

## The Colebrook Cave

Here is perhaps the one topic that elicits more interest than any other in the entire history of the town of Colebrook. Every one of us who grew up in town were introduced to the topic at an early age, and those who moved here weren't residents very long before being "bitten by the bug", whereupon they sought out any scrap of information that they could uncover on the subject. It didn't take long, however, to discover that there weren't really many facts, but rather many stories, some of which were contradictory. It certainly isn't difficult to find someone in town who is willing to tell you their particular set of "facts" as they know them. I'm going to start at the beginning and tell you my observations on the subject.

Ed Simonds (1864-1956) was the first to tell me about the cave. The facts as he understood them were as follows: A group of youths in the late summer of 1841 decided to "have an adventure", and somehow or other found their way to Colebrook, where they had heard rumors concerning a large cave. The results of their outing were published in a Norwich, Connecticut newspaper dated September 24, 1841. In those days, it is a safe bet that few readers lived outside the circulation area of the local paper; hence the chances of this or any other local story being seen at any distance was slight. This letter resurfaced in a book entitled "American Adventure", a compilation of adventure stories written about the New England area. Harper Brothers subsequently published this in 1868. This prominent publishing house guaranteed wide circulation, and undoubtedly someone in the local area obtained a copy. It wouldn't have been long before someone organized an expedition to rediscover this local attraction. Ed believed in the existence of the cave, but told me that the closest he had come to it was one summer in his youth, while working for a surveyor, their work took them over the top of the cliff situated above the entrance to the cave, then covered by large boulders.

The 1868 book sparked renewed interest in town, resulting in further accounts of searching for (and in some cases) finding and writing about the elusive cave. This took place during the publishing reign of the *Mountain Times*, a weekly newspaper that preceded the daily *Winsted Citizen*, which made its debut in 1888. It was the latter paper that published a series of accounts, spaced about a generation apart, concerning the elusive Colebrook Cave. During the 1920s, a period of time when Frank L. Wentworth was writing locally, the topic really took on a new and larger aspect, and the editor of the *Citizen* capitalized upon the creative writing of Wentworth, knowing the value of hype in increasing public interest (and sales). Whatever it took to increase sales, he was right there. In addition to the articles in the *Citizen*, Wentworth authored several books about local lore, such as *The Winsted Wildman*. If you believe that story as being the verbatim truth, I have a document I will sell you giving title to the Colebrook River Dam (and for a reasonable price, too).

It was during the 1920s that several local men and youths scoured the wooded hillside lying north of Shantry Road and west of the Phelps' buildings in North Colebrook. They claimed to have found the site and even explored the cave for a distance of 50 feet before running low on matches. This was duly reported in the *Winsted Citizen* on Nov. 19, 1926. One week later the *Citizen* carried another article stating that a dozen or more men revisited the cave site, but this time were only able to penetrate it to a depth of 80 or 100 feet, whereas the group the previous week claimed to have reached 30

rods (495 feet). There is a major inconsistency here- the previous week's account clearly stated 50 feet as the depth to which they were able to penetrate.

Another episode in the periodic interest in the cave occurred in 1947, when the *Citizen* again reported that youths representing several Colebrook families spent the better part of a day combing the area generally agreed upon to be its location, only to come up empty handed.

Alan DeLarm, in his book *Colebrook Stories*, written in 1979, devotes almost 6 pages to the topic. One weakness in this account is that some of the articles quoted from are not dated, and I'm fairly certain, based in part on Ed Simons' account, that some stories consist of a hodge-podge of various articles written at widely separated times.

Let's go back and take a closer look at what we know.

The earliest account occurs in 1841, in a newspaper located in the southeast corner of the state. This period of time marks the era of expansion in the United States; the era of the turnpike, begun in the 1790s, had been challenged first by the canals, then by the iron horse. It was then that the railroad came as far north as Winsted, allowing for the first time convenient travel from places as far distant as Norwich, Connecticut, for example, in the space of a day or two. The era of exploration, begun in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, offered fewer and fewer challenges, at least east of the Appalachians. If the urge was strong enough, there was the west, known, but hardly tamed in the early 1840s. At the end of the decade, Sutter's mill in California would cease producing lumber and would initiate the great gold rush that would change the political and demographic face of North America forever.

