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## MR. CUMBERLAND FALLS

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On August 21, 1931, Cumberland Falls State Park became the third Kentucky state park to receive Commonwealth endorsement. Many factors were involved in this achievement,<sup>1</sup> but perhaps the most significant and continuing force behind the establishment and development of the park as we know it today was a man from Corbin, Kentucky -- Robert Blair. Described from the 1930s on as the "Keeper of the Keys" to the park or "Mr. Cumberland Falls," this doughty, feisty, energetic and undaunted preservationist fueled a community's protective concern and inspired state and national support not only to establish Cumberland Falls State Park but to preserve it against all assaults. Much like an advance observer for a rifle platoon or a cavalry patrol in the Old West, Blair was always there to sound the alarm when hostiles revealed their presence.

What were the dangers? From Blair's point of view efforts to reshape the natural characteristics of the park are, particularly the falls itself, represented destruction of God-given beauty. The only changes he countenanced were those that offered opportunities for more people to view and enjoy that which God had wrought. Hence, entrepreneurs who desired to use the natural resources of the area for private gain were enemies. Those who wished to preserve it as much as possible in its natural state were friends. For Blair there was no room for compromise.

Thus when the Cumberland River Power Company, one of multiple subsidiaries of Sam Insull's Midwest Utilities company, prepared to erect an eighty-seven-foot-high dam upstream to divert water from the falls for hydroelectric production, Blair was alarmed. From that point on until the electric company sold its rights to the state of Kentucky, "Mr. Cumberland Falls" fought energetically against the proposition. He was not alone. Before the struggle ended, Blair's efforts inspired strong support from Corbin citizens, Kentucky newspapers, congressional progressives, and an increasingly strong national preservationist movement across the United States.

The first step came in 1927 when Blair and three other locals drove an automobile eighteen miles from Corbin to the site of the falls using an old logging trail. The ten-hour round trip prompted Corbin citizens to band together and build a road including a thirty-foot-high trestle dryland bridge.

The job took two months and stimulated national as well as statewide interest. It also prompted those who supported construction of a dam to greater efforts. The seat of those efforts was Williamsburg, Kentucky. Attracted by the possibilities of a large lake that would back up to their community, leaders of the town became allies of the Cumberland River Power Company. Lawyer H.H. Tye, for example, argued that parks were a waste of time, appealing only to the "idle rich," while the dam would enrich the area through tax revenues and by expenditures of construction workers.<sup>2</sup> One McCreary county man insisted that people he represented overwhelmingly favored a power dam<sup>3</sup> even though most people from the Corbin area opposed it.

Corbin citizens reacted by establishing the Cumberland Falls Preservation Association dedicated "solely" to the establishment of a state park at the fall,<sup>4</sup> although it seemed that the federal government would soon grant a license for dam construction. When Federal Power Commission chairman Herbert Work, who was also Secretary of the Interior, came to Kentucky in 1928 to investigate, he found people at a Middlesboro public meeting grimly hostile to preservation. They talked of the inaccessibility of the falls, the surrounding and unattractive wasteland full of black snakes and seed ticks. Putting all this under a deep lake seemed to them to be an idea whose time had come. Only one man present objected to all this -- Robert Blair of Corbin. With the courage and determination of an Horatius at the bridge, he denounced what he called the shortsightedness and greed of those around him. One person threatened him, and according to Blair, was forestalled only by Chairman Work's statement to the people that all should "remember that one righteous man [could have] saved Sodom."<sup>5</sup>

Later Blair and his CFPA cohorts got Work to visit Corbin and kept opponents away while they argued their case.<sup>6</sup> The beleaguered FPC chairman did not commit himself, other than to agree that erection of a power plant would probably destroy the falls. Work spared himself further consternation by resigning from the cabinet to become the chairman of the Republican national committee. Supporting the election to the presidency of his friend, Herbert Hoover, may have seemed a less controversial responsibility.

It soon became apparent that the controversy was basically between preservationists on the one hand and business promoters on the other. Money to purchase the land from the Cumberland River Power Company had been available for over a year in the form of a gift from Senator T. Coleman du Pont of Delaware. The only stipulation was that the area had to be maintained as a park, a wild animal preserve, and a bird sanctuary.<sup>7</sup> Kentucky Governor Flem Sampson tried, without success, to persuade du Pont to combine a state park with hydroelectric development. Consequently, the governor, a Barbourville native, worked out an arrangement with the power company whereby the governor would support power dam objectives in exchange for \$250,000 from the company to finance a state park.<sup>8</sup> Hence the issue was joined. Both sides favored a park. One side wanted a park with some evidence of modern development. The other believed that industrialization would destroy the very values that a park would preserve.

