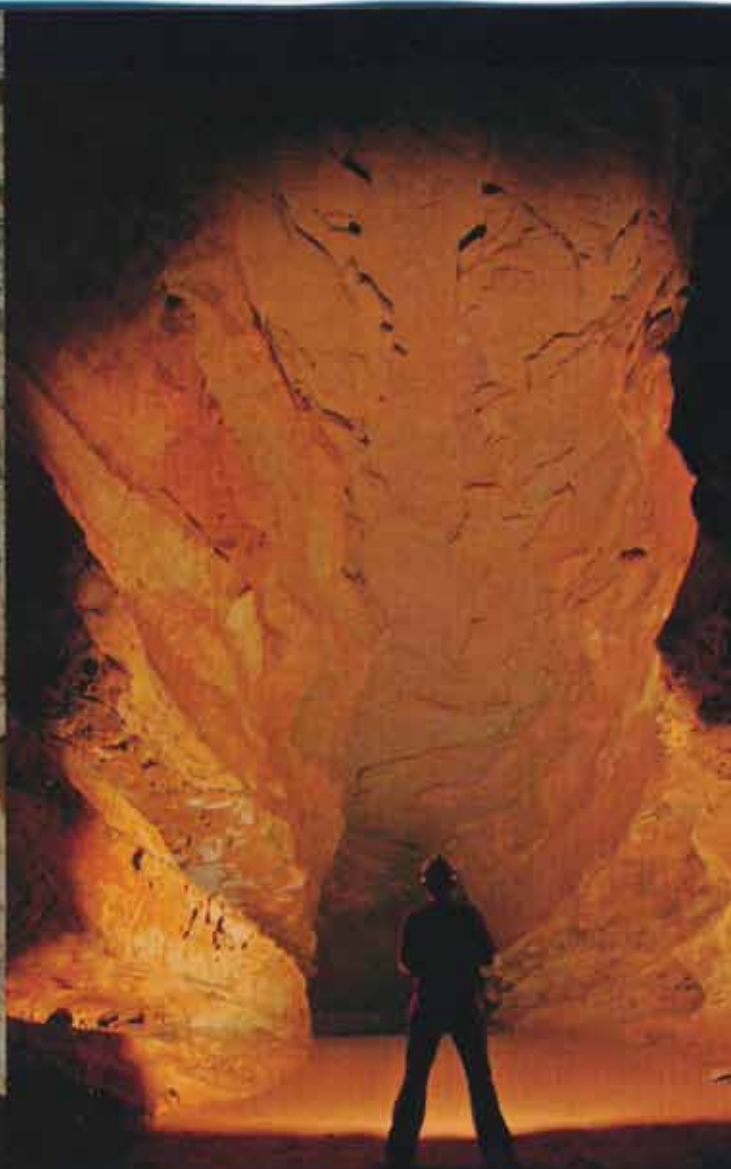
A photograph of a vast, underground cavern with layered rock walls. A person stands in the center, looking towards a bright opening in the distance. The lighting is dramatic, with the person's shadow cast on the floor.

The Echo Auditorium is the largest chamber in Great Saltpetre Cave, about a third of the way in and also where the Renfro Valley Barn Dance was held in the 1940s. On your way to Echo Auditorium, you'll walk over Bunker Hill (center). The Chapel room (right) is located off Echo Auditorium, because long ago the auditorium was referred to as "The Church." The Chapel is in a bend in the passageway and has a higher ceiling, which makes it feel like you are in a small room when you stand on top of the mounds of dirt left from the saltpeter mining operation. Photos: Nathan Williams

Preserving
Rockcastle's

Great Salt



Walking through spacious passages of solid rock, you feel like you're in another world. Soft light illuminates the winding cave passage. Water droplets gently fall, punctuating the silence. As the tour guide leads you into the depths of Great Saltpetre Cave, you'll experience the thrill of a whole new world under the surface of Kentucky.

Saltpetre Cave

by Jennifer Pinkley



Popular performers for the Renfro Valley Barn Dance held in the Great Saltpetre Cave included Jess Baker, Virginia Sutton, Old Joe Clark, Linda Lou Martin, and Bob Baker. Photo: Renfro Valley/Rockcastle Karst Conservancy

John Lair, well-known songwriter and harmonica player, left his mark as a manager, promoter, and organizer by founding the Renfro Valley Barn Dance, initially in Ohio in 1937 but then returning it to his home in Rockcastle County in a barn and later purchasing, along with Dr. Walker Owens, the Great Saltpetre Cave where dances were held to huge crowds deep within the cave (in Echo Auditorium). The opening night was broadcast from the cave on CBS radio in late 1939, and later on many other radio shows. Photo: Renfro Valley/Rockcastle Karst Conservancy

