

# JIM WHITE

CARLSBAD CAVERNS  
NATIONAL PARK, NEW  
MEXICO

**Jim White**  
**Carlsbad Caverns National**  
**Park, New Mexico**

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Carlsbad Caverns National Park, New Mexico      *The Story of its Early*  
*Explorations, as told by Jim White:**

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**Carlsbad Caverns**  
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**Mexico      The Story of**  
**its Early Explorations,**  
**as told by Jim White**

**HOW JIM FOUND THE CAVERNS**

Bats!... millions of black little mammals drifting along the horizon and seeming to fuse into the hazy clouds of a New Mexico sunset! That was the spectacle which led Jim White, back at the turn of the century, to become interested in the colossal phenomenon designated by Act of Congress as Carlsbad Caverns National Park.

If you could ask him about it today, Jim's eyes would probably turn inward as he'd muse and remember. "I thought it was a volcano—but then I'd never seen one. For that matter, I'd never seen bats fly. I had seen plenty of prairie whirlwinds during my life on the range, but this thing didn't move. It seemed to stay in

one spot near the ground—but the top kept spinning upward. I watched maybe a half-an-hour, and being about as curious as the next fellow, I started toward the place”.

Jim White, native of Mason County, Texas, grew up ranching ... surrounded by the cattle-business, without even a grammar school education. Jim would have preferred bustin’ broncos to books and blackboards even if there had been a little log schoolhouse on his native soil. So it was an experienced ten-year-old range-rider who teamed up with John and Dan Lucas of the X-X-X Ranch in New Mexico, three miles or so from the entrance to the cave. Jim White spent eight or ten years on the range surrounding Lucas’ Ranchhouse, and like the other rangemen, had known of “the bat cave”, but he had felt no impelling urge to see what was hiding in its darkness.

Then came the day of the bat-flight. Crawling through the rocks and brush, Jim White approached the spot from which the bats seemed literally to boil. The incredulous young range-rider made a feeble guess about the number of bats—could think no further than millions—but realized that any hole with capacity for that many bats must be a whale of a big affair. Creeping still closer, Jim finally lay on the brink of the chasm and looked down ... into awesome, impenetrable blackness.

Torn between awe and curiosity, Jim did the natural thing for a man familiar with desert ranges.

“I piled up some dead cactus and built a bonfire. When it was burning good, I took a flaming stalk and pushed it off into the

hole. Down, down, down it went until the flame went out—and I still watched until the embers sprinkled on the rocks below. Seemed the thing wouldn't ever stop, but later it measured about thirty or forty feet from where I dropped the fire down to that faraway bottom. I kicked the remainder of the fire into the hole and watched it fall. The bats seemed to be scared, and for several minutes none flew out. Soon as the embers died, though, they boiled up again. I watched another hour or so, then went back to camp.”

The fence-building crew, camped in the vicinity at the time, heard not a word from their companion about his observation.

# JIM EXPLORES FARTHER

Jim White kept his counsel, waited a couple of days for the opportunity, then gathered together several coils of rope, a kerosene lantern, some wire and a hand-axe.

“I got back to the cave about mid-afternoon. You know the opening faces West, and the sun was in the right place to shine down into it. There was enough light so I could see the bottom of the shaft. Off to the right I could see the opening of a huge tunnel, and my imagination started running ahead of me. Where would that tunnel lead? I made up my mind to find out.”

Busy with the hand-axe, Jim cut sticks of wood from the shrubs nearby, accumulating a sizeable pile. Next, he picked up the rope and the wire ... and with his newly-cut sticks for steps, Jim White's rope-ladder-to-adventure was soon lowered into the entrance of the cave. Cautious rung-by-rung descent led the probing cowboy down into blackness until his feet touched something solid. Lighting his lantern, he discovered himself on a narrow ledge—almost at the end of his rope, literally and figuratively!

From that precarious spot, Jim could see into the tunnel—only a little farther and he could be on its smooth-looking floor level. Appetite whetted for exploration, the range-toughened man dared a “human-fly” approach, holding onto the rough wall for that final twenty feet or so to wide, level footing!

