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Old Developments, New Developments

Kenneth W. Smith

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The Lost River Cave is a place of great historical interest. It has been the site of various business ventures. The small valley which contains the river and cave is located at the intersection of Nashville Road and Cave Mill Road just south of Bowling Green, Kentucky. The river has been termed the world's deepest and shortest river. Although the property has been and may still be considered as a state park, it may also be looked upon as a possible location for a private enterprise.

History

According to reports, the cave was the location of a mill as early as 1796. One article said that a grist mill and carding machine were located at the scene then, powered by an undershot waterwheel. Many dates and relative information have been lost through the years, but the first person associated with running the mill was a man by the name of Shanks. He operated a grist mill and a distillery in the cave. A letter in the Park City Daily News in 1948 reported that the first flour mill in Warren County was erected in 1825. This was confirmed by William H. Temple, a native of Bowling Green. He stated that the builder was James Skiles, a pioneer resident and capitalist. When the mill was down in the cave area it was necessary to use a chain arrangement to lower the grain. The farmers would come to the top of the the bluff where they would ring a bell and the men below would wait for the grain to be lowered to them. It was then floated down the river to the mill and after ground, it was brought back to the entrance where it hooked to a chain and the farmers could pull it back to the top. This was a major problem for the business so much thought was put into a solution.

Finally an idea was conceived to build the mill on top of the bluff. They blasted a hole in the ceiling rock of the cave and put a drive shaft through to the top. The mill was built on top and the farmers were spared a lot of time and hard work. A distillery was also operated in the mill building. The old mill stood for many years but was destroyed by fire sometime during the Civil War (1861-1864). Another mill was built in 1874. The last record of operations was in 1857 and this mill was also destroyed by fire in 1915.

In 1917 the property was bought by E. S. and W. L. Perkins with the intentions of development. A roadside lunchroom had been built on the property and the property was leased for a term of ten years for development but a lack of funds made it unsuccessful and the lease was dropped. The roadside lunchroom continued in operation and a tourist camp and service station were later added. A small power plant was built in 1933 when the dam at the entrance of the cave was rebuilt. The generator supplied power for lighting the cave and the surrounding area. The generator had previously been the power source for Liberty, Kentucky. It was used mostly at night and city power was used during the day. The number of visitors increased and the tourist camp was enlarged. It still seemed that the power plant had set them back in funds and the profits were small so a dance floor was built in the building housing the lunchroom. Later another dance floor was built in the entrance of the cave. Many improvements were made and the cave became more popular every day. There was a charge of ten cents to go down to the river but the scenery and atmosphere could not be found anywhere else. The average temperature of the cave

is sixty degrees. The two dance floors in the cave were separated by a waterfall and were joined by two bridges, one built over the river under the big cave's dome, below the falls, the other built directly over the falls. There were tables and chairs located up and down the valley, near the river, for the convenience of picknickers. There were private tables for parties outside of the cave entrance to be used both afternoons and evenings. The night club served lunches and refreshments or the customers could bring their own. Several famous big bands played in the cave. There were lights placed around the entrances and cave area. Many travellers were lured in by the beauty of the valley being lit at night. The social organizations at Western and the residents of Bowling Green found the cave to be a nice meeting place. A beer garden was in operation at the upper level, with patrons permitted to travel around the side of the bluff down to the cave. A winding path allowed passage to the lower level on the north side of the river. A staircase provided access to the cave on the south side of the river. A number of commercial attractions were added to the site to encourage tourism, including a museum and gift shop. The charge for the museum was twenty five cents.

The sources of income for the Lost River business were varied and were not all to be absorbed by the owners. The dance floor was leased out usually for periods of Summer length. The service station which had been run by William F. Smith, Sr. until 1942 was leased out to Shell Oil for ten years at one hundred dollars a month. This happened right after the Nashville Road was torn up and the traffic rerouted. After

about four or five months the building burned also burning one of the small cabins behind it. It was built back and when the lease with Shell Oil ran out in 1952 William Smith, Sr. again took over with the franchised name of St. Clair. This lasted only about six months. At that time there were four types of gas being sold. They were: (1) white gas at nineteen cents a gallon, (2) clear gas at nineteen cents a gallon, (3) regular leaded at twenty one cents a gallon, and (4) ethyl high test at twenty five cents a gallon. The camp consisted of twelve cabins each renting for about seven dollars a night. There was also at one time the Lost River Walnut Company. It existed for three or four years. Because of the lack of strict rules on record keeping at that time there were few accurate records of profits and losses. Just how much money was made by each of these segments of business cannot be figured or even guessed at within reason. The cave had been registered as a corporation with W. L. Perkins as President. That corporation was dissolved in 1954. Eunice Perkins and William F. Smith, Sr. acquired the land and held ownership of the cave and all of the buildings until 1974 when they sold it to LeRoy and Dorothy Highbaugh, Jr.

