

Modern Cave Dweller Belies Usual Hermit Characteristics

By BILL RAWLINS
JEFFERSON CITY, Tenn. — When Ben Ballenger was 34, his sweetheart jilted him and "hauled off and married a fellow with a brand new Hudson." To ease a broken heart, he holed up in a cave.

That was nearly 17 years ago, and he's lived there ever since. "I've got it in my blood," he said, as he sat in his rocker, rolling a cigarette. "I've been told that I'm the only man in the United States who lives in a natural cave."

But for all this, the talkative Ballenger — slight of build, normally clean-shaven and neat — is no hermit. "When I first moved in here, I stopped shaving, and I had a beard down to here," he said, indicating his chest with his gnarled hands. "But it was too much trouble."

Comforts of Home
He welcomes visitors, knows everyone in his hollow, likes to fish on nearby Cherokee Lake, and is ready with advice for anyone who seeks it—particularly advice to the lovers. He provides for his wants by doing odd jobs; he's a good carpenter and bricklayer.

Opening into the side of a wooded, Holston River bluff, the 40-foot cave is reached by a wooden stairway, complete with handrail, which Ballenger built himself. He also fitted the arched cavern with a frame door and a wood cooking stove, and such comforts of home as a pancake turner, hung from a nail, two teaspoons and a knife and fork, a coffee pot, and several jars filled with such things as sugar and flour. He sleeps on an army cot, and keeps abreast of current events by reading the Knoxville newspapers.

These he gets daily at the foot of his stairway in a rural mailbox. When Ballenger needs supplies, he hitches a ride to Jefferson City, about three miles to the south.

Memories of Past
Come spring, the cave gets a bit damp and Ballenger moves his cot into a tiny shack outside the cave door—using the naturally air-conditioned cave (with a year-round temperature of 58 degrees) as a retreat from the summer sun. He usually moves his bed back into the cave in November.

In the wintertime, with a warm fire blazing in the stove, the narrow, jagged cave contains memories of four ex-sweethearts, all of whom, says Ballenger, "let me down for fellows with bigger bankrolls and cars." These include the fiancée who married the man with the Hudson, another who married "a fellow with a little Ford coupe," and two more he doesn't talk about.

"I tell people that a woman's theme song is 'how green is my hillfod,'" Ballenger declared. "It's gotten so every time I'm about lined up with a girl, I expect her to let me down."

His role as area handyman keeps him too busy to fret much.

Helps Friends Build
"I'm a sort of jack-of-all-trades," he explained. "I built every house in this hollow, I guess. And I've just been down the road cutting a neighbor boy's hair. I reckon I've handled everything but confinement cases, and if I could find some confinement cases, I'd handle them too."

"The people around here don't have too much," he said. "I get about \$200 a house. If I wanted to work for a contractor, I guess I could get about two and a half an hour."

Born and raised up in Knoxville, Ballenger joined the Navy when he was 18, and served a six-year hitch from 1923-29.

"I'm often asked how I got the idea for living in a cave," he said. "I guess it was when I was in the Navy in New York. We'd get toddled up, and spend the night in a subway. It was warm and didn't cost anything. When I found this cave, it was just like sleeping in the subway."

May Marry Yet
Thoughts of leaving can be dispelled by a 35-mile trip to Knoxville. "Whenever I get in one of those Knoxville traffic jams, with everybody in such a hurry, I get awful lonesome to get back to my cave. When I was a kid, I wanted

to be right in the middle of the loudest noise there was—but not any more."

Now 51, Ballenger says he's over his broken love affairs. Asked if he might yet get married, a twin-like came into his blue eyes.

"You can't tell," he replied, grinning. "They say that guys like me fall the hardest. But the only reason I'd want to marry now would be to raise a couple of kids."

"I wouldn't expect any woman to live with me here," he declared, indicating the cave, with its dirt floor, kerosene lamp, jagged walls and ceiling—just high enough for a man to stand erect. "I'd want to save enough money to build myself a house so I could take care of her. That's expected of a man."

Cave Stew Menu
Life in the cave sometimes gets lonesome, but Ballenger creates the Navy with making him self-reliant. "What the Navy teaches a man about taking care of himself—how to sew for himself and things like that—well, it just sticks with you."

How about cooking?
"I fix myself 'cave stew' and plenty of meat (and almost anything else at hand). When I'm in a regular kitchen with everything convenient, I reckon I can cook as good as any woman. But I don't do much real cooking here. You can buy everything you need in cans these days."

"Anyway, I do most of my heavy eating with the folks I work for."

His weathered face grew thoughtful.

"Fellow from Knoxville was up here talking the other day. He told me he'd just had another cuss fight with his wife. They have a couple of kids, and they're about the only thing that's holding them together."

