Carlsbad Caverns is one of over 300 limestone caves in a fossil reef laid down by an inland sea 250 to 280 million years ago. Twelve to fourteen thousand years ago, American Indians lived in the Guadalupe Mountains; some of their cooking ring sites and pictographs have been found within the present day boundaries of the park. By the 1500s, Spanish explorers were passing through present-day west Texas and southeastern New Mexico. Spain claimed the southwest until 1821 when Mexico revolted against her and claimed independence. Mexico, fighting the westward expansionist United States in the late 1840s, lost the southwest to the US. In 1850, New Mexico Territory was created, and for the next 30 years the cultural conflict between American Indians and the US government continued. Eddy, New Mexico, the future Carlsbad, was established in 1888 and New Mexico became a state in 1912.
History is about change made by people and events and the results of that change. It is also about how that change stimulates new directions of change. How people changed this area from the frontier to a guano mining area to a world famous geological site and premier showcave to a World Heritage Site is a compelling story told within the beautiful limestone caves and Chihuahuan Desert of southeastern New Mexico.

The park staff invites you to understand and enjoy these resources and to join us in preserving them for the future.

On October 25, Carlsbad Cave National Monument was established.

1923 to 1927 – W.F. McIlvain serves as first custodian (superintendent), overseeing first trails, stairs and lights. He supervises Jim White, works with Willis T. Lee, coordinates with city officials, including the Chamber of Commerce, and makes $12 a year.

1924 – March 20 to September 14, Dr. Willis T. Lee, sponsored by National Geographic Society and assisted by Jim White, extensively explores cavern. NPS Director Mather visits in April.

1925 – Staircase from natural entrance to Bat Cave installed, eliminating use of guano bucket to enter cave. Donated by Carlsbad Chamber of Commerce. See photo.

1926 – First trail by NPS—dirt path and wooden stairways through Main Corridor, Kings Palace, Queens Chamber, and three quarters of the Big Room. Installation of first electric lighting system via Main Corridor and Kings Palace.

1927 – Trail past Bottomless Pit opened. School for employees’ children established in park. Cavern Supply Company is established as the park concessioner. Entry fee – $2.00 per person.

June 23 – First wedding ceremony is held in Carlsbad Cavern, performed at Rock of Ages.

1928 – February, Charlie White (no relation to Jim) homesteads 120 acres at the entrance to Walnut Canyon, the future Whites City. Amelia Earhart visits the caverns in September. See photo.

1930 – May 14, Congress designates Carlsbad Caverns National Park.

1931 – January-August, 730’ elevator shaft is drilled and blasted from both ends—the surface and the cavern. In November, the elevator is installed, going into operation in January 1932. Two larger elevators and another shaft are added in the middle 1950s.

1934-1935 – Six miles of water pipe is laid from Carlsbad Cavern to Rattlesnake Springs replacing Oak Springs as the park water supply.


September 28, park receives the 1 millionth visitor. Though February 2005, the park has received over 39,000,000 visitors.

1938 – July 1, a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp is established at Rattlesnake Springs. The camp is in operation until April 1942.

1946 – Jim White dies in Carlsbad, on April 26, at the age of 63. For his exploration, guide services, and promotion of sharing the caverns with the public, he is unofficially “Mr. Carlsbad Caverns.”

1959 – In March, construction of the current visitor center is complete; old stone buildings near the cave entrance are removed and tour operations transferred to the visitor center. Adjacent parking areas, originally constructed in 1940 as overflow, are now used as primary parking, with the lower parking area designated as overflow and Bat Flight parking.

In June, the motion picture *Journey to the Center of the Earth* with Pat Boone and James Mason, is filmed in the Kings Palace and Boneyard.

1965 – The bat flight amphitheater at the natural entrance is constructed and placed into operation. First requested some 16 to 17 years earlier as seating area for bat flight viewers at the natural entrance watching the bats.

In December, the Rattlesnake Springs was added as a detached unit of the park.

1967 – In June, self-guided trips through the Big Room are begun. Rangers stationed at points throughout the Big Room interpret their section as visitors pass by. Tours are still guided through Main Corridor and Scenic Rooms.

In December, the Rattlesnake Springs was added as a detached unit of the park.

1972 – On January 6, self-guided tours of entire Cavern are initiated.


1986—Lechuguilla Cave discovered to “go further” than expected. Over the coming years, it is taken to over 100 miles of explored passageway.

1995 – In December, Carlsbad Caverns National Park is declared a World Heritage Site.

2005 – Lechuguilla Cave tops 110 miles of passageway.