

Offbeat Oregon No. 520

Central Oregon Coast's Lost Crystal cave

By Finn J.D. John
For The Sentinel

(Note: This article is a re-writing and re-researching of a shorter column first published on March 28, 2010.)

Central Oregon is cave country. There may be more caves, discovered and undiscovered, within a 100-mile radius of Bend than anywhere else in the country — ranging in size from tiny, dangerous lava tubelets like Thimble Cave to mile-long subterranean vaults like Lava River Cave.

To the dedicated cadre of spelunkers who enjoy exploring these secret underground spaces, finding any previously unknown cave is a dream.

But there's one particular cave — one that may actually not exist, but probably does — for which cave buffs have been keeping their eyes peeled for more than a century now.

This cave is usually called "the Lost Crystal Cave." And lost it is indeed — so lost that no one really knows whether to file it under "geology" or "folklore."

There are two basic variants on the Lost Crystal Cave legend, and dozens of sub-variants; passed on from mouth to ear for generations, the story has changed and grown like a wind-blown juniper tree. Both variants estimate the worth of the cave, as described, as roughly \$1 million — but it's pretty clear that they don't really know, since they've been using that same number for about 50 years now.

The most commonly heard version of the tale comes from Marjorie Smith, the daughter of a Bend shopkeeper named Nicholas Smith, who spent most of the 1910s and 1920s beating the bushes looking for it. Marjorie was about 10 years old when it was supposedly found, so her recollections carry some authority.

According to Marjorie, the crystal cave was discovered by a group of cowboys on a cattle drive from Burns to LaPine.

Near Pine Mountain, the drovers stopped for the night to make camp and cook dinner. While hunting up some wood for a cooking fire, the cowboys found a cave entrance; looking inside with a light, they gasped and stared.

They were in a room-size cavern, and the walls and ceilings were covered with thousands and thousands of clear diamond-like crystals.

The cowboys broke some off for souvenirs and continued on their voyage to La Pine, and then to Bend. When they arrived, they told anyone who would listen what they had found, offering the chunks of crystals as proof.

The cowboys had places to go, so they moved on shortly after that. But Marjorie's father, Nicholas Smith, got curious after examining the crystals. So he rode out south of town to try to pick up the trail of the cattle drive.

This he soon did, and by nosing around at the places where he found the cowboys had camped, he found the cave. It was everything the cowboys had said.

But the weather was looking ominous, and Nicholas didn't want to get stuck out in the

range in the snowstorm that he thought was coming — or get stuck sheltering in a cave with no food while his horse shivered outside. He broke off a few more crystals and, noting the relevant landmarks as best he could, hurried home to Bend.

That spring, he returned — or tried to. Problem was, without the cattle trail to follow, he had no idea where to go; and the landmarks he'd tried to use just weren't helping him.

Nicholas Smith spent the next 20 years fruitlessly searching for the cave. He found plenty of caves during that time — little pockets under rimrock and lava tubes of the type the Bend area is peppered with — but no sign of the crystal cave.

The other version of the Crystal Cave story came from Aubrey Perry, son-in-law of Newt Cobb, one of the men who supposedly discovered it. In this version, there were three men and they were not driving cattle; they were on their way from Millican Ranch, where they'd just finished a job shearing sheep, heading for the old Shonquest Ranch near Sunriver. They stopped to camp for the night; while gathering firewood one of them found the cave entrance; and that's how the story comes into circulation in Bend.

The trouble with this story is, it's geographically impossible. Geologist Larry Chitwood told writer Melany Tupper that the terrain between Millican and Sunriver is just not old enough to support the growth of quartz crystals the size of the samples.

So could the crystals have been something else? Ice? Opals?

Maybe, but that wouldn't explain the sheepmen's having brought quartz crystals back from their journey.

So, what are we left with? Not much. But, there is a third possibility. What if the cowboys were actually on a drive from somewhere other than Burns? What if they were coming into the Bend-La Pine area from, say, Baker City or John Day, and somehow — by accident or by design — the story got altered?

When the original version of this story was first published in

the Redmond Spokesman, back in 2010, I got a phone call from a gentleman from Pendleton. I didn't catch his name, although he did throw it; it was just as well, since I know he wouldn't have been OK with being mentioned by name in this article. Judging by his voice, I would estimate he was 75 to 85 years old. In any case, he was mostly interested to know more details of where I thought the cave was. I told him the legends I'd unearthed.

When he spoke next, he actually sounded relieved. With a chuckle, he told me the cave was nowhere near the places I was talking about; it was northeast of Bend, he said, about 150 miles out of town.

He made it pretty clear that that was as close as he was going to get to revealing its location. But it was, he told me, real; he had been there, several times.

Now, this was 2010, and he was calling me from a land-line — meaning this was a long-distance phone call that he was paying for. He didn't come off as the kind of fellow who has nothing better to do with his time than phone up strangers long-distance to lie about crystal caves.

So, perhaps everyone has been beating the bushes on the wrong side of town for all these years? That certainly could explain 100 years of failure to find anything.

But there is one more possibility as well. And to explain it, I have to tell you what happened in 2010 at the Arnold Ice Cave.

In the late 1880s and early 1900s, the Arnold Ice Cave was a source for ice in the summertime for the city of Bend. Then affordable refrigeration technology came along and made it unnecessary, and after that, people stopped going to the cave to cut blocks of ice.

But the ice continued to grow in the cave, and by about 1940 it had filled up enough of it to block off the entrance.

In 2010, the groundwater flows changed, and the cave cleared enough for people to start coming in again. Members of the caver group Central Oregon Grotto eagerly came to the site and explored it, carefully documenting all the neat old artifacts they found inside: an old cigarette box, a rusty ax, the skull of what appeared to be an actual

wolf.

Then word leaked out to the general public. And within a few years, all the artifacts had been pilfered and the walls of the cave were covered with spray-painted graffiti.

In the following year, 2011, a group of bonfire partiers with a bag of spray-paint cans covered Hidden Forest Cave with about 15 cans' worth of graffiti, covering over Native American pictographs in the process.

It's a pretty safe bet that if any of the cave buffs who remember the Arnold Ice Cave — or — were to stumble across the crystal cave today, they'd keep their mouths shut. They might even drag some brush over the entrance before leaving, to try and keep it hidden a little longer.

(Sources: Tupper, Melany. High Desert Roses: Significant Stories from Central Oregon. Christmas Valley: 1stBooks, 2003; Wood, Patti D. "The Mystery of the Lost Crystal Cave." Little Known Tales from Oregon History. Bend: Sun Publishing, 1988; McGregor, Brent. "Hidden Forest Cave," The Archaeology Channel, archaeologychannel.org; Skeels, Matt G. "Arnold Ice Cave Pilfered," Central Oregon Subterranean, mattskeels.wordpress.com)

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