

The Tech Troglodyte



Elvis Grotto #1
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Spring '02

The Tech Troglodyte

A Journal of the Virginia Tech Grotto of the National Speleological Society

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Note from the Prez

by Katherine Ferguson

Reprinted from the Cave Club Listserv.

No one will ever be excluded from club meetings or events without just cause. Each one of us contributes priceless amounts of knowledge, skill, and friendship. Without these contributions, the club would be nothing. My hope for this club is that the younger members of the club put as much passion and time into the club as possible and that the older members allow the younger ones to implement new ideas and find their way to caver wisdom through action. I hope that all of us can look at how the campus community views us (militant assholes) and work to change that negative image. I hope

that all of us look at how the caver community views us (competent and knowledgeable) and work to uphold that positive image. I hope that we use every possible means to attract cavers to our club. I hope that we will be friendly and inviting to new people without being pushy or demanding.

I hope that everyone who wants to cave will be able to cave at the level they desire.

Above all, I hope that this will be a safe and fun year for all of us. If you have concerns or ideas on how to make this club better, please let me know (katherine@vt.edu). Thanks to all of you who have talked to me already.

Honaker Cave – A Great Intro into the Club

by Travis Coad

The first trip I went on with the Cave Club is probably the best trip so far. This trip was in the spring of 1999 to a cave called Honaker, somewhere near the Virginia/West Virginia border. The trip consisted of David Hill, John Deighan, Kevin Rock, and myself. David Hill was in town and had come by the meeting mentioning that he wouldn't mind going to the cave, so I went.

Who knows when we left, and who cares? This is about caving, not times and dates. We got to the house, where I am guessing the land owner lives, said hi, and chatted for a while checking to make sure it was all right to park the cars there and go caving. They said it was no problem. From this point until we were actually in the cave I must have blacked out, because I do not remember how we got to the entrance or even what it looked like, so I will just skip that part.

Once inside the cave, there were a lot of cool passages, most of which you could stand in. The cave was highly decorated with formations and had several large flowstones, one of which stands out vividly in my mind. There was a room we came upon that was about 20 feet wide and 30 feet long (for those that use metric, you figure it out). As you came into the room, off to the left was a massive flowstone that was about 15 to 20 feet wide at the ceiling and flowed down to the floor in a large mushroom shape formation. At the base of the formation were numerous rimstone dams that came out into the middle of the room. Beyond the rimstone dams there was a steep mud slope with a mudslide to the right where water drains into a large basin that was about 30 feet deep. David Hill told us that he had never seen this before because it was usually full of water up to the rimstone dams.

Kevin and I decided to go into the basin to see what was at the bottom. We found lots of mud and in one place we found a piece of 2x4 sticking out of really soft mud. Thinking that it was small we started to pull the 2x4 out, but it ended up being about 4 to 5 feet long. This

gave us the general notion that we needed to be careful where we stepped or we would end up like that 2x4. Once bored with that, (no pun intended) we had to go back up the steep mud slope we had so easily come down. Unfortunately, it wasn't so easy going back up.

Later in the trip, we went into another room that was called the Echo Room. You can guess why it is called that, but from what I remember, it didn't really echo that much. This room, however, had a really interesting up sloping entrance hole that you had to squeeze through. I think this is where I burnt my hand with a carbide lamp for the first time. The room also had a rather large flowstone about 10 feet wide and 15 feet long that flowed near the floor; it was definitely worth pushing my way through the hole to see.

Also during the trip, I had a few heart racing moments. While John and Kevin were off exploring some passage that leads to who knows where, David, the only one who knew the cave, went off ahead through the next passage we were going into. I was just sitting around taking a break somewhere between John, Kevin, and David, when out of nowhere I heard large rocks fall and David yell. Considering this was my first trip, I wasn't quite sure what to do. I got John and Kevin out of their little hole and we started looking for David. We found him, he was fine, he had just slipped and kicked rocks down while he was climbing. Later, after I had calmed down from that, Kevin and John went off again to explore. Not long after, I heard John yelling to Kevin. At that time I was thinking that he was just trying to find where Kevin was, but soon after, Kevin appeared and told David that John was stuck in a hole. So David, Kevin, and I ended up having to haul John out of this hole. All the while I was thinking that we were never going to get him out, and we'd have to go get help. After a few minutes of pulling really hard on a piece of webbing we got him out, but then we had to wait until he got the feeling back in his legs before continuing on.

This trip was not only my first, but it was my best. It showed me what caving is all about. The trip gave me the delight of seeing very pretty and unusual formations along with a little heart racing excitement and danger. The best and most important thing is that it got me hooked to the VPI Cave Club and to the techniques of

good responsible caving. All in all, the trip was great, and everybody that went in came out with only minor cuts, bruises, and scrapes. It is a trip I highly recommend, and have wanted to go do again for quite some time. If anyone knows the cave, I would love to plan a trip and take some trainees.

by Rance Edwards



A Rock Climber Crossing Over to the "Dark" Side

by Chris Michie

Coming from a background of fancy shoes and dynamic rope, the adjustment towards the vertical caving community has had its shares of difficulty. It was not that long ago when I would call up a few friends and drive to a little known bluff where we would spend the last of the daylight hours following our morning classes climbing slabs of granite and limestone. "Run up to the top and set up a belay," my friends would call, as they strapped on their harnesses and squeezed their toes into shoes that were three sizes too small.

Ten minutes later, I would return to the bottom, only to see one friend chalk up his hands to take the first climb. I pulled out my ATC belay device from my pack, and after a few brief commands, off he went. Sticking to the walls like Spiderman, he used every smallest crack and crevasse to pinch, catch, tweak or grab in order to make one more move. Three quarters the way up the wall I saw him slowly extend his foot to step on a ledge no more than one eighth of an inch wide, but as he finished the move, the skimp of limestone that was his foothold gave, and I heard a stuttered cry: "Falliiiiing." As his worn fingers suddenly got three times the amount of load, they gave from fatigue and I felt a small jolt in my harness as the dynamic rope stretched to catch his fall.

"Well at least you weren't on a lead," I called to him, as he regained his strength to attempt the move a second time. "You would have been four feet above your belay point, and that wouldn't feel too good." "Yeah, that would have sucked," he responded, grateful that he only fell a couple inches. Climbing back on the rock, he finished the climb, and I lowered him forty feet so someone else can try the wall.

When I entered into the caving community, I had one goal in mind: I wanted to go vertical. I bugged the Vice President to take me on one more horizontal trip to fulfill the requirements for the first vertical trip. As I entered into the darkness of Links, I noticed the great advantage that the cool damp air would give comfort to the hot summer heat, as well as the

sub freezing temperatures for which Blacksburg is so well known. Remembering the two hundred foot rappels that frightened me as a child, and the 5.10 climbs that thrilled me as a new Hokie, I felt that I was ready for whatever these big holes in the ground would have to offer.

However, the moment I first squeezed through the Nasty, I realized that I had a lot to learn. As I entered into the canyon section for the first time, I noticed the first major difference between the two sports. Rock climbing uses a lot of foot friction. I gingerly reached my foot across the gap and tried to find some friction on the sloped ledge on the other side, but to no avail. I knew that from this point forward, I had to take a new approach to maneuvering at heights above the ground. After learning the fine art of canyoning, and watching a well experienced vice president bolt around the Whale's Tail, I began to appreciate the value of caving experience, as I slid my butt cheek onto the jutting rock and peered around the corner. After a blazing, and very physical Links trip that logged all of an hour and a half, I looked forward to the following Friday, where I could try my hand at some real vertical caving.

As I sat down at the next meeting among strange old fogies that kind of smelled funny, I was shown the kind of thrill that keeps these cavers coming back for more, as the presentation of the Mexico Pits began. As visions of 1400-foot rappels danced in my head, I later spoke up and asked for a first time vertical trip.

As embarrassed as I was the night before, the next morning was nothing but excitement as I stood next to a fairly large crack in the limestone, and asked, "So where is the cave?" Reexamining my current location, I realized that I was about to rappel a mysteriously large distance into complete darkness... and I was completely thrilled. As I clipped my rack onto eleven-millimeter thick PMI static line, I noted another fascinating difference between the two sports. The rope is stiff. My mind was blown

for a minute, as I clipped the last bar onto the rack. This doesn't feel like my pretty Blue Water static line. A slight bit of concern came over my face, but as I weighted the rack, I realized that I was not going anywhere. The force that I applied in order to pinch the Blue Water rope was not required for the concrete cord that I was about to descend upon. Thinking of a few differences during my enjoyable first descent, I concentrated on not burning the rope with the torch mounted upon my head, as well as wondering when I would be able touch the ground, since I could not very easily see where I was going. After the two other consecutive drops, by the time I had reached the ninety-foot drop, the descent was nothing out of the ordinary.

The biggest problem I had adjusting to the new style of vertical technique, besides all the mud on my gear, was that there were two very different methods of going up. Now for years I have not relied on the rope to support my weight with the exception of a fall, but when I was hanging fifty feet off the cavern floor dangling by a set of loosely tied helical knots, and feeling the rope sway from my uneven movements, for the first time on the trip I became a little nervous. After working over the lip, I happily climbed out of the hole in the ground and tried to catch my breath. I later helped coil the rope, also in a very strange way, but I could feel nothing but excitement about the new sport to which I had become hopelessly addicted.

The Opening of Spring Hollow

by Pam Wolf

Reprinted from the '79-'80 New Member Issue of The Tech Troglodyte.

Friday, Oct. 31, 1976, at the VPI Cave Club meeting, Chuck Shorten asked who'd be interested in digging out what he thought was a cave over in Bland County. Dennis Vaders and I, a trainee, decided we were going to go into this cave if it was the last thing we did. Besides, I wanted to go caving, Chuck needed a car, and Dennis was dumb enough to go along to drive.

The morning began at 8 a.m., when we were to meet Chuck in Owens for breakfast. After a slight delay - to get my ID card from Dennis' room - we ate a nice breakfast (at the dining hall?) and went to gather gear.

Gathering gear took about an hour and a half. When we left Blacksburg, we had enough sling for an army, plus shovels and anything else we could think of. Next, we went to sign out at the Loud's. Finally, after neatly weaving miles of sling, we were on our way.

We stopped at Don Anderson's in Dublin to get more sling. Don told us how sick he had gotten the night before. He told us he had a pick we could use. On to the cave! We drove toward Buddy Penley's, stopping for bread, bologna, and a can of Hawaiian Punch.

