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The Curious Case of Curious Canyon

By Frank Perry



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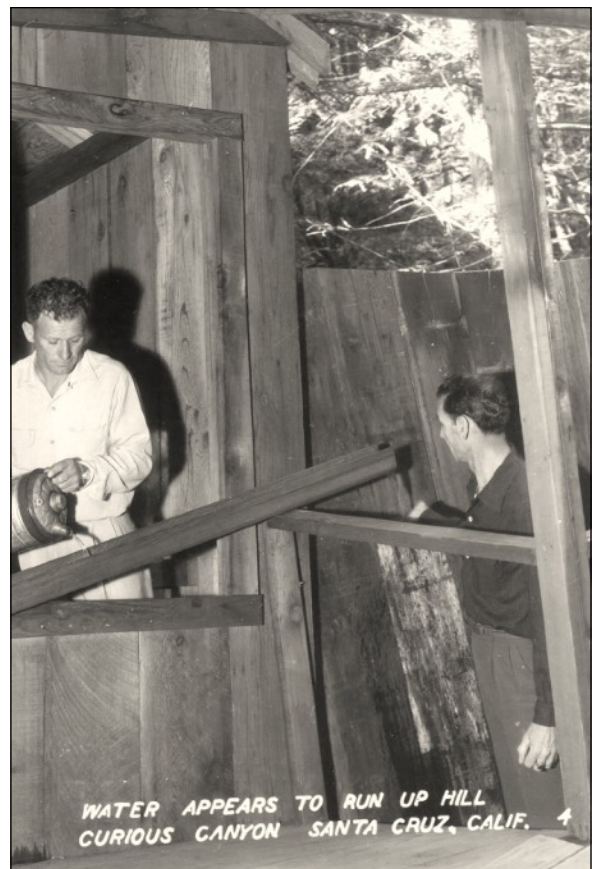
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In 1954 two entrepreneurs founded a tourist attraction in Santa Cruz County, California, called Curious Canyon. It was nearly identical to the nearby and already popular attraction called The Mystery Spot. The latter still exists, while the largely forgotten Curious Canyon closed after a little over a year.

Introduction

Tourism has long been an important part of the Santa Cruz economy. At first, it was natural features that attracted visitors, such as the sandy beaches, majestic sea cliffs, and giant redwood trees. Just after the turn of the last century came the first large-scale tourist attraction that was constructed. This was the Beach Boardwalk, with its giant Casino and assortment of rides and games. The boardwalk was ideally located not only because it was beside the beach, but also because it was beside the railroad tracks. Day trippers from the Bay Area could travel by train to within a few steps of the amusements.

By the middle 1900s, more and more vacationers took to automobiles instead of trains, prompting the development of several “roadside” attractions. One of the first of these was The Mystery Spot, established by George Prather in 1941. At the same time Prather was building his attraction, the Southern Pacific was dismantling the railroad line through the Santa Cruz Mountains. This was before Highway 17 was completed, however, and visitors driving over the mountains from San Jose sometimes took Branciforte Drive or Granite Creek Road to reach Santa Cruz, passing right by the turnoff to The Mystery Spot.



A Curious Canyon postcard.



Entrance to Curious Canyon, showing ticket booth and sign. The sign says “Welcome to Curious Canyon, The Toppsy Turvey World.”

After the World War II, more attractions followed: the Tree Circus in Scotts Valley (1947); Sorenson’s House of Wax in Capitola (1956); Santa’s Village in Scotts Valley (1957); The Lost World (a successor to the Tree Circus, 1963); and Roaring Camp railroad in Felton (1963).

In 1954, smack dab in the middle of the post-war baby boom, came Curious Canyon. Curiously, it was a close neighbor of The Mystery Spot and practically identical. Not surprisingly, the histories of the two attractions were intertwined.

