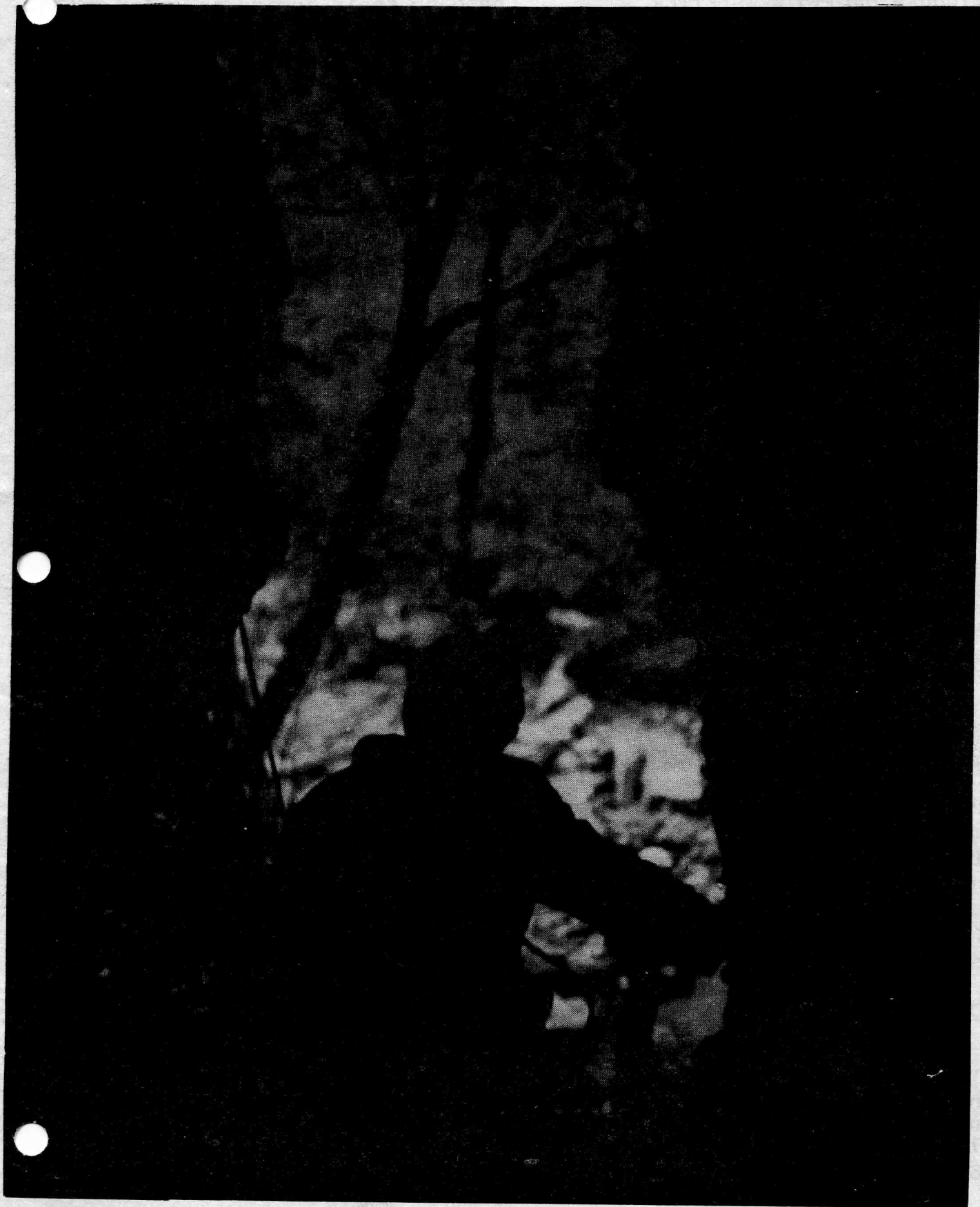


# BIRMINGHAM GROTTO NEWSLETTER

NATIONAL SPELEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

MAY 1976



# EDITOR'S PAGE

## BIRMINGHAM GROTTO NEWSLETTER

May, 1976

Published once monthly by the Birmingham Grotto of the National Speleological Society.

Subscription rate: \$4.00 per year.

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MEETINGS: First Monday of each month  
at 7:30 p.m. at the Ala. Gas Corp.  
auditorium, 1918 1st Avenue, No.  
Birmingham, Alabama.

