

# **Marshall Andy and Cherokee Caverns**

**(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on September 1, 2009)**

On Saturday, August 1, 2009, Jim Whidby held his semiannual Cherokee Caverns open to the public tours – “Cool Down in the Cave.” 640 individuals enjoyed the grand experience of seeing the 300 million years old formations. Jim does a tremendous job of protecting this most special and unique cave system.

You may recall that for years Cherokee Caverns was also the “Haunted Cave” and was open to huge crowds around Halloween each year. Jim held the last haunted cave adventure in 2008 and does not plan to continue that approach into the future. Rather the cave system is now being used to promote preservation of the cave features and to the education of the public and professional cave explorers.

Jim now holds caving workshops and educational tours regularly. These excellent training programs are held in one of the most accessible yet exotic caverns with a wide array of unusual cave features found anywhere. Because of the intense interest of the public and Jim's desires to educate everyone to the wonders of underground caverns, he continues to create unique learning experiences for both experienced and novice cave explorers.

“Warm up in the cave” in February and “Cool down in the cave” in August remain the mainstays of the public access. Additionally, he will give special group tours by special arrangement for groups of 12 or more.

Granted, many of the people touring the public access portion of the cave on Saturday failed to appreciate that startling age of what they were seeing, they only saw beautiful shapes and unusual flow stones, some that have developed seemingly in defiance of gravity. How does a stalagmite grow on an angle, or a stalactite grow in an upward slant, when the only way either of them can grow is for water to drip from the ceiling?

Each time I visit Cherokee Caverns and take photographs I am again amazed at the enormous variety of formations and the most unusual growth patterns I have ever seen in any cave system. You can see my latest photos at: <https://cid-465e8525eded80a6.skydrive.live.com/browse.aspx/Cherokee%20Caverns%20-%208-1-09>

On Saturday, I was privileged to get to take a personal tour of the cave with Jim and Marshall Andy Smalls. You know who that is, right? He is the cowboy Marshal Andy, aka Andy Smalls, who is Knoxville's greatest singing cowboy. And he has been for the last 30-plus years!

The Marshal Andy character started out in the Tennessee Valley Fair in 1971. Marshal Andy has appeared on numerous television ads and radio spots. Marshal Andy, in 1983, began hosting the old cowboy movie showcase Riders of the Silver Screen.

He can be found on public television dressed in full early Hollywood cowboy regalia and joined by film historian Dan Calhoun and Rawhide Ray. Smalls also plays bass in the Riders of the Silver Screen Band. Marshal Andy continues to host old B Western movies and cowboy serials every Saturday morning on public television affiliates WSJK and WKOP.

But on this Saturday, Marshall Andy was telling me the story of his involvement with this very cave, Cherokee Caverns. He is a great storyteller and he soon had his small audience spellbound with his knowledge about this particular cave.

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While we were preparing to venture into the cave, Marshall Andy began to tell stories about the time when he was marketing manager for what is now Cherokee Caverns. I was amazed to learn about Marshall Andy and his pivotal role in the naming of the caverns.

Andy Smalls, "Marshall Andy," of the *Riders of the Silver Screen* fame, the man who has a cowboy country band and who plays with large bands as well, was sitting on a golf cart with Jim Whidby and having a blast entertaining kids as they passed by. He just stuck his hand out to shake their hand and asked them some question that showed he had noticed something special about them and he sincerely wanted to know them better.

Youngsters were amazed that this 80 year old man would be interested in them. I think this act by Marshall Andy tells us something about our current generation and culture. We are ignoring the children. But not Marshall Andy, he sought out the kids. His eyes were constantly roving the crowd seeking the eyes of children and when he caught one looking, he immediately reached out to them. We could learn from Marshall Andy!

Yes, we buy them video games, toys, and such and we take them to soccer or football practice as well as anything else their little heart's desire...but generally speaking we adults don't talk to children! Have you noticed? If we do talk to them it is usually talking down to them. Not Marshall Andy. He is genuinely interested in everyone he speaks to, especially kids.

Some of the adults there recognized Marshall Andy and rushed over to have their picture taken with him. He dutifully stood at attention and made pictures with everyone who asked. He has done this plenty of times in his long career. The kids, however, did not know him, but quickly saw he was genuinely interested in him. Remember, he did not have on his authentic western outfit, just a broad rimmed hat.

