



Dunbar Cave and Idaho Springs Hotel

For over 10,000 years, the cave now known as Dunbar Cave offered shelter to many of Tennessee's prehistoric Indians. Excavations in the cave entrance have revealed arrowheads, bone needles and other tools. Indian burial sites have been found in the entrance. Diggings beneath the manmade entrance have revealed even more evidence of early Indian habitation.

Dunbar Cave is the largest known cave on the Western Highland Ridge of Tennessee. The cave entrance is 25 feet up on the face of a 75-foot bluff. Today it is a semi-circular opening 60 feet wide and twelve feet high. Currently a poured concrete floor outside the cave contains about eight and a half miles of passage that have been explored and mapped with an undetermined number of passages yet to be explored or mapped.

In 1790 Isaac Rowe Peterson of North Carolina discovered this cave and realized it would provide shelter for his family. Peterson decided to return to North Carolina for his family but first staked his claim. Upon his return in the spring of 1791, he found Thomas Dunbar well established in a blockhouse on the land which Mr. Peterson had claimed. This blockhouse was in the vicinity of the bathhouse now headquarters for the state natural area.



The two families argued for sometime but with winter approaching the Dunbars gave the Petersons shelter. It is said that Mr. Peterson refused to stay in the blockhouse and spent much of the winter in a hollow sycamore log. In 1792 in the matter of Peterson vs. Dunbar, Isaac Peterson received clear title to the land in payment of one hundred pounds to Thomas Dunbar. However, the cave became known as Dunbar Cave. Thomas Dunbar's daughter Anne was the first white girl to be born in what is now Montgomery County.

During 1847 saltpeter was mined in Dunbar Cave for a short period of time. It was shipped to the Sycamore Creek Powder Mill near Ashland City.

The report that Jenny Lind visited the cave in 1851 and sang has been disproved. She visited Mammoth Cave.

There are several versions of how Peterson's leap received its name. One version is that in the cave, either searching for money hidden by Jesse James or while leading a group of people, Bryant Peterson fell into a 35-foot gorge. One version said he died; another version said he was rescued by friends with a grapevine rope and suffered a fractured leg and cuts and bruises. Another version is that the account of the fall is fictional, invented by Peterson himself.

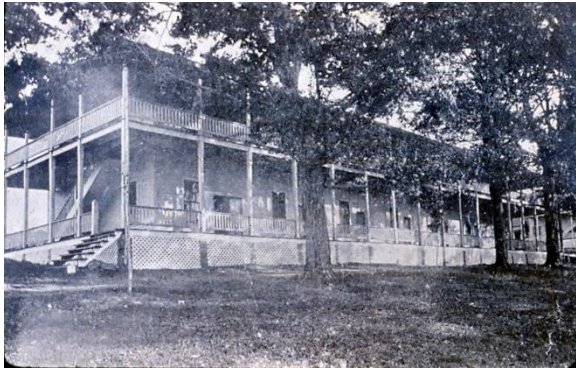
Charles P. Warfield who once owned an interest in the cave lost his way and his light while exploring the cave and it took him two days to find his way out.

During the Civil War, the Confederates used the cave to conceal horses and troops from the Union Army. Local residents also used the cave to hide their livestock and other items from Union Troops. The cave continued to be used for social affairs during the Civil War as Colonel S.D. Bruce, commander of the Union troops occupying Clarksville, hosted a picnic here. After the Civil War, Ku Klux Klan meetings were held at the cave.

A counterfeiting ring making Mexican silver coins is said to have operated around Clarksville after the Civil War. Two Clarksville brothers who were reputed to be the local ringleaders of an East Tennessee ring were seen entering the cave. The sheriff formed a posse and entered the cave only to find the men had disappeared, evidently through a back entrance. The posse found some of the counterfeit coins but failed to find the back entrance. Another account of this incident said a Mr. Cherry was the counterfeiter.

From 1879 to 1895 the cave changed ownership several times. It was ideally suited for picnics, camp meetings, family get-togethers, fairs, etc. The cool breeze from the cave offered comfort on hot summer days and nights. Once a race track covered the level land between the cave and the mineral springs.

