

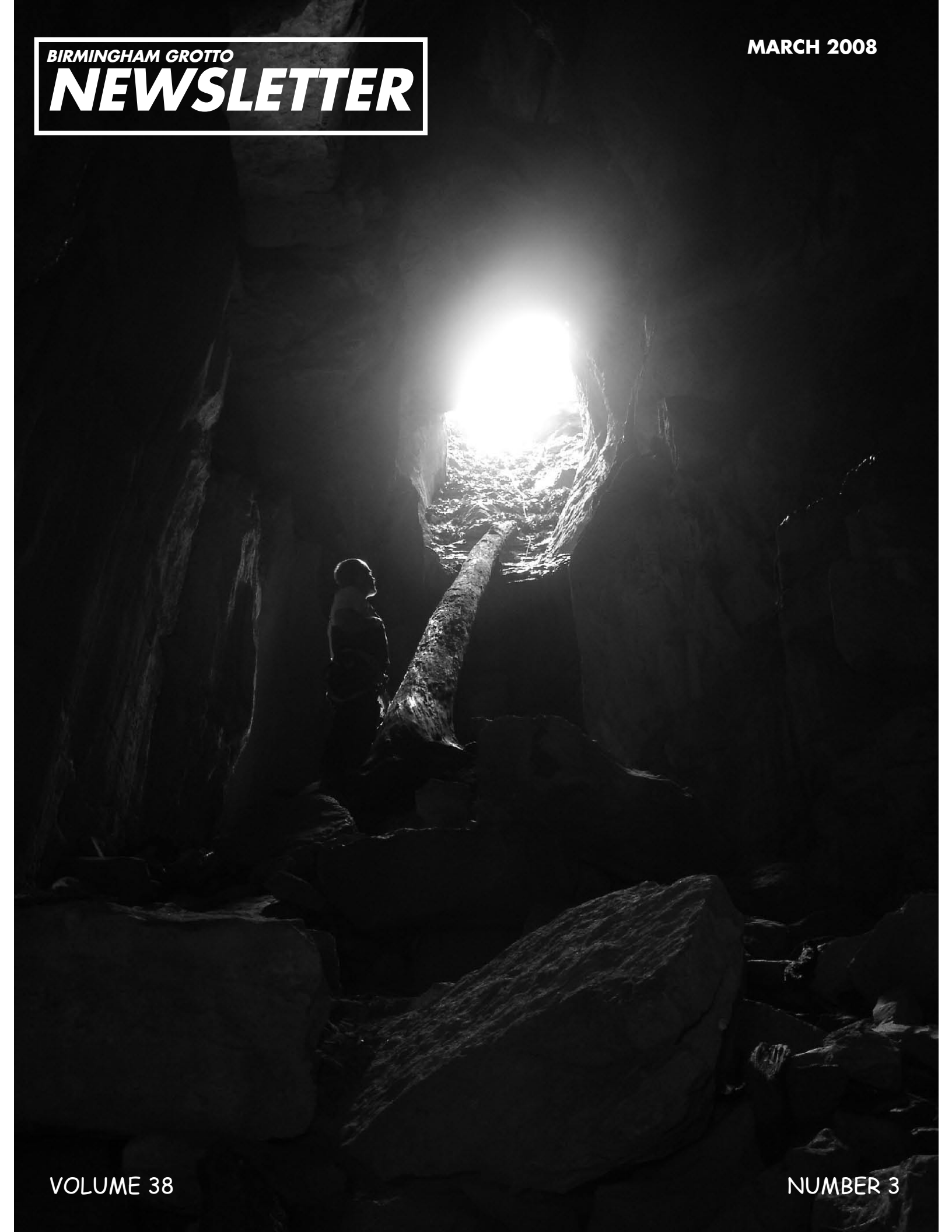
BIRMINGHAM GROTTA

NEWSLETTER

MARCH 2008

VOLUME 38

NUMBER 3



BGN Calendar

MAR 6	The Birmingham Grotto Meeting begins at 7:00 PM, at the Home-wood Library, 1721 Oxmoor Road.
MAR 20	GROBS starts at 7:30 pm. Ask a grotto officer for the current hot spot.
MAR 15	The Spring 2008 NSS Board of Governors Meeting is being hosted by the East Tennessee Grotto in Oak Ridge, Tennessee.
MAR 15 MAR 16	Anderson cave will be open for visitation for the final weekend of the 2007/2008 season. We will have cave trips, clean up trash above and under ground, update the kiosk, and check on the new fencing project. Meet at the cave at 9:00am cst. both days. For more information call Joel McGuire at 205-854-CAVE.
APR 3	The Birmingham Grotto Meeting begins at 7:00 PM, at the Home-wood Library, 1721 Oxmoor Road.
APR 17	GROBS starts at 7:30 pm. Ask a grotto officer for the current hot spot.
MAY 3	Birmingham Grotto 50th Anniversary party at Horse Pens 40. See announcement on the next page or contact Edna Caudle at 205-647-221 for more details.

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



A gaggle of cavers inside Guess Creek Cave during Dave McRae's inaugural grotto trip. (Scott Fee)

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.

On the cover...

Alan Cook looking out of Slant Well.
(Dave McRae)

ANNOUNCEMENTS

From the President....