We pulled up at a big white house in front of the power line cut near where Chuck had found the hole last spring. We were met at the door by Mrs. Banes. Would she mind if we looked for a cave on the property? She said we must want Buddy Penley down the road. Chuck explained he'd found the hole while walking down the cut last spring. Mrs. Banes talked to her husband, who seemed unsure about these young speleologists, but who gave permission.

Off we went, through the field, carefully avoiding cattle with big horns and cow pies. We

located the big rock near the hole. We spent 15 or 20 minutes throwing rocks down it. Then we began to dig.

Finally, we cleared enough rocks to get in, or so we thought. We hurried back to the car for gear and to the Banes' for permission to enter the cave. When we told her the location, she said they called the area Spring Hollow. We got permission to drive to the entrance.

We were ready to go caving. Chuck tried to rig a cam rig while Dennis tied off to a tree. The entrance appeared to be a 30-foot drop and Chuck wanted to go first. Down he went, until he got to a narrow part and tried to squeeze through. "I'm stuck!" he yelled.

Dennis and I pulled him up (he was only three feet down) and we decided Dennis should try since he was the smallest. But the opening was too small. We had to dig.

With prodding and digging, a large rock on the right dislodged. Hope arose. Chuck threw out a large rock and yelled, "Snake!"

"What kind?" I asked.

Chuck, not being fond of snakes, replied in absolute terror with some obscene remark.

I saw it was a garter snake and swore to never let Chuck forget it. The snake jumped down the hole and Chuck allowed Dennis to finish digging.

Actually, it was time for Dennis to take a break, but Dennis didn't know what it was to stop once he had started digging. Chuck and I took the rocks away as Dennis passed them to us. Meanwhile, the sun got closer to the horizon and the air got a night chill.

Dennis announced if we could remove one more boulder, the hole would be open. We gave him the retired piece of tenstrong, and he tied

Way Back is a series of articles pulled from the club archives. Every once in awhile it's nice to be reminded that this cave club has a long and rich history of cave exploration. The idea and this submission came from Lawrence Britt, keeper of the club files.

it around the boulder. Just as Chuck and I prepared to pull like hell, Dennis knocked loose one or two smaller rocks and all I saw was the end of the tenstrong disappearing down the entrance. This was followed by a thud.

Now the hole was big enough for Bill (Stringfellow) or Gary (Moss) to get through.

Again, we donned our caving gear. Chuck told Dennis he could go first, since he had done all the work. Actually, I think Chuck was afraid of the snake, which was surely crushed.

We rigged a rock, and Dennis rappelled and took the left passage. Chuck followed, going right. Dennis said he could see Chuck's light from where he was - and that the entrance didn't have to be rappelled. I rappelled in, following Chuck's path.

We followed the passage, admiring the virgin passage and noting where to find our way out. I was really impressed, being a trainee and seeing my first virgin cave. Continuing along the passage, we crawled through some small breakdown and down through some really loose shale which broke if you even thought about using it as a foothold. This brought us to a room above a drop which appeared to be 40

to 50 feet deep.

The floor we were on was really bad. A stream ran through the middle, coming in on the left. From above, we had seen a passageway across the area where we were. We climbed over a conglomerate boulder that broke in our hands as we climbed, then up the wall to the passage. At its entrance, there was a rock that looked like a mallard in flight. The passage became the Duck Walk. Someone short could duck-walk this passage. It ran 75 feet. We noted soda straws and rimstone pools along the way.

The Duck Walk ended at some breakdown. We were tired. We wanted to go back to the party. We decided not to push more passage. We sat down and had a gorp break. Going down from the Duck Walk above the pit was scary with so much exposure. The floor beside the conglomerate rock was small pebbles and loose rock, which fell through an opening where the water went down in the floor.

Past this, up the shale we went. Back at the entrance, we were tired, happy, and feeling triumphant about our new cave - Spring Hollow.

An Adjustable Spacer for Rappel Racks

by Mark H. Eisenbies

In October of 2000, I was a member of a team of VPI cavers who participated in Bridge Day and rappelled off the New River Gorge Bridge in Fayetteville, West Virginia. At just over 700 feet, the rappel was probably my longest to date, and several of us had some difficulty picking the right configuration of our racks on our first rappels. Several of us found ourselves feeding the rope through our racks while using five brake bars.

On long drops, acquiring the right balance between friction and smoothness can be a challenge. Maintaining the proper spacing, particularly between the first three bars, can be tricky because of their tendency to jam together due to the weight of the rope. Since attempting long rappels like this on four bars is undesirable, many cavers resort to the use of spacers in order to maximize smoothness while keeping five bars engaged. This article will describe an adjustable spacer using a simple hose clamp within a SMC stainless steel brake bar. While this method has surely been independently developed elsewhere, I have not encountered it as of yet.

According to Smith and Padgett (1996), the use of spacers is a radical and dangerous addition to your rappel rack. However, Smith and Padgett also state that one of the challenges of using a rappel rack is preventing the second bar from overheating. They recommend the use of

spacers as one method for controlling the heating of the second bar, although on the next page they rebuff them as a "drastic" modification by reducing the available friction by up to 30%. How this 1/3 reduction in friction should be considered more drastic than a 1/3 reduction in friction by changing from aluminum to steel bars (Smith and Padgett, 1996) is not explained.

Whether or not Smith and Padgett can reach a consensus on the use of spacers isn't the point. Rappelling is an inherently dangerous activity, and I assume no particular responsibility for the use or misuse of the following suggestion. It is always prudent to practice with any changes to your vertical technique in a controlled environment before utilizing a change underground.

Traditionally, spacers are constructed from pipes, springs, washers, nuts, or any other item that can be placed on the U-frame of the rack to set the minimum distance between the first and second bar (see Figure 1). For years I used two 0.6 inch pieces of PVC pipe to serve this function. The rest of my rack consists of a solid, 3/4 inch, grooved, stainless steel top bar, and SMC stainless steel U bars. I have been using this particular rack since 1990. While I weigh 170 lbs., a four or five-bar rappel commonly is my preference. I have never had the occasion to use all six bars.

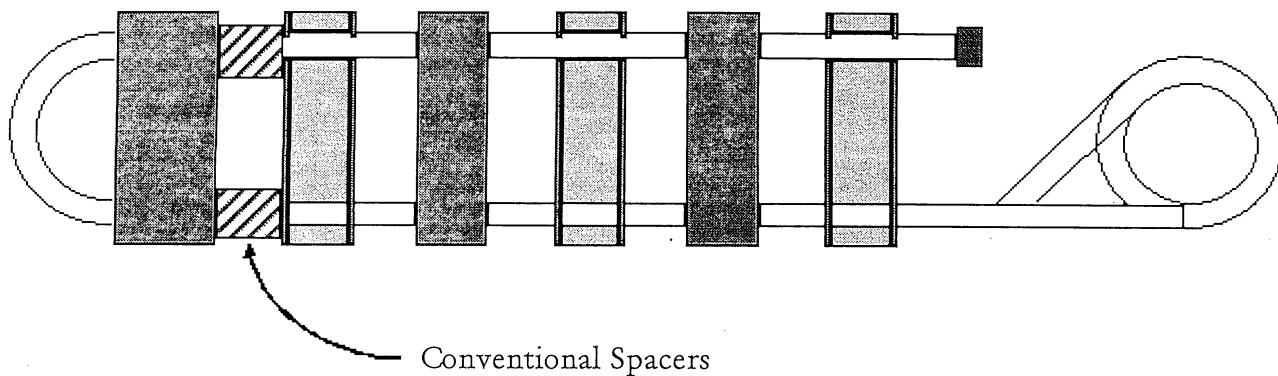


Figure 1: Rappel Rack with Traditional Spacers Installed

At Bridge Day, I found that my second bar would jam tightly against my spacers and it took a great deal of hand strength to move the bar even to the point where force-feeding rope allowed my descent. On my second rappel I switched to a 4.5 bar configuration (braking hand on the same side as the face of the last engaged bar), and the rappel was more acceptable, but not ideal.

Just after Bridge Day, I installed a stainless steel hose clamp within my SMC U bar in the second position (see Figure 2). Cut off the excess band and file smooth. Because it fixes the second bar in position, the bar had to be filed into a strait-groove, idiot bar to allow the bar to be opened for rigging. My initial spacing between the first two bars was set at 0.7 inches, and the maximum spacing I have used in practice has been no more than 1.1 inches. I currently have it set for approximately 0.9 inches.

Since installation, five-bar rappels have been my standard even on dirty ropes, and I have still not required the use of a sixth bar. Thus, I have found this modification to improve the overall performance of my rappel rack. There have been no problems with slippage or creep

of the hose clamp, and I have not had to adjust its position after setting it.

Because the second bar is fixed, friction can only be controlled by bars three through six. Despite this minor inconvenience the modification allows a precise setting, as well as the ability to tweak it. Since my hand can only manipulate three bars at once anyhow, I do not find this particular disadvantage all that problematic.

In conclusion, despite what Smith and Padgett happen to say in favor or against the use of spacers, I have found this addition to be useful in providing myself smoother rappels. Furthermore, the option of fine-tuning the spacing to provide the exact friction I desire is a definite advantage. Now that I've found a balance that suits me, I have not had the need to change my spacing of 0.9 inches. Because of its adjustability, this method of bar spacing probably has promise for owners of long racks.

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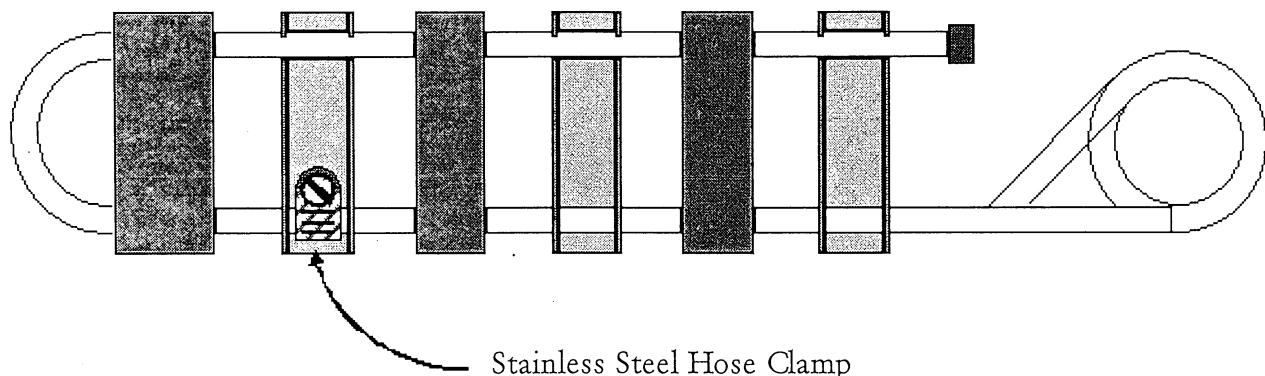


Figure 2: Rappel Rack with Hose Clamp Spacer Installed

Grotto Grapevine

by A.I. Cartwright

BANQUET - A SMASHING SUCCESS

This year's Banquet was a bit smaller than usual, possibly due to a shoddy job on the part of the invitations folks. However many of the usual suspects still turned out for the feast, which was again catered by Steve Williams.