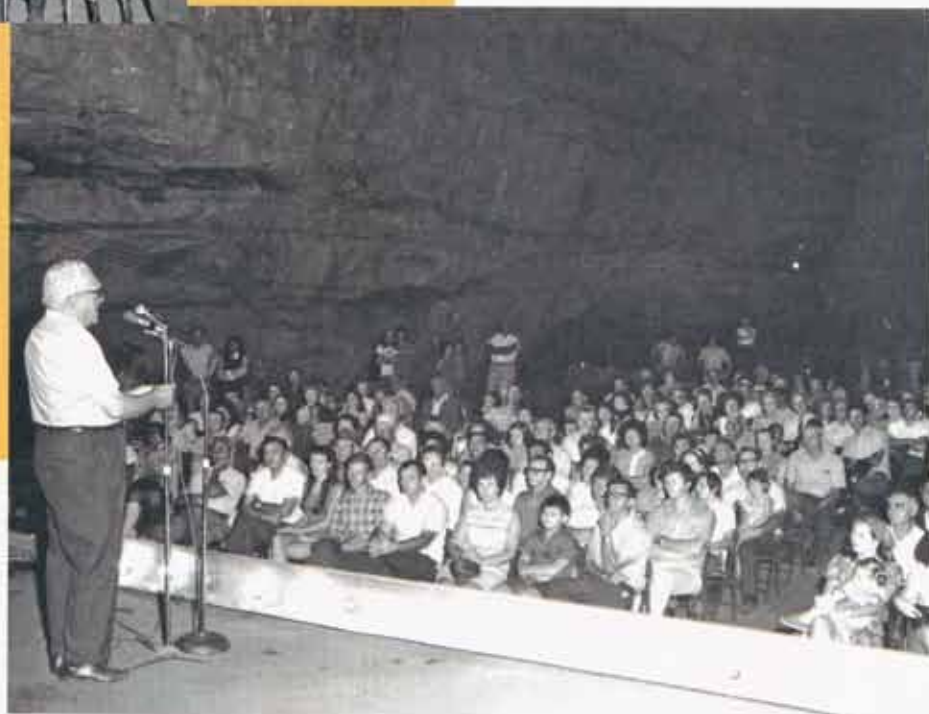
The cave, located in Rockcastle County, is deeply entwined in Kentucky's history. Through the years, the cave property has passed through many hands, and in late 2006, the 306-acre cave preserve once again changed owners. Now, a new nonprofit organization, the Rockcastle Karst Conservancy, or RKC, owns the unique cave.

Great Saltpetre's rich history

Great Saltpetre Cave has played an important role in Kentucky history. "It's got quite a bit of human intrigue," says Mary Gratsch, past chair of the Great Saltpetre Preserve Management Committee, the group that manages the cave property.

The first person to describe visiting the cave was John Baker, who one day in 1799 noticed a dark hole in the hillside. He and his family ventured into the cave to explore, but their torches soon went out, trapping them in the inky darkness for two days.

In the early 1800s, miners discovered a valuable mineral in the cave: saltpeter, one of the main ingredients in gunpowder. Miners started digging the mineral out of the cave to help provide gunpowder for the War of 1812. "A vast amount of human effort went into mining that saltpeter," explains Gratsch. "At one time, more than 60 people were working in that small, cramped environment. The sound must have been terrific: digging, pounding, blasting, all (those people) work-



ing in saltpeter pits with no electricity." Even today, you can see remnants of the saltpeter mining operations inside the cave.

After the mining days were over, the cave changed hands many times, at one point becoming home to the Renfro Valley Barn Dance in the 1940s. Audiences gathered deep inside the cave to watch some of the best acts of the day perform in the enormous Echo Auditorium. The cave later became a commercial tourist attraction, but was then closed to the public for many years until a private historical foundation purchased the property in the late 1980s.

But no matter who owned the cave, it has always been connected to the community. "The cave actually appears on the county seal," says Andy Niekamp, past chairman of the RKC, "so the cave and the property are very much associated with the county and its residents."

People who grew up near the cave, in fact, considered it not only a natural wonder, but a shortcut under the mountain. "One woman told me she lived on the side of the cave where the main entrance is now,

and her boyfriend lived on the other side," Gratsch says. "It was a lot shorter for him to ride his horse through the cave to pick her up, and then they would go back through the cave and go on their date."

