

Historic Three Caves

A Unique Huntsville Landmark

Mining History

The area known as Three Caves is not a cave at all, but a limestone mine. The story of Three Caves has its roots in Tennessee with the Jarrell Family. Mr. Frank Jarrell operated a limestone quarry in Sommerville, Tennessee, from 1935 to 1945 when the quarry ran into underground caverns. This coincided with his considering moving south to Madison County. Frank's oldest son Lawson had just married a woman from Decatur and her brother was the agricultural agent for Madison County. Her brother had discussed the availability of limestone deposits in Madison County and a need for agricultural limestone for farming and road construction in North Alabama. With the mine in Sommerville exhausted and a clear need in North Alabama, Lawson Jarrell made the move south.

The site of Three Caves (Hermitage Quarry) was owned by Madison County and leased to Mr. Jarrell's Madison Limestone Company for five cents per ton of limestone hauled away. Initial capital for the mining operation was only \$50,000 and was provided by the First National Bank of Huntsville on Mr. Jarrell's signature. All of the moveable equipment from the Sommerville quarry was brought to the new property.

The initial operation was very small. Dynamite was used to blast the ground and expose the limestone. The larger limestone rocks were then broken by manual labor using a sledgehammer and hauled to the "jammer" mill, which crushed it into useable pieces. It was then trucked away for either agricultural or construction use. Approximately eight workers made the move with Mr. Jarrell from the Sommerville area. Others came from the quarries around Sherwood, Tennessee. Some of the workers rented rooms in the nearby Madison County Alms House. Two others, "Uncle" Charlie Battle and his nephew "Nuck" Walter Macon, built a one room shack on the site, installed a small stove, and spent the work week there - rent free.

When World War II ended and the demand for limestone increased in the fast growing Huntsville area, the quarrying operation expanded. First, a jaw crusher was installed. This took the place of the manually operated sledgehammer. Dumpsters replaced the wheelbarrow for hauling the limestone rock to the crusher. Eventually, huge Euclid's would replace the dumpsters. As time passed, another jaw crusher and two more hammer mills were added. (Remnants of these items can be seen near the gravel road Kennamer Drive entrance.) At the height of operations, the mine would employ 25 workers.

Around 1949, the type of mining shifted from the "drill and shoot" method of blasting an open pit to the more complicated "room and pillar" method of mining. There were two reasons for this change. First, the upper strata contained little of the finer quality limestone needed. It was rocky earth, which had to be blasted out and then moved to expose the "good" limestone beneath. The second was that the city of Huntsville was growing rapidly around the quarry area. The "drill and shoot" method, with its open blasting, resulted in large quantities of dust and flying rocks landing outside the boundaries of the quarry, sometimes with disastrous results. One sizeable rock landed in a nearby residents' refrigerator, another went through the roof of the county Alms House which was located where the Hermitage playground now stands. One notable incident involved Phillip and Belinda Scott, who had just bought a new sporty red 1949 Ford. Belinda polished that automobile religiously, until one morning when she found that a large 3' by 3' limestone rock had landed on the trunk, knocking the car out of gear and sending it rolling down the hill. Mr. Jarrell, always the gentleman, replaced their beloved vehicle.

In the summer of 1951, a typical Alabama thunderstorm rolled in and all activity at the mine was stopped. However, a miner named Jordon was working with explosives at the far end of a tunnel and didn't get the word to exit the mine. The miners who had left the cave heard a loud blast and drove back to the cave entrance to investigate. They met Jordon running out of the caves. He had been perched on the top of a ladder when

lightning struck and set off nearby charges. The blast knocked him off the ladder. He wasn't seriously hurt but was covered head to toe in limestone dust. The driver of the vehicle didn't want to let Jordon in because he was sure Jordon was a ghost.

Post Mining Years

In 1952, the Three Caves Quarry was closed. First, the mine was becoming too expensive to operate. The cost of excavating equipment and newer competitive open pit mines were more economical than the methods used at Three Caves. Second, the growth of Huntsville was encroaching on the boundaries of the quarry. The rock crushing process raised huge clouds of heavy white dust that settled onto laundry, autos, and people alike. The constant noise of the heavy lumbering trucks traveling up and down the roadways and the frequent explosions were very unsettling as well. Progress had caught up the mine and it was abandoned.

Nothing further was done in the mine until 1962 in the midst of the Cuban Missile crisis. Huntsville and Madison County officials decided that the former quarry would make an ideal fallout shelter. The Alabama National Guard was tasked with readying the area for emergency occupation if the need arose. A National Guard Engineering Company spent several weekend drills clearing out rubble and debris. The Company Commander often operated the bulldozer due to a shortage of trained operators. Plans to stock the shelter with food and other necessities were soon shelved, however, when the crisis was averted and cooler heads realized the inadequacies of the quarry as a shelter.

The next role for the Three Caves Quarry was as a movie and music video location. In 1978, "The Ravagers," starring Richard Harris and Ernest Borgnine, was filmed on location. The story line followed the survivors of a post apocalyptic holocaust. Ironically, the movie depicted what life might have been like if indeed Three Caves could have been used as a fallout shelter. Approximately 350 local residents served as extras. David Fisher, a former equipment operator in the mine, assisted as a technical advisor.

Another movie entitled "What Waits Below" was also filmed at Three Caves. This 1984 movie, starring Timothy Bottoms, was a low budget horror film. 2005 brought the actors and crew of "20 Years After" (working title "Like Moles, Like Rats") to the quarry. This post-apocalyptic fairy tale was locally produced. The City of Huntsville Fire Department helped create a mini-lake inside the caves. The rock group "Kansas" utilized Three Caves in their music video for "Reason to Be" from their "Monolith" album,

The land surrounding the Caves also has a bit of history. The playground area, next to the Mountain Springs Swim Club, was the location of the County Alms House, or poorhouse, from 1922 until the late 1930's. The concrete storage building in the Three Caves parking lot was once listed as a polling site.



Filming 20 Years After which was released in 2008

Protected by the Land Trust - Forever

The County of Madison donated the property known as “Three Caves” to the state’s first land trust (now the Land Trust of North Alabama) in 1989. Electricity was added in 2013 and a permanent stage was created in 2014. Three Caves bowl has become a signature feature where the Land Trust hosts a regionally recognized Concert series, the popular “Moon Over Three Caves Dance” every third Saturday in September, the Haunt (in October), the Mountain Deux aquathalon, and environmental education events. In order to continue to serve our community, first responder groups are allowed to train at the Caves.

Due to drought in 2006 and 2007, rock fall issues were discovered. Summer cave tours were discontinued and the interior of the caves was closed until further notice.

In May, 2014, the Land Trust removed the chain link fence and made the small parking lot a trailhead. Landscaping was kindly provided by the Blossomwood Garden Club. Later that year, the city of Huntsville installed a series of signs from Big Spring Park along 1.2 miles streets that lead residents and visitors to the Three Caves trailhead – and the Land Trust’s 25+ mile trail system on the Monte Sano Nature Preserve, the 20 miles of Monte Sano State Park trails, and the four miles of Burritt Museum trails. (The Monte Sano Nature Preserve trails were the first National Recreation Trails in Madison County.)



Though the Caves are man-made, Mother Nature is slowly asserting her influence. Geological formations such as flowstone, cave pearls, stalactites, and stalagmites have formed. Possibly some bats along with birds, lizards, and lichens have become cave residents.

The positive future of the Three Caves is now assured through the preservation of its history and evolving wonders by the Land Trust of North Alabama.



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