

A Long History of Linkages and Synergy: Western Kentucky University and the Mammoth Cave System

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South central Kentucky's Mammoth Cave System is by far the most extensive cave system on earth, and has been designated not only as an American National Park, but also by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site and International Biosphere Reserve. In addition to the unique natural landscape, there has been a rich human history in and around the cave over several thousand years.

Nearby is Western Kentucky University (WKU), which since the early 1900's (and as various precursor institutions including the Potter School for Young Ladies and later the Western Kentucky State Normal School) has had numerous interactions with the cave system and its proprietors. These events and relationships have been remarkably synergistic, for example providing the University with a nearby, world-class learning environment while offering the cave managers, particularly in recent decades, the expertise of faculty and student scholars in interpreting the cave system, landscape, and associated resources.

Early interactions include many school field trips to the cave and area, which originally involved multi-day excursions. While some of these were by train between Bowling Green and the cave, at least in some cases the boys would make the 100-kilometer round trip on foot accompanied by horse-drawn wagons loaded with girl students who, while riding ahead of the boys, would sing songs to encourage and provide energy to their walking colleagues. A camping trip along the Green River after one such cave trip was described as having festivities occurring to a level "not seen since the celebrations of the Danes on the morning after the slaying by Beowulf of the sea-monster Grendel."

A particularly significant event occurred in early 1925 when the assistance of the WKU football team was requested (along with many others participating) in the attempted, and ultimately unsuccessful, rescue of trapped cave explorer Floyd Collins at Sand Cave.

Class field excursions still continue regularly to the cave, and more recently several departments have developed interactions at the cave including professional funded research, graduate thesis and undergraduate research projects, and extensive educational experiences. These include the WKU Center for Cave and Karst Studies Summer Field Studies Program and the Mammoth Cave International Center for Science and Learning, jointly funded by Mammoth Cave National Park and WKU's Center for Cave and Karst Studies.

Through the years the WKU library system has built an extensive collection of contemporary and historical print materials concerning Mammoth Cave. An important outreach beyond the cave and University community involves the recent and ongoing collaborative work between The WKU Libraries and Museum and Mammoth Cave National Park, funded through the US National Park Service Cost Share Challenge Program, to inventory, organize, and make available online these materials for broad access through the internet.