



Old-timers and new comers relax outside the southern mouth of Rockcastle County's Great Saltpetre Cave. The historic cavern was opened to the public recently. Hundreds came to tour the privately-owned cave. (All Photos By Mike Steely)

A Look At The Rockcastle County's Great Saltpetre Cave Then And Now

*Ancient Cave Was Once An Important Source
Of Saltpeter Used In Making Gunpowder*

By Mike Steely - 1996

It was an odd collection of visitors to Rockcastle County's Great Saltpetre Cave back in June, when the ancient cave was opened to the public for a too brief day. Old-timers who played and courted there in their youth, newcomers with electric helmet lights and kneepads, and children led by parents and grandparents took advantage of the free tours of the cavern.

Great Saltpetre Cave has been known to the white man since about 1780 and was "discovered" by John Baker in 1798. Baker and his family promptly got lost in the large cave for several days before finding their way out of one of the two entrances. In 1800 James Kincaid began mining saltpetre there for making gun powder, and Great Saltpetre Cave boomed with that early industry, especially during

the War of 1812, the Mexican War, and later during the Civil War. At one time the production there was greater than that of Mammoth Cave.

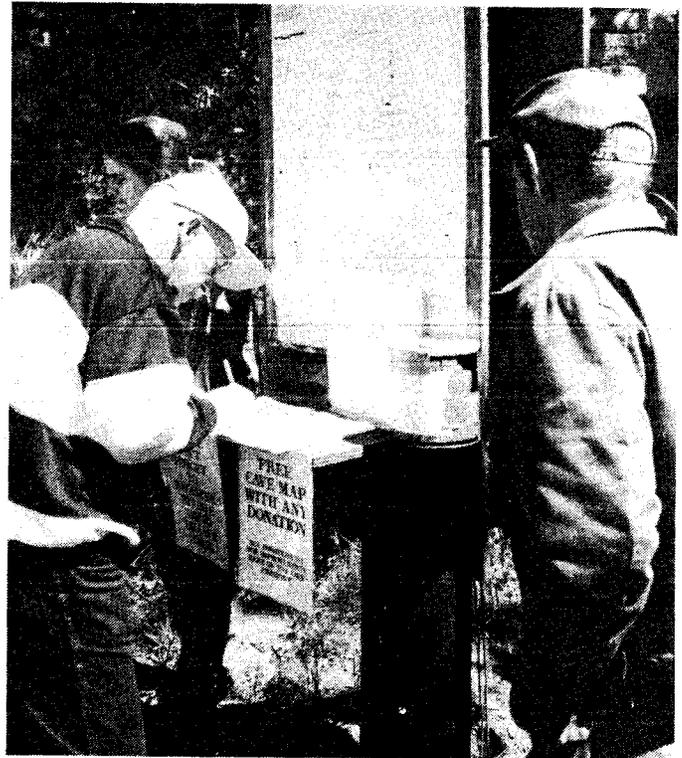
From the time of the first long hunter poking into the mountain with flaming pine knots, people have left their names and dates inside. More recent visitors used spray paint or lipstick. Some of the dates go back to about 1800, including one of C.A. Stewart. In a narrow bone-white passage near the south mouth is a signature of "D. Boon."

In 1940 John Lair, song writer, performer, and promoter, bought both entrances and created his now famous "Renfro Valley Barn Dance" there, from a natural stone stage in front of rows of chairs in a huge chamber he called "Echo Auditorium."