MAY MEETING: May 3, 1976

### DATES TO WATCH:

May 29-31 Speleofest  
June 12 Huntsville Yo-Yo party  
June 28- July 2 NSS Convention  
July 23-25 SERA Carnival  
Aug 6-8 Cave Capers

SPRING-EXIT THE CAVER! The season is upon us when the caves of Alabama are once again assaulted by those hibernating cavers who hung up their jumars and hard-hats as winter's chill touched the countryside. It is akin somewhat to the rutting season of the deer--as you see the mad caver dashing his head against the cave walls and ceilings in his mad zeal to make up for winter's lazy time. To those of us who did not let winter's discomforts deter us from our caving, those spring-time frolics are a real riot!

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WELCOME BACK! We were really pleased to see CARL CATHEY back once again at a Grotto meeting. To those of you who don't know Carl, when he was a baby, he was going on every Grotto trip and then some and some few years ago he was the only teen-ager in the Grotto. We're glad you're back Carl and hope to see you on some trips in the future.

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ARTICLES WITHIN: I've printed an article that appeared in the "Family Safety" magazine, which was brought to my attention by Valerie Haden. This is one of the best articles on caving that I've seen in a long time, neither glorifying caving or condemning it.

### IS IT TRUE...

-----  
That our beloved Chairman recently was attacked viciously by a king snake, which left teeth in the bite?

That on a recent Bankhead Survey trip that Larry Moore had a strange sleeping bag companion? She was a little slender, but kinda cute.... (she was a copperhead!)

On the cover: Gerald Moni prepares to climb down out of Falling Spring Cave, March 16, 1974.

BOOK REVIEW

Greg McGill-Reviewer

Cave Divers

Robert F. Burgess

Dodd, Mead & Co., New York, 1976

There is another branch of cave exploring known as Cave Diving. This sport is more scientific in its execution because of the many applications it has in archaeology and geology. The field of underwater archaeology is now reaching its zenith. This book covers the main discoveries and talks profusely about Florida's sinkholes.

A few years ago, I entered Mornson Spring Cave to the third cavern entrance. If I had read this book prior to that journey I doubt that I would have even considered it. Burgess is most revealing about the numerous cave diving accidents and discusses the National Association of Cave Diving (NACD). Among the major causes of accidents are floating rope used as a guideline, panic, and disregard of the one-third rule for air consumption. The one-third rule calls for 1/3 in, 1/3 out, and 1/3 emergency reserve. The use of a guideline may seem ridiculous to "dry" cavers but I can assure the reader that in total blackout conditions caused by silt or mud this is the only way to find one's way out.

The story of Bill Royal and Warm Mineral Springs is included here. This is the story behind the discovery of the oldest human bones found in Southeastern America (Carbon dated to 10,000 BC).

Anyone interested in archaeology or curious about sinkholes should look into this book. I can suggest

borrowing it from a public library because only a part of the book would appeal to the regular "dry" caver.

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JOHN'S FIRST PIT (Trip Report)

Jay Clark

By the first weekend in March, it became apparent that my 7 year old son was wanting to go vertical caving with me. We played around at the Lake Purdy-Corkscrew pit, went to the Bessemer Bridge and decided it was time to do our first pit.

I fixed up my extra set of jumars and my extra ascender box so that John could use them and he climbed much better than many older folks.

We decided to do Pipeside Pit near Stephen's Gap because it's a fairly easy 66 foot free-fall pit. John is not going to learn how to use the rack for a while, but I did make him a swiss seat and hooked the main climbing rope to this. He was tied in the swiss seat and had a safety sling around his waist with another rope hooked to this as a safety. I lowered him down to the bottom while my wife lowered the safety rope.

When I got to the bottom we took pictures, did a little exploring and then rigged for the climb. I had doubled the main climbing rope and we were able to climb side by side. John climbed all the way by himself but did get a little boost at the lip. He had no trouble climbing up and now claims to be ready for a 100 foot drop. If anybody's interested in a trip like this, we're ready to go.

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LOG OF TWO TRIPS TO MEXICO

Marion O. Smith

December 13, 1975: Alan Johnson (Ga.), Neil Montgomery (New So. Wales), Charlotte Rogers (Tenn.), Jim H. Smith, (Ga.), Marion O. Smith (Tenn.), and Mark Stock (Tenn.) leave Austin, Texas, in Marion's truck for the border. At 1 a.m., CST, 1,100 feet of rope is jettisoned at the home of Dr. Stanley Bittinger in Kingsville in order to make additional room.

At 4 a.m. they stop to sleep on side of the road south of Haringen, Texas.

