

OCALA CAVERNS HISTORY



HISTORY (IN A NUTSHELL):

- Originally a Phosphate quarry between the 1880's
- Second quarry-Limestone for foundation or road construction 1920's
- Mid-1934/5 movie set "The Lost City", directed by Hary J Revier (maybe)
- Late 1940's opens as a tea house and garden
- 1953-1956 Edmond Heintz started and owned "Magic Valley"/ "Coral Caverns"
- 1956-1958 Alex and Clara Petz owned "Uranium Valley and Caves"
- 1958-1965 Clifford Jack incorporated "Ocala Caverns"
- 1965-1972 Jim (Man Mountain) Dean owned "Ocala Caverns"
- 1972-1993 Sharon Glassman of Glassman Real Estate Holdings
- 1993-2025 Jack and Judy Staples of St Petersburg "Judy Caverns"

NOTES:

Phosphate: Since Dr. C.A Simmons discovered phosphate in the are, it formed a boom. Phosphate is used in fertilizer. The first company was started in Ocala in 1889 by Abertus Vogt and it created boom. Population of Ocala in 1880 was 803, In 180 it was 2,904.

CAVE DISCOVERY:


The cave itself was said to have been discovered in the 1920s by a boy who went into a hole to find a rabbit. It is believed both entrances were blasted open in the 1950s (Coral Cavers era). This story was part of the tour in the early days.



Matchbook from mid-1950 showing the rabbit

OCALA CAVERNS
INC.

See Florida's Prehistoric Caves
and
Nationally Publicized Cypress Room

RIDE  UNDERGROUND

ON CRYSTAL-CLEAR OLYGOPYGUS RIVER

8 MILES SOUTH OF OCALA ON
U.S. HIGHWAYS 441-27-301

Rte. 2, Box 182 E

You may notice on the map "Olygpygus River", this comes from the extinct Echnoid (sea urchin) that adorn the walls-mainly in the lower passages.

Underground River Boat Trip Is Featured At Ocala Caverns

Clifford Jack, new owner and operator of Ocala Caverns, reports a number of changes in the local tourist attraction since he bought it.

The underground river that flows through the caverns—formerly Uranium Valley and Caves—has risen five feet in the past two months, he says, and viewers now tour the caverns in eight-passenger boats.

Jack has also added lights in the valley, enabling him to stay open until 8 p. m. Opening time is 10 a. m.

He reports he recently found a large bone in the caverns—possibly that of a mastodon—and has asked the University of Florida to examine it. No investigation has yet been made, however.

The valley will be especially beautiful in the near future, Jack says, because the century plants that grow there are about to bloom.

Jack, a former Cleveland real estate broker, first saw the caverns as a tourist, he says, and adds:

“I was so amazed I bought it.”

The caverns are located on U S. 441-27 about eight miles south of town.

Petrified Tree Reportedly Found In Ocala Caverns

By AL LEE
Star-Banner Staff Writer
An object believed to be a petrified tree has been discovered in the Ocala Caverns, south of Ocala.

The rare find probably a petrified trunk of a cypress tree, according to the manager of the none too successful tourist attraction, Mike Hannigan.

Hannigan, who recently assumed managership at the attraction, said if a scientific study proves the find to be a tree it would be millions of years old.

The tree was found embedded in limestone in the huge cavern. With the aid of a hammer and chisel Hannigan has chipped away a large part of the stone surrounding it, revealing a trunk and limb.

The tree is 82 feet beneath the surface, and rests above a clear, 62-foot deep lake of water.

Hannigan is in the process of remodeling the place, and he said a grand opening is set for next June. He said although the attraction had been losing money for the past year it's now operating on a paying basis.

The cavern, carved out by nature, has ancient formations of fossils of animal life. The cave has intricate designs etched in the limestone. An underground river, which flows through the cavern, has an access to Silver Springs via the Silver River, Hannigan said.

Underground River
Hannigan said he has explored and mapped more than five miles of the underground river, using scuba



Petrified Tree?
Mrs. Mike Hannigan, wife of manager of Ocala Caverns, points to object believed to be branch of petrified tree. Trunk is in foreground.

diving equipment. He said he has swum through underwater passages and discovered numerous hidden chambers that will be made accessible to the visitor this summer. One of the chambers, which now can be reached only by crawling on the hands and knees for a short distance, contains the petrified tree discovered by Hannigan and Eastern Air Lines public relations man Bill Wooten of Miami.

On one side of this room, which contains the small lake, the shore plunges straight down. The bottom of the lake can be seen due to the clarity of the water, like Silver Springs.

The lake contains small fish and a huge inhabitant resembling a turtle. Hannigan and his wife, who also explores the underground chambers, say they were unable to positively identify it because it only partly emerges from a deep, dark pit at the bottom of the lake.

Hannigan said evidence has been found that Indians crawled inside the caves many years ago, perhaps to escape from their enemies.

Several months ago a carved stone statue was found inside the caverns, "which belonged to the Inca Indians who migrated from Peru."

He said a sacrificial block was also recently discovered.

