

BIRMINGHAM GROTTO

NEWSLETTER

JULY/AUGUST 2009



VOLUME 39

NUMBER 7

BGN Calendar

AUG 29	Kids Caving Trip to Beech Springs Cave (near Arab). Meet at the Pinson Hardees at 7:30am and then the Guntersville Sonic at 8:30am to eat.
SEP 3	The Birmingham Grotto Meeting begins at 7:00 PM, at the Home-wood Library, 1721 Oxmoor Road.
SEP 5 SEP 7	Pupfest, Sewanee Mountain Grotto. Must RSVP.
OCT 1	The Birmingham Grotto Meeting begins at 7:00 PM, at the Home-wood Library, 1721 Oxmoor Road.
OCT 8 OCT 11	TAG Fall Cave-In.
OCT 31	Birmingham Grotto Halloween Party.

Thanks to Scott Fee for assistance in maintaining the BGN Calendar.



*Indian Creek, Arkansas.
(Dave McRae)*

Disclaimer

Caving trips posted are led by volunteers. No grotto committee reviews any trip leaders' qualifications. New cavers should inquire about the nature of the trip and the experience of the leader in advance. Those participating in the trips should be aware of their limits. On vertical trips all participants are expected to supply their own gear and be knowledgeable about rigging and safe practices.

The *Birmingham Grotto Newsletter* is published twelve times a year by the Birmingham Grotto, Inc. of the National Speleological Society, Inc. Other NSS Internal Organizations may reprint material provided credit is given to this publication and the author.

Annual dues are \$15.00 per individual and \$20.00 per family which is payable on October 1st. Dues are prorated for anyone joining during the year. The subscription rate is \$15.00 per year. The Birmingham Grotto will exchange publications with other NSS Grottos. Exchange newsletters should be sent to:

Birmingham Grotto
PO Box 55102
Birmingham, AL 35255

Articles, Trip Reports, Graphics, Poetry, and any other speleo-related material should be sent to the Editor via email at the address noted below. Naturally, the Editor will accept typed text in practically any form; however, electronic submission reduces the risk of typographical errors. Submissions via e-mail should be directed to: editor@bhamgrotto.org. The deadline for publication is the 20th of the month; however, the Newsletter is limited to 12 pages and often fills up quickly.

Birmingham On-Line!
Check out our web site:
www.bhamgrotto.org

On the cover...

Dave McRae inside Sinking Cove Cave.

(Dave McRae)

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Green Tunnel: *Impressions from TAG* Tom Chamblee

A tan-orange clay dirt road disappears beneath a canopy of linden oaks. Their massive branches intertwine forming a dark tunnel of verdant green mystery for a half mile. Streams of misty sunlight illuminate the road as blazing orange lanterns along the tunnel's course. Once through, the afternoon sun bursts forth, brilliantly illuminating rolling hills of golden sage in the hot summer breeze; as mounds of nature's gold they appear. The cool, dark waters of a spacious lake extend out to a billowing mass of electric blue mountains beyond. The wind picks up; ripples fan out across the lake, sparkling in the reflected sunlight. Puffy white cumulus reach high into a deep blue sky producing a soft tranquility in lovely TAG country.

Beech Spring Cave: *Parches Cove, Marshall County, Alabama* Tom Chamblee

A soft golden afternoon, the peaceful hum of a tractor mowing hay as the dust rises into the hot afternoon sun. Green pastures roll to the edge of the mountain as the world drops away to the Tennessee River below. Immaculately clean farm homes, barns and yards pass as we descend the mountain down steep, winding Parches Cove Road into the sparsely settled valley below. The rich green verdance of summer woods surrounds us; moss-covered limestone rockscapes hint at the possibility of vast cavern systems around. Across the river looms the towering sheer cliff known as the Painted Bluff, a massive bluff of Monteagle limestone rising 400 feet above the mighty Tennessee River.

Beech Spring has 3 entrances - a dry "once a spring" entrance behind a talus pile 100 feet off the county road, and 2 small climbdowns around the mountainside 200 feet west of the dry spring entrance. Once inside we're standing in an elliptical passage 70 to 100 feet wide by 15 to 20 feet high. A small breakdown rockpile on the right leads us to a large open room the size of a football field profusely decorated with large stalactite columns of white, bluish gray and reddish brown. Forests of white stalactites and draperies hang from the ceiling contrast with the bluish gray ceiling and walls. It is an imposing scene!

