

**THE ROBBERS' CAVE – AN ACCOUNTING OF DISAPPEARANCES IN
PUTNAM COUNTY**

Source: The Daily Inter Ocean (Chicago. IL)
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The following story from an 1887 Chicago newspaper was discovered by Tennessee Tech Librarian Charlene McClain. In trying to locate the Putnam county cave mentioned in the story, Tech historians read Thomas Barr's 1961 publication "Caves of Tennessee." Barr visited 35 caves in Putnam County. In only one, Wade Pit, did Barr mention the discovery of skeletons. If you can help identify the cave in this story please contact Dr. Dickinson at Tennessee Tech. Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN: Sunday Oct. 9, 2011, pg. C-5.

Putnam County before the war, for 75 years had a road within three miles of Cookeville, leading from Louisville through this State down into Georgia and South Carolina. It was known as the Kentucky stock road, and was at that time the principal highway for traders between the two sections. Planters, slave dealers, and stockmen would drive their negroes, mules, etc., down to the Southern market, returning with the money from the sales. Such parties were frequently missing very mysteriously, no trace of them ever being found. The road ran through a wild, thinly-settled mountain country, the stopping places or dwellings where a traveler could get shelter frequently being 30 or 40 miles apart, and as recent investigations show, were kept by robbers and murderers of the worst description, who for years followed this business of whole-sale robbery and murder.

About 30 years ago a man, who is now a citizen of Cookeville, found a skeleton at the entrance to the cave, but no further investigation was ever made until yesterday, and it was left for a stranger to make discoveries that cast in the shade of all stories of like description where the writer finds his terrible characters only in his own brain. A party was organized under the leadership of Mr. Fred Kincaid to explore the cave where the skeleton was found 30 years ago.

Back on the mountain side about half a mile from one of the notorious stopping places described, the entrance to the cave was found. A hole something like a well, going straight down 35 feet, was first passed through, and then the cave opens into large cavern, with a downward course under the mountain. At the bottom of the shaft the party found human bones, and with a little digging in the debris which had accumulated at this point, unearthed about sixty skeletons of men who have been murdered and thrown down this hole. Some skulls were found with bullet-holes through, and others being mashed with an ax or instrument of that kind. Old citizens now living in this vicinity, say that the keepers of these dens would keep track of the travelers when they passed through with stock, and on their return they would be almost certain to disappear. The robbers were even so bold that they would take the clothing, saddles and harness of their victims and use them publicly. They would get a man drunk if possible, and as whisky was plenty and the custom of drinking so common, it was not a hard matter to do; then in their drunken stupor kill, rob, and throw their bodies in this hole. Without doubt, many men, as this fearful disclosure pores, never returned to their homes, and anxious friend waited,

and watched, and wondered why they returned not. Not far off, by the side of the road, still stands a house. The walls of one room are stained and spattered with human blood, and above, in the mountains, about 20 miles, was still a worse place, if possible, than this. Another cave is there, which would, if investigated, repeat the sickening story of yesterday's investigation. The people are much excited over this discovery, as many descendants of this robber gang are still living all through Putnam County, but "dead men tell no tales" and the history of these fearful crimes will never be known.

"Cumberland Tales," created by Calvin Dickinson and Michael Birdwell and sponsored by the Cookeville History Museum, welcomes any tale of this region's history. For more information, contact Calvin Dickinson at cdickinson@tntech.edu or Michael Birdwell at birdie@tntech.edu.

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