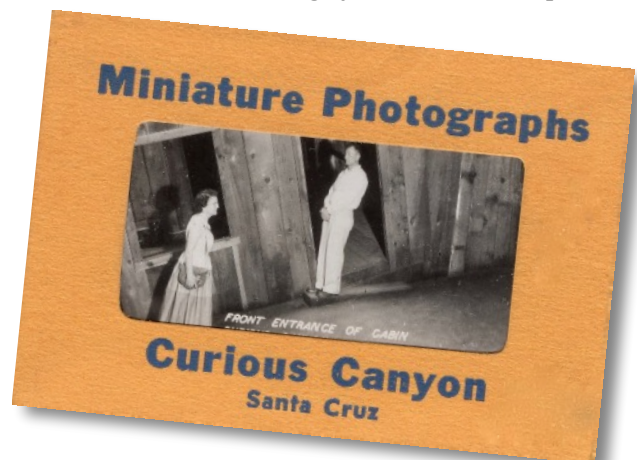
Mystery Spot Came First

The Mystery Spot opened Sunday, June 15, 1941 to much fanfare. “You never saw a crazier place,” said the headline in the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*.¹ In a cabin, perched at an angle on a hillside, people seemed to lean to one side, visitors could walk up a wall, water ran uphill, and brooms stood up on their own. Visitors changed in height depending on where they were standing. Even before it opened, the newspaper noted the similarity to the “famed House of Mystery” (aka Oregon Vortex) in Oregon. Indeed, proprietor George Prather had visited the House of Mystery the year before.²

I visited the Oregon attraction as a teenager in about 1970 and recall the tour guide claiming that it was due to a strange gravity anomaly. The guide insisted that it was a natural phenomenon while The Mystery Spot was created. He said that the proprietor of the Oregon Vortex taught Prather how to re-create the effects artificially.

Prather had a different explanation. He stated that he had “discovered” peculiarities in the area of Gilbert Gulch off Branciforte Drive on Labor Day, 1940. “When he felt slightly, inexplicably dizzy while walking around the hillside one day, he wondered what was up,” said the newspaper. “The upshot was that he built the crazy house, built it crazy to accentuate what was already there. . . .”³ He charged a nominal fee for the tour—5 cents.⁴

The attraction barely survived the war and the wartime restrictions on travel. George Prather died suddenly in 1946, and his son, Bruce, took over the managing the business.⁵ By then it was a partnership with neighbor Vaden McCray.⁶ McCray and several members of his family worked at The Mystery Spot as guides and appear in a 1948 *Life Magazine* feature on the place.⁷



Souvenir collection of ten miniature photographs of Curious Canyon.

The national publicity drew huge crowds, and presumably profits quickly soared. Perhaps this is what prompted the McCray family to start their own version of The Mystery Spot, dubbed Wonder Hill. It was in operation by early 1949 off Highway 101, a few miles north of Salinas. An advertisement from April 16, 1949, boasted, “It’s Perplexing, It’s Wholesome, It’s Entertaining, It’s a Wonder. See the Law of Gravity Do Strange Tricks. Truly an Amazing Sight!”⁸ In December, 1949, Bruce Prather bought out Vaden McCray’s interest in The Mystery Spot, and the partnership was dissolved.⁹ Wonder Hill remained in business at least into the fall of 1951.¹⁰



Advertisement in *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, June 25, 1954, p. 11. Described as “California’s Newest Discovery.”

Enter Curious Canyon

On Sunday, June 27, 1954, Curious Canyon opened on the McCray property near The Mystery Spot. The owners of the business were Earl W. Perrin of Redwood City and Melvin C. Biesemeier of Santa Cruz.¹¹

The McCrays were involved in several ways. Melvin Biesemeier’s wife, Vera, was Vaden McCray’s sister.¹² Virgil McCray (a brother) and Maynard McCray (Virgil’s son) were employed as tour guides.¹³ The advertisement in the newspaper sounded a lot like the Wonder Hill ad: “It’s Entertaining, It’s Wholesome, It’s Perplexing, It’s a Curiosity.”¹⁴

