

Brown's Cave—A Safe Haven for All

By *Kenneth W. Brown*

This article about Brown's Cave is in four parts: 1) a recount of my visits to the Brown's Cave area; 2) some comments about the uses of the cave; 3) reprints of 1913 and 1930 newspaper articles about the cave; and 4) a reprint of a cave explorer's report for the Missouri Geological Survey.

1. My Visits to the Brown's Cave Area

In early February 1998, while the nation was trying to cope with the newly revealed Clinton-Lewinsky affair, I made one of the better decisions in my life. That was to have a weekend visit to Assumption Abbey, the Trappist Monastery, southeast of Ava. Both the monastery and nearby Brown's Cave had always been an intriguing mystery to me since the time I was a young boy growing up in Ava in the 1950s [On Figure 1, a large black star in the lower right-hand corner indicates the location of the Monastery and Brown's Cave]. My long-time interest was fueled by the many times my mother, Kiree Hartley Brown, and others talked about being at Brown's Cave for picnics and school gatherings in earlier years. Also, the Trappist Monastery, established in 1950, was a major topic of conversation during my youth. With the county being largely Protestant at the time, those conversations often described the Monastery as being mysterious and strange. For a child, those often uninformed opinions and biases only caused me to be even more intrigued.

The reasons for my scheduled 1998 visit to the monastery were fourfold. First, I wanted to retreat from my world for a short time and reflect on my slightly out-of-control life. Second, I wanted to visit and walk on the lands to which my great-great grandfather, Lyhue Brown [b. ca 1820, d. ca 1849], had traveled from Kentucky in 1836, just a few years after the Indians were removed from Douglas County. Third, I wanted to observe the monastery and perhaps gain a better understanding of the monks' unusual lifestyle and remove some of the misinformation from my mind. Last, I wanted a chance to locate and visit the Brown's Cave about which I had heard so much but had never seen.

Although I had never been to Brown's Cave until last year, on two other occasions I recall being in the vicinity of the monastery during my 54-year life. First, on a summer afternoon in the mid 1950s, my mother took my brother, James, my grandmother, Minta Gunnels, Hartley Breedlove, and me for a car ride in the

Bryant Creek area in her 1946 Chevy coupe. We drove across Bryant Creek where she stopped the car a few hundred yards short of the Monastery building and said "we can't go any farther, they don't allow women up there." I looked back in wonderment at that mysterious looking building as we turned around and left the area. I was shaken by the thought that this strange place would not welcome my Mom and Grandmother. To me, Mom and Grandma were the nicest people in the whole world. I gazed at that building like it was a haunted house.

I never returned to the area until the 1970s, when a car ride I conducted for my wife's out-of-state relatives led us to the swinging bridge that the monks built across Bryant Creek. By this time, people were better informed about the Monastery and some things had changed in the Trappist Order as well. The brothers were now housed in a new structure further up the hill, and they would have welcomed my mother as a visitor by then. While I knew Brown's Cave was in the area, I assumed it was off limits, and made no attempt to find it.

Back to my latest visit in February 1998—the retreat proved to be nourishment for my soul, my mind, and my body as I had heard it could be. After I arrived at the Monastery on a late Friday afternoon and rang the Abbey's door bell, Father Cyprian showed me to my room, told me when dinner would be served, and as is the Order's tradition, promptly left me alone. The next day, I stopped a brother to tell of my desire to visit Brown's Cave. He gave me a very general description of where it could be found, and left me to find it on my own.

After breakfast, I drove to the low-water bridge at Bryant Creek, and then started walking north across the floodplain on "Bryant creek's east side while watching the ridge to my right for a possible opening to a cave [Figure 2 shows a 1972 geological map of the cave's location relative to the old monastery used at that time]. Although the flood plain was covered with brush and trees, I eventually spotted a dark area on the ridge that,

on further investigation, proved to be the cave. [Note: while I traveled across Monastery land to get to the cave area, the cave itself is actually on land owned by the Whitman family of Wichita, Ks. According to Father Theodore, the family does not mind a casual visit such as mine on their land. Neither the Whitman family nor the Trappist Order want lots of traffic, however Father Theodore suggested that one simply call the Monastery at 417-683-5110 to let the Order know of an intended visit. Recognize however, that a 1/2 mile walk through brush and wilderness is necessary to reach the cave].

