinging to the cave walls. Because of the cave's dampness, the glyphs have been preserved over the centuries but were unknown until a U.S. Forest Service ranger, who also is a spelunker, found them in 1979.

"Some of the motifs in the cave are found on copper plates and shell pendants that date back to the 13th and 14th centuries," says Faulkner.

"The important thing about this site is that it gives us a much larger repertoire of Mississippian motifs than we have already. Until now, we've had artistic expression only on nonperishable items like shell or copper or bits of bone. This is the first time we've found these motifs on clay.

"And the style, which is kind of crude, might indicate that ordinary people were going in there and trying to copy the religious iconography of the time."

Scientists have known for some time that prehistoric American Indians entered caves. But in other cases, they were seeking shelter or minerals. That applies, for example, to Kentucky's Mammoth Cave, where the mining history was studied by Patty Jo Watson of Washington University in St. Louis, another member of Faulkner's team.

But preliminary archeological digging disclosed no evidence of mining in Mud Glyph Cave. There

was no sign of tools or tool refurbishing, no pottery, no food remains — no artifacts at all except for the charcoal residue of torches used to light the cave.

"As far as we can tell, this cave was entered only for ceremonial or ritual purposes," Faulkner says.

A combination of radiocarbon dating of the charcoal residue and identification of the known motifs found on the cave walls helped place the time the drawings were made.

"Quite a number of Mississippian Indian sites have been excavated in east Tennessee," Faulkner says. "We know what their villages were like, we know what their houses were like, we have a good handle on their material culture."

The people living in the vicinity

of the cave between the 12th and the 16th centuries came from the Dallas culture, named for a Tennessee River island, Faulkner says.

The Dallas culture emerged about A.D. 1200 and may be ancestral to either the Creek or the Cherokee peoples. The Dallas Indians were a farming people who grew corn, beans, and squash and lived in villages with a chieftainship and a high priesthood. Their square houses had hearths in the middle, and had walls made of mud or clay covered with thatched roofs.

From the formal art of the Mississippian Period, scientists have concluded that the art on the copper plates and shell pendants was executed by training artisans.

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Using the carbide lamp on his hard hat for light, University of Tennessee Professor Charles H. Faulkner examines some of the glyphs incised on the mud-covered walls of an east Tennessee cave. Scientists know of no other North American cave where prehistoric Indians drew on the walls in this fashion.



The figure of a bird, possibly a great horned owl, is seen on the wall of a cave in east Tennessee. Scientists say drawings in the cave made by prehistoric Indians date to between the 12th and 16th centuries.

COLOR THIS!

- | | |
|-----------|---------------|
| 1. BLACK | 6. PEACH |
| 2. RED | 7. GREEN |
| 3. YELLOW | 8. LT. BROWN |
| 4. BLUE | 9. LT. BLUE |
| 5. BROWN | 10. LT. GREEN |

GEORGIA IS THE LARGEST STATE LOCATED EAST OF THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER.

JAMES OGLETHORPE BROUGHT THE FIRST SETTLERS TO GEORGIA, 42 YRS. BEFORE THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR. THIS STATE SUPPLIES FOUR-FIFTHS OF THE NATION'S TURPENTINE AND ROSIN. GEORGIA BECAME A STATE IN 1788.

