

Knox County Tales: Secret Silver Mines in Copper Ridge

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Every now and then we like stories and tall tales; they add so much life and color to the past. This story is excerpted from an article in the *Knoxville Journal and Tribune*, 26 Aug 1900:

“Copper Ridge skirts the northern part of Knox County. It is a broad, flat elevation resting on the Knox dolomite formation of rocks. In the early settlement of the country it was covered with a coarse grass and pea-vines. Here and there were salt licks where buffaloes and antlered bucks fought and bellowed.

We speak here of that part of the ridge about one mile and a half north east of Powell’s Station. Much of the ridge land is level and easily cultivated, and now thickly settled. Other parts are hilly, rough, and full of sinkholes, caves, and deep hollows. The north side especially is rugged, rocky, and precipitous.

From the time of the earliest settlement, this Copper Ridge has had the reputation of containing minerals. This is true of the land in the vicinity of the Grahams, Coxes, and Conners. In early times, stories were told of mysterious caves from which the Indians brought forth treasures, especially lead and silver. The slaves of the early settlers were also said to have knowledge of these hidden treasures.

On one of the north-side streams an old run may be seen today. It is in “Mingee Hollow,” a wild, dark, and wierd-looking ravine. The water pours over a stone wall and fragments of decayed timber. These are the remains of a mill built by old Uncle Daniel Yarnell in 1822. An inscription on one of the stones attests the fact.

Uncle Daniel had an old negro slave named Jack. Jack had heard the stories about the cave from which Indians dug out supplies of metals, and so he was constantly on the look-out. One day, as the evening sun was disappearing behind the Bull Run knobs, old Jack drove the cows home on the path along Copper Ridge. He detoured into the thick woods in pursuit of a vagrant cow, when he ran upon a flat rock lying in the bottom of a sinkhole. He lifted the rock from what proved to be the mouth of a cave! Here was the long-sought treasure-house!

Jack forgot all about his cows and descended into the bowels of the earth. An Indian ladder sustained him for twenty feet or more, and then a narrow passage led off into the darkness under the earth. Jack had no light so he climbed out, replaced the rock, and followed his herd home as if nothing unusual had happened.

But Jack lost no time, as the story goes, in preparing

pine torches and, at the hour of midnight, again entered the cave. He found it all that was reported. In one ‘room’ of the cave the roof and sides sparkled with the precious metal. Jack was almost overcome with the consciousness of his great fortune, but he could do nothing: he was only a poor slave. Fear that his treasure would be taken from him by others kept him from revealing his secret and when he, at last, died, his great secret died with him.

But yet it was somehow known that there was such a cave and that Jack had been in it and had seen all the treasures, but nobody could locate the same sinkhole and the flat rock that closed the entrance.

Sometime in the 1850s a preacher named John Matlock claimed to have found out the secret of the cave’s location from Jack. According to Matlock’s version, Jack had received his information from the Indians under vow never to reveal it. But Matlock induced Jack to take him in as a partner and, in order to ease Jack’s conscience regarding the vow, when they came near the cave Jack he would whistle. This plan was carried out, Matlock found the cave, entered it and heaved off great flakes of metal with a broad-axe – or so he said.

Matlock’s claim was disputed by Alexander Tillery, an easy-going farmer, who lived in Hine’s valley and studied perpetual motion when he was not hunting minerals. For a long time a strong rivalry existed between Matlock and Tillery as to their knowledge of the cave and its treasure. Finally Matlock died and Tillery moved to Texas without the world’s being any the wiser or the richer from their knowledge.

After the civil war, affairs took on a more practical shape. Rad Conner, an eccentric inhabitant of the Bull Run knobs, decided to sink a shaft and pierce the secret galleries of the treasure house. He dug down ninety feet or more in a number of places. His purse and patience were exhausted about the same time with no returns for his labor.

Several years ago, William Simpson sent north for a valuable (?) metal-finder, which was to point to the exact location of the secret treasure. He succeeded – not in finding the treasure but in bankrupting himself.

Whether or not anything will come of all this ‘fuss and sarch’ for the old Indian cave remains to be seen. Many persons still firmly believe that the treasure is there and are yet digging for it.”

...and that was over a century ago. Whether people are still digging for it I do not know, but the tales yet persist; I live nearby and have heard them since childhood. Clearly there is something to it – but what?

At “East Tennessee Roots” we are very careful to differentiate between stories and documented research. Remember, folks, this is just a story!

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