Awards included many things silly and frivolous, yet we managed to seriously thank Kirk Digby for his many contributions with the A.I. Cartwright award.

The main entertainment of the evening was provided by a swing made of webbing and rigged from the ceiling. Cavers, booze, and high speed toys - not a good combination!

Banquet speaker Chip Clark had a "crashing" good time this year. He stepped into the path of Steve LePera on the webbing swing and they both went into a table of drinks. Chip and Steve got up laughing, but the table didn't fare as well.

Before breaking tables, Chip gave an excellent presentation of mixed content: he dug up a bunch of random photos and had an interesting tale to tell about each one. Who says we need pictures of caves to keep us awake?

In a battle of young vs. older, Mike Cole refused to end the music until there was nobody left dancing, and Ed Loud and Lynn Morgan refused to stop dancing until the music ended! The battle raged on until the sun came up, and finally ended in a draw. Let's see this again next year!

PARIS? MAIS NON.

Unfortunately, another yearly tradition did not take place this year. Usually a group of old farts makes their way to Europe for a long weekend. However due to recent terrorism and other fiascoes, the trip just didn't quite happen. Better luck for next year's travel.

HOUSING

Slum lord Lawrence Britt is paying three caver lackeys to fix up and paint the blue house on Wilson Avenue. Now it's *really* blue - half of it, anyway. Kirk Digby, Pam Mohr, and Chris

Garguilo plan to drag out the project for as long as they can.

Recent events have convinced Chip Mullins to move out from Ray's old place where he was rooming with Chris Garguilo. He's now living in his frat house. Interestingly, Sam Lambert doesn't have to memorize a new phone number to reach her boyfriend.

Amanda Stiles has moved in with Penelope Pooler on Meadowbrook in the space abandoned by Nikky LaBranche. People can't seem to move into a new place without getting a dog, so of course Amanda now has Connie, an adorable Australian something-or-other.

EJUKASHUN IS GUD

Congrats to Paul Hess, who is now Dr. Paul. We can hear it now: "Let me examine that for you, miss. It's okay, I'm a doctor." Don't be fooled! He's just another engineer.

And just when are Steve LePera and Ko Takamizawa going to finish their - oops, we're not allowed to ask about that.

AND ANOTHER....

Jeff Leach, KG4SUB. Need help remembering this? Just think "sonuvabitch."

MOVING ON - WE'LL MISS YOU

After graduation in May, Matt Stec and his wife Stacy will be heading out to Boise, Idaho. Matt has taken a job with Hewlett-Packard. Congrats, Matt!

Andy Yeagle also graduates, but hasn't found a job yet. As soon as he finds one "someplace cool" he's outta here.

Chris Hibshman and his wife Michelle are soon moving to NOVA. Chris has found a dorky engineering job, while Michelle will find a teaching position once there. Chris swears they'll be back for all the "important" club functions.

Sue Setzler is also seeking employment. She and Megan are heading to Tennessee, where they'll catch up to Doug Bruce. Hopefully they will each still find time to visit us in the 'Burg.

ACTUAL CAVING NEWS

Thanks to new landowner relations involving Carrie Blankenship, the club was given the chance to ridge walk her family's property in Narrows. On January 26, a big group of cavers went out and discovered a cave now called "Elvis Grotto # 1." Supreme Ruler Balister is currently controlling access, so check with him if you'd like to visit the cave. Almost all leads have been killed off, but there's still a slimy high lead which Kevin Rock is anxious to check out.

This same day of ridge walking turned up a few other digs with potential. However none of them have yet produced any cave booty.

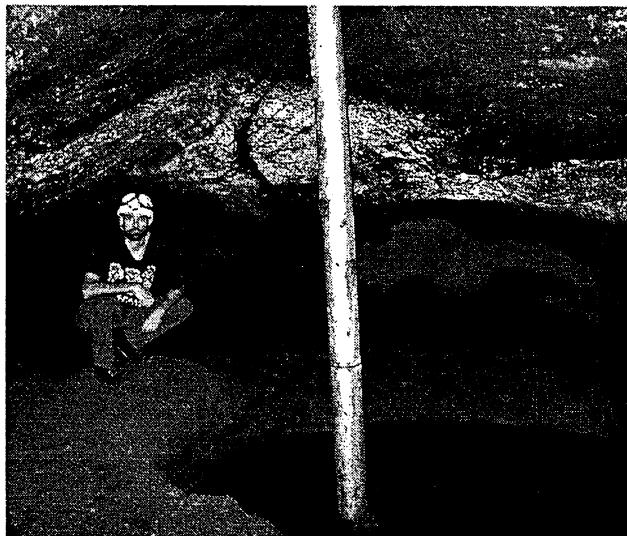


Eric Stanley and Brian Ekey haul a BFR from a so-far disappointing dig. Photo by Eileen O'Malley.

Recently, National Geographic filmed a show on Girl Scouts caving. Organized by Joey Fagan, Joey and Matt Burnett assisted the film crew and led the girls through Starnes. To thank Matt for his assistance, Joey has convinced the local chapter to allow Matt to keep the Girl Scout uniform he wore during the filming.

Who says it takes millions of years for a cave formation to grow? Tawney's Cave has a new formation which appeared in a day. It seems the state of Virginia wanted to get Calvin Lucas' cows out of Sinking Creek to improve the water quality, so they paid to have a well drilled in his field. Despite having a topo map overlaid with the cave map, they managed to send the well casing right through Tawney's near the

Saltpetre Room. Mr. Lucas didn't look happy to learn of the mishap and expressed concern about the impact on the cave. VPI cavers assured him that while it made a big muddy mess and isn't very pretty, the long-term effect on the actual cave environment is minimal.



Steve LePera checks out the new Tawney's formation.

Photo by Steve Wells.

CLUB RELATIONSHIPS - BLINK AND YOU'LL MISS THEM

Our infamous Chip and Sam saga ended just after Banquet this year - did the awards ceremony jinx them? Luckily, both parties are now happy in other relationships.

Here's your chance, ladies! The men of the Wells household are single again. With their dashing good looks and charming personalities, we're sure they won't stay single for long. [Someone else made me print that last bit. - Ed.]

After a long courtship, Kelly Rose and Joe Thompson are buying a house together in Morgantown, WV. Of course we won't see Joe any more often since he's still chasing nuclear reactors for a living.

EASTER BEER

Despite the drizzly rain, the annual Easter Beer Hunt took place at the Bat Ranch. Septapus played their wonderful mix of background tunes and elevator music, but was it what the people wanted?

At one point late in the night, Brad Atkinson took control of the microphone. Apparently he

had some problems with his female parts, but claims it's okay because he's going to Hawaii.

Club members are getting more generous these days, hiding actual good beers. This is a trend many of us heartily support. (No offense, of course, to Wells and his treasured Olympia.)

HE THINKS CAVING IS DANGEROUS?!

In a spectacular performance, Philip Balister recently crashed while riding his road bike. He didn't get very far on the ride before his rear wheel came off, sending him over the handle bars. He's still with us because he was wearing a helmet, but that didn't save him from getting lots of road rash.

After his great wreck Philip pedaled back to Sandy's house longing for training wheels. In an interesting twist, his wife continued on the bike ride while Karen Everhardt supervised him in the shower.

YTR

Another early spring, another chance for our younger members to hit on chicks from other grottos. The VPI new members and trainees made us all proud with their dogged persistence by the fire. This time, however, we had a special treat as one of the *women* threw herself shamelessly at an eligible Blacksburg male.

The cool thing about YTR, as far as caver events go, is that people actually go caving. Lots of trips went out with a good mix of grottos participating. Sandy Knapp lead one of her famous trips to Organ Cave with help from Ray Sira. VPI folks went caving with WVACS, NCRC, WVU, JMU, and other several other acronyms. Judi Wasilewski even drove from Chicago to get in on the action.

LET'S DISCUSS THE BY-LAWS – NOT!

This past semester has seen more speleopoliticing in the club than the past seven years put together. Checking email was a dangerous thing, because you never knew if there were two or twenty-two posts to the listserv arguing the next hot topic.

It all began with the Secret By-laws Committee, designed to consider revamping and modernizing the by-laws of the club Constitution. Once people started feeling

snubbed by the committee, the emotions steamrolled until many of the committee members resigned.

That was followed by the young students planning a coup to overthrow the older members. Before any blood was shed, Katherine Ferguson stepped in and managed to make peace between the two tribes.

After all the commotion, only three motions were made to change the by-laws, and those three were the most innocuous of all. It's possible that the motivation to stir up more trouble died down because people were tired of reading long-winded emails.

At this point, most members of the club are still speaking to one another.

CLUB RESCUE GEEKS

Alison Williams and Brian Ekey continued their journey towards ultimate rescue geek by getting their cardiac certification. Now they have the official authority to say, "Yup. His heart stopped."

PICNIC

Ah, another rainy, dog-infested Picnic. This year's eating and drinking binge was sponsored by an anonymous donor (thank you whoever!). This allowed enough funds to get a roasted pig. Between Ray's ubiquitous chili and other potluck contributions, it was quite a feast.

In the spirit of having lots of good food at Picnic, the treasurer is taking donations towards next year's event. If you enjoyed the food and bevvies at this one, please toss a few dollars his way.

In a fairly new tradition, several bikers rode out to Picnic on Friday: Steve LePera, John Deighan, Wil Orndorff, John McKenna, and Danny Zokaites made the 48-mile trek that day, making pretty good time. In fact, some think Danny's fast pace was a driving force behind Wil's time – can't get beaten by a Zoling, after all!

Penelope Pooler, Amanda Stiles, and Jeff Leach straggled in later that evening. Apparently they left late and didn't make quite as good time. Even though Jeff bailed partway and hopped in a vehicle, the other two pushed on and arrived

at the site well after dark, and well after the AFC started to worry about them.

During the day on Saturday, the usual group of pick-up drivin' rosebush pullin' firewood gettin' folks collected enough to keep us toasty all night. Given the rainy conditions, some of the grass in the field got torn up. Of course this prompted a lot of fuss on the listserv, and rumor has it that the saga rages on in private emails.