Hello! I hope everyone had a great February and is looking forward to an eventful March. The Guntersville Getaway was a huge success as usual. The auction finished up with about a \$1200 total. I'd like to thank everyone for donating to the auction, and give a special thanks to some that really went the extra mile to make it happen:

- Dave Howell for serving as the auctioneer extraordinaire and expert ridgewalker guide
- Dave McRae for setting up a great trip on Saturday
- Scott Fee for ordering and assisting with the beverages
- All the cooks that helped out with food and snacks
- Larry M. for the great DVD's
- Larry and Margaret for sorting all the auction stuff
- Julie Fee for heading the cleanup effort on Sunday morning

I'm sure I forgot something or someone, so I apologize in advance.

Our 50th Anniversary Celebration is coming up quick, so strap in for all the fun. Our Webmaster, Jeff Harrod, has got all the information up on the website. So, download that registration form and get it in as soon as possible. The Grotto has decided to subsidize some of the cost, if needed, to insure the registration cost is \$20 or less. Dave McRae has come up with some great designs for the T-shirts. Don't miss your chance to own a piece of history.

Best wishes to everyone for the coming month, and I look forward to seeing all ya'll soon.

Scott A. Parvin



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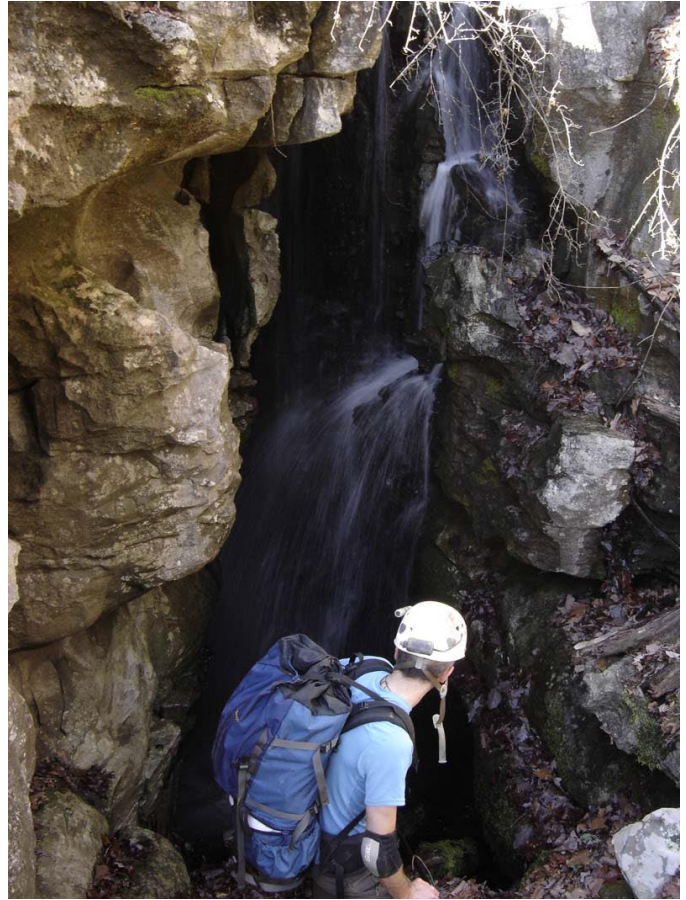
Tom Chamblee

