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The Madison County Alms House: A Poor But Proud Tradition

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The Madison County Alms House: A Poor But Proud Tradition

Oral history from the following—

Cecil Ashburn, David Fisher, Henry E. Gattis,
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The purpose of this report is to present as much information about the Madison County Alms House as can be gathered in the time available. Sources include the Madison County Commission Records and interviews with numerous residents of the area at the time and employees of the Madison Limestone Company. In gathering oral information forty years after the fact, there were some gaps and inconsistencies relating to the beginning and ending of the Alms House. These we rectified as best we could.

Madison County was operating a poor house as early as 1863. The earliest indication found to date of a county poor house was when six year old Jim Britt was taken there by his mother. Jim was mentally and physically handicapped and his father had just been executed as a Yankee spy. Jim remained a ward of the county until he died in 1929 at 72 years of age. During his life, Jim lived in three different houses Madison County operated for the indigent. The first one he was taken to was replaced in 1870 by a poor farm of 200 acres given by Joseph Rice. Supervision of the farm alternated between Mr. T. P. Hereford and Mr. W. P. George. Mr. George supervised the Alms House during most of the 1920s and 1930s. An investigation into the condition of the children at the poor farm in June of 1920, may have led to the decision to relocate.

In 1922, J. N. Williams Construction Company built the new Alms House, more commonly known as the poor house, for Madison County. The poor house was located in what is now the center of the park on Kennamer Street which was then known as "poor house road." The building was approximately 80' x 30'. It was constructed of clay brick with a tin roof. There is some confusion as to whether it was one or two stories high. Oral accounts from several people agreed that it was two stories in front with a balcony and one story in back. A porch ran its length on both sides. There was a large common room in the center flanked by approximately eight rooms on each side. All rooms including the bathrooms opened onto the porch. The building was heated with coal oil. The structure seems to have been erected quickly because the plans were approved by the county commission 6 March 1922, and it was ready for occupancy 4 August 1922.

For the next thirteen years the Alms House served its purpose with no documented major changes. Most of the county records deal with routine expenditures: 19 February 1922—purchase of two stoves; 23 June 1923—installation of coil system for cooler water; 7 November 1923—repair of water pipe; and 20 June 1923—purchase of supplies costing \$50.63. The staff and supervision of the Alms House received attention from the board of commissioners. On 6 July 1925, the superintendent, Mr. Tom Giles, was asked to resign for unspecified reasons. Mr. W. F. George was elected to replace him. On 3 December 1928, Mr. George was still serving as superintendent. Records state he was directed to dismiss a colored employee. The only minutes dealing with the size of the staff are from 20 June 1934, which stated the salaries for the three employees amounted to \$37.50 per month. The average monthly cost of the Alms House was \$557. This figure comes from the following expenses: superintendent salary, \$50; employees salary, \$37.50;

physician, \$30; supplies, \$363; milk, \$6; clothing, \$37; and livestock feed, \$34.

The Madison County Commission Court ordered residents to and from the Alms House. These residents are referred to as “inmates.” The reasons for ordering someone to the Aims House, as opposed to placing them on the paupers list is not known. People on the paupers list were provided a monthly dole of approximately five dollars.

In 1935 another, and somewhat unclear, period began for the Alms House. It is not known if this change was due to the improving economy decreasing the number of destitute or if it was a simple change in policy. This uncertainty is heightened by the lack of available records. In any case, on 27 June 1935 the commissioners requested the Red Cross find homes for the sixteen residents of the Alms House. About one month later, 21 July, the Red Cross reported back their impressive success: they had located homes for all but two residents. This couple was now the sole residents of the Alms House, along with Mr. and Mrs. Lovelace who were placed in charge. How empty it must have been in such a large building with only four people in residence. On 2 September 1935 the county struck a deal with the City of Huntsville. The county allowed the city to tap into the power line at the Alms House in order to provide power to the growing Blossomwood Community springing up in return for the city paying the electric bill for the Alms House.

