

# THE SANDYLAND CHRONICLE

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## THE DEATH OF FLOYD COLLINS

When I was a young boy, I used to visit my grandparents who lived in the Goose Ankle community about five miles southwest of Bluff City. They had a large room on one side of the hallway that they seldom used. In this room was an old Victrola phonograph that stood about four or five feet high and had a crank on the side and a lid that raised to reveal the turntable. We kids enjoyed cranking up the machine, folding the arm which held the needle down onto the record, and listening to some of those old 78 rpm records. One that left a lasting impression on me was entitled *The Death of Floyd Collins*. I didn't know at the time that it was telling the story of an actual event that happened in Kentucky in 1925.

Floyd Collins was known as the greatest cave explorer in the world. He came from a poor farming family living near Mammoth Cave in Kentucky. Floyd spent all his spare time exploring caves and had explored many of the 330 miles of underground passage-ways in Mammoth Cave. The Collins family owned a cave known as Crystal Cave, but it was too far off the tourist trail to make money. Floyd spent much of his time trying to find an entrance to Mammoth Cave from the Collins property in hopes that his family could cash in on the tourist business or at least find an entrance near the highway so tourists could explore Crystal Cave.

During his explorations, he explored a little known cave called Sand Cave about four miles from his home that most everyone ignored. Even though he was the world's greatest cave explorer, he was somewhat careless. He left one day to explore Sand Cave without telling anyone where he was going. He carried only one small light and wore no protective gear. When he was about 120 feet from the entrance and about 60 feet underground, a 27 pound rock fell on his foot and trapped him in the narrow passage-way. There was nothing to do but wait and hope someone would come to his aid. His lantern soon went out and Floyd found himself in total darkness and unable to move.

It was a day or so before anyone became concerned about Floyd. Finally his brother, Homer began a search for him and soon discovered that he was trapped in Sand Cave. Homer tried his best to free Floyd, but soon realized he needed help. Word spread and the rescue of Floyd Collins began. The radio was just becoming popular at that time and the listening public received regular updates on the rescue attempts. All the major newspapers printed stories about the incident. Soon the whole nation had heard about the man trapped in a Kentucky cave and listened to their radios and read the papers for all the latest news.

We remember only a few months ago when nine coal miners were trapped in a flooded coal mine in Pennsylvania and how happy we were when they were brought out alive. And I'm sure you remember the story of Baby Jessica who fell in a well and was finally rescued back in 1987. The area around Sand Cave soon took on a circus-like atmosphere as reporters and other people flocked to the area. It was said that there were no parking places for twelve miles around Sand Cave. There were pony rides for the kids and vendors sold

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food and souvenirs as the rescue party labored. An estimated crowd of 20,000 people gathered at the scene in the days that followed.

A newspaper reporter from Louisville who was very skinny managed to make it down to where Floyd was trapped and was able to touch him and talk to him. He took food, water, and whiskey to Floyd and read telegrams from people all over the country who were praying for his rescue. He conducted several interviews with Floyd about what it felt like to be trapped in a cave and this reporter even won a Pulitzer prize for his unusual reporting.

For over two weeks, Floyd suffered in the cold, dark, and tight passage. The rescuers tried everything to free him, but nothing worked. They tried to pry the rock to free Floyd's leg, but it would always fall back in place. Then the cave began to collapse and these efforts to free Floyd had to stop before others became trapped. They tried sinking another shaft to intersect with the tunnel where Floyd was trapped, but all this took time. Finally, they broke through to where Floyd was trapped, but it was too late. He had died about a day before. It was considered too dangerous to move his body, so he was left in the cave for about 80 days. His brother, Homer managed to raise enough money to give Floyd a decent burial and his body was brought out of the cave and buried outside the entrance to Crystal Cave.

Crystal Cave which the Collins family owned was later sold and Floyd's body was placed in a glass-topped coffin and displayed inside the cave for many years. Then the unexpected happened. Floyd's body was stolen. It was later found with one leg missing, which has never been found. Floyd's family finally had him buried in the family cemetery in 1989. His headstone reads:

William Floyd Collins  
Born 7-20-1887  
Buried 4-26-1925  
Trapped in Sand Cave 1-30-1925  
Discovered Crystal Cave 1-18-1917.

Technically, Floyd Collins was buried four times—at first when he was left in the cave for 80 days, then when he was removed and buried outside the entrance to Crystal Cave, then when his glass-topped coffin was placed inside Crystal Cave, and finally at the Mammoth Cave Baptist Church cemetery in Mammoth Cave National Park.

Many poems and songs were written about this event. One of the most popular records was the one my grandparents had entitled *The Death of Floyd Collins* by Vernon Dalhart. The words were written by Rev. Andrew Jenkins and Mrs. Irene Spain, for which they received \$25. Vernon Dalhart's recording sold over three million copies in two years. The legend of Floyd Collins lives on and there have been many books written about him. Floyd Collins is a legend especially among other cave explorers. Floyd Collins was 37 years old at the time of his death.

