HUNTSVILLE CAVE--DOES IT REALLY EXIST?

by Joy Russell

A few weeks ago before I was to speak to the third graders at Watson

Elementary about the history of the Town of Huntsville, I was

challenged by a question that was given to me by them concerning

whether or not there is a cave located under the Huntsville Square.

It seems that some of the third graders had heard rumors that there

was a cave and that perhaps there might be "buried treasure" in it.

This was a subject they wanted to know about and since I had suggested

to their teachers that they prepare some questions to ask me, I was

obligated to try and find the answer for them. I had also heard

rumors that there was a cave under the City but I had never heard or

read any definite facts about it. Since there seemed to be nothing

written about it, I placed a notice in this newspaper asking that

people call me if they had ever heard anything about it.

As a result of that notice, I have spoken with about a dozen people

concerning this cave. It seems that a lot of people have heard of it

but that most people were in the same position that I was in...they

knew only bits and pieces about it. But after talking with these

people and by putting all of their bits and pieces together, I have

gathered the following information about the cave.

Yes, it seems that there definitely IS "something" located under the

Square of Huntsville. My dictionary defines a cave as "a hollow space

underground or an underground cavity", so by using that definition and

weighing the information I was told, I tried to determine if this

should be classified as "a cave".

Some people said that they didn't think this was really a cave but

was merely a series of tunnels that had been carved in the rock by

water. One person remembers that years ago they had heard a young man

speak of these tunnels after he had explored some of them. The young

man related that some parts of the tunnels were tall enough to walk

upright in and other parts were so small that they required a person

to crawl on their belly to get through them. It seems that these

tunnels run in many different directions and whether or not all of

them connect is not known.

One person said that this couldn't be classified as a cave because the

entrances were only "sinkholes" and that there wasn't a proper cave

opening by which to enter it. At one time it seems that there were

several of these sinkholes located at various locations around

Huntsville but over the years people have filled them up because they

were a nuisance. The "sinkhole" that most people remember was

located somewhere in a field near the Huntsville Cemetery. Since the

old two-story school building was located nearby, it was common

knowledge among the people who attended school there, that this

"sinkhole" led to an underground tunnel. This two-story school

building was moved from its location on College Street by rolling it

on logs to the present location of Watson Elementary School in 1928.

Huntsville has many out-croppings of limestone rock that protrude out

of the ground . Several of the openings to the tunnels were located

in these areas. One such opening was apparently located near the

corner of Lee and Maple Streets, south of the current post office.

I was told that a landowner poured concrete into this opening to seal

it up. About 1936, Chancie Duncan used to relate the story of how a

dog was chasing a rabbit and entered into the opening at this

location. The dog and rabbit both disappeared and after several days

the dog crawled out of the sinkhole that was located in the field near

the Huntsville Cemetery on the other side of town from where it went

in.

Somewhere near where the street goes around the "Hill" to the Middle

School, there was another opening. Years ago some of the boys would

play hooky from school and would hide out in the tunnel located here

until it was time to go home from school. Another opening was located

under what is now the new playground between the present kindergarten

building and the gym. Because this opening was such a nuisance, for

many years it was used to dispose of cans, bottles and trash from the

school, and when it was almost full, dirt was spread over it to cover

it completely.

I was also told by one person about a vast cavity that was discovered

when a local cafe was being built years ago. Stones were dropped into

this cavity and it was determined that it was too deep to fill in. It

was decided to put it to use, so the cafe drained its plumbing into

the hole. By the way, this cafe is no longer in operation and has not

been for a long time.

Another opening that I was told about was apparently located somewhere

near the old "Famous" building on the south side of the square.

Before the square and the roads were paved, there was an opening

somewhere near this building. Within the last couple of years, while

digging in the alley behind the Cain building to repair an utility

line, the backhoe bucket being used by the utility crew broke into an

underground opening which was located only about two feet under the

top of the ground. I called one of the men who were present at the

time and he told me that this happened on a day when the temperature

was in the 20's. According to him, at the time the backhoe bucket

broke through the ground into the tunnel, steam came up out of the

tunnel for about an hour. He felt this steam was caused because the

temperature inside the tunnel was warmer than the air temperature.

