

# The History of Cherokee Caverns, Part 2

By: D. Ray Smith | *Historically Speaking* | The Oak Ridger | August 14, 2007

Last week we introduced the history of Cherokee Caverns, a historic cave with most unusual formations and unique features found in few caves. We chronicled the early history of the cave dating back to the American Indians and noted the first time it was opened for public access. This week we continue the history of this beautiful historic cavern in our community.

In the late 1960s a restaurant was built over the entrance to the cave and operated until fire destroyed the restaurant, gift shop and cottage in October 1980. The last time I visited the cave before recently was during the fall of 1980, just before the fire. I recalled the many formations and the beauty of the flowstone and crystals. When I went on the special photo tour during this year's "Cool Down in the Cave" event, I recalled with fond memories my last visit there when our two boys were still at home and we went often to such places as a family.



Jim Whidby stands by the 'Historic Cherokee Caverns' sign near the entrance to the cave

As mentioned last week, this cave has some of the most diverse formations of any cave. Unfortunately, from 1980 until 1989 the cave was heavily damaged through vandalism after public access was stopped and the cave was left unprotected for several years. What a shame! The formations destroyed by vandals in a matter of a few years can not be replaced. Remember, cave formations are created at an approximate growth rate of one cubic inch in 125 years! So, the actions of a few very stupid people destroyed beautiful objects that took nature hundreds, even thousands and in some cases millions of years to create.

In 1989, the first Haunted Cave was held. It was a resounding success. Along with that effort, local cavers (spelunkers) who are members of the National Speleological Society began an 18-year vigil and implemented protective actions to prevent future damage. Jim Whidby is leading this effort.

The following more specific details of the history of Cherokee Caverns is taken from the history section of the Web site: [www.cherokeecaverns.net](http://www.cherokeecaverns.net) :

"The caverns began forming about 300 million years ago. Shells and skeletons of ancient marine life mixed with sand, clay, and other material to form the Copper Ridge Dolomite rock. This occurred in an inland sea, which covered the area at that time. Ancient earthquakes created cracks in the dolomite rock, as the inland sea gradually receded the water enlarged the cracks to form the caverns. Ground water, acquiring a small amount of carbonic acid from the air and vegetation on the surface, dissolves the dolomite rock as it works its way into the caverns.

"As this water drips and flows within the cavity of the cave it leaves a very small amount of dissolved rock on the cavern ceiling, walls and floor, gradually creating the cave formations known as speleothems.

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Soda straws, stalactites, stalagmites, columns, flowstone, are only a few of the beautiful speleothems found in the caverns.



The formation straddles the earthquake fault line - note the shift of approximately four inches

“The caverns were first entered by early American Indians as indicated by cane torch marks (stoke marks) found on the caverns walls. The caverns were rediscovered about 1854 by Robert Crudington, a farmer.

“According to legend, Crudington was hunting on the hillside when he noticed fog emerging around rocks. After moving the rocks he entered the caverns and at the time was thought to have been the first person to see the caverns. In 1866 Crudington bought 800 acres of farmland, including the caverns.

“Crudington’s daughter, Margaret Crudington Gentry, was urged by friends to open the caverns to the public. In 1929 the first commercial tours were given under the name Gentry’s Cave, but within a year she renamed it Grand Caverns. The caverns were well advertised and were well visited by many people. In 1946 Margaret passed away and her family sold the caverns in 1947.

“The property and cave was leased resulting in it being renamed Atomic Caverns. This name came from a large stalagmite column, which was thought to resemble the bottom of the “mushroom” of the famous Bikini Atomic test, which was heavily publicized during that time.

“During this period of time Homer Harris, known as the world’s tallest singing cowboy, along with his famous performing trick horse, Stardust, held a one-day western music show in the Crystal Ballroom of

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the caverns. A second show was held outside the caverns entrance. Admission was, adults 75 cents and children 35 cents, for both shows.

"In the mid-1950s the caverns were redeveloped once again and opened with the name Caveman's Palace, but after a short time the name was changed to Palace Caverns. In the 1960s much improvement was made to the cavern trail and lighting.

"A restaurant was built over the cavern entrance and the cave was reopened with a new sixth name, Caverns of The Ridge. In 1970, the caverns underwent further development, and once again, were given a new name, Cherokee Firesite Ceremonial Caverns. This unusually long name was soon changed to its eighth and current name of Cherokee Caverns.

"In October 1980 Cherokee Caverns Restaurant was destroyed by a fire believed to have begun in the kitchen area. The fire destroyed the restaurant, the gift shop and the adjoining stone cottage, which had been built in the late 1800s. During the next eight years the caverns experienced extensive vandalism and became the local 'party' place.

The Web site history ends with "Check back soon for the rest of the story!" So, there is obviously more history to tell and the efforts being taken to preserve the cave are creating history every day.

During the past years, the caverns have experienced major improvements to the original tourist trails. Today, the cave is one of the best tourist "show" caves in the area and continuing to improve. The trails are smooth and wide making for easy access.

Robert Hamm (Hamm Landscaping) joined Jim and has spent thousands of hours removing obstacles, as well as widening and leveling the original trails to make the caverns handicapped-accessible. Robert is the official "caverns engineer." Most commercial (show caves) are not handicapped-accessible; nature just didn't make them that way. Today people in wheelchairs do not have a problem touring Cherokee Caverns.

In addition to being open for the Haunted Cave event at Halloween and the one-day event in the summer, Jim Whidby will give guided tours to groups of 12 or more by appointment. A sign at the cave states, "Cherokee Caverns is now being developed into a non-profit educational center. Donations to this effort are greatly appreciated. For information concerning special group tours contact Jim Whidby, a member of the National Speleological Society, by e-mail at [cherokeecaverns@aol.com](mailto:cherokeecaverns@aol.com).

Jim and I agreed to meet Saturday, Aug. 4, to photograph the cave's extensive formations. We spent four hours in the cave photographing unique and unusual formations. Jim told me much about the cave during the afternoon. What a treat that was! I can hardly wait for my next opportunity to continue photographing the cave.

One of the most unusual things Jim showed me was the earthquake fault line in the middle of the ceiling in the large room near the back of the cave. It has a chert pod formation that straddled the fault line. The formation was split by the earthquake and is clearly shifted approximately four inches.

Isn't it amazing the interesting things I learn about local history and the special folks I meet as I pursue stories to publish in *Historically Speaking*! Jim Whidby is a most knowledgeable individual when it comes to caves. He knows all the formations and understands cave formation like no one I have ever met.

We still want to take more photographs of the formations. We just got started when our time ran out. We are going to try again later. Jim wants to set up the camera and use a flash to create extensive "light paintings." I look forward to that adventure.

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Cherokee Caverns is an excellent example of a unique community asset. Jim's desire to protect the cave and also to allow access by all is certainly an admirable and challenging endeavor. His optimism is catching. He has several people working with him. He told me about film companies that had filmed at the cave, including Bill Landry's Heartland Series and a film company specializing in movies about caves. He is also working with some local radio personalities who help mostly with the Halloween Haunted Cave.

Jim is a special person and is dedicated to the preservation of Cherokee Caverns. I am glad I got to meet him and look forward to more interaction with him in the future.