The stream passage goes forever, varying in width from 60 to 110 feet by 7 to 12 feet high. The active spring has incised itself into the clay fill terrace. Very slippery banks, knee and belly crawls must be negotiated to dodge low ceilings and deep water along its course. Part of the challenge and to one's amazement is sliding down the slicks, trying to stand up and finding oneself airborne - attesting to the slipperyness of this pure clay!

Numerous dense speleothem areas make the crawls and falls worth the effort. They are beautiful! Underground scenes from serene Parches Cove, Marshall County, Alabama.

Birmingham Grotto Meeting Minutes

June 4, 2009

Chairman Scott Parvin called the meeting to order at 7:09 PM. Cameron Hamilton heard about us through a friend. Cindy Cooley is Laurence Breeland's close friend. Rebecca "Becca" Caudle heard about us through her Momma's womb.

Since our Treasurer was traveling to Arkansas with at least ten other grotto members, Scott Fee reported that our actual "bank" balance is currently \$6,603.21. The treasurer has indicated that 7 members still owe for the Guntersville Getaway Auction. The debts range from \$15 to \$340.

Barring any corrections, amazingly enough, the April were passed as presented in the newsletter. The May minutes were corrected to spell Mr. Laurence Breeland's name correctly. Score: Secretary = 4, Nitpickers who don't read the minutes on the e-group = 1.

Announcements:

- 1) Sinking Cove campout was discussed.
- 2) The NSS Convention starts on July 18th.
- 3) Third Annual Birmingham Grotto Splash will be on August 9th.
- 4) Indiana Cave Capers will be August 14-16th.
- 5) The August Meeting will be August 13th, not the first Thursday of the month.
- 6) HCRU Tyrolean Traverse will be July 11th.
- 7) Charlie Smith's memorial will be July 11th.
- 8) Frank Ray is taking a youth group to Bryant Mountain

cave on August 9th and would like some helpers.

9) The Grotto received a letter from the NSS thanking us for our recent \$1,000 donation. Scott Fee will post the letter on his Flickr site.

Old Business:

1) The NSS Board of Governors meeting is coming up in November. Please contact Scott Fee if you are interested in hosting a caver during the Board meeting.

New Business:

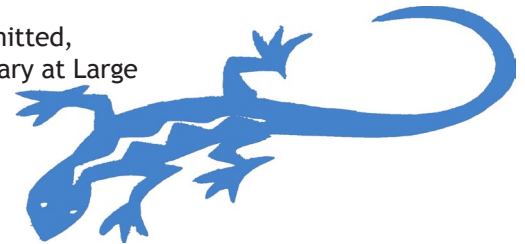
1) Dave Caudle mentioned that Laurence Breland would like to gate Bryant Mountain Cave. Laurence has a potential gate design and is seeking contacts for acquiring steel.

Trip Reports:

Dale, TinY, NikkY, and Bruce when to Valhalla and had good time. Deirdra and friend went to Kennamer Cave. Scott Fee reported on visiting the Lula Falls Nature Preserve near the TAG Site.

The meeting adjourned at 7:30 pm after which Dave Caudle showed the NSS Slide Show titled "Best of the 2000 Photo Salon."

Respectfully submitted,
Scott Fee, Secretary at Large



Birmingham Grotto Meeting Minutes

July 2, 2009

Chairman Scott Parvin called the meeting to order at 7:00 PM.

No Treasurer's report and no Newsletter this month.

Barring any corrections, amazingly enough, the June minutes were passed as read by the secretary. Score: Secretary = 5, Nitpickers who don't read the minutes on the e-group = 1.

Announcements:

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- 7) Charlie Smith's memorial will be July 11th.
- 8) Frank Ray is taking a youth group to Bryant Mountain

cave and would like some helpers. It will not be the weekend of the Splash.

Old Business:

1) Dave Howell mentioned that he is waiting for Dan Wood to provide a contract template for the Gene Lambert proposal.

New Business:

1) None

Trip Reports:

Dave Caudle, Lin Guy, and Kenneth Ruple mapped Wading Cave and Little Creek Cave in DeKalb County. Andy Zerbe paid \$1.00 to visit Cave Springs Cave in Cave Springs, GA.

The shortest grotto meeting in the known history of the Birmingham Grotto adjourned at 7:15 pm after which we watched Jeff Harrod's "Best of 2009" slideshow.