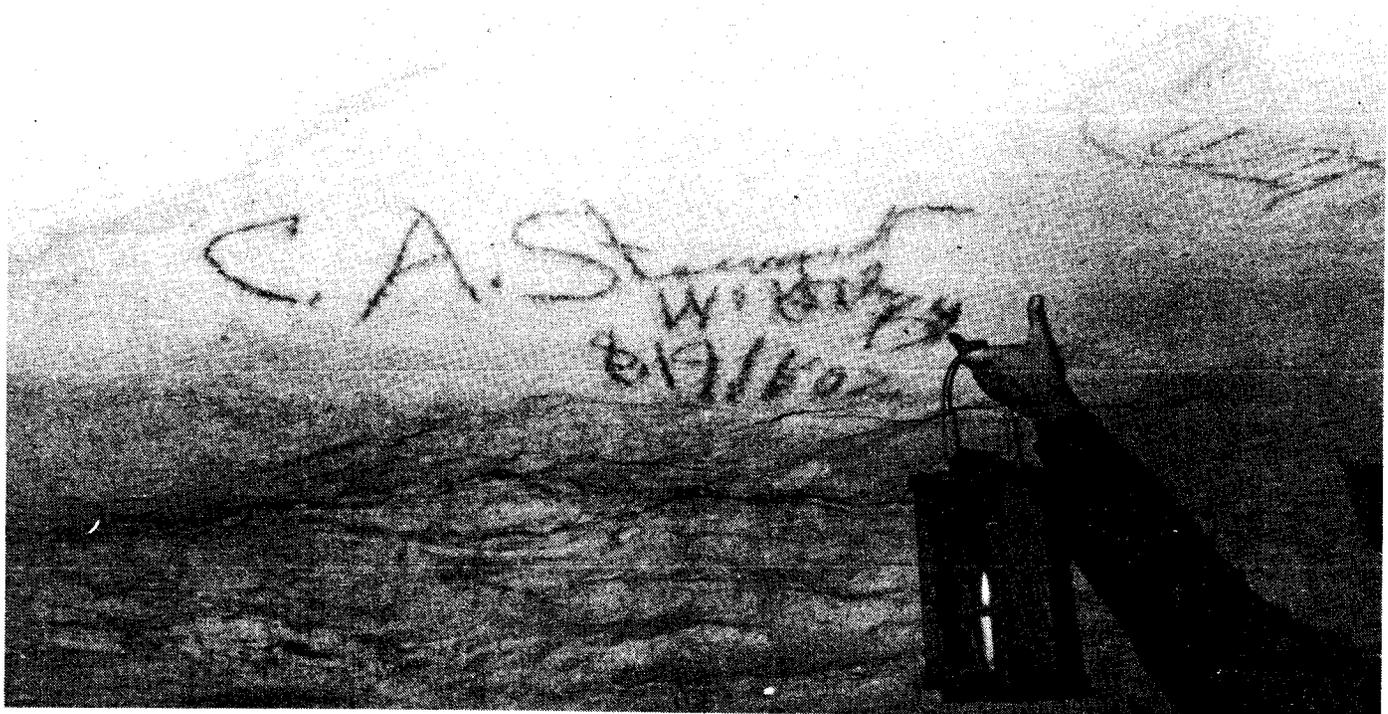
J.R. French, of Mount Vernon, visited the cave during the brief tour, and running one of the bulldozers inside the



Allan Watts and son, Michael, dressed as Union soldiers, led some of the visitors on tours of the Great Saltpetre Cave. Inside are supposed to be some soldiers' graves.



People from across the nation visited the old cave last month, signing in before each tour. Two grottos of the National Speleological Society control the historic cave and only open it one day a year.



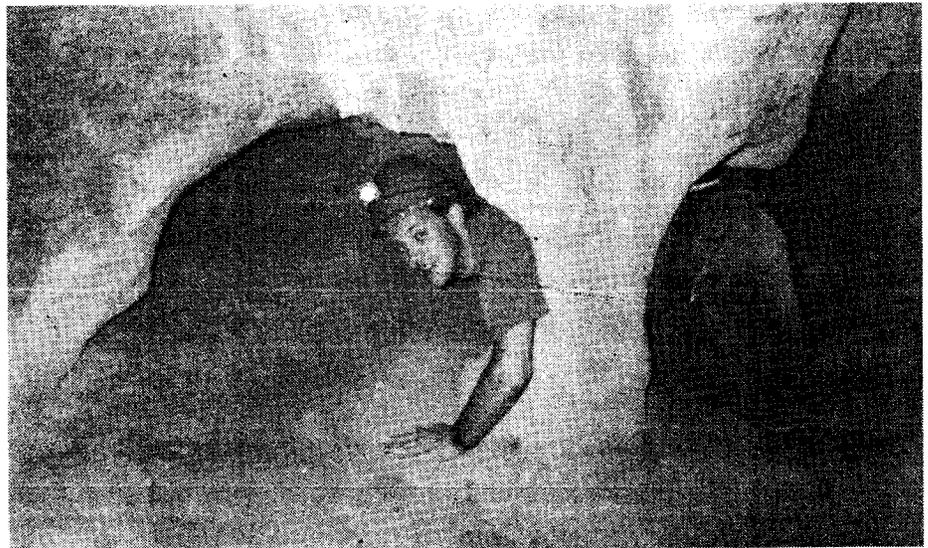
Nitrate mining has taken place within the Rockcastle County cave since about 1800. Some early visitors and workers signed their names on the smooth walls. Here "C.A. Stewart, 1802" can be seen. There may be earlier signatures, including "D. Boon."
(All photos by Mike Steely)

cave as Lair was preparing the cavern for shows and tours. French said that, as a child, he visited the cave and bought his first soft-drink, a 7-Up, and drank it sitting on the bluff outside the southern mouth when he was eleven years old.

