

# The Tech Troglodyte

Spring '00

# The Tech Troglyte

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

### Spring Semester 2000 New Officers:

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Artwork by Beth Geiger.

## Potholing with the M.N.R.C.

by Walt Pirie

MNRC, you ask? Yep, that's the official name of the British caving club that visited us, summer of '97. It stands for the Mendip Nature Research Committee. A pretty awesome name for a caving club, but then it's England. Besides, the club was founded in 1906 and in the early days, caving was just one of its major interests. The MNRC is located in the Mendip Hills in Southwest England, one of the three major caving areas in England. I've been caving there several times now, and I thought I'd try to give a brief impression of Mendip caving. Before my first trip, in December, 1995, I admit to being quite leery of caving in England. All I had heard indicated they were small, wet, cold, flood-prone, dangerous, and very difficult. And the only visual impression I had was from the Sid Perou film of Otter Hole, parts of which would be enough to make me give up caving. But I still wanted to give it a try. That became possible when I hooked up on the internet with Denzil Brown, one of the blokes who was here in '97. He invited me over that first year, and off I went. Well, caving aside, I had a great time on that trip. In true caver fashion we partied, pub-hopped, ate like a SIVTAC food orgy, hiked, and in general I had a ball. I also learned that funky nicknames are not unique to the VPI club. Members of the MNRC go by such monikers as "Mushroom," "Droid," "Womble," and so on. Is it any wonder we've gotten along with them so well?

The caving was great too, and not nearly as forbidding as I had originally feared. I caved mostly with Denzil, Tony Littler, Angus (Dave Bell), and Tufty (Dave Tuffery), all of whom were on the trip over here a year and a half later. Before I could go caving, I had to buy some caving gear, as mine had been stolen in a London train station on the way to the club. In the nearby small city of Wells, Somerset, a caver by the name of Tony Jarrett (J-rat) runs what I think is the only caving vendor in the world set up in a regular store in the downtown shopping area. The shop is called Bat Products. The club was able to lend me most of what I needed, but at Bat Products I purchased two things which are standard caving clothing in England and different from what most U.S. cavers use. The first was rubber boots, which they call "Wellies," short for Wellingtons. A few U.S. cavers use them and although their traction isn't the greatest, they are really nice in wet caves. The other was a "furry suit," which I've never seen in the U.S. It's a one-

piece long-john made of thick, piled material for wearing under coveralls, and is pretty standard in England. They tend to be a bit warm for me, but again, helpful in wet caves.

In the Mendips, my first cave was White Pit. This cave was discovered only around 1990. The passage is kind of small, and the cave is a bit muddy but not what I would call wet. It has some small, very pretty white formation areas, and overall it was a pleasant, fairly easy trip. The biggest surprise was that the temperature in Mendip caves is about the same as in Virginia: in the low 50's. By the way, a second myth about British caving was dispelled on that and subsequent visits. I have never heard a member of the MNRC refer to caving as potholing.

The second trip that first year was to Swildon's Swallott, the longest cave in the Mendips, at just under 6 miles. This cave was quite different, involving a lot of moderate breakdown climbing. It was mostly clean, bare limestone and quite wet, but not enough to be unpleasant. The entrance series was mostly a breakdown crawl and climb-down ending with a cable ladder. As I was climbing down the ladder through a very light waterfall, the light seemed to be playing tricks on me in the spray. When I got to the bottom I found out why. I looked to my left and there was a Christmas tree, complete with blinking colored lights. I think they were operated with a motion sensor. Apparently it's traditional for some group to pull a prank like that in Swildon's at Christmas. How they ever got it through the entrance series I'll always wonder. No one with me knew which group had done it. We then climbed and crawled down to the stream level at Sump 1. Sumps are a common feature in the lower levels of Mendip caves and I think there are 9 just in Swildon's. Some are quite short and free-diveable, but we didn't attempt that on this trip. That's something I'd like to try on a future trip.

So far I've done eight caves in the Mendips and the most spectacular was in March of this year (2000). In late 1999 a cave called Withy Hill was re-opened after being closed for over twenty years. It had been owned by a quarry and no access was permitted. Like a few sensitive caves there, a trip must be arranged with and led by an approved leader. In this cave, the leader limits the party to three cavers in addition to himself, because of the delicate nature of the cave.

