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Historically Speaking: The chalk mine at Eastport

by RaNae Vaughn

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(The following information is from Dr. Ben E. Kitchens' "Gunboats and Cavalry: A History of Eastport, Mississippi, with Special Emphasis on Events of the War Between the States" printed 1985 and reprinted 2010.)

The "Chalk Mine" is an abandoned Tripoli quarry which is located several hundred yards up in the hollow leading from the first inlet up Bear Creek from Eastport. The mine originally had two entrances on the north side of the hill, but in recent years, one of the openings has become covered with gravel, and only the one closest to the lake is now accessible. For the last several decades, the mine has served as a tourist attraction and as a playground for youngsters.

The mine was owned by a Mr. Malone and was in operation at least by 1890. Three long tunnels were dug deep into the hill, and these tunnels were connected by numerous passageways. The chunks of Tripoli were brought out from deep within the mine on railcars. The cars were taken across Bear Creek on a tramway. A mule pulled the car loaded with the Tripoli to the mill at Riverton which consisted of a large hopper with granite balls used as catalysts. The finely ground Tripoli (called silica or chalk by the local residents) was then loaded on the Riverton train for export.

The Riverton Railroad was completed to Riverton in 1890 from the Memphis and Charleston Railroad. It was built by the Northern Alabama Railway Company during Riverton's boom years with the Riverton Land Company. The railroad carried passengers and products to and from Riverton Junction and the river port. The train was slow moving and stopped often. One of the favorite spots was at a big spring at Walker's Crossing where the Malone Chalk Mill was located.

Tripoli is soft silica which is also found along the east bank of Bear Creek from a point about two miles east of Margerum northward to Riverton. The siliceous deposits at Eastport are of much better quality and more easily mined, however. The mine at Eastport had to be closed in 1912 because many of the workers developed silicosis, a respiratory disease due to inhalation of the fine particles of silica. Although the workers in the mine also inhaled the dust, the disease especially affected the workmen at the Malone Chalk Mill where the crude chunks were reduced to fine powder. Mr. W. B. Leatherwood of Iuka, the owner of the Leatherwood Hotel, promoted an attempt to reopen the Eastport mine in 1926, but the attempt was unsuccessful. The mine is presently inactive and is owned by Mr. Olen Jourdan of Iuka, Mississippi.

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