Visitors are lured to the cave not only because of the intriguing scenery and history underground, but also by the beauty of the preserve itself. Many people don't

know what to expect when they first plan to visit the preserve, but Niekamp says, "When they get there, they find it's kind of a magical place. You look up and all you see are trees and mountains."

Protecting the rich history and scenic beauty of the cave for future generations is the main goal of the new conservancy.

What is the Rockcastle Karst Conservancy?

The RKC is a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving caves and karst in the Rockcastle region of Kentucky. Great Saltpetre Cave is the first acquisition for the RKC, but protecting the historic cave is only one of their objectives.

"Another part of our mission is also education," explains Niekamp. In fact, the RKC plans to work with the local community to educate the public about caves and the unique geology called "karst" that dominates Kentucky. Karst geology (terrain featuring sinkholes, underground streams, and caves) is very vulnerable to pollu-

tion, so the RKC wants to work with area residents and landowners to teach people about karst in addition to protecting caves.

Niekamp says there are many different ways the RKC would like to work with area residents to help protect caves and karst areas. The group can work with landowners to protect caves from vandalism and advise them about liability issues. In addition, the RKC can use many tools to help protect sensitive caves and karst: conservation easements, memos of understanding, leases, or even purchasing land.

The RKC started working with the Daniel Boone National Forest to help the Forest Service manage access to two caves and to keep an eye out for vandalism. "We can be the eyes and ears in the field for them," says Niekamp.

If a resident of the Rockcastle region needs help protecting caves or karst, Deb Bledsoe, RKC's karst monitoring coordinator, says RKC can help. "One



Adjacent to the Echo Auditorium is an area called the Museum Section. A fence surrounds a large vat used during salt peter mining and farther back (shown in this photo composite) are other artifacts typical of the 1800s salt peter mining in the cave, such as a cart that oxen would have pulled and a millstone from the area. Photo: Nathan Williams

For more info

RKC is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the education and preservation of caves and karst in the Rockcastle County, Kentucky, region through education, land acquisition, and resource management. To learn more about Rockcastle Karst Conservancy, go online to www.rkci.org.

RKC owns the property but it is managed by the Great Saltpetre Preserve Management Committee. RKC does not directly manage any preserve they own. Each preserve has its own management committee for care, operations, and access since each property has its own unique features. For more information about Great Saltpetre, go online to www.caves.org/conservancy/gsp. For questions or requests for visiting the GSP, e-mail gsp@caves.org.

To learn more about caves in general, contact the National Speleological Society at (256) 852-1300 or go online to www.caves.org. To find a caving club in Kentucky (called grottos) on the Web site, click on "Find A Local Caving Organization" and choose a state, or ask the office staff for help.

of the best things they can do is meet with someone from the RKC and talk to them about all the different options for protecting their land," she says.

One of RKC's projects is working with the local elementary school in Mt. Vernon to develop educational programs; volunteers take 2nd- and 4th-graders on a tour of Great Saltpetre Cave every year. Bledsoe and other members of the RKC are also looking into ways to develop additional programs to get the community involved in their work.

Visiting Great Saltpetre Preserve

Each year on the weekend after Mother's Day, the entire Great Saltpetre Preserve is open to the public for an open house, which usually attracts nearly 1,000 people.

Visitors choose from a variety of activities, including hiking, picnicking by the creek, and venturing into the cave. The hour-long cave tour takes visitors through many historic parts of the cave, and the tour guides sprinkle in generous bits of geology, history, and humor.

In addition to touring the cave, visitors can also explore the many trails meandering along the creek or winding up nearby hills.

RKC representatives also take the time to share information about their new organization, discuss what they hope to accomplish in the community, and explain how

area residents can get involved.

Although the cave is only open to the public once a year for a large event, the cave can be visited, with advance notice, throughout the year by special arrangement with RKC for educational purposes, such as for school groups, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and other similar groups for campground use, hiking the trails, and touring the cave.

Jud Werner, Great Saltpetre Preserve treasurer, explains that visitors are "sponsored" by one of the grotto members who have access to the preserve. The group needs more volunteers to handle requests, so if you are interested in joining, contact the Great Saltpetre Preserve committee by e-mail at gsp@caves.org or go online to www.caves.org/conservancy/gsp to read more about Great Saltpetre Preserve.

Werner says, "RKC and GSP are aware of the gem we have in Kentucky. We do not consider Great Saltpetre as a commercial tour cave or just an amusement for the public. It is a very special place that many feel highly protective of. Sharing this concept is just as important, if not more so, as sharing the place itself."

Those who do visit Great Saltpetre Cave understand what has lured thousands of people to this cave for more than 200 years, and also why so many people are now working to preserve the pristine world under Kentucky's rolling hills.