



Mystery of Alabama's ancient cave caskets, pine boxes built at the asylum and the Coffin Shop

Loading Photo Gallery

Kelly Kazek | kkazek@al.com By **Kelly Kazek** | kkazek@al.com

Email the author | **Follow on Twitter**

on May 15, 2014 at 6:30 AM, updated May 15, 2014 at 7:53 AM

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking you wish you had some chocolate cake with butter cream frosting and some of those little sprinkles right about now.

Oh, that was just me? Then I bet you're wondering what kind of crazy mind comes up with a history feature centered on casket making. But if you read any of my regular features, you know the answer: Mine.

Sometimes these groupings occur naturally – Alabama castles, movie palaces of the past, covered bridges – but sometimes I find an interesting tale and save it until I find another interesting tale in the same category. So I've had an "Alabama coffins" file on my desktop for a while now, waiting for the trifecta.

My discovery over the weekend of the existence of Crump Burial Cave in Blount County helped me round out this feature. In the mid-1800s, the cave was the site of the discovery of several wooden coffins used by natives. Didn't know Indians used caskets?

Read on.

Native coffins of Crump's Burial Cave

In 1840, when he was 22 years old, the Rev. William N. Crump settled outside Oneonta in Blount County and built a farmhouse. He began farming the land and, in 1858, bought 246 acres from the U.S. government. The land included entrances to five caves, according to a 2005 newsletter of Birmingham Grotto: Crump Cave, Second Cave, Horseshoe Cave, Bishopella Cave and Sewer Cave.

Crump and friends were hunting in 1840 when they discovered Crump's Cave, which geologist Frank Burns would later describe as having an "opening so small that a man could scarcely crawl through it."

Inside, Crump found Native American artifacts including beads, arrows and spears, copper items and stone axes. There were also more than 200 pounds of galena, an ore used in lead and silver. Most surprisingly, he also found skulls and wooden coffins that had been hollowed by fire and stone implements. According to Burns' 1892 account published in "**The Report of the U.S. National Museum**," Crump and his friends explored and plundered the cave, taking the trinkets and ore and even the skulls, "carrying away such things as suited their fancy."

They left behind only the wooden boxes, which began to deteriorate.

When the Civil War began, Crump served with the 49th Alabama Infantry and eventually obtained the rank of lieutenant colonel. During this time, Crump's Cave was heavily mined for saltpeter, used in making gunpowder.

Crump returned to his farm after the war and, in 1892, Burns visited Crump's Cave.

He wrote in the 1892 report: "A short distance from the entrance was a room, which proved to be a 'burial cave' of the aborigines. They found eight or ten wooden coffins of black and white walnut, hollowed or cut out of the wood, after the fashion of the 'dugout' canoe. .. The coffins are about 7.5 feet long, 14 to 18 inches wide and 2.5 inches thick and 6 or 7 inches deep."

Burns shipped the deteriorating pieces of the wooden coffins to the National Museum, which was part of the Smithsonian Institution, "where they have been restored as far as possible and are now exhibited in the department of prehistoric anthropology."

However, the coffins may now be lost among the Smithsonian's millions of artifacts, leading the Crump coffins to become a hot topic among archaeological conspiracy theorists. According to several online sources, including "Suppressed Inventions," researcher Frederick J. Pohl wrote in a 1950 letter to a friend that the Smithsonian had misplaced the coffins. He wrote: "I wrote recently to the Smithsonian, and received a reply March 11th from F.M. Setzler, Head Curator of Department of Anthropology ... 'We have not been able to find the specimens in our collections, though records show that they were received.'"

A word of warning for the curious: Although the 1840 farmhouse built by William Crump still stands – with its log walls covered in plaster – it is privately owned. It is listed on the **National Register of Historic Places**. The cave is no longer safe to visit after mining left it unstable.

Rev. Crump, who died in 1882, is buried in Crump Cemetery in Blount County.

