

Truth and Myth of Sauta Cave

By David Bradford

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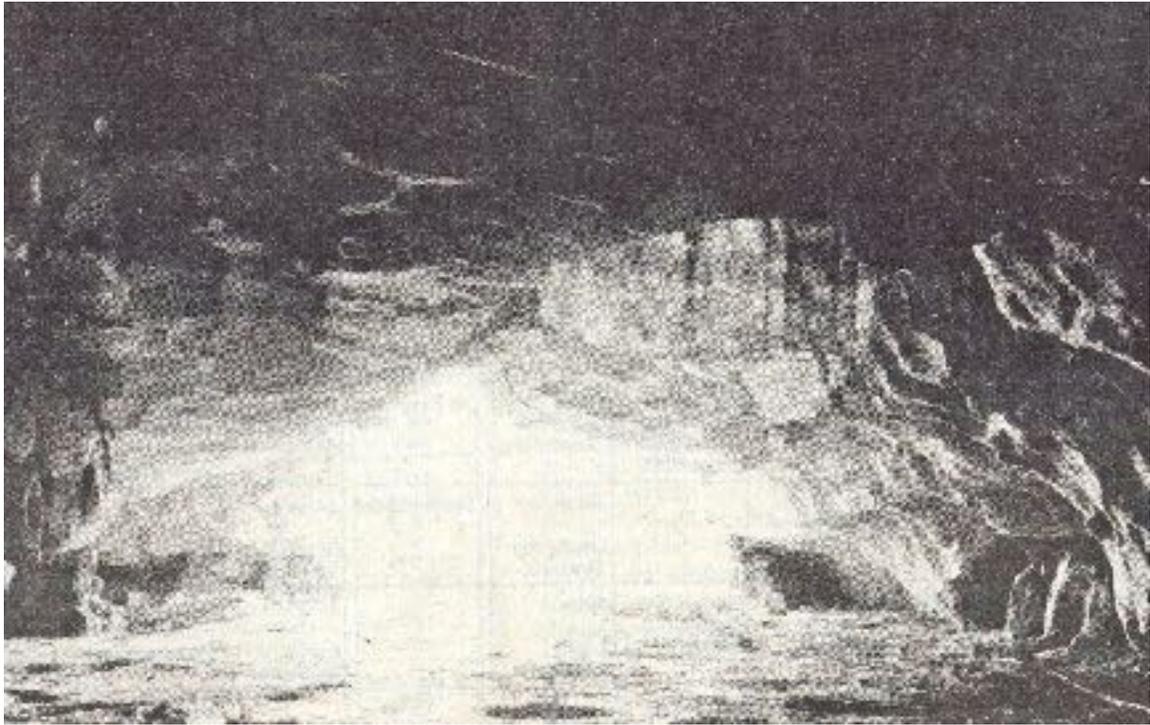


Figure 1: Entrance to Sauta (Saltpeter) Cave, inside looking out

Of all the caves of Jackson County, probably none has received as much attention as Sauta. The two entrances to the system, commonly known as Saltpeter and Blowing caves, have long served as recreation sites and sources of legend for an audience far exceeding the boundaries of our county. No history book, no folklorist can long recount the story of Jackson County without at least passing reference to the caves, and evidence of its function in the development of a young nation are still very evident.

The first mention of Sauta Cave in official documents occurs even before Alabama achieved statehood. An early 1780's legal suit charged Richard Riley (a Cherokee Indian) with breach of contract in connection with mining operations in the cave. Mining continued through the early 19th century, but was escalated with the coming of the civil war. John B. Boren began the 1860's operations, but the

Confederate government soon took control as the insatiable need for the mineral increased. According to John Robert Kennamer Sr. in his book "The History of Jackson County," Captain James Young on Larkinsville was in charge of mining, supplied by W. T Bennett with 17 kettles used for boiling the niter. One of those 17 still lies in the cave, only a few hundred feet from the entrance.



Figure 2: One of the 17 kettles used to boil wood ashes and nitrate-bearing water still lives inside Sauta Cave. W. T. Bennett brought them from Selma to supply the operation in the cave by John Boren.