Once I had climbed up the ridge and was in the cave opening, a feeling of closeness with the land and with my ancestors came over me. I stood there looking out toward Bryant creek which could barely be seen through the brush and trees. I tried to envision how it might have looked to my great-great grandparents, Lyhue and Elizabeth [Hail] Brown, as they stood on the same spot 160 years ago. When they came to Bryant Creek area around 1836, the flood plain may have been cleared off by Isaac Fleetwood who already resided there at that time, and the course of Bryant may have been some different [according to a story told by the family of Thomas S. Brown, the Creek cut a new channel in the flood of 1876].

Having not prepared myself with any kind of light, I could only explore the cave as far back as daylight would allow, which was probably no more than 100 feet into the cave. The passage of the cave narrowed quickly, and a portion of the floor was muddy from perpetual seepage through the cave. I took the pictures included with this article, and for the rest of that day and the next, I explored the Monastery land to the south and west of the cave, knowing in my heart that I was stepping on the very same places my ancestors had walked while hunting for game or gathering berries and nuts.

II. Prior Uses of the Cave

All caves like Brown's Cave were used by Indians for shelter for hundreds of years. We know from family lore that our ancestors used the cave as temporary shelter while completing their cabins. At some point, the cave became a public gathering place for all types of functions both good and bad.

The good—in September 1892, local Methodists reportedly held a "protracted" meeting in Brown's

Cave. The bad—in 1897, Edward Perry and his uncle, William Yost, went to Brown's Cave to plot the robbery of the Sawyer family. He and Yost were subsequently involved with the murder of the three-member Sawyer family at their home on Hunter Road east of Ava. Perry was convicted and hanged from the gallows off the southwest corner of the square in Ava. Yost, was acquitted by a Howell County jury, and left the area.

Of course, many people still remember the two-day annual picnics staged at Brown's Cave from an early time all the way into the 1930s. Similarly, school groups frequently chose the area for their end-of-the-year gatherings. My friend, Paul Barker, says that his Ava High School class of 1941 went to Brown's Cave for their "senior sneak day. I suppose people stopped going to Brown's Cave once land ownership changes and access became more limited. Now the land is being allowed to return to its natural state. Even without restrictions, one would not choose it for a summer picnic—there are no cleared areas for the picnic nor for the kids to play.

III. Major Articles in the Herald about Brown's Cave

Dozens of references to Brown's Cave have been published in the *Douglas County Herald* almost from the newspaper's inception in 1887. Only two provided us with substantial information about the cave and its background. One appeared in 1913, and contains a history of the cave, that appears to be the basis for the Brown's Cave chapter of J. E. Curry's 1857 book, *A Reminiscent History of Douglas County*. A second and shorter article appeared in 1930. Both of the articles are reprinted here.

{Reprint of an article published in the Douglas County Herald, August 7, 1913}

**THE BROWNS' CAVE AND ITS HISTORY
Sees the Beauties and the Country and Cave—
The Exploring Party and What They Have Found—
A Look Backward, and a Prophecy—What will the
Future Bring**

IT IS WORTHY OF A VISIT

The Browns' Cave. This is a great formation or tunnell [sic] in the rock on the north side of Bryant river hill, located down the river about two miles from Rippee postoffice, and about six miles from Vera Cruz. Very little attention has ever been given this wonderful structure or foundation of nature, and the "natives" who inhabit this special settlement, pass and repass this wonderful cave without giving it a thought, or without considering its magnitude and beauty. Many have lived as its neighbor for years and have never seen its beauty—they have never been on the inside of the cave to any great extent. A few have explored it pretty thoroughly.

But notwithstanding the indifference with which the "old timers" treat it, it is a wonderful cave and is a beauty—the country surrounding it is beautiful and the serene and solemn old river which is almost as clear as crystal adds beauty and dignity to it all. There is a great story which this country could tell—a bit of history—the fiction. The story we shall only touch upon, the history will be very brief, and the fiction—we shall reserve for another chapter in our life.

