



A Creative Narrative of the Archaic Period at Russell Cave
by James Holtzclaw

Living in the Archaic Period at Russell Cave

I have brown hair, eyes, and skin. I'm 29 years old, an old man for my time. My family and I have moved with a local band to a cave that someday will be known as Russell Cave.

We are here to hunt deer, and turkey, and this cave gives us shelter during the fall and wintertime as we seek out the abundant game that is available. Tomorrow, when the sun rises, some of us will go out in search of a herd of deer that has been spotted at the end of the cove. Tonight, my son and I will stay up late to guard our band from predators; especially from mountain lions. While sitting below our winter home at the edge of the stream, my son and I warm ourselves by huddling together, listening for signs of predators. To pass the time we stare at the crystals in the black sky.

"Why does the river run into the cave," my son whispers to me?

"There are two worlds, the upper world and the underworld. Evil creatures live in this underworld. These creatures can exit the underworld through the cave but they can't get through the river."

"Father, how did you get your lion necklace?"

"It belonged to your grandfather, the great lion hunter. He gave it to me before he died."

"I'm going to get me one, too," my son proudly said.

"Many moons ago, your grandfather killed a lion to get this necklace."

"I want to be a great hunter like him."

"I'm sure you will but you need to sleep to be a great hunter. Let's go and get some sleep so that we will be ready for tomorrow's hunt."

We are relieved from our post and enter the cave. There are twenty five members of our band and they have small tents that encircle a fire. We huddle under our small deer skin tent to stay dry from the water that drips from the ceiling. There, I cuddle with my family to stay warm from the cold that is trapped in the cave and fall asleep while watching the fire dance.

We wake up before dawn so that we can reach the fields before the deer leave. The fire died during the night but the smoke still lingers in the air. Before my son and I leave to hunt the deer, my wife and my daughter leave us to gather nuts, berries, and fruits. They like to store these foods in pits to preserve them so that we can eat them another time.

Ten or fifteen of us gather along the edge of the woods and spy on the deer. Thirty deer grazing along a small ridge, and not knowing that we wait in ambush, they walk toward us. We choose a member of our hunting party to dress up in a deer skin so that he can blend in with the herd. A buck challenges our decoy and charges at him. Before he reaches our friend, we jump out of the woods with our atlatls and spears. We hurl our darts at the buck, killing him in seconds. This is our first kill of the day; hopefully, we will have at least three more before the moon comes out.

After the hunt, we share the meat with each family. My wife digs a pit out of the cave floor and places a small piece of deer skin in the hole. Then she pours water into the deer skin and puts some stones in the fire. When the stones are hot, she places them into the water to make it boil. When the water starts to boil, my wife places the deer meat in it. The deer meat is tender and juicy and we will be able to live on this meat for days to come.

The next morning, my son and I leave the shelter and walk up the mountainside to some oak trees. Although there are many oak trees in the forest, these are the trees with acorns that the squirrels like. My son and I have seen squirrels in these trees before and we find them here again today. I have brought my hollowed out stick made from river cane and I have several darts ready to blow through it. My son sees a squirrel peeking around the trunk of a tree and he moves around the tree to confuse the squirrel. As my son moves to the far side of the tree, the squirrel decides to move around the trunk of the tree and stay hidden from my son. But now the squirrel is where I can easily see it and my dart whizzes through the air, striking the squirrel in the neck. Soon, my son runs over to pick up the dead squirrel. I realize, as we stand there together that my son is growing up and I am proud of him. He understands how we can hunt better as a team. Someday he will be a hunter, and perhaps, even a leader of our band.

While we hunt squirrels, thousands of passenger pigeons fly overhead turning the sky as black as my little girl's hair. They land close to the cave and we run back to help our small band net the pigeons. There are so many pigeons that when they land, the trees are full. Sometimes there are so many on a branch, it snaps and some of the pigeons flutter to the ground. My wife and daughter toss a vine net over some of the birds, and my son throws any stones he can find. After gathering these creatures, my wife and daughter walk up to the cave to pull the feathers off the birds and prepare them for cooking.