In true Reggie form, Mr. Ried got in a fight with the pig head by the fire Saturday night. For awhile, it was touch and go as to which one would end up in the flames.

Speaking of flame, is that Sue Setzler in the woods? Sue had a great time which began with the cider and ended by frisking people by the fire - not that anyone complained!

News flash! Several times during this Picnic, Kirk Digby formally announced that he's an asshole. Stop the presses!

FREE GEAR FOR THE OLD FOLKS!

Rope running season has officially begun at the yellow house (Wil and Zenah Orndorff's place). Despite it being an excellent opportunity for newer folks to learn new systems, so far no trainees have shown up. Looks like once again the older members will be the ones to win all the free gear at OTR.

ELECTIONS

The club recently held elections for the upcoming school year. Katherine Ferguson won the presidential race on her campaign of, "If you don't vote for me I'll kick your butt." Mike Cole is the new VP, but he's looking for lots of help with trainee trips - we'd like to *keep* him in school this time. Spotty Dog Rapier continues his role as treasurer (we just can't seem to get rid of him). Kevin Rock is now Secretary and promises to speak louder than Andy Yeagle at the meetings.

NEW MEMBERS

The club had a sudden burst of membership activity in the past few months. First came Travis Coad, Aaron Thomas, Jeff Leach, and Sandy Ramsey. Then Zenah Orndorff, Katherine Ferguson, and Penelope Pooler completed the challenge to increase the estrogen level of the club.

Despite comments to the contrary, Eileen O'Malley did not recently get her membership.

TAG IN THE SPRING

A new generation of VPI cavers are learning to enjoy the pits in TAG. Kirk Digby took several trainees and new members to TAG over Spring Break. Amanda Stiles, Travis Coad, Jeff Leach and Aaron Thomas were the participants, and all of them returned safely. The group did a standard

tourist trip of Stephen's Gap, Neversink, Pipe Dream, and Ellison's. Items of note: Amanda carled her lamp in Ellison's and Aaron got lost in the woods on the way to the cave. The most important thing they learned, however, was how to get back home. One vehicle missed the turn to Blacksburg on the return trip and drove an extra hour on I-81 before they realized the mistake!

Speaking of TAG, The Southeastern Cave Conservancy has purchased and opened another cave. This time it's Valhalla, a once-popular TAG pit which has been closed for many years. Walt Pirie is heading up the local fund drive raising money to contribute to the SCC. So far VPI has collected around \$3000, which gets us either a significant formation or section of passage named for the club. Thanks to Walt for his nagging efforts! Make sure you all put Valhalla on your list of places to visit next time you visit TAG.

QUESTION

How many times can Ko Takamizawa fall asleep at a birthday party? The answer is seven.



Alison Williams takes her first taste of Mexico brown shit, a caver favorite. Photo by Eileen O'Malley.

The "UAYCEF" Knot System: The "Knotted Frog"

by Penelope Pooler

Based upon an article of the same title written by Chris Nicola and edited by Bob Zimmerman (*Nylon Highway*, 1999).

INTRODUCTION

As part of my VPI Cave Club membership requirements, I had to demonstrate that I could ascend rope using knots. With permission from Kevin Rock, the former Vice President, I used the knot system that I am accustomed to and was signed off by Kirk Digby, who then asked me to write an article for the *Trog* about it. This article assumes that you know how to tie a Helical knot, as well as some others mentioned, and understand the basics of the frog ascending system. A basic knowledge of how to ascend rope with knots is also assumed.

When I first became interested in learning more than basic vertical technique a few years ago, I was surfing the web and stumbled upon a reference to an article in the *Nylon Highway* (Nicola and Zimmerman, 1999) about a knotted frog system also dubbed the "UAYCEF" knot system (see endnote for name explanation). I basically learned how to climb with knots from reading this article and practicing at informal vertical sessions at various cliffs and friends' backyards in northern West Virginia. The system construction described below is similar to that described in the original article. In my subsequent comments, I suggest some alternatives that you may want to adopt.

SYSTEM CONSTRUCTION

To construct this knot system, you'll need 30 feet of the knot cord of your choice. Chris Nicola's article specifies 6 mm accessory cord, which is ideal if you want to build a very lightweight system. After experimenting with various cord diameters and materials, I've found that I prefer 8 mm Mammut[®] for climbing on 11 mm rope. It grips the mainline really well and you can break the knot fairly easily when sliding it up. It's a little more expensive than most other cord choices, but is very abrasion resistant.

One of the primary advantages of this knot system is that it can be constructed from one long segment of cord. You can make it out of two shorter segments for convenience, but the advantage of using one long piece is that the same cord can also serve as a handline or belay line in the cave.

To start constructing your knot system, use a Double Figure Eight or a Bowline on a Bight to create double foot loops large enough to fit muddy cave boots (see Figure 1). You do not need to make the loops large enough to bind the foot as in a traditional knot system. Even if you prefer to use one large foot loop when climbing with a mechanical frog system, two foot loops are preferable for this system.

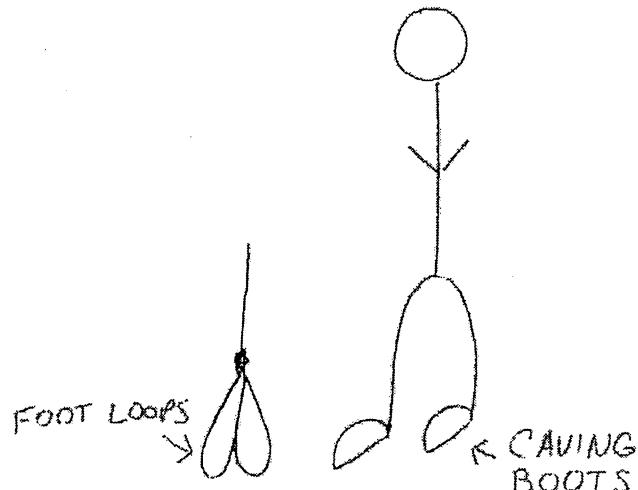


Figure 1 - Create the Foot Loops

While standing in the foot loops adjacent to the mainline, pull the cord taut from your foot loops and tie a Helical with a Bowline and Yosemite tie-off at a height on the mainline roughly level with the top of your thigh (see Figure 2). It's important to use a Yosemite tie-off for the Bowline knot of this lower helical. As you'll see in the next step, the tail of this bowline is then connected to your harness. A Yosemite tie-off is much more likely to prevent the bowline from capsizing or coming undone in the unlikely event that this bowline's tail line to your harness is weighted. This reasoning is

explained more fully in the comments section after the entire system is described. You can also complete a Helical with a Figure Eight.

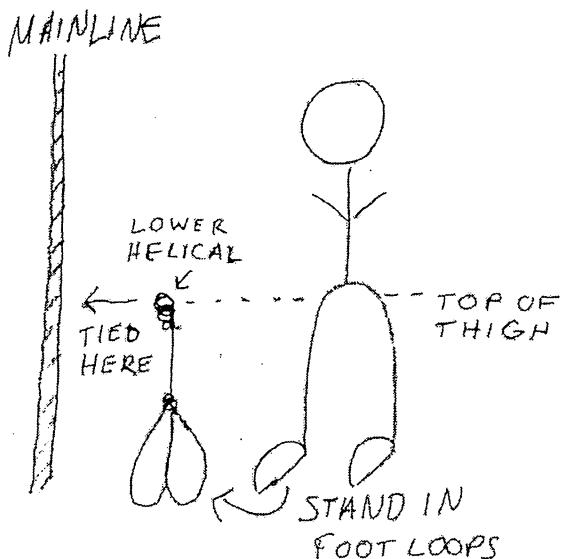


Figure 2 - Connect the Foot Loops to the Rope

From this Helical knot, measure out a length of rope down to below your knees and back up to your harness D-ring (or whatever connection link you use). Tie a Figure Eight on a Bight at this point and slip the bight loop on to your D-ring (see Figure 3). There should be enough length of cord between the bottom Helical and this Figure Eight connection to your harness so that this line is never taut when you're climbing.

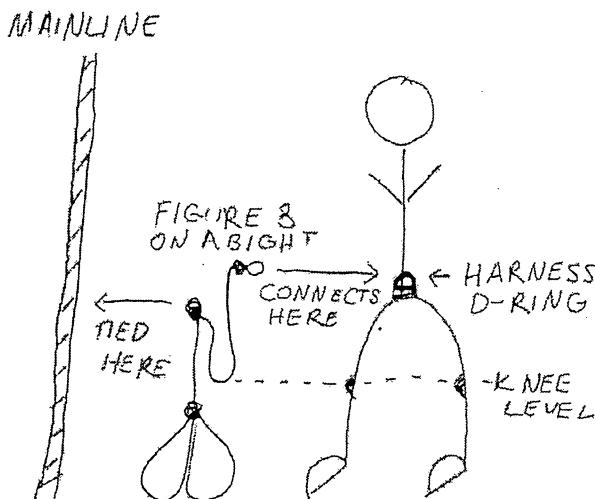


Figure 3 - Connect the Foot Loop Cord to your Harness

From the Figure Eight on your D-ring, pull the line taut and tie a Helical at approximately your chin level or slightly lower. If there is substantial cord length left over after tying your top knot, you can cut it (making your handline shorter) or bind it in some way to keep it out of your way.

After you have tied all of your knots and before you start climbing, you might want to take a Sharpie® or laundry marker and mark the placement of the knots on your knot cord so that you can easily recreate or adjust these lengths in the future.

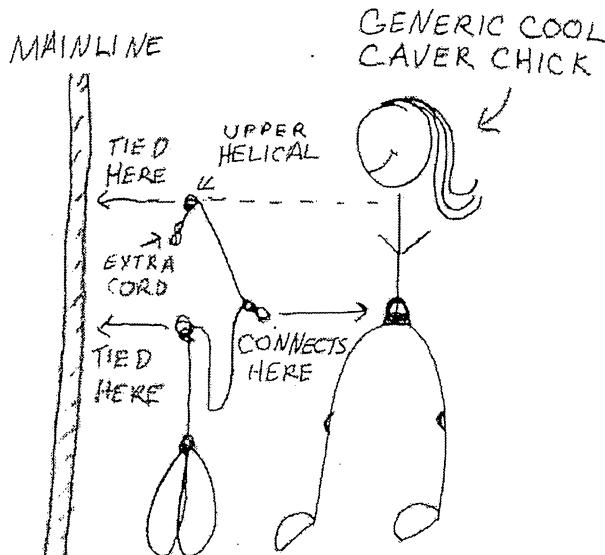


Figure 4 - "Ready to Climb"

You are now ready to start climbing. In a mechanical frog system, your feet are attached to your upper ascender, and your chest is attached to an ascender below that, which is the reverse of the knots connections described here. Despite this difference, Chris Nicola adopted the "Frog" name for this system, and I agree, because its use feels very similar to the frog motion on the rope. Move your top Helical knot up the mainline as far possible. Rest your weight on your top knot and pull your bottom Helical knot up as you fold legs up in a kneeling position. Stand on the foot loops to unweight your top knot, and simultaneously slide the top knot up as far as possible. Repeat motions until you have climbed to the top of the given climb.