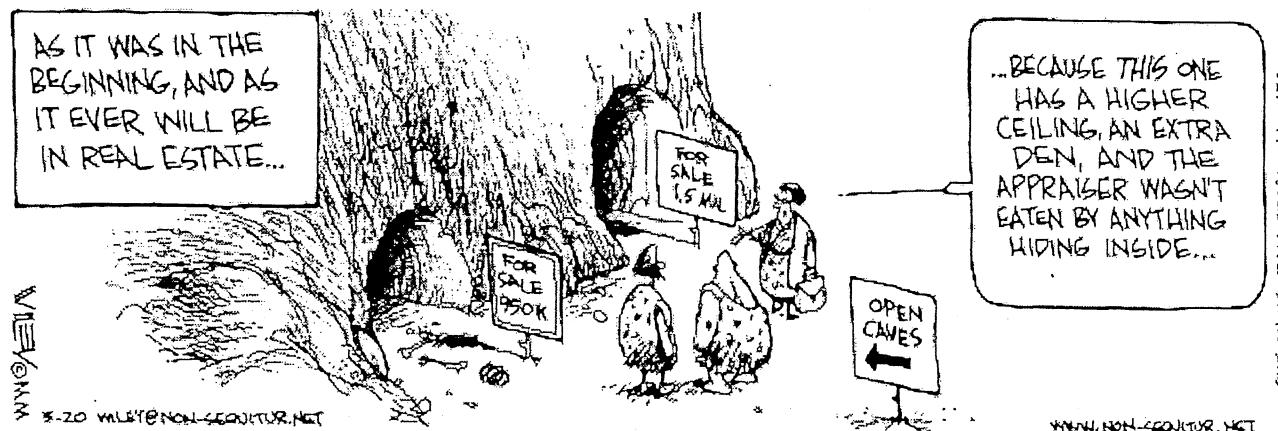
The group consisted of Tony, Val and myself and I felt privileged that Tony had arranged a trip for my visit. Withy Hill is one of the two or three most highly decorated caves I've ever seen, beautiful white and yellow formations everywhere, and at the end of the main passage, a small grotto that was breathtaking, with a deep green rimstone pool, festooned with white and transparent flowstone and stalactites. The closest I can come in comparison is that it's like the Queen's Bath in Pig Hole on steroids. Because of the long closure and the controlled access, the cave is mostly in pristine condition. Many caves in the Mendips are gated, and the local caving clubs have keys. Frequently they are in sinkholes in farm fields, just like in Virginia. One thing notable is that I've never seen graffiti or trash in a British cave.

Outside of the Mendips, I've been to one cave in South Wales, Ogof Ffynnon Ddu II (that translates to Black Spring Cave II). South Wales caves typically have big booming passages, like some in Monroe and Greenbrier counties, W.V. They are very different than Mendip caves, and very impressive. The third major caving region in the U.K. is the Yorkshire

Dales in Northern England. I haven't been there yet, but my impression is that the Dales are the TAG of England, with world-famous vertical caves. As is true in continental Europe, vertical caving in England relies heavily on rebelay and smaller diameter rope. Tony jokingly refers to that system as SRT (single rope technique) and our style as SRD (sling the rope down).

Caving in the U.K. has been a very enjoyable experience, both with the opportunity to experience great caving in another part of the world, and with the incredibly welcoming hospitality I've received from the MNRC. In addition to Lynn and myself, they have also hosted Amy Johnson on a trip a couple of years ago, and would likely do the same for other VPI cavers.

Seven MNRC members are coming to Convention this summer at the OTR site and then spending the following week in Blacksburg. I hope many of us will take that opportunity to renew old friendships or to meet them for the first time.