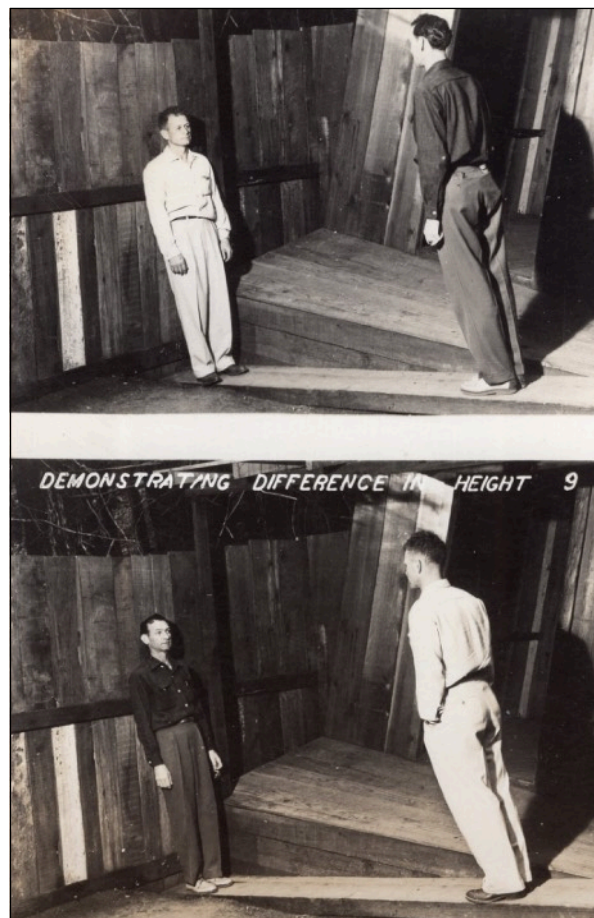
A small, red and yellow brochure described the attraction in more detail:

Curious Canyon is an oval shaped area of ground approximately 200 feet in diameter. On entering this area you neither stand erectly, or see correctly, or even feel normal.

Some say it must have been caused by an earthquake; some say there must be magnetized mineral deposits in the ground underneath. Some astonished visitors have just sworn off drinking and let it go at that.

IT IS AN AMAZING SIGHT, to see a person grow or shrink nearly a foot in height merely by standing on opposite ends of a perfectly level plank; to step up on a table with the ease of stepping upon a curb.

IT IS A CURIOSITY, to stand on a level board and try to resist the pull of strangely acting gravity; or to see a free swinging pendulum that requires twice as much pressure pushing one direction as the other.¹⁵



Curious Canyon postcard. Note that the camera is to one side so that the man on the left is farther away.

A series of postcards (shown here) provide some of the few visual records of the short-lived attraction. Several show visitors leaning at angles that seem to defy gravity. As described in the brochure, other postcards depict people whose height seems to change when they switch positions on a platform. Another shows a ball seeming to roll up hill. One shows water doing the same.

Curious Canyon had barely welcomed its first tourist when The Mystery Spot sued. Bruce Prather wanted \$10,000 in damages and asked the court that the defendants be restrained from operating their business. He argued that Curious Canyon is in all possible respects the same as The Mystery Spot and that many persons will be confused by the similar locations and will patronize the defendant's business in error.¹⁶