My son comes into the shelter proudly holding three pigeons in one hand and a squirrel in the other. Our good fortune will add many days to our food supply.

The next morning, my wife and I walk out of the shelter, leaving our children sleeping. We hike up the mountain side, looking for buckeye trees. When we find one, I climb up the tree and knock down many of the nuts. My wife picks them up and places them in her river cane basket. After collecting the buckeyes, we walk back to the cave to wake up our children. Then we are going to the big stream to fish.

We force our way through the dense river cane that is along the big stream. We discover a small pool beside the waterway. My wife hands me a buckeye and I use a rock to crack it into several pieces. I pick up a piece of the nut and place it in the water. My family and I stare into the water waiting for our food but nothing happens. Then I pick up another piece of the nut and place it in the water but nothing happens. My wife gives me another buckeye and I crack it and place the whole nut in the water. Soon, fish float to the top of the pool. My children jump in the shallow water and gather our dinner for us. My wife places the fish in her cane basket. We walk back home and share our food with the other members of our band. That night, everybody eats fish with leftover passenger pigeons, and squirrel.

The week of the big moon, my daughter and my wife explore the woods to gather my favorite food, muscadines. While they hike back down the mountain, my daughter discovers an orphan dog. Instead of leaving it alone, my wife allows the dog to follow them. We take this creature in and give it some left over squirrel.

My son and I train the dog to help track rabbits and squirrels. As the dog matures, he becomes an excellent hunter. On one trip, we track and kill fifteen rabbits.

One day, the dog places his nose to the ground, then raises his head, and barks. Then he gallops off into the forest. We find him at a tree, standing on his hind legs, and clawing on the tree's bark and howling toward its limbs. My son and I look up to discover a mountain lion resting on a limb.

My son grabs the dog around his neck, pulling him off the tree. With all his strength, my boy picks up the dog and carries him on his shoulders to stop this brave canine from harassing this massive cat.

At the cave, we gather the men around the fire. We tell them about the lion that we saw. Lions have not been in this area for years and we wonder if this mountain lion will propose a threat to our band. Since I'm the only one who has seen a lion, I volunteer to lead a small hunting party to kill it.

My son and I huddle around a fire in the middle of the night. He wants to go with me on this hunt.

"Father, I want to kill the lion so that I can have a powerful necklace like yours."

"No, it's too dangerous for you. It is alright for you to come along but you will not attack the lion."

In the morning, we gather at the cave's entrance with our atlatls and spears and then we walk to where my son and I saw the mountain lion. We follow its tracks over the mountain to another cave. I tell my son to stay back as we cautiously move down to the opening. With our atlatls ready, we slowly look inside; but the mountain lion isn't there. The small cave is empty.

Suddenly, the lion comes out of the forest behind us. Its ears are laid back and its head is held low with its teeth bared in a growl. It charges us at a full run. The lion had circled around as we approached its lair and now my son is in danger. He turns with his atlatl ready. He slings a dart at the mountain lion but he is too fast and his aim is poor. The dart flies wide and the beast pounces on him. The coyote dashes forward to protect the boy but a single swipe of the feline monster's paw slams the pup into a tree where it falls and goes limp. The lion grabs my son by the neck and shakes him violently. My atlatl dart is in my hand and I rush in stabbing the great beast. The other men rush in but the lion is already staggered as I stab it repeatedly. Soon the lion falls and I run to my son. He lies there, still. He does not move, he does not cry out. I stare into his eyes and I know the life force has left him.

We cut the lion's teeth out and make a necklace. Then we sadly place it around my son's neck. We pick him up and carry him and the dog to the cave. There, we bury them in the cave's floor so that they will be with us the rest of our lives. When we bury our dog we place a spear point by his body since he was a good hunting dog.

My lineage ends with my son's death. Winter comes and goes and sometime during the spring, the band leaves the cave walks back to the big stream (Tennessee River) and to another season of life.

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