The fog around the poor house becomes more dense. On 16 September 1940 the Alms House was rented to Mr. M. J. Bingham for \$120 a year, with the City retaining the right to cancel the lease and use the Alms House as a T. B. hospital. This indicates the county was finished using the Alms House for its original purpose. There is a gap of sixteen years until 1956 when

the county made plans to sell the Alms House. What went on at the Alms House during these sixteen years?

Based on discussion with people who walked this area as children and with workers at the nearby Three Caves Quarry, the following changes developed. A paramount fact is the Alms House became multifunctional. There were numerous residents during the late 1940s and early 1950s who were indigent and Caucasian. Some were couples but most were elderly women. One woman was so stooped, that she placed her hands on a chair seat for support. One of the boys, Wendel Payne, grew up to be an insurance salesman. He tells of stopping by to collect insurance premiums from two elderly ladies in the early 1950s. He and his wife later took Christmas gifts of slippers and cotton stockings to these ladies. Their sincere appreciation and heartfelt gratitude are pleasant memories that linger still.

In addition to the Alms House, there was a small cow barn located approximately in the angle of Kennamer Street and the present pool/park fence. Other livestock included horses for the wagons and pigs as food supply. There was also a vegetable garden which today would be located across Kennamer Street. This garden was worked by both staff and residents. Oral history from most folk interviewed indicate the major pastime of the poor house residents was sitting on the front porch in rocking chairs and having good talks.

However, all residents of the poor house were not necessarily poor. A considerable number were Three Caves quarry workers. Both single and family men migrated to the Three Caves Quarry from the closed mines at Sherwood, Tennessee, around 1945 when the Madison County Limestone Company opened the quarry. There proved to be some unfortunate connections between Three Caves Quarry and the poor house. One of the workers who lived there was Philip Scott and his wife

Berlene. It seems that after arriving in Alabama they bought a brand new sporty red 1949 Ford. Berlene took great pride in this new car and washed it almost every day. One day, as the car was parked on the slope beside the Alms House, a blasting charge at the quarry went awry and deposited a 3' x 3' rock onto the trunk of Berlene's new red Ford. Berlene took exception to this occurrence and proceeded to the quarry. Once there, she gave vent to her emotions with an explosion similar to the one which launched the rock. Several big men restrained her. Mr. Jarrell, the quarry owner, and by all accounts a true gentleman, bought the Scott's a new car. On another occasion a charge sent a rock crashing through the poor house roof. Even without these stray missiles, the noise from the blasting, the grinding from the rock crushers, and the roar of the truck traffic must have been horrible.

Exactly what caused the county to finally close the Alms House? While the precise answer cannot be reconstructed, we can surmise that it was a combination of these factors: the Three Caves Quarry activity was making the nearby poor house untenable, the Alms House was over thirty years old and not economical to maintain, and social policy towards treatment of the indigent had changed, coupled with the economy that was reducing the number of indigent people. Due to these reasons and perhaps others, the county took steps to dispose of the poor house. First, the few remaining residents were moved. No record to date has been found regarding when or where these people were moved. Mr. Payne remembers that in 1954 or 1955 the elderly ladies from whom he collected insurance money were moved. The county commission minutes of 23 July 1956 states that demolition of the Alms House was to begin. A large tree in the middle of the present park playground was likely nicked by a bulldozer while removing the Alms House foundation. This was followed four months later by minutes of 2 November 1956, which state that a survey was taken and plans made to

expedite the sale. These plans were formally approved in the meeting of 13 November 1956, and the sale advertised 8 December. Just nine days later, on 17 December the bids were rejected as too low. It is a mystery why the bidding period was so short in view of the fact that obviously there was no market for the property. The high bid was \$25,150 for the 24 acres. It is a further puzzle as to why, after expediting the sale and then refusing to sell, the county seemed to lose interest in trying to dispose of the total 24 acres. It made one last attempt on 1 April 1957, to lease the area to the city for a public area. This fell apart. On 29 April the county sold 1.51 acres for a swimming pool with the provision that the city maintain access to the fallout shelter in the Three Caves Quarry. A month later, 6 May 1963, the county leased an unspecified number of acres to the city for \$2,000 for a park, again, providing the county allowed access to the fallout shelter. Apparently these transactions ended any action related to the Alms House property until the 1980s when the Madison County Commission transferred 78 acres to the Huntsville Land Trust.