## Hoo-Ah Murder Hole! Wait a minute - This is Clover Hollow!

by Beth Geiger

It was a dark and stormy night, the air was deathly still and the sky was black. Well actually it wasn't but it could have been. I was in the process of building a frog climbing system and was very anxious for a good vertical trip. It was Friday night so I went to the club meeting where a trip was planned for Murder Hole on Saturday. The trip members were to be Kirk Digby, Ray Sira and Dave Colatosti. Also going on the trip were three new trainees who had not yet been vertical caving. After instructing the new trainees on what to buy for the next day's trip (knots and webbing) we agreed on a time and a place to meet in the morning. Meanwhile Dave C. was busy changing his mind about going on our trip and trying to get on Steve and Steve's DMC trip (which he didn't go on either). That night at the Speleo-Seminar the three new trainees showed up with their knots and participated in the first ever (and last) "Beth's vertical session" where they cut their knots to the appropriate length. (Why I was even involved in that is beyond me). Any way, after a pretty good speleo sem, I decided that since I had not actually yet built my frog but only just had the pieces, I should go do some work. So after saying goodbye to everyone, including Sandy Ramsey who really wanted me to go look at the stars or something with her even though she knows I'm not that way, I drove back to the house with Kirk, who also happens to be my roommate, to work on my vertical gear. Not long after we got back, Joe Thompson showed up to help. So never mind the fact that I didn't fully understand the mechanics of the climbing system I was building, I had Kirk and Joe to help me. Soon enough though, both Kirk and Joe passed out on the couch. Whenever I had a question or a concern I had to wake one up and listen to a bunch of crap just to get a yes or no. Every now and then Kirk would regain consciousness and check what I was doing so I of course felt very confident in my work. By this time it was getting pretty early in the morning and we were scheduled to pick the three new trainees up at some ridiculous hour like 9 or something.

After a very restful 4 hours of sleep, I reluctantly got up and woke Kirk to go get the new trainees. Meanwhile, I gathered up my gear and prepared for my long awaited trip to Murder Hole. Finally after screwing around at the house for about an hour, we were signed out and ready to go meet Ray.