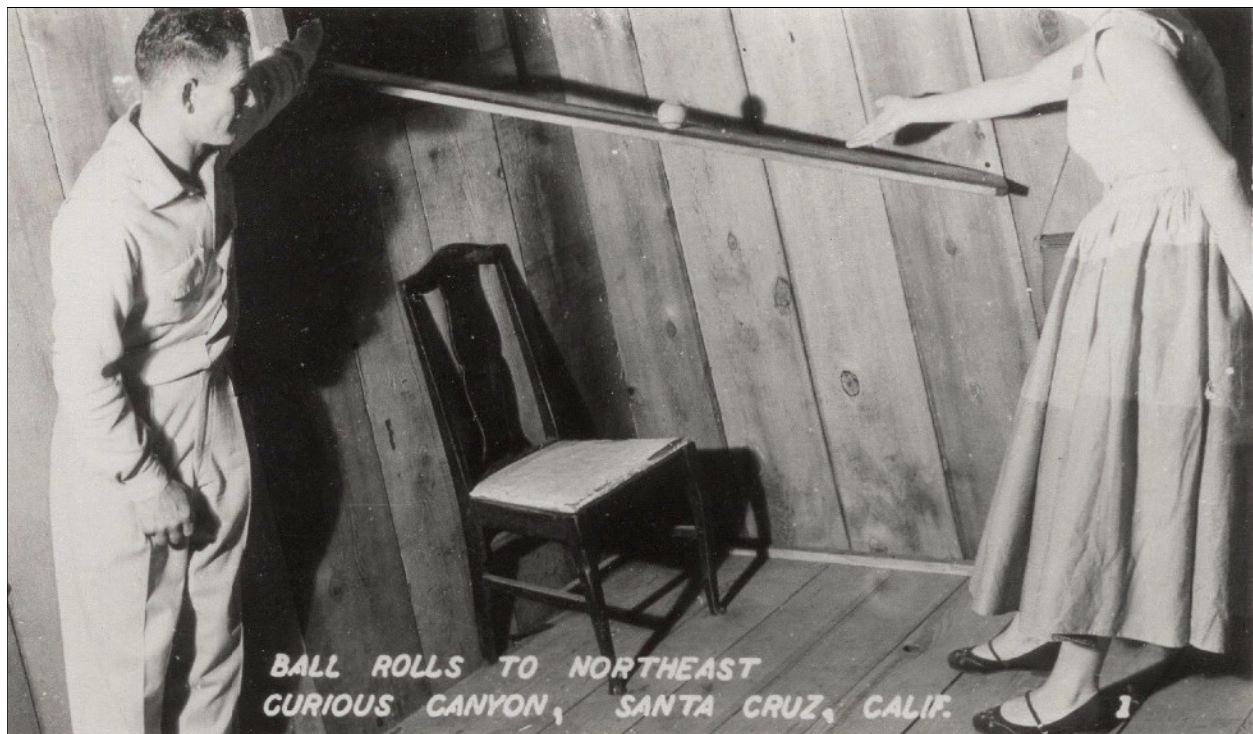
Prather's argument continues to have merit. On one of the old postcards of Curious Canyon, someone wrote that it was The Mystery Spot. At least one website (by a major university) says that Curious Canyon is now known as The Mystery Spot. Both statements are incorrect, but they illustrate how the similarities and close proximity of the two attractions did indeed lead to confusion.

The Curious Canyon owners responded to the lawsuit in an affidavit, noting that theirs was just one of several similar attractions. These included "Confusion Hill" near Crescent City, "Bodega Bay

Mystery Spot" near Sebastopol, "Wonder Hill" near Salinas, "Riddle" near Redding, and the "Oregon Vortex" near Gold Hill, Oregon. According to the newspaper, the owners stated that they "know of no monopoly on the business dealing with the exploitation of the natural conditions present in any of these locations, and deny the contention of the plaintiff that 'Curious Canyon' is not located in a site where certain phenomena occur."¹⁷

The judge denied the request for a restraining order, but attorneys for both sides agreed on changes to the signs advertising Curious Canyon.¹⁸ The case was scheduled to be heard by the court in January, 1955. At the last moment, Prather's lawyers filed for a dismissal "without prejudice," meaning that it would not be dismissed forever and could conceivably be brought back to court.¹⁹ It could well be that Prather worried that evidence brought out in a court case might adversely affect his own business.

Around this same time came another curious event: the opening of a Civil War museum between Curious Canyon and The Mystery Spot. "J. T. Richards, owner, curator, guide, janitor, ticket collector, and promoter passed through Santa Cruz on a trip in 1949 and liked it so much he came in to settle and brought his Civil War collection with him," said the newspaper.²⁰ It was an odd place for such a museum and was short lived.



Curious Canyon postcard. Other similar tourist attractions also did the "ball rolling up hill" demonstration.

Curious Canyon took an active role in the community, participating in a fundraiser for the March of Dimes polio drive in early 1955. For ten days, it turned over its full gate to the charity.²¹ On just one Sunday, it had 124 visitors. They came from as far south as King City and as far east as Reno.

Later in 1955, Curious Canyon ran into financial problems. The owners failed to pay the principal and interest owed Vaden and Grace McCray for the property on which it was located.²² Curious Canyon somehow managed to continue to entertain visitors into the fall of that year, but it soon folded. It is not listed in the business directory for 1956. Indeed, the winter of 1955-1956 would have been a tough one for a tourist attraction to survive. Heavy rains wreaked havoc on Santa Cruz County and much of northern California. Downtown Santa Cruz suffered one of the worst floods in the town's history.