December 14: Neil was not allowed to cross the border at Brownsville because he was trying to enter Mexico on an old visa. Consequently, he was left behind to get a new one and to cross the next day. By 11 a.m. the red tape was surmounted by the others and the drive South was continued. Seven hours later they were eating supper at La Condesa Restaurant in Valles. Continuing South, Marion left a note on Mike Saunders' truck at Aquismon (Mike, J.J. Williams, Tim Walker, Dwight Drennan, and Michele Gaigon were at Sotano de las Golondrinas), and about 8:45 p.m. they arrived at La Pimienta, where they soon sacked out on the side of the road. Within minutes Harry White's truck from Nashville, Tenn. appeared with Harry, Ed Yarbrough, Nick Nichols, Steve Lawler, and Bob Binkley. They also camped by the road.

December 15: By 9:30 a.m., all ten people started the trek to Hoya de Guaguas, carrying 600', 700', 90', 750', and 100' lengths of rope (Jim Smith alone carried a 600'). It was a warm day and the abrupt change from riding to walking under heavy loads caused the group to take three hours to reach Guaguas. Once a camp site was selected, the high side, about 615-620 feet free, was double

rigged, and all but Bob entered this extremely impressive pit. A 600' rope was rigged in the second 400' drop and Jim, Marion, Mark and Charlotte rappelled it. Only Jim prusikked it while the other three free-climbed it. By the time everyone was out it was dark. White's crew pulled up their rope and by 10 p.m. camp was quiet.

December 16: In the early morning Marion yo-yoed the entrance drop of Guaguas a second time. Thousands of swifts spiralled out of the pit as he climbed, dozens hitting the rope. White's crew left as the pit was being derigged. Soon, in a misting rain, the trek to the truck began, broken by a stop to wash in a large spring at the base of the mountain. From La Pimienta the Smith crew drove to 386 foot deep roadside Sotano de San Antonio just west of Xilitla and all five yo-yoed the pit. Then, after eating at La Principal Restaurant in Xilitla, they drove to the Xilitla turn-off and at 9:30 p.m. picked up Neil Montgomery Dr. Julia James (Sydney, Australia), and Martyn Farr (Wales). Returning toward Xilitla, they took the Tlamaya road and camped next to a 25 foot high bluff.

December 17: After a very leisurely morning involved with getting gear ready and packed, the eight person crew moved to the town of Tlamaya and by 1:30 p.m. started into the lower entrance of Sotano de Tlamaya. Everyone eventually reached the bottom of all the rope drops (of which there were about nine), with Neil and Martyn swimming to the bitter end" at about -1,410' below the entrance. Unknown to any of them at the time, Nick Nichols and others of the Harry White crew yo-yoed the first couple of entrance drops. En route out Jim Smith killed

Marion O. Smith

a coral snake on a ledge below the 279' entrance pit. By 4:25 a.m. all were out, but the entrance rope got snagged on bottom. It was drizzling rain.

December 18: After a miserable night in the rain, Mark Stock rappelled the entrance shaft and freed the rope. The crew then went to Xilitla to eat at the Principal, then continued driving westward. Beyond Jalpan a roadside camp was located on the mountain and everyone crashed early (6:30 or 7 p.m.) for a long night's rest.

December 19: Drizzle conditions continued and it was noon before the town of Ahauacatlan (Queretaro) was reached. After further delays the new road to Guilota was driven part way to a refresca stand on the left. By late afternoon Sotanito de Ahauacatlan was located and about dark it was rigged. Marion and Jim yo-yoed the 946' shaft that night and were back to camp (in the pasture below the Sotanito) by 11:25 p.m.

December 20: At 9:25 a.m. Neil and Julia entered the Sotanito. Later, Alan, Mark, Martyn, and Charlotte practiced going over a knot in the 71' entrance pit. By 1:30 p.m. no one was yet on rope in the 946'. Concerned that something might be wrong, Martyn, with an assortment of first aid articles and food, rappelled down. On bottom he found both Neil and Julia okey. Julia explained that while on rappel, the rope dropped a foot and came off the top rope pad. Consequently, they had been afraid to climb until the pad was secured. They then prusiked out and Alan started down. At the knot, Alan's light went out so he signaled Martyn to start climbing

while he changed over and also started climbing. At 8 p.m. as soon as Mark and Charlotte entered the Sotanito, Jim and Marion pulled up the 160' entrance rope and walked 1/3 mile away and yo-yoed well-decorated 125' Sotano de Amistad. The 160' was re-rigged and at 12:50 a.m. Mark and Charlotte returned to camp.