Respectfully submitted, Scott Fee, Secretary at Large

News & Notes, July 2009
Dave Howell

*** Happy Summer! It is summer solstice as I write these words, crowds gather to watch the sunrise at Stonehenge, and to light the great cave at Zagurramurdi, Spain with torchlight in celebration not only of the longest day and shortest night of the year, but also in recognition of the hundreds of witches tortured and burned there by the Inquisition, some of whom were children ages 8-14. There was a time when we cavers might have been subject to the tender mercies of the Inquisitors for our frequent and willful entry to the underworld, the realm of hell and Satan. Nice to live in more tolerant times, yes? (Did the Inquisition use waterboarding?)

*** Last month's paragraph about the Southeastern Cave Conservancy's selective reopenings of Tennessee caves was, as Scott Fee pointed out to me just before the Newsletter went to press, outdated before it saw print. Since my updated version of the column never made it to Toby (aren't computers *wonderful?*), here is the latest: on May 22 the SCCi Board voted to reopen the following Tennessee caves: GOURDNECK, SINKING COVE, SOUTH PITTSBURG, SNAIL SHELL, and SWIRL CANYON. In addition, Kentucky's LOGSDON CAVE was also reopened. The following Tennessee caves will remain closed: HARDINS/JUNKYARD, HOLLY CREEK, RATTLING PIT, WOLF RIVER, and FRENCHMAN KNOB. Be sure to disinfect your caving gear!

*** Good news: as you may surmise from the previous paragraph, the 2009 SINKING COVE CAMPOUT is on! With a few new conditions: a list of folks attending must be submitted in advance, along with a declaration of where (in what states) they have caved during the preceding year. If anyone attending has caved in a state afflicted with White Nose Syndrome, or in any adjacent states, this must also be declared along with a confir-

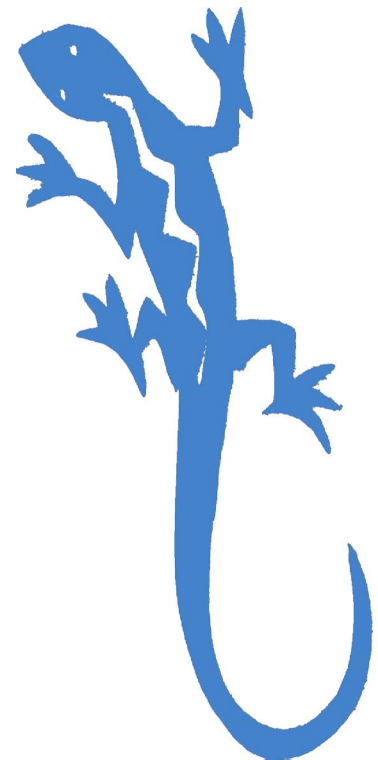
mation that your caving gear, clothing, etc. has been decontaminated. (For decontamination guidelines consult the Internet, or ask a Grotto officer in advance of the Campout.) Oh, and uh... no fireworks. See you there!

*** The Voice of Vietnam reported last April 24 that an English caving team has discovered the largest cave in the world. The English team reported to provincial authorities that the cave, SON DOONG, is 140-150 meters wide and over 5 kilometers long (i.e. 460-492 feet wide x over 3.1 miles long), and is described by HAWARD LIMBIRT, the team's spokesman, as "having overwhelming beauty and grandeur." The cavers who made the discovery reportedly spent about 1 month in the area and discovered 20 other caves, bringing the total number in Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park to 150. Already packing your cave gear? Don't forget your overnight stuff: Son Doong is in a location extremely difficult to access, about 6 hours' hike from the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Son Doong replaces DEER CAVE in Malaysia as the world's largest.

*** If last April's news seems stale, check this out: in 2000, gigantic gypsum crystals were discovered in CUEVA DE LOS CRISTALES, also known as Naica Mine, in Chihuahua, Mexico, when a local mining company looking for deposits of silver, zinc and lead drained the cave of water. Located at a depth of 1000 feet and an in-cave temperature of 135 F, the crystals are as much as 40 feet long and weigh as much as 55 tons. It is believed that they attained their colossal size due to the mineral-rich water in which they were submerged. Since discovery of the crystals the cave has been closed to both caving and mining, although scientists are allowed in to examine the megacrystals. (Guess we don't have to worry about cave vandals harvesting and selling these

crystals!) (Hey Nikky, you're in mining, right? Don't you ever come across stuff like this?)

