

The Other Caves

By

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This is part memory, part speculation and was gathered from a few old articles and my brain. I have never been up to the quarry that most people around here refer to as Marble Mountain. When I was in high school, over 50 years ago, I heard stories of kids from my class climbing up to the quarry, bypassing the barricades and going into the tunnels. I did not pay much attention because I just was not interested and it sounded like a lot of dangerous exploring. Then this memory seeped into my brain again and I thought I would see what I could quickly find. I was not going to do deep research, because I can write quicker from my mind when my fingers type in the information as quickly as the brain processes it.

All my life I have heard that there were caves at Marble Mountain. The story I was told by older relatives, long gone by now, is that the caves at Marble Mountain rivaled the Oregon Caves and were beautiful but “someone” decided not to develop them as a place to visit and explore because they would take away the value of the Marble Halls of Oregon, now called the Oregon Caves. Dad said he heard they rivaled Carlsbad Caverns. It seemed reasonable to me since Marble Mountain is a lot closer the Grants Pass than the Oregon Caves that people would opt to go to the caves that were closer to Hwy. 99 than trekking out to Cave Junction and up the mountain road to the “real” caves

Over the years a story surfaces about someone going into the tunnels and getting far enough inside to see the natural limestone caves. Supposedly, there are three to six large “rooms” with ceilings over thirty feet high. There has been speculation that if one followed the caverns they could go all the way from Cheney Creek to the Oregon Caves. The two cave sites are less than 20 miles apart, as the proverbial crow flies. The Marble Mountain caves have stalactites and stalagmites just like the Oregon Caves and plenty of rock crystals too. Do remember learning in school that the pillars that “grow” from the ceiling of a cave are stalactites because they “held tight” to the ceiling, whereas the ones that rise

from the floor are stalagmites because they “might have been” stalactites if they held tight?

I do remember there was a spot with a wooden platform that hung over the old California and Oregon Coast Railroad tracks where trucks would dump the crushed rock into railroad ore cars. I was told that was where the ore from Marble Mountain was loaded. I do not know how long all of this lasted and most of it was done before I was around to develop a memory. The granite cut in the side of hill is still visible but no platforms and I am not even sure if it is the correct place. To tell the truth, it wasn't well situated to be something useful for Marble Mountain. The road to Marble Mountain does not intersect with Demaray Drive. Demaray Drive is built on part of the old railroad bed of the C. & O.C. Railroad. However, the railroad continued on past where Demaray Drive ends. The road to Marble Mountain turns off Fish Hatchery Road and goes up the mountain side to the quarry. Taking crushed ore to Wilderville to put on the train seems like a more efficient route. The Josephine County Historical Society has photos of ore cars being loaded at Wilderville, but it could also be the copper ore that was hauled to the railhead from the Illinois Valley. All of this is just shadowy memories and I am sure some of the readers have better recollections. The quarry operation had its own railroad, narrow gage I presume, that had a couple of ore rail cars that would be lowered down the steep mountain filled with ore and then hauled back up with cables, no train engine. Eventually they had a road that could be travelled by truck and that changed how they delivered the ore to the train. After the railroad bridge that crossed the Rogue River went out in the 1955 flood, the trucks wound up taking the ore all the way to Gold Hill on Highways 199 and 99.

The Ideal Cement Company in Gold Hill did have a regular train engine to haul the freight on the C. & O.C. Railroad from the Wilderville area to Grants Pass, where the Southern Pacific would take the loaded ore cars on to Gold Hill. The locomotives on the railroad would back out to Water's Creek and Wilderville they come back to Grants Pass head first. When looking at old newspapers the name of the Gold Hill company seems to have two names that were interchanged often, sometimes in the same article, i.e. the Ideal Cement Company and the Portland-Beaver Cement Company. I recall Dad just called it the Beaver Cement Company. I do remember that Gold Hill was a grey community when I was a child. The

equipment they used to make the bagged concrete-mix blew out grey debris, sort of a mixture of smoke and dust from my recollections. Everything in Gold Hill seemed covered with grey dust. When the rains started in the fall, the little town would be washed back to normal until the next summer and less rainfall.

I have heard different stories about what happened to the Marble Mountain locomotives. The first one supposedly was sold as scrap metal during World War II when it was replaced with another engine that came from the Sacramento River area in California. I heard it was sold for scrap too, but one newspaper article mentioned that it was sold to India, which does not make much sense to me since the railroads in India have a narrower gage railroad system and it would not fit on their tracks.

The railroad tracks of the C.& O.C. Railroad were sold to India, but not as tracks. They were used upright as electrical poles. Of course since no one followed the rails to India, that too could be just an interesting story.

Meanwhile, back on the mountain... I have driven up the road that supposedly goes to the quarry, but turned around when it got narrow and not much more than a pathway. It is private property and should not be visited without permission. It is not on public land. Old timers in Grants Pass know exactly where to look to see the quarry. It is southwest of Grants Pass. It can be seen from many places, such as the top of Hillcrest Cemetery and some downtown areas. In the winter, with snow on the ground, it shows up as a big white spot. Some people may have never noticed it or were not interested enough to inquire about it. In the summer time it is red like the red clay dirt of that area. It is not as clear as it used to be and I suppose that trees have grown up in some spots in the quarry. Look to the southwest as you drive out the Redwood Highway or Demaray Drive and you can spot the quarry. Think about the mysterious caves that may or may not exist at the site.