A succession of fortuitous events favorable to preservationists ensued. New FPC personnel in the Hoover administration visited Cumberland Falls itself to study the situation first hand. They might have reached a verdict favorable to power dam enthusiasts, but the chairman of the FPC at that time, Secretary of War James Good, died from blood poisoning following an emergency appendectomy only five weeks after the visit.<sup>9</sup> With the FPC decision placed on hold as a result, the battle shifted to Frankfort, Kentucky, where preservationists now mounted a powerful assault against Governor Sampson by joining with Democrats determined to undermine his gubernatorial authority in its entirety. Even the governor's subsequent veto of legislation to accept du Pont's gift could not withstand the pressure. The preservationists were totally victorious.<sup>10</sup> By dedication time in August 1931, the intense emotion of the past had abated. Joining in the ceremonies were representatives from each side.

Yet on the local scene it was apparent that Corbin had triumphed over Williamsburg. The state immediately moved to improve the now somewhat rundown road to the falls from Corbin. Corbin locals, particularly Robert Blair, became much more involved in promoting tourism in the area, protecting the park and identifying with its future. Anything affecting the region was now a matter of basic concern to "Mr. Cumberland Falls" and his allies.

In 1965 the Corps of Engineers proposed to build a power plant by tunneling around the falls and diverting water to make electric power. Blair led successful resistance by reestablishing the CFPA, and the Corps of Engineers

found other projects to play with.<sup>11</sup> Nine years later when artful money-makers endeavored to install a chair lift near the falls, which would have necessitated the hacking down of considerable timber, Blair again blew his trumpet. Governor Wendell Ford halted the project.<sup>12</sup>

I met Robert Blair in 1981 about ten months before his death. His office at that time was in the First National Bank building in Corbin, located somewhat apart from the rest of the financial institution on the second floor. He called it a museum office and he was right. Over the entry was his name followed by the simple title -- "Conservationist." He was chairman of the board of the bank, but nothing in the office suggested that.

Those who pride themselves on orderly decor would have been appalled by the clutter, but also impressed by the wide variety of treasured mementos. Arrowheads gathered in his many hikes through the forests around Corbin lined the wall. Stone knives, hoes, and cooking utensils used by Indians in the area were there. Old pictures of the falls were everywhere. There was even the gold-plated spike that was removed from the old trestle bridge when it was replaced.

Other items, and there were many, did not relate to the falls, but reflected Blair's lifelong love affair with the outdoors. Mounted fish and the heads of a mountain lion and four bears, plus the stuffed bodies of a bobcat and a beaver, stood out prominently. Lest one regard him as only a trigger-happy sportsman, Blair was quick to explain that he not only killed but he also consumed the meat of his prey. The three-hundred pound mountain lion, for example, at one time connected to the head now on his wall, had been processed into hamburger-- the best hamburger he ever ate, he said.

Blair was famous also for his varmint dinners. Such affairs have had a special prominence in the history of Kentucky politics, but none approached what Blair provided periodically for his guests in a cabin on the Cumberland River. Here he entertained friends from time to time with spectacular collections of dishes. In 1963, for example, at a surprise birthday party for a colleague, Blair provided the following to a large group: shark fin soup, quail eggs, fried grasshoppers, caterpillars, sauced clams, smoked rabbit, roast leg of elk, barbecue of Puma sirloin, topped off by a dessert of snowballs frozen from the previous winter. 13

Now Robert Blair is gone and his varmint dinners are only a memory, but the museum items relative to the park remain. Above all, his beloved Cumberland Falls is unchanged. Those who endorse preservation in its finest form undoubtedly hope his legacy will be maintained and honored.

## NOTES

1. See George W. Robinson, "Conservation in Kentucky: The Fight to Save Cumberland Falls, 1926-1931," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 81. 1 (Winter, 1983): 25-58.
2. *Louisville Courier-Journal* 24 February 1928.
3. *Courier-Journal* 25 February 1928. State Senator Henry Cline was the observer.
4. *Courier-Journal* 17 March 1928.
5. *Courier-Journal* 31 May 1938. Interview with Robert Blair, 26 May 1981.

6. *Courier-Journal* 1 June 1928. Conservationists announced Work would be available at the local hotel, after which they met with him in the home of Blair's father. Interview with Blair.
7. T. Coleman du Pont to Helm Bruce, 6 April 1927, in *Courier-Journal*, 18 February 1930.
8. *Courier-Journal* 6 December 1928.
9. *Courier-Journal* 19 November 1929.
10. *Courier-Journal* 9 and 11 March 1930.
11. *Courier-Journal* 13 April 1974 and 29 May 1974.
12. *Corbin Times Tribune* 23 March 1981.

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