

## **Crystal Lake Cave, Alive and Lifeless: A Creative Journalism Piece**

*This was my first creative journalism piece, and I unexpectedly learned to love it. If I had known that it would be so enjoyable, I would have started practicing it much early on in my Loras career. In creative journalism, the writer presents facts and information about a subject but does so in a creative way: sometimes through reflects, sometimes memoir, sometimes something entirely different. I chose to write about Crystal Lake Cave in Dubuque, IA.*

I'd never seen a body of water so completely motionless until I peered over the little lake within the cave. So calm and clear I almost didn't see the water, like a fine invisible film hovering in the darkness below the stalactites. I yearned to touch it, dip my hand in the cold alien water. When I was child, and quite honestly sometimes still, I'd lay in the bathtub completely motionless to try and stop the water's swooshing and slapping against the side of the tub. I'd make it so still that only the heaving of my chest as I breathed created a miniature tide throughout the tub... then I'd hold my breath for forty seconds, sometimes fifty on a good day, and watch the water glaze over into a glass-like calm. But even then, I could not create the total stillness I saw in the cave's lake as my heartbeat forced tiny staggered ripples through the bathwater. There was no life within it to force the smallest ripple.

Crystal Lake Cave is unlike many caves one might imagine with insects or bats scurrying in the dark, it lives a solitary existence deep underground, and therefore remained undiscovered by any living creature at all until 1868 when James Rice and other miners drilled for lead and found a maze of limestone cave in its stead. They realized its geological value, named it Rice Cave after the founder, and opened it to the public. It then passed to different family members as owners who each did their own part to better the cave. Bernard Markus worked hard to carve out

the cave to make the passages bigger so people may walk through it instead of crawl, which sometimes lead to the destruction of low hanging stalactites.

My tour guide Emily told us that she was a huge fan of Bernard Markus and that we should all be thankful that we can walk through the cave instead of crawl like the first explorers and tours did. She shined a light into a tiny hole near the floor-- no wider than my shoulder width. "That used to be one of the original passageways that we would have had to crawl through in order to see the whole cave." I'm not generally claustrophobic, but it was difficult to wave the stifling image I had of me alligator-crawling on my belly and getting stuck in one of those unbearably small tubes. It was difficult enough to wind through the passageways with a tour guide, my two roommates, and a family with two girls, I can't imagine attempting such a feat while crawling through *that*.

Skin-colored slimy walls, which resembled the inside of a human cheek, seemed to breathe as we passed. I'm told that these wall formations are known as drapery, but they look more flesh-like rather than cloth-like. Surprisingly, I was not cold—Emily explained that the temperature remained a constant 50 degrees celsius all year round because we were so far below ground and the temperatures on the surface never sunk this deep. We passed through several long and twisting veins through the cave, passing various *speleothems*- cave structures lit up with colored lights like miniature skyscrapers. I watched the shadows dance on the rock walls as our group passed through the lit passageways and I couldn't help but let Plato's allegory of the cave seep into my mind.

I thought about the people in the allegory were chained up in a cave, perhaps like this one, and were forced to look at a cave wall for their entire lives. A fire blazed behind them and

other people made shadow puppets on the walls in front of the prisoners. They made the shadow of a dog walk across the wall and they made barking sounds. The people in chains lived their whole lives thinking the shadows were real dogs, for it was all they knew. One day the prisoners were freed from their chains and led outside of the cave to see reality. They saw a real dog walk and bark in front of them and the prisoners were told that this was a real dog. Because the prisoners grew up thinking that shadows were real dogs, this knowledge was blasphemous... so blasphemous to everything that the prisoners knew and believed their entire lives that they killed any "heretics" who told them that dogs were dogs and shadows of dogs were just imitations of reality.

We then reached a dead end in the passageways where a hole opened up to view the ten mile long, and 2 inch deep lake for which the cave is now named. I merely observed for a moment through a small hole in the cave wall; the hollowed out opening that stretching far into the blackness where lights could not reach, the low arched ceiling with young stalactites dripping downwards, the thin line of water spreading-- like the horizon line in perspective drawing, and the floor below the crystal clear water mirroring the ceiling with stalagmites protruding upwards trying to break through the surface. Like monster teeth and a deep throat eager to swallow.

