

BIRMINGHAM GROTTO NEWSLETTER
NATIONAL SPELEOLOGICAL SOCIETY
JULY/AUGUST 1979





EDITOR'S PAGE

DATES TO WATCH 1

The long, hot simmer is here - and that's no typo! I can barely make out the city skyline through the haze and I melt almost as fast as my popsicle when I'm out. A fine time to be in a cave with its thermostat set at 65..

Note the location change for the grotto meeting. The Red Mountain Museum began a policy of charging groups \$15 per meeting for the use of their facilities. Because our limited budget would only cover about 10 meetings (and because it was felt there were better things to be spending it on), we opted for another, less expensive location. Beginning with the October meeting, we'll be back at the Alabama Gas Co. Building downtown. More next newsletter. This month, we'll see you at the Volker maze. guides will be posted around.

You can probably tell by the first sentence that this was started a while back. Lack of material, lack of interest, lack of spare time all contributed to the delay. Hopefully, this will be the last double issue we'll have to put out. Making the most of what we have and what has befallen us, we've ended up with a nifty color cover and typeset text. I won't tell you to wait until next month, since we're hoping to get that issue out in the next week. But once we're caught up, look out!

Understand the Huntsville Grotto is interested in having a joint clean up trip with us, something along the lines of the GUFFEY trip on Saturday. Any suggestions on places, dates, times? Want to take this opportunity to acknowledge the success of the H'ville April newsletter which caught us as well as several others, including the NSS News, with our guards down. Good joke, guys!

Be sure to catch the announcement of the Alabama Cave Survey meeting. It's a planning meeting to discuss a continuation of the ACS.

In the meantime, let us hear from you!

September: ACS organizational meeting
(See announcement)

Sept. 3 LABOR DAY!
Due to holiday, delayed meeting

Sept. 8 GROTTO TRIP: Clean up trip to GUFFEY CAVE Leave Tarrant Krystal 6:30 am
Trip Leader: Dave Howell

Sept 10 GROTTO MEETING
7:30pm Lecture Room C,
Volker Hall, UAB

COVER PHOTO: Co-Editor Dave Howell caught a typical North Alabama wood gnome by surprise during a ridgewalk in the Wannville area last winter. What did you expect NA gnomes to do with their weekends?!

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VOICES FROM UNDERGROUND

Report from the Birmingham Grotto
in Scottsboro
Ken Kifer - Reporter

During the fall and winter I reported to the Grotto a number of small cave finds near my cabin which always made Greg McGill turn his eyes upward as if to say "Lord spare us". So in March I decided to check a nearby ridge top. I figured if he didn't like nice 100-foot long horizontal caves, maybe he would like nice 100 foot deep vertical caves. I didn't know how close I would be.

A walk one third of the way around the ridge revealed only one pit, looking less than 30 feet deep, so I decided to drop lower on the mountain. After a complete circumnavigation, I found nothing but sinkholes and was very discouraged. I decided to return in the reverse direction and immediately found a sink. A five foot drop led to a passage which led to a ten foot drop which was badly undercut. Beyond that was a hole in the wall I could throw rocks through which I felt fell twenty feet.

On around the mountain I found a very shallow sink, a tiny wash, and a climb down entrance. I started to climb down when I discovered that the entrance had no bottom. Rocks thrown down made the pit seem 100 feet plus. The next discovery was a steep slope down to a small drop. But an occasional rock would go much deeper. The next was a triangular hole that belled out. Looking for a rock to throw in, I climbed down into the neighboring sink and found an entrance that took me inside the pit. I was on a slope with a large eroded formation in front of me with drops on both sides. The walls were black and fluted like cedar roots, but with holes eaten here and there. I guess the pit to be 70 feet, but rocks seem to go further.

The next pit was shallow, the next a crack later measured at 27 feet long and 15 inches wide. The pit belled out inside and was at least 70 feet. The next was a hole I didn't pay much attention to... I would be back later and the next, directly in line, was my first pit.

Since that time I have been back up that mountain so many times I've lost count - I made, for instance, four trips on which I didn't even try to go down one. Therefore, I'm simply going to tell about each of the pits we have descended. Joining me were Larry Moore, Jet and Donna Thomas, Steve and Fenn Spencer, and David Howell.

The first pit I discovered turned out to be 42-45 feet deep, depending on where you measured. I was the first one down. Although the pit is not very deep, I feel it deserves inclusion in the survey because of the beautiful flowstone column extending over thirty feet up one side. The other side is also quite pretty according to Larry, but my light was on the blink and I had a poor look at it. Larry, Steve and Fenn also descended this pit. We call it PAINT BRUSH PIT from the flowers around the entrance.

The third pit I discovered turned out to be 118 feet deep. I descended first, thinking I had a solid floor at 85 feet, since I had checked the depth with a string and rock. Instead I found myself on a knife edge taller than a man with what looked like multiple drops ahead (or rather below - Ed.). Since I felt quite spooked, I returned to the surface and Larry finished what I had started. The pit is at the south end of the opening, about twenty feet down. The walls are close on three sides down to the knife, but on the fourth side the walls open out and the pit feels quite large. After Larry passed the knife (at 74 feet), he dropped to a ledge at 90 feet or more. He took pictures there and then went on down through a narrow gully, then over a lip to the bottom, which was about 8 feet wide and 18 feet long and tear-drop shaped. He found a slick chute full of rubble on the right, which he couldn't climb. He gibbed back up to the knife and dropped down the other pit, finding a shoulder-width chute with two drops which curved to the right. Then he found himself back in the same room at the bottom. He noticed a high lead but it was not climbable.