Many people, not wishing to journey so far afield, sought to discover interesting sites closer to home overlooked by their predecessors. Of course, there were many legitimate examples that came to light, but there were also cases where much recklessness of the truth was foisted upon a gullible public. My personal feeling is that we are confronted with the latter situation. I don't say this lightly, because I really want to believe in the Colebrook Cave, but my interpretation of the facts as I see them state otherwise.

Beginning with the location: There seems to be a general agreement as to its being located at the base of a hill just east of the Norfolk town line. Some place it on land belonging to the descendants of Arah Phelps, just west of Brummagem Brook, others say a little more to the south on land closer to Shantry Road on Lossin property. At any rate, both locations consist of talus slopes made up of large, jumbled boulders situated below steep granite ledges.

The 1841 account describes the physical attributes of the cave as follows: the opening lies at the base of a cliff. The first 50 feet consists of jagged rock covering the floor, after which the floor is of stone and gravel much like a road. The roof is sometimes quite high, never less than 8 feet. At a distance of 165 feet, the width is 23 feet; at 495 feet, it is 31 feet high. It comes to an abrupt end many rods from the entrance. There are two wells, one with water, also there are several openings to the right and left, large enough for a man to enter; the sound of falling water could be heard from one of them near the far end.

The description that appeared in the *Citizen* in 1926 stated the length as being a quarter of a mile long (1320 feet), and being over 80 feet wide at one place. Also it contained several deep caverns and recesses, with pools of water and a stream of running

water in it. Having said all this, they go on to say *that they did not explore more than 50 feet*, as it was very spooky, dark and damp, and their matches kept going out in the damp air. The descriptive terminology used in these newspaper accounts are written so as to elicit interest in the readers. Hints of possible animals (presumably large carnivores), skeletons, precipitous cliffs containing huge boulders hanging over the explorer's head with no visible means of support all lend an air of great adventure.

Another newspaper account cited by DeLarm is undated, but contains the term "macadamized" when describing the nature of the floor, which tells me it also is most likely from the 1920s. The reporter claims to have borrowed a lantern from one of the twenty some-odd people standing around outside, and joined those inside the cave. He states that if all the fallen rocks that blocked the entrance were removed, the cave opening would be 50 feet wide and 30 feet high. At 165 feet he found the width to be 83 feet, and again at 495 feet determined that the width was 67 feet. He describes the *walls as being so smooth that they appeared to have been chiseled; the ceiling in places was very high, never less than 10 feet.*

There is one thread of continuity throughout its history, namely that all the accounts (that I have seen, at least) are newspaper articles, all of which were written in a tone calculated to excite the interest of the public. In most cases, subsequent stories outdid its predecessor in descriptive terminology. In 1841 certain measurements are given as to widths and heights at specific depths; the first 50 feet consisting of jagged rock, at 165 feet the width was given as 23 feet, at 30 rods (495 feet) the width was 23 feet. They failed, however, to give any estimation as to its depth, simply stating that it ended abruptly many rods from the entrance. Bear in mind however, that nothing further is described after the 495-foot figure. And why should all of these accounts use the same measurements in a dark cave having such high humidity that the matches and lanterns kept going out? Under the circumstances it would have been difficult at best to do any measurements, let alone use the exact measurements (165 feet, 495 feet) as the previous explorer.