Every cave has a lifeline, a crevice exhibiting where and how the cave was born. Emily pointed out Crystal Lake Caves'; a deep crack etched in the ceiling where water seeped through after the glaciers melted. When water mixes with carbon dioxide from the surface and seeps down through the soil collecting even more from decaying plants and animals, it forms carbonic acid, an acid with a weaker pH than vinegar, but an acid capable of slowly hollowing out a cave nonetheless. This is how the cave formed then and how it continues to form today.

When the cave was formed, the cave sat below the water table and the water widened cracks and passageways throughout the limestone to form the hollowed out cave, then when the glaciers began to melt and rivers and streams cut deeper into the ground, the water table lowered so cave now sits above the water table and most of the water left the cave. When the cave finally hollowed, formations began to occur as carbonic acid reacted with the limestone and cut, molded, and sculpted the beautiful figures witnessed today.

Of course, such a feat does not happen overnight, it takes millions of years to create a single formation. In fact, it takes one hundred years for one cubic centimeter of a speleothem to grow! I gazed around me at the huge stalactites and stalagmites still growing larger. Sometimes I could spot a tiny drop of carbonic acid clinging to the nose of the stalactite shivering to drop on to the eager stalagmite below it. One day the two formations will join together as a column, and be one again.

Somehow at this moment my thoughts turned to The Symposium and Aristophanes' drunken yet beautiful speech to explain the origin of love. How humans roamed the earth like big rolling kegs stuck back to back with two sets of arms and legs, and when the gods grew angered and frightened by their defiance they split them down in two, turned their heads around, and tied the skin up together into human navels. From then on humans search their whole lives for their other half and once they find them, they make love to try and shove themselves back together so they can be whole again. I started to humanize these stalactites and stalagmites as trying to drip and slowly grow towards each other for thousands of years to finally join each other as a single column and become whole.

Emily led us through more slimy walled passageways until we stood under the anthodite formations, small sparkling white rock clinging and huddling together like frost on a windowsill. They were so fragile... like one light touch would crumble them to the ground. "These are rare-- there are only three caves in the United States fortunate enough to have these forms, and we are one of them." Again, Emily's pride of the cave showed through. Anthodite formations are composed of aragonite or gypsum and grow little spikes from a central core creating an urchin like form.

We left the frosty anthodite and Emily introduced us to some of the many named formations. An eerie bleach white form named "Lot's Wife", for it indeed looked like the woman from the story who turned into a pillar of salt after she gazed upon Sodom and Gomorrah. There was the "Swiss Cottage Roof" which looked like heavily hung icicles dripping over gingerbread. The huge "Chandelier" hung above an archway with thick stalactites huddled together as their wax dripped towards the ground. The formation used to be even larger, but the a few pointed tips of the stalactites were cut short. Millions of years to grow, one day to destroy.

Emily showed us "The Bell", the largest formation in the cave looking just like its namesake and weighing and estimated three tons! It honestly wasn't the most beautiful speleothem in the cave, but it's age and size warranted it respect. The handle of the bell was once a stalactite that dripped forming the stalagmite below it, the bell, and through billions of years of struggle, the two joined together. Some cave formations near it were so close to touching, I so eagerly wanted to pull the two together so they may become a column together.

We walked below what was termed "The Nursery"; a grouping of delicate baby stalactites sleeping, and growing. Young formations like these are called *soda straws* because when

stalactites first form they are hollow, then after they grow into a large enough tube the center fills up into the point. I looked up at the delicate newborns dripping down wards... so delicate they seemed to quiver. They were like an alien's offspring hanging in little pods until they burst into little creatures. Somehow, I found them cute, if it's possible to find rock cute. I wanted to watch them grow further and see what they'd become. But even if I live to be one hundred years old, the soda straws only will have grown a *centimeter*.

Crystal Lake Cave is older than James Rice who found it in the 1800s, older than Plato and his allegory, older than the existence of humanity. It is patient and sage. Within it, I felt like time slowed down, and there was a zen-like quality in realizing that my short existence is dwarfed by that of this cave. The formations and crevices are the wrinkles that tell the story of its ancient past, and yet it is still growing!

As I started to ascend up the stairs and out of the cave, I spied more flesh-like drapery thick with dripping water, and held myself back from touching it. Two cool drips plopped on my forehead from a hanging stalactite, and only then did the sheer majesty begin to register.