

State of California C The Resources Agency
DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION
PRIMARY RECORD

Primary #
HRI #
Trinomial
NRHP Status Code

Other
Review Code

Reviewer

Date

Listings

DRAFT

Page 1 of 27 *Resource Name or #: (Assigned by recorder) The Mystery Spot

P1. Other Identifier: _____

*P2. Location: Not for Publication Unrestricted

*a. County Santa Cruz and (P2c, P2e, and P2b or P2d. Attach a Location Map as necessary.)

*b. USGS 7.5' Quad _____ Date _____ T _____; R _____; _____ of _____ of Sec _____; _____ B.M.

c. Address 465 Mystery Spot Road City Santa Cruz Zip 95065

d. UTM: (Give more than one for large and/or linear resources) Zone _____, _____ mE/ _____ mN

e. Other Locational Data: (e.g., parcel #, directions to resource, elevation, decimal degrees, etc., as appropriate)

APN 068-121-04; APN 068-081-07; APN 068-081-06; APN 101-191-07

*P3a. Description: (Describe resource and its major elements. Include design, materials, condition, alterations, size, setting, and boundaries)

The Mystery Spot, a roadside attraction opened in June of 1941, is located on a 17.5 acre parcel off Branciforte Drive, approximately four miles north of Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz County, California. The parcel straddles Granite Creek, a tributary of Branciforte Creek and is composed of a flat portion on the east and a steeply-wooded portion rising up above the creek on the west. The focus of the attraction is a classic "tilt-box" or "gravity house" perched up on the steep hillside in a grove of redwood trees built between Oct. 1940 and June, 1941. The shack, a vernacular two-room structure with composition roof is 28 feet long and 12 feet wide and 8 feet tall at the peak built of 1x8, 4x4 and 2x4 redwood boards is surrounded by a redwood fence measuring seven feet in height and sixty-one feet in length built in 1940-41. Other contributing resources include a seven foot high ticket booth measuring twenty feet by six feet with a flat composition roof (1941), railings and pathways, and native and introduced trees and plantings all dating from the 1940-1946 period. There is a non-contributing office (1945) north of a gift shop (1950) as well as a tall gateway (ca. 1990) on the east side of the creek. There is also a non-contributing maintenance building located to the south (1950).

The shack and ticket booth were constructed by George Prather with the assistance of his son, Bruce, and a neighbor between October of 1940 and June of 1941. It has been in continuous operation as an amusement park since opening on June 15, 1941.

*P3b. Resource Attributes: (List attributes and codes) _____

*P4. Resources Present: Building Structure Object Site District Element of District Other (Isolates, etc.)

P5b. Description of Photo: (view, date, accession #) _____

*P6. Date Constructed/Age and Source: Historic Prehistoric Both

1940-1941

*P7. Owner and Address:

Christopher and Blanca Smith, PO Box 250, Capitola, CA 95010

*P8. Recorded by: (Name, affiliation, and address)

Sandy Lydon, Historian, 2255 Redwood Dr., Aptos, CA 95003

*P9. Date Recorded: January 19, 2014

*P10. Survey Type: (Describe) California Historical Landmark Nomination

*P11. Report Citation: (Cite survey report and other sources, or enter "none.")

None

*Attachments: NONE Location Map Continuation Sheet Building, Structure, and Object Record

Archaeological Record District Record Linear Feature Record Milling Station Record Rock Art Record

Artifact Record Photograph Record Other (List): _____

State of California C The Resources Agency Primary #
DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION HRI#
BUILDING, STRUCTURE, AND OBJECT RECORD

*Resource Name or # (Assigned by recorder) The Mystery Spot *NRHP Status Code _____

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B1. Historic Name: The Mystery Spot
B2. Common Name: _____
B3. Original Use: Roadside Attraction/Amusement B4. Present Use: Roadside Attraction/Amusement
*B5. Architectural Style: Vernacular/no style

*B6. Construction History: (Construction date, alterations, and date of alterations)
Original shack (tilt-box), ticket booth, restroom and fencing were constructed between October 1940 and June 1941. The construction is 1"x8" and 2"x4" sawn redwood boards that were milled on site. There has been incremental replacing of boards as required by weathering and visitor safety, but an examination of old photographs, and interviews with several who were present at the original construction, indicates that the integrity of the shack, ticket booth and site has been carefully maintained. A non-contributing office was constructed in 1945, and a non-contributing maintenance building and snack bar were added in 1950. More substantial steps and handrails were added in the late 1940s and early 1950s for visitor safety. One restroom was added ca. 1985.

*B7. Moved? No Yes Unknown Date: _____ Original Location: _____

*B8. Related Features:

Free-standing gate added in 1950, heightened in 1985.

B9a. Architect: Prather, George b. Builder: Prather, George
*B10. Significance: Theme Roadside Attractions, "Tilt-Box" Area Northern California
Period of Significance 1941-1946 Property Type _____ Applicable Criteria CHL-1

(Discuss importance in terms of historical or architectural context as defined by theme, period, and geographic scope. Also address integrity.)

