

trough spring, which my grandmother told me, was where the soldiers watered their horses during the Civil War battle of Wild Cat Mountain.

I can't imagine anyone going away without a backward glance at such a lovely place. I feel the beauty of it all, and I know the good times out weighed the bad. Wild Cat Mountain to me is really a place as close to heaven on earth as any I will ever find. By: Betty Oliver Mauk Submitted by: Sandra L. Botkin, 7369 Hwy. 21 E., Paint Lick, KY 40461

## ROCKCASTLE'S UNDERGROUND WILDERNESS

"Boys, them hills is all holler!"

Asked by us if he knew of any caves nearby, Ott Miller of Dry Fork included the whole countryside before him with a gesture of his arm. Under his chair on the front porch, an orange tabby cat yawned and stretched; out in the yard a beagle dog sat and studied the strangers. The little white house was nestled in a narrow valley, flanked by tree-covered ridges that peaked five hundred feet above the gravel road.

That was in 1969. I was seventeen years old, then, and lived in Lexington. For the past four years, to my mother's dismay, I had shown an unnatural hankering to crawl around in dark holes underground. Nearly every weekend I would be out exploring one of Knetucky's many caves. It was this habit that finally led me to Rockcastle County, to sit with Ott on his front porch and hear tales of his younger days when he, too, had a yen to poke into those dark old holes.

There are many places in Kentucky where caves are found. Nearly half of the state's land area is underlain by limestone rock at or near the surface. A peculiar property of limestone is that it will dissolve in rainwater, for rainwater is very slightly acidic. This is a very slow process, so slow that progress cannot be measured in terms of human lifespans. Over a period of many, many centuries the rainwater that filters down through the soil into the bedrock will enlarge the cracks and crevices in the limestone. Eventually, some crevices will become large enough that people can walk or crawl into them, and these we call caves. These larger openings, however, are only the most visible part of a vast network of underground conduits through which groundwater flows in cave country. Tiny cracks direct water into larger fissures, into still larger ones, to finally mingle in cave streams that ultimately discharge from the hillsides and along the creek and river banks.

Rockcastle County is divided into two parts by a physical feature of the landscape that geographers and geologists call the Cumberland Escarpment. This is an area of transition, from the mountains of the Eastern Coalfield to the gently rolling plains of the Bluegrass. Along this northeast-southwest escarpment (which my dictionary calls a "steep slope") are long ridges separated by narrow valleys. At a casual glance, it doesn't look much like cave country. There are not hundreds of big sinkholes dotting the countryside like so many moon craters, such as can be seen in the Mammoth Cave region and in southern Indiana. There are not huge rivers roaring out of the ground, or swallowed whole, like those in Missouri. But Rockcastle County is cave country, indeed, and famous throughout the Eastern United States for the number and variety of its underground chambers.

Along the edge of the escarpment, sandwiched in the ridges, between the sandstone caprocks and the shales and siltstones of the ridge foundations, are thick beds of limestone. Where the water runs off the sandstone and filters through the soil and the vertical crevices hidden beneath the soil, huge cave systems have developed in this limestone. Almost every

little valley has a spring at its mouth, some small, some large; and hidden away underground behind each spring is a cave system. Not all have openings that a person can go into. Some are blocked by rock rubble and boulders, or by deeply pooled water. But surely as the spring exists, there is some sort of cave behind it.

These springs are found low, down near the valley bottoms. Higher on the ridges can be seen dark openings, where water once flowed but now has sought lower levels. Some of these cave mouths were once springs, centuries ago before the creeks had cut down so far. Some of the openings were made as the valley lowered and cut into the side of a cave passage. If a person explores one of these high and dry caves far enough, and deep enough, sooner or later they will come onto an underground stream, gurgling away in the dark as it works its way down to the outside and sunlight.

Long before white settlers came to Kentucky and Rockcastle County, caves here and elsewhere through the state were used by the prehistoric peoples whose land this was. Some caves, particularly well sited, dry and comfortable, were used as homes by these people, and their artifacts have been found in the earth of cave entrances. Some caves were used as burial chambers, where the bodies of loved ones were laid to rest with tools, weapons, food and ornaments to aid them in their next life. Such Indian graves have often been found in caves of the Cumberland Escarpment.

Dr. Thomas Walker is the first person to leave a record of his travels through the Rockcastle region. In 1750, Walker wrote in his diary of finding alum-tasting rocks in a large rock-shelter or cave that possibly was located somewhere on Crooked Creek in the eastern part of the present county. These "alum rocks" may have contained saltpeter, a mineral that occurs naturally in the earth of dry, sheltered locations. The many saltpeter caves of Rockcastle County were destined to play an important role in the history of the state and nation. Saltpeter was the main ingredient in gunpowder, and so the mining of saltpeter and the manufacture of black powder became important industries in Kentucky through the period 1790-1814. During this time, many persons explored caves along the Cumberland Escarpment, searching for rich deposits of saltpeter that might be profitably mined.

Cave exploration in the early days, just as in our own time, was frequently done for sport, to see what passages might be hidden behind the dark cave mouth. The first recorded visitation to a Rockcastle County cave occurred in 1798, when John Baker made torches and led his family through a large cave on Crooked Creek — and promptly became lost in the dark when the torches burned out. This story has a happy ending, fortunately, for although the Baker family wandered in the dark for several days (as reported), they eventually found their way back to daylight. This same cave soon became the largest saltpeter mine in the state, and is known today as Great Saltpetre Cave.