Extracting saltpeter was a complex process. It first involved removing nitrogen-rich dirt from the floor of the cave and rinsing it in water from the nearby Blowing Cave branch of the Sauta system. This water dissolved the saltpeter compound and left it in solution. The nitrate bearing liquid was then boiled with wood ash, usually the ashes of hardwood, and the mixture was allowed to cool for 24 hours. At the end of that period, the nitrate bearing solution would crystallize, and the saltpeter could be scooped from the top.

We can assume that the Sauta Cave mine was fruitful since it was raided by the Union General O.M. Mitchel his campaign through Jackson County. In anticipation of his raid, the Confederate troops removed several of the kettles and reportedly buried them in the vicinity of the Sauta Creek. The exact location of the 16 kettles that should remain is

unknown, but reports say that at least some ended their service as watering troughs for livestock.

I'm told by Mr. Matt Smith that in the early years of Captain Young's mining operation the entire nitrating process was performed within the cave. The blackened ceiling of the mining area supports such a belief. But the smoke of the wood fires proved too thick for the workers.

Mr. James Clemens in explaining the process of nitrating told me that in his youth he had talked with one of the men who supplied the works with hardwood. John Dulaney, a confederate veteran told Mr. Clemens that the wood burning operations were finally moved to the mouth of the cave and were fueled from forests located on Gunter's Mountain. This was undoubtedly a dangerous move late in the war since it called attention to the location of the works.

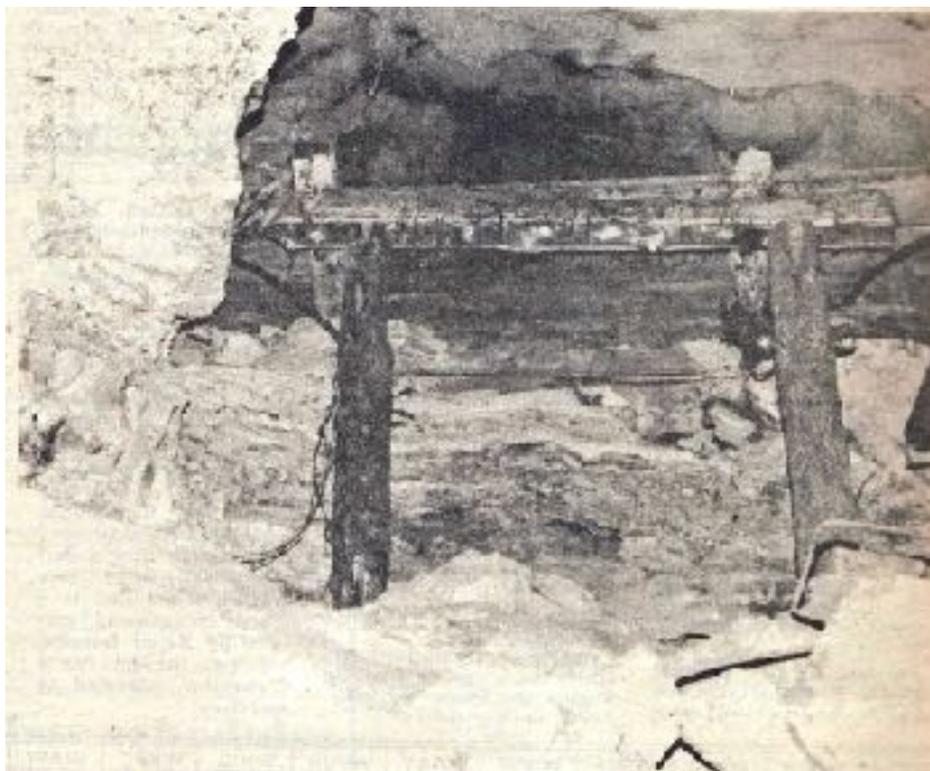


Figure 3: A wooden loading platform still looms above the mining pits. The large boulder on the right reportedly buried a slave and mule when it fell during civil war operations.