The Mystery Spot is eligible for listing as a California Historical Landmark under Criteria CHL-1:

"The property is the first last, only or most significant historical property of its type in the region." The Mystery Spot, built over the winter of 1940-41, was the first of the roadside attraction gravity houses or "tilt-boxes" built in California, and has been in continuous operation since opening in June, 1941. It is the oldest tilt-box roadside attraction in California and the second oldest in the United States, and is the only such California attraction devoted solely to its original purpose. The integrity of the original shack, ticket booth and landscaping have been maintained for over seventy years as has the interpretive materials used to explain the phenomenon to visitors. A number of similar tilt-box attractions were inspired by the Mystery Spot. By the 1960s at least five other tilt-boxes had sprung up throughout the state, including Confusion Hill (1949), Wonder Hill (1949), Calico (1954), Knotts Berry Farm (1954) and Frontier Village, San Jose (1960). At this writing only Confusion Hill and Calico are still in operation, and both of these tilt-box attractions have been supplemented with additional rides. Through world wars and depressions and technological revolutions, The Mystery Spot has kept a steady course, entertaining generations of visitors from all over the world.

The Mystery Spot is an outstanding example of the Golden Age of automobile tourism, a classic example of the roadside attractions that dotted the American and California landscape after World War II. It is an outstanding example of the period when Americans celebrated their prosperity and adventuresome spirit by traveling the country's highways and byways.

The Mystery Spot is as it was in 1941, and it continues to tell the same story. This is not faux history, where something was built to resemble history. The Mystery Spot *is* history, a place where visitors come back time and again, remarking that "it hasn't changed since I was a kid." And when the visitor takes the guided tour and rubs his or her hands on the railings worn smooth by the thousands of hands before them, they can literally feel the history. New theme parks have grown up since George Prather opened the Mystery Spot, and even the venerable Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk has added thrill rides and closed down most of their 1940s-era attractions. But the Mystery Spot continues to amaze, amuse and mystify visitors 365 days a year.

(See continuation sheet)

B11. Additional Resource Attributes: (List attributes and codes) _____

*B12. References:

See continuation sheet

B13. Remarks:

*B14. Evaluator: _____

*Date of Evaluation: _____

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B10. Statement of Significance (continued):

Tourism in the Santa Cruz Mountains

Beginning in the 1840s, the rugged, well-watered and redwood-forested southern slopes of the Santa Cruz Mountains provided the basis for Santa Cruz County's primary industries--lime and lumber. Besides the loggers, the redwood forests also began attracting visitors seeking refuge from the increasingly-urbanized San Francisco Bay area. In 1867 Joseph Welch purchased several groves of old-growth redwoods along the San Lorenzo River in the belief that the trees had more value as a tourist attraction than they did as lumber. Their visitor appeal was enhanced by the local oral tradition that claimed national political figure, John C. Fremont, camped in one of the trees in 1846. Over the decades, Welch added a campground, dance floor and imitation frontier village, marking the beginning of what we will call *redwood forest visitor enhancement*.¹ Access to Welch's campground was originally via a narrow wagon road, but when the over-the-mountain South Pacific Coast Railroad was completed in 1880, passing alongside Welch's campground, his grove was both a roadside and raiiside attraction. .

Railroad tourism increased in importance into the twentieth century, particularly after the 1904 construction of the beach-front boardwalk located in Santa Cruz. Excursion trains stuffed with thousands of visitors came each summer to enjoy the county's beaches and forests. Simultaneously, that first decade of the century also marked the beginning of automobile tourism in the Santa Cruz Mountains. As roads improved, automobile tourists, freed from railroad schedules and corridors, ventured farther into the county's redwood nooks and crannies.

The development of automobile tourism in the Santa Cruz Mountains was typical of that occurring all over the United States as automobiles became less expensive, and ever-improving roads and increasing leisure time encouraged the growth of roadside attractions designed to provide services and entertainment.² Soon the various trans-mountain roads were lined with resorts, car camps and roadside stops.

The Triumph of Auto Tourism

As auto tourism increased, railroad passenger traffic declined. In 1938 the California Highway Department began the first phase of Highway 17, a modern over-the-mountain highway designed

¹ (Barbour, Lydon, et al. 2001)

² One of the earliest Santa Cruz Mountain automobile roadside attractions was Holy City, founded by William Riker in 1919 (Beal 1991)

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to replace the winding two-lane Glenwood Highway.³ In 1940 the Southern Pacific Railroad stopped carrying passengers over the mountains, and within the year had abandoned that section of railroad completely.⁴ Auto tourism was triumphant. In that same year, 1940, George Prather began building the Mystery Spot.

