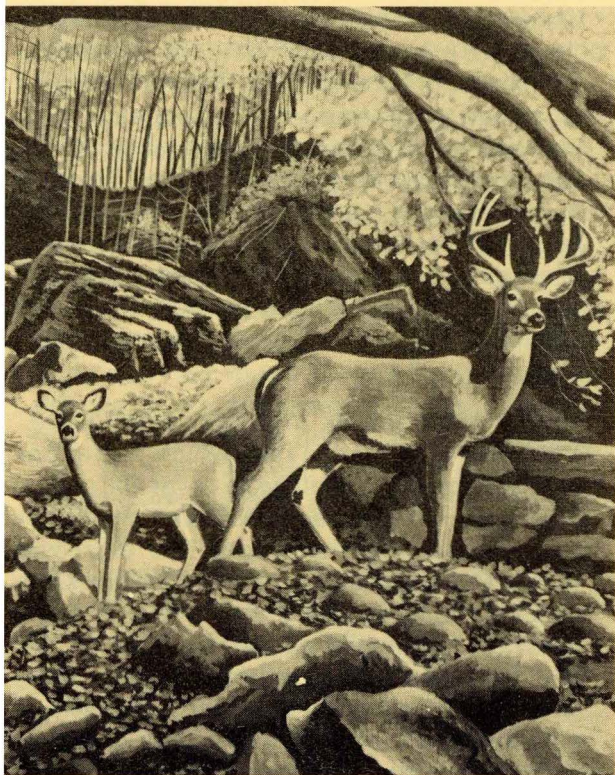


# The Caves Trail



Maquoketa Caves State Park  
RR #2  
Maquoketa, IA 52060  
(319) 652-5835

The Caves Trail is approximately a mile in length and is rugged in some areas. One of the caves you will visit is lighted but in the other two, you will need a flashlight.

Begin the trail by crossing the road and following the sidewalk down the hill. In the spring this area is covered with wildflowers, which include hepatica, anemones, violets, and wild ginger. There are over 350 different kinds of plants in the park, some of them rare. Please do not pick or disturb anything so that others may enjoy their beauty. At the bottom of the hill and to the left, you will see the "Natural Bridge." This was at one time the entrance to the cave, and the large rocks around you were part of the ceiling of a large room. The ceiling eroded to the point that it could no longer support itself and collapsed, leaving the Natural Bridge standing alone.

Follow the sidewalk into "Dancehall Cave." This cave is formed in rock which was at one time sediment in a shallow sea over 400 million years ago. The passage itself was created by water dissolving the stone. The cave was opened for easy access by the Civilian Conservation Corps during the 1930's. A major renovation project was undertaken during 1982 and 1983 after a flood destroyed much of the walks, floors, and retaining walls. The restoration was accomplished with a special appropriation by the Iowa Legislature and labor provided by the Mens Reformatory in Anamosa.

After crossing the stream, you will see an opening on the right known as "Bat Passage." This passage reappears back at the main passage farther downstream but about eight feet above the sidewalk. The name comes from the bats which hibernate in this area of the cave during the winter. These bats come from many miles away to stay here because the temperature near the ceiling is around 50 degrees.

The large opening you come to next is the middle entrance, known in the early part of the century as the "Devil's Cavern." Sinkholes like this are how most caves are discovered. A depression will be seen in the ground and, as



the stone collapses, a hole will open up in the surface. There are two other sinkholes in the park. One is located just below "Fat Man's Misery" which shows a cross section of a collapsed sinkhole. The entrance to "Wye Cave" is another. Across the dirt balcony, there is a square opening which is the entrance to "Steel Gate Passage." If you choose to enter, be prepared to get dirty because it is 800 feet of crawling.

Continue to follow the sidewalk through the cave. Notice the small stalactites on the ceiling. They are formed by water moving down through the limestone rock and slowly dissolving it. When the water drop that forms at the end of the formation evaporates, it leaves the rock it dissolved on the stalactite. If the water drop falls from the stalactite to the floor, the dissolved rock will eventually form a stalagmite growing up from the floor. Most of the large formations were vandalized before the State of Iowa acquired the area in 1921. Please do not touch the formations in the caves because the natural oil of your skin will stop the deposition of the stone. These formations grow at a rate of about an inch every 100 years, so it will be a long time before the large formations will be seen here again. To get an idea of what the cave looked like when it was first found, you need to come here in the winter. Then, icicles form like stalactites and stalagmites, only much faster. In the course of the winter, some of these icicles will grow to ten feet in length and may join up with the ones growing up from the floor if left alone.

The large flat area to your right is the "Dancehall," from which the cave gets its name. It is said that the Sac and Fox Indians used this area for their tribal council meetings because of the privacy the cave afforded. In more modern times, square dances were held here in the cool of the cave on hot summer days.

As you follow the trail out of the cave, notice how the trees have grown in this deep narrow valley while trying to compete for sunlight. Looking up and to the right, you can see

“Balance Rock.” You can leave the trail now, if you wish, by going up by Balance Rock and following the trail back to the lodge/concession area where you started.