Mr. Julian Clemons told an interesting story, one that was substantiated by three other sources, about a slave who was killed in the mines before the arrival of General Mitchel. To remove the dirt from the deepening pit, the miners had to use mule teams to pull carts up an incline. The mules pulled against metal rings, which were attached to boulders by means of something resembling rock climber's expansion bolts. At least one mule proved stronger than the cave's rock and a massive boulder buried both slave and mule in the fall.

Mr. J. O. Carter, a man who has had considerable experience in the cave, believes there is some truth in the story. The white oak rails that lead into the cave are diverted by the large rock that perhaps serves as headstone for man and beast, and newer rails were diverted around it.



Figure 4: Rails of white oak, over 100 years old, remain despite the humidity.



Figure 5: Mining platform. A coleman lantern, a rare luxury in any cave, lights the platform built and used by Southern troops during the Civil War as they followed seams of saltpeter through the walls of Sauta Cave.

Workmen were unable to move the boulder, and as early as 1900 the rock was known as "Jack's Rock" after the man buried beneath it.

It's just that it is often hard to distinguish fact from legend in telling the story of Sauta Cave. Various accounts say that the cave was the first seat of young Jackson County, and that it was at the site at which Sequoia introduced his alphabet to the Cherokee tribe.

Mrs. Ann Chambless, of the Jackson County Historical Society says that the cave itself was probably never used as the county seat, but it is likely, she added, that the first county seat was somewhere near the community. Records show that a plot of land either near or was purchased for the for the project and Julian Clemons remembers being shown the remaining log building which he was told was the legendary first courthouse.

The cave certainly figured in early county government; it was designated in 1821 as one of three polling places in Jackson County where the pioneers were to elect a clerk of circuit court, a clerk of county court, and a sheriff.

Most of the chilling tales of death and entrapment in Sauta Cave are also fiction. But Matt Smith tells of a rescue effort around the year 1900. A group of unidentified explorers entered the cave for a Sunday outing and took a misleading turn on the return trip. When the rescuers located them, they were, according to Mr. Smith, having a regular camp meeting. They were "shouting and praying." Their dramatic conversions were unnecessary, however. They were less than 200 yards from the entrance.

Numerous rescue operations in the past decades have netted only shaky victims with expired flashlight batteries. No injuries, no deaths.

The story of the cave's utility does not end with the civil war operations. In fact, one of the most interesting chapters in the cave's history was written when the Army Corps of Engineers surveyed the cave for use as a fallout shelter in 1963. The cave was one of nearly 50 Jackson County caverns considered for use as emergency shelter, and one of 19 finally designated for the purpose.

The estimated capacity of Sauta Cave was 2.639 persons with provisions.

An experimental effort to stock the cave proved fruitless since the high humidity rusted the cans in which the food and water were stored.

Fifty tons of food, stockpiled during the 1960's nuclear crisis, are still stored in Limrock, but are soon to be transferred to Florida for recycling into dog and livestock feed.

Rodney Gentles of Jackson County Civil Defense says that when the new shelter plan is issued, none of the caves will serve as refuges, but as of now, Sauta Cave is still a recognized shelter.

But military and governmental agencies are not the only groups interested in the cave. The Huntsville grotto of the National Speleological Society mapped the cave in 1956, and Sauta is well known for its recreational value.

For the Sunday caver, there are several hundred feet of easily passable and large caverns. For the climber, there is "rock mountain", a mass of breakdown blocking all but a few feet of passageway. For the experienced caver, there is "Lundquist crawl" and "Bill's Back Pass," crawl ways that extend some 1,800 feet into the cave.

I need to say no more of what awaits the observant historian.

But whatever your interest, check for clearance before you enter either entrance of Sauta. The owner, Harry Hoover of Birmingham is in the process of clearing the passageway in Blowing Cave with dynamite and the two passageways connect only 1,000 feet into the Saltpeter entrance.

And please, find other walls to grace with your signature. Sauta is one of the worst vandalized caves in Jackson County.



Figure 6: A bat passes the winter in the 58 degree comfort of Santa Save. Scientists have not yet determined why some bats migrate and others hibernate.



Figure 7: Brady Wright emerges from the entrance to "Lundquist's Crawl, an 1,800 foot crawlway leading to the "Mountain Room" in Santa Cave.