American Roadside Attractions

Nineteenth century circuses and traveling sideshows, with their exhibits of natural and manufactured oddities (“See the two-headed calf!!”), fed an American appetite already whetted to be surprised and shocked. As the public began to travel in its automobiles, these sideshows took root alongside America’s highways, their huge billboards enticing passers-by to not only stop, but to come in and be mystified. Early roadside entrepreneurs often settled down near already established natural sights such as waterfalls or caverns. In 1930, on the highway leading to the already-popular Oregon Caves, John Litster opened the Oregon House of Mystery.⁵

Tilt Houses and Oregon’s House of Mystery

Historians of roadside attractions trace the concept of the tilt house (also called “trick houses” or “anti-gravity houses”) to 1904 when Arthur Griffen discovered that by carefully building a small house inside a house, the rules of gravity seemed to be suspended.⁶ The Oregon House of Mystery was the first such tilt house opened on the West Coast, and at this writing has the distinction of being the oldest in the United States. John Litster (1886-1959), a geologist and engineer, not only set up a tilt house but also expanded its disorienting features on to the landscape outside the building. A crucial element in Litster’s attraction was what we call “the creation story”—the building’s history and the explanation of how it was discovered and came to be leaning so badly.⁷ Most tilt-house creation stories claim that the house or shack was built on the level and then a natural event—usually a heavy rain and landside – caused the building to slide down and come to rest very much out of plumb. The story is then enhanced with attendant geological and gravitational mysteries.

The tilt house is perfectly suited for steep, wooded canyons where, with supplemental fencing, the visual reference points are easier to control. Three of the West Coast’s four existing anti-gravity houses--Oregon Vortex, Confusion Hill, and the Mystery Spot--are located in forested areas, while Calico is surrounded by a high fence.

³ (*Santa Cruz Evening News* 1938)

⁴ (*Santa Cruz Evening News* 1940)

⁵ (Shaw and Nelson 2004)

⁶ (Davis 2001)

⁷ Litster’s Oregon attraction is located within 100 miles of the Oregon Caves National Monument which was a popular auto tourist attraction beginning in the 1920s. (Oregon 2012)

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George Prather and the History of the Mystery Spot

George Prather was born in California in November, 1890, and grew up near Fresno where his father was a farmer. As a young man he exhibited a talent for machinery and electricity, and in 1920 he and his wife, Nellie, moved to Santa Cruz where he operated a welding shop and automobile repair garage.⁸ According to those who knew him, Prather was a talented electrician, mechanic, and inventor (one interviewee who knew him called him a “genius”) and was the holder of at least five patents, including his most famous, a device that helped to align automobile front wheels.⁹ In the early 1930s (he was then in his early 40s), he sold his garage and patents and built a home on the Santa Cruz-Watsonville highway (present-day Soquel Drive). Prather was not idle, however, and on September 1, 1940, he visited John Litster’s House of Mystery in Southern Oregon and was inspired to build a similar attraction in the Santa Cruz Mountains.¹⁰

George Prather Purchases the Granite Creek Property - 1940

Prather returned to Santa Cruz County and on October 21, 1940, he purchased three acres of relatively steep redwood forest from Leighton Newcomb.¹¹ The property straddled Granite Creek, a small tributary of Branciforte Creek in the Santa Cruz Mountains about four miles north of Santa Cruz. Access to the property was by a narrow dead-end road off Branciforte Drive. Branciforte Drive was one of the oldest roads in the Santa Cruz Mountains¹² and was one of the popular alternate routes to the Glenwood Highway (and later Highway 17) which was often bumper to bumper with traffic headed to Santa Cruz’s beaches and boardwalk on summer weekends.¹³

When Prather bought the Granite Creek property there was already a summer resort just south of the Granite Creek property on Branciforte Drive and in 1939 the County had relocated an antique covered bridge that once had spanned a nearby creek to De Laveaga Park about a mile south.¹⁴ Thus, besides the primary destinations of Santa Cruz County’s growing number of State-owned beaches and the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk to the south, Branciforte Drive had several roadside attractions along it when Prather bought the Granite Creek property.

⁸In 1910 the census taker lists him as “electrician” working for the Traction Company. (Census 1910; 1920; 1930; Prather 2010)

⁹ The 1930 census lists him as a “manufacturer” of a “Wheel-o-meter.” He filed and was granted a patent for a “Device for Testing Wheel Cant,” in 1926 (Patent, U.S.1926)

¹⁰ The Mystery Spot collection contains an admission ticket for the House of Mystery, Gold Hill, Oregon date-stamped September 1, 1940.

¹¹ (Santa Cruz County Deed 1940)

¹² (Clark 1986)

¹³ (Beal 1991)

¹⁴ (*Santa Cruz Evening News* 1939)

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The Construction of the Mystery Spot buildings – 1940-1941

Over the winter of 1940-41 and into the spring, Prather logged a number of redwood trees along the creek and milled them on site for the redwood lumber. With the assistance of his son, Bruce, and one of Leighton Newcomb's sons, Craig, he built a bridge, a gate, fencing, and a ticket booth.¹⁵ On the hillside tucked into the redwood trees, Prather constructed what was called (and still is) "the shack."

