



Cook's Cave

This cavern, a novel sanctuary and place of rendezvous for Alfred Cook's Rebel guerrillas, ultimately became a fiery trap for the gang leader. (Photograph by author)

cave, located midway up the side of a bluff, and consisting of a big circular room, just inside the entrance, that would have accommodated three times their number. Flowing from the rock face near the cave entrance, the water of a large spring cascaded down the rocky precipice. At the base of the bluff, the waterfall formed a small stream that meandered down a scenic valley for several miles.

A wall of stone closed the cave's mouth, leaving a small passageway for the men to enter and exit. Openings between the stones in the wall allowed an effective use of small arms to a limited field of fire, thus making the cave both a fortress and a novel sanctuary. Despite its many advantages, the cave could also serve as a trap, for there was no other exit for escape from a siege.

In January, 1865, Capt. William L. Fenex, 73rd Infantry Enrolled Missouri Militia, started Lt. Willis Kissee²¹ and 25 men on a scout into northern Arkansas in search of information about Colonel Schnable and with orders to capture and exterminate Alfred Cook and his band. After reaching the Sugar Loaf Mountains, 10 or 12 miles south of Dubuque, Kissee learned from an informer that Cook's band was hidden in a cave. Not knowing the whereabouts of the hideout, Kissee located Cook's small son and forced him to act as a guide to the gang's retreat.²²

With his troops surrounding the cave entrance, Kissee demanded that the raiders surrender, a demand which, if complied with, could mean death. When no one emerged, Kissee called out that the raiders

would be treated as prisoners of war and not harmed if they surrendered. He gave the embattled men four hours to decide. At the expiration of the time allotted, 11 of the men emerged from the cave. Cook and two others refused to surrender.²³

Not wishing to risk Union lives in an effort to take the remaining men from the cave, Kissee built a huge fire on the ledge above the entrance and pushed it over the cliff into the mouth of the cave, where wind blew the smoke inside, forcing the occupants out. As Cook and his companions emerged from their lair, blinded by the smoke, they were gunned down and left where they fell. True to his promise, Kissee brought the 11 captives unharmed to Captain Fenex's headquarters near the mouth of Beaver Creek.²⁴ The next day Fenex delivered them to Union authorities at Springfield, Mo.²⁵

According to legend, the bodies of Alfred Cook, Ed Brown and Hiram Russell were retrieved from the cave site by two neighborhood girls, a 13-year-old boy and an old man.²⁶ The dead raiders were conveyed in an ox-cart, pulled by a yoke of calves, three miles to a small cemetery on a little eminence overlooking the stream that today still flows from the spring at Cook's cave. Box coffins were made for each of the men. They were buried in a common grave with the body of Alfred Cook resting between his two faithful comrades.²⁷ We have no specific record of the hardships and heartaches that Rebecca and her children must have endured in the ensuing months.

Much energy continued to be expended by the Federals in efforts to clear the borderlands of troublemakers of all persuasions, but with only limited success. On Apr. 19, 1864, Brig. Gen. John B. Sanborn, in a communiqué to Brig. Gen. Lewis G. Hunt, proposed that one grand drive should be made to clear the border of guerrillas and bushwhackers. Then, if they continued to infest the region, every building in the area should be burned.²⁸

Brig. Gen. J. B. Sanborn (U)
Vexed by the stubborn resistance of the Rebel guerrillas, Gen. John Benjamin Sanborn proposed burning all buildings in the area "so that no man could live in it".

