

CRITERIA FOR CAVE NAMING

By

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Cave names are the source of much confusion to speleologists. There are long names, short names, caves with no names, caves with many names. Untangling the snarl of names and establishing the identity of caves frequently requires more time than is necessary to completely explore and describe them. On one occasion, the author located a cave, which had been lost to speleology for many years, merely by studying the derivation and application of names applied to several caves in a restricted area.

Spelunkers or amateur speleologists must often name new caves they have found, and since there are no hard and fast rules for cavern naming, it is extremely important that some reasonable criteria for naming caves be presented.

For consideration, any prospective cave name should be: (1) unique; (2) brief; (3) related to the cave; (4) usable and (5) semantically compatible. These characters are discussed in the following paragraphs.

1. Uniqueness: All caves are different and like manner, all cave names should be different. However, comparatively few cave names are unique. In actual practice, they be unique only to the state, county or quadrangle that is being used as an arbitrary cave area. In states which have very few caves, the entire state may be taken as the unit area, so that no two caves in the state have the same name. In Missouri, the basic unit is the county and all cave names should be unique to the particular county in which they are located. In some states, the quadrangle is used as the arbitrary unit.

2. Brevity: Cave names should be brief, if for no other reason than to save space in the literature. The “life history” of a cave name often starts with a long, rudimentary name and ends with a short, permanent name. On discovery, a cave might be called “that cave on the Jones farm”. Later, as it becomes better known, it may be called the “Joe Jones Cave”, or “Joe Jones’ Cave”. Still later, in the old age stage of the name, it will have evolved to simply, “Jones Cave”, as it should have been originally.

The derivation of the name in the preceding example is from the fact that a man named Jones owned the cave at the time of its discovery. It is of no consequence that his name was Joe; the cave will remain long after Joe has departed the scene, even though the Jones family may continue to occupy the land for generations.

3. Relation to Cave: Names must be related to the things for which they stand. Caves may be named after natural features, cultural features, historical events or people connected with caves. It is important that the relationship of the cave to the name be fairly obvious and valid.

Caverns are most appropriately named after things other than people. Landmarks and topographical features provide far better source material.

Perhaps the most dubious names are those derived from some event that occurred during the discovery or subsequent expeditions into caves. Such names as “Jim’s Unlucky Day Cave” or “Lost Carbide Cave” often occur. In these examples, some event or situation known to the namers has been used as a criterion for naming the cave. More

often than not, these criteria are obvious only to the namers; others will not be able to relate the cave and its features with the name in any way.

Cave naming is in poorest taste when explorers name caves after themselves. One of the highest compliments a caver could hope for would be to have a cave named after him, but to do it personally is unthinkable.

4. Utility: Cave names should fit the cave and not be offensive. Customs and traditions of people living in the surrounding area should be taken into consideration. Names prejudicial to sects, races, individuals and ideas should be avoided. Spelling should also be considered and names selected that are not difficult to spell or to pronounce.

5. Semantic Compatibility: Some of the best names are those which are terse, easy to pronounce and contain an element of imagination and mystery. Carlsbad Caverns, Pendulum Pit, Murder Hole and Coffin Cave are excellent examples of this characteristic. It is not always easy to select such a name, but some thought given to the selection of names will preclude the use of impulse names which later may require changing.

SOURCE MATERIAL FOR CAVE NAMES

1. Features of Caverns: Names derived from impressive domes, waterfalls, underground rivers, interesting speleothems, occurrence in geologic formations, structures or areas and a host of other geological and morphological features of caves may be used as source material.

2. Association with Natural or Cultural Features: It is important that features such as landmarks, topographic features, nearby towns, parks and other man-made or natural features be in close proximity to the caves so that the association is obvious and not misleading.

3. Historical Events: Caves have long been prominent in legend, superstition and folklore, and almost every cave of note has associated with some event or stories, whether fact or fiction, from which an excellent name may be selected.

4. Landowner's Name: Perhaps the most widely used type of name at present is the landowner's name for a cave on his property. This procedure is to be discouraged, for in most cases, the landowner does not lend any particular distinction to a cave by allowing his name to be used. However, if other criteria are lacking, landowner names are acceptable provided the names appear in the singular and not in the possessive form.

5. Biological Features: This criterion is considered less desirable than others, since the flora and fauna of caves may change rapidly, especially when man interferes with natural processes. Overzealous collectors may occasionally disregard principles of conservation and completely destroy cave fauna, especially if the name gives away its presence.

Naming a cave after a rare animal found there may be detrimental to the population of the species. The numerous "Bat Caves" throughout the nation are proof of the widespread abuse of caves named.

6. Archaeological and Paleontological Features: Many caves were once used by early man as homes, burial grounds, and sacred places. Skeletal and cultural remains of

these early cave dwellers, along with paleontological remains of animals, are frequently found in caves.

The interpretation of archaeological and paleontological remains requires very specialized technical knowledge. Therefore, discretion should be exercised in deriving names from prehistoric deposits. Such materials constitute a valuable and irreplaceable scientific record, and every effort should be made to preserve them and to prevent their desecration by souvenir hunters until after scientific study is completed.

PROCEDURE FOR NAMING CAVES

A definite procedure should be followed in naming caves. In order to insure their being unique, each name should be checked through the literature to determine whether it has been used previously. In the case of Missouri caves, often the only requirement is to check Missouri Speleological Survey or Missouri Geological Survey files, which are normally more up-to-date than existing publications and personal files.

Once it has been determined that the name under consideration is acceptable, it should be tested for meeting the qualifications set forth for cave names elsewhere in this paper. When selected, the name should be entered with its derivation in the full cave report.

If speleologists are to untangle the snarl of names that presently exists in the literature, it will be necessary to change many existing names. All too often, incorrect and unusable names are applied to caves, either due to bad information or a complete lack of it. Changing cave names is not a routine matter. They should only be changed where absolutely necessary. Caves are listed in publications by the names in use at the time of publication, with the preferred name first followed by synonyms in order of preference. When a name is changed, it renders obsolete all previously published names for the cave. Since the name may have been printed in several publications, a correction may result in confusion, and some time may pass before the new name becomes established. Accordingly, name changing is to be discouraged except as a measure to eliminate incorrect, unsuitable and unusable names.

All suggested name changes for Missouri Caves should be submitted to the Missouri Speleological Survey for referral to Missouri Geological Survey. Along with the old name and the suggested new name, a brief of the reasons for changing the name should be included, so that a decision can be made as to whether a change is warranted. Once approved, changes of name will be submitted to Missouri Geological Survey with recommendations that new names be applied to appropriate caves, with pre-existing names being added as synonyms.

When naming caves, changing names or questioning the validity of existing names, complete details of the reasons for naming or changing names should always be included in the report or letter submitted. Names, which may at first glance seem unsuitable or unusable, may appear suitable in the light of complete information on their derivation.

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