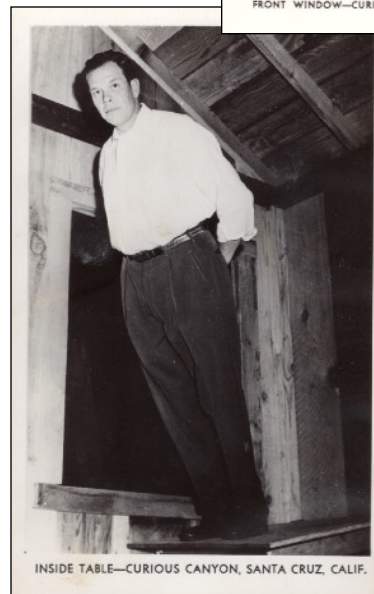
Earl and Juanita Perrin had moved to Santa Cruz shortly after they established Curious Canyon, and by the time of its closing were the sole owners. Perrin was a carpenter and in 1967 started doing business in Santa Cruz as the Earl W. Perrin Construction Co.²³ In 1972 he built some of the structures around the new addition to the Santa Cruz Small Craft Harbor.²⁴

Vaden and Grace McCray left Santa Cruz and moved to Michigan where in 1955 they started a roadside attraction almost identical to The Mystery Spot.²⁵ In fact, they named it "Mystery Spot." Located just east of the town of St. Ignace on Michigan's upper peninsula, it still welcomes visitors. The McCrays then moved to Ruidoso Downs, New Mexico and established yet another "Mystery Spot."²⁶ In all, The McCrays had a hand in at least five Mystery Spot-like attractions.

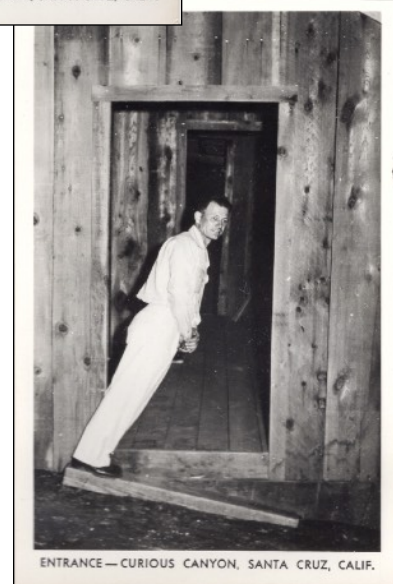
Reminiscences and Final Thoughts

Curious Canyon opened before I was born. I never heard of it until I discovered a postcard of it about 20 years ago. I still remember frequently visiting The Mystery Spot as a child, however. My parents sold merchandise to the gift shop there and became friends with Frank Pitts and his wife, Imogene. She ran the gift shop and he led tours. I found the tour fascinating and wondered if, indeed, there was some strange, unexplained force at work.

In the early 1960s I visited another similar attraction at the Frontier Village amusement park in San Jose. This western-themed park opened in 1961 and closed in 1980.²⁷ In addition to stagecoach



