

THE SUBTERRANEAN VOYAGE,

OR

THE MAMMOTH CAVE,

PARTIALLY EXPLORED.

(From a gentleman in Bowling Green, Kentucky, to his friend in Russelville)

BOWLING-GREEN, January 21st, 1810.

MY DEAR W.

You may perhaps not deem it uninteresting to have some information respecting the largest cave now known. It lies about eight miles from the Dripping Spring, a little south of east, near Green River, in Warren county. The surrounding country is composed of knobs not unlike those in the barrens generally. The mouth of the cave is situated on the north side of one of those knobs. We descended abruptly about fifty or sixty feet, when the mouth presented itself complete; it is arched over by a large ledge of rocks, from which issues a clear fountain; from this the workmen are supplied with a sufficiency of water for their salt petre works; it falls perpendicularly fifty feet. In removing the earth near the mouth for the purpose of erecting furnaces, several human skeletons were discovered, of a size unusually large; one of the former proprietors of the cave, a stout man, compared the size of the under jaw bone with his own, and found that it would easily pass over his, the other bones were of a corresponding size. The salt petre earth commences with the cave, and continues so far as has been examined, which is about seven miles. In passing what is called the narrows, you are obliged to walk half bent, these continue about a quarter of a mile; in this pass there is constantly a strong current of air; the six cold months the air rushes into the cave, the other six it issues from it; this is easily accounted for by all men of science. At the termination of these narrows, you are ushered into one of the most sublimely beautiful and picturesque amphitheatres in the world; it expands to sixty or seventy feet wide and as many deep. The most elaborate effort of the pencil would fail to do justice to the rich scenery and varied drapery with which the senses are delighted. -- Immediately on entering this large room, you experience a sudden change of the air from a chilling cold to a heat oppressive; here some of our companions pulled off their outer clothing, and left them till we returned. We progressed but a little way before we discovered innumerable quantities of bats which had taken refuge there from the severities of the season; they were suspended from all parts of the rocks by their claws, with their heads down, and crowded so close that they resembled a continued black cloud; they appeared much disturbed at our intrusion

which they manifested by a disagreeable hissing or twittering noise, and so tenacious were they of the hold which instinct had caused them to take, they would suffer themselves to be burnt to death sooner than relinquish it. At the distance of about half a mile, there are two branches making out at right angles on either side; the one on the south-west which is called the little room we examined; here the earth is sufficiently impregnated with nitre to yield eight & ten pounds to the bushel; it has a fine spring where it again divides into the upper and lower rooms; in the upper there is a fissure in the rock sufficiently large for a man to enter, where you have the appearance of the different orders of Gothic architecture, columns, mouldings and pilasters in embossed and stucco work, elegantly wrought by the friction of water constantly dripping from above; the heights of these columns are so great that with the assistance of all our light we could not discover where they terminated.

Some distance further along, we passed what is called the sick room, in consequence of an attempt being made to explore it, which proved unsuccessful; the person who made the attempt, first felt a nausea and general debility, which was succeeded by violent puking; they very prudently retreated and have never since entered it; we supposed the existence of mephitic gas, and thought it most prudent to pass without entering. At about two miles from the entrance we found Glauber and Epsome salts, with Ochreous earths of different colors; here the whole surface of the rocks are incrustated with stalactites of half an inch in thickness; the rocks are so strongly impregnated with the salts, that they burst through the incrustation and exude in octahedral, hexahedral, and rhomboidal prisms, and more frequently in curved rhombs. Nothing can exceed the brilliancy of the scene; figure to yourself a canopy irradiated with ten thousand diamonds, and you will have a faint idea of its lustre. The salts are in a virgin state, and efforesce when brought in contact with atmospheric air; they continue for half a mile and are often of indeterminate forms: at times the whole surface of the rocks appear as if covered with new fallen snow. We went on for several miles, often passing branches of the cave, making out at right, acute and obtuse angles from what we supposed to be the main body; when we approached near the end, we came to a fountain falling from the roof as the first, forming a basin of about thirty feet deep, this we descended and crossed, in going a few paces we came to another of the same size, which we went round on the edge of a precipice, and soon after came to the end, which terminates abruptly; here at the extreme parts we found bats, which caused us to determine that there were other outlets, because, till we reached the end we had not seen any bats for some miles. -- We passed one very extraordinary room, it is so formed that a voice at the entrance pronouncing a word, is reverberated distinctly six times;* for the want

* The vulgar suppose this room to be haunted, from the reverberation of the voice. They supposed there were persons in the room mocking them when they spoke.

13

of time and light, we did not enter, but had our information from those who have wrought at the cave some years. At the end or near it, of the first branch, it makes a short turn, we then pursued this branch nearly in a retrograde direction, till we supposed we were under the bed of Green river; at or near the termination of this branch we found glauber salts and nitrate of lime in much greater abundance than before; at one place particularly, I crept into a small cavity, where not only the rocks but the earth appeared to be at least formed one half of regular formed crystals of glauber salts; I have no doubt but that a great deal of the earth is impregnated with borax.

From the entrance to the extreme part of our travel, there appeared a beaten track on the rocks; they were worn quite smooth, the remains of cane torches were plenty as far as we went: several mocasins curiously wrought from the bark of the Lyn tree were found, also many poles of considerable length which appeared to have been cut with stone hatchets; muscle shells were found six or seven miles from the entrance with many other vestiges of the cave having formerly been a place of great resort by the aborigines of North America. In many parts there is the appearance of great labor of removing the stones, in others where they had been piled up to get at the salts. In many places we discover rats and reptiles. Generally speaking, the cave is very dry, and the air salubrious; we judge of the latter from the facility with which combustion went on, our tapers burnt much more brilliant than when in the common air, owing we suppose to the presence of a greater proportion of the oxygen gas. The bottom of the cave is generally covered with lime stone, which appears at different times to have been detached from the roof or ceiling. When we were near the end of the last branch we explored, our friend, Mr. Curiosity, pushed him on before a considerable distance, when attempting to snuff his candle, he put it out -- he was obliged to sit in the dark and halloo, after some time he made himself heard, when we dispatched a messenger for him, and sounded a retreat. On many stones we found rude characters traced, specimens of which I have in my pocket book. After about five hours travel, we reached the mouth again much fatigued.