*** Did you catch the article in the June 21 issue of the *New York Times* on the caves of Belize? The caves, according to the article, are chiefly in the Cayo district, which abuts Guatemala. To quote the article, "Most [caves] feature jaw-dropping archaeology, including skulls of sacrifice victims and etched clay pots left dusty and untouched for hundreds of years." One of the most popular "tourist" caves is ACTUN TUNICHIL MUKNAL, "a subterranean cathedral that features rare artifacts and mineralized human remains." Other caves in the Cayo offer opportunities (or necessities) for canoeing or tubing. Still others offer wild caving, with crawls, climbs, squeezes, swims, in a word all the maneuvers we know and love. The article even gives info on organized cave tours, where to eat and stay, etc. I'm ready to pack! Let's see... helmet, light, cave pack, obsidian dagger... yeah, I'm ready.



Another interview from the Birmingham Grotto 50th Anniversary Transcribed by Edna Caudle

Valerie: So John Attaway and Laurence Breland are going to talk about..

John: Hey, Laurence. Do you remember going to that Sauta Cave in Guntersville - Scottsboro? A lot of bats in that cave.

Laurence: Yeah. I remember that. They'd be a foot thick on the ceiling, covering an area maybe 50 by 75 feet about a foot thick. Isn't that right.

John: Yeah.

Laurence: And I've seen that many bats in Anderson Cave, too, in the mud room

John: Yeah?

Laurence: Back when I was young.

John: I never did see that many in Anderson Cave. I do remember that I drove my car in...



Laurence Breland

Laurence: There are only two caves that I saw that many bats in, Anderson Cave and Sauta Cave.

Valerie: Where did you drive your car?

John: I drove my car all the way back to the catacombs in Sauta Cave.
Laurence: You could drive about 15 to 30 cars in there and park them.

Valerie: I don't

think I've ever been in it. I've been to the entrance.

Laurence: Big cave, big cave.

John: It's a huge cave. The big room back there. Big room But that was quite interesting. At that time it still had one of the vats in there where they made saltpeter.

Laurence: A big kettle, big kettle.

John: Mining saltpeter

Laurence: A cast iron kettle was about 8 foot across. A big kettle.

Valerie: When was that?

Laurence: During the Civil War. And they mined salt peter during the war of 1812 and different things.

Valerie: That's neat.

John: That is. But it was neat, neat driving back in there.

Valerie: And all the bats in Anderson Cave.

John: Well, I didn't remember seeing as many as Laurence.

Maybe because some of them had died out. But there was a rock in there that had one famous name. You can guess what it was. BS Rock.

Laurence: It was Castration Rock

John: Well the Castration Rock was before you get back into what we called BS rock. Because that rock was always covered up with new guano. That was one of our landmarks as we made the connection.

Laurence: It was only a short period there when I saw that many bats in Anderson Cave. Later on, they were gone. They must have went to a different part of the cave. There's still some big parts of that cave that nobody knows about yet.

Valerie: Really? I thought Steve and you had done a pretty good

John: No, no. There's a lot of that cave that's virgin.

Laurence: There's virgin cave all over the place in there, passages everywhere that's not even explored or mapped or anything yet.

Valerie: Have you met Joel McGuire? I guess he'll be here later. I don't know his title...

John: Well, you can get Joel later this afternoon, and Joel has never been back into Cotton Valley. He doesn't know the cave as well as some.

Letitia Korbly: I was back in there one time. Larry Moore lost one of his boots.

Laurence: Yeah. Cotton Valley it was -you'd get waist deep in mud. You couldn't move, you couldn't do nothing. Just wallow in the mud. We named it Cotton Valley - put it on the map - just so people would want to go back there to see what it is. (Laughter) Yeah, we took a bunch of Boy Scouts in there and let them cross Cotton Valley and the mud was just working. You could see the mud moving, and it was Boy Scouts, all the mud. You couldn't tell it was people, just the mud was moving. And then when they got to the other side we let them know, "That's as far as we go. Turn around and go back."

Valerie: Did you get a lot of mean calls from mothers saying, "What did you do?"

Laurence: Then they lost their shoes. Everybody - every one of them Boy Scouts lost their shoes. None of them had their shoes when they come out of there. (Laughter)

Valerie:have a lot of fun in there.

John: Yep. They will have. Laurence, how many of the cave rooms in there did you mislabel on the walls when you was writing, like Crystal Room?