Kring remembered for his Coffin Shop

Edward N. Kring was a builder, one of the most prolific in Sumter County history. After the native New Yorker moved to Gainseville, he had a carpentry shop but also constructed many of the towns businesses in the 1870s, according to **RuralSWAlabama.org**.

"He built both the Methodist Church and St. Alban's Episcopal Church, as well as several homes and businesses. It appears that he built a large portion of the businesses downtown based on old pictures," the website says.

But Kring also built caskets, one of those necessities of life that would allow him to provide well for his family. Oddly, it is that skill for which Kring is remembered, largely because his small cabin called the Coffin Shop survived nearly 150 years to remind us.

Kring, born in 1836, moved to Gainseville in 1860, according to an **obituary published in the "Confederate**

Veteran" in 1910. When the Civil War began, the newly southern man joined Company A's Fifth Alabama Battalion and "served faithfully throughout the war in the Virginia Army." Afterward, he returned to the tiny town and married Bettie Gray Little and started building. His obituary says he was "an upright citizen and loyal church member, a zealous Mason, and faithful to the memory of the cause for which he had fought."

Sometime between 1860 and 1870, he built the Coffin Shop as an auxiliary to his carpenter's shop, which no longer stands. The small building, with a shot-gun-plan interior and scallop-trimmed gable, was Kring's showroom, where people could pick the types of wood and materials they wanted used for their coffins.

The Coffin Shop was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1985, along with the rest of the historic district, and can still be seen near downtown Gainesville along Highway 39. His home, built in 1865 at Spruce and Church streets, also still stands. **Read about it here.**

Kring, who died May 21, 1910, is buried in Gainesville's Old Cemetery.

What happened to pine boxes built at the asylum?

The only evidence historian Steve Davis had that patients at Bryce Hospital once built pine boxes for burial were a casket-making room and three coffins in widely varying sizes. One casket was long and narrow. One was the size for an average person. One was built for a baby.

Today, only one of these caskets remains and it has been placed in storage to be displayed in a museum planned to tell the hospital's history, Davis said. The caskets were discovered in the main building in 1975 when the hospital had contracts with local funeral homes to bury indigent patients. But no records exist to show the recipients of the caskets. Were they built for other patients or to sell to members of the community?

Construction on the Alabama State Hospital for the Insane, later known as Alabama Insane Hospital and now as **Bryce Hospital**, was begun in 1853. It opened in 1861 in Tuscaloosa as a place for the mentally ill to receive progressive treatment. It was a state-of-the-art facility with the city's first gas lighting and central heat. Since then, Bryce has had a long, and often dark, history. As the population swelled to more than 5,000 and staff dwindled amid funding cuts, patients received substandard care. In 1970, a lawsuit filed by a 15-year-old patient led to new care standards.

In June, the main building of the multi-facility institution will become the property of The University of Alabama, which has agreed to preserve that building and allow space for a museum of the hospital's history, Davis said. The once-mammoth building was expanded through the years until a legend began that Ripley's Believe It Or Not once listed it as the building with the longest roof line in the world. Today, three wings remain on either side of the main building. Davis said he's not sure if anyone ever measured the square footage of the facility at its largest and he has no idea how large it is currently.

Davis and members of the **Bryce Hospital Historic Preservation Project** hope university officials decide to preserve more of the hospital, which includes numerous buildings, mostly abandoned, in addition to the main facility. The group is also working to preserve the cemetery where patients were buried beneath numbered markers.

Davis said the infant- and normal-adult-sized caskets disappeared at different points from the hospital grounds. The small coffin would indicate patients made caskets for people in the community, but Davis feels they likely built them for other patients as well.

"Just from that sampling, it would seem they probably made them to fit different-sized people to have on hand," he said. The wood had to be bent, a long process, so he feels they were not made to fit specific people.

"There is no documentation of when it started or stopped," Davis said.

*Join al.com reporter Kelly Kazek on her weekly journey through Alabama to record the region's quirky history, strange roadside attractions and tales of colorful characters. Call her at 256-701-0576 or find her on **Facebook**.*

© 2014 AL.com. All rights reserved.