

**Notice: This chapter has been heavily abridged and is merely a sampler.  
For the complete text, see the book. Copyright © 2009 Greg Brick.**

## **The Medieval Temples of Mushroom Valley**

**“A whole economy and countless legends lie locked from view inside those rustic cliffs.”  
Oliver Towne**

Mushroom Valley, in St. Paul, according to the boast, was the largest mushroom-growing center west of Pennsylvania, or alternatively, west of Chicago. Sometimes it was called the mushroom capital of the Midwest. The mushrooms were grown in the more than 50 sandstone caves that punctuated the bluffs. Although called caves, they were artificial, often beginning as silica mines, and subsequently used for mushroom growing, and other purposes. I will call them caves here, however, because the phrase “mushroom mine” is not good usage and presents its own problems.

The name “Mushroom Valley” was the informal name for a several-mile stretch of the Mississippi River gorge, from South Wabasha Street to Pickerel Lake, and on one side of the river only. Used in the broadest sense, Mushroom Valley is divided into three distinct segments: Plato Boulevard, Water Street, and Joy Avenue. Each segment has its own distinct flavor. The Plato segment, incorporating what had been the cave-riddled Channel Street before a 1970 replatting changed the area, is capped by Prospect Terrace with its historic houses and magnificent views of the city. Most of these caves are filled with flammable wooden debris, discussed later. The Water Street segment, running right along the river and under the High Bridge, had by far the largest caves, forming a labyrinth extending under Cherokee Park. The Joy Avenue segment, now vacated, can still be seen where an unmarked dirt road runs through the woods in Lilydale Park. While most of these caves are very short—root cellars and such—Joy Avenue is book-ended by large caves, Mystic Caverns at its eastern end, and Echo Cave, at its western end. Named after its namesake acoustic effects, Echo Cave was dug for silica by the St. Paul Brick Company and gated as a bat hibernaculum by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources in 1989. More than any other cave in the valley, Echo Cave seemed stuck in a time warp, providing silica right up to the end. Beyond that are the brick company’s claypits in the Decorah Shale, a bizarre industrial landscape but the city’s premier ice-climbing venue because of the spring-water seeping from the cliffs.

The Mushroom Valley caves had been considered for bomb shelters during World War II, well before the Pearl Harbor attack. In the early 1960s they were surveyed by a local firm, TKDA, for suitability as fallout shelters, producing the maps that we have today. Generalizing from the TKDA survey, the typical cave is a straight, horizontal passage about 150 feet long, but often connected by cross-cuts to similar caves on either side, creating network mazes with multiple entrances. A cave operated by the Becker Sand & Mushroom Company was the largest of all, with 35-foot ceilings and nearly a mile of passages, its wonderful hybrid name capturing the chief dual usage seen throughout the valley.

Not all the former sand mines were used for mushroom growing. Examination of city directories, insurance atlases, and real estate plats allowed me to reconstruct a fuller picture of the diversity of people and businesses that inhabited Mushroom Valley. These sources reveal what each of the caves was used for, as it is fairly easy to correlate each street address with a particular cave entrance. It is not the purpose of this book, however, to cover in detail all of these varied uses. In this chapter I will focus on the three chief uses of the Mushroom Valley caves: mushroom gardening, the aging of blue cheese, and as places of entertainment, especially nightclubs. Another major cave-related industry in Mushroom Valley, brewing, has already been

**Notice: This chapter has been heavily abridged and is merely a sampler.  
For the complete text, see the book. Copyright © 2009 Greg Brick.**

described in a previous chapter in the context of Yoerg's lagering caves. Others included Bruggemann's Brewery, and some very short-lived, obscure ones. Finally, I will briefly discuss the dark cloud that has hung over Mushroom Valley in recent decades owing to injuries and death in the abandoned caves.