Standing at the entrance to the tunnel, Jim peered ahead by light from his lantern ... a sickly glow against a blackness that seemed solid. Determined to see what was there, dark or no dark, the cowboy summoned his courage and started walking slowly forward.

“The tunnel grew larger with every step. It seemed to me that I was wandering into the very core of the Guadalupe Mountains.

“Finally, I reached a chamber—a whale of a big oval-shaped room. Looked like several hundred yards before there was a sharp curve to the right and another sharp descent. On the left was another big tunnel leading in the opposite direction ... and the floor on the left looked a little more smooth and level, so I tackled it first. It didn’t take long to discover that this one was the Bats’ Cave, so I went back to the big entrance and started down the other tunnel.

“I kept going until I found myself in the mightiest wilderness of strange formations a cowboy ever laid eyes on! It was the first cave I was ever in, and I didn’t know then that those formations had names like ‘stalagmites’. But I did know, with the kind of instinct the Creator puts into a man, that there just wasn’t another scene like this one in the whole world.”

To arrive at this point, Jim White had crept cat-like across a dozen dangerous ledges and past many a tremendous opening that seemed to reach downward into the very center of the earth. He dropped rocks to sound depths; into one opening he pushed a great boulder. It hit something—not bottom—and kept rolling

and rolling until the sound faded into a haunting memory of sound.

“I walked through more of those ‘stalagmites’, and each one seemed larger and more beautifully formed than the ones I’d already seen. I blinked at the sight of giant-size wonders that turned out to be gleaming ‘onyx’. The ceilings blinked back at me with clusters of ‘stalactites’ ... like great chandeliers. The walls sparkled and glittered.”

Those walls were frozen cascades of flowstone, with jutting rocks holding long, slender formations that rang under Jim White’s experimental touch like keys on a xylophone. Floors were carpeted with formations with new shapes and new sizes at every turn. Through the gloom, Jim saw the tall, graceful, ghost-like shapes resembling totem-poles, stretching upward into darkness. Through crystal-clear water, Jim White saw that the sides of several pools at his feet were lined with what appeared to be marble. Lost in the beauty, the weirdness, the grandeur into which his inquisitive mind had led him, Jim forgot time, place and distance.

Suddenly, the oil in his lantern was exhausted. The flame curled and died. Reality descended swiftly, as if millions of tons of black wool drifted down to smother and choke. With the black loneliness paralyzing his bloodstream, Jim White tried to refill his lantern from the small emergency canteen of oil, brought for just such a moment.

“My fingers shook so much that I fumbled the filler-cap and

spilled more oil in my lap than I did in my lamp. Then I dropped the filler-cap when I tried to screw it back on.

“The inky blackness and the almost ‘deafening’ total silence, save for an occasional drop, drop, drop of water, didn’t help me stop shaking, either. It’s hard to describe how completely dark, how perfectly still it is down in that cave. Seemed like a month went by before I got that lantern going again and looked around in the dim light to get my bearings.”

Foresight and range experience had prompted the westerner to leave landmarks for himself so the retracing of steps would be possible, even if natural sense of direction failed. Resourcefully using what was at hand, Jim’s guide-marks were broken stalactites taken from the floors and placed on top of the rocks, ends pointing to the outbound pathway. Even so, Jim started feeling a mounting fear that he might not be able to find the markers he had left behind. It was worse when he realized that no one at camp knew where he had gone—that his chances of being found were extremely remote even if his companions had known of his destination. In the cool depths of the cavern, now known to be 56 degrees day and night, summer and winter, the once-bold adventurer felt the wild alarm in his veins turn into perspiration and panic-chills.

“Suddenly I was seized with a mad desire to run—to charge like a crazy bull when he’s cornered. I scrambled along the edge of a black gash in the rock, and rammed my head against those sharp-pointed critters above me that all at once seemed

unfriendly. Those needle-points pierced my hat and cut a few holes in my scalp . . . and that sort of cooled me off. I leaned back against the wall and talked to myself the way a lonesome cowboy does. ‘Here, Jim’, I said, ‘don’t get in an uproar. It won’t get you anywhere. Take it easy’.”

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