Laurence: How many what?

John: How many rooms did you mislabel? Like the Crystal Room. I know that the real Crystal Room you

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didn't list it.

Laurence: Well, there was one called, I think it was Cactus Room?

John: Yeah.

Laurence: I remember it was real pretty. I didn't want to put it on the map because I was afraid to put it on the map people would know where it was, it was so pretty, it would eventually get destroyed, you know. For a long time I was going to leave it off. I finally put it on the map.

John: Well, I know the Crystal Room, it was mislocated. Yeah, it's written on the wall. But that wasn't really where the Crystal Room was. I wouldn't accuse Laurence of doing anything like that, now. But I think he did.

(Laughter)

Valerie: You mean abandon you in Cotton Valley? He wouldn't do anything like that.

Letitia: Did he shoot Liberty Valence while he was there?

Valerie: That was one of my early cave trips. We went on a week night. You might have led the trip.

John: Lord, I hope not.

Valerie: That would have been way back. I lost a flashlight. But I couldn't tell you if it was in Cotton Valley or outside.

John: I know one area in the cave off of the Polecat entrance down at the bottom. It just has dotted lines there. I crawled up that crawl way down through there. Somebody went through there with their pack open I guess. I found a Bulova watch that worked and a flashlight that worked and several other things that they had just dropped out of their pack. I hadn't been back there myself. It was a nice passage.

Laurence: I know one thing about the clay in Anderson cave is some of the best clay. You could use for modeling, you know model with that clay.

Valerie: Could you fire it?

Laurence: Yeah, It's good clay. I'm talking as deep as - easy four foot deep. 20-30 foot wide in the passageways. You could go there and get all you wanted. Just as pure

Valerie: Now who did the sculpting? I've been hearing about them. A dragon?

John: Different people through different years.

Laurence: They are in the Iron Grotto Room. I remember. First time I saw them was about four years ago, but I hadn't been caving in there twenty years anyway. I guess some kids made it. But it's pretty neat. dragons. Dinosaurs.

John: Yeah. Kids by the name of Joel McGuire, Hazard, and all those kind of people. Valerie never did anything like that, not that I know of.

Valerie: I was too busy trying to get out.

John: Yeah. Stayed clean.

Valerie: No, never clean.

Letitia: That spring that was blocked off, you know,

when we came out. That stream we used to lie down in it to wash off.

John: Cox's creek. Yeah.

Letitia: Is that what it was?

Unidentified voice: Yeah, lie down in it & wash off.

John: I killed one of the biggest Cottonmouth moccasins right there at that spring you've ever seen. It was about 6" in diameter and about 4' long.

Letitia: You know Larry Moore told me that story and I didn't believe him.

Laurence: Talking about snakes, I mean I used to go there.. I wasn't on this trip, but Anderson cave, they used to go out there every Wednesday night a lot. I shouldn't have said that about snakes, but anyhow, they went in the cave, and the first 3-4 cavers who went in, they had to push these big tree roots out of the way that were hanging in the entrance to the cave. As they went through they just moved the roots out of the way. And about the 5th or 6th caver that went in realized there was rattlesnakes hanging down there over the entrance. It was not roots. And the first cavers moved them out of the way. Pushed their way through them as they went into the cave.

Valerie: That was right in the entrance?

Laurence: They were hanging over the entrance. I guess the breeze.

John: What they were doing was trying to catch the bats

Laurence: That could very well be the case.

John: Snakes will do that.

Valerie & Letitia: That makes sense.

Laurence: Rattlesnakes don't usually hand like that.

These were rattlesnakes.

John: Oh

Valerie: Nobody got bit?

Laurence: Unh.

Letitia: They were too big for a bat. The thing is they have to be able to swallow those.

Additional conversation too far away from the mike.

Laurence: I've never. Ever seen a snake in a cave

Letitia: I have. I've seen a snake in a cave. I repelled into a cave somewhere near Huntsville, and there was a snake in the bottom of the pit.

Laurence: In the bottom of a pit? Probably, yeah, fell, and couldn't get out.

Letitia: Then there is Dead Cow Cave in Virginia.

Valerie: That's Virginia.

John: You don't want to hear about Tennessee, do you?

Valerie: No. Definitely not.



