The Pratt Cabin

McKittrick Canyon attracts thousands of visitors each year to enjoy its hidden beauty and spectacular fall colors. The canyon is open to the public due to the generosity of Wallace Pratt and his family, who donated the land to the National Park Service around 1960. In a 1974 interview, Wallace Pratt revealed the circumstances that brought him to McKittrick Canyon. In 1921, Pratt accompanied two West Texas oil-lease brokers to Pecos, Texas to purchase leases for his employer, Humble Oil and Refining Company. He was the first geologist hired by Humble. While awaiting a meeting with landowners, Pratt was offered a chance to visit what Pecos attorney Judge Drane assured him was "the most beautiful spot in Texas." Pratt agreed to go, but during the trip through the barren desert scrub of West Texas, Pratt became skeptical about Drane's enthusiastic description. Pratt had nearly concluded that Judge Drane's "beautiful spot" referred merely to the high desert mountains; then he entered the canyon, and the beauty of the hidden woodland deep within McKittrick Canyon's walls was revealed.

In 1921, the canyon was even more spectacular than it is today. It sheltered a free flowing stream running the length of the canyon with a succession of miniature waterfalls formed when travertine deposits created dams along the watercourse. These dams were destroyed and most of the stream went underground during flooding in 1945 and 1968.

Maple, walnut, oak, and madrone grew alongside desert plants like cactus and agave, all enclosed by steep walls formed when the creek cut through the limestone of the Capitan Reef.

On the return trip to Pecos, Judge Drane told Pratt that the McCombs Ranch containing part of McKittrick Canyon was for sale. Pratt acquired a quarter interest for a summer vacation getaway. His partners were interested in a place to entertain clients on deer hunts, but Pratt recognized the uniqueness of the canyon. When the stock market crashed in 1929, Pratt bought out his partners and by 1930 he owned a major portion of the canyon.

Building the Stone Cabin

During the winter of 1931-32 he began construction of the home Houston Architect Joseph Staub had designed. With the depression on, good help could be hired inexpensively. From Staub's office, Pratt hired Vance Phenix, a young architect displaced by the lack of projects. Phenix brought along his brother, Dean, a carpenter, and Adolph May, stonemason. Local ranchers Green McCombs and Alfred Lehman helped haul rock to the site and position materials.

The cabin is made of only stone and wood. Heart-of-pine rafters, collar beams and sheathing to support the stone roof were shipped in from East Texas. The stone used in building the house was quarried outside the canyon at the base of the Guadalupe Mountains. Always the geologist, Pratt selected "silty limestones, thin-bedded and closely jointed by clean vertical fractures." Workers scraped off the thin layer of earth to reveal the proper stones, then using crowbars, levered the blocks apart. The joints made the blocks fit well, and Pratt noted that few required the stonemason's hammer or chisel.

Once complete, the Pratts furnished the cabin with rough plank reclining chairs, four beds and assorted hammocks, and a special table to seat twelve. Outdoors was a picnic table made of stone.

A Vacation Home

Although the cabin is often called the "Pratt Lodge," Wallace Pratt told an interviewer that he had grown up in Kansas and never quite learned what a "lodge" was used for. He always referred to the house as The Stone Cabin.

During summers when Houston, Texas is hot and humid, the Pratts and their three children spent time in the Guadalupes, sharing the cabin with friends. This was the principal use of the cabin for over a decade. When they retired in 1945, the cabin was their home for a brief time. Years earlier a flood had trapped them in McKittrick Canyon; the experience convinced them that any permanent residence would have to be outside the canyon, and they selected a site on the mountain front. During construction of the new house, called Ship On The Desert, the New York architects lived in the Stone Cabin for a year.

Donating the Canyon

In the late 1950s the Pratts planned a move to Tucson, Arizona for health reasons. By 1960 they had bought property there and began to donate the family holdings in McKittrick Canyon to the National Park Service. Ultimately the donations totaled over 5,000 acres, and included the Stone Cabin and Ship On The Desert.

Although Pratt recognized the geologic and biologic value of his West Texas property, the canyon's natural beauty exerted a stronger influence on him than its science. Pratt said that his early career had been spent in the open. "Instead of dealing with men I had communed with rocks-they never let you down." Until his death in 1981, Wallace Pratt remained interested in the "most beautiful spot in Texas," and in sharing its magic.

Published by Carlsbad Caverns Guadalupe Mountains Association on recycled paper.