

**The History and Romance of  
MAMMOTH ONYX CAVE**

By Works Progress Administration (circa 1940)

Sequestered among the foothills of the Cumberland Mountains, that overlook the beautiful plateau of the Pennyryle in central Kentucky, is to be found that gem of underground fairylands, the Mammoth Onyx Cave. Unrivalled for its riot of fanciful colors, Nature here seems to have captured and hidden, in frozen stillness, a softness and delicacy greatly superior to other rock formation. It was on a summer's afternoon of 1799 that a native maiden, named Martha Woodson, allowed her inquisitive spirit to lead to a propitious discovery. While in quest of hillside berries, she suddenly became conscious of a cool draft of air that seemed to come from a small vent in the rock surface. Summoning courage, her adventurous spirit led her to seek the aid of her two smaller brothers, and, with their able assistance, lowered the trunk of a fallen cedar its full length into the newly found aperture. It was then that her activities made history, for she lowered her supple body through this small crevice and descended into the darkness below. Such is the traditional version of the discovery of the now famous Mammoth Onyx Cave. If Martha Woodson had possessed the powers of a seer, she might have informed her backwoods neighbors that these palatial chambers were early to become a favorite rendezvous of the traveler in quest of the luxurious. With the advent of such modern conveniences as the automobile and the electric light, this beautiful cavern has attained its rightful place as an attraction of international fame. As its descriptive name might suggest, here is to be found in mammoth proportions those well known, though often mispronounced, ceiling and floor decorations, the *stalactite* and *stalagmite* onyx formations. It has been made possible now, through a newly constructed entrance into the side of the cave, to be admitted by taking only fourteen easy steps from the surface whence you are suddenly submerged in an atmosphere strange for its fantasies, delightful for its beautiful array of pastel tints and shades, and pleasant for the ease and comfort with which it is made accessible. Even the most frigid will become lost to the trials of life in the serene pleasure of experiencing what could be termed, almost literally, an optical illusion. In a trip that varies but a few feet in elevation one passes continuously through a maze of shapes and forms, minute as well as gigantic in size, that stud the ceiling, walls, and floors and span a multitude of gaps at every angle and in every direction. Although characteristic icicle-like formations predominate, a feature which makes the cave especially acceptable from the standpoint that it fulfills the expectations of its guests, there are found also countless numbers of unique and interesting attractions. Coral Avenue, appearing as though it were lifted from the very bottom of the sea, presents a washed and spotless panorama of sponge-like forms, sea coral, and anemone. Bridges of onyx that rival in color the bow that spans the heavens following an afternoon shower, beckon your attention. Crystal clear pools of water are alive with those little known and less understood inhabitants of the nether world, the eyeless fish, transferred from Hidden River Cave. And not to be entirely outdone by Nature we find that man has left a contribution, a symbol of the hill country, an old Kentucky still. Carefully selected guides supplement this well-appointed trip in an informative manner. In a ninety-minute tour that returns you to the surface refreshed and with a lightened soul, this story of the ages will leave you an impression that will last a lifetime.