News & Notes, August 2009

Dave Howell

*** August is upon us, July is past, and with it the 2009 SINKING COVE CAMPOUT. This year's event went fine, as usual, with horizontal and vertical (pull-down) through trips, an excellent buffet-type meal and a great campfire Saturday night. I think DAVID McRAE set a record for his time on the pull-down trip, 46 minutes from the time he left the campground (at a dead run) to the time he returned - I timed it myself! The horizontal through trip, Waterfall Entrance to Spring Entrance, also went well, unstable refrigerator-size rocks notwithstanding. (Glad to have you with us, SHAY!) The horizontal trip ended up a tad fragmented, but that's to be expected with 23 cavers in the group, not counting those who came in the Spring Entrance and met us in the Big Room. Even the rain that started around 11:00 pm Saturday night did not dampen the group's enthusiasm (pun intended). And the fact that it rained all night did not raise the level of the stream, nor did it send people fleeing in panic at dawn's early light or flood out vehicles making a desperate attempt to escape, as in previous rainy Campouts. (It did, however, raise the water level in several people's tents.) Another successful Campout.

*** Those who have been in the Grotto for a (long) while might remember when we used to have the meeting after the meeting at BURLY EARL's, more recently known as "The Burly Earl," or just "the Earl." And those who liked the place (which was most of us - we quit going there because they started having live music Thursday nights, which made conversation impossible) were chagrined to see it close its doors last year. Well, good news. The Earl is reopening, now to be

known as STILL WATER PUB. My source tells me the interior is just the same as always, and the pool room (billiards, not swimming) is still there just like always. So - are they going to have live music on Thursdays? Stay tuned.

*** Here's a news flash for you speleotherpetologists out there: a CORAL SNAKE was sighted in central Alabama. Yes, it's true. NICK SHARP, biologist with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources was in the Forest Wild Preserve in Coosa County near Rockford, Alabama looking for red cockaded woodpeckers when he spotted instead the distinctive coloration of the coral: "red on yellow, kill a fellow; red on black, friend of Jack" (or Mack, or Zack). Although coral snakes are rarely seen north of Alabama's coastal plain, this sighting is not the first. Corals were sighted in not only Coosa but also Bibb and Talladega Counties some 40 years ago. So watch your step when caving, hiking, paddling, etc. in central Alabama. The good news? While their venom is a virulent neurotoxin similar to that of cobras, coral snakes are docile, and nearly always prefer to flee rather than bite. Most bites result from people handling them, perhaps on the assumption that such small, retiring, gaily colored reptiles could never be a threat to humans. Wrong-o! The bad news? The company that produces coral snake antivenin, Wyeth, is ceasing production. Unless the FDA approves a Mexican antivenin presently being tested, current stocks will expire October 31 of this year (along with anybody bitten after that date). The better news? At least we don't have to worry about mambas, kraits, or gaboon vipers in Alabama. (Yet. You remember,

that spitting cobra that escaped from a private collection in Moody a few years ago was never found.)

*** We hear about TAG - Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia - all the time, TAG caves and cavers, the TAG Fall Cave-In, TAG this, TAG that. But do you ever consider that there are also caves in Mississippi? Yep, it's true, there are 44 caves known in the State of Mississippi, as documented in "Caves of Mississippi" (Knight, et al., 1974). "Where," you might ask, "can I go caving in Mississippi?" Well, I'll tell you. There are actually 3 distinct limestone regions in the state, (1) the Ft. Payne Formation in Tishomingo County in the northeast corner of the state, (2) the Ripley Formation that runs diagonally north-southeast across the state in Benton, Tippah, Union, Calhoun, and Winston Counties, and (3) the Marianna Formation trending east-west through the center of the state in Wayne, Jones, Jasper, Smith, Rankin, and Warren Counties. These formations and counties are home to 30 of Mississippi's caves; in addition, 14 caves are known in 8 other counties not within the above carbonate outcrop areas. Of these, 3 caves are not even in limestone areas: one is in Loess soil, another is in clay, and the third is in sandstone. Cool, huh? Maybe we'll have to start talking not about TAG, but about MAGT (pronounced "maggot"). (Info for this paragraph came from "Progress Report on the Digital Karst Map of Mississippi," presented March 17-18, 2005 at the 54th Annual Meeting of the Southeast Section of the Geological Society of America, by Christopher M. Moore and John Mylroie of Mississippi State University and Adam Walker of Starkville, Mississippi - thanks!)

Birmingham Grotto Newsletter
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Forwarding & Address Correction Requested