There are stories that the caves in and around Mammoth Cave are haunted. One of the stories is that Floyd Collins' ghost still roams the caves looking for his lost leg. If you ever visit Mammoth Cave in Kentucky, be sure to stop in at the cemetery and pay your respects to Floyd Collins, the greatest cave explorer the world has ever known. Just before the visitor center, turn right on Flint Ridge Rd. and go two miles to the church and cemetery.

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### THE DEATH OF FLOYD COLLINS (RECORDED BY VERNON DALHART)

Written by Rev. Andrew Jenkins and Mrs. Irene Spain

You can view pictures and listen to this song on the Internet at  
<http://www.bluegrassgrotto.org/floyd-c.html>

1 Oh, come all you young  
people  
And listen while I tell;  
The fate of Floyd Collins  
A lad we all knew well;  
His face was fair and  
handsome  
His heart was true and  
brave;  
His body now lies sleeping  
In a lonely sandstone cave.

2 How sad, how sad, the  
story  
It fills our eyes with tears;  
Its memories too will linger  
For many many years;  
A broken-hearted father,  
Who tried his boy to save;  
Will now weep tears of  
sorrow  
At the door of Floyd's cave.

3 Oh! mother don't you  
worry  
Dear father don't be sad  
I'll tell you all my story  
In an awful dream I've had;  
I dreamed that I was a  
pris'ner  
My life I could not save;  
I cried, Oh! must I perish  
Within this silent cave?

4 Oh! Floyd, cried his  
mother  
Don't go, my son don't go  
'Twould leave us broken-  
hearted  
If this should happen so  
Tho Floyd did not listen to  
Advice his mother gave  
So his body now lies  
sleeping  
In a lonely sandstone cave.

5 His father often warned  
him  
From follies to desist  
He told him of the danger  
And of the awful risk  
But Floyd would not listen  
To the oft advice he gave  
So his body now lies  
sleeping  
In a lonely sandstone cave

6 Oh! how the news did  
travel  
Oh! how the news did go  
It traveled thru the papers  
And over the radio  
A rescue party gathered  
His life they tried to save  
But his body now lies  
sleeping  
In a lonely sandstone cave.

7 The rescue party labored  
They worked both night and  
day  
To move the mighty barrier  
That stood within the way  
To rescue Floyd Collins  
This was their battle cry  
We'll never, no we'll never  
Let Floyd Collins die.

8 But on that fatal morning  
The sun rose in the sky,  
The workers were still busy  
We'll save him by and by.  
But oh! how sad the ending  
His life could not be saved  
His body then was sleeping  
In a lonely sandstone cave.

9 Young people oh! take  
warning  
From Floyd Collins fate  
And get right with your  
Maker  
Before it is too late  
It may not be a sand cave  
In which we find our tomb  
But at the bar of Judgment  
We too must meet our doom

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### WHAT A HAIL STORM!

A severe hail storm was reported near Sheppard, Arkansas between Hope and Fulton. Mr. F. B. Harkness stated he found numerous stones as big as coconuts and several so large they wouldn't fit into his hat. Railroad engineers passing through at the time of the storm reported the ground covered ten inches deep with hailstones over a three mile stretch. They estimated the stones to weigh between one and two pounds. (Prescott Daily News- May 8, 1909)



**GUM GROVE SCHOOL PICTURE- Early 1920's**

**If you look closely at this picture, you will see that the group was posed this way by the photographer or the teacher. Notice the pattern—girl, boy, girl, boy, etc.**

Front row- left to right: (1). ????, (2). Will Otwell, (3). Myrtis Hall, (4). Harland McKelvy, (5). ?????, (6). Ruel McKelvy, (7). Georgie Bradley, (8). Haskell Norman, (9). Mary Jane Walters, (10). Lee Plyler

Second row- left to right: (1). Alvin Dunn, (2). ????, (3). Lee Roy McKelvy, (4). Lois Nelson, (5). Carl Greer, (6). Ardis Hall, (7). (??) Bradley, (8). Elsie Walters, (9). ????, (10). Ardle Nelson, (11). Gertie Parker

Third row- left to right: (1). ????, (2). Archie Stone, (3). Edna Walters, (4). ????, (5). Beulah Johnson, (6). Bryon Thompson, (7). Ollie Otwell, (8). Edward Dunn, (9). Mae Norman, (10). Vernon (??) Bradley, (11). Esther Nelson

Back row, left to right: (1). Lois Bradley (??), (2). Ellis Griffith, (3). ????, (4). Arl Moody, (5). Adell Norman, (6). Alvin Bradley, (7). ????, (8). ????, (9). Grace Griffith, (10). Garland Plyler, (11). Thelma Dunn

**SUTTON, ARKANSAS (NEVADA COUNTY)-AUG. 16, 1909**

Yesterday afternoon at 7:00 Rev. Greer united in the bonds of wedlock Mr. Jim Mann and Miss Pearl Murry. The contracting couple met the minister in the road near this place and were married while seated in their buggy. Mr. Mann is a promising young man of this community and Miss Murry is the accomplished daughter of Squire Murry.