An innovation this summer, he said, will be an upside down periscope that will give tourists a skin diver's view below the surface of the water.

Hannigan said he will also have a series of dioramas to be made from clay inside the caverns. He said they will depict prehistoric life in this area.

Most of the Ocala Caverns stock is owned by a Tallahassee realty firm, which is owned by James Lassiter. Other owners are unidentified.

But it appears they intend to make the attraction show a profit, and perhaps attract more tourists to the area



VIOLET RAY and 660-LB. JIM DEAN

Ocala Star Banner, April 12 1964 (Above: highlights)

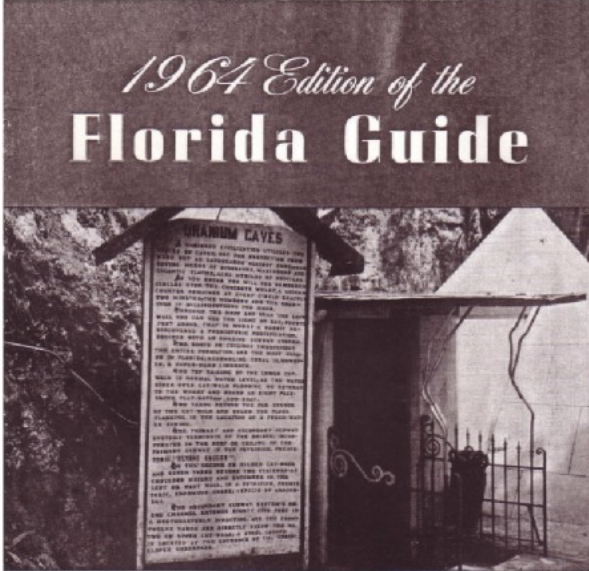
Petrified Cypress tree found 82 feet beneath the surface, above a clear 62 foot deep lake

5 miles of passage has been mapped using SCUBA gear

Evidence of Indians escaping from enemies

Carved Olmec stone from Peru Indians found inside cave and relocated outside

Below is the most interesting history. It was on a sign just outside the main entrance

	<p style="text-align: center;">TRANSLATION OF THE SIGN</p> <p>“A vanished civilization utilized the series of caves, not for protection from wars but as safeguards against enormous roving herds of dinosaurs, mastodons, and gigantic sloths, also herds of reptiles.</p> <p>As you enter, you will see numbered circles upon the concrete where Geiger Counters remained at every circle for exactly two minutes. The numbers are the readings in milliroentgens per hour.</p> <p>Through the roof and near the left wall you can see the light of day, forty feet above that is where a rabbit rediscovered a prehistoric fortification equipped with an amazing subway system.</p> <p>The roofs or ceilings throughout the entire formation are the most unique in Florida; resembling coral is however, a super-hard limerock.</p> <p>The top railing of the lower catwalk is normal water level, as the water rises over the cat-walk flooring we retreat to the wharf and board an eight passenger flat bottom row boat.</p>
---	---

Two yards beyond the far corner of the cat-walk and below the floor planking is the location of a fresh-water spring.

The primary and secondary subway systems terminate at the bridge. Incorporated in the roof or ceiling of the primary subway is a petrified prehistoric “flying saucer”.

On the second or higher cat-walk, and seven yards beyond the stairway at shoulder height—entombed in the left, or west wall, is a petrified prehistoric enormous snake, species of anaconda.

The secondary subway systems one channel extends eighty five feet in a northeasterly direction, the front twelve yards are directly below the number two, or upper cat-walk. A steel ladder is located at the entrance of the undeveloped underpass.”

Failing health and obesity forced Sam Hesser to leave his beloved Ocala Caverns sometime around 1972.

On 3 September 1974 the giant wrestler died alone in a VA hospital at the age of 51.

The gates closed and Ocala Caverns fell into ruin. It was never to be used again. Attempts were made to do something with the property, such as:

- County Park
- Well (water source) The Glassman family refused to allow it.
- Environmental Center

There were always big plans. However, faster cars and interstates made tourists bypass the old quarry. Now it is almost forgotten. The buildings and pools are gone with overgrown grounds.



Remnants of Yesteryear

These monuments once graced the roadsides of Marion County, beckoning tourists to part with their dollars and reminding them of beauty and growth in the Sunshine State. Among the defunct sights are the entrance to Rainbow Springs Attraction, below right, which boasted glass-bottom boat rides, soon to be a major development. Also shown, at top, is the entrance to the former Ocala Caverns, just north of Belleview on U.S. 441, with a sale sign, below left, that cries out to those who might resurrect the attraction. Two other sights lie just up the road from there, the so-called "Roosevelt Monument," right, a planned highway bridge over the Florida Ship Canal (an earlier idea than the Cross-Florida Barge Canal), a short-lived Depression-era project fostered by President Franklin Roosevelt, and the Birds of Prey Attraction, bottom, where Big Sam, allegedly the world's largest bull — only to be replaced by a horse when the first Sam died — shared the spotlight with walking catfish.



David Watson/Star-Banner