COMMENTS

You can tie the system onto the mainline in reverse order starting with the top Helical knot. This order of tying might allow you to make larger foot loops to take up some of the left over cord length and/or to bind up excess cord length in a knot near your feet and out of the way. I have never tried to tie on this way, but I suspect it would work well.

As I mentioned, using one long cord allows you to carry one line in your cave pack that can be used for a handline, belay line, or for a knot system. If, however, you would prefer to have a system somewhat pre-cut and pre-rigged, you can use two shorter pieces. The bottom cord would go from your pre-tied foot loops to the lower Helical and then be connected to your D-ring with a pre-tied Figure Eight on a Bight. The top piece would go from the upper Helical to your D-ring with another pre-tied Figure Eight on a Bight (see Figure 5). In addition to convenience, another advantage of using two separate pieces to construct the system is that it results in two independent connections between the mainline and your D-ring, which is the preferred level of safety and redundancy in an ascending system.

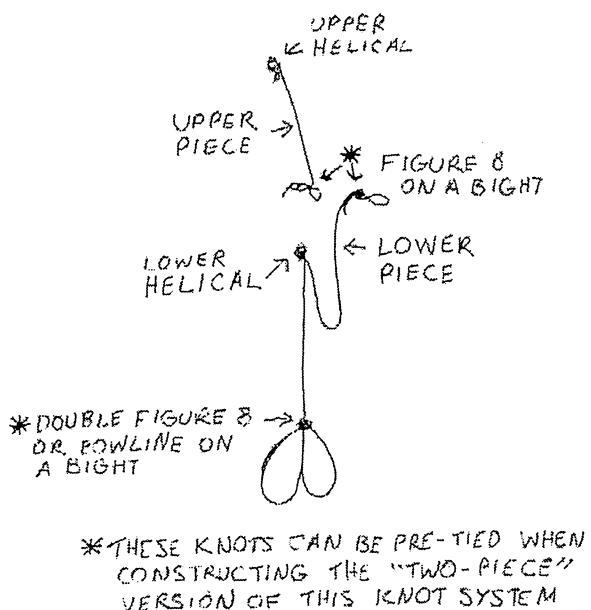


Figure 5 - Using Pre-cut Cord

When I first explained this knot system to a VPI caver, he thought that the connection of

the lower Helical to the D-ring could be a problem because it might result in pulling on the tail of a Bowline knot. Based on observations and field practice, I don't think this is a problem if a Yosemite tie-off is used because it completes the Bowline knot and prevents it from deforming under irregular tension. With respect to the Helical's coils, it doesn't matter which line coming out of the knot you pull as long as the coils are being tensioned from below. This line would only be weighted if your top connection from the harness D-ring to the upper Helical was removed, i.e., the upper rope was cut or the upper knot broke. In a traditional 3-knot system, the removal of the upper connection to the rope would result in doing a heel-hang from the mainline rope. Remember to never push down on a Helical knot from the top of the coils. This will break the knot's grip and cause you to slide down the rope.

I'm not really sure if this knot climbing system is easier than the traditional knot system, but it seems more intuitive and less labor intensive to me. It does have the disadvantage of not being acceptable for vertical competitions at OTR and NSS Convention. For competition purposes, you must use a traditional 3-knot system.

I realize some of this may be difficult to picture without a demonstration. I would be happy to spend some time with anyone who is interested in learning to use this system, including but not limited to, prospective members who need their knots climbing requirement signed off. As with any vertical technique, this method is not set in stone. If you experiment with this knot system and find a way to improve upon it, I would really appreciate any insights you have.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Chris Nicola and Bob Zimmerman, in addition to being the author and editor, respectively, of the original article, are both people whom I've had the good fortune to cave with, survey with, and learn from. After experimenting on my own with the instructions in their original article, I had the chance to talk with each of them about this knot system at different times, which was very helpful.

ENDNOTE

Chris Nicola, who developed this method, named it the UAYCEF System after the Ukrainian American Youth Caver Exchange Foundation (UAYCEF), which he co-founded with Ed Sira and Ukrainian caver Valeriy Rogozhnikov. Chris attributes Bob Zimmerman with first teaching him about knot climbing but stated in the article that the long hours with Valeriy in the deep pits of Crimea are what really honed his vertical skills. Thus, he felt the system should bear the name of the organization they founded. If you'd like to find out more about doing some Ukrainian caving, check out the UAYCEF website listed under references. Chris has tentative plans to lead his ninth caving trip to the Ukraine this August.

This website also has a link to Chris' original knots article. I highly recommend reading the original article, which goes into much greater depth.

REFERENCES

Nicola, C. and Zimmerman, B. (1999). "The 'UAYCEF' Knot System: The 'Knotted Frog'." *Nylon Highway*, 44, 2-7. NSS Vertical Section.

Zimmerman, B. (1993). "The Lightweight Simple Knots System." *Nylon Highway*, 36. NSS Vertical Section.

(Article first appeared in *Met Grotto News*, 42:8. 1992. Metropolitan Grotto.)

URL for UAYCEF Website:

<http://www.uaycef.org>

Cavin' in Kuwait

submitted by Kristen Matak

Pat Smith, a long-time West Virginia caver, was sent to Kuwait as a member of the West Virginia National Guard. This is an excerpt from an email he recently sent to WVACS friends, and I thought it was an interesting caver interest story.

Yes I'm still alive and kickin'! Many thanks to everyone for the mail.... The pictures made me reminisce about the good old days, and vow to partake of much revelry when I get back! If anyone wants to buy me a beer when I return I should be a real cheap drunk by then!

Anyways for the most part we have been working around Camp Doha (oh what a lovely vacation spot....) It's f***in' hot and everything smells really bad... If they had a weather station, that would be the forecast: "Today it will be smelly and damn hot, the extended forecast is smelly and really damn hot with a chance of blowing sand."

I have also had the pleasure of driving around Kuwait some. The freeways here are actually very modern. Kuwait has several different

"road rules." Here are my favorites:

- 1) The fastest car has the right of way.
- 2) Stop signs are suggestions (for real!)
- 3) Avoid women wearing burkas. (They have no side vision whatsoever! Imagine four jumping kids in this car... if one kid pulls on the burka, the veil goes over the eyes... now you have a blind woman driving a big car full of screaming kids at a high rate of speed! Scary!)
- 4) Try to keep the emergency lane clear, but if you do need to stop (to use the restroom, buy a soda, or whatever) feel free to just stop the car in the middle of whatever lane you are in and leave it!

Not much else is new, our camp is crowded, but the accommodations could be a lot worse (sort of like living at WVACS... minus the booze).

So far the only caves I have found here are small 8-10' long very small lizard holes.... I have actually been trying to get back into caving over here.... The attached picture is from one of our searches for the elusive grotto!



Pat Smith hunts for caves in Kuwait. Note the bat sticker and OTR sticker on the vehicle.
Photo by someone in Kuwait.

Club Quotables
submitted by your "friends"

- SL to KF: "Craig is not a good example of a normal person."
- SK to PP: "She'll get her comeuppedies."
- JF at mtng: "I'm all in favor of recruitment, but it's like liquor... get too much of it and it'll kill your ass."
- TC to PP: "Then I went for his leg and got him off again, and he was like, 'Wait a minute!'"
- KF to AS: "Every weekend I spend with Matt makes me sore."
- WO to KD: "You could aim at LePera's nuts all night and not hit them."
- EOM to KE: "Two Halloweens ago was the first time I ever got felt up by a lesbian, and you know, it was okay. It was the Cave Club."
- MH to WO: "Is Eric Stanley still doing the pig?"
WO: "She's not *that* big."
- PB to group: "Now... *this* is how you tie a diaper seat."
ME: "Shouldn't someone your age call it a Depends seat?"
- BA to young members: "Yeah, I was going to get back into cave diving but then I hurt my ankle."
- KD to WO: "We should light some carbide bombs."
C?: "What's the safest way to make one?"
- CB to PB: "I only want intelligent people in my cave. Philip can come."
- NO to crowd: We've got the biggest bush!"
- KF to group: "I don't even know what a child molester looks like."
SL: "Well... you married one."

Quoth the Kirk

by Travis Coad

On a dark and blustery night,
I was startled with such a fright
by a noise outside my window
howling like the wind.

I peered through the shades,
looking with a daze,
to discover it was just a good ole friend.
His name was Kirk,
bright eyed and bushy tailed,
even though it was 3a.m.

He yells, "Hey, lets go caving,
and stop this schoolish slaving,
before we both drive ourselves insane."
The thought of whether or not to go,
didn't take me very slow,
it was like a natural reaction in my brain.
And the thought of more work
just made the night seem so mundane.

I looked into his face
and saw that he was in great haste,
wanting to get to the entrance soon.
He said, "I don't know how long it will last,
but it will be a blast,
I'm hoping to be out of there by noon."
This was a great idea to go caving
under the light of the moon.

So I let the good man in,
he and all his friends,
and asked what cave we were going through.
Clover Hollow was the choice,
by a unanimous voice,
that no one could distinguish who.
This would be great because
it was a cave I hardly knew.

I gathered up my vertical gear,
locked up the rear,
and away to sign out we went.
We pulled up to the cave,
daring each other who would be brave,
enough to go and rig before more time was
spent.
Unfortunately most insisted
on staying in front of the heater vent.

We finally got the entrance rigged,
without dropping a twig,
into the pit that lay beneath.
The rest of the caving crew
didn't have a clue,
that the rope was ready
and hanging the 70 feet.
Good grief.

We all rappelled down,
some of us in leaps and bounds,
till we hit the floor of rock.
Some had never done this cave before,
it was like opening a new door,
and they were in for a good shock.
Even after all this
there was still plenty time on the clock.

We dropped the nuisance pits,
then did the sits,
till the canyon drop was rigged.
Most of the people were wired,
fortunately not very tired,
and starting to realize how dangerous the
gig.
To ease our minds
we started talking about roasted pig.