Deed restrictions prevented commercialization of the cave. The sale or use of intoxicating beverages was a deed restriction that remained in force over 50 years.

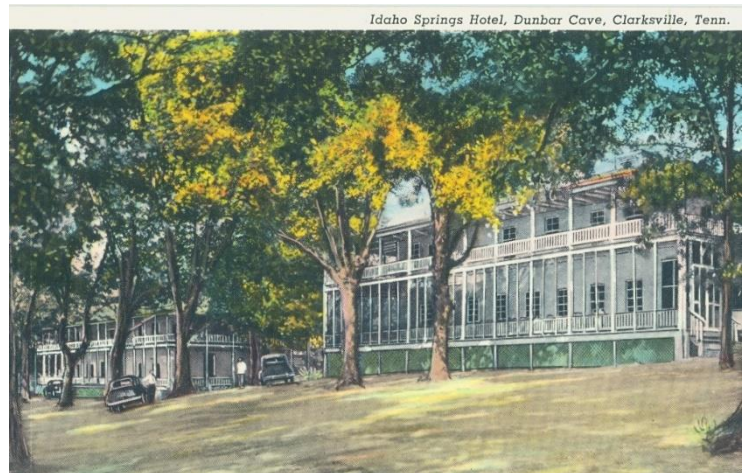


Located near the cave were Idaho Springs and the Idaho Springs Hotel. The springs were mineral springs which the Indians called Idaho which meant "Jewel of the Mountain." One legend said the Indians felt renewed courage and strength after drinking the waters and so named the springs Idaho. Another said an Indian chief who stopped with his tribe to drink was named Idaho and gave his name to the springs.

In 1858 a number of cabins were erected near the Idaho Springs with plans to erect a large hotel later. The project was abandoned due to the Civil War and the property lay comparatively unoccupied until 1879 when purchased by James A. Tate from the Hickory Wild Academy.

Professor Tate employed a skillful Irishman to assist him and built a hotel for guests to enjoy the mineral waters and healthful air. Professor Tate also bottled and marketed the mineral water and bottles of it were sold as late as 1944. The hotel featured nice accommodations and provided an excellent menu. Families also built summer homes around the resort grounds and the men would ride the St. Bethlehem train to and from Clarksville.

Idaho Springs contained three mineral springs, consisting of red, white and black sulphur, alum and chalybeate. The red spring contained pyrite, a combination of iron ore and sulphur. The black spring primarily contained sulphur which gave off an odor of rotten eggs. These waters were thought to cure hills, diabetes and all types of skin and blood disorders. The air was said to be free of asthma. These springs were said to be equal, if not superior, to any in the state. The white sulphur spring water in particular, was said to give one a ravenous appetite and the cool pure air from the cave assisted digestion to such an extent that an invalid would be under no restraint to diet.



In 1884 the hotel and property were purchased by Colonel A.G. Goodlett and H.C. Merritt. These gentlemen expanded the hotel to accommodate from 200 to 300 guests. The hotel advertised that livery and feed stables were furnished, telephone services were available and that no mosquitoes were present. Rates were \$8.00 per week for board and lodging, with special rates for families and those spending the season. In that year J.H. Bowling and J.M. Rice were the managers. After a fire in 1893 the hotel was replaced by another one at a cost of \$10,000. In 1895 O.D. Thomson was the proprietor and John Rice served as guide. After the decline of spas and mineral springs were no longer fashionable the hotel closed.

In 1901 the cave was under the Management of Sterling Fort of Adams Station. In 1906 large amounts of fill dirt were placed near the entrance of the cave and a wooden floor constructed. Dances were held on this wooden floor in the late 1890s and early 1900s. By 1920 the entrance had a limited concrete floor and Mr. L.I. MacQueen was the manager. Carbide lamps similar to those used by miners were used for lighting the cave before an electrical system was installed.

In the early 1920s livestock conventions were held at Dunbar Cave, the last one being in 1923.

