

Open House scheduled at famous cave

Saltpetre mining in Rockcastle County

By: Gary A. O'Dell
Great Saltpetre Cave
Historic Preserve

Great Saltpetre Cave was a well-known landmark in Rockcastle even before the county was created by act of the 1810 Kentucky legislature. Discovered in 1798 by John Baker, within a very few years the cave became possibly the largest saltpetre mine in the state. Saltpetre, also known as niter, was the primary ingredient of gunpowder. In the early years of our state, there were few commodities so valuable and necessary as gunpowder. Gunpowder put meat on the table and defended the frontier and the new country against enemies. Before the land that became known as Kentucky was discovered, there were few sources of saltpetre available anywhere in the country, so supplies of niter and powder had to be imported from abroad. When this country fought a second time for independence in the War of 1812 and shipping was blocked by the British, there was a great need for saltpetre. Rockcastle County was one of the most important sources.

"Peter Caves"
When the early pioneers, among them Daniel Boone, cut trails from Cumberland Gap through what is now Rockcastle County, they were impressed by the numerous caves they saw. Gaping black holes beckoned from virtually every ridge. Many of these caves were dry, and their loose sandy soils were rich with deposits of nitrates. Although the first kegs of gunpowder had been packed in from the east to defend the fragile pioneer forts, soon there came to Kentucky a few men with the skill and knowledge to make black powder from cave soils. Among the very first of these was a black slave named Monk Estill, who was said to have mined saltpetre from Adams Cave near Richmond in 1780 to make gunpowder and thus saved the lives of the inhabitants of Estill's Station.

Before long there were many in Kentucky who set about to make gunpowder, beginning what was a very important early industry in the state. There was a concentration of powder mills in the Bluegrass, and to these mills flowed a steady stream of refined saltpetre from the surrounding cave region. Among the local

caves that were mined in the early days were Climax Cave, Teaners Cave, and Crooked Creek Ice Cave, as well as many others along Roundstone Creek, Crooked Creek, and Horse Lick Creek. There were a few caves that had such an abundance of niter soil that they were mined commercially. Among these large operations were those at Great Saltpetre Cave and Mammoth Cave, that used dozens of slaves working around the clock. Most of the mining, however, was done on a much smaller scale. One or two men, or a group of neighbors, would get together and mine saltpetre for a while to trade for supplies in Lexington or other communities. Often this was done in the late fall - winter after the crops were laid by.

Refining Saltpetre
It was hard labor, but not especially complicated. All the materials needed were right at hand - wood and water. Wood was used as building material and fuel, and water to dissolve the nitrates from the soil. With pick and shovel, men would work by flicking candlelight or torch in the dark passages, filling gineysacks with the "peet dirt." This they would

haul to a large room or passage where they had constructed wooden vats or hoppers. When the vats were full of soil, they would pour water over the top and let it seep slowly through, dissolving out the nitrates and carrying them in solution to the bottom. Underneath the vats to catch the drippings was a log scooped out to make a trough. On some of the larger and better operations, logs had been hauled in or with an auger to make wooden pipes. These pipes were laid end to end and the connections sealed with mud to direct the dissolved nitrates (called "liquor") to the place where it would be boiled down.

The boiling operation was almost always located outside the cave entrance, to have a handy supply of firewood and to keep from suffocating in the smoke. The "liquor" would be boiled down in large iron kettles until it began to crystallize. At this point, the refiners did not yet have the saltpetre they needed to make gunpowder. The saltpetre is a chemical called potassium nitrate; the niter found in caves was mostly calcium nitrate. To turn one chemical into the other, there was another step needed.

If you want to go
Saltpetre Cave is located on Hwy. 1004
Open House is Saturday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.
Refreshments will be served

The niter miners took the substance they had made, and mixed it thoroughly with wood ashes in another wooden vat. Then they poured water through it all again, and caught the drippings once more. In this way, potassium in the wood ashes replaced the calcium, and they ended up with mostly potassium nitrate. This second liquor they boiled down again until it became thick, and scooped a floating layer of impurities off the top. Sometimes, if they wanted to make especially pure saltpetre, they might repeat this refining several times.

