

Few Permitted to Visit the Mosque of Abraham

REV. F. C. STIFLER SEES FAMED SPOT IN HEBRON

Abdel Hammuri Leads Tourists
Through Spacious Aisles to
View Cenotaphs

"In Abraham's City" is the title the Rev. Francis Carr Stifler, pastor of Wilmette Baptist church, gives his seventh article describing the wonders of the Holy Land, which he recently visited. It is a story teeming with interest.

By REV. FRANCIS CARR STIFLER

TO cool one's heels in the office of an American consul seven thousand miles from home is not quite as lonesome as to do it in a purchasing agent's office in Chicago. For there is lots to see that looks strange and new. The "office boy" is an Arab with flowing mustache and flowing robes. When the telephone rings and the American clerk lifts it off the hook you wonder where they make telephones that can carry such a strange language as that clerk speaks.

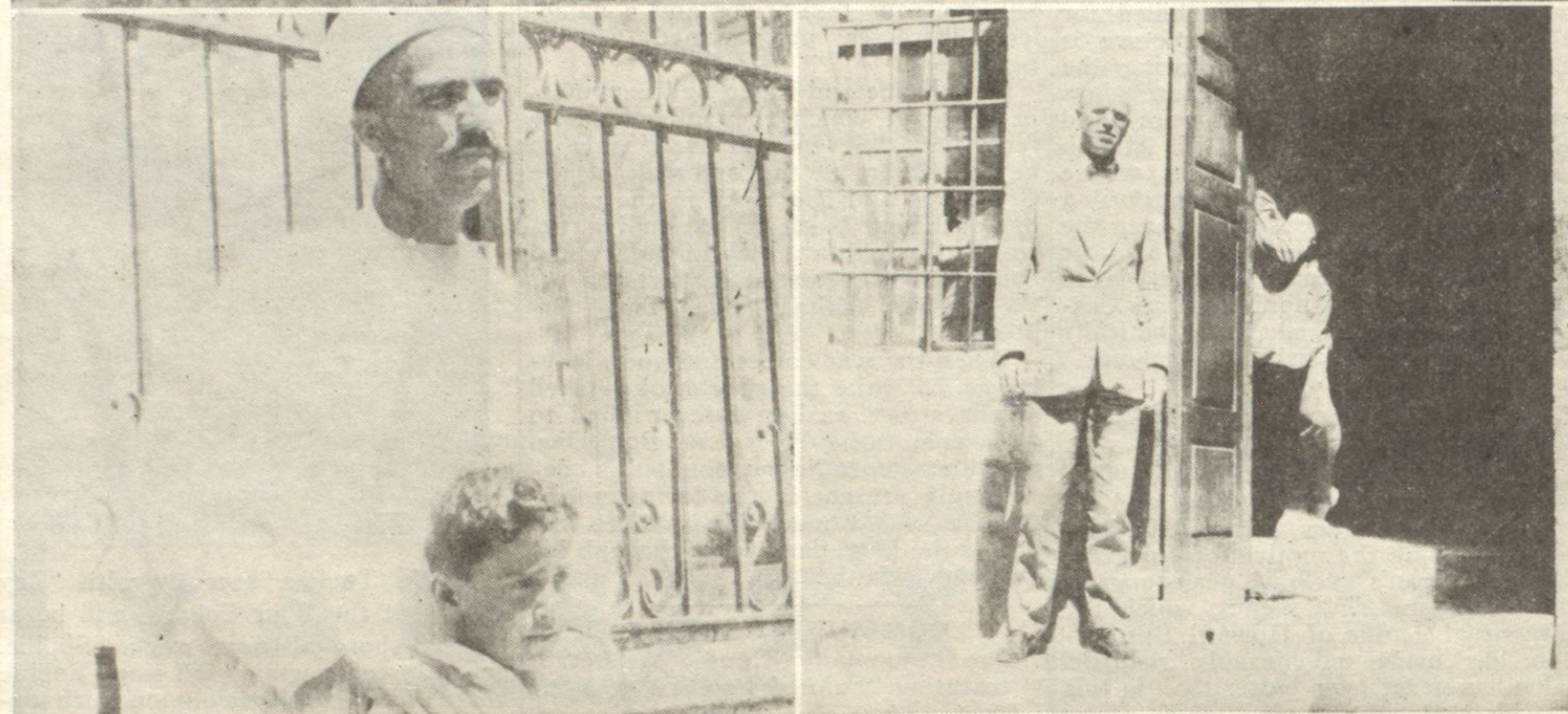
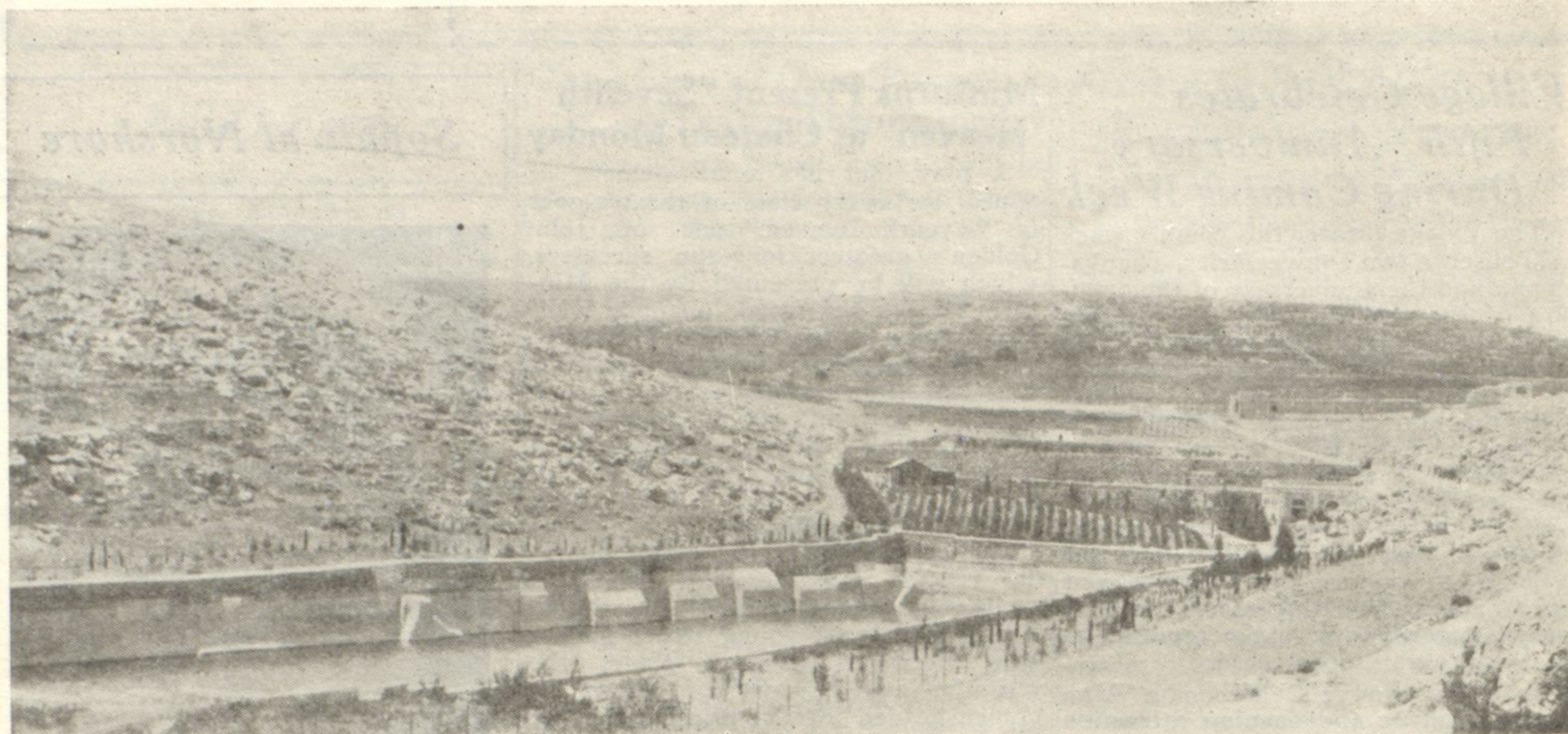
And then the very place itself is strange. It is outside the walls of the City of Jerusalem. The approach is through a beautifully kept garden. There are benches under the trees of the garden and they are full of people—almost a hundred men and boys are waiting there. We guessed what they were waiting for—a ticket to America. The immigration law allows an annual quota of about 100 from Palestine. There were more than 1900 on the waiting list this summer. Part of these had nothing better to do than hang around the embassy.

Difficult Place to Enter

The building was both the office and residence of Oscar S. Heizer, our American Consul. The business quarters occupied the first floor where as many, I should say, as a dozen clerks and secretaries were working. At the rear on the second floor was Mr. Heizer's private office which was most homelike and comfortable. The living quarters occupied the other space upstairs. The house was like every house in Jerusalem, built of solid stone. Its walls and partitions were fully a foot in thickness. This made it very cool in summer time, but never damp. There is no dampness there in summertime.

