



## Harry Heidemann: 1925 - 1996

by *Brian Vauter*

Some of you might have heard of Mrs. Heidemann, owner of Natural Bridge Caverns. Fewer of you probably know of her husband, Harry, or "Mr. H" as we called him at the cavern. Harry Heidemann died on October 5, 1996. He was one of the four main developers of Natural Bridge Caverns -- the biggest show cave in Texas.

Mr. Heidemann was born on September 25, 1925 in Brenham, Texas. He attended Blinn College for two years then served in the U.S. Army during the Korean War. Upon returning to the States he entered Texas Lutheran College and majored in theology. Upon graduation Mr Heidemann entered the Wartburg Seminary in Iowa; however, after a year he decided that the ministry wasn't in his calling. Harry wanted to serve the public in a different fashion and chose to become a Texas Highway Patrol Officer, a position he held for seven years before retiring to work on the caverns. His exploits on the Highway Patrol were the subject of many stories told to us on slow days in the Snack Bar.

Mr. Heidemann married Mrs. Clara Wuest on January 21, 1961. This would have been almost a year after the discovery of the big section to Natural Bridge Caverns. The Heidemann's toyed with the idea of developing their cavern, and cavers suggested they contact Jack Burch. At the time, Jack was with the Caverns of Sonora. After seeing Natural Bridge, it didn't take much to get Jack working as the main developer. Joining Jack and Mr. Heidemann was Orion Knox (one of the four discoverers) and Reggie Wuest, Mrs.

Heidemann's son. Development started in April of 1963 and continued until opening day on July 3, 1964.

According to both Orion and Jack, Mr. Heidemann probably did the most physical work out of all of the developers. One of the tasks Mr. Heidemann loved to perform was driving "Bill," the small bulldozer used to excavate the entrance tunnels. Jack says of Mr. Heidemann:

"What he was interested in was helping us. And he certainly did more than his share of the work. He was stripped off and working right there with us. Sledgehammer, pavement cracker, anything. We got more work from Harry in working in the cave than anyone else. Harry was there to help. He never did question the way we were going to do it. Amazing that a guy with that authority would not push it onto other people."

When talking with other people about Mr. Heidemann, three elements of his life always come into the conversation: his no-nonsense business ethic, his dry sense of humor and his goats. After developing the cavern, Mr. Heidemann served as Manager from 1963 to 1990. He had a no-nonsense attitude when it came to the caverns. He detested lying. If he ever caught you in a lie, you were on his "list," and it took an act of God to get you off of it. And if you ever did lie to him, it really hurt him, as Mr. H took it personally. There was one instance that Mr. Heidemann told me about when he discovered a box of hot dogs left to rot in the parking lot.

Only a few hot dogs had been eaten from a package of perhaps 50. He was furious. Harry finally tracked down the employee responsible and asked him for an explanation. The employee tried at first to lie about not knowing anything, but eventually he explained that he was flat broke and needed something to eat. He didn't want Mr. Heidemann to find out he had taken a few of the hot dogs, so he tried to bury the rest near the picnic areas. Mr. Heidemann explained to him that he had no problem with him taking some of the hot dogs if he needed to eat. He would have even loaned the employee money to help him out. What he could not understand was why the guy didn't ask for help, nor why the guy then tried to lie when he knew he was caught.

To offset his no-nonsense attitude regarding business, Mr. Heidemann had this wonderful dry sense of humor. It came through when he mixed "city kids" with farm animals. The outcome was always assured to be amusing. One incident I recall involved a bag of chickens which needed plucking. Mr. H showed up at the caverns one day and asked me if I knew how to pluck chickens. Being one of those "city kids" I naturally had never had the experience of plucking chickens. I could tell by the smile on his face that I was in for a real treat.

Mr. Heidemann got Sharon, who was the supervisor for the snack bar and a "city gal," to help me. The two of us went outside, and I pulled the burlap sack off the back of his truck. The sack started moving! Sharon bolted back inside the building and I followed after. I caught up with Sharon just as she approached Mr. Heidemann.