According to the old settlers who are living there now—who were born and raised in this settlement—the country first saw civilization something like one hundred years ago. At that time the "red man" was the inhabitant—there were no farms, no schools, no churches. The chief occupation was fishing and hunting and trading among the Indians. This period would bring us back a few years before this wonderful State of Missouri was admitted to the Union. Can you boys and girls, who are now living in beautiful homes, surrounded by schools and churches, conceive of the conditions that existed a short hundred years ago?

Among the first settlers of whom we could get any record are Tom Brown, Hiram Stout, Dan Sloan and Samp Rippee. Tom Brown and Samp Rippee came to the country from Indiana, something like 75 or 80 years ago. Mr. Brown settled across the river from the famous cave, and hence the name—Browns Cave. Mr. Rippee settled at the mouth of Rippee creek, which empties into Bryant about two miles up the river from the cave, and here is where Rippee creek gets its name. Hiram Stout came from Indiana about 100 years ago and settled on the old Stout place about 3 miles down the river from Vera Cruz, where now lives Uncle Jot Stout, who has passed the three score and ten. Dan

Sloan, who was father of D. B. Sloan of Larissa, and who is also passed 70 years, came to this country from Kentucky about 100 years ago. As we remember the story, Mr. Sloan spent most of his pioneer days out west of Ava somewhere. Of course there were many other immigrants coming into the country at this time and shortly following, but they do not come into this chapter, however they are a part of the country and are deserving of the same credit for the study pioneer life as these parties mentioned. We can hardly conceive of the hardships which they have gone through. Volumes and Volumes could be written of the incidents and the hardships of this early pioneer life each individual life making a chapter within itself.

But to the present day inhabitants the cave is the real attraction, and especially is this so of the new comer. The entrance is large and is some 20 or thirty feet above the river bottom. In 1876, the time of the Bryant flood, it is said that the water was up to the mouth of the cave. This flood destroyed practically all the farms and homes that was on the river bottom at that time. The hill which the cave enters is very steep and rugged. It is covered with a thick growth of oak—dotted here and there with a lonesome pine.

On entering the cave you are met with a very cool vibration of air which seems always to be in motion. As you progress farther into the large entrance, a few yards, you come to a "stump", which is no more that a large stalagmite, which has been formed by a constant dripping of water for ages. From here on "traveling" is exceedingly "muddy" and slow. The wonder and beauty of the cave increases as you proceed toward the end. The beautiful stalactites and stalagmites, the wonderful formation of rock, the large spacious rooms, and the narrow entrances, and crevices all carved and decorated, seemingly by the artistic hand of a great sculpture; at places the almost bottomless pits of "mud," and other of solid rock, and yet others of a fine clay. Altogether it makes a great subject for "nature study."

This continues to about six hours "travel" in and out, and is certainly worth the trip—that is, into what is called the main entrance. There is another entrance, or another "room," which sets in about 1 1/2 miles back, which has never been explored to any great extent, and of which there has never been anybody found the end. There is lots of it, very narrow and tall, and some dangerous crevices which one in exploring it, must pass

over. In this is a place which has been termed the "devil gulch," presumably so called, because of the deep, narrow chasm which one must pass over in the onward march.

There are a lot of incidents and stories of fiction, which the "old timers" there claim as being true stories, but which we cannot give in this chapter. But the past is gone—it is history. The story is forever sealed by the stillness of the solemn cave and the silence of the lonesome pine.

The future—what will the future bring. Of this we can only surmise or fancy. We must draw on our imagination. We will say that we fancy we can see this wonderful freak of nature all lighted up with electric light, generated from the flow of the Bryant river. The trails will be supplied with walks, so that the Browns Cave visitors can walk easily and leisurely along, admiring the beauties and wonders of the cave without getting in the mud. Then we see a great lake created by the building of the large dam, where sportsmen and visitors can spend the summer in peace and ease. We imagine we see many summer homes and camps. We can also see great wood factories, and every stick of wood is being worked into something valuable and useful; then the more homes, and more contented, prosperous people.