"I tell people that I've sailed five of the seven seas—been on both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans—and I've settled down here to some peace and quiet."

"But when any man tells you he hates women, don't believe him, because it's just not so. Look at me. Women have let me down a-plenty, and I don't hate 'em."

Moving Woe Curtailed by School Bus
RUMFORD, Maine (AP)—Malcolm D. McLean had a problem—how to move inexpensively the contents of a five-room house from Mercer, Wis., to Livermore Falls, Maine—a distance of some 1,600 miles.

He bought an old school bus, ripped out the seats, selling them for \$1 apiece, and loaded the furniture with the living room sofa just behind the driver's seat so he'd have a chance to nap on the way.

McLean, 29, sent his wife and three children on ahead in the family station wagon. He left Mercer Monday, made his wife's home in South Portland by Thursday night and came on to visit his parents in Rumford Friday.

TV Set Shipments Dip Slightly in '56
WASHINGTON (AP)—Television set shipments to dealers during the first four months of 1956 totaled 2,059,129 compared with 2,229,449 sets shipped during the first four months of 1955.

The figures came from the Radio-Electronics-Television Manufacturers Assn.

Babies Can't Eat Surplus
LINCOLN, Neb. (INS) — Economists who place hopes of a solution to food surpluses in a rising baby population are having their dreams dampened by a dash of cold farm state facts.

Two University of Nebraska agricultural economists say the country just can't produce enough babies to eat up all that butter, wheat and corn.

The more babies, the more production, say professors Don Kanel and Howard Otteson. They cite statistics showing that as population increases food production goes up even more.

Otteson and Kanel say some economists have pinned their hopes on the post-war crop of youngsters as a ravenous solution to the stored produce. But, they say, since 1930 the population just hasn't been rising as fast as the nation's farm production.

Actually, consumption increases very little once adequate diets have been achieved.

Symphony Gets Touch of Glamor
LONDON (INS) — Glamor has come to classical music in Britain. Those males who invariably closed their eyes or went to sleep while listening to symphony orchestras will undoubtedly welcome the innovation and change their habits.

For a new professional symphony orchestra has been formed by famed British cellist Douglas Cameron and all his musicians are girls between 20 and 30.

Baby Sitter Aids Writer's Problem
LONDON (INS)—British Author Lelage Pulvertast was having trouble getting her second novel finished, so her publishers stepped in and solved the problem in a business-like fashion.

They gave her an advance on the book to pay for a baby-sitter who watched over one-year-old Timothy Pulvertast while mother concentrated on her writing.

Coffee Drinking High in Armed Services
WASHINGTON (AP)—Members of the armed forces and their families drink twice as much coffee as the average civilian, reports the magazine Military Market, an armed forces buyers guide.

It calculated the Army consumes an estimated 1,539,931,160 cups per year; Air Force 1,365,228,480 cups, the Navy 968,881,540 and the Marines 291,280,220.

These figures do not include coffee consumed off-base.

Coos Bay Asks End to Portland E-R Controversy
COOS BAY — The Coos Bay Chamber of Commerce has gone on record asking the Portland Chamber to help end the Portland location controversy which has prevented construction of an \$8,000,000 exposition-recreation center approved by voters two years ago.

The Coos Bay Chamber said the center was "vital to the economy of Oregon" because of its potential for national conventions.

France, U.S. Agree To Tax Changes
WASHINGTON (AP)—The United States and France have signed an agreement to make technical changes in their double taxation records.

Under these conventions, reached in 1939 and 1946, citizens of the two countries, when they reside in one and work in the other, are protected from paying taxes to both.

Ancient Egypt produced yellow dye from the crocus and red from the madder plant.

Polio Drop In Oregon On Forecast
PORTLAND (AP) — Predictions that Oregon's 1956 paralytic polio toll may be 50 per cent below average were voiced Friday.

Dr. S. Gorham Babson, chairman of the state Polio Vaccine Advisory Committee, and Dr. Harold M. Erickson, state health officer, said their prediction was contingent upon vaccinations of Salk anti-polio vaccine continuing at the present high levels.

They said in a letter to all the state's practicing physicians: "It is our hope that if polio vaccinations are continued as rapidly as the supply of vaccine permits, the toll of paralytic polio can be reduced in 1956 about 50 per cent below the average of recent years."

If their prediction proves correct, the state can expect about 140 cases of polio this year compared to the average of 280 cases a year since 1950.

The board reported 34 cases of polio through June 15 of this year in Oregon. Of these 22 cases were paralytic.

Last year at this time there had been 60 cases of polio, 46 of which involved paralysis.

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