

# The “Cave Lady”

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by *John DeRosier*

Married to Wilbur Phillips with five children, Violet Leigh lived in a cave on the south bank of the Eau Claire River. That was in August 1917 and the cave is still there, right across the river from the old Uniroyal building. Because trees, leaves and branches block its view, it would be best to wait until late autumn or winter if you want to see the cave. A word of caution, please don't try and climb down the bank to get a closer look, it just isn't safe.



Violet had talent. She wrote poetry and in 1915 she appeared in a literary and musical program in the Osseo Theater. We don't know her real name; Violet Leigh was her pen name, and her articles were often published in the *Voice of the People*, 1910-1917.

We do know that Wilbur was a music teacher but not too productive on the 9-5 side. Consequently, rent money was not available so the family took up residence in the cave, originally built or made by one Robert Hantzch, who had used it to cool beer. The family lived there until February 1918 when a sanity hearing was held, and Violet was declared insane. She was 49 years old at the time. Her youngest child was 15 years old. Violet's 76-year-old mother also lived with them; she refused to leave when the ambulance came for Violet. We also know that Violet was the eldest daughter.

The “home” was equipped with an old boiler that had a fire going to keep the mosquitoes away. It had some furniture (just the basics), a carpet and a flagpole with the flag was out front. She used a curtain to divide the cave into two rooms. Violet was reputed to have had several love affairs, or so it was said during her sanity hearing. They included an affair with a married man from Eau Claire, another with a minister from Altoona, a third with a physician from Madison and a fourth with a physician from Mendota.

Sent to Mendota after the hearing, Violet returned to Eau Claire next year to see her mother. Just how long she had stayed at Mendota is not known. Meanwhile, her husband and eldest son got 90 days of manual labor, apparently under the Huber Law. Violet got married around 1913. Her mother suggested it. But the newly married husband found marriage to Violet somewhat unsettling and left, claiming his bride had “bees in her bonnet.” It seems that Violet left soon after that, only to return a year and a half later. Two days later she gave birth, but the baby died. By then the husband had started divorce proceedings but that was all. Even though the divorce had not been finalized, the husband had remarried, and he was charged with bigamy. Was he the music teacher first introduced at the beginning of this article? It's doubtful, and we may never know for sure.

In 1928 a poem written by Violet Leigh, Madison, appeared in the Eau Claire papers. Nothing else has since been submitted by her. As to her children, no one knows what happened to them.