The shack is a vernacular single-wall structure consisting of two rooms built out of redwood lumber. It is surrounded by a fence and rests at a seventeen degree angle. According to Prather's "creation story," the shack was originally built on the level, but during a heavy winter storm, it slid down the hillside and lodged against a redwood tree. Upon further investigating the property, it seemed that compasses were thrown askew by some unseen and unexplainable force. Prather named his attraction The Mystery Spot.¹⁶

The Mystery Spot's Opening, June 15, 1941, and the War Years

On Friday, June 13, 1941, the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* newspaper heralded the opening of George Prather's Mystery Spot for that coming Sunday. The three-column article titled "Mystery Spot—You never Saw a Crazier Place—Opens Sunday for your Amazement" included a picture of George Prather standing in the tilted shack's doorway. Assuring the reader that Prather was a "sane and sound Santa Cruzan" the author noted that the Mystery Spot was "similar in many respects to the famed House of Mystery in Oregon"¹⁷ and that the visitor would experience many "strange things." In the article Prather acknowledged that the access to the site off Branciforte Drive was narrow, and that "people may come slowly at first." But he predicted that his Mystery Spot would someday become as popular as the Oregon site, and that Santa Cruz would be

¹⁵ (Prather 2010) (Newcomb 2010) (Setnor 2011) .

¹⁶ The 1940-1941 winter was extremely wet, but the story passed on by the Newcombs was that the shack was built on the level, and then lowered to its present location. (Newcomb 2010) (Setnor 2011)

¹⁷ Apparently that similarity was not lost on John Litster because according to Karen Setnor, niece of Craig Newcomb, Litster came down to Santa Cruz and threatened to sue Prather for copying his tilthouse. Setnor suggests that Litster may have been dissuaded from following through with a suit because the actual mechanisms of the tilt house would then be exposed in open court. (Setnor 2011) The Oregon Vortex also makes note of George Prather's inspiration, stating in its brochure that the first imitation of the House of Mystery "was built at Santa Cruz, California, in 1941." (Oregon 1986)

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identified as being "...where the Mystery Spot is."¹⁸ Some of the earliest guides working at the Mystery Spot included George Prather, his son Bruce, as well as Don and Craig Newcomb.¹⁹

America's entry into World War II six months later changed everything. Most of the area's young men, including Bruce Prather and Don Newcomb, went into military service. Wartime tire and gasoline rationing cut deeply into the Santa Cruz automobile tourist business, as did the rationing of newsprint.²⁰

Apparently George Prather's wartime economic difficulties were serious enough that in October of 1944, he sold a one-half interest in the Mystery Spot business to Vaden McCray, an upstream neighbor living alongside Granite Creek.²¹ According to Vonda McCray Hodges, the late Vaden McCray's daughter, her father, her uncle Virgil, and a cousin all worked as Mystery Spot guides in 1945.²²

George Prather died suddenly on January 29, 1946 at the age of 55. He was described in the local newspaper as "owner of one of the craziest spots on earth" which had "world-wide fame."²³ George's widow, Nellie, and his son, Bruce, inherited the Mystery Spot real estate and one-half of the business. When Bruce returned from his military service in the Pacific in 1946, he assumed the management of the Mystery Spot, and Vaden McCray continued to be a partner and acted as a guide.²⁴

Advertising and promotion—Selling the Mysteries

The Mystery Spot was not visible from any of the heavily-traveled roads in the Santa Cruz Mountains, nor is it today. It is tucked back up a narrow canyon, served by a one-lane dead-end road, and camouflaged by dense redwood foliage. It could not nor can not, by itself, attract anyone. Promotion, including advertising, signage and word of mouth were (and are) critical to the success and longevity of the Mystery Spot. Beginning with that first 1941 newspaper article published two days before it opened, the Mystery Spot has been calling attention to itself.

¹⁸(*Santa Cruz Sentinel* 1941)

¹⁹(Newcomb 2010) Admission in 1941 was 5 cents, and the guides were paid 1 cent per paid admission. (Setnor 2011)

²⁰(Santa Cruz Seaside Company 2007, 98-102)

²¹(United States Income Tax Return 1945)

²² Vaden McCray, a native of Texas, came out to California in the 1930s with his extended family. The McCrays were involved in professional dog racing. He is listed in the 1940 census as a "dog trainer. (Census, 1940) His daughter describes him as being an entrepreneur, promoter and a "showman." (Hodges 2012)

²³(*Santa Cruz Sentinel* 1946)

²⁴(Prather 2010; Hodges 2012; Prather 1949)

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The word “mystery” was often used by American roadside entrepreneurs. By the mid-1920s, on the north side of the Santa Cruz Mountains, the late Sarah Winchester’s house was already labeled as the “Winchester Mystery House,” the Oregon anti-gravity house that was George Prather’s inspiration was named the “House of Mystery.” When Prather combined the name and a spot in black type against a bright yellow background, he created a powerful advertising icon that is recognized nationally and even internationally.²⁵ One of the Mystery Spot’s most powerful advertising mediums was the bright yellow bumper strip²⁶ that, beginning in 1941, became part of the experience of having visited the Mystery Spot.²⁷

Roadside billboards and signs were also an integral part of the Mystery Spot’s advertising, announcing its existence and giving directions to the isolated venue. The Mystery Spot’s distinctive black-on-yellow logo became a Santa Cruz County icon and beginning in the 1940s it could be seen on billboards and signs throughout the county. Even after the city of Santa Cruz began passing anti-billboard ordinances, the Mystery Spot billboards had become such a part of the county landscape that some elected city officials were reluctant to see them removed.²⁸ Several billboards with their distinctive yellow and black design continue to help guide visitors to the Mystery Spot along Branciforte Drive.

