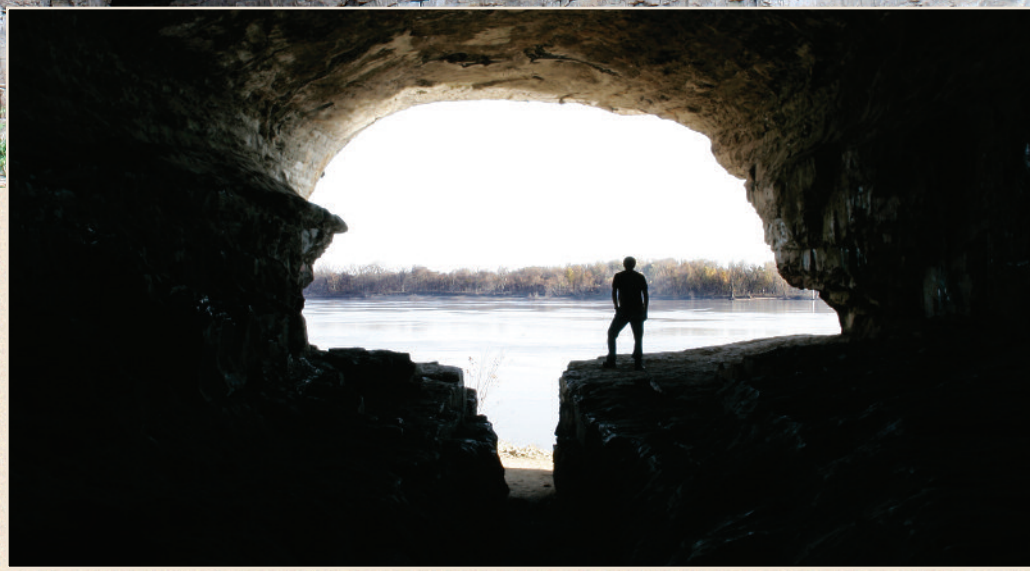
Cave-in-Rock State Park attracts chill-seeking history buffs. But did river pirates really hide out here?

The Hole in the River



Story and Photos By Joe McFarland

When it comes to old-fashioned pirate stories in Illinois, no destination is better known for its dark history than the shadowy underworld at Cave-in-Rock State Park in extreme southeast Illinois.

Pirates lived here. Or so the stories go. Real river pirates. Thieves and murderous con men. According to local legend, during the late 1700s and early 1800s, when the Ohio and Mississippi rivers of the Midwest were still rough frontiers, bloodthirsty pirates living at this massive, natural limestone cave on the Ohio were said to rule the region with fear. Operating with Cave-in-Rock as their hideout, they'd ambush river flat boats, or pretend to be helpless travelers in need, then lure victims to a dark, terrible fate.

It all happened right here at Cave-in-Rock. Pirates galore. Or so the stories go. Of course, as with all great stories, verifiable facts don't always matter.

Today, historical scholars have deep skepticism about the many tales attributed to Cave-in-Rock, citing court testimonies and original documents from the era that mention only one outlaw—the pirate Samuel Mason—who visited

(Photo by John Muchow.)

The huge, natural hideout known as Cave-in-Rock along the Ohio River has invited visitors and pirate tales for more than 200 years.

the cave in 1797 but eventually fled downstream to the Mississippi River where he was murdered by his own men in 1803. But whether or not piracy on the Ohio River ever was a major problem in the late 1700s and early 1800s simply hasn't mattered to most people for more than 150 years. By the mid-1800s, steamboat operators and other enterprising tour guides began stopping at Cave-in-Rock to unload passengers for a visit to what they all believed was the famous pirate cave along the Ohio. By then, it had already been assumed as rock-solid knowledge that this cavernous spot above the famous river was the site where real pirates once lived. Since half a century had passed since any witnesses to the alleged river crimes had been here, nobody disputed the tales. And the fabulous stories of piracy on the rivers continued. In fact, the variety of pirate legends seemed to increase: Outlaw names from unrelated atrocities documented elsewhere were now included in the oft-repeated and oft-published pirate stories of Cave-in-Rock.

Piracy as an Attraction

By the mid-to-late 1800s, travel on the Ohio River no longer represented a voyage into the lawless frontier. Visitors to this famous natural landmark—the largest limestone cave of its kind along the Ohio—came as sightseers, intentionally seeking out this attraction without fear. The piracy legend, firmly established, was now synonymous with Cave-in-Rock.

