

Snake's Cave (what's left of it) still intrigues the imaginative

by Jerome Coryell

Most children carry active imaginations, and I recall that in my early days I was no exception. It seems like I was either slaying dragons, or looking for buried treasure or, on an off day, I would merely bring heinous criminals to justice. It was great fun doing the work of a 5-year old, and I probably would have extended the lifestyle indefinitely had not financial concerns overruled.

When I grew older, books acted as a catalyst in my imaginary endeavors and through vicarious experience no four walls could hold me. I recall that caves were a topic of unceasing wonder for me. They represented excitement and intrigue and served to heighten my imaginary journeys. It was inevitable that I stumble across Mark Twain's "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer". The scene where Tom and his sweetheart, Becky Thatcher, become lost in an endless expanse of tunnels and caverns will forever remain etched on my mind.

They wound this way and that, far down into the secret depths of the cave, made another mark, and branched off in search of novelties to tell the upper world about. In one place they found a spacious cavern, from whose ceiling depended a multitude of shining stalactites of the length and circumference of a man's leg; they walked all about it, wondering and admiring, and presently left it by one of the numerous passages that opened into it.

About that same time, my father noticed my geological en-

thusiasm and told me of a cave that he had played in years ago, right here in Barry County. Immediately my little-child brain shifted into overdrive. He took me to a place on Guernsey Lake Road in Orangeville township near an old washout. He walked about a mile back into the woods with me tripping along at his heels. I listened to the tale of his own childhood adventures in the 1940's. At that time, the cave had been a favorite playground for my father and his friends.

He told of an old man who spoke of legends concerning the cave. He said the cave was used Pottawatami Indians in the early 1800's before the early settlers converted it into an emergency shelter.

I was unable to verify these stories, but my father showed me several old pill bottles that he had found inside the cave as well as a curious looking glass syringe.

When we finally reached the cave, I was disappointed to see that it had fallen in. There was nothing left but a tunnel that went back about eight feet and a large sinkhole on top where the cavern had been.

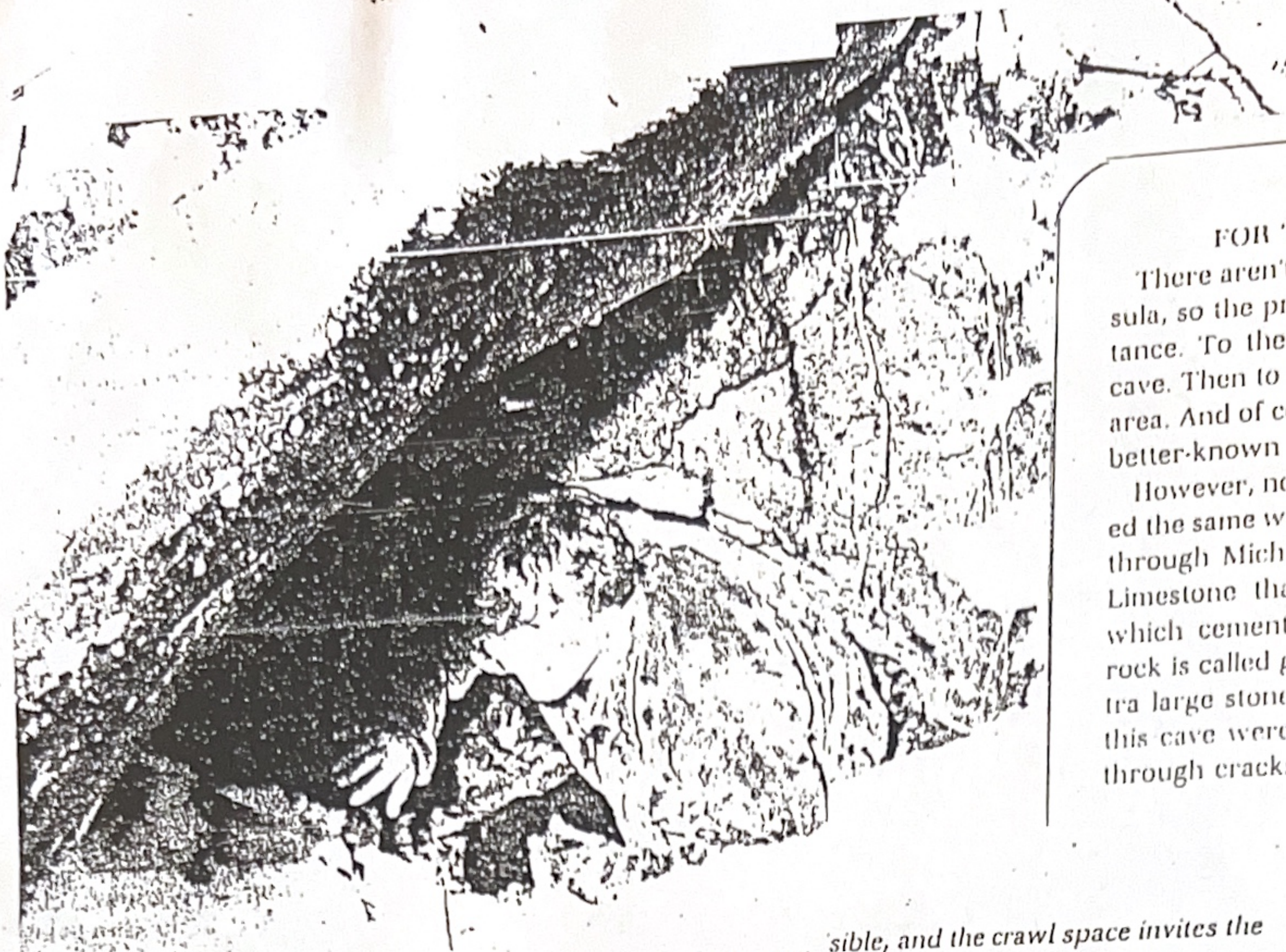
Recently, I returned to the cave and found it just as it had been almost 20 years ago except an old Beech tree, guardian of the cavern, had rotted and fallen over the entrance.