Steep rolling pastures rise as billowing mounds of gold. Behind, rises the towering emerald escarpment of Cumberland mountain above. Cliffs atop are projecting as brilliant yellow fortresses in the morning sun. Slopes appear as verdant buttresses, boldly guarding shadowed gulfs and ravines. Sweeping pastures descend to a clear "subterranean source" river below. Along the river rise "white washed" walls of limestone potmarked with numerous solutional pockets, cave entrances and joint crevices, luring one to explore. Pools reflect overhanging beech and sycamore trees as Nature's aquatic painting in this peaceful setting. A tributary creek pours over multicolored alluvium, while clean sandy "beaches" adorned by thickets of tall cane line the banks along its course, rolling to the master stream beyond.

Impressions - The Eastern Highland Rim

Tom Chamblee

A dusty lane weaving between steep knobbed mountains. High pastures reaching far up the sides of pinnacles towering above. Golden sage sways in the summer breeze, while deep green leaves rustle in tall oak trees. Billowing clouds cast their shadows on high pinnacles; as forboding pyramids they appear, guarding the pastoral valley below. Beyond, a lake, deep, dark and clear is surrounded by rushes and marsh grass dancing in the afternoon breeze, the columns of an antebellum farm home glisten brilliant white in the hot summer sun. Behind, tall silver bark poplars and beeches stand in sharp contrast to the dark mystique beyond. Sylvan scenes cradled in Tennessee tranquility.



*Daniel Wood inspects the watery entrance to Wil's Welch Well
(Dave McRae)*

Indian Post Office Cave

Tom Chamblee

Down the street to Biddy's Store, a neighborhood grocery much like a rural general store. A basement store with a rather exotic atmosphere. Fresh collards and turnip greens, sides of beef and pork all from local farms in adjoining Blount County. Mr & Mrs. Biddy were Missouri farm folk, very friendly and of high moral character. My friend, Eugene Trucks, wanted to show me a cave he believed extended deep into the heart of the mountain.

A long trek through tall hardwood forests, steep ravines and numerous old iron ore mines led us to the limestone section of the mountain. Past a tremendous abandoned quarry, the walls of which tower 150' above the floor. Around the mountain, one-half mile, is a natural bluff in which is the entrance to the Indian Post Office Cave. A narrow vertical shaft that one must turn sideways to slide down. Once down the shaft, we enter a room 40' wide by 10 to 15' high, the floor strewn with wide piles of rock

rubble. Down through a slit we called Fat Man's Squeeze, to a junction of two passages. The one to the right ascends a steep clay slope to the upper section of the cavern. The one to the left descends into a circular dome 70' high by 12' in diameter. The walls are orange-red, luminescent in our lights.

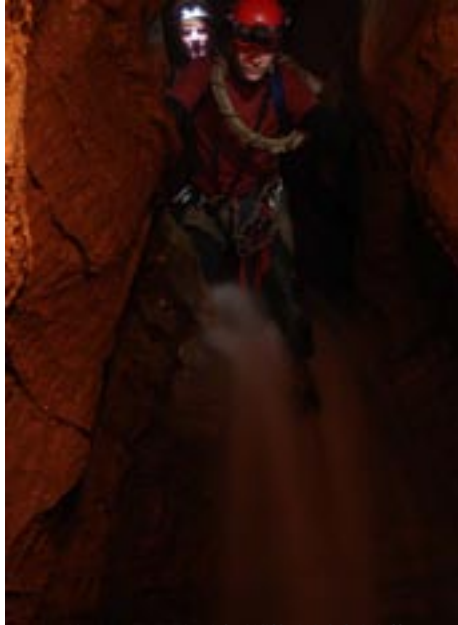
The vadose water has deposited dissolved iron from the Red Mountain ore beds above. Back up the right hand fork we ascend the steep slope to a dry flat-floored room high above. There are large stalagmites and stalactitic curtains all around. The next challenge: to cross a deep shaft that possibly leads to another cavern below.