We sat and he told me his story of how he came to be the one who named *Cherokee Caverns*. I knew the cave system had changed names several times over the past several years, but I had no idea who or what had made that happen.

Between Jim Whidby and Marshall Andy, I learned all about the various names for the cave system. The cave systems started out (in historical times as we know them) in 1929 as *Gentry's Cave*. This was the first commercial venture to open the cave to the public. Margaret Crudington Gentry's father, Robert Crudington, in 1854 when he saw fog rising from around some rocks and upon exploring found a cavern beneath the rocks.

In 1931 Margaret changed the name to *Grand Caverns* hoping to give the caverns a more descriptive name. In 1947, after Margaret's death, the cave was sold and the new owners, taking advantage of the huge amount of publicity attached to the explosion of the atomic bomb on the Bikini Atoll renamed the caverns the *Atomic Caverns* because the huge formation near the center of the lower cave that (if you get your mind just right) looks somewhat like the base of the mushroom cloud of the Bikini Atoll atomic bomb.

A side note: Margaret Crudington's grave stone can be seen as you drive through Hardees at Karns and look to the right into the graveyard nearby. The first large tombstone is hers. There is no death date, only a birth date. Jim used to tell folks during the haunted cave weekends that the reason there was not a death date on the stone is that she is still haunting *Cherokee Caverns*.

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Next the cavern was renamed as the *Caveman's Palace* in 1950 and then the *Palace Caverns* in the last 1950's. Caverns of the Ridge came along as the name in the 1960's. Then the longest name *Cherokee Firesite Ceremonial Caverns* was chosen in 1971.

Here is where Marshall Andy, the "Knoxville Cowboy" comes into the picture with regard to the names of the caverns. Marshall Andy was hired to promote the cave. He knew right away that the long name would not do. But first let's see how he came to be in Tennessee.

Andy told me that he had come from New York City where he was working for Ted Turner's father to Knoxville in 1968 working for Ted after Ted's father's death. But Ted soon sold the firm and Andy had to go to Atlanta. But soon he was asked to take a job promoting the Lost Sea caverns.

Andy did this for a while and recalls fondly the time he spent there. Soon he was offered the job of promoting what was then known as *Cherokee Firesite Ceremonial Caverns*. This was in 1973. The new owner had changed the name of the caverns and Andy thought the name was too long to promote effectively. So he shortened it to *Cherokee Caverns* to get a more workable name for advertising and promotion. This name has stayed with the caverns to this day.

Andy also designed the advertising brochure that is proudly displayed by Jim Whidby in his display of the caverns. It was about this same time that Andy Smalls got "Marshall" added to his name.

The name "Marshall Andy" came about during the Tennessee Valley Fair when he was under contract to perform a cowboy show where he was the person getting shot during each show. During one particular show, Andy noticed his hands were bloody and he thought, "I don't have to do this. I can be the one doing the shooting and would not have to fall on my hands so much."

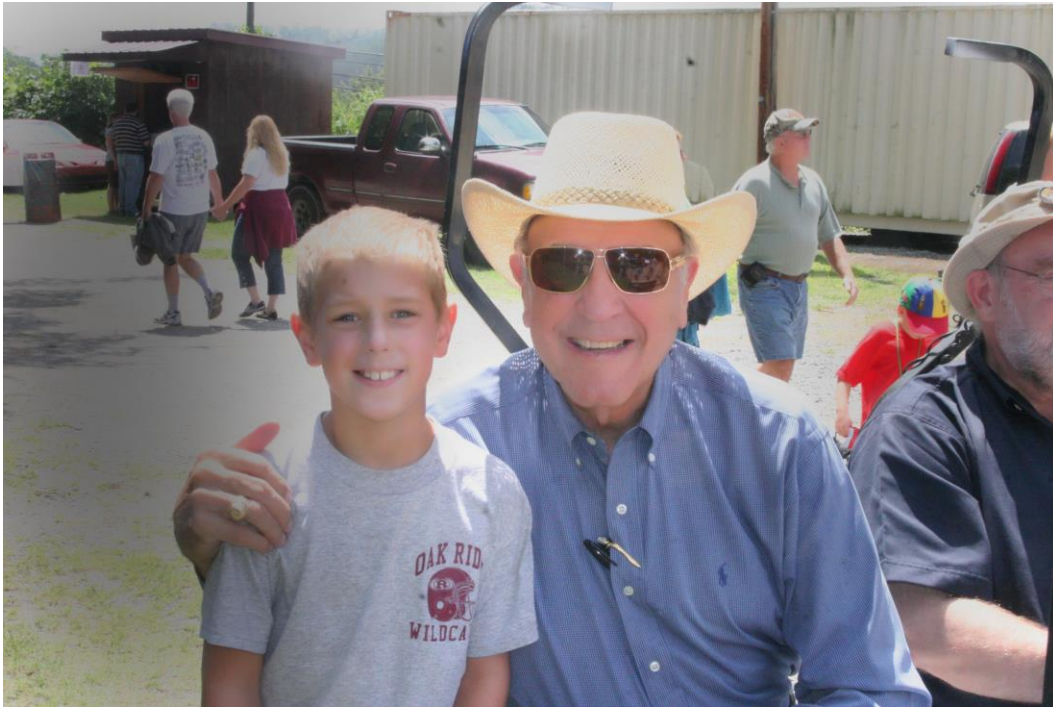
So, he told the man announcing the show that he was going to change the script. Andy wanted to be the one doing the shooting. They decided that would be okay but they now needed a name for Andy that played to that new role of the shooter.