In 1931 a group of Clarksville businessmen formed the Dunbar Cave and Idaho Springs Corporation to develop the cave into a resort which would be "The Show Place of the South." An earthen dam was built across the valley near the cave

entrance to form a 15-acre lake fed by a stream from within the cave. The lake was stocked with fish and boats were available for rent. A bridge was constructed across the lake near the cave entrance for access to the opposite side for nature hikes. A modern concrete swimming pool with three diving boards and a bathhouse were built. A small swimming pool of earlier days no longer existed having been in the area of the new lake. Tennis courts and other recreational facilities and restrooms were also constructed. At the cave entrance the dance floor was enlarged and the concession stand extended along the cliff wall with a railed concrete floored terrace to the concession stand which overlooked the dance floor. A lower deck supported a fine arcade. There was a bandstand and some of the nation's finest big bands performed here: Kay Kaiser, Artie Shaw, Guy Lombardo, Tommy Dorsey, Blue Baron, Shop Fields and his Rippling Rhythms, Glenn Miller and Benny Goodman. These bands would be between dates on the Louisville to Memphis circuit and would stop overnight in Clarksville. Each performance of a noted band would be insured for \$2,000 with Lloyds of London against cancellation due to rain. The popular bands of Francis Craig, Owen Bradley and Beasley Smith from Nashville also performed here. Snooky Lanson, who later went on to fame with "Your Hit Parade," sang with these Nashville bands.

Having dances at the cave entrance was not new to Clarksville. Dances on the wooden floor at the cave entrance had been held in 1895 with Vincent Nigro's band providing the music. Such dances continued into the early 1940s.

In 1934 the Corporation hired W.W. Dunn as manager of the cave and the concessions. A catering service was provided for banquets and bridge parties. An electrical lighting system was installed in the cave and cave tours were conducted regularly.

The Idaho Springs Hotel which was near the cave was remodeled and could accommodate 200 guests. Henry Merritt, one of the stockholders, was manager, Leonard Sowell was the desk clerk and Mrs. L.L. Dubois supervised the dining room. The mineral waters of the Idaho Springs were available for guests along with excellent food and recreation, such as bowling. Each mineral spring had a roof with lattice walls and a concrete floor. A pump was installed on each spring to send the sulphur water bubbling to the top.

The cave and the hotel flourished during the 1930s and early 1940s. In 1945 William Kleeman, Mayor of Clarksville, purchased the 400-acre resort and W.W. Dunn continued as manager for about two years.

In 1948 Mayor Kleeman sold the cave to Roy Acuff, a country music star. W.W. Dunn returned as manager. Mr. Acuff built an 18-hole golf course to the east of the lake. Billed as Roy Acuff's Dunbar Cave, Tuesdays and Fridays at the cave became square dance nights with round dancing on Saturday nights. On Sunday there was country music. A radio show of country music was also broadcast from the cave.

In 1950 the Idaho Springs Hotel was destroyed by fire and never rebuilt. Shortly thereafter Mr. Dunn left and Spot and Gladys Acuff managed the cave for some time. During the 1950s Dunbar Cave was selected as a fallout shelter and was stocked with the necessary supplies.

In 1951, the 4th of July celebration at the cave included a parachute landing on the lake, an afternoon show at the open air theater featuring Roy Acuff and his Smoky Mountain Boys, and a dance that night.

The cave began to decline in popularity in the 1950s. Individuals no longer needed the cave for its cool breeze since man-made air conditioning was available and entertainment was provided by television.

In 1963 Roy Acuff sold the property to McKay King, a local contractor. The swimming pool closed around 1967 when several municipal pools opened. In 1971 with Mr. King's death, his widow closed the cave.

In 1972 the City of Clarksville purchased the golf course for \$3000,000 leaving about 110 acres in the cave property. In 1973 the State of Tennessee purchased the remainder of the cave property from King's estate. The swimming pool was demolished and filled with dirt and the bathhouse was renovated into a visitor's center and museum. All signs of commercialization such as electric lighting were removed from the cave, its entrance and concession area.

Today Dunbar Cave is a state park.