The LIFE Magazine watershed November 15, 1948

LIFE Magazine was the most popular and influential magazine published in the 1940s in the United States, enjoying an astonishing weekly circulation of over 5,000,000 copies. In the November 15, 1948 issue, with Ingrid Bergman as Joan of Arc on the cover, the lead and very popular “Speaking of Pictures” segment featured the Mystery Spot with seven photographs showing the shack with visitors leaning at odd angles, appearing to defy gravity. The article was titled “How do they do it?” and despite the one phrase describing it as a “tourist trap” the text conveyed the mystery of the Mystery Spot in an inviting and humorous tone. Bruce Prather was quoted as saying that the site attracted 100,000 visitors a year. This one article propelled the Mystery Spot into national and international prominence.²⁹ Bruce Prather still believes that the LIFE Magazine article was the most important marketing moment in the Mystery Spot’s

²⁵ (California Secretary of State 1995)

²⁶ The bumper strip was developed in the American mid-West in the 1920s. Initially tied on with wire, after World War II it was attached with adhesive. (Kaszynski 2000)

²⁷ These days the Mystery Spot gives out bumper stickers but no longer attaches them to visitor’s automobiles.

²⁸ The last billboard within the city of Santa Cruz remained until 1995 alongside Soquel Avenue. It was finally removed and acquired by the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History. (Santa Cruz Sentinel 1995)

²⁹ (LIFE 1949)

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history.³⁰ Beginning in 1949, the Mystery Spot was able to use the magazine's bright red rectangular logo in its advertising, on its brochures and on its billboards, giving the attraction the imprimatur of credibility. Even today, long after the magazine has ceased publication, the LIFE Magazine article is displayed on the Mystery Spot ticket booth. There were many subsequent promotional moments, including being mentioned in Ripley's *Believe it or Not*, featured in a *Dennis the Menace* comic book, and being featured on national television shows, but none as important as that LIFE Magazine article in November 1948.³¹

The Mystery Spot's power of Inspiration – Wonder Hill to Michigan Mystery Spot

George Prather's Mystery Spot was both representative of the era known as the "Golden Age of Auto Tourism" and a powerful inspiration for many other roadside attractions. It is the nature of these "mysteries" that we will never know exactly how many other roadside attractions were inspired nationally by The Mystery Spot. But, one regional tilt box is easy to follow. In December, 1949, Bruce Prather bought Vaden McCray's interest in the Mystery Spot and dissolved the partnership.³² Apparently Vaden McCray had already set out on his own. A lengthy article published in the *San Francisco Chronicle* in November of 1949 described a visit to a roadside attraction named Wonder Hill. Located alongside Highway 101 about eight miles north of Salinas the attraction had all of the elements including the demonstration of a ball rolling uphill, and two people having differing heights while standing on a concrete slab. Vaden McCray was described as the owner of Wonder Hill and appears in the accompanying photographs. The visiting newspaper reporter noted that it all seemed very similar to the sites in Oregon and Santa Cruz.³³ It is not known when Wonder Hill ceased operating, but in the early 1950s, Vaden McCray and two other "surveyors" traveled to Michigan where they "stumbled across an area where their surveying equipment didn't seem to work properly." They called their attraction Mystery Spot, and, at this writing it continues to attract visitors with yellow and black signage.³⁴

The Tree Circus – Another roadside attraction that we can trace directly back to The Mystery Spot was Axel Erlandson's Tree Circus. According to a book written by his widow, she and her daughter had their inspiration in 1946 while standing in line at The Mystery Spot. Realizing the postwar automobile visitor potential in the area, they returned to Hilmar, California and

³⁰ (Prather 2010.)

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² (Prather 1949)

³³ (*San Francisco Chronicle* 1949)

³⁴ (Hodges 2012; Michigan Mystery Spot 2013)

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convinced Axel Erlandson to move his Hilmar roadside exhibit of fantastically shaped trees to a site alongside the over-the-mountain highway in Scotts Valley. The Erlandson's followed the Prather model almost exactly, getting a LIFE magazine feature and then being mentioned twelve times in Ripley's *Believe it or Not*. But, try as they might, Erlandson's trees never captured the popular imagination as did the Mystery Spot, and following the mid-1950s realignment of Highway 17 that rendered his trees no longer visible from the primary automobile artery, Erlandson closed his exhibit in 1963.³⁵

Santa Cruz County's Roadside Golden Age – The 1950s and 1960s

With the relaxation of wartime restrictions, the burgeoning postwar economy, and the Baby Boom, American families hit the road with a vengeance in the 1950s. American auto tourism doubled from 1950 to 1960, and the Sunday Drive became a regular part of middle-class life.³⁶

