

*Munson, Patrick J. (Department of Anthropology, Indiana University) and Munson, Cheryl Ann (Glenn A. Black Laboratory Of Archaeology, Indiana University)*

## **ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS IN WYANDOTTE AND OTHER SOUTHERN INDIANA CAVES**

Archaeological investigations were conducted in August 1986 to assess six southern Indiana caves as historic and prehistoric cultural properties. These studies were supported by a grant from the Department of Natural Resources, Division of Historic Preservation and Archaeology. They were modelled after and were a continuation of archaeological reconnaissance studies of Indiana and Kentucky caves from 1980 to 1986.

Our study was designed to evaluate the archaeological potential (prehistoric and early historic) Of six true caves (as opposed to rockshelters) in south-central Indiana. Unlike most caves, the ones we investigated have dry passages, which provide environments suitable for the preservation of normally perishable remains. Such remains include plant materials which were used for illumination (i.e. torches and fires), wooden constructions and implements, fibers and fabrics for apparel or carrying devices, and wooden poles for climbing. Other clues we sought in documenting the cultural use of eaves are modifications of walls and natural formations; these include marks produced by battering or scraping minerals, cavities or faces made by quarrying or mining, marks left by picks or digging sticks, signatures or "graffiti," and spoil piles resulting from mining or from the leaching of saltpeter from cave sediments.

Wyandotte Cave is a large, dry limestone cavern in Crawford County. Intensive reconnaissance, limited excavations and radiocarbon dating demonstrated that portions of the cave, some as many as 3000 feet from the entrance, were used from about 2200 B.C. to A.D. 800 for the mining of chert, epsomite, and aragonite. Numerous artifacts and modifications associated with these prehistoric mining activities have been documented Aragonite from Wyandotte Cave is mineralogically unique, and it has been possible to identify it as the raw material of a number of artifacts (primarily pipes and gorgets) from Middle Woodland sites in Eastern North America.

Several secondary sources imply that Wyandotte Cave was mined for saltpeter during the War of 1812 era, but this is not supported by primary documents or evidence of saltpeter extraction in the cave. The cave was, however, an important commercial source of Epsom salts during the period ca. 1810-1830, as demonstrated by both primary documents and the discovery of epsomite mining implements in the cave. Residues are also preserved from an abortive 1884/85 commercial attempt to store onion sets in the cave.

Buckner's Cave in Monroe County is another large, dry limestone cavern. Reconnaissance of this cave revealed fragments of hickory bark torches, some of which were located as much as 700 feet from the entrance. These are comparable to prehistoric artifacts found in Wyandotte Cave, but a radiocarbon date on one of these fragments revealed that it was used in very late prehistoric or early historic times. A signature (L. V. Cushing) dated 1775 once existed in the interior of this cave, but has since been destroyed by vandals; possibly the torches relate to this early historic exploration. Reconnaissance of Coon's Cave, also in Monroe County, revealed bark torch fragments, some as many as 500 feet from the entrance, but a radiocarbon date on one of these yielded an historic age. Robinson's Ladder Cave in Crawford County produced two heavily gnawed strips of hickory bark from a woodrat's nest some 400 feet from the entrance. Although they have not been dated, they might be prehistoric or early historic torch fragments, but equally as likely they were carried into the cave by woodrats. Examination of Cheese Cave in Washington County and Leonard Springs Cave in Monroe County, both of which had been described as "dry," revealed that they are in fact too damp to preserve prehistoric-early historic organic materials.