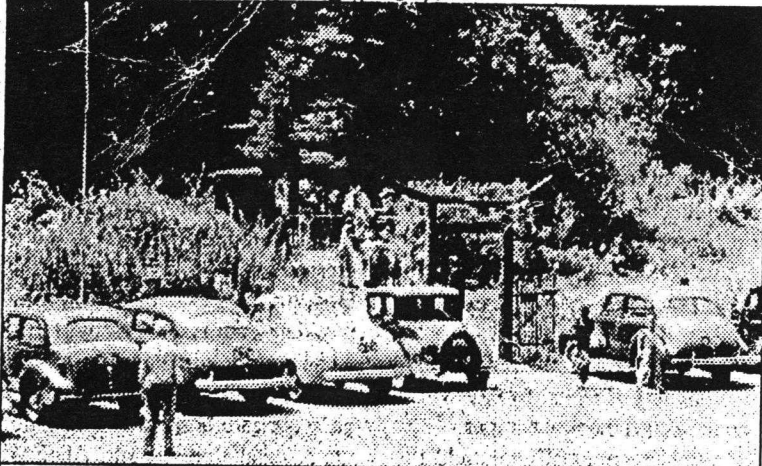


What's the Mystery?

Mystery Spot



Visitors from around the world have experienced the local phenomenon known as the "Mystery Spot."

by Carolyn Swift

Nothing fits the dizzy reputation of 1950s Santa Cruz as well as the Mystery Spot. A whole generation of children throughout the United States rode around in cars with bright yellow bumper stickers that told the world they'd been to the place "where gravity is defied

and visual perception is double crossed."

A stay in Santa Cruz, in fact, was incomplete without a trip down Branciforte Drive to the Mystery Spot.

The amusement park with a weird slant on reality is not the only one of its kind in the United States, but few who came here had ever experienced anything like it. Established in

1940, it has continued to attract thousands of visitors each year for well over a half-century.

What's the mystery? In 1943, H.G. Hubbard said in the 39th Report of the State Mineralogist that the phenomenon is "...a marked refraction of light rays within a small area," caused by the density differential between air and carbon dioxide gas and the normal atmosphere of the region.

That clears it up for just about everybody. Hubbard also disclosed that the carbon dioxide gas seeped up "in a soil-covered ravine among redwood trees and heavy brush..." which is a fancy way of saying it came out of the ground. The opening of the fissure was attributed to an earthquake or landslide.

The 1943 author concluded the "curious visual distortion due to the refraction is being exploited by the owner."

Donald Thomas Clark and

the Santa Cruz County Place Names has chronicled the Mystery Spot's brief history and its somewhat far-fetched explanation. The photographs,

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though, make it hard to believe it's all the result of some visual hocus-pocus. And perhaps it's better to remain baffled. That is, after all, the fun of it. □



Could this photo really be the result of a marked refraction of light within a small area? Photos courtesy of the Aptos Museum