No place was the Sunday Drive more strongly manifested than in California, and Santa Cruz County was particularly well-positioned within easy driving distance from the growing population of the San Francisco Bay Area. The Mystery Spot, Tree Circus and Santa Cruz Boardwalk were joined by a number of new nearby roadside attractions after World War II, most notably, several 1950s wax-figure exhibits including The Last Supper and two Sorensen's Wax Museums. But the largest new 1950s Santa Cruz County roadside attraction was Santa's Village, fronting the newly-aligned section of Highway 17 in Scotts Valley (the very re-routing that helped kill the Tree Circus.) Inspired by a similar and successful year-round-Christmas roadside attraction in Southern California, Santa's Village opened May 30, 1957, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors.³⁷ The interconnectedness and cross-fertilization of these attractions is demonstrated by Bruce Prather becoming the manager of Santa's Village during the late 1950s and early 1960s while continuing to manage The Mystery Spot.³⁸

Further evidence of Santa Cruz County's Roadside Golden Age can be found in the story of F. Norman Clark's Roaring Camp Railroad. Clark also saw the potential of this new surge of visitors in the County, and in 1958 he brought the idea of a short-distance railroad from Southern

³⁵ Erlandson died not long after he closed his exhibit and his widow sold it to Larry Thompson who added a herd of large fiberglass dinosaurs to the trees and renamed it "Lost World." The addition of dinosaurs helped prolong the life of the Tree Circus, but it finally closed in 1982. (Lydon 1993)

³⁶ (Lange 2004)

³⁷ (Laffey and Pokriots 1991)

³⁸ (Prather 2010)

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California and planned and built the Roaring Camp Railroad attraction. Roaring Camp officially opened in 1963.³⁹

The 1960s was the Golden Age of the Sunday Drive in Santa Cruz County, but as the decade wore on, some of the smaller attractions died off, and those that didn't were sorely tested by the 1970s fuel crisis.

The 1970s Fuel Crisis and the Internationalization of The Mystery Spot

The tradition of the Sunday Drive was severely restricted by the gasoline shortages beginning in 1973. American drivers faced long lines at the gas pumps, a national speed limit of 55 miles per hour and gas rationing. Motorists were urged to restrict unnecessary driving, and the idea and practice of the Sunday Drive fell out of favor. The number of visitors coming to Santa Cruz County dropped as a result, and many roadside attractions did not survive, including Santa's Village which closed in 1979.

Meanwhile, from across the Pacific came a new group of tourists—the Japanese. Freed to travel by the relaxation of Japanese government restrictions and a burgeoning economy, Japanese tourists began coming to California by the thousands. And simultaneously, several Japanese television production crews came to Santa Cruz County and produced shows featuring the Mystery Spot. The Mystery Spot became one of the most popular California visitor destinations for Japanese tourists in California by the end of the 1970s. The Mystery Spot was featured in publications geared toward Japanese tourists.⁴⁰ According to the director of Northern California's Japanese Tourist Bureau, in 1980, 4,000 Japanese visitors came to Santa Cruz County with the majority visiting the Mystery Spot. Sometimes as many as ten buses filled with Japanese tourists would work their way up the narrow road each day, and The Mystery Spot employed several bilingual Japanese-English guides to accommodate them.⁴¹ This flow of Japanese tourists continued well into the 1980s and no doubt helped the Santa Cruz County tourist business weather the fuel crisis.

³⁹ Ironically, Roaring Camp is directly adjacent and less than one hundred yards from the redwood tree that John Fremont purportedly slept in back in 1846. The tree is now within the Henry Cowell State Redwood Park. (Clark 2010)

⁴⁰ (Gateway 1976)

⁴¹ (Prather 2010; Woodrow 2010; undated newspaper article in Mystery Spot collection. Musitelli, 1993)

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By the 1990's, Wally Trabing, long-time newspaper columnist for the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* considered the Mystery Spot to be one of "Big Three" Santa Cruz County tourist attractions alongside the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk, and Roaring Camp Railroad.⁴²

Beyond the Built Environment

The Mystery Spot's history has two basic elements to it. First, there's the built environment, and in particular the shack which has not changed since George Prather designed and built it over the winter of 1940-41. Secondly is what we might call the site's "software" which includes the marketing and the presentation made to the visitors over the years. Some of this software has changed, but there is also a general continuity that deserves mentioning.

The Creation Story – George Prather's Script

The Mystery Spot archives have several typescript copies of the history of the Mystery Spot and the script written by George Prather that guides were to use when explaining the various features of the site. These are the organic documents of the Mystery Spot and include the story about how the location was "found" by George Prather back in 1940 and how the anomalies were discovered during the winter of 1940-41, and how the Prathers began construction on the site. This "discovery" story and the attendant anomalies continues to be told almost word for word as George Prather wrote it. There is even a large display panel of the story just uphill from the ticket booth that has been there since 1941. Present-day guides continue to memorize the story during their training. Once they have mastered Prather's organic story, they may add their own personal emphases and examples, but Prather's original story continues to be passed along just as he wrote it in 1940-41.⁴³

The manner and style of presentation and the tone with which it was delivered has evolved over the years as the Mystery Spot shifted and changed with the times and the sensibilities of its visitors. Initially the presentation had a somewhat authoritarian feel to it, with the emphasis on the scientific. This reflected the awe and trust that Americans had for the ever-expanding scientific world in the Atomic Age. Who wouldn't believe that there was a gravitational anomaly involved at the Mystery Spot in light of the amazing discoveries that were being announced regularly during the 1940s and 1950s? Most of the guides in the early years (older men) cited various scientific studies and experiments during the tour, and the typical early visitors were already nominal believers because of the LIFE Magazine article. In those early

⁴² (Trabing 1994).