First "Sheriff Andy" was briefly considered, but Andy was afraid that name would be too easily associated with Andy Griffith. So, they settled on "Marshall Andy" and within weeks Andy Smalls was doing commercials as Marshall Andy. It proved to be a very good choice.

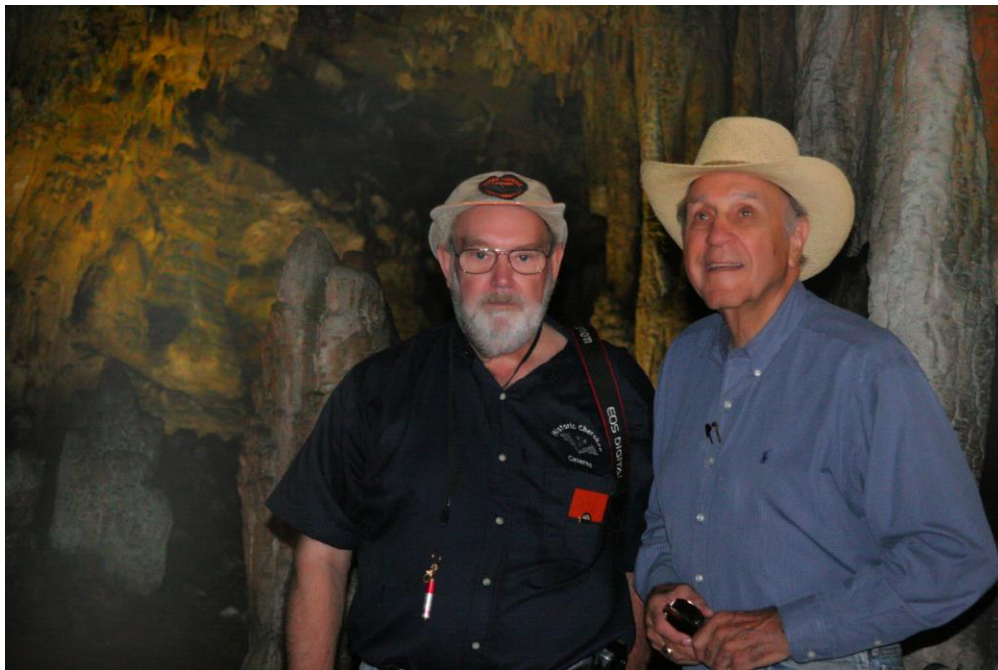
But on this day, Marshall Andy was thinking back to the 1973 when he explored the *Cherokee Caverns* and gave the cave system its lasting name. What a joy it was to be with Jim and Andy as they explored "their" cave once more.

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Marshall Andy Smalls and a new young friend, Matthew Thompson who was touring Cherokee Caverns when the Marshall captured him in a conversation across the generations



Jim Whidby and Marshall Andy Smalls pose near the entrance to the upper cave of the Cherokee Caverns, a cave they both admire and cherish

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Marshall Andy points to the brochure he developed that caused the need to change the name of the cave system to the simpler *Cherokee Caverns*