These things are not at all impossible, in fact they are very probable. They will come about with time and the onward march of the thrifty American people. One hundred years has made a great difference in this country. A hundred years hence will make ever a greater difference still. Who can say it will not.

{Reprint of an article published in the Douglas County Herald, July 17, 1930}

BROWNS CAVE BECOMING POPULAR OUTING POINT

Browns Cave, estate of Wm. H. Wright, 18 miles southeast of Ava is rapidly becoming one of the favorite outing points in this section. Beautiful scenery, the big cave and numerous smaller caves, together with excellent fishing and bathing waters of Bryant creek, are attractions that are drawing hundreds to Mr. Wright's resort this season.

Everything is free at Browns Cave, and Mr. Wright

seems to take a lot of pride in having folks visit his resort. Numerous cabins, dressing rooms and other conveniences are provided for visitors.

Just back of the cave on a high bluff overlooking Bryant Creek, Mr. Wright owns a large tract of timbered land, said to be one of the most beautiful in the county. The tract lies practically level and is heavily timbered with pine. Not all of the attractions are confined to the big cave section, according to Mr. Wright. Back through the pine timber may be found tar pits, used in olden days for the burning of pine knots in the manufacture of tar; and there is another smaller cave on the tract, known as Bear Den Cave, he stated.

With the completion of highway 14 through that section [editor's note: the highway was completed in the early 1930s], Mr. Wright's resort will be within easy access to tourists. The highway will pass within two miles of the tract, and Mr. Wright already is planning an outlet to the highway. With the completion of this road, the cave territory will be only a few minutes drive out of Ava.