When the tunnel filled with cooler air, the steam stopped and the crew

stuck their heads down into the hole and looked into the tunnel with

their flashlights. The tunnel ran as far as they could see both to

the North and South and the floor of the tunnel was located about 8 or

9 feet below the surface of the ground. According to Howard and Dixie

Cain, there were several dumptrucks full of gravel dumped into it but

this didn't begin to fill it up. The utility company finally placed a

large metal pipe across the hole and ran their pipes inside of it and

were able to cover it this way.

As to whether or not all of the tunnels from these openings connect or

not...I have no answer. The young men who years ago entered the

sinkhole near the Huntsville Cemetery evidently were able to travel

through the tunnels and exited on the south side of the square near

the old "Famous" building. They told of being able to hear the sound

of horses and wagons overhead on the unpaved street when they were in

the tunnel. From this information it would seem that the tunnel they

traveled in did in fact reach from near the Cemetery and extended

under the Square.

I received a call from Thelma Faulkner who told me that when she was a

small child she remembers vividly that one day her mother was very

upset because she had discovered that Thelma's two brothers, Albert

and Noel King, had went into the cave. According to Thelma they went

through the tunnels and talked about them for years.

Also Howard and Dixie Cain have related to me that when they ran a

cafe on the square many years ago, that Harry Logue and his brother

went into the cave. Evidently going into caves was their hobby and on

one such excursion one of the Logue brothers got stuck in a narrow

place in one of the tunnels and it took quite an effort to get him

out. Dixie thought the Logue brothers said that there was one big

room under the square and a lot of tunnels.

History of the settlement of Huntsville records that one reason the

early settlers decided on this location for a town was its abundant

springs that would provide water. On the property previously owned by

Arlis Coger behind Ozark Foods, there is a big spring that used to

have a huge oak tree beside of it. This location is recorded as being

where Indian tribes and white men held their pow-wows and may have

signed treaties for the Indians to move out of this country. Some

people who called me thought there was an opening near this spring

that went into the cave. Going East from that location, all the way

down Swamp Street, springs were known to exist. In fact the reason

Swamp Street is so named is because it did in fact used to be a

"swampy" area and water stood there. Many have said that these

springs seep out of the underground tunnels.

Before it was filled in, an old hand-dug well located within a couple

of blocks of the square contained water that constantly moved.

Instead of the water standing still in the bottom of the well, it

would seem that there was an underground stream running through the

well. Water in this well was always known to be ice cold.

Another story that I have heard was that these tunnels were used in

the 1860's to hide slaves that were escaping from the South to the

safety of the North. Supposedly this was one of the stops on the

"underground railroad" that was in operation to assist them. I could

find nothing to prove this theory so I couldn't say if this was true

or not.

I did ask at the City Hall if there were any kind of documents or

surveys that the City might have that would show any of these tunnels

and I was told that there was nothing.

Based on the above information and the definition that a cave is "a

hollow space underground or a underground cavity", I would have to

say , " Yes, I do believe there is a cave under the Square as well as

other parts of the town of Huntsville". As to whether or not this

cave contains "treasure" as some of the third graders have heard...I

believe the only "treasure" to be found would probably be sewage and

old bottles, cans and trash that have been tossed into some of the

sinkholes. When I reported my findings to the third graders, the

question I heard most was "Why would anyone want to fill in the

openings and keep people out". That's a question that each landowner

would have to answer individually, but I can guess that these

landowners probably weren't nearly as excited as the third graders

were about having a hole in the ground on their property. As far as I

know at this time, there are no openings that give access to the

tunnels , however, I can't help but wish there were because I am

curious as to what exactly is down there.

I want to express my "Thanks" to all of the third graders at Watson

Elementary for having inquiring minds that wanted to know about this

cave rumor that they had heard. Because of them and their interest,

this story has been researched and written and now there is some

recorded information about the cave that did not exist before. I'm

certain that this covers only a small part of what is known about the

"Huntsville Cave" and I urge anyone else that knows other information

to contact me. If you enjoyed reading this story, stop by the

library of the Madison County Genealogical and Historical Society and

find out more about Madison County's history.