Since then I've done a lot of research, and for the most part, the cave remains shrouded in mystery. I found no mention of it in written records and few people remain to tell its story. However, I did find several people who were able to give me

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A MASSIVE "GUEST BOOK," this ancient Beech tree snag bears carved signatures from years long past of those who visited Orangeville Township's only cave. Now on private property and barely findable, even when you know where it is, the cave was once a playplace for children—and pigs! Writer Jerome (Skip) Coryell added his own initials to the tree on a recent visit to the site.



ALTHOUGH MOST OF THE CAVE has fallen in, the opening is still v
brave to take an imaginative tour of the darkness beyond.

Snake's Cave

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bits and pieces of recollection.

The land surrounding the cave was bought in 1909 by Charles Benjamin Foote. His niece, Ila Francisco, remembers the cave like this:

"I was scared to go in there. They called it 'Snake's Cave' because of all the rattlesnakes in the tunnels. They said the room inside was about 10-foot deep and 12-foot wide. Uncle Charlie's pigs used to get in there and root around, probably for the snakes. Uncle Charlie used to get so mad cuz he had to crawl in there and chase them out."

George Foote, Ila's cousin and Charles' son, remembers stories told by his grandfather George

Chapman who owned the property since before the turn of the century.

"When my grampa had it, he said one of his pigs got in there and towards the back of the room there was a little tunnel about 18 inches wide. Well, anyways, the pig went back about 8 feet and tried to turn around and got stuck. So my grampa and a few others went back and had to dig 'em out. It must have been close on to noon, by the time they got done; so they leaned their shovels inside the entrance and went on up to the house for lunch. When they came back, the opening was caved in and the shovels were gone. This all happened about 1900 before I was born, and that's the way it stayed, mostly, until about 1930 when Clem Munger, that's Ila's son, partially dug it out. But by then it only had about 40 inches of headroom. Before that you could fit six guys in there and you could all stand up."

George Foote elaborated on

sible, and the crawl space invites the

the snakes that had terrified his cousin Ila. He referred to them as "Carter snakes" and speculated that they had been named after the John Carter farm where they were first seen. He said the snakes liked to hibernate inside the cave during cold months and that his grandfather would go in there and spear them as they lay dormant. The snakes were reputed to be 6 to 12 feet long.

Little else is known about Snake's cave between 1930 and the present except that it must have caved in the second time between 1953 and 1965. The property is now posted and should not be visited without permission.

Perhaps the bulk of the story of Snake's cave will never be restored to the living—I don't know. But it's always fun to dig around for old stories and to talk to people who lived during a time we younger folks will never know.

Even today one can find the

FOR THOSE INTERESTED IN GEOLOGY

There aren't many other caves in Michigan's lower peninsula, so the presence of Snake's cave is of geological importance. To the south of us, near Benton Harbor, is Bear's cave. Then to the north we find several caves in the Alpena area. And of course, if you include Mackinac Island, there is better-known Skull's cave.

However, none of the other caves in Michigan were formed the same way as Snake's cave. When the last glacier came through Michigan, it left gravel deposits called glacial till. Limestone that dissolved through the till left carbonate which cemented the gravel together. This newly-formed rock is called glacial crag. It looks a lot like cement with extra large stones. It is likely that the cavern and tunnels of this cave were formed by groundwater running downhill through cracks in the crag.

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Even today one can find the cave and reminisce about what may have happened. Beside the cave stands a hollow beech tree, now broken in half. On the trunk still stands the grown-over initials of earlier visitors. I smile when I see them, and ache to know their stories as well. But for now I'm content to add the letters JC to this massive guestbook.

As I carve I can't help but wonder about the young boys who carved here 50 years before me. I bet they used a Barlow, too—just like Tom Sawyer.