Down the pit we go, not moving slow.
Trying to make it every where we can.
Down the Dragon's Tail,
to the gypsum flowers "never fail!"
even to the library stand.
Then back to the above ground land.

The trip was quite a few hours,
yet no one was very sour.
We even got out by the mid of day.
No one complained
as a few cold beverages got drained
as we made it back to town
perfectly ok.

Then we did a different trip the next day.



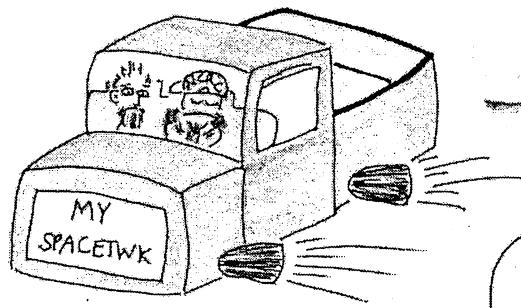
Vincent Van Gogh's rendition of a Flying Fox.
Submitted by Andy Yeagle.

Steve's in Space

When last we saw our heroes
they were preparing to bolt their
way out of the black hole....

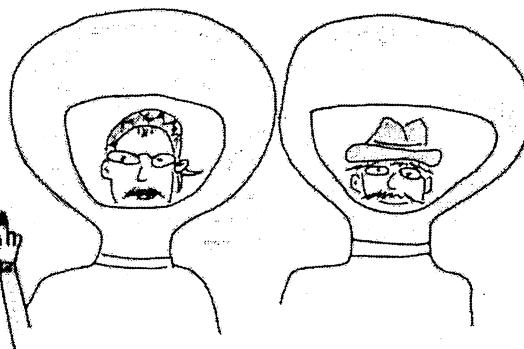


Steve: Hey look, it's Brad and Joe
Anti-5: You guys want to climb with us?



Joe: Dangole blackhole climb dangole - yeah -
dangole Brad dang Wakeup ...

Brad: (yawn) I was going to get back into black hole
bolting but I hurt my toe... yawn... and my
— hurts.

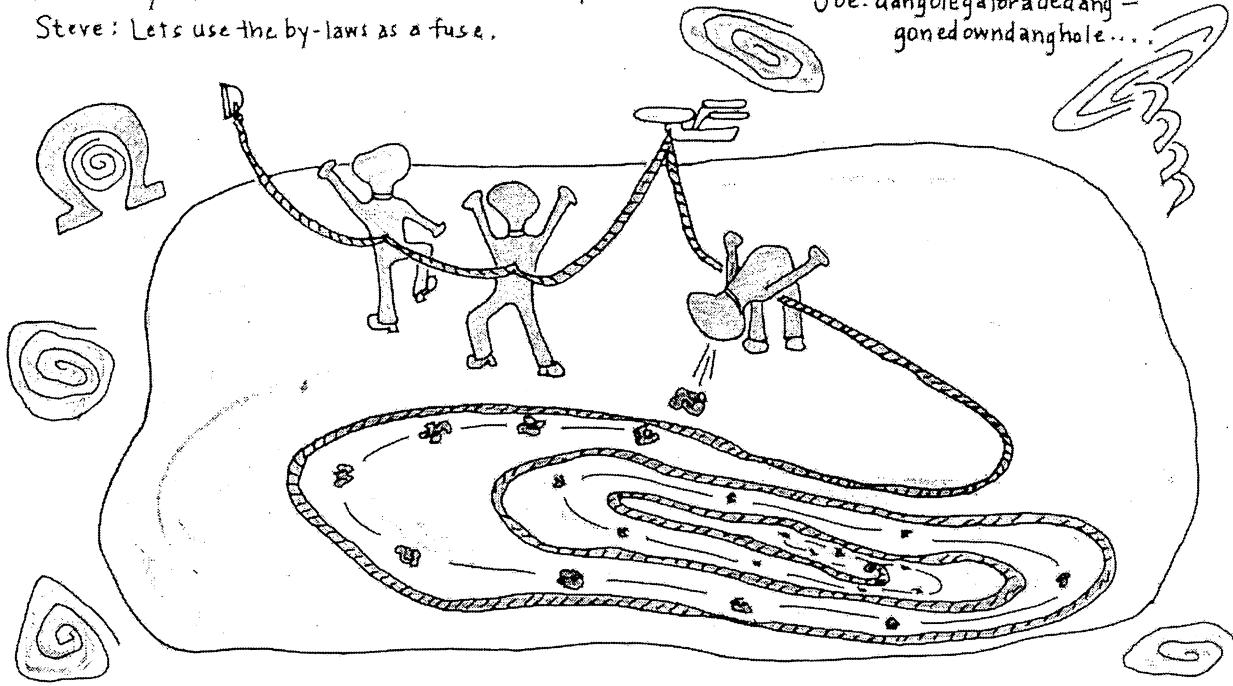


Steve: Wow - 227 light years. That makes this the deepest black hole in the galaxy!

Anti-S: Yes, too bad we have to blow it up.

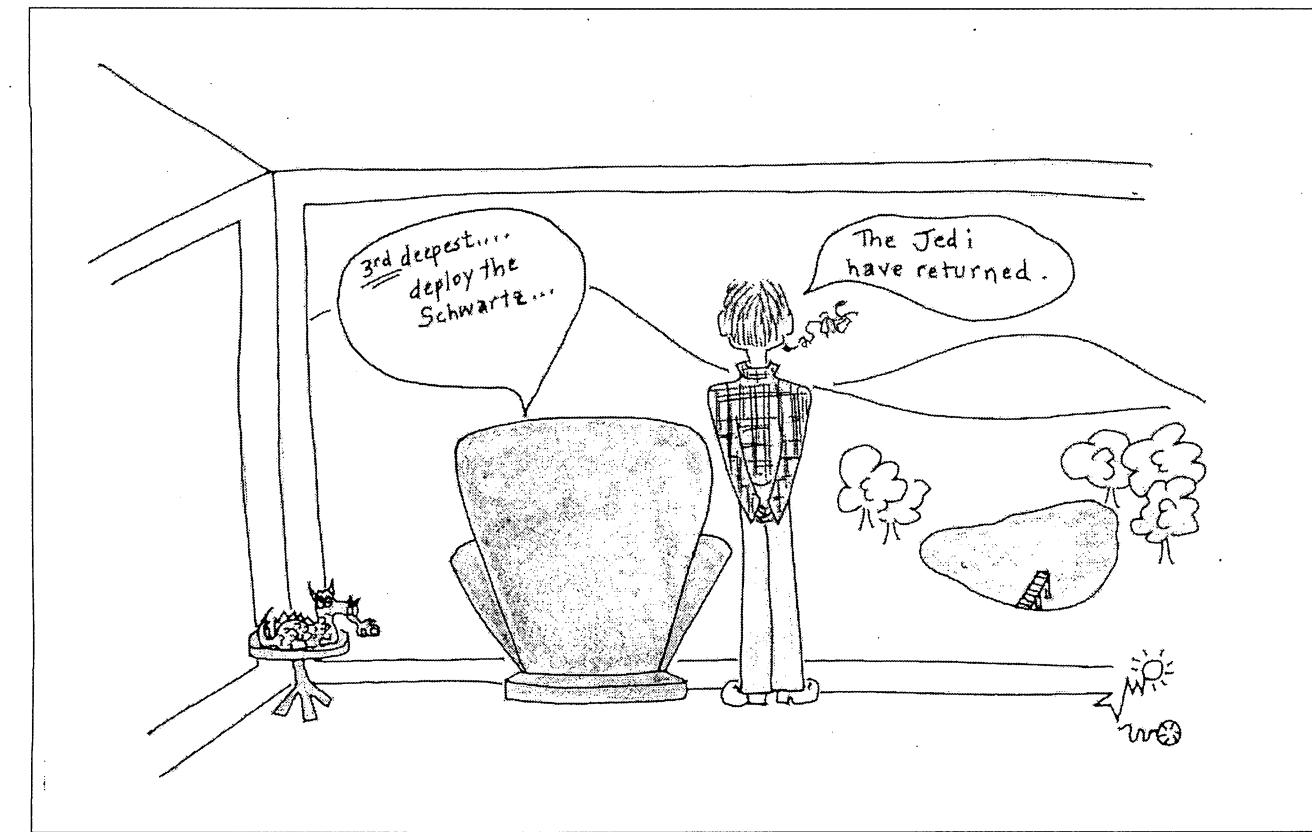
Steve: Let's use the by-laws as a fuse.

Joe: dangolegatoradedang -
gonedowndanghole....



3rd deepest...
deploy the
Schwartz...

The Jedi
have returned.



Neel Sinkhole Clean-up Project

by Joey Fagan, Conservation Committee Chairman

On Saturday, September 22, 2001, members of the VPI Cave Club along with personnel from the Giles County Public Service Authority and the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation Division of Natural Heritage cleaned out a sinkhole located on property owned by the Kenneth Neel family.

The sinkhole was used as a dump by previous landowners for many years. Former occupants of a house trailer located next to the sinkhole almost certainly "straight piped" their sewage and wastewater to the sinkhole and into the karst aquifer below. Cleaning the trash from the sinkhole will serve to improve the groundwater quality for many of the area's residents who depend on springs or wells for their domestic water supply. It is possible the drainage from the sinkhole on the Neel property makes up part of the calcium carbonate-rich water flow emerging from a spring on Sinking Creek known for its travertine deposits. It was hoped excavation work performed to remove debris from the site would uncover a cave entrance, but no opening was found.



What a mess! The sinkhole at the beginning of the day.
Photo by Joey Fagan.

The bulk of the debris removal was performed by a backhoe provided by the citizens of Giles County. A grant from the Cave Conservancy of the Virginias provided funds for removal and proper disposal of the sinkhole debris at the regional landfill as well as purchase of erosion

control supplies and seed for groundcover. Twenty-five VPI cavers provided considerable help in moving equipment and sorting recyclable material. In all, three "roll off" boxes full of material were removed from the sinkhole along with the old mobile home. Jay Williams, Vice Chairman of the Giles County Board of Supervisors, attended the clean-up to personally express the gratitude of the board for the cooperation and work by the Cave Club on this worthwhile karst protection project.