Historical Background

The businesses of the cave have made an interesting history by themselves, but there were many stories told about the cave and the people who visited it. According to an article published in Billboard magazine in 1933, the cave was used by Jesse James as a hideout after robbing the Russellville bank in 1869. The article said that Jesse and Frank James after robbing the bank took their accomplices and hid in the cave until they were able to make their way to Missouri after the search for them had been called off. While the fact has never been verified, it has been widely rumored for years, and was advertised as such when

the cave was a major attraction. Dummies of the James brothers were placed in the cave to show tourists where the men were believed to have stayed. This was an undertaking that took work and money. The spot that the James brothers had picked was accessible only by wading a portion of the river or by using a boat and then climbing a bluff to the room which is twenty five feet from the ground. They had to tunnel under a large rock some seventy feet under ground and built steps back up to the room. Facts have been substantiated that the cave was used by soldiers during the Civil War. According to an unsigned document included in the Lost River collection, General John Hunt Morgan and his Confederate raiders hid in the cave after burning the train depot at Shakertown, or South Union, in Logan County, where Union soldiers had their supplies. The soldiers thought they had Morgan surrounded in Bowling Green but somehow he escaped. The document relates, "It is said that the soldiers gave up their pursuit for him and on their march to Shilo they passed over the cave where he had hid. It has been told that Morgan said, 'I could hear the horses feet and the soldiers, and I knew where they were, but they did not know they were riding over me eighty feet below the road.'" Morgan later was killed by Union soldiers at Greenville, betrayed by a woman who notified the soldiers of his whereabouts, the article said.

Other accounts related that eighty eight thousand soldiers of the Confederate army camped at Lost River on November 9, 1862. The 14th Corps, which had eleven divisions, reportedly moved to Nashville, and fought the battle of Stone River near Murfreesboro on December 31, 1862.

There have been many stories told about the cave that make it interesting and mysterious. Some are backed by facts, others are carried by interest. The cave advertised "The Man That Turned to Stone." Owners of the cave at one time reportedly found a petrified person and had it on display in the cave as a tourist attraction. In 1847, Thomas Kite described the river this way in his journal: "Three miles from Bowling Green on the Nashville Road we visited cave mill. A growth of fine timber here skirts the road and would prevent us or the casual observer from noting the large sink of an oval form at the bottom of which (one hundred feet below) flows a river twenty or thirty yards wide; Descending its precipitous sides, a scene of wild and rugged beauty presents. At one end the river rising at once full grown, flows about three hundred yards enclosed by the steep and rocky sides of the ravine then enters a cavern one hundred and fifty feet wide at its mouth and at least forty or fifty feet high. A solid arch of rock about fifty feet in thickness forming the roof. Under this arch an enterprising Kentuckian has located his grist mill and the noise of falling water and the clattering of the cog wheels by giving life and animation increases the picturesque effects. Finding a small board, we secured upon it a Bengal light, ignited it, and committing it to the current, it floated away, illuminating the extensive cavern, with the intense brilliancy of its light, until a change in course of the cave hid it behind a projecting rock from those at the mouth, who were anxiously watching its progress."

Lost River as a State Park

In recent years Lost River has been considered as a state park. State officials were termed cooperative but noncommittal in discussing plans for possible development of the river and cave as a state park and tourist attraction. Warren County has no state parks in its boundaries. It appeared from the last Official word on the matter that no funds were available for the development.

Location

Lost River is three tenths of a mile from a major interchange of the Green River Parkway. The Green River Parkway connects with I-65 approximately one mile from Lost River. Mammoth Cave National Park is thirty five miles away, Nashville is sixty miles and the Land Between the Lakes is one hundred and ten miles away. Lost River is already marked on most highway maps and the site is located near one of the nations prime tourist regions. This makes it ideal for a park, but a private business might be a little different. To privately develop it as a park would be as well as the state developing the property, but it is highly unlikely that a sole proprietor could furnish the funds needed for the task. A night club in the cave would be well located as Bowling Green has few night spots, especially for students.

Size

The land has splendid facilities for installation of an amusement park, riding devices, athletic fields, and other diversions. The property includes about twelve to fourteen acres. A buyer with intentions of a night club may not want or be able to purchase the entire property.

Legal Aspects

It is most probable that only minor problems would arise if the state developed the land as a park. A private investor may need special permits or licenses to operate a business. If he plans to run a night club he would have to check the laws governing the sale of alcoholic beverages. The old night club sold drinks at ground level because it was unlawful to sell below the level of the street. They sold at street level, but permitted the buyers to take the beverages to the river and cave level. It was still popular for the patrons to bring their own.

Advertising

In the past, advertising had been done basically on a person to person basis. A brochure was available and some publicity was gained from a book written by Major Walter Leigh entitled "A Romance of the Old Cave Mill".

A new night club would require extensive advertising in Warren County to get a good start but could become a popular spot in Bowling Green and need very little advertising.

Growth

Lost River had at one time many different businesses operating and it could be done again. The old businesses were plagued by fires and financial difficulties but a new business with proper management could be successful and expand with different facets of business. It must be noted that for the first time in recent history, one owner has acquired the Lost River and the surrounding properties, including the entire length, approximately one mile, of the Lost River Valley.

Conclusion

The Lost River Cave appears to be a location of great interest but when entering into a business the investors must be careful not to look at just the aspects of interest. Should a new business be started it must carefully be planned. There must be a market for what they sell. They must select the best legal form of organization. They must know how much capital they need and how much they can get. They must know their strengths and weaknesses. They should have a good knowledge of the business that they are entering. They should know their strategies, their objectives, and their responsibilities both to their fellow workers and customers and to themselves.

As a night club the Lost River Cave would require a large investment to get it ready for business and would have to be closed during the winter months unless facilities could be supplied to house the festivities during the cold weather. This would also be true of a park if it was located there. Whatever may have been attempted in the past on the Lost River premises held less restrictions but had less communication media available and a smaller market than today's available enterprises.

Whether a person will have the foresight to use the history of the Lost River Cave as a part of his business is unknown, but ~~it is~~ most certain that it will not be forgotten.