Continued...

REPORT FROM SCOTTSBORO cont'd

I decided to call this pit the KNIFE PIT.

The fourth pit started as a chute, then a ten foot drop and at the end of a sloping passage a tight crack going into a canyon with probably a fifty-foot drop. Larry and Jet were unable to remove all of the rocks wedged in the crack, so SQUEEZE PIT was not descended.

The next pit, with the triangular pit entrance, which I decided to call the BLACK PIT, because all the walls were black, and this held true at the bottom. One rainy day, Larry descended the first two drops and I went down the first. We later measured these at 67 and 66 feet, with it being possible to get off rope at two places on the first, one being a slope leading to the second entrance. The first pit had nice flowstone draperies hanging under the room above. The second pit had a small rim part way down to a small crack leading to a flowstone covered crack. Above the crack was a canyon going back, full of formations. Larry had stopped here because he felt the rope didn't reach the bottom.

We were imagining a whole succession of pits going down 370 feet to the water table when we returned. Larry, Jet and I reached the bottom of the second drop with plenty of rope left. But after clearing the hole and squeezing through it, we found the bottom only 45 feet away. These Larry found the most disgusting thing anyone can find at the bottom of a virgin pit. But we were at least going to be the ones to add this 180 foot hole to the survey. The discovery - a neatly folded pair of gloves.

The next pit was 31 feet deep when Fenn and Steve Spencer dropped it. Fenn said there was a passage and Steve said no. They both said it was quite pretty. Fenn wanted to call it SPENCER'S DROP.

The next pit was the crack 27 feet long and 15 inches wide. Since the pit bells out immediately, it is a comfortable drop. I was the first one down the 96 feet, followed by Jet, Donna, Larry, Steve, and Fenn. It is a

neat pit for photographs because you can straddle it; and a good pit for beginners. This was my first pit in nearly ten years.

The next pit, and I have left out three which are small and unexplored, was one Dave Howell and I found when he came by to see what I had found. Larry was the only one to drop it. In the beginning we had been apprehensive because of loose rock in the entrance sink., but five inches of rain in one hour had washed it all away. Larry went over the edge and found himself in a ten foot wide canyon passage which wound out of sight. At the 84 foot level, he found a sloping one foot ledge around the pit, and the only formations in the pit. At the 107 foot level he found a three foot wide ledge, with the canyon now five feet wide and still extending out of sight. After a maximum of 40 feet more, he landed on a five by ten floor with a two foot high hole at right angles with the canyon. Dropping through Alice's hole, he found the walls badly fluted and scalloped, and his rope rubbing badly. The pit belled out to 12 feet across as he pressed a ledge on the opposite side. There the rope caught in a crack. He went on down to the bottom at 189 feet. There he found only large rocks, no passage. He took pictures there and all the was up.

Twenty five feet up, he found his rope caught in the crack. Because the wall was badly undercut, he couldn't push off the wall to get by. Finally, he had to use his head - to push him out of the crack until he could get his shoulder in. Coming on out he noticed another dome which let in a little water.

This was our last trip to the mountain, I hope for a long time. I have some horizontal caves that need to be pushed anyway

(See the box on the following page for directions to Ken's place.)

HOW TO GET TO KEN KIFER'S CABIN

Follow Hwy. 79 from B'ham. It now turns to the left a few miles shy of Scottsboro, crosses new 72 and old 72 (now 35) and climbs up Skyline Mountain. Nearly to the top of the mountain is a paved road leading back down to the right (County 21). Half a mile down the road, on a hairpin curve, is a dirt road leading off to the right. And this is where Ken lives.

Or, County Road 21 can be followed from Scottsboro, starting where 35 used to end (the road from Ft. Payne). Cross the railroad tracks and head towards TUMBLING ROCK. Five miles out of town, 21 turns left (with 31 straight ahead). Follow 21 five miles until it climbs the mountain and watch for a turn on the right on the second tight curve to the left.

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Submit materials for publication directly to the Editors. Deadline for receiving materials is the 20th day of the month preceding the month of issue. Materials received after this date will be published in the following issue.



OCTOBER
is
MEMBERSHIP
RENEWAL
TIME!

*** ATTENTION ALL CAVERS!! ***

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ALABAMA CAVE SURVEY

ORGANIZATIONAL MEETING

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 23, 1979

10:30 AM Central Time

University of Alabama in Birmingham
Volker Hall, Lecture Room C

(Same location as the 1979 SERA Winter Business Meeting)
Direction signs will begin at the 8th Ave. So. exit of I-65 South

This meeting is to set up an Alabama Cave Survey to take over where retiring Bill Varnedoe's efforts end. Among other things, the meeting will include: a discussion of what shape the organization will take, adoption of a constitution, election of officers (unless the discussions lead to other proposals), discussion of the imminent publication of the 2000 book.

The meeting is open to any interested cavers. There is no charge -- except what you want to spend on meals etc. Anyone coming the night before needing a place to stay can contact GREG MCGILL (956-1627) and crash pads will be located.

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