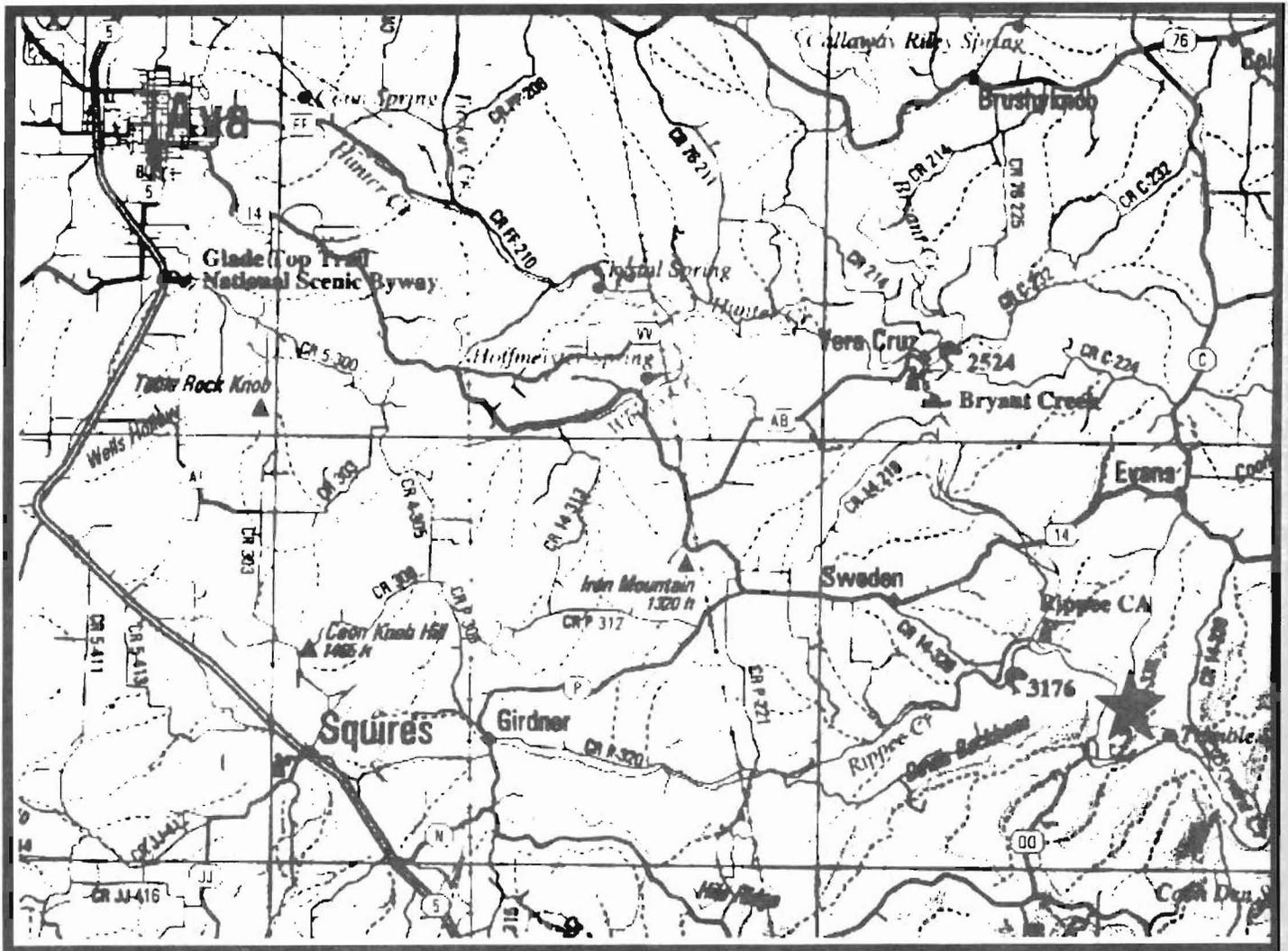
IV. Official Exploration of the Cave

In a recent telephone interview, Father Theodore, long-time resident of the Trappist Order, told me that he had been to the "end" of the cave, generally regarded as being 2600 feet from the entrance. His description was similar to the report of a Missouri Geological Survey's explorer published in 1956—muddy. He didn't find it to be a very spectacular caving experience. Besides the narrowness of the passage at certain points, the deepening mud on the cave's floor provides the explorer with a rather miserable caving experience. Here is the explorer's report [complete with geologic terms this editor does not understand] published in 1956 in *Caves of Missouri* by the Missouri Division of Geological Resources and Water Resources on page 308 and 309.

Brown's Cave
SW 1/4 SW 1/4 sec. 11, T. 25 N., R. 14 W., Douglas
County

Shown on Buckhart Quadrangle

Exhibit 1
Location of Brown's Cave From Ava, Missouri



A very fine Gothic arch, 20 by 20 feet, with a rock floor, opens in the east bluff of Bryant Creek valley, about 30 feet above floodplain. For the first 600 feet in the cave, the floor is covered with angular gravel. For more than 2000 feet beyond this distance, the floor consists of low terraces and slip-off slopes of a tan-colored slightly gritty clay. A small stream trench 2 to 3 feet deep cuts into the clay floor and makes the terraces. This stream, ordinarily only much attenuated mud puddle, has been meandering and undercutting the bedrock walls apparently since the clay terraced floor was formed. In numerous places, tan-colored, clay remnants reach the ceiling. One needs rubber boots for traversing this long stretch. Beyond a distance of 2650 feet the writer gave up wading in deepening mud.

The cave obviously continues much farther. The

cross section of the cave at this point is as large as the average along the entire traverse. As there is no gravel floor for the last 2000 feet, there is no gradually rising gradient to bring that floor up too close to the ceiling for further passage. The ceiling is 10 feet above the floor virtually all the way.