River Clean-Up Week
Rockcastle River clean-up scheduled for Sat., May 9

The week of May 2 - 10 has been designated National River Clean-Up Week. Volunteers throughout the country will be involved in cleaning rivers and streams in an effort to show their concern for these valuable resources. Daniel Boone National Forest will be providing residents of our area an opportunity to participate in this event by sponsoring a Rockcastle River Clean-Up. The clean-up is scheduled to be held on Saturday, May 9 from 9 a.m. to noon. Efforts will be concentrated near the U.S. 25 Bridge in Rockcastle. Service will provide bags, volunteers will supply their energy and Rockcastle County work crews will haul the trash away. Pepsi-Cola Bottling Company of Corbin will be providing free drinks for all participants. The Forest Service reminds all volunteers to wear long sleeves, long pants, sturdy shoes and gloves. For more information contact the London Ranger District, 864-4163.

Brown has not let handicap keep him from excelling in life, business

By: Laura Mize

Disability is no handicap for Mike Brown -- and it's obvious. A quadriplegic, Mike suffered an automobile accident yet has continued to inspire friends and family through his determination and willingness to succeed.

Owner of S&M Grocery as well as Bee Lick Video, Mike has become a successful, thriving businessman who was recently nominated for the Melbourne Mills Achievement Award.

The award is given to someone who has suffered a tragic or disabling accident yet has become successful and accomplished. Pleased at the thought of receiving the award, Mike said, "I would be proud to get such an award. It would mean a lot."

Nominated for the award last year, Mike was runner-up. "The man who received the award really deserved it," he said. "He and his wife were both handicapped and they had a business that helped handicapped people."

In 1981, Mike leased the old S&M Grocery building and was on his way to a successful business. In the same year, he married his wife Susan and the couple shared a desire to succeed in the business which is evident to this day.

The accident, which occurred in 1981, three months after the couple were married, was no deterrent to Mike's goals in life.

"I knew if there's a will, there's a way," he said proudly. "A lot of people

Local businessman is nominee for Melbourne Mills award

who became handicapped just lay down and give it. That's not right." After months spent in hospital rooms, Mike returned to begin again building his business. "I had to prove myself," Mike said.

"Some people didn't know how to face me after the accident," he said. "The best way is to treat handicapped people just like anyone else."

Although Mike owns and operates a business, he admits there are barriers that come in his way at times. He credits his wife, Susan, with being the one who helps him overcome these barriers.

"I need a little help sometimes, and she's the one I depend on. There's a lot of things I wouldn't have if it weren't for her," said Mike.

Everyone who knows Mike knows how hard he works and how important Susan is in his life. "She is the backbone of everything," he said.

He also said that his friends and patrons are helpful at times when he is unable to reach something on the shelf, for instance. "The people around here are so friendly. I can always get someone, a customer, to help if I need it," he said. But being around Mike, one knows that he is very independent and motivated as he has virtually helped himself in many ways.

According to Susan, Mike has always been a go-getter and has never

let his handicap get in his way. "He's been an inspiration to everybody," she said. "Not everyone tries like he does. Mike's not one for pity."

Teresa Durham, one of Mike's employees, said, "We don't think about his wheelchair. We just see Mike, not the wheelchair." The feeling was mutual with Fern Larkin, another employee who said, "Most people in his situation would have given up, but Mike doesn't."

Although Mike has no use of his legs, he has obtained, through therapy, the use of his wrists and arms which enable him to do virtually everything he needs to. "I had to work to get that back," he said.

From running a cash register to driving his car, Mike has crossed bridges that many people would have considered uncrossable. Award or not, he is deserving of much recognition for his accomplishments and remains so in the hearts of his many Rockcastle friends.

Local businessman, David Gregory, dies at St. Joseph Hospital

David Gregory, 79, Mt. Vernon, businessman, died Saturday, May 2, 1992 at the St. Joseph Hospital in Lexington.