Throughout much of the 20th century, the famous steamboat the Delta Queen would stop at Cave-in-Rock to unload passengers for a firsthand glimpse of what everybody believed was a pirate den. The historic town of Cave-in-Rock on the riverbanks (one of Illinois' oldest communities, although it wasn't incorporated until 1901) represented a living connection to pirates as it welcomed travelers crossing on the Cave-in-Rock ferry between Kentucky and Illinois. Between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, tourism-attracting businesses were set up in and around the cave. By the mid-1900s, so well entrenched was the legacy of piracy here, when it came to selecting a filming location for the 1962 classic "How

Streams of visitors—including Joe and Mary Patton of Arkansas—visit Cave-in-Rock a busy tourist destination.

(Photo by Adele Hodde.)

Four duplex cabins overlooking the historic Ohio River are available to park visitors for overnight lodging. Class A campsites, as well as tent camping, also are available.

the West Was Won," no cave in America better represented the home of river pirates than Cave-in-Rock.

By then, the amazing geologic wonder known as Cave-in-Rock had been acquired by the State of Illinois. Cave-in-Rock State Park, established in 1929, originally encompassed the cave itself and 64.5 surrounding acres. Additional land purchases brought the park's size to 204 acres, which today includes a campground, picnic shelters, a restaurant-lodge and deluxe cabins overlooking the river.

Although its relatively modest size of 204 acres would seem to limit recreational opportunities (there is no hunting program at the state park), travelers today consider Cave-in-Rock a must-see destination when touring the scenic Ohio River in southeast Illinois. And there really is much to see and enjoy here.

Hundreds of thousands of acres of Shawnee National Forest spread across rural southern Illinois between the Mississippi and Ohio rivers, making the road to Cave-in-Rock both pastoral and breathtaking in its woodland beauty. Nearby river towns, such as Elizabethtown, home of Illinois' oldest operating hotel—the Rose Hotel, built around 1830—are historical treasures. The fabulous sandstone cliff formations at Garden of the Gods (soon to be pictured on a new Illinois quarter) are less than 20 miles away.

In this sparsely populated region of Illinois, the hundreds of thousands of people who come to Cave-in-Rock each year can be from anywhere—and often are. Acting Site Superintendent Keith Spivey said vacationers and other visitors commonly show up with accents that clearly aren't local.

"We have a lot of folks come down from Chicago," Spivey explained. "People from Indiana and Kentucky and all over the United States come here, as well as from other countries."

Hang around the cave for a few minutes on any particular day and a steady procession of those unique people can be seen strolling in. On a recent August afternoon, Joe and Mary Patton of Pottsville, Arkansas stepped down the hillside and along the boardwalk leading up to the 55-foot-wide cave entrance and announced their mission.

"We watched that movie recently, 'How the West Was Won,'" a grinning Joe Patton said. "So we came up here to meet Jimmy Stewart and Debbie Reynolds." The Pattons, both retired, said they were midway through a casual vacation—Garden of the Gods was their next stop, they decided—and then onward.

"We don't have any plans," Mary Patton said proudly.

Next came newlyweds Gregory and Jessica Bergschneider of Champaign, who made Cave-in-Rock a destination for their first vacation together as husband and wife.

"We're honeymooning, actually," Gregory Bergschneider said with a hint of awkwardness. (We left them alone in the cave.)

No sooner had the newlyweds wandered elsewhere then in came another young couple from upstate celebrating their two-week dating anniversary. Then came a pair of brothers, Mike and Gary Barker from Mt. Carmel and Avon, Indiana—and Dwight Cox from Indianapolis.

Up in the campground, which includes 34 Class A and 14 Class B sites, vacationers Gary and Lucyanne Claflin of Fishers, Indiana were busy preparing a tent and oversized air mattress for the

Kaylor's Restaurant within the state park features family style dining from March 1 until the week before Thanksgiving.

The cavernous main attraction at Cave-in-Rock is accessible from nearby parking lots and a stone walkway leading a short distance to the river.

night. He taught anthropology and archaeology in Indiana for years before retiring, and is well-versed in the famous tales of Cave-in-Rock.

"One thing people elsewhere don't seem to realize about Cave-in-Rock," he explained, "is how nice this campground is. I mean, look at how beautiful these sites are, and it's not crowded. You couldn't ask for a better place to camp."

"The restaurant is one of the reasons I come here," Lucyanne Clafin smiled while smoothing out a blanket. "Have you been there yet?"

The invitation has merit. Overlooking the Ohio River is Kaylor's Restaurant, a lodge-style hall famous for southern food, catfish fillets and family style dining. Open from March 1 until the week before Thanksgiving, the restaurant also can be rented out for parties with advance notice. A stone patio affords outdoor dining and a spectacular view of the river and the distant shore of Kentucky.