We were there to get a permit to the Mosque of Abraham. This is the place most difficult to enter in all Palestine, for Christian tourists. Before the war, no Jew or Christian had entered since 1187 except the Prince of Wales, (afterward Edward, VII) and Dean Stanley in 1862. But since the British Occupation the Moslem Supreme Council has been persuaded to allow a maximum of ten visitors a week to enter the mosque. We secured the permits and this is the story.

On Thursday, August 4, we left Jerusalem very early, motoring south past Bethlehem, the Pools of Solomon and El Arrub. From these latter places the British are now pumping fresh spring water to Jerusalem. After an hour's run we reached the city of Hebron. Next to Jerusalem it is the most important of all the cities of Old Testament times. It is a very ancient city. It was there when Abraham came out of Ur of the Chaldees. It



was there that Abraham purchased from the natives a burying ground for himself and his clan. It was there that Joseph went north toward Shechem to find his brothers with their flocks.

It was to Hebron that the brothers having sold Joseph to a caravan of Egyptian merchants, returned with the blood-stained coat of many colors. It was there that David reigned for seven years over Judah before he became for 33 more years the ruler of all Israel. Absalom was born there and it was there he tried to set up a rival kingdom against his father, David. Hebron is a city full of thrilling happenings in Old Testament times.

Just a Mohammedan City

But Hebron is now a Mohammedan city. Out of its 17,000 people none are Christians and only 450 Jews. It is a prosperous city, we are told, but it hardly looks it. Its streets are narrow and dirty. Its women are forlorn with their black robes and heavy veils. Its shops are open to the air and the goods are covered with flies. So much and little more can Mohammedans do for any city.

We went there because the Mosque of Abraham is there. Why a mosque for Abraham? A question fair enough. And here is the answer. In almost every sacred place in Palestine the tourist will be shown evidences of ancient interest, then maybe remains of Roman building upon it, then possibly some further building done there in the time of Constantine or Justinian, the first great Christian emperors. The next stratum will be that of the Arab invasion, then a rebuilding by the Crusaders and finally a surmounting

The pictures: The pools and gardens of Solomon on Hebron Road (top)—Abdel Hafez Hammuri, Superintendent of Abraham's Mosque, Hebron, and his son (lower left). The Rev. Francis Carr Stifler at the cave of Machpelah, Hebron (lower right).

structure from the days of the mighty Saladin, Mohammedan.

The Temple Area in Jerusalem reveals almost all of these strata. There the Mosque of Omar stands above where Solomon's and Herod's temples stood. In some cases older buildings were not destroyed by each fresh conqueror but remodelled and re-adapted to his use. That is true of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem which may fairly be called the oldest Christian church in Palestine, since it has never really been destroyed since first built in the early fourth century.

Mosque of Abraham Remodeled

The Mosque of Abraham in Hebron is one of these remodellings. It is an old Crusaders' church built over the cave of Machpelah. This cave was bought about 4000 years ago as a burying ground for Abraham when he first came out of Ur of the Chaldees to seek a new home. The transaction in all its detail is given in the Book of Genesis. The records of the interments in this cemetery-cave are also given in detail in the Old Testament record. First Sarah, Abraham's wife, was buried there. Then Abraham himself, then Isaac and his wife, Rebecca, then Leah, Jacob's wife and finally

Jacob's embalmed body was brought by Joseph, his youngest son, then Prime Minister of Egypt, up to the old family burying ground. So there were these patriarchs buried. It is an authentic site and a holy place indeed for any lover of the Bible to set foot.

When we alighted from our automobiles in the center of the city, we were led up a narrow steep alley-way with many angles and many turns until we came to the door of the Mosque. Our guide knocked and an old man with white beard and gray robe answered. Our permits were given him and while he was gone with them, other old men appeared to fit our shoes with sandals. Soon the Superintendent of the Mosque, Abdel Hafez Hammuri, was on the scene. He was to the manner born, a gentleman. He greeted us in English and to our surprise was most cordial. We followed through the spacious aisles of the mosque. The old church pews had been removed. The floor was heavily carpeted. The walls were lined with ancient marble to a height of six feet.

Cenotaph of Each Worthy

The ancient nave and transepts and chancel were readily discernible. On each of three sides were two chapels and in each chapel the cenotaph of one of the worthies of the Bible story. Here was Abraham and Sarah, here Isaac and Rebecca, here Jacob and Leah. Each cenotaph was covered heavily with green silk wrought with gold. Beneath our feet was the rock covering the cave. A lantern was let down through a crevice by which we could see the cavernous depths of

(Continued on Page 59)