December 21: By 8:30 a.m. Marion, Jim, Alan and Mark had entered the 71' drop to derig the Sotanito. While they pulled the rope there, Neil, Julia, and Martyn, coiled it on the surface. By noon the group was back in Ahauacatlan where a fine meal of eggs, rice, tortillas, beef, and beans was had for a total price of 130 pesos in a small restaurant just west of the bridge. After shopping in Ahauacatlan and Jalpan, the crew split up. Neil and Julia caught the bus for Valles, Charlotte caught the bus for the U.S. and the rest drove to the river at Ayutla where they bathed and reorganized. That night a large assortment of people met them there: Buddy Lane (Tenn.), Donna Mroczkowski (Ca.), Jack Wheat (Tenn.), Rick Bridges (Tenn.), Mary Saunders (Ga.), E.T. Davis (Ga.), Tommy "Teddy Bear" Thurman (Ga.), Bill, Donna & Heather Bauman (Ohio), Dennis Vogler (Ohio), Phil Collett (Binbury, Oxon, England), Peter J. Lord (Eng.), John Bassett (Ind.), and Sam Frushour (Ind.).

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 EDITOR'S NOTE: There is a lot, lot more of Marion's Log to come in the next Newsletter. So watch for it!  
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(The following article was reprinted from The Floridian, May 11, 1975.)

# CAVING IS NOT FOR EVERYONE

by Tom Hirsh

IT WAS Angeline Palmer's first caving trip. The University of Texas freshman had practiced rope climbing on a cliff near Austin, but the trip into Devil's Sinkhole was her first experience underground. Angeline was part of a group of about 40 cavers, most of them beginners trying out their caving skills.

The group safely descended into the 130-foot pit and explored the area at the bottom. Then they started the return to the surface. When Angeline's turn came she attached herself to the rope, had an experienced caver check the straps and rings of her climbing rig and started up.

Above the pit Craig Bittinger hung over the lip and watched her progress. In his report, published by the National Speleological Society, he recalled:

"She appeared to be moderately tired from the exertion involved in having climbed 100 feet. While she was resting on the rope about 30 feet down, I called to her, 'Sure is fun, isn't it,' knowing full well how tiring the climb is. She looked up and smiled.

"I glanced away for a second and then heard a small gasp. I immediately looked back to see two metal rings hanging on a rope with no one attached to them. Her knot had failed.

"My eyes focused down the pit and I saw her tumbling toward the bottom. I immediately yelled several times for the people on the bottom to look out. A tremendous thud followed. I screamed to the people nearby, 'Oh my God! A girl just fell into the pit!'"

One caver rushed to the nearest ranch and called for an ambulance. Others started giving mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. The ambulance arrived, a stretcher was lowered into the pit, Angeline was quickly hoisted out and sped to the hospital. She was dead on arrival.

Death, of course, is not common in cave exploration, but even so, the sport of caving doesn't appeal to everyone—although the National Speleological Society boasts almost 4,000 active members, and thousands of other would-be explorers go underground each year without the blessings of N.S.S. Exploring a wild cave is not like taking a guided tour through Carlsbad Caverns. There are no floodlights, railings or man-made steps.

## Belly crawl

Instead, imagine yourself squeezing through a narrow crack in the ground. You wiggle your way down through a pile of boulders and find yourself in a narrow passage about 30 inches high. As you crawl along, gravel scattered on the muddy surface cuts into your knees. You keep bumping your head on the rocks overhead, but your hard hat protects you. A carbide lamp attached to the hat casts a narrow beam of light ahead of you. In your pockets or pack you carry spare carbide and water for the lamp, plastic bags for used carbide, plus a flashlight and a candle for emergencies.

Now the passage narrows. There's not enough room to crawl, so you slither along on your stomach, pushing with your feet and pulling with your elbows. A bat flies into the narrow passage and stops beside you. You lie still, and a moment later it flies off again.

You turn into a larger passage, big enough to walk at a crouch. A two-foot-wide crevice opens at your feet, dropping to a canyon 50 feet

below. You straddle the crevice and keep going. After two more turns, you come to a deep pit. You and your companions rig a strong nylon climbing rope. You put on your climbing gear and rappel down.

## Spoiled by speleoboppers

Caving is hard work. But experienced cavers treasure the silence, the challenging climbs, the chirp of bats, the unexplored side passages which could lead to an undiscovered chamber beyond. For the veterans the greatest disenchantment is to crawl and scramble into the deepest reaches of a wild cave, only to find piles of used carbide fuel and other litter, walls defaced with "John Q. Was Here," and delicate, 10,000-year-old formations chipped away for souvenirs by careless speleoboppers.