By the 1920s, the length has become one quarter of a mile (1320 feet), at the depth of 165 feet the width is given as 83 feet and at the same 495-foot mark, the width was reported as 67 feet. The minimum height of the ceiling has increased from 8 feet to 10 feet. No two accounts describing the rock-covered entrance ever agree, even those separated by one week. When local boys returned home with their tales of adventure, their fathers are told when they went to investigate that there must have been a recent rockslide that now effectively blocks the entrance. Some accounts in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century hint that local men had blasted the mouth of the cave shut to protect society from the dangers that lurked within. Ted Vaill of the *Citizen* wrote in 1947 that he had been informed by someone in his audience that the entrance had been closed up by dynamiting a dozen or so years before by the WPA (Works Project Administration – one of President Roosevelt's creations designed to lift the country out of the Great Depression.) I really doubt that, mainly because no Colebrook land owner ever was contacted by that or any other agency for permission to do any blasting, as they were required to do. I even remember "the CCC Boys" asking my parent's permission to walk on our farm searching for wild currants to destroy, because they could be a carrier of a blight known as Pine Rust, which devastated White Pine trees.

My thesis that the role of newspaper reporters plays a prominent part can be taken a step further at this point, as Ted Vaill's account, in attempting to give specific directions on the whereabouts of the cave, states that it is "in the same vicinity as Colebrook's famed dinosaur tracks can be seen". Having broached the subject, let me say that what Ted was alluding to are depressions in outcroppings of granitic schist having examples of what geologists refer to as differential erosion, namely the weathering out of softer stone surrounded by a harder matrix. One other example of this type of erosion occurs at the swimming area known as Flat Rock in Colebrook River. These depressions were called "the Devil's footprints". They do, for all the world, look as though something with cloven hooves had walked over soft mud that then solidified. The only problem is that granite schist does not allow for the presence of fossils, and that is the only type of bedrock we have in Colebrook. The overburden left by the glacier, to my knowledge, consists of materials devoid of any type of fossils.

For my final, and strongest argument as to my belief that no cave having the characteristics attributed to Colebrook's exists, I'm going to give you a short (and hopefully clear) lesson in geology.

The northwest corner of Connecticut, beginning at the western shore of Barkhamsted Reservoir and progressing southwest to a point near Torrington, then northwest so as to encompass Norfolk, and on into Massachusetts, forms a triangle that contains the oldest geological formations in the state (probably in the neighborhood of one billion years). It consists of rock known as gneiss (pronounced "nice") and schist. These are both members of a family of rock called "igneous", formed from molten material deep within the Earth. They have subsequently been subjected to great pressure and additional heat that gives a banded appearance when erosion eventually exposes them on the surface. What we see today as we look at our landscape is comparable to a snapshot in time of the never-ending process known as erosion, the term we use to describe the process of chemical and mechanical breakdown of any material that happens to be elevated over its neighbor. Millions of years ago, when our present-day surface lay five to seven miles below the surface, there occurred a truly cataclysmic event caused by the collision of what is today Europe and Africa with present-day North America. Connecticut was centered on the collision point. The titanic pressures our native rock was subjected to resulted in the gneisses and schists. These rocks do not and cannot contain fossils, nor do they harbor large empty spaces known as caves

There is another type of rock however, which can contain caves. These formations were created on the bottoms of ancient oceans by the slow deposition of shells and skeletons from deceased marine life, as well as fine silts and muds being eroded from land areas. If, after millions of years, mechanical movements within the earth elevate these old ocean floors, it sometimes creates an environment that allows groundwater to percolate downward, dissolving softer regions and creating what we call caves. The depths of some of these marine deposits are amazing; for example in the area immediately south of Albany, New York, they reach 13,000 feet. This material eroded westward from what is now western New England, which was home to a range of mountains rivaling today's Himalayas. Incidentally, there are many large caverns in the Albany area, most of which are not commercial. I was an avid spelunker while in college, and spent many a weekend exploring seemingly endless passageways over there.

Unfortunately for Colebrook, we never had an ocean or even a shallow sea over our territory, hence no marine deposits that could ever harbor caves. Therefore, sadly, (and I truly mean that), the original 1841 description, as well as subsequent embellishments, are of a classic limestone, or perhaps mudstone cave – the flat floor, smooth sides, side passages, sounds of falling or running water and the extreme humidity. The only embellishments they overlooked were stalactites and stalagmites! It did exist however, in the fertile minds of various newspapermen who undoubtedly generated additional sales and a following of several generations of our forefathers (and contemporaries).

