

Cave Robber Case Closed: Intrepid forest investigator hunts down missing lava cave formations

Written by Jim Anderson

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Eddy Cartaya is a caver with a strong sense of responsibility who wants to see our local lava caves protected. And he's in a unique position to do that as the Deschutes National Forest's law enforcement and investigations officer. When Cartaya introduced himself to the Oregon High Desert Grotto of the National Speleological Society, the local chapter of the national cave exploration and protection group, a light went on among several grotto members. They had heard rumors about someone taking formations from the Lavacicle Cave. This was not only illegal, but directly opposed to the NSS philosophy: "Leave nothing behind but footprints, and take nothing out but photographs."

Officer Cartaya's ears pricked up and he wanted to know more about Lavacicle. The more he listened, the straighter he sat in his chair, especially when he learned the cave is known worldwide for its unique lava formations. Discovered in 1959 by firefighter Max Stenkamp, Lavacicle revealed itself with a strong draft of air that ascended through the smoke of the Aspen Flat Fire. Stenkamp and his men followed the draft, but went only as far as the lavacicles and

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came out dazzled by the spectacle.

My caving partner, Phil Coyner of Bend, and I were the first cavers to go to the very end of the Lavacicle. It was on that arduous trip, crawling through tight cracks and around giant mud-caked chunks of lava that had fallen from the ceiling, that we found an ancient skull almost buried in the clay-filled pockets among the lava on the cave's floor. It looked like a badger, but didn't fit the anatomy, so I asked the USFS if I could send it to the University of Oregon Natural History Museum in Eugene. The response from the museum was quite a surprise, it turned out to be a northern river otter, *Lontra canadensis* — and it was more than 6,000 years old!

As you can see by the lavacicle Eddy is holding above, the formations resemble common stalagmites and stalactites. However, they were formed by cooling lava rather than by dripping water. Phil Coyner and I took Phil Brogan into the cave on our second trip, along with a forest supervisor, Ashley Poust. It was Brogan, a geologist and writer for *The Bulletin* and *The Oregonian*,

who gave the formations the new name: "lavacicles." (He also wrote an article for

The

Oregonian

about the ancient river otter crossing the high desert with a canteen on its back...)

In order to protect the formations, Poust ordered that a gate be placed at the opening of the cave immediately, and that, Oh Best Beloved, started a fuss. On one hand, cavers were delighted; they saw an effort on the part of the USFS to protect what they considered a valuable natural resource.

However, when word got out about Lavacicle (helped along by articles in *The Bulletin* and *The Oregonian*

), curious people went to see it, but when they found the locked gate, there were some very unhappy campers. A few visitors were so angry they left their strong (and sometimes colorful) opinions nailed to the USFS interpretive sign at the cave cite. Others reacted more violently, tearing the gate off and entering the cave with blood in their eyes; lavacicles were kicked over and stolen. The really sad outcome was that one of the largest and most beautiful formations, the so-called Horse Head was actually stolen from the cave, never to be seen again.

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