"Speleobopper"—that's the term used by some disdainful cavers to describe untrained cave visitors. "The typical speleobopper is a teenager," explains one veteran. "He wanders into a cave with about six of his friends. Their only equipment is four of the cheapest flashlights money can buy. They have no spare batteries, no candles, no hard hats or carbide lamps, no rope and no sense of how to explore a cave. Usually there's one who wants to charge ahead full speed and another who's scared to death and wants to get out immediately."

They also have an unerring talent for getting into trouble.

Three inexperienced cavers went into Onyx Cave in Arizona and explored for four hours. When they turned around to go out, they could not find the way. "In our time spent exploring we never once turned our heads to see how passages looked from the opposite direction, so that we could recognize them on the way back," said one of the trio later. "We were always looking ahead to the

next formation, the next room beyond. When we did turn around to return, everything looked different." After 12 hours of fruitless searching, the three sat down to wait for rescue. It finally arrived—two days later.

In Indiana two college students without caving experience descended the 72-foot pit in Shaft Cave and got lost in the passages. Unfortunately, they had neglected one of the basic procedures for safe caving: always tell somebody where you are going. A passing motorcyclist became suspicious when he noticed a car parked along the side of a country road for two days. Police summoned local cavers, who rescued the pair.

That rescue was one of many in Shaft Cave. A sign posted in a nearby caving shop reads: "Shaft is a killer." But, as the proprietor explains, the danger comes not just from the cave itself, but from the dangerous behavior of untrained explorers. Beginners often tackle a pit with only a slender rope and a naive confidence in their ability to climb hand over hand. However, climbing a thin, mud-slicked rope in the dark after five hours of exhausting cave exploration is not the same as shinnying up 20 feet of stout manila in gym class or the back yard. Experienced cavers do not attempt to climb ropes hand over hand. Instead they use specially designed climbing gear which has been carefully in-

spected and tested.

Although falls account for the largest number of caving accidents, drowning causes the most fatalities. More than 100 persons have drowned in cave diving accidents since 1960. Competent scuba divers often fail to recognize the special risks of cave diving, including narrow passages, muddied waters and jagged rocks concealed by darkness. A diver who becomes disoriented may be unable to find his way to the surface. And an underground air pocket can prove deceptive.

Caver Don Broussard swam into a water-filled passage in a cave in Mexico, hoping to find an unexplored dry passage opening up beyond. He was equipped with a face mask and flashlight and attached to a safety line. After swimming about 17 feet he surfaced in a small air pocket and paused to catch his breath and look around. Unfortunately the air in the pocket contained very little oxygen. He passed out and might have drowned except that his friends at the other end of the safety line saw the flashlight sinking rapidly to the bottom and pulled him out.

Last spring three Indiana college students, Terry Yokem, Kim Aldridge and Marsha Bott, decided to explore Salamander, a fairly roomy cave that is considered ideal for beginners. Rain started while they

were deep underground and water rushed in, filling the cave. Their bodies were recovered two days later.

Water can contribute to another caving hazard: hypothermia. A wet caver, exhausted by hours of crawling and scrambling, can easily fall victim to cool temperatures if he is not dressed properly. A combination of wetness and cold can do strange things to the mind. Caver Doug Rhodes was exploring Harvey's Cave in New Mexico with three friends when he began to feel the effects of the cold and decided to get out. He made it—but only after stopping just inside the entrance to chat with a porcupine.

#### Get expert advice

There's no doubt that caving offers both danger and demanding physical exertion. If that turns you off, experienced cavers won't be disappointed. They're not eager to see hordes of speleoboppers trampling the fragile beauty and cherished solitude of the earth's underground frontiers.

But if you insist on donning a hard hat and going underground, your local caving club will welcome you. They'd rather train you now than have to rescue you later. For information on a caving group near you, contact the National Speleological Society, Cave Avenue, Huntsville, Alabama 35810. ■



On uneven ground experts always keep at least three points of contact: two feet and a hand or two hands and a foot.



A hard hat is essential to protect the head. Sturdy boots, gloves and coveralls give protection against mud and gravel.

# 7 VOICES FROM UNDERGROUND

Haden's Dilemma  
The Three Sisters

Myrna Attaway  
Steve Attaway  
Steve Durham  
Lin Guy  
Stan Haden  
David Howell

April 4, 1976

Our trip set out for the purpose of investigating two new vertical caves which we had located in our recent trips to a hollow near Guntersville which previously been untouched by

ridgewalkers, but which yielded to us 12 new caves. (These are now in the process of being mapped, and will very soon be reported to the Cave Survey.) We entered Haden's Dilemma first, a cave with an attractive 30-foot entrance drop with an old log ladder in it. Approximately 700 feet of nicely decorated passage was found at the bottom of the drop; the cave's total length will undoubtedly map out to more than this, however, as a stoopway/stream passage was left untouched.

