

A Brief History of the Park.

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Colossal Cave had been used for centuries by native peoples before being reportedly “discovered” by cattle rancher Solomon Lick in 1879. Prior to 1917, Colossal Cave was known by an assortment of names, Arizona Catacombs, 5-mile Cave and the Mountain Springs Cave according to a recent publication by Sharon E. Hunt “Vail and Colossal Cave Mountain Park”.

The cave itself extends approximately 600- feet into the mountainside and descends 40 feet below the entrance. Colossal Cave is believed to be the largest known “dry” cave in the United States.

Colossal Cave and surrounding property was actually State Trust Land up until 1992. Although public tours were occurring as early as 1913, it wasn’t until Frank “Pop” Schmidt acquired the lease in 1922 that a more business-like approach was taken. Schmidt constructed a ticket office and residence at the entrance of the cave and ran a successful operation up until 1934. In 1934 Frank Schmidt released his rights to the lease so that the cave could be designated as a State Park and become eligible as a “CCC Public Park Improvement Project”. (Civilian Conservation Corps) Schmidt stayed on and worked as a member of the CCC technical staff until the completion of the project(s) in 1937.

Pima County acquired the lease from the State of Arizona in 1944 in order to operate the site as a county park. Under the direction of the Board of Supervisors, Frank Schmidt would continue operating the cave (for the County) up until 1956. In 1956 Pima County sublet the operation of the cave to the private partnership of Joe Maierhauser and Earl Bockelsby, both renowned cave experts.

In January of 1965 Joe Maierhauser became sole proprietor for the operation of the Colossal Cave. Rather than enter into an agreement with Joe Maierhauser as a concessionaire, the County elected to enter into a “management agreement” for the entire 495- acres. Included within the 495-acres were the El Bosquecito picnic grounds, La Sevilla picnic grounds and the hand dug well that serves all the facilities today. Pursuant to the agreement with Joe Maierhauser, Pima County paid for the state lease and all other expenses borne by the lessee.

Due to the increasing cost of the annual lease, Pima County negotiated a sale with the State Land Department for the outright purchase of the lease in 1992; although Pima County was now the new owner of the 495-acre park, the management agreement with Joe Maierhauser remained unchanged until 1992.

Shortly before the purchase of Colossal Cave, the Pima County Flood Control District had purchased the

La Posta Quemada Ranch as a flood control project. Posta Quemada was adjacent to Colossal Cave and used as the staging area for the CCC. It only made sense that the two properties be combined into one larger mountain park, thus the name Colossal Cave Mountain Park.

Through an agreement with the Pima County Board of Supervisors, management of the newly formed Colossal Cave Mountain Park was turned over to the Pima County Parklands Foundation, a non-profit corporation, in September of 1992.

The Foundation, in turn, entered into an "Agreement for Operation and Administration of Colossal Cave Mountain Park" with Joe Maierhauser in November of 1992. At the time, the newly formed park totaled approximately 1,957-acres. Pima County owned approximately 1,800-acres and the Parklands

Foundation owned 160 acres (all donated land from the Maierhauser family.) The Maierhausers' increased their donations to the Foundation on two more occasions, 80-acres in 1994 and an additional 80-acres in 1999.

The management plan in 1992 was to close that portion of Colossal Cave Road located within the boundary of the park and improve Pistol Hill Road, a dirt road at the time, as an alternate route. By making these improvements, the Foundation would be able to charge an admission fee into the park and increase the revenue stream that had slowly began to erode due to the downturn in tourism.

At the time of the management change, it was generally felt that the new plan would work; in fact, would optimistically generate enough revenue not only to manage Colossal Cave Mountain Park, but help subsidize other needs of the Natural Resources, Parks and Recreation Department. Unfortunately, the improvements to Pistol Hill Road were delayed due to the lack of county bond funds; as a result of the delay, management costs associated with the increased size of the park soared and the additional income from the road closure would not happen for another 8-years.

The Foundation and the Maierhausers (Martie and Joe) continued to operate CCMP but were unable to recover from the tourism downturn and the lost income from not having the entry gate in place when the Colossal Cave Mountain Park was expanded.

Joseph G. Maierhauser passed away on March 7, 2007 just a few days before his 80th birthday. Joe had been instrumental in managing Colossal Cave for over 50-years, the longest continuous management lease to a sole proprietor in Pima County history.

In 2010 the Parklands Foundation terminated all management responsibilities for Colossal Cave Mountain Park. Pima County entered into a separate agreement with Martie Maierhauser to "Operate and Administer" Colossal Cave Mountain Park for 5-years with the option to renew for two (2) additional 5-year periods. The Pima County Parklands Foundation agreed to transfer \$110,000.00 for electrical repairs at Colossal Cave. The funds covered the costs to add new wiring between all of the electrical junction boxes within the cave and added new communication lines. The Parklands Foundation continues to operate as a non-profit agency, providing assistance to Pima County Natural Resources, Parks and Recreation Department and to Colossal Cave Mountain Park.