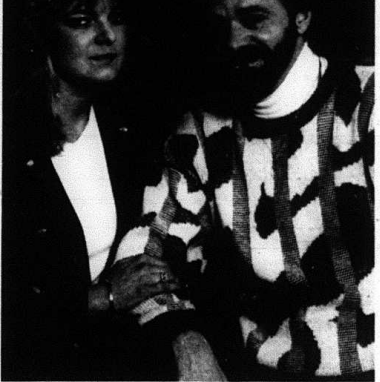
He was born April 22, 1913 in Clay County, the son of the late Sam W. and Laura Hundley Gregory.

He was a retired L&N Railroad Station agent, operated a motel and tax business, and had formerly taught school in both Clay and Rockcastle counties.

Survivors are: two sons, William D. Gregory of Mt. Vernon and Wayne M. Gregory of Lexington; a daughter, Mrs. Carolyn Brown of Route #1, Brodhead; a brother, Cecil Gregory of Harrodsburg; three sisters, Mrs. Daisy Dean of Baltimore, Md., Mrs. Hazel Charlton and Miss Mary Catherine Gregory, both of Richmond, Ind.; eight grandchildren and one great grandchild.

Services were held May 4, at the Horse Creek Baptist Church in Clay County with Rev. Dennis Rush officiating. Burial was in Hurd Cemetery in Clay County. Cox Funeral Home was in charge of arrangements.

Pallbearers were Joe Gregory, Bill David Gregory, William Joe Gregory, Jimmy Cromer, Steve Pittman, Neal Payne, Greg Brown and Wayne Gregory.



Recently nominated for the Melbourne Mills Achievement Award, Mike Brown, owner of S&M Grocery, is pictured above with his wife, Susan, whom Mike credits with being very instrumental in his success.

Boom Time ...

The refined saltpetre was packed in gunny sacks or barrels, loaded into wagons, and taken to market. Lexington was the major marketplace for most of the saltpetre mined in Kentucky. Much of what was brought to market was in small lots, perhaps a few hundred pounds that was traded for groceries or credit at the stores. At first, most of the saltpetre was purchased by operators of local powder mills. Within a few years, saltpetre became an important export for the state as the large powder mills on the East Coast began to purchase Kentucky saltpetre in bulk quantities. The largest purchaser of Kentucky saltpetre was the DuPont Company, who in 1802 had set up the nation's largest gunpowder factory in Delaware.

By 1808, competition for the supply of saltpetre became fierce as the threat of war with Great Britain became more likely. As brokers, speculators, and powder mill operators fought over the available supply, the price for saltpetre rose higher and higher as war approached. Saltpetre caves became valuable real estate, and were advertised in the newspapers. There was a sudden swarm of men in the hills hunting for caves, and exploring those they found, looking for deposits of nitrates that might make them rich. Men in Lexington became purchasing agents for the large Eastern companies, having letters of credit deposited in a local bank from which to make their purchases. Advertisements in the newspapers stated, "Will Give the Highest Price, In Cash, For Salt Petre!"

The wagons rumbled into Lexington from Rockcastle County, from Pulaski, from Mammoth Cave, and what was then Warren County, from the Red River region where the hill folk made saltpetre from the soil of sandstone rockshelters instead of caves. The brokers bid for their wagon loads, offering ever higher prices. Sometimes the company agents were "sleekered" by the miners, who mixed sand or gravel in their saltpetre to add weight and spread a layer of purple white crystals over the top. The buyers would test the saltpetre they received by putting a pinch on the tongue; pure saltpetre would dissolve completely and leave no grit behind. Some of the miners were given contracts, binding them to produce so many thousand pounds at a set price. When these bulk purchasers had accumulated several tons of niter, groaning wagons rolled out of town, north to Maysville on the Ohio River, south and west to the Kentucky River.

The rivers were the main shipping highways, the only practical way to export from a state barricaded by mountains to the east and wilderness to the west. The strong current of the Ohio River made it very difficult to move the barges eastward, against

the flow of the river. Before the war, it proved easier and less expensive to send freight down the Ohio, even though this was the long way. Barges loaded with Kentucky saltpetre and other produce floated down the Ohio River to the Mississippi, and south to New Orleans. At New Orleans the saltpetre was loaded onto fast ships, who sailed around the tip of Florida and up the East Coast to deliver at Philadelphia, New York and Boston. This route was cut off just before the War of 1812 when the British blocked the American Coast, forcing Kentucky exporters to send their products up the river at greater effort and cost. Even worse, this limited the shipping season, for in the winter time, ice on the Ohio River often halted all boat traffic.