The Three Sisters was entered next; this is a 73-foot pit having three entrances in close proximity to each other. No horizontal passage was found at the bottom, but a 50-60 foot dome was observed to one side of the entrance pit. Due to the lateness of the hour, no other caves were entered that afternoon.

Emerald Well, Carrot Cave

Steve Durham  
Lin Guy  
Valerie Haden  
David Howell  
Ray Lewis  
Gerald Moni  
Charlotte Rogers  
Captain Crud  
(Mark Stock)  
David Teal  
James Worthington

April 17, 1976

One of the caves found last winter on the Eureka Quad was one which was named Emerald Well because of the large amount of brilliant green moss around the entrance, was It was originally estimated to be around 80 feet deep. When Lin Guy and several others returned to investigate it further, however, it was found that the

80-foot drop was only an entrance drop to a ledge; the pit continued much deeper. On the 17th of April the group enumerated at left returned to look again into Emerald Well.

Dave Teal rigged the pit and was first down. Lin followed and aided in tape-measuring the depths. The pit was found to drop initially 91 feet to a 7' x 12' ledge, then drop an additional 101 feet to the floor. It was seen to be a narrow pit in which one is against the wall all the way down; it was further seen that its walls were quite unstable – a person rappelling



could not help but dislodge many rocks on the way down, which in turn rained down on the floor and on anyone standing at floor level, since there was no place at the bottom where shelter could be sought.

A register was placed at the bottom, then the rope, which had collected copious quantities of mud, was hauled out.

On the way back to the parking place, Steve Durham and I entered a small cave found earlier in the day by our stalwart companion Captain Crud; this cave was named Carrot Cave, for reasons unknown to me. It consists of a 20-foot entrance drop which can be chimneyed, followed by about 20 feet of fairly tight horizontal passage to another drop, this one about 17 feet. To descend this second drop would require the rigging of a rope, so Steve and I took our leave of Carrot Cave, to return another day when we were not so tired and dirty.

### Salt River Cave

|               |                                  |
|---------------|----------------------------------|
| Myrna Attaway | May 1, 1976                      |
| Steve Attaway | Saturday morning found our       |
| Steve Durham  | group setting out from B'ham     |
| David Howell  | for Jackson County, specifically |
| Greg Jordan   | for the Gonce area (Eureka Quad) |
|               | to begin mapping in Raven's      |

Brook Cave, a brand new one, not yet on the Cave Survey, containing multiple drops. Having attained the parking place and the hillside by mid-afternoon but not, alas, the cave (we couldn't find it!), we decided to reassess our goals of the day. Since we had run out of time for Raven's Brook – those drops do take some time to rig – we terminated our search for the entrance and went instead to nearby Salt River Cave.

Salt River, though easily accessible, is a seldom-visited cave. It consists of over a mile of wide, level-floored passage which carries a fairly sizeable stream. Entering the cave necessitates much wading through knee- to waist-deep water; ceilings are typically five to seven feet high in the main passage. Points of interest in Salt River include the rather awesome-looking remnants of an old wooden dam, constructed years ago in an effort to produce electricity (?) and eventually destroyed to relieve the flooding that the dam caused in a sink nearby in Tennessee. Also of interest are two very beautiful flowstone/rimstone formations (the only significant formations we saw in the cave). Cave life observed included crickets, oats (and bat bones in the upper level dry area near the siphon), and many gnats.

"There was a time when we didn't talk much about our caves, except to each other," an experienced Florida cave explorer admits. "Hell, we couldn't."

It was a matter of pride, this silence, like the reluctant reticence of a mountain-climbing enthusiast in the flat, sandy sunshine state. Fifteen years ago the average known mid-Florida cave was only 200 feet long. Hardly the kind of thing a caver would boast about to friends from Kentucky, where several caves are more than five miles long or from Virginia, where there are dozens of beautiful commercial caves. In Florida, it seemed the cynics who said caves were nothing but holes in the ground might be right.

Something indomitable in the spirit of Florida's cave explorers, or spelunkers, changed all that. Driven by the conviction that around the next bend, or beneath the next gushing spring, could lie a cave of unrivalled beauty and proportions, in the 1950's and 1960's Florida cave explorers and cave divers made their dreams come true.