Since this time the Huntsville Land Trust has been administering the Three Caves and the Alms House site in the public interest.

Three Caves Quarry

Oral history from the following—

Cecil Ashburn, David Fisher, Henry E. Gattis,
James & Irene Jarrell, Raymond B. Jones,
Wendal C. Payne, James Record Sr., Elise Stephens,
and Walter Terry

The Three Caves on the west side of Monte Sano Mountain in Huntsville, Alabama, is not a cave at all, but a limestone quarry. The story of Three Caves has its roots in Tennessee with the Jarrell family. Mr. Frank Jarrell operated a limestone quarry in Summitville, Tennessee, from 1935 until 1945, when the quarry ran into some underground caverns that were obstacles in the mining operations there. Interestingly, this coincided with his idea of moving south to Madison County, Alabama. Lawson Jarrell, Frank's oldest son, had just married a young lady from Decatur whose brother was the agricultural agent for Madison County, Alabama. He recognized the availability of rich limestone deposits in Madison County and their useful applications to agriculture and road and bridge construction. These three factors: the availability of limestone in Madison County, its need in North Alabama, and an exhausted quarry in Tennessee, resulted in the decision to move to Madison County in the spring of 1945.

The site of Three Caves was owned by Madison County and leased to Mr. Jarrell for a royalty of five cents per ton of limestone hauled away. Initial capital for the operation was only \$50,000 and was provided by First National Bank of Huntsville on Mr. Jarrell's signature. Mr. Jarrell called his new business The Madison Limestone Company. All the movable equipment from the Summitville quarry was transported to Madison County. The initial operation was on a very small scale: dynamite was used to blast the ground and expose limestone; large

rocks of the limestone were broken with manual labor by using a sledgehammer and hauled in wheelbarrows to the hammer mill where it was then crushed into usable limestone. The finished product was trucked away for use in either agricultural or road and bridge construction.

About eight workers came with Mr. Jarrell from the Summitville area and others came from the quarries around Sherwood, Tennessee. Several of these workers commuted weekly from their homes in Tennessee. Some of the workers rented rooms in the nearby Madison County Alms House which was located only yards away from Three Caves. Two other workers, "Uncle" Charlie Battle and his nephew "Nuck" Walter Macon, built a one room shack on the site, installed a small stove and cots, and spent the work week there rent free. Uncle Charlie's job was to operate the jaw crusher for the quarry.

Following World War II, the demand for construction limestone increased. In order to supply the fast-growing Huntsville area, the quarrying operation expanded. A jaw crusher was installed which took the place of men with sledgehammers. Dumpsters replaced the wheelbarrow for hauling the limestone rock to the jaw crusher. To keep pace with demand, another jaw crusher and two more hammer mills were added. Eventually, Euclid's, which are huge earth moving carriers, replaced the dumpsters. At its height, Three Caves employed 25 workers, some of whom still reside in Huntsville.

The initial quarrying technique at Three Caves was "drill and shoot." This process began on the ground surface by drilling a hole and placing the dynamite vertically inside and igniting a charge. Around 1949, this method was changed to the "room and pillar" technique which placed the charge at the base of the rock face causing a horizontal blast. The result of this method can be noted in the large underground rooms separated by the



The results of the “room and pillar” technique.

eighty foot pillars which were carefully engineered to support the roof. There were two reasons for the change to “room and pillar.” First, the upper strata contained rocky earth which had to be removed in order to access the rich limestone in the next lowest level. This was not economical in terms of money or time. The second reason was the encroachment of the City of Huntsville into the Three Caves area. Nearby houses began to receive numerous airborne rocks from the “drill and shoot” method. One rock landed in a nearby resident’s refrigerator and another went through the roof of the county Alms House. The best story involves the wife of a quarry worker. Philip and Berlene Scott had just bought a new sporty red 1949 Ford. Berlene polished the new car almost every day. One day a blast sent a 3' X 3' rock onto its trunk. She promptly marched to the quarry to “discuss” the matter. It took several of the big quarry workers to restrain her. However, the quarry bought her a new sporty red Ford.