To take the trail on farther, go to the left, cross the creek, and then follow the base of the cliff to the right. You will find the trail more rugged now.

The next cave you come to is “Rainy Day Cave,” about 130 feet long. Because of the constant temperature of 55 degrees inside, the Woodland Cultures of prehistoric Indians (about 2000 years ago) used areas like this for their homes during the fall and winter. This is quite similar to the way in which we are building earth sheltered homes today to save energy. The Indians would hunt and pick nuts and berries when living in areas like this and then move during the spring and summer to the river where they would fish and harvest wild rice.

As you continue south, we would like to remind you to stay on the trails. Scrambling off the trails can damage the plants and cause erosion problems to the thin soils. All the caves are marked, and the holes you see along the cliffs are not actual caves.

As you climb the steps in the rock, you enter a mechanical cave known as “Fat Man’s Misery.” Mechanical caves are formed by the physical movement of rocks, not by water action as in the other caves. As you leave the cave, look back and see how this rock fit against the cliff before it moved. Also to the left, you can see a cross section of a collapsed sinkhole and how it would have made a depression in the surface above it. A short distance down the trail, you will see the other mechanical cave. You can either go through or around it on the trail.

Farther down the trail to the left, after going up the stone steps is the entrance to “Ice Cave.” This cave is noticeably colder than the others in the park. Could this be because there is more cave here than can be seen? Perhaps it has ice in it, and there is cold air coming from this area. During the winter, this cave often has



three-foot icicles growing up from the floor like stalagmites.

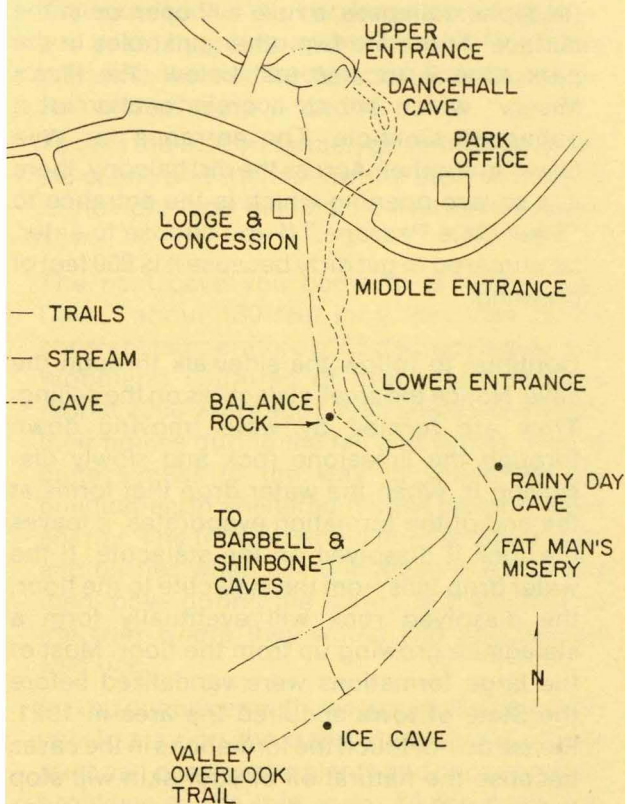
You will now have to backtrack on the trail to where you can turn left and cross the creek. Before you turn, look at the rock wall on your right, and see if you can find the seven names carved into the rock. The letters have almost weathered away in the hundred plus years since they were carved. What occupation could the man that carved these names have had?

After you cross the creek, imagine that you are back in the 1830's trailing 10 deer up this valley. It is late in the day, and as you look around you, it appears that the deer are trapped in a box canyon. Camp is set up so the deer can't escape down the valley, and the hunt will continue tomorrow. In the morning, it is as if the earth opened up and swallowed the deer. They can't be found. Searching on, a great opening is found, the lower entrance to Dancehall Cave where the deer made their escape. This is how two early settlers of Jackson County, Joshua Bear and David Scott, found the cave.

As you come to the cliff, the trail forks. The left fork will take you to "Shinbone" and "Barbell Caves." Following the right fork will take you over large rocks which were once a portion of Dancehall Cave's ceiling. They fell as the cave eroded back. Dancehall Cave at one time could have extended a mile down this valley to the Maquoketa River, but has eroded back to where there are only about 1100 feet remaining.

At the top of the metal stairway, you will pass Balance Rock. Looking at the base of the 17-ton rock you can see daylight under it. Follow the steps up and you will be on the trail that will take you back to the lodge/concession building where you started. This building, along with most of the buildings in the park, was built by the Civilian Conservation Corps during the great depression of the 1930's.

We hope that you have enjoyed this trail and your visit to Maquoketa Caves State Park. There are approximately five more miles of hiking trails, picnic areas, a campground, con-



cession stand for refreshments, and 10 more caves open for exploration. These caves range in length from 30 feet to over 800 feet.

*Credits:*

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*Assistance in text preparation by Gean Cummings, South Dakota State University, Brookings, South Dakota.*

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