

Cherokee Caverns, Part 1

By: D. Ray Smith | *Historically Speaking* | The Oak Ridger | August 7, 2007

The next two weeks will feature the history of a local tourist attraction, the Cherokee Caverns, including the changes in the name and other aspects of the attraction during the past 78 years since it first opened to the public. We will conclude with a look at what is being done to assure the protection and future access to a unique and beautiful part of our community.

Just across the Clinch River through Solway, about two miles southeast, is a historic cave system. It is located just north of the Oak Ridge Highway going toward Karns. The cave has a storied past and a fairly recent string of senseless vandalism.

More importantly, it has a recent past and present of beloved stewardship and a hopeful future of community service. Jim Whidby is taking great care to protect the Cherokee Caverns. He has a treasure in his care and is taking great pains to assure future generations are able to experience the wonder of Cherokee Caverns.

I met Jim for the first time this year on July 14. I learned of the one-day opportunity to visit Cherokee Caverns through newspaper articles that mentioned the “Cool Down in the Cave” annual event. Jim held this event for the first time last year, on July 15, and had over 800 people attend. He hoped for over 1,000 this year and from the looks of the crowd when I was there, he certainly got that and more.

The annual tour is free, but donations of \$5 are suggested. It is well worth that and a lot more. I asked if I could take some photographs and was given a personal tour to allow me the time to take the photos without holding up others who were touring.

Scott Dixon took me to the cave and pointed out the various formations. He held the flashlight to help me focus my camera. I really enjoyed talking to Scott and quickly became aware of his devotion to the cave. This was reinforced when I attempted to pay him for his time and he insisted I put the money in the donation can for the cave.

Jim also opens the cave on Halloween when it is outfitted with various scary images and harrowing experiences created by air pressure and other simple and not-so-simple means. He described two of them to me. One is a “vortex” created by hitting a drum head that forces a circle of air about 60 feet that can be felt striking one with substantial force. The other is a rattlesnake that rattles on command, again by air pressure. I also saw a realistic “devil’s head” inside the cave.

Over the years since the cave has been operated by various individuals it has undergone several name changes. In all, Jim knows of eight names the cave has had over the years.

In 1929, it was known as Gentry’s Cave when Margaret Crugdington Gentry first opened the cave to the public. She was the daughter of Robert Crugdington, the person who in 1854 discovered the cave. He was not the first to find the cave. Early American Indians had been there long before him. However, he was the first white settler to stumble upon it. He later bought the property that contained the cave.



Beautiful flowstone in Cherokee Caverns with the ‘devil’ set nearby waiting for the next annual Haunted Cave adventure

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In 1931, the name was changed to Grand Caverns. The cave operated under this name and continued to give public access for the next 16 years.

In 1947, the name was changed to Atomic Caverns. The timing might suggest the name was changed because of the close proximity to Oak Ridge, but Jim assures me that was not the case. He said the name was chosen because of a formation in the cave that looked like the lower portion of the mushroom cloud of an atomic bomb explosion in the atmosphere.

Next the cave was named Caveman's Palace in the 1950s. Then late in the 1950s the name was again changed to Palace Caverns.

In the 1960s, the name was changed yet again to Caverns of the Ridge, and in 1970 the name Cherokee Firesite Ceremonial Caverns was given to the cave to honor the Cherokee use of the cave before it was discovered by the Crugdington in 1854.

Finally in 1971 the present name of Cherokee Caverns was chosen. This name has lasted the longest of any of the names given this beautiful and ancient cave. Formations such as exquisite examples of columns, soda straws, stalactites, stalagmites, flowstone, slanted stalactites, twisted soda straws, anthodites, helictites, mud cones or mud volcanoes, and chert pods are among the numerous unique and beautiful aspects of Cherokee Caverns.

This past Saturday, I was fortunate enough to get to go back to Cherokee Caverns and photograph many of the most unusual formations I have ever seen in a cave. There were soda straws that have grown sideways – explain that! There is even one that is an upside down question mark!

Jim also showed me how some of the formations that were clear to white quartz will hold light after being exposed to strobe light flashes. For about 10-15 seconds after being exposed to intense light, the



Unusual cave formation – a soda straw that has grown in the shape of an upside down question mark

formation gives off an eerie light green glow. He says it amazes groups of school kids who come to the cave. The explanation of why this happens is quite technical, but basically is because the formations have layers of varying density within them that hold the light waves for a few seconds.

We also saw the alligator that is a formation hanging at an odd angle from the ceiling. The Capital Dome is the largest formation in the cave and is difficult to capture in a photograph to show the massive size of the whole flowstone. Then there is the huge Peace Pipe formation that is lying on its side with later formations forming the bowl of the pipe.

The mud volcanoes are most unusual formations. They have formed on top of a large layer of clay that is several feet thick. The water dripping from soda straws softens the clay and pressure from beneath the softened spot forces the clay up into a cone shape that resembles a volcano. The water stands in the center of the volcano-like structure, soaking the clay softening it even more, and thus the volcano grows over time.

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Then there is the “slab of bacon” which is a curtain formation that when lit from behind looks exactly like a strip of bacon. Also, there is the chert pod that lies on a fault line where an earthquake many years ago shifted the rock about four inches, breaking the formation in half and leaving one half of it on one side of the fault and the rest on the other. This fault line runs the entire length of a huge room. There are huge rocks on the floor that obviously came from the breakdown resulting from the earthquake.

Finally, there is the bear skull that was found 23 inches down in the clay floor of the large room in the back of the main cave. Jim says this bear skull is likely the result of bears using the cave as a den. He has asked the University of Tennessee to help identify the bear and to determine what the most likely time when the bear died in the cave. He expects it to be very old.

This unique and beautiful cave in our community is certainly an historical treasure worth preserving. The bats that can be found in the far reaches of the cave and in the holes in the ceiling are also special features of the cave. Some of them collect water droplets that cover their entire bodies while they hibernate. Would I love to get a photograph of that!

And we did not even get into the upper portion of the cave. That will be where we will do the light painting next. I am looking forward to more opportunities to photograph the unique formations and to create some photographs that include whole rooms of the cave through light painting.

Next week we will look at more unusual aspects of the Cherokee Caverns.