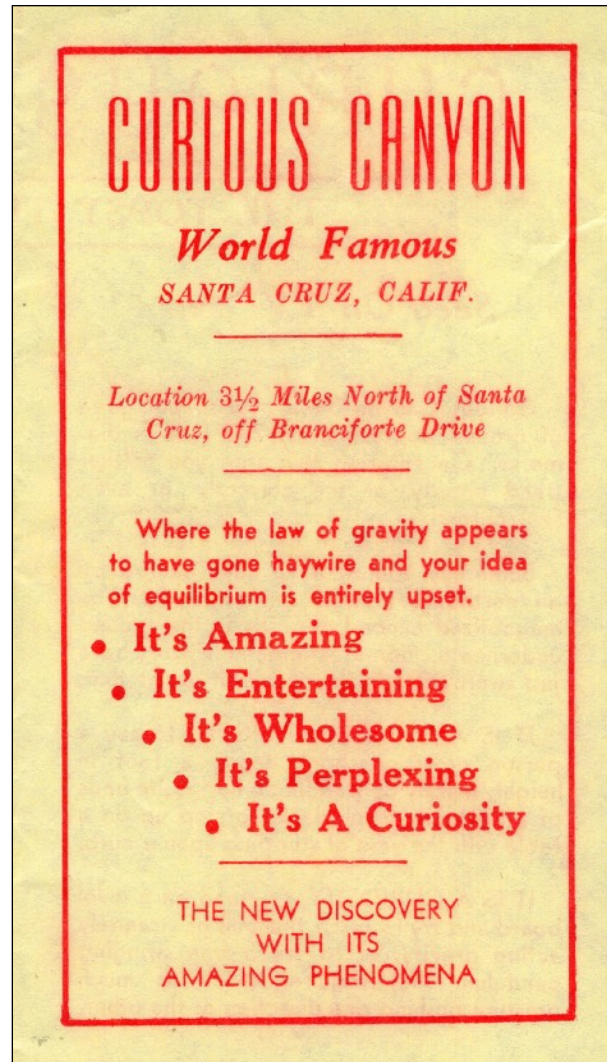
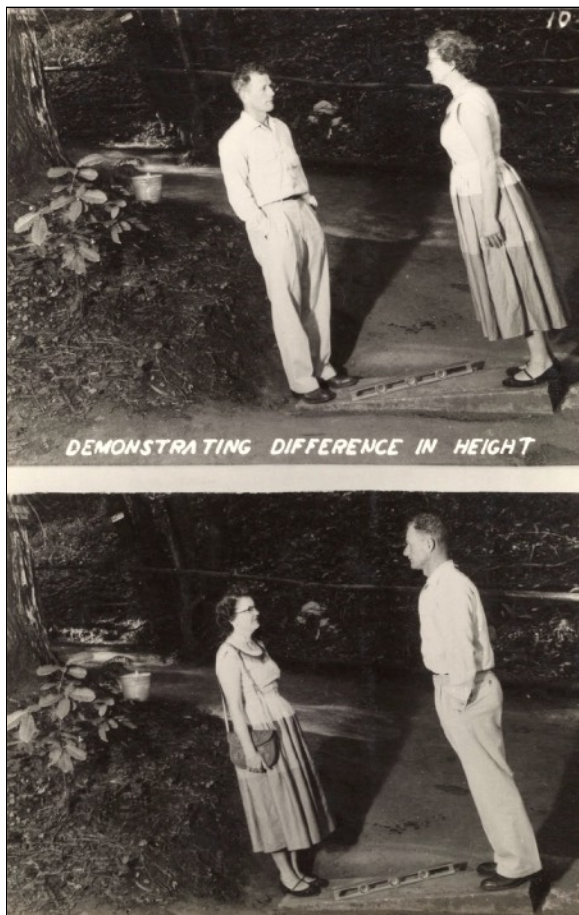
Several of the Curious Canyon postcards depict people leaning at strange angles.



rides, train rides, canoeing, a fishing pond, and other amusements, there was “El Sito Mysterio.” The array of effects were remarkably similar to The Mystery Spot. The guide had some kind of story about the history of the place and how it had caught the attention of ranchers many years earlier. Could it be that such a phenomenon just happened to occur where an amusement park would later be built? I was beginning to grow skeptical.

Years later I came across a photograph in an old *National Geographic* (September, 1962, page 414) of the same sort of thing created for the Seattle World’s Fair. “Topsy-turvy street of illusion makes visitors to the United States Science Pavilion feel they are walking downhill when they are actually climbing,” it said.²⁸ Curiously, “topsy” and “turvy” were the same words used on the entrance sign for Curious Canyon.

Is it a real phenomenon? Is there really some type of gravity anomaly or other strange force here? Or, are the effects illusions that play tricks with people’s perception? George Prather suggested



Above: Front of Curious Canyon brochure, c1954.

Left: Another Curious Canyon postcard showing people appearing to change in height.

some of both in 1941 when he stated that there was a real phenomenon unique to that area and that his tilted shack just “accentuated” it.²⁹

It is beyond the scope of this article to go into a detailed discussion of each of the demonstrations conducted at Curious Canyon or The Mystery Spot. Readers can find plenty of online articles offering scientific explanations, some simple and some technical.