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A St. Louis newspaper reporter passed through Prescott in 1887 and wrote an article giving his impression of the town and listing some of the positive things he noticed. (From the Nevada County Picayune-June 6, 1887)

### **A WIDE AWAKE PROGRESSIVE AND PROSPEROUS PEOPLE A SPLENDID TOWN IN THE HEART OF A FERTILE REGION**

1. Situated on Iron Mt. RR
2. County seat with 3000 voters in county.
3. Population of city is 2000 souls
4. Fine public school and fine courthouse and jail
5. 7-12 thousand bales of cotton handled out of here each year
6. Vast fruit production; well adapted for peaches
7. Artesian wells provide clear water, slightly impregnated with sulphur
8. Large lumber shipper; ships several hundred cars each year
9. Prescott Lumber Co. with stock owned by St Louis men has \$50,000 capital
10. Good merchants; Substantial stores, mostly brick
11. Two newspapers- Nevada County Picayune (one of cleanest and most spicy sheets) has J. W. Gardner as editor (Eugene White was former editor); has modern machinery; The Dispatch published by J. A. Ansley
12. Hub, spoke, and handle factory run by T. M. Neel; also ships pine and oak lumber
13. Thos. S. Bryan is sewing machine agent and wife has millinery store
14. B. L. Harwood has grocery business and ice cream restaurant
15. One of finest barber shops run by Adam Frederick features hot and cold baths.
16. J. C. Trevillion has meat business in a first class shop
17. Hinton Drug Store and Gro.
18. Foster and Logan Hardware
19. Hatley and Christopher grocery and hardware
20. Palace Dry Goods run by W. F. Armstrong
21. J. H. Kershaw has grocery store
22. Pat Cassidy, a former peddler, now has a neat store with Wm. Parr
23. E. Littlefield is a photographer
24. Hugh Montcrief is druggist
25. J. O. Howell has drug store
26. Montgomery, Madden, and Montgomery is a law firm
27. Nevada County Bank managed by W. H. Terry and J. C. Young
28. T. C. McRae, a congressman, lives here
29. the best hotel is the Winter House, run by Mrs. Sarah Winter
30. John M. Milburn is the news agent
31. W. B. Waller general merchandise
32. Mr. White, the postmaster

Prescott is a lively little Southern town full of vim and enterprise. The stranger is made welcome, it has good facilities for pursuing any line of business, standards of morality are high, and everywhere in her borders prevails the spirit which says, "Come".

**CORN BREAD TAMALES PIE**

**If you want something a little spicy, try this recipe**

- |                       |   |
|-----------------------|---|
| 1 lb. ground beef     | 1/4 teaspoon pepper                     |
| 1 large onion chopped | 1 tablespoon chili powder (or to taste) |
| 1 can tomato soup     | 1 cup whole kernel corn (drained)       |
| 2 cups water          | 1/2 cup chopped green pepper            |
| 1 teaspoon salt       |   |

Brown ground beef and onion in skillet and drain any excess grease. Add tomato soup, water, seasonings, corn, and green pepper. Simmer for 15 minutes.

**TOPPING MIX**

- |                    |                               |
|--------------------|-------------------------------|
| 3/4 cup cornmeal   | 1 1/2 teaspoons baking powder |
| 1 tablespoon flour | 1 egg                         |
| 1 tablespoon sugar | 1/3 cup milk                  |
| 1/2 teaspoon salt  | 1 tablespoon oil              |

Mix dry ingredients together. Add egg, milk, and oil. Place meat mixture in greased baking dish (2 1/2 quart). Cover with cornbread topping. Bake in hot 425 degree oven for 20 to 25 minutes or until corn bread is brown. Yield: 6 servings.

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**AN ODE TO TIMES LONG GONE**

**For older folks only—(If you're under 40, you won't understand**

You could hardly see for all the snow,  
Spread the rabbit ears as far as they go.  
Pull a chair up to the TV set,  
"Good night, David; Good night, Chet."

Dependin' on the channel you tuned,  
You got Rob and Laura - or Ward and June.  
It felt so good, felt so right.  
Life looked better in black and white.

I Love Lucy, The Real McCoys  
Dennis the Menace, the Cleaver boys  
Rawhide, Gunsmoke, Wagon Train  
Superman, Jimmy & Lois Lane.

Father Knows Best, Patty Du ke  
Rin Tin Tin and Lassie too,  
Donna Reed on Thursday night--  
Life looked better in black and white.

I wanna go back to black and white.  
Everything always turned out right.

Simple people, simple lives  
Good guys always won the fights.

Now nothin' is the way it seems  
In living color on the TV screen.  
Too many murders, too much fight,  
I wanna go back to black and white

In God they trusted, in bed they slept.  
A promise made was a promise kept.  
They never cussed or broke their vows.  
They'd never make the network now.

But if I could, I'd rather be  
In a TV town in '53.  
It felt so good, felt so right  
Life looked better in black and white.

I'd trade all the channels on the satellite  
If I could just turn back the clock tonight  
To when everybody knew wrong from right  
Life was better in black and white.