Wartime

War with Great Britain was officially declared in July, 1812. There were battles and scattered elsewhere through the state; the 1810 census listed 63 gunpowder factories in Kentucky. It seems Rockcastle County also had at least one powder mill, as there is a "Powdermill Hollow" in the southwest part of the county. The U.S. government made contracts with a number of Kentucky powdermills to supply military needs. One gunpowder factory in Lexington produced over 170,000 pounds of black powder during the war; it is likely that much of the saltpetre used in the manufacture came from Rockcastle County.

Kentucky gunpowder was made as fast as possible and sent to arsenals on the Ohio River, to Pittsburgh, to Newport, Natchez and New Orleans. When battles were fought west of the Appalachians, it was Kentucky powder in Kentucky long rifles that vanquished the enemy. The battles of the northwest territory against Indian tribes advised, supplied and led by British officers were as bloody as any encounters ever fought in this country. Kentucky's safety was assured by the Battle of Thames River (Canada) in 1813, where the great Indian warrior Tecumseh was slain, a company of Rockcastle men was present at this battle, and the faded Indians hidden in the swampland along the river.

The Kentucky gunpowder at New Orleans was put to good use by Andrew Jackson and his troops in January, 1815. On the 8th day that month, the Americans defeated thousands of British troops in the last battle of the war.

Busted

During the early part of the war, the price of saltpetre had climbed steadily. Concerned with their rising costs, the big Eastern factories sent orders to their purchasing agents in Kentucky: fix a price ceiling and pay

no more than that. The agents warned the big companies that miners could not afford to make saltpetre at these prices, but followed their instructions. In 1814, less and less saltpetre came to market as the miners gave up their profession in disgust at the low prices they received. It also had become harder to mine, for the most productive areas had been exhausted of their rich soils. In a get-rich-quick mood, most of the mining operations had not bothered to replace the soil in cave passages where it would have again become naturally enriched with nitrates in a year or two. If the war had not ended when it did, it seems certain that the price ceiling would have been overturned and prices soared once more. The country had to have saltpetre.

With the end of the war, the British coastal blockade was lifted and overseas trade was resumed. Saltpetre could be imported more cheaply from India than from Kentucky, strange as it may seem. Foreign saltpetre delivered to the dock at New York could be purchased by the Eastern powder mills at less than one-third of the cost of saltpetre imported from Kentucky. This gave the East Coast gunpowder factories a big advantage over those in Kentucky. No one was mining saltpetre in Kentucky any more, and local powder mills would have to pay extra shipping costs to get imported saltpetre from Kentucky. Also, the American market was flooded with cheap, good-quality gunpowder after the war, imported from Europe. Kentucky powder mills could not compete, and most gave up and went out of business. A very few managed to hang on for a few more years.

The War of 1812 had been the highest point of the saltpetre mining industry in Kentucky. Never again would caves in this state be mined for nitrates in such great quantities. When the Mexican War came in 1849, there was no shipping blockade and thus no shortage of either saltpetre or gunpowder. When the Civil War began, the North had plenty of ordinance and did not need Kentucky saltpetre. The South, lacking the factories of the industrial North, desperately needed saltpetre and gunpowder. Kentucky was a border state that officially sided with the Union, so the Confederacy was forced to obtain saltpetre from caves in Tennessee, Georgia, and Alabama. It is likely that some Kentucky caves were secretly mined by Southern sympathizers or even Confederate troops, but there were no large-scale operations.

Black powder was the key to survival during the years when this region was being settled, and to remain free from foreign rule. Rockcastle County was the heart of the saltpetre mining region that has made this area so proud of the role she played in the history of our state and country.

Board of Education to meet

The Rockcastle County Board of Education will meet in regular monthly session on Thursday evening, May 12 at 7 p.m. at the Central Administration Building. The public is welcome to attend.

Appreciate a Teacher during Teacher Appreciation Week May 4-9