"Mr. Heidemann," reported Sharon, "those chickens are still ALIVE!"

A huge grin moved across Mr. Heidemann's face. "Well, I suppose that's why it was so hard for me to catch them this morning. Yes, the chickens are still alive. Here's what you two need to do."

I don't think I've ever seen a person's eyes get as wide as Sharon's did while Mr. H explained what we were to do. We walked back outside and Sharon got water boiling in a pot while I reached into the sack to get the first victim. Mr. H came outside to view the proceedings. I put the chicken down on the block and raised the hatchet. I brought it down and merely nicked the bird's neck. I heard a chuckle from Mr. Heidemann's direction. Just at this time, Weldon Preiss, assistant manager at that time, drove in and took over the hatchet. Mr. Heidemann was enjoying himself.

Goats are probably one of the defining things for Mr. Heidemann. Anyone who worked at Natural Bridge during Mr. Heidemann's tenure as manager is all too familiar with goat milk. Mr. Heidemann sold goat milk at the snack bar and routinely tried to get the employees to take a sip. There was a lady who actually came by on a regular basis and bought one or two gallons of goat milk from him. She said her baby had allergies to formula and cow milk, and that goat milk was the only thing her child could drink. I personally never liked the stuff; it was too rich for my "city boy" tastes.

Mr. Heidemann's goats, however, weren't always a source of joy. Jack Burch tells of "Ralph," a goat that Mr. H used to keep at the building. "Kinda like a pet," recalls Jack. "We had just installed some huge plate glass doors at the cavern. The windows were smoked glass so they were expensive. Well, that goat of Harry's must have seen himself in the reflection of the glass. He came running up to butt heads with this other goat and the whole window just came crashing down. Harry had to sell that goat after that, and I know he didn't feel good about it."

One other element of Mr. Heidemann's personality deserves mention here — his generosity. He took care of you, as long as you didn't cross him. He'd do just about anything to help you. One of our guides was going to Las Vegas on a vacation. Mr. Heidemann found out about it and slipped him some money. "See if you can make me some more," were Mr. Heidemann's instructions. The guide came back and didn't have a dime left. He was up by some 215 dollars, but got greedy and lost it all. He felt guilty for having lost the money Mr. Heidemann had given him, but Mr. Heidemann just smiled and chuckled.

Jack Burch also recalled a time when Mr. Heidemann sent him on an errand:

"I know one day he had me to drive his little camper VW. And I took that thing into New Braunfels and I was getting some lumber and cement and stuff. It was a place where they had a shed in the back and they had a steel pipe from the ceiling down into the concrete. And for some reason, when I was backing up to turn around, I couldn't find the pipe in the rear view. I backed up the car and hit the pipe dead center in the bumper. Well, it didn't hurt that pipe as it was probably full of concrete. But it made a big bend in the bumper. Well you know, Harry didn't get mad at all. He couldn't quite understand why I had to back into that, you see, but he accepted my explanation and that was the last of it. Harry was that kind of guy."

The same generosity can also be found in Mrs. Heidemann. They both maintained a very active presence within their church. During Mr. Heidemann's funeral services, the reverend told of an instance when the church's youth group wasn't going to have the money it needed to go on a mission trip. Mr. Heidemann told the reverend that he would give whatever was needed to get those kids on their trip. He wanted them to go.

All of us who knew Mr. Heidemann have nothing but fond memories. He had an "air" about him which commanded respect. Many employees actually feared him, but when you got to know Mr. H all you could do was like the guy. His family called Mr. Heidemann "Big Daddy." Mr. Heidemann was a big guy, but he had a bigger heart. If you were privileged enough to know Mr. Heidemann, then you know what a loss it was when he died. If you didn't have a chance to know Mr. Heidemann, well, that's too bad. 🐾