As 11 year old boys we stop and contemplate its depth; maybe it extends to the center of the Earth! Now across, we belly crawl out into the brilliant afternoon sun on our trek back across Ruffner Mountain.

Trip Report Daniel Wood

Well, I knew it must have been a fairly sporting trip as there was not much conversation around the table at Buena Vista Restaurante and nobody seemed to even have an interest in drinking beer. An hour before, the difficulties were at least temporarily forgotten as my brother James and I walked out of the woods together and across a long valley field with our lights off under an incredible blanket of stars. But coming down off the mountain had been hard, my feet were still ice cold and my legs were still profusely complaining.

The whole thing was intense enough to keep me awake - the night before from anticipation, the night after from waves of sensory after-shock. I had wanted to see a genuinely wet multi-drop cave, and I got what I asked for. The climb out was about 245 vertical feet over four pitches on two ropes, and it started with a fifty footer directly in a waterfall. The welcome party to the end of the trip was a maelstrom of wind, water, and sound, and the battering effect of them all.



*More water inside Wil's Welch Well
(Dave McRae)*

Once through that initial climb, there still was really nowhere to hide, another 15' climb to another maelstrom, then a 150 which starts out in a knee deep pool at the outer reaches of the water falling from the top of the entrance pit. About 30 feet off the deck here my head got light and my arms and legs tried to quit and I literally just grunted it out making about 10" strokes on the frog until I was finally well clear of the water and could see day light coming over the lip above. Daniel, meet hypothermia.

But this was a private struggle, as I had left James, Dave and Alan back at "the nozzle" when I first felt peckish and bolted for the entrance. Ah, those were happier times, Dave with the camera set, trying to get me to "freeze" as I emerged from an oval 14x20" scalloped stone tube with a travertine cap and the entire flow of cave drainage in my face.

Beyond had been a 20' wet drop to a splendid but wicked pool, from which it took several minutes to extricate 75 unneeded feet of my prized red Talon rope, the falling water having beat it into every jagged snag. This was followed with a brief, low passage to a 2' deep pool at the lip of the last pit, a 100 footer. All I could see leaned out over the void was a rusty bolt and what seemed a ton of water every few seconds surging headlong into oblivion. Not today, no way.

Even before we saw the nozzle, James came running back to the formation grotto where we were working on some pictures and said "man you got to come hear this." James is a musician. The slow build of low sound as you approach the constriction intrigued him. Certainly cool, but the visual feast there is just as astounding! Exquisite pools with funky little formations. Straws covering the ceiling. Water rolling through rough cut channel to the nozzle on one end and under a big flowstone mound up stream, which hemmed in the whole scene. This little section of passage is as fine as they come.



*Even more water inside Wil's Welch Well
(Dave McRae)*

And the 1000' feet or so of passage to the nozzle from the entrance drops was not too bad. There was "the duck," a bathtub crawl under a formation, and a couple of short climbdowns in the stream passage, but there was some dry to muddy canyon passage in there too. So we were all saying how glad we were that we'd made the decision to drop that 50' waterfall to see all this good stuff. It had been a long deliberation, all four of us huddled up on a ledge between the 150 and the 50 looking it over, and trying to shout over the pounding water.

Here we could actually see what we were up against. At the entrance, though, all we could do was hear it. Standing in the bright beautiful sunshine, not a drop of moisture in sight, there is a wide 30' deep hole to a slanting ledge and the unmistakable sound of invisible big moving water - rushing, and falling, and echoing. This alone was enough to persuade Jerry that his afternoon would be spent ridgewalking.

Once down to the ledge, it was obvious that the water (from the adjacent spring cave) is coming from the opposite side of the pit, but equally clear that you and this water will inevitably meet at some point in or after this 150' shaft. And when we did meet it, we ultimately decided we would go with it and see where it would take us.