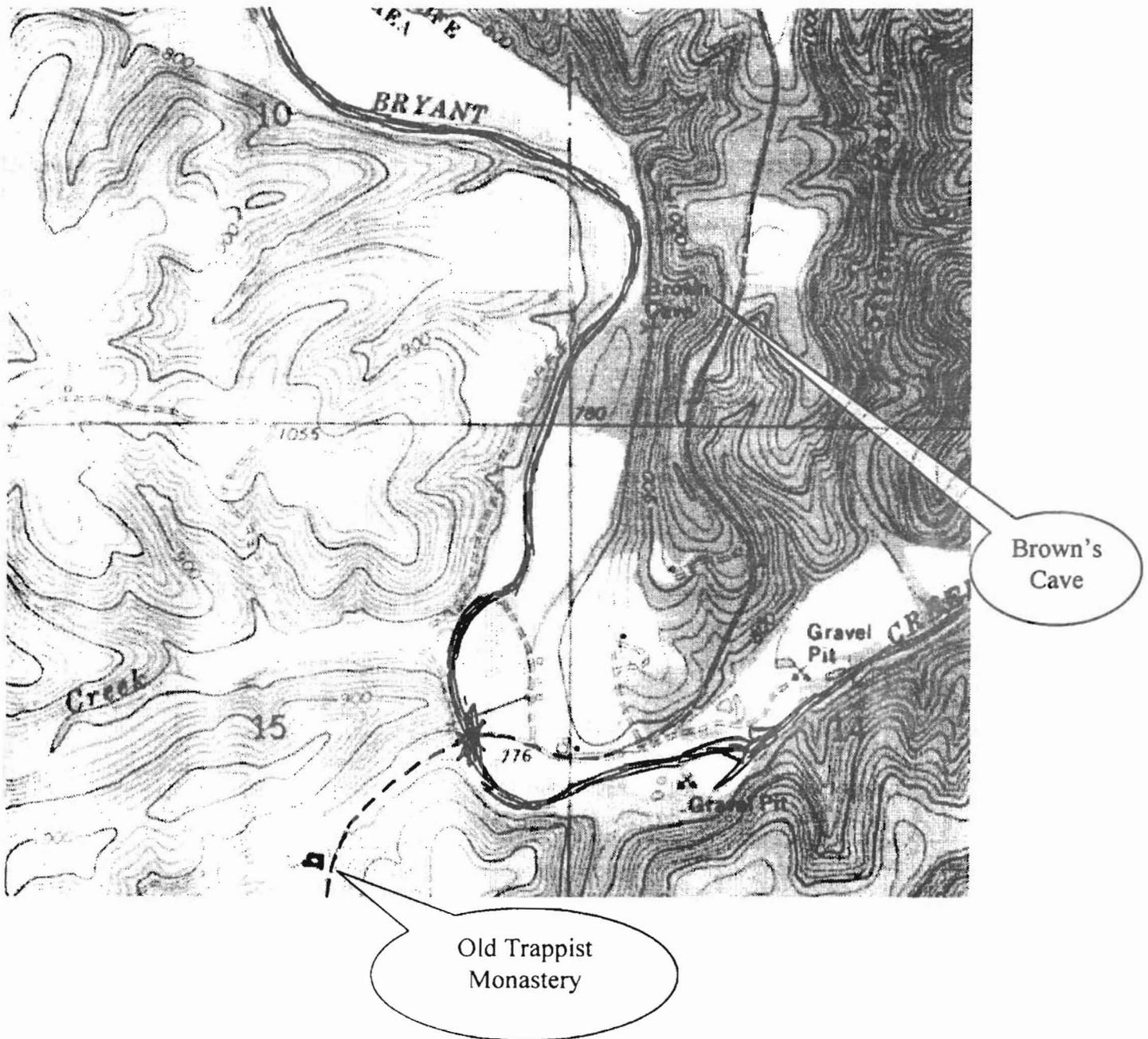
A curious feature of Brown's Cave is that, although it is a simple linear passage without branches or cross chambers, the first half of its examined length has a definitely smaller cross section than the second half, and that the change in dimensions is as abrupt as in those caves where one enters a main chamber from a tributary passage. However, there is no T junction where the change occurs, nor any indications that there ever was one that has since become blocked. The cave is one simple, continuous ground water conduit. Why

Exhibit 2

BROWN'S CAVE AREA

Township 25N, Range 14W, Douglas County, MO

Source: U.S. Geological Survey Map, Buckhart Quadrangle, 1972



the abrupt change its caliber occurs is not understood.

The ground plan has some reverse curves as tight as a letter S. They are most pronounced at floor level, although the entire chamber, 12 to 15 feet high, has the curves. The cave where these curves occur looks very much like a winding subterranean gorge that a vadose stream would make. However, the cave cannot be of vadose origin. The character of its walls and ceilings, the character of the topography under which it lies, and the orientation of the cave under that

topography all bespeak a phreatic origin.