Such tourist attractions were more common in the early to middle 1900s.³⁰ Many were at amusement parks and associated with fun houses—an attraction that has faded into history. One such

tilt-house still in a theme park is the Topsy House at Arnolds Park in Iowa.

Most of today's versions are stand-alone attractions. There is the aforementioned House of Mystery at the Oregon Vortex (established in 1930). In California there is also Confusion Hill near Leggett (1949) and the Calico Ghost Town Mystery Shack near San Bernardino (date unknown). The Haunted Shack at Knott's Berry Farm opened in 1954, but closed in 2000. Elsewhere there is the Mystery Spot in Michigan (1955), Mystery Hill in North Carolina (1958), the Montana Vortex and House of Mystery in Montana (1970), the Cosmos Mystery Area in South Dakota (1952), and The Mystery Hole in West Virginia (1973). Magnetic Hill in Wisconsin opened in 1949 but closed in 2007.

While Curious Canyon is long gone, The Mystery Spot and the other survivors continue entertaining thousands of children and adults each year. Santa Cruz's Mystery Spot is today the oldest such attraction in California, and on August 22, 2014, it became an official California Historical Landmark (No. 1055).³¹

Acknowledgments

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All photographs and the brochure are from the author's collection.

About the Author

Frank Perry was born and raised in Santa Cruz and presently serves as curator of the Capitola Historical Museum.

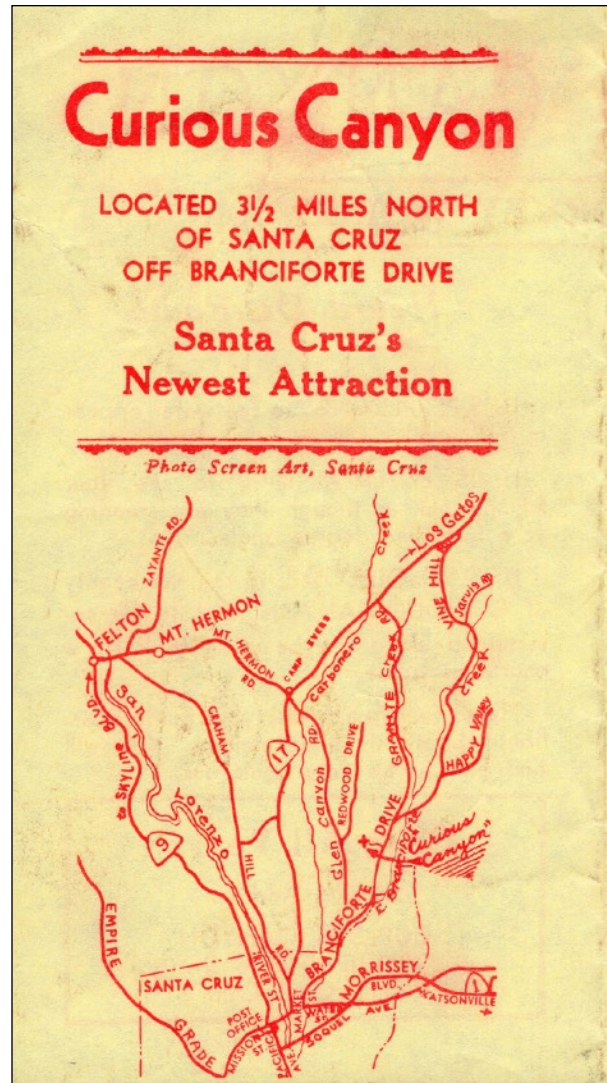
Notes

¹ Lowell Brady, "Mystery Spot—You Never Saw A Crazier Place—Opens Sunday For Your Amazement," *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, June 13, 1941, 9:1-3.

² Sandy Lydon, *The Mystery Spot*, California State Department of Parks and Recreation: Application for Historical Landmark Status, 2013, unpaginated.

³ Lowell Brady, "Mystery Spot—You Never Saw A Crazier Place—Opens Sunday For Your Amazement," *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, June 13, 1941, 9:1-3.