I was eager to be taken, but not quite prepared for what it would take from me. There is no learning like that from intense experience. And I will mark it as a matriculation of sorts. Not that I earned anything, but through an unmistakable humbling, I think I definitely gained a clearer understanding and a heightened respect for the forces at play in awesome places like Wil's Welch Well.

Birmingham Grotto Meeting Minutes February 7, 2008

The February meeting was opened by Scott Parvin just after seven o'clock.

Visitors

Visitors Jim and Barbara McDowell attended the meeting and reminisced about days when they held office for the Birmingham Grotto. In attendance was also Kathy Freeland, who was our first female president.

Two new visitors came in, Olen Taylor and Mark Sparter. Both commented on hearing about the Birmingham Grotto from Michael Montgolf.

Treasurer's Report

Daniel was absent...the secretary is awaiting his notes

Review of Minutes

The minutes were accepted by Scott Fee and seconded by Larry Money; thus the minutes were approved for January.

Announcements

Guntersville Getaway— is planned to begin Friday February 22nd around 4:30 pm. Scott Parvin plans to be there early for those who wish to arrive before 4:30pm. The cabins will be in Scott Fee's name, three cabins have been reserved. If you arrive after dark, there will be a guard at the gate and you will need to tell the guard that you are going to the cabins under Scott Fee's name.

Cave Closings—Andy Zerbe brought up the issue of school cave, as far as he knows, we are still unable to visit the cave.

Fencing for Anderson—currently set for the week of the Guntersville getaway, Joel is working on trying to move the date so that more Grotto members will be able to attend. Water works has decided to place a chain link fence around the cave entrances, not an actually gate to block the cave entrances.

Old Business

50th anniversary presented by Edna Caudle—they have a t-shirt design. A bat will be on the front in small and two caving hats will be on the back with the words "Birmingham Grotto, 50th Anniversary". We will be wearing name tags, not armbands to ensure that everyone will be able to know who everyone is. Dave Howell will be in charge of the publication and is currently requesting pictures. It is planned to be 40-50 pages in length with a color cover and perhaps a few color inserts. Jimmy and Donna have been working tirelessly to locate previous grotto members and presidents, if you can be of any assistants please contact them. If anyone knows of any deceased member please contact the 50th anniversary committee. Chicken will be the dish for the banquet.

We are also still looking for a paper supplier; Nikky Labranche is assisting Edna Caudle in this. Valerie Howell is working on drafts of the registration. Cost, assuming we have 100 people will be \$25; however, they were worried about that costing too much. Shirt costs are expected to be \$10 for t-shirts and \$20 for the golf shirt for the ladies, the golf shirt will only be printed on the front, no back logo. Changing back to cost, \$20 would be ideal for entry for the banquet, with half the cost for children 10-16 and \$5 for 2-10 year olds. The park charges 10 and above which is the reason for the age pricing. It was also agreed that if we don't make money or lose money then the grotto will pay the extra expenses. If the banquet makes money then it goes back into the grotto. Camping must be paid directly to land owner, \$8 Friday and \$5 on Saturday. It will be at Horsepens 40 on May 2 and May 3, the party will be on Saturday the 3 and the informal meeting will be on May 2. To pre-register, you must have your forms in by April 3rd. The colors on the t-shirt are going to be grey and gold, the design will be in full color. Scott Parvin with Edna Caudles suggestion made a proposal to accept fee, the fee was accepted for admission for the 50th Anniversary. The next date for the meeting has not yet been set; if anyone else would like to attend the meeting

for the 50th anniversary, please contact Edna Caudle.

Guntersville Getaway beverage issue—Scott Parvin called around and discovered that there are absolutely no beer distributors in Guntersville. Scott Parvin found a place in Center Point; the price is \$97 for a regular keg including Bud light, Coors, etc. Premium beers are \$100. Discussions opened on for what kind of beer; there will be a \$100 deposit for the tap and keg, discussion was opened as to weather or not they have tubs or barrels to contain the keg. It was suggested to have one keg with Michelob and one with Coors. BRING CUPS or a mug of your choice.

New Business

Birmingham Grotto after meeting—Dave Howell made the suggestion to move the after party back to Club South, on account of the lack of parking and pool tables. Several suggestions were made, it was decided that Club South will be the hang out for the February after meeting.