The excellently developed spongework in the walls and ceilings, the many ceiling cavities and pockets, and a few broad domes which are twice as high above the floor as the average ceiling level indicate a phreatic origin. The meander slots are all near the floor. None of them is a wall-incised, half-cone niche. Little vadose alteration has occurred.

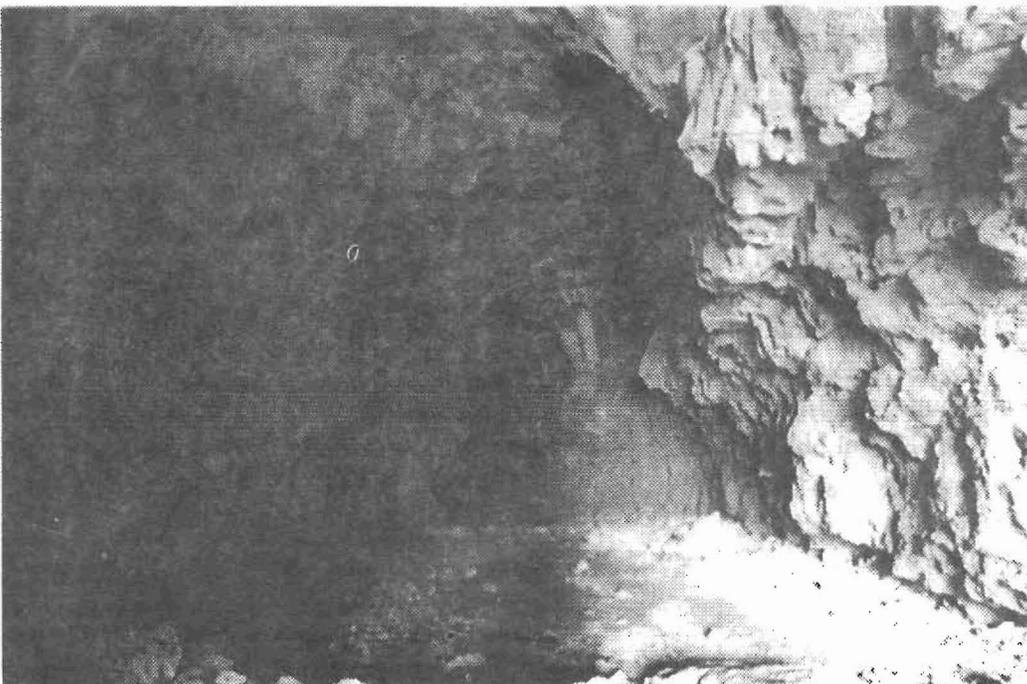
The cave lies under a ridge between two north-south, parallel valleys; Bryant Creek on the west and

unnamed tributary on the east. The ridge is only 2000 feet across at cave level, along an east-west line drawn through the cave mouth. The summit width of the ridge is nowhere more than 1000 feet, and its height above Bryant Creek is more than 200 feet. The cave is so much longer than the ridge is wide that only its prevailing northeast-southwest elongation allows it to be contained under the ridge, and even thus, its water must flow in a diagonal course essentially through the ridge. It may be that this water is leakage from the bottom of the tributary valley, and that a sinkhole in the bottom of the tributary is scheduled for some time in the future. At that time, gravel will enter, and the floor will be aggraded up close to the ceiling, as in so many caves thus related to sinks. It is certain that the ground water

of this ridge never made a cave of this orientation and of this length in its rock.

V. Conclusion

All institutions change over time. Brown's Cave is one example. Will the cave become the commercial enterprise that the *Herald's* 1913 editor envisioned? I certainly hope not, and I feel sure that both the current owners and the Trappist monks would agree. There is pride, I think, on their part, to keep the area preserved from the urban and suburban sprawling that is slowly consuming virtually all of America. And, who knows—someday Brown's Cave may again be needed as a shelter for the pioneers of some future civilization. If needed, Brown's Cave, no doubt will be there to serve.



Top left: Entrance to Brown's Cave, picture taken by Ken Brown, February 1998.

Top right: Kenneth Brown on Ledge to the left of Brown's Cave. Photo taken February 1998.

Left: Interior of Brown's Cave. Timed exposure taken by Kenneth Brown.