The “room and pillars” method requires more precise judgment because the person responsible for the excavation must determine where to leave the pillars for roof support and

where to place the charge to keep the ceiling level. The Madison Limestone Company had an advantage in the person of Lawson Jarrell. He observed this technique in operation at the Sherwood quarry and adapted it for use at his own quarry.

A strange quirk of nature occurred at Three Caves in the summer of 1951. An electrical storm suddenly arose which caused all activity at the quarry to be shut down. However, a fellow named Jordon was working with explosives at the far end of a tunnel and did not get the word. Suddenly, a lightning bolt entered the cave and traveled through the tunnel. The workers at the entrance heard a loud blast. They quickly drove to the end of the tunnel to see if anything was left of poor Jordon. To their surprise they met him running out! It seems Jordon was on the very top of a ladder when the lightning struck and set off the charges on the ground. The blast knocked him down and shook him up, but did not hurt him. However, the driver of the vehicle didn't want to let Jordon ride with him because he was sure Jordon was a ghost and was about to disappear. Eventually they took Jordon to a hospital for a check-up and he was fine.

In 1952, the Three Caves quarry closed for several reasons. Surprisingly, lack of limestone was not one of them. The increased cost of excavating the limestone was a prime consideration. As the quarry progressed further into the earth, it became too expensive to extract limestone compared to the less expensive open pit technique. A second reason was the growth of the City of Huntsville. As the loaded trucks hauled the crushed limestone away, they had to drive through the city. When the limestone spilled, as it often did, it caused a nuisance and outright hazard to drivers. Area residents complained of the noise from the blasting, of the constant rumble from the jaw crusher and hammer mill, and that the roar from the trucks raised the noise level. All of these combined to cause the Madison Limestone Company to move operations to the airport.

There was no further activity in the abandoned limestone quarry until 1962, when the Cuban Missile Crisis developed. The Madison County Commission determined the Three Caves would serve as an ideal fallout shelter should the US be attacked. The Alabama National Guard was ordered to ready the area. An engineer company spent several weekend drills clearing out the rubble from the entrance and inside the caves. The company commander himself sometimes operated the bulldozer due to a shortage of trained operators. Plans to stock the shelter with food never met completion because the crisis was solved peacefully.

The next role for Three Caves was as a movie stage. "The Ravagers," starring Richard Harris and Ernest Borgnine, was filmed there in 1978. It is the story of the occupation of Three Caves by the survivors of a holocaust which destroyed civilization. Approximately 350 residents of Huntsville served as extras. Davis Fisher, a former equipment operator in the quarry, and very knowledgeable about the site, assisted as set advisor and was hired for the use of his water truck as a rain-maker for the movie.

This brings us to the current use of Three Caves. In 1987 Madison County transferred title of this land to the Huntsville Land Trust. The Land Trust is a non-profit organization which administers well over 1,000 acres for the public good. Its object is to maintain this land in its natural state for the enjoyment of area residents by developing hiking trails and periodically sponsoring hikes.

Three Caves Trivia

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- “The Ravagers” starring Richard Harris and Ernest Borgnine was filmed at Three Caves in 1978.
- The Three Caves were originally a rock quarry.
- Many of the roads in Madison County were paved with the rock from Three Caves.
- Today, the quarry which feeds into natural caves is evolving into a natural cave. You can actually see the formation of stalactites and stalagmites beginning.
- During the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, the National Guard began preparing the Three Caves for use as a fallout shelter. Thanks to the peaceful resolution of the crisis the preparations were never completed and the caves were never used as a fallout shelter.