The divers have now followed underwater caverns for more than a mile. The state's largest dry cave has been mapped for four miles through the Florida limestone and unknown distances remain. Somewhere beneath our sandy surface, says a national expert, may lie a cave system to challenge even Kentucky's Mammoth Cave.

"When we used to get together with other cavers, I always felt snowed under by the ones from Alabama and Tennessee," says Dr. Paul Boyer, an Okaloosa-Walton Jr. College science professor and director of a cave mapping team. "But now they're interested in what WE can tell THEM. Lately we've been seeing them coming down to explore our caves."

Our cavers' optimism was not unrealistic. Time and again the unfolding history of speleology has been dramatically punctuated by discoveries of the "impossible" and pushes into the unknown:

In 1948, William Davies, mapping caves in West Virginia, checked a crawlway, concluded it was a dead end and left it. More ambitious cavers followed. What happened next gives nightmares to any caver who quits before pushing himself – and the cave he is searching – to the limit: They have found so many additional passages in that cave that a 3-day trip cannot cover all its known routes. Maps show its official name: "Davies Didn't Crawl."

Hedrick's Cave, in West Virginia, was known as a pleasant, difficult cave with disappointing limits. Then cavers dragged rocks away from a tiny opening

through which a breeze was blowing. They squeezed through. Suddenly one of them recognized the room they had entered. They were in a previously explored part of the state's largest cave system.

But the amazing story of Hedrick's Cave did not end there. On a return trip, another virgin cave was found. A third trip located a previously unknown entrance. And the best was yet to come.

On a fourth trip, three cavers pushed deep into still another virgin passage. They finally popped into a large chamber — from behind the stalactitic pipe organ in commercial "Organ Cave." Their appearance came "amidst electric lights, tourists and consternation." They now have mapped 15 miles of "disappointing" Hedrick's Cave, and about that much more has been explored but not yet mapped.

Even before the dramatic breakthroughs in Florida in the past 20 years, there were noteworthy caves in the state.

Florida Caverns State Park, near Marianna, includes one of the state's longest and most beautiful caves. It was found in 1937 when a storm blew down a tree. The roots ripped from the ground, exposing the incredible mineral world hidden below. It rivals many commercial caves in northern states.

The real ~~dis~~ discoveries have come from independent adventurers drawn to the subterranean world by scientific curiosity and that magnetic lure of the unknown.

Early in 1953, Charles McNabb and Frank DenBlyker took their nearly new SCUBA gear into the clear waters of Silver Springs. 20 feet under water they stared in awe at a cave opening the size of a ranch-style home. When McNabb kicked his black rubber fins against the tepid water and tried to swim into the opening, he was doing something very few people have done anywhere in the world.

Cavers have often been stymied by passages that lead downward into water. Would the cave rise again on the other side of a flooded section, with untold wonders on the dry, far side? Some tried to "force the sump" — to hold their breath and swim under water to the hoped-for air-filled passage on the far side. Some succeeded. Others died.

The world's first SCUBA cave dive had been made in France only 7 years before McNabb and DenBlyker's. Earlier in 1953, a Californian had dived several hundred feet through a submerged west coast cave, to a dry chamber beyond; a Georgia diver had died in a cave dive attempt; and two Nevada divers had swum into dark Devil's Hole, near Las Vegas. One of them nearly drowned when he knocked his air tank switch to the "off" position on the wall of the cave. He checked the valve, but was confused by the intoxicating effects of "rapture of the deep." Only the memory of safety drills, practiced during long hours in neighbor's

swimming pools, brought him back alive from had threatened to become a lonely tomb.

McNabb tried to swim into the Silver Springs Cave, but was forced back by the rush of 5000 gallons of water per second out of the hole. Gritting his teeth, he hurled himself like a spear at the opening, and was again rebuffed. On his third try he penetrated the amazing natural barrier, and DenBlyker followed him in.

Inside was a chamber 30 feet high. It was divided into several levels, with passages leading off on both sides. Farther inside, where the twilight dimmed to darkness, the chamber was even larger. In a depression in rippling sunlight near the entrance, they found a bone from a mastodon, an elephant-like mammal extinct in Florida for 10,000 years.

Wakulla Springs was the next target. In 1955, Florida State University student divers found mastodon bones 200 feet down in the cave that feeds the springs. In the following month they made more than a hundred dives beyond the 200 foot depth. They filled plastic bags with air from their tanks, and used them to float the heavy bones to the surface. A few divers penetrated nearly a quarter mile into the cave, but by then the depth was more than 250 feet. Air time is so brief at that depth that further exploration had been stymied.

There is still a vast potential in the underwater caves.