French, adding to the lore of the cave, said a local man who worked through the week in Ohio hid his pay under a large tree just down from the cave and made regular deposits into his Mason jar. One day he moved from Ohio, gathered his family, dug up the money, and bought a farm near the cave.

French said that he and a brother did most of the earth moving inside the cave for Lair and drove a Volkswagen back and forth, inside and out, to bring in parts and fuel.

In 1989 Great Saltpetre Cave came under the management of the National Speleological Society, a country-wide organization of cavers, scientists, and historians who have gated the cave, with old bars from



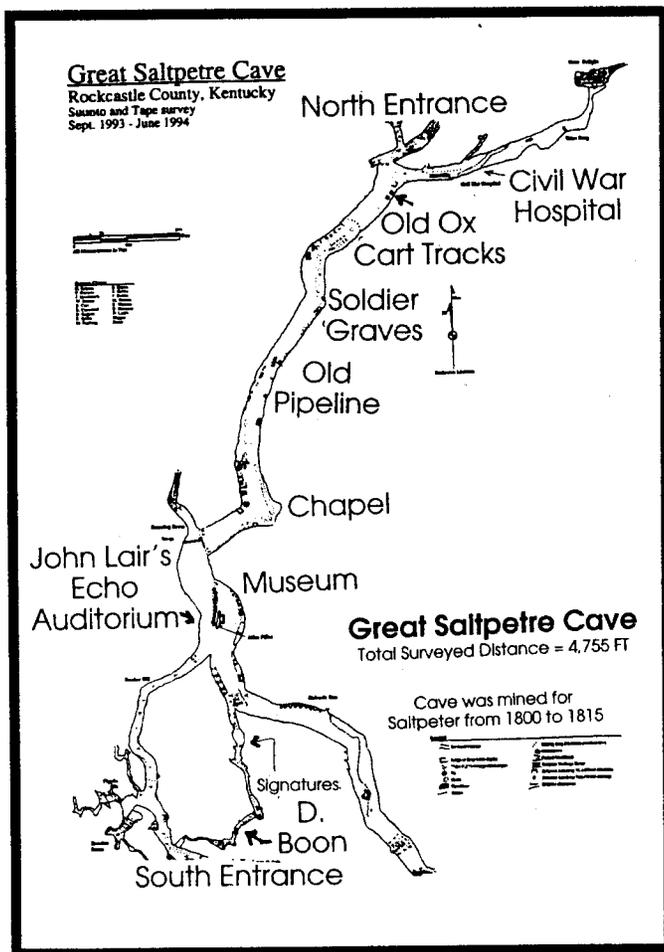
While Great Saltpetre Cave has been mapped there are still places to explore, as this member of the Cincinnati Cave Club recently demonstrated.

the Rockcastle County jail, to protect the cave and its wildlife.

Two NSS grottos, Cincinnati and Lexington, plan to restore the cave and the woodlands nearby, construct hiking trails and camping facilities, and study the cave.

Anyone interested in volunteering, touring, or getting information about the cave should write: Great Saltpetre Cave, c/o John E. Wisher, 7427 Thompson Road, Cincinnati, Ohio 45247. Information about the cave, its history, or donations are also welcome.

Mike Steely, Route 1, Box 22, Jellico, TN 37762, is an author and former newspaper editor. His work appears regularly in *The Explorer*.



Cavers To Converge On Rockcastle County

Spelunkers, known to most of us as cavers, will be flocking to Rockcastle County July 12, 13, and 14th, to take part in a "Karst-O-Rama" event at Great Saltpetre Cave near Mt. Vernon. The gathering of caving clubs will feature trips to several area caverns, a vertical rope contest, programs, door prizes, tours of the cave, meals, camping, and companionship. Proceeds from the event go to the preservation and restoration of the historic cave. Anyone wanting information, should contact Mark Seyfang, 3807 Ferdinand Place, Apt. 15, Cincinnati, OH 45209-2139.