Those who live in the eastern portion of Rockcastle County have often explored the caves near their homes. It is quite common to see on the walls, written in soot, the names of several generations of a single family, often representing more than a century of explorations. The older men of the area will talk with enthusiasm of the caves they had explored in days past when their limbs were spryer, and recall the stories of these same caves heard from their fathers and grandfathers. And, while the old men are remembering the past, almost surely a son or grandson will put in tales of their own adventures underground.

The numerous springs have long been important to the inhabitants of the region as water supplies. Mount Vernon was founded on the site of a spring, as have been many communities throughout the cave regions of Ken-

The valleys of eastern Rockcastle County show a settlement pattern that has been strongly influenced by the location of springs. Near the mouth of nearly every little valley is a homesite, and these locations are not by chance. Just behind the house, one almost always finds a good spring, which is used by the residents for all the needs of the household. Along the roadsides are also many good springs, and many persons who are not so fortunate as to live by a spring will stop to fill jugs and bottles for their drinking water at home.

Spring water has always been regarded as providing the very best drinking water. This is not always the case in fact, for groundwater in caves of the region is usually fairly close to the surface, and liable to contamination by pesticides, livestock, coal mining operations, and particularly from the dumping of trash in sinkholes that lead directly into the groundwater supplies.

After World War Two, when the United States embarked on a massive road-building campaign through the rural regions of the nation, knowledge of the many large caves of Rockcastle County became available to outsiders. At about the same time, cave exploration was established as a recreational activity and a scientific pursuit. In 1939, an organization had been founded in the District of Columbia which soon became known as the National Speleological Society (NSS). This organization has always been dedicated to the exploration, study, and conservation of caves. Within a few years, local chapters (known as "grottos") were established in cities across the nation as more and more people became interested in exploring caves. Members of these local grottos, as well as many people who were not part of any organized group, visited the caves in their regions and often traveled hundreds of miles to areas known to have many large caves. Thus began a minor tourist industry in Rockcastle County.

At first there were only a few, but by the 1970's it was common to see several carloads of cave explorers on Rockcastle County back roads. While many of the "cavers", as they call themselves, come from Berea, Richmond, and Lexington, a large number also travel from much farther away, driving from Ohio, Virginia, and even Michigan, just to spend a weekend exploring caves. Although in any large group of people there may be some "bad apples", most cave owners have found the cave explorers to be well-mannered and considerate of their property. Fortunately, considering the large number of persons that have been through area caves, there have been very few serious accidents. Every few years, some people will climb a rope down into a deep hole without having done some serious thinking as to how they might get out again. Organized caving groups such as the grottos of the NSS teach safe caving techniques such as wearing hard hats for head protection, carrying three separate light sources, and the special techniques necessary to explore deep holes. These organizations stress to their members the importance of courtesy to the landowners and protection of the caves. Most of the incidents that have occurred in caves in the county have involved persons who had not had such training and were unaware of the hazards.

One notable exception to this was the well-publicized 1983 entrapment of a group of out-of-state cavers in a cave near Barnett Valley. This group failed to use good judgement, by entering a cave whose entrance was prone to flood shut at a time of threatening weather. No lives were lost, but the incident attracted national publicity and incurred needless expense to state and local agencies.

Several functions have been held over the last few years that have focused upon Rockcastle's caves. The national convention of the NSS was held in Frankfort, Kentucky in 1985,

for the first time in this state in more than twenty years, and one of the biggest attractions was the caves of the county. Two years later, a smaller convention was held in Renfro Valley, with over five hundred cave explorers attending from as far away as Florida and Alaska. In 1989, the Great Saltpetre Cave property was purchased by a private historical foundation and is currently managed by interested members of the Lexington and Cincinnati chapters of the NSS. Every spring, an open house is held at the cave, to which the public of the county is invited for free tours.

The many caves of the county are a valuable natural resource. They represent an underground wilderness unique in its diversity, from rushing underground streams with strangely sculptured rocks to vast echoing chambers more than a hundred feet high, from passages bristling with stalactites to life forms found nowhere else on earth. Sadly, much of the splendor of Rockcastle's subterranean wilderness has declined in recent years. Thoughtless persons armed with cans of spray paint have defaced formerly pristine passageways, spread beer cans in their wake, and broken away delicate stalactites that may not be regrown in a thousand years. In caves that only two decades ago harbored colonies of valuable insect-eating bats numbering in tens of thousands, now only pitiful remnants, mere dozens, may be found. Garbage and sewage dumped into sinkholes fouls the underground waters.

I first became acquainted with the caves of the county back in 1969, and as the years went by I discovered that there was no other place that held as much interest for me. I came to love the land and made many good friends among the residents. I sat again on Ott Miller's porch a few weeks ago and reflected upon the changes I had seen through nearly a quarter-century of walking the roads and hills of the county. The passage of time brings change. Better roads, more industry, modern schools, a higher standard of living, arrived along with the less attractive consequences of "progress" such as increased pollution, fewer trees, more crime. The caves of Rockcastle County are a priceless part of our heritage. They have existed for untold ages, yet they will not last forever without care on the part of those who visit them. It is sad to think that future generations may be denied the wonder of our underground worlds — in the name of progress.

*Submitted by: Gary A. O'Dell*

## "SHINING STARS OF '53"

Mt. Vernon Signal Thursday, December 24, 1953

### BROADCAST IN A BARN

Members of the 5th grade class of Conway School in Rockcastle County record their prize-winning Bookmobile program in the barn at



"Shining Stars of '53"