Engineers sounded a huge water-filled chamber under downtown Orlando and found that it was so tall that it could accommodate many of Florida's 20- and 30-story beachfront condominium towers. Divers in a north Florida spring system swam almost two miles through connected underwater caves, passing a half-dozen springs and sinkholes opening to the surface.

But cave diving has become so popular, and so deadly, that the spring system, like many others in the state, is now closed to the public. Too often divers have been trapped in watery graves. All police can do is get other divers to recover the bodies.

When Floyd Collins was trapped in Kentucky's Sand Cave by a falling rock, in 1925, rescue seemed much more feasible. But when mountain men had exhausted their crude methods, the 34-year-old cave explorer still lay pinned underground.

On the surface, crowds milled about and sampled local moonshine. The Kentucky National Guard was called in. Mountain men clashed with experts from the "big city" of Louisville. Desisions were made at gunpoint. Collins' father wandered through the crowd, offering rewards to anyone who could save his son, and distributing brochures advertising his own Crystal Cave, which Floyd had discovered seven years earlier.

Floyd Collins had been looking for a link between his Crystal Cave, which ran beneath one ridge, and huge Mammoth Cave, running beneath a parallel ridge. Had he found it? No one knows. He was dead

when a rescue shaft finally reached him, and the tight cave crawlway was eventually sealed. They claim he whispered, before he died, that he had succeeded. A few cavers entered the cave before it was filled in. They didn't find the link to Mammoth.

At last count, 139 people had died in Florida cave diving accidents since 1960. They come from as far away as Michigan, to see the eerie underwater caves — and to die. In the first dozen years of cave diving there were 29 deaths in Florida. In the first 10 months of 1974, there were 26.

One of the victims was George Reinholm, 24, of Miami Shores. An expert diver, he died of nitrogen narcosis on a dive with the careful, precise National Cave Divers' Association.

More commonly, the cave dive deaths involve people with moderate sport diving experience, but little cave diving training or equipment. They panic in a tight spot. Or they go too far and run out of air. Or the intoxicating "rapture of the deep" clouds their minds, and they forget to breathe, or let the air hose wander from their mouths.

"When we go down to get bodies out," says Dave Desautels, executive director of the Cave Diving Association, "they often have plenty of air left. And when we check the car they left behind, there's always the same paperback guide to cave diving spots."

He speaks bitterly of publicity. At first he refused to be quoted for this story. "Publicity is no good, even if you point out the dangers. When we go back to a spot where someone has died, a week later, there are more people there than ever.

"It's really too bad. There's not anything romantic about dying underwater in a cave."

Mike Mishko, a 21-year-old senior at the University of Florida, knows what Desautels means. On September 20, 1974, Mishko and five close friends went to a spring near Live Oak. Two of them, Mishko and one other, were experienced cave divers. "We'd grown up around water," said Mishko. "None of us were afraid of it."

He and Brian Woodard dove down and fastened a rope from an inner tube on the surface to a permanently fixed rope that guides divers 200 feet into the cave. He swam the 200 feet, turned around and came back. He returned to the surface with more than half his air remaining.

Four of his friends prepared to dive next. They agreed to follow the rope to its end, turn around and return. They ~~agreed~~ rehearsed the hand signals they could use to point out an object of interest — or a diver's difficulty. They checked their gear, including a light for each diver. Then they slowly, eagerly disappeared into the clear spring water.

Mike Mishko never again saw his friends alive. He and Brian Woodard kept a close watch on the time, as

they always did, and suffered through the agonizing first minutes when something seems awry, but the mind refuses to admit it.

"We waited half an hour," he says. "It's a wierd thing, the way you feel at a time like that. We couldn't understand why they weren't back. We dove down to the entrance to the cave, but we couldn't see anything inside."

After 30 minutes they sent another diver for the sheriff with the ominous, too-familiar news: "divers overdue."

Mishko identified the bodies. He went home and told his friends' parents that their sons were dead. The divers who recovered the bodies said one was 400 feet inside the cave, the others scattered between that point and the spot 50 feet from the entrance. All were out of air.

Mike Mishko still can't figure out why ~~h~~ they went in so far. "I'll probably still dive, but not into any more caves. Those guys were so close to me. I don't know what it might do to me if I went back into a cave."

The accident that changed Mike Mishko's life and took the lives of four others was only one page in the book of fatalities in Florida's caves. Not a month after his accident, four more young men died — in the same cave.

Why do they do it? There may be psychological reasons.

(The conclusion of this article will be printed in the next issue of the Birmingham Grotto Newsletter. Stay tuned.)



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