Graves Cave Cleanup—good dedicated crew members worked very hard, thank you to all who helped! David McRae purchased a total of \$60 of expenses to fix the gate as smaller people were able to fit between bars 2 and 3. A motion was made and passed to reimburse David for those materials. David McRae along TinY, Alan Cook, TPH (Tony Tomasello), Chris Leggett, Ryan Strickland, and Jeff Harrod took on the task of repairing a speleothem. They were able to repair the majority; however, some of the pieces were unable to be recovered. They carried a jack some adhesive, propane torch, etc. and heated up the formation to dry it in order to apply the glue. By the end of the day they were able to repair several formations.

The combination has been changed, so if anyone is interested in going please call for new combination. Dave McRae asks that you not place the pin in the mud; also there is oil in a mustard bottle that needs to be placed in main

Birmingham Grotto Newsletter

locking hole so that the lock will not rust. The old gate was also removed as TinY jumped on it and welded the bolts for the old gate together. Scott Fee mentioned that about 95% of the graffiti was cleaned up between the entrance and the 400 foot crawlway.

Guntersville Getaway—Please bring “good stuff” for the auction at the Guntersville Getaway. Also bring your checkbooks incase you see any great new gear, etc.

Birmingham Grotto Library—Jimmy Sims made a donation of a video to the Grotto’s library.

Slide Show—Scott Parvin announced that he is running out of pictures and asks that anyone interested in showing pictures at the next meeting to please contact him. Everyone is welcome to use his equipment to show their pictures and/or videos.

White nose syndrome—Leigh Dudrow spoke about how they think that the

die out may be from the abnormally warm weather and the bats are dying off from starvation. There is currently a lot of talk going on asking cavers to stay out of ALL caves in NY, VT, and PA to prevent the spread of the fungus from cave to cave. Jimmy Sims commented how he traditionally licks his boots clean at the end of the day! Leigh Dudrow was happy to also report that the white bat syndrome is being published in several news papers, hopefully more publicity will follow.

Cave Closing—A Pendleton County, WV cave has been closed due to several populations of bats being protected under the endangered species act.

Trip Reports

Hazard, Alan Cook, Daniel Wood, Jeff Harrod, Ryan Strickland, John Roberts, Howdy (Chris Davis), and David McRae traveled to Anderson cave. Alan Cook commented that it was an enjoyable trip, a security guard stopped them and commented on the caving gating

project. Apparently a college student spent a lot of time in the cave writing a thesis paper on bat populations.

Dave Howell reported going up to Upper Coon valley and relocate a lead on a solo walk, Jimmy found the lost lead and commented that it will need a little work before access is possible. Two pits were also found, one is borderline and the other looks to be a promising prospect.

Nikky Labranche and TinY Manke attended a crawlathon in Kentucky; they also went on a hike and viewed several beautiful ice formations along cave entrances as well as natural bridges.

Scott Fee, Julie Fee, Jonathan Gladden, John, and Ralph Powers went to signal light pit and saw a lot of signatures, some from the early 1800’s. Julie commented on the beauty of the cave, they also saw a lot of speleothems.

-Jessica Backes

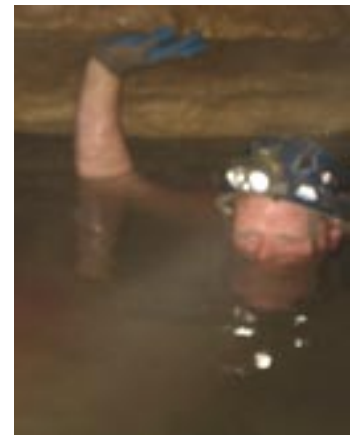
Grotto Trip to Guess Creek



John, Carly, Dave and Alan making their way through Guess Creek
(Scott Fee)



Dave McRae outside Guess Creek entrance
(Scott Fee)



Watersports inside Guess Creek
(Scott Fee)



Jessica - enthusiastic or hypothermic?
(Scott Fee)

News & Notes

Dave Howell

*** March is upon us, and as usual, the GUNTERSVILLE GETAWAY in late February took place just a few days after my deadline for this column - argh! Watch this space next month for a rundown on this year's Getaway, who gambled away their life savings in Friday night Texas Hold 'Em, who did a heel hang halfway down the drop in War Eagle, who became so hopelessly lost in the course of the Grotto ridgewalk the rescue squad had to be called, and other such news tidbits. You'll find it all here. This column tells all!

