After some hemming-and-hawing, I have finally decided to attend this year's CSICON in Nashville, Tennessee (I hear the world is coming to an end in December of this year so I might not get another chance). Since this will be my first visit to the Volunteer State, giving this post a Tennessee theme seemed a natural enough idea. The only problem was picking out what to write about considering that state has more than its fair share of, er, eccentrics. In the end, I decided to write this post about the amazing Ronald Eldon Wyatt , archaeologist/explorer/fundamentalist extraordinaire.

Born in 1933 in Tennessee, he was raised as a Seventh - day Adventist and grew up with an ironclad belief that the Bible was literally correct in every detail. Though trained as an anesthetic nurse, Wyatt's real career began in 1960 when he first saw a picture of the Duripinar site in Life magazine. A large aggregate structure located 18 miles from Mount Ararat in eastern Turkey, the boat-shaped geological formation was proclaimed by many creationists to be the original Noah's Ark since it was first discovered in 1948. Although extensive scientific investigations turned up no evidence of human artifacts and concluded that it was a purely natural structure, that was before Ronald Wyatt got involved.

Fascinated by the story of the Ark's discovery, Wyatt spent the next fifteen years obsessing over the Biblical account of Noah. He even built a scale model of the Ark, which he floated in a river so that he could observe its movement on the water. His obsession eventually took him to Turkey and the site of Mount Ararat (legendary resting place of the Ark) where he would repeatedly return while raising funds for his own excavation at the Duripinar site. Along with evidence of Noah's Ark at the Duripinar site (despite previous expeditions finding nothing), Wyatt also claimed to have discovered the actual house where Noah and his family lived post-Flood (complete with tombs of Noah and his sons). He also announced that boundary markers used in the area were actually anchor stones from the Ark - a revelation which came as a surprise to the local farmers who had first carved them.

But it hardly ended there. Beginning in 1977 and continuing for the next twenty-two years, Wyatt reportedly carried out a series of archaeological expeditions at Biblical sites all over the Middle East and Turkey. What was remarkable about Wyatt's expeditions was that he only excavated in spots specified in the Bible and, almost without exception, succeeded in finding whatever Biblical evidence for which he happened to be searching.

Among other things, the redoubtable Ron Wyatt reported discovering the ruins of Sodom and

Gomorrah (along with sulfur and brimstone balls from its destruction), the Tower of Babel, the site on the Red Sea where the Israelites crossed, remains of Pharaoh's chariots on the bottom of the Red Sea, the site of Christ's crucifixion, and various other Biblical sites during the more than one hundred expeditions he claimed to have made. He also brought back artifacts from these various expeditions to back up his claims (despite the fact that removing genuine artifacts without the permission of the various governments involved would have been illegal).

When asked how he was able to make so many amazing discoveries, Wyatt would say that he had been "guided" by divine inspiration. The fact that receiving legal permission for archaeological digs would have been impossible for an amateur with no real academic credentials in many of those countries (Israel and Egypt for instance) was easily explained by Wyatt. The same divine guidance that led him to the sites also made the expeditions possible by clearing away red tape and arranging him to receive whatever financial backing he needed to carry out his expeditions. If conventional archaeologists and historians were, well, less than supportive of his claims, fundamentalist groups rallied around him and proclaimed him to be "God's archaeologist".

Ron Wyatt had more than his share of prominent backers, including former astronaut James Irwin. Irwin actually joined Wyatt on several expeditions to investigate Noah's Ark but this relationship later soured when no physical evidence was found and Irwin was injured on an expedition. Even with the loss of Irwin and his foundation, it is probably not surprising that Ronald Eldon Wyatt was the most successful amateur archaeologist of the 20th century. Despite serious questions being raised about many of his claims, Wyatt typically dismissed all naysayers as agents of the Devil.

Not that he didn't face opposition, mind you. During the course of his various adventures, Ron Wyatt reported being kidnapped, arrested, attacked, and deported. The Turkish government had an odd love/hate relationship with Ron Wyatt and his supporters. While his odd statements and behaviours nearly got him deported at times, he was also invited back as a guest of honour in 1987 when the Turkish government dedicated the Duripinar site as "Noah's Ark National Park". Even by then, the Duripinar site had become a military hotspot due to being so close to the Iranian border and further archaeological expeditions were banned.

Political upheavals failed to stop Ron Wyatt from discovering just about everything possible for an archaeologist to discover relating to the Bible. And, yes, that did include the Ark of the Covenant, which was apparently buried in a secret chamber directly underneath the site of Christ's crucifixion. Along with the Ark, Wyatt also reported finding an enormous sword (which he believed belonged to Goliath) and the "Mercy Seat", a solid-gold throne that God sat on while

talking to Moses. Although Wyatt tried to take photographs, his film was ruined due to the Ark's power. Unfortunately, his claims can't be verified since he filled in his excavation (reportedly due to an agreement with the Israeli Department of Antiquities to prevent information about the Ark's location from getting out
).

The only real physical evidence that he brought back from the Crucifixion site was the blood of Christ, which he said had seeped through into the underground chamber containing the Ark. According to Wyatt, genetic testing of the blood proved that it had no male chromosomes, only female. Since Wyatt never reported which laboratory did the analysis (except that it was in Israel), this claim can never be verified either.

Whatever you make of Ron Wyatt's expeditions, they all seem to have had a consistent pattern. Not only did he rarely, if ever, fail to find what he was searching for but he always used the Bible as a reference to guide him to the right location. When asked why professional archaeologists failed to find these things before him, Wyatt would say that they were searching in the wrong place". The cache of artifacts that typically turned up then verified his find. That all of this was unscientific and unverifiable did nothing to dissuade the Wyatt supporters who tend to denounce skeptics as hopelessly negative.

Ronald Eldon Wyatt died on August 4, 1999 at a hospital in Memphis, Tennessee. Interviewed on his deathbed, he refused to recant a single word of his archaeological discoveries and insisted that Israel would soon announce the discovery of the Ark of the Covenant. Shortly after his death, a schism developed among his various supporters. While the Wyatt Archaeological Foundation (founded by Wyatt) now claims sole ownership of his various photographs, books, and other intellectual property, there are numerous independent ministries and websites promoting the discoveries of God's archaeologist.

Bringing it back to Nashville and CSICON, I was intrigued to learn that the Wyatt Archaeological Museum, featuring posters and videos of Ron Wyatt's various discoveries is located at a gas station in nearby Cornersville. While it would have been worth a visit, the gas station and the m useum appear to have been closed to the public for several years now
, unfortunately.

Such is life.