⁴³ (Nickerson 2010-2012)

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years, visitors were not encouraged to bring instruments such as plumb bobs and cameras with them.⁴⁴

However, as the belief in the infallibility of science began to decline and suspicion and skepticism rose, the presentations became more playful and visitors were encouraged to bring whatever instruments they wished. It was not unusual to see at least one carpenter's level come through the turnstile each day. What was once delivered with a seriousness and defensiveness was now explained with a wink and a nod. Sure, OK, maybe there's not a gravitational anomaly, but what's YOUR explanation? asked the guides. There's a playful challenge issued by the guides to each group. With the recent rise of what is called the "postmodern relativism of truth," the pendulum has shifted yet again, and visitors, particularly Americans softened by "infotainment" and speculation, are once again, more apt to believe in George Prather's "creation story."⁴⁵ And, perhaps more important to the site's success and longevity is the fundamental truth that people enjoy being tricked.

A Stationary Magic Show

It is beyond the scope of this history to get into the details as to just how the Mystery Spot creates the feeling of disorientation. But, there's no question that Americans enjoy being fooled, and there is a long and continuous history of the importance and attraction of magic and illusions in America. We need only consider the number of magic acts that are permanent fixtures in Las Vegas; thousands of visitors to Las Vegas each year pay millions of dollars to see magicians such as Penn and Teller.⁴⁶ What George Prather designed and wrote (and the guides continue) is in the grand tradition of American magicianship. The major difference, of course, is that the visitor is on the stage, surrounded by the magic and able to examine and touch the various elements of the "act." Every visitor is challenged with the same question posed by LIFE magazine back in 1948 – "How do they do it?" Most visitors come away with the understanding that there's something visual going on and the site is altering their perception. But there's more to it than that – it's how their perception is altered that takes this much deeper.

⁴⁴ The author, as a student at Hollister High School, surreptitiously brought a camera and plumb bob into the Mystery Spot in the spring of 1957 and did his senior physics project on an "expose" of the site.

⁴⁵ (Shermer 2009)

⁴⁶ (Green 2013)

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The symbiosis between the University and the Mystery Spot – where magic meets neuroscience

From the opening of the Mystery Spot in 1941 there was a stream of articles debunking and dismissing the place as nothing more than a hoax. Skeptics did not believe George Prather's "creation myth" and yet they were unable to adequately explain or replicate the effects it had on visitors. Following the 1964 opening of a University of California in Santa Cruz, an interesting relationship developed between some of the University's professors, their students, and the Mystery Spot; entire classes came to the Mystery Spot to study it. The result has been a handful of professional journal articles analyzing the causes of visitor disorientation. Some University of California researchers were so impressed with the Mystery Spot that they named one of the visual distortions "The Mystery Spot Illusion."⁴⁷ These studies have all been undertaken with the approval of the Mystery Spot.⁴⁸ The Mystery Spot management has welcomed the expression of alternate opinions to George Prather's "creation myth" because, in the end, the disorientation is so artfully done. And, it's good advertising.

Reasons for the continuity and success of the Mystery Spot –

One might think that the somewhat simple, direct and wonderfully naïve elements of the Mystery Spot would have fallen out of favor in this very high tech era of the 21st century, but a visit on a summer weekend will convince the visitor otherwise. Thousands of visitors arrive each summer and though they may have registered for their tour over fiber optic cables and the Internet and found their way up the narrow road on their hand-held telephone, the Mystery Spot is anything but high tech. The experiences they have, and the structures they enter are almost identical to those developed by George Prather in the early 1940s.

This continuity of buildings, style and message is a main part of The Mystery Spot's success. They have stayed on message for over seventy years. There have been no additions of train rides as with some other tilt houses.⁴⁹ Nor has the The Mystery Spot had to pursue visitors with new rides or attractions as have the Santa Cruz Boardwalk, or the Monterey Bay Aquarium.

The continuity has been made possible, in part, by the fact that The Mystery Spot has had only two owners in its over 70 year history – the Prathers (in partnership with the McCrays in the 1940s) from 1940 to 1994, and Blanca and Christopher Smith. Bruce Prather and the Smiths continue to be good friends and meet regularly. George Prather's original vision has been

⁴⁷ (Shimamura and Prinzmetal 1999)

⁴⁸ (Bridgeman 2005)

⁴⁹ (Campbell 2001; Michigan Mystery Spot 2013)

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continued and guided for over seventy years through Bruce to the Smiths to the present-day Mystery Spot management and staff.⁵⁰

Nostalgia and History

It is hard to calculate the importance of the nostalgia and history factor in the success of the Mystery Spot, but it is not unusual to have visitors who first visited as children, bringing their children and grandchildren. They are able to share that sense of wonder and puzzlement with succeeding generations, comfortable with the knowledge that when they bring new visitors, the tilted shack will be there just as it always has been, and though the guides may be younger, the ball will still roll uphill and short people will become tall. For the repeat visitors, the Mystery Spot takes them back to a simpler time, and allows them to relive their childhood.