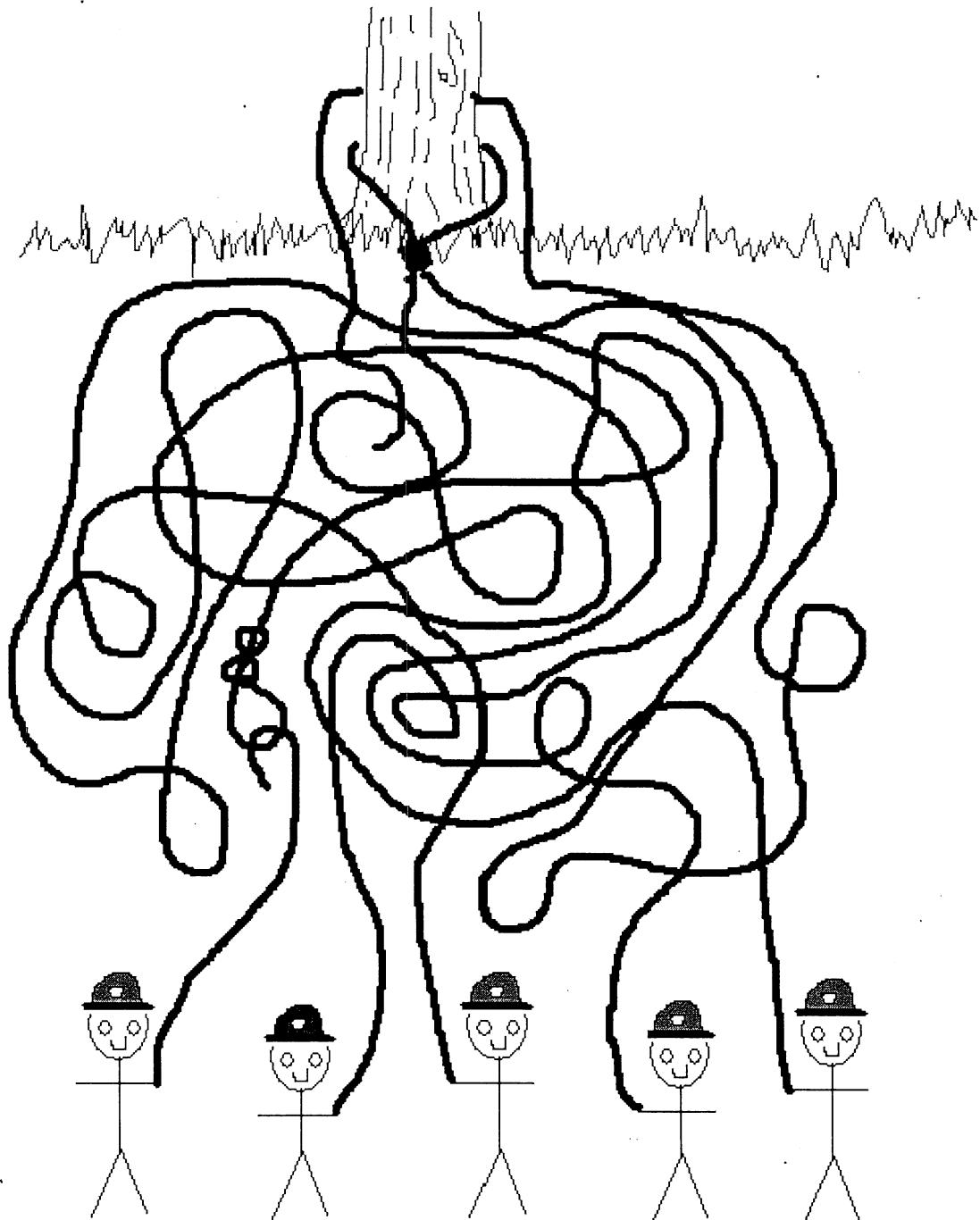
People participating in the Neel Sinkhole Clean-up include:

Philip Balister	Eileen O'Malley
Carrie Blankenship	Naomi Orndorff
Matt Burnett	TJ Orndorff
Michael Cole	Wil Orndorff
David Dent	Zenah Orndorff
Mark Eisenbies	Mike Porterfield
Brian Ekey	Sandy Ramsey
Joey Fagan	Kevin Rock
Chris Hibshman	Ray Sira
Mike Horne	Eric Stanley
Sandy Knapp	Gary Tickle
Steve LePera	Sandy Warner
Richard Long	Steve Wells
Dana Martin	George Williams
Chip Mullins	Jay Williams
Madge Neal	Andy Yeagle
Scott Neal	someone with illegible handwriting

URL of The Cave Conservancy of the Virginias
<http://members.aol.com/caveconser>

Who has the Rigged Rope?

by Katherine Ferguson



Uh-oh. Someone tossed some spaghetti down the pit. Which caver has the rigged rope?

The Strainer: A Tale from Last Year's Float Trip

by Laine Buckwalter

Although I didn't know it at the time, according to Mike Mike Mike [Horne] later, the river was 6-8 feet above flood level, and 6 degrees warmer than the water the Titanic went down in. I did know I'd never been on the river when it was flowing that fast. But a blue sky was sporting white puffy cumulous of fair weather, all the more beautiful because a rainy day had been predicted. Charlie Mullins, a VA State Police Sergeant who was there discouraging the trip, seemed overcautious. It was his day off, he was going to a family barbecue, and he didn't want to get called out. He also very definitely "did not want to put a boat into that water." Pooh, pooh. His fears were unjustified. I knew we wouldn't need him on such a beautiful day.

Our raft, three plyboards wide, was shored with two underlayers of truck inner tubes and stabilized by a fourth plyboard lying lengthwise across the three. The inner tubes and the plyboard were bound with twine. It was a sloppy job; excess twine trailed in all directions. Later, it would almost cost me my life.

We were reveling in excess paraphernalia. We had a construction spool for a table, food and drink in coolers, four poles and a mast with pink flagging tape. I was geared in my usual yearly raft mode: bikini, shorts, a big shirt and a backpack with a large, ugly wool sweater in a plastic bag.

I also had a purple floating tube, a long piece of foam bedding to lounge on, a big straw hat that had seen many floats and looked it, and a life jacket.

We put in and immediately shot downstream. Ed Day had brought his friends Jack and Baxter for their first float trip. Dale Novotny and I completed the party.

The guys poled madly to avoid the bridging, and from there it was smooth, wide and fast. I lounged on the foam while Dale rubbed my shoulders and Jack rubbed my feet. The sweet little breeze was better than a palm fan. I thought perhaps someone would feed me

grapes soon. It really didn't get any better than this.

Aaaahhhhhhhh. Heaven....

UH-OOOOOOHHHHHH! A submerged forest stood dead ahead. To the left was a wide, clear expanse of the river, and to the right, an equally wide expanse. DOH! The narrow forest was spang in the middle of the river, and we were headed straight into it like silly cartoon characters.

"Guys!" I shouted, "Pick a side!" There was some quick and ferocious poling that had all the effect of rowing with a toothpick. A crash imminent, we hunkered down and braced. I grabbed my life jacket.

WHAM! We lodged in the forest with astonishing force. Dale toppled over backwards off the rear deck and went under the corner of the raft. I tracked his progress through the boiling water. He swept out from under the raft, wedged between two trees, and managed to surface his head. A huge rooster tail swooshed over his face. He clearly had made no improvement in his ability to breathe. Finally he grabbed the side of the raft and we dragged him aboard. "It was unfortunate," gasped Dale, "that I had just breathed out when that happened." Dale had lost a favorite hat, his glasses, and one deck shoe, and his visual range was reduced to an impractical distance. He was now more vulnerable.

And we'd had a yard sale. My purple tube and the foam pad were almost out of sight already, bobbing down river with impressive speed along with a thermos, the remains of my straw hat, and at least one of our poles.

But we were fine. We were in the shade, we were warm and dry for the most part, we had water, and Dale put some chicken in my backpack "for safekeeping." I wondered mildly why my backpack was safer than a cooler, and what was that important about chicken. Whatever, it made Dale happy. Fine. My eyes would be opened later.

Dale and I concurred; we should wait for rescue. Baxter, Ed, and Jack set about determining the points of contact and rocking the raft in an effort to dislodge it. Straight down river, sycamore trees choked our way. We were caught in a strainer. Behind us the river pinned our craft tightly into the trees. Two pleasant hours passed and we were wedged more, not less.

Ed was restless. It was his raft anyway, and he had an idea. Why didn't we just cut off the back deck, reducing the raft by a third, and perhaps we could squeeze between the trees and be free. Dale and I still thought we should wait for rescue, but Ed wore us down. We scooted to the front of the raft and Ed removed the top stabilizing board. The raft instantly destabilized and began to flex. We renewed our rocking efforts but remained stuck, so Ed squatted beside the rear deck and cut again.

Flop! Just that quickly, the raft – and ourselves – reconfigured. The rear deck went free, the middle deck dropped into a neat right angle to the last remaining deck, and my end of that last deck went skyward at a 40 degree angle. Wow, I was Queen of a Bent Plyboard. Ed sat on the downward end, his butt dipping slightly into the water. Dale was parked in the middle like the perfect bowl of porridge, not too hot and not too cold. Jack was in a tree, and Baxter was heading downstream with another yard sale.

This one was more like a neighborhood yard sale. It included our spool table and everything tied to it. Baxter snagged a post and lunged for the spool.

Miraculously, he caught it. He worked in the cold water for a long time, fighting the current to secure all our stuff. I begged him to leave it and get back on board before he went hypothermic, but he sort of pretended not to hear me. Finally I realized that it was impossible for him to re-trace even one step against the current. We tossed him some inner tubes and he disappeared quickly.

We were no longer warm, dry and safe. It seems ludicrous that we compromised the situation further. We were not particularly comfortable, but we weren't drowning, either. The advantage should have been clear.

The second deck was still folded in a right angle causing turbulence and was apparently the cause of our last remaining plyboard half high and half low. When Ed proposed cutting the second deck free, we all imagined it dropping neatly away, leveling our perch. We would be much more comfortable sitting on a level plyboard and maybe Jack could come down out of his tree.

Why did we think we could predict the action of some boards pinned by a river? Our whole situation was a demonstration of evidence to the contrary. We had already seen Dale's helplessness overboard; we had already felt a demonstration of the force and its unpredictability... not once, but twice.

The madness of it struck me along with the certain knowledge I would be much better off in the tree with Jack during this experiment. Quick on the heels of that realization came an oppressive feeling of regret that I hadn't been paying attention to my surroundings at a critical and irrevocable time, and that it was too late. I reached for a branch I would never touch.