*** By now you've probably heard about the die-off of bats up in the Northeast, the WHITE NOSE SYNDROME, and the closure of caves in New York and Vermont. With any incident as scary as this rumors can run wild, and the facts can get lost in the brouhaha. Here is the story as best I have been able to ascertain it: The die-off involves thousands of bats of several different species, and its most noticeable symptom is a powdery white fungus on the victims' muzzles. The predominating opinion on what kills the bats is a metabolic disorder causing them to use up fat reserves that would otherwise carry them through their winter hibernation, and starve to death in their sleep. The white powder on the muzzles is probably the *Fusarium* fungus, and is most likely not a causative factor, but rather the result of the bats being so weak they cannot groom themselves as normal. Of course all this is theoretical, and whether this disease is transmissible from bat to bat as they hang in colonies (which can be as thick as 300 per square foot), or whether it is some pathogen spread on cavers' boots and clothing, is unclear.

Also, risk to humans remains to be determined. These are obviously the reasons for the cave closures. Another unknown: what happens in the spring when the surviving bats leave their caves to migrate hundreds of miles away? I guess we're about to find out.

*** Have you been reading your *NSS News* lately? In the January 08 issue Bern Szukalski's "Underground Update" column reported the BGN's September 07 article about NIKKY LaBRANCHE and TinY MANKE's adventures on California's El Capitan, pointing out (among other things) that Nikky set a world record for being the first woman to tandem rappel El Cap, with - guess who - TinY. Remember that dynamite BGN cover of them both on rope? The February 08 *NSS News* contains a couple of articles about caving in Montana, and MIKE McEACHERN gets a mention for the 10-day expedition into the alpine karst areas of the Bob Marshall Wilderness last summer in which he participated. Mike was one of the mappers of Una Ice Rink Cave and Packers' Meatlocker Cave, the map of which appears in the issue. An anecdote is related in which Mike woke the group at 7:00 one morning with a loud "cock-a-doodle-doo" - how ironic, considering that he complained of always being awakened too early by the call of the cuckoo while he was caving in Romania in 2004. Congrats to all of y'all on the publicity!

*** Our Nashville Grotto colleague LARRY MATTHEWS is now a published author! His book *Caves of Chattanooga* is advertised in the February 08 *NSS News*. I haven't seen an actual copy yet myself, only the cover picture in the *News*, but I think this one is going

to be a "must have."

*** Most of us have seen saltpeter workings, the excavations of cave floors, the big wooden vats and kettles in Big Bone, Cathedral Caverns, and other caves that were used to extract saltpeter for use in the manufacture of gunpowder back in the years circa the War Between the States, right? Sure. But I for one have never known the process by which that was done. Well, here it is: The first step was to build the wooden vats, and to fashion wooden pipes from long, straight poplar logs. The logs were bored out with augers, and the ends were bored and tapered so they would fit together. Once all this was in place, the workers (who were sometimes slaves) dug the in-cave soil, placed it in the vats, then piped in water through the poplar log tubes to saturate the soil. As the water trickled through the soil, calcium nitrate leached out. The solution was then filtered through ash and boiled to concentrate the saltpeter. The end product was bagged and transported to mills where it was combined with powdered charcoal and sulphur to make the end product - gunpowder. Picture it: a cave passage somewhere in TAG lighted by flickering, smoky coal oil lanterns. A gang of men in the coarse cotton clothing of the day sing rhythmic spirituals as they dig with picks and spades, filling oaken buckets with soil from the dry dirt floor. Other workers carry the buckets from the workings to dump them into leaching vats in a large room nearby. An overseer tracks the number of buckets with charcoal hash marks on the wall... It's like a scene from a Goya painting or a Piranesi etching, yes? But *it happened here!*

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