Adjacent to the restaurant are four duplex cabin houses overlooking the Ohio. One is disabled-accessible, all include deluxe baths, a dining area and wet bar, a large bedroom/living room and a large patio deck overlooking the river. Individual rates start at $98.79 ($88.80 for seniors) tax included.

For picnickers, four shelters are located throughout the park and feature charcoal grills, picnic tables, drinking water and nearby restrooms. Other picnic areas, including scenic river overlooks and three developed playground areas, are scattered throughout the park.

Spivey said that while the centerpiece of the park is the 150-foot-long cave, there are two hiking trails that wind through the forested hills and among the cliffs. Plus, fishermen often bring their gear for excellent river fishing opportunities. A nearby boat launch provides direct access to the Ohio from Cave-in-Rock (anglers unfamiliar with specific regulations between Kentucky and Illinois should consult with the park office before heading out).

"We also have a 1.5-acre fishing pond over in the campground," Spivey said, noting that the Ohio River can be unpredictable when it comes to flooding and access. "The pond is stocked with largemouth bass, bluegill and catfish."

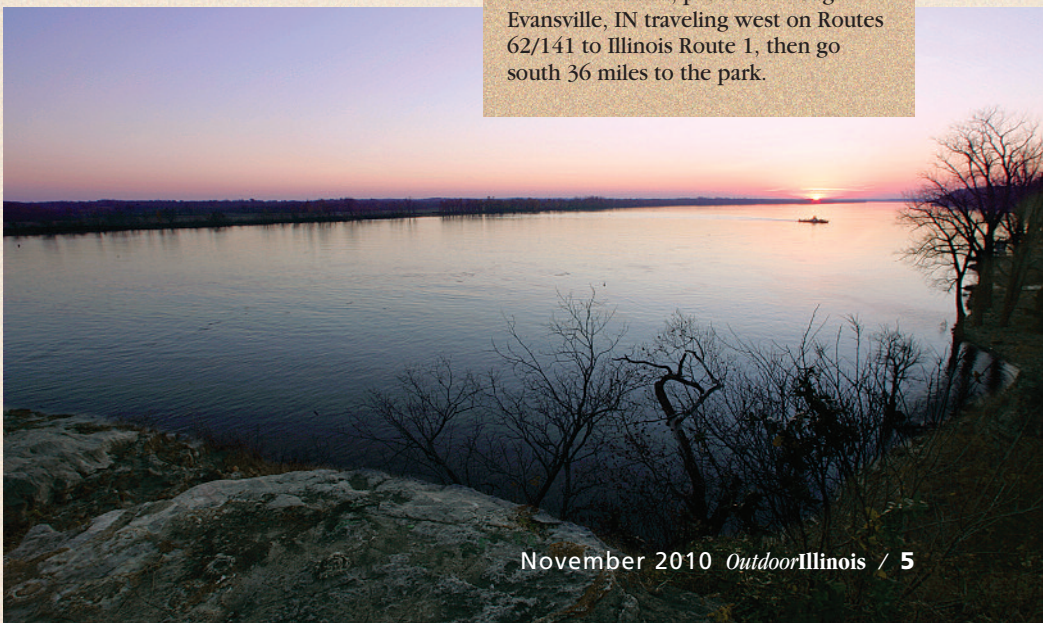
Because of the nature of rivers, Spivey offered this advice for all visitors to Cave-in-Rock:

"Basically, you can count on the river flooding up into the cave at least once during the spring," he said. "So it's always best to call ahead if you're planning a trip and you want to see the cave. Also, the river can flood in any season. During my 25 years here, I've seen floods in August and floods in December. So call ahead."

At a glance

Cave-in-Rock State Park, 1 New State Park Road Box 338, Cave-in-Rock, IL 62919
Telephone: (618) 289-4325
Web site: dnr.illinois.gov/parks
Lodge/Kaylor's Restaurant: (618) 289-4545
Directions: Cave-in-Rock State Park is located on the Ohio River in Hardin County. From the north, proceed south on I-57, exiting at Marion on highway 13 east. Go east through Marion and Harrisburg to Illinois Route 1, turn south and proceed 22 miles to the park. From the south, take highway 90 from Marion, KY, cross the Cave-in-Rock ferry and follow directional signs to the park entrance. From the southeast, take I-24 west from the I-24 bridge to exit 16, then go 38 miles east on Illinois Route 146 to the park. From southern Indiana, proceed through Evansville, IN traveling west on Routes 62/141 to Illinois Route 1, then go south 36 miles to the park.

(Photo by John Muchow.)



Scenic overlooks within the park along the Ohio River invite visitors to pause and reflect on the countless passers-by (including a pirate or two) who floated this famous route to New Orleans.