For first-time visitors, the place evokes an earlier time, and they get the feeling that they are stepping back in history.

⁵⁰ (Prather 2010; Nickerson 2010-2012)

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Photograph Log

Mystery Spot – Photograph Records

Photo #1 – Mystery Spot Shack, front (north end) February 16, 2013

Photo #2 – Bruce Prather, 1941 – standing in front of shack

Photo #3 - North end of shack – same perspective as 1941 photo

Photo #4 – South end of shack – Bruce Prather (left) and father, George, August 1941

Photo #5 - South end of shack – same perspective as #4 – January 22, 2013

Photo #6 - North end of shack – Life magazine photo taken 1948, Virgil McCray (left), Bruce Prather and Vaden McCray

Photo #7 - North end of shack – same perspective taken January 15, 2013

Photo #8 - Interior of “ladder demonstration” – Life Magazine photo taken 1948 Vaden McCray

Photo #9 - Interior showing “ladder” – looking south – Photo taken January, 2013

Photo #10 – Exterior of 1941 Ticket Booth, taken February 16, 2013

Photo #11 – Exterior of 1941 Ticket Booth north end, taken January 22, 2013

Photo #12 - Looking west up hill toward shack which is behind fence – Feb. 16, 2013

Photo #13 – Looking east downhill toward ticket booth and entrance – February 16, 2013

Photo #14 – Looking west across parking lot entrance in center, c. 1948

Photo #15 - Looking west across parking – same perspective as #14 – Feb. 16, 2013

Photo #16 – Beach Street, Santa Cruz, looking east – c. 1962 – showing iconic Mystery Spot Sign on side of building. The golden age of auto tourism.

Photo #17 - Mystery Spot billboard – Branciforte Drive looking north – January 15, 2013

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Photographs



Photo #1 – Mystery Spot Shack, front (north end) February 16, 2013

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Photo #2 – Bruce Prather, 1941 – standing in front of shack



Photo #3 - North end of shack – same perspective as 1941 photo

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Photo #4 – South end of shack – Bruce Prather (left) and father, George, August 1941

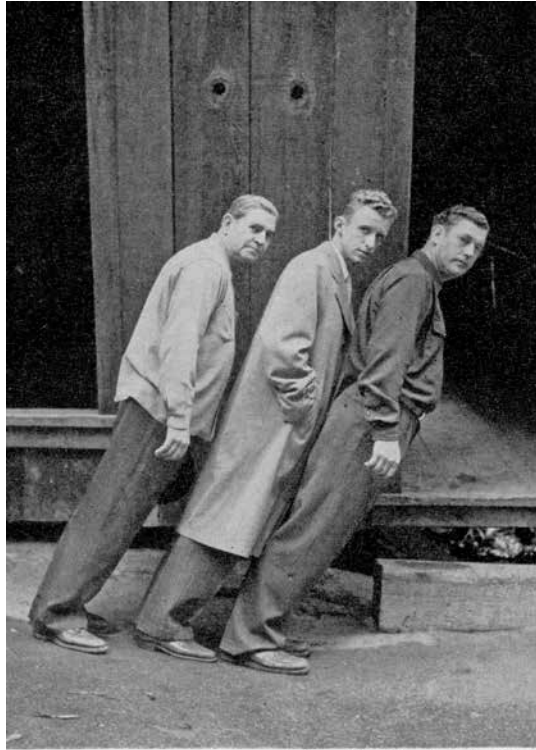


Photo #5 - South end of shack – same perspective as #4 – January 22, 2013

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HACK'S PERSONNEL assume tourists' positions. Total overhead for the owner (center) consists of salaries for his guide (left) and his manager (right)

Photo #6 - North end of shack – Life magazine photo taken 1948, Virgil McCray (left), Bruce Prather and Vaden McCray



Photo #7 - North end of shack – same perspective taken January 15, 2013

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SHACK'S CRAZY TILT allows guide to balance himself "no hands" on wall (*above, left*) and prompts Mrs. Jason Powers (*below*) to plant an impromptu kiss on Mr. Powers.

Photo #8 - Interior of "ladder demonstration" – Life Magazine photo taken 1948 Vaden McCray



Photo #9 - Interior showing "ladder" – looking south – Photo taken January, 2013

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Photo #10 – Exterior of 1941 Ticket Booth, taken February 16, 2013



Photo #11 – Exterior of 1941 Ticket Booth north end, taken January 22, 2013

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Photo #12 - Looking west up hill toward shack which is behind fence – Feb. 16, 2013



Photo #13 – Looking east downhill toward ticket booth and entrance – February 16, 2013

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Photo #14 – Looking west across parking lot entrance in center, c. 1948



Photo #15 - Looking west across parking – same perspective as #14 – Feb. 16, 2013

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Photo #16 – Beach Street, Santa Cruz, looking east – c. 1962 – showing iconic Mystery Spot Sign on side of building.



Photo #17 - Mystery Spot billboard – Branciforte Drive looking north – January 15, 2013