

History relates story of cave-style home near Silver

A look inside



"Uncle Con" as some people called Cornelius C. Whitehill, enjoys a moment of leisure with his dog in his cave home south of Silver City. The homemade house was cut out of the side of a hill and maintained a constant temperature of about 68 degrees.

EDITOR'S NOTE — The following story was written by Ernie Pyle of the Los Angeles Daily News on Dec. 7, 1939. It concerns a man with Deming ties. Cornelius Cosgrove Whitehill, who

built a home by digging out a manmade cave out of the hillside four miles from Silver City. The cave-home has long since been destroyed.

'THE ROVING REPORTER'

Silver City, New Mexico, Dec, 6 1939.

It seems to me that I've already got friends living in caves all over the United States, and now I've made another one. His name is Cornelius Cosgrove Whitehill, they call him 'Con'. He is 65 years old and happily married, he rolls brown paper cigarettes without licking them. He wouldn't kill a living thing and he lives in a cave simply because he likes it.

It isn't a natural cave. It's a manmade cave dug out of a hillside. It's four miles from downtown Silver City. When the new airport is built, the planes will roll their wheels almost across Whitehill's roof. But they won't know it's his roof because it's just country up there on top. Although originally from New Mexico, the Whitehill's lived for years in California. He was a contract painter there. Eight years ago, he got lead poisoning and had to quit painting and

came back here. During his absence, people had simply taken apart the ranch house he once owned and taken it home with them. Whitehill couldn't afford to build a new house and didn't want to anyway.

So he took his pick and shovel and began digging into one of the hillsides. Two weeks later he was living in it. When Mrs. Whitehill came on from California eight months afterwards, the cave was big and comfortable.

Today it has four rooms, kitchen and bath. It is well furnished and clean as a pin, and more comfortable than the average farmhouse. Every room is light, and the temperature of the cave is so even they don't need much fire, their annual coal bill is only 6 dollars.

The entire house cost less than twenty dollars. Mrs. Whitehill wasn't so hot about the idea at first, for she is a woman that enjoys living as other people live, but she finally gave her approval, and I believe now she is a little proud of the place herself, as she might well be.

I asked Whitehill what put the idea in his head in the first place. He said he had always wanted to live in a cave, he feels it was his destiny; he feels he has a mission to demonstrate that cave living is practical.

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Con Whitehill is a practical philosopher, his philosophy might not fit you, but it does mighty fine for him. He is occupied, contented, and satisfied that he is doing good. Con won't kill anything. He is the only Southwesterner I've ever met who won't kill rattlesnakes. He even keeps three or four bull snakes in one of his 'barn caves.' We didn't see them but we could see the skins they've shed, even a snake skin scares me.

He has a cave for his ten cows. Caves for his chickens. A cave for a machine shop. A cave for their car. A cave for a greenhouse packed with luxuriant blossoming plants.

And he has an immense three room cave that he wants to devote to the Arts and Crafts. He wants to make it a workroom for the people of Silver City who have no place to paint and carve and model.

Whitehill wishes some scientist would come out and sort of go into partnership with him.

He feels there is so much power in everything around us, if he could only get it out.

He feels that in a few years houses can be lighted just by the electricity in one rock laying out there on the ground, he is right now fixing up a solar water heater for himself.

Mr. and Mrs. Whitehill have two children, both married, in California. Each drives home frequently. Mrs. Whitehill usually goes back with them, and then the other child brings her back in a few weeks.

The Whitehill's income is from their cows and chickens. They are in no need of relief, and Whitehill wouldn't take it if he were. He says they could live like Kings on \$10 a month.

And before long they are likely to have that much and more. For their land is the only spot near Silver City level enough for an airport.

Con will probably lease it to the City for a very small figure, but even a small figure will more than supply his wants. He doesn't want the City to give him much money; all he wants is for people to appreciate him. And who wouldn't want that, I ask you?

Ernie Pyle visited the ranch often, his home was in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Whitehill died in February of 1952, about a year after his wife. His cave house was filled in several years ago.

He is survived today by a son and daughter in California, and by three Deming residents, nieces Myrtle Carlisle, C. M. "Tough" Biggs, Thelma V. "Susie" Cook and by Mrs. Carlisle's brothers, Harvey, who lives in Albuquerque and Vance Whitehill of El Paso.