⁴ Sandy Lydon, *The Mystery Spot*, California State Department of Parks and Recreation: Application for Historical Landmark Status, 2013, unpaginated.



Back of Curious Canyon brochure, c1954.

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- ⁵ “Owner Of ‘Mystery Spot,’ George W. Prather, Is Dead,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel-News*, January 30, 1946, 1:1-2; Sandy Lydon, *The Mystery Spot*, Application for Historical Landmark Status, California State Department of Parks and Recreation, 2013, unpaginated.
- ⁶ Sandy Lydon, *The Mystery Spot*, California State Department of Parks and Recreation: Application for Historical Landmark Status, 2013, unpaginated.
- ⁷ “Speaking of Pictures . . . How Do They Do It?,” *Life Magazine*, November 15, 1948, 22-23, 25.
- ⁸ “See the ‘Wonder Hill’ . . .” *The Californian* [Salinas], April 16, 1949, 12:3. (advertisement)
- ⁹ Sandy Lydon, *The Mystery Spot*, California State Department of Parks and Recreation: Application for Historical Landmark Status, 2013, unpaginated.
- ¹⁰ “Home From Trip,” *The Van Nuys News*, September 6, 1951, 25:4. Mentions the Elmer Griggs family recently visiting Wonder Hill, where “gravity doesn’t follow the rules, so balls roll uphill, and people walk uphill at the wrong angles.”
- ¹¹ “Public Notice,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel-News*, July 16, 1954, 3:1.
- ¹² “John W. McCray, Retired Farmer, Succumbed Today,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, May 29, 1962, 18:6.
- ¹³ “‘Curious Canyon’ Is Opened,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel-News*, July 4, 1954, 6:3-4; “Virgil W. McCray Dies in Salinas,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, November 17, 1961, 5:3.
- ¹⁴ “Curious Canyon, New Discovery . . .,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel-News*, July 2, 1954, 8:5. (advertisement)
- ¹⁵ Curious Canyon brochure in collection of the author.
- ¹⁶ “‘Mystery Spot’ Owner Sues ‘Curious Canyon,’” *Santa Cruz Sentinel-News*, July 4, 1954, 16:1.
- ¹⁷ “Affidavit Notes Similarity Of Location Names,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel-News*, July 15, 1954, 20:8.
- ¹⁸ “Restraining Order Denied,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel-News*, July 21, 1954, 2:5.
- ¹⁹ “Dismissal Filed,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel-News*, January 18, 1955, 12:7.
- ²⁰ Wally Trabling, “Civil War Comes West In New Santa Cruz Museum,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel-News*, January 9, 1955, 9:1-3.
- ²¹ “Donations To Polio Drive Reach \$7281,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel-News*, January 26, 1955, 1:8.
- ²² “Notice of Default,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel-News*, March 25, 1955, 19:6.
- ²³ “Notice is Hearby Given . . .,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, March 2, 1967, 11:8.
- ²⁴ “Extra Crews Speed Work At Harbor,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, August 16, 1972, 12:5.
- ²⁵ “Vaden John McCray,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, March 22, 2001, 8:1-2.
- ²⁶ “Grace Anestine (Osterberg) McCray,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, May 27, 2007. <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/santacruzsentinel/obituary.aspx?n=grace-anestine-mccray-osterberg&pid=88252320>
- ²⁷ Elliott Fong, *Remembering Frontier Village: Frontier Village History*, website <https://www.frontiervillage.net/pages/history.html> (Accessed April 21, 2020)
- ²⁸ Carolyn Bennett Patterson, “Seattle Fair Looks to the 21st Century,” *National Geographic Magazine*, September, 1962, 402-427.
- ²⁹ Lowell Brady, “Mystery Spot—You Never Saw A Crazier Place—Opens Sunday For Your Amazement,” *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, June 13, 1941, 9:1-3.
- ³⁰ Rick Davis, “The TiltHouse,” *DAFE: Dark Attractions and Funhouse Enthusiasts* website, <https://www.dafe.org/articles/miscellaneous/tiltHouse.html> (Accessed April 21, 2020)
- ³¹ Mystery Spot website, <https://www.mysteryspot.com/california-historical-landmark> (Accessed April 21, 2020)