The water was shocking, shocking! Gasping, fighting debris, fury drove me. Fury at our stupidity, my inattention, all the little missteps that culminated in my launching like a rock in a slingshot from high and dry and safe to low and small and downstream of the mess of our raft. What was left of it rode high as it came apart and swept toward me. Twine was everywhere and it was bound around my right ankle. This is the part where I probably would have drowned struggling to both stay afloat and free myself. I could almost taste my anger at it all coming down to this, drowning on float trip on a beautiful day due to massive group stupidity. Horrible pictures and words flashed through my mind of being dragged underwater and pinned, and dragged while I drowned.

"Have you heard the news?"

"Laine drowned on Float Trip!"

"Oh, my God!"

"I knew we would lose someone, it was just a matter of time."

"I knew it too, I just knew it. I've said it more

than once."

"Oh, my God!"

But I was wearing a life jacket, one of the two life jackets I saw that day. My heroic orange and purple life jacket held me up while I dragged the twine from my legs with both hands. Free, I began turning to face downstream to see what I was heading toward.

I hit the tree as I turned, a sycamore with the circumference of a dinner plate. I hit it hard, on the left side of my chest, and stuck. The river nailed me like crucifixion to that tree. I gulped down several big mouthfuls of water, wondering why I was drinking. I wasn't thirsty.

Then the river fought itself, vying to pin me there while washing me down river. Slowly, with great pressure, it scraped me around the side of the tree until the downstream force ripped me loose. The feeling was similar to that moment between losing control of a car and wrecking it. I saw an inner tube about ten feet away and swam hard toward it.

If I had managed to escape the twine without my life jacket, I surely would have lost the battle at the sycamore. Especially since I would have been pinned lower in the water. My life jacket protected my chest on the impact but it almost knocked the breath out of me even with the padding. It's unlikely I could have caught up with the inner tube after the encounter. I caught the inner tube and looped my left arm through the hole.

Curiously, my backpack was floating on my right arm. Even with the life jacket, I was quite low in the water. I grabbed someone's very nice cave pack as it went by. I now had to choose my side of the river. The left was closer, but equidistant on the right I saw Ed, Dale and Jack perched on a conglomerate of inner tubes. Jack had opted to leave his tree rather than be left alone.

I opted to head left for land as quickly as possible. I had no idea what kind of situation we were heading into. Far ahead was a point where the river hooked left and out of sight. I intended to make land before that point. If I could.

Like a cheap appliance, I have two speeds: "on" and "off." The "off" speed is unpredictable. The extra struggle of salvaging the blue cave pack could easily sap strength I might need. My backpack still had flotation, mysteriously, even with the big wool sweater and bottled water and chicken inside. I thought I could tow the cave pack to land, but land wasn't near and the inner tube, the backpacks and I were simply rocketing toward the unknown. It wasn't worth the risk. With great reluctance and cursing apologies to its owner, I let go of the cave pack and it quickly went down.

I was strangely small and light now. The feeling was faintly familiar... it was like almost being out of body - like the summer I lost too much weight but enjoyed a lightness that made me feel pleasantly as though the wind could blow me away, dancing like a leaf. It was how I had imagined being an ant in a bathtub would feel like, perhaps as a child watching an ant floating on tempestuous, child-generated seas. Or a leaf, or a water bug denting the aquatic tension. I was exhausted by my sprint for the inner tube, by the suddenness of my plunge into Hell. I was terrified I would strike underwater rocks and be torn apart, and at that speed, life jacket or no, it was eventually a sure thing. For awhile, though, I could do nothing but cling to the inner tube and backpack, catch my breath and ride downstream.

Water Dave's (David Parks) advice for escaping turbulent streams entered my head. The trick was swimming upstream at a 45 degree angle from land. At the time, it had seemed horribly counter-intuitive and dubious. Now I was ecstatic to put all my trust in Dave, and have a formula. I managed to haul myself on top of the inner tube and could immediately see much better than from my low-water position. I remember thinking, "All right. Now I have a chance."

Some time later I made shore with the help of a fallen tree reaching into the water. It was the type of place I normally would have avoided as "snakey" but at this time it was a great help as the current was just as high and fast along the land. I gave a few shouts to scare off any of the armless legless critters. My Dad had taught me

they didn't want to be around me any more than I wanted to be around them. I also shouted and waved so the faraway guys could see I was ok. "I--HAVE--CHICKEN," I yelled.

Down the railroad track in the middle of Lonelyville I plodded. I felt I could handle anything that came my way - spending the night in the woods, fighting homeless men, murderers, ghosts, whatever. It was all so easy next to trying not to drown. Every time I came to a railroad outbuilding I wrote my name with coal, the day, the time and an arrow pointing the way I was going. Eventually I stopped to rest on a large boulder and solved the mystery of the floating backpack. Dale's chicken was in ziplock bags. Lots and lots of ziplock bags, all full of air!

I heard the freight train coming as I uncouthly gobbled chicken. Good. I would wave at the engineer. Not an Emergency Life or Death Help wave, but not quite a Friendly-Howdy wave either. What I needed was the kind of wave that said, "do notice I probably shouldn't be out here alone in my bikini, and mention it to some official preferably soon." I waved a chicken leg at the approaching train. The sun was on its front window and I couldn't see the engineer. As the train pulled past I looked directly into the cabin. In silhouette, the engineer was intently reading a book. I shouted meekly and he dropped the book. I waved the chicken leg again, and he leaned out of the window, shouted something back at me and pointed down the tracks in the direction I was going. I took that to mean, "There are people coming that way looking for you." It turned out to mean, "I am stopping the train and you can talk to the man in the caboose." Never underestimate the power of a chicken leg.

So now I was in Heaven again. Standing on the back porch of the caboose, high above the sparkling river with a sweet breeze in my face. Golden sunlight sifting through gorgeous green leaves, on one of those absolutely perfect days. The train backed up, generously carrying me toward the take-out point. Eventually we met up with the hapless sergeant in his white truck, on his day off and not at his family barbecue. I was transferred from the train to the sergeant, and the train reversed directions and chugged

off. I felt bad the engineer hadn't gotten to eat any of the chicken.

I was the first of our group to arrive back at the take-out, hours behind everyone else. I started to feel pretty bad as the day caught up with me. My aching legs were horrendously bruised from the sycamore. It wasn't too long before Jack, Ed and Dale arrived but it was hours until we found Baxter. He had last been seen going underwater at the head of an island. It turned out that he was diving to avoid a tree limb. Then our mast came along and fortuitously speared right through his inner tube hole and made itself useful as a rudder. When he made land at a steep little cliff, it served as a ladder. Baxter had his own set of adventures but they will have to wait for another day. Baxter's a class act, and he sent a case of steaks to the ranger who had to leave his family barbecue and "put his boat into that water" to look for him. Cave Club people at the take-out were very caring, wrapping us up in blankets and dosing us with wine for medicinal purposes. We were all worried about Baxter and so glad to find out later that he was ok.

And the Moral of the Story... don't make this the year we have your funeral!

On hearing my tale, almost everyone I spoke with reacted with some variation of how fortunate it was that I happened to be wearing my life jacket. It wasn't fortune. I happened to be wearing my life jacket because I happen to always wear it on the river as a matter of policy. Even at normal levels, it's a particularly dangerous river. Because of its age, it is notoriously unpredictable in currents, depths, and rock ledges. When things go bad on the river, they tend to go WAY bad, WAY fast. You can be Mark Spitz and still not swim well if drunk, stoned, hit on the head, hit in the chest, tangled in twine, or any number of other pesky little problems.

Today's life jackets are very comfortable and not restrictive like the old ones. Hint, hint. I am beating a dead horse here. I am not writing this story on my day off for my health. Please have fun on float trip this year. And please be careful. Respect the river. Drowning probably sucks even more than almost drowning.

From the Signout
compiled by Steve Wells and Matt Burnett

VPI cavers and their guests logged in 1162.5 caver hours from 2/02/02 to 4/15/02.

2/2/02	Giant Caverns	Chris McClaning, Matt Stec, Andy Yeagle	Chrissy and Stec CAVING
2/9/02	Links	Kevin Rock, Bob Fisker, Del Moche, Derry Moore, Chris Greenway, Robert Mitchell, Brian Levay, John Deighan	John never found his other trip
2/9/02	Philip's Secret Cave	Steve Wells, Philip Balister	2 shots = 105 ft, Guido is a dumbass
2/16/02	Tawney's	Aaron Thomas, Kevin Rock, Marie Gestole, 25 TT'C people	- I've been straddling rocks all day. - Do you know what my last name is? - No, what? - Rock :)
2/17/02	Elvis Grotto # 1 surface	Steve Wells, Scott Rapier, Steve Lepera, Eileen O'Malley	Despite Sandy watching 12 hours of plastic surgery on TV last sunday, she wasn't above ground to repair my burst digit.
2/23/02	Smokehole	Chip Mullins, Matt Rotugom, Jennifer Burnwell, Hunter Dasch, Chris Emery	Frat Boys go caving and there's a half naked chick in the car.
2/25/02	Clover Hollow	Kirk Digby, Pam Mohr, Zenah Orndorff	It's better with a trainee!
3/2/02	Elvis Grotto # 1	Philip Balister, Steve Wells, Kevin Rock, Craig Ferguson, Guido Garguilo, Sam Lambert, Carrie Blankenship	50% attrition. Philip sucks as a motivator
3/3/02	Smokehole	Matthew Burnett, Matt Stec	I had nerd cavers in front of me and stec behind me - I was screwed
3/6/02	TAG	Jeff Leach, Kirk Digby, Amanda Stiles, Travis Coad, Aaron Thomas	Nice going fucker!! You missed our turn!!
3/16/02	Clover Hollow (Andrew's Drop)	Jeffrey Leach, Ray Sira, Jeralin Molinaro	Jeralin did not sleep with 9 guys at once
3/16/02	Skunk Hollow and/or Barker's Cave	Craig Ferguson, Katherine Ferguson	Skunk Hollow: 1st cavers to see entrance in 20 + years. Barker's: Re-secured landowner relations - WE HAVE PERMISSION
3/30/02	Links then Smokehole	Steve Wells, Eileen O'Malley, Chris Michie, Steve LePera, T.J. Kilekenny III, David Bramlett	Ringworm must make you stupid, we have multiple lamp burns to prove it.
3/30/02	Starnes	Matthew Burnett, Joey Fagan, Doug Perkins and "a cast of hundreds" and National Geographic	Over 9 hours in "The dark heart of Virginia" and I did not see all of the tourist loop.
4/6/02	Elvis Grotto # 1	Sandy Knapp, Penelope Pooler, Eileen O'Malley	Fuckity Fuck Fuck Fuck Fucking Mud!!!! - EOM

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