Soon we were on our way to Murder Hole, which is

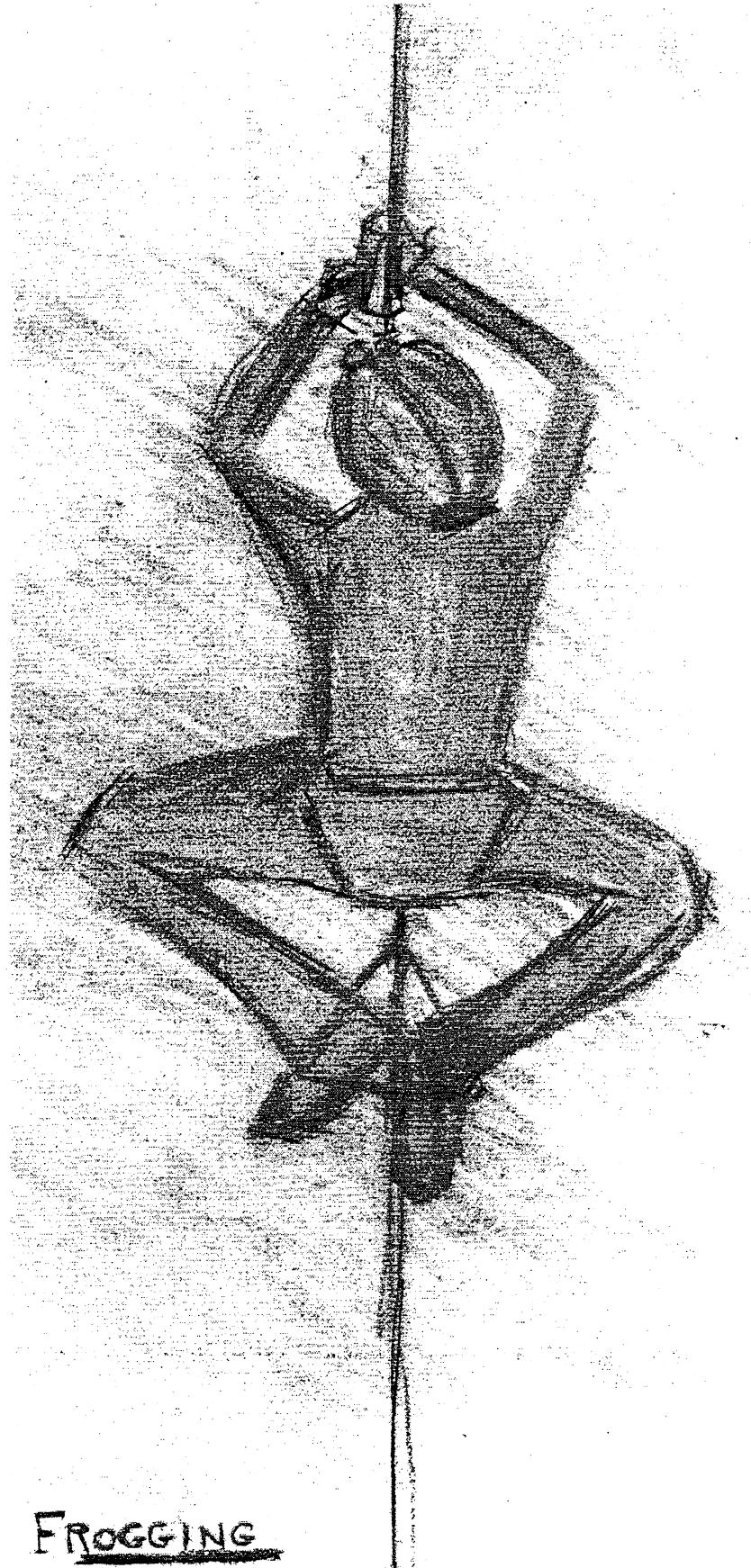
maybe an hour away. It was a rather pleasant day so it could have been a really nice drive- except Kirk was in the car. By the time we were halfway to the cave I was ready to KILL Kirk. I don't think it is possible for anyone to be more annoying than he was that day. Eventually, though we all (even Kirk) made it to the Sizer's (owners of Murder Hole) where we went up to the house to ask permission to cave that day. Well after milling around the place for a bit and knocking on the door quite a few times we realized that no one was home and we would have to take our cave trip elsewhere. It was decided that we would drive back to Ray's and from there we would construct a Plan B. Everyone agreed that the day should definitely not be wasted, so instead of Murder Hole we would have our fun in Clover Hollow (oh joy). We called back to town and got Steve Wells to change our sign out to Clover Hollow and once again set out for a cave trip.

Well it was a nice trip but lasted ten hours (could these trainees possibly climb ANY slower). We went down to the Gypsum flowers -which I of course had to go down and see again (they are just too beautiful to pass by). Then we laughed when one of the trainees Jason Obenschain spent almost ten minutes looking for the flowers and still didn't see them. Soon we were on our way out of the cave. The Canyon Section was double rigged so I climbed first with Ray and then waited at the top for the rest.

Kirk stayed at the bottom to check everyone's knots. When Kirk finally got on rope and started climbing, he was climbing next to the trainee Jason. However, when he reached almost the top of the canyon, he dropped his carbide light and had to do a changeover and go back down and get it. Then as he was ascending again, he got about part way up the rope and dropped his carbide light AGAIN. What was really funny is that after all that screwing around, he still got to the top of the canyon before Jason.

I suppose it was about this time that Kirk became incapacitated due to the overwhelming pain of a tooth-ache he had been dealing with for about a week. Soon it was clear that my status on the trip as the "trainee with a clue" was going to be put to the test. I was deemed de-rigging trainee and helped get the others on rope at the flowstone nuisance drop and got them off-rope at the next drop. It was also around this time that it was decided that I really suck at coiling rope

(the 300 used to double rig the canyon looked a little less than ugly). However, I am sure that I will get lots more practice honing this skill. Anyway, we all finally made it to the entrance where we shuddered to think of how cold it was up there. Kirk climbed rope first and I eagerly went second. I tried to climb fast so I could build up some body heat so maybe it wouldn't feel so cold at the top. By the time I was up, Kirk was feeling better, so I made my way to the car and got the heat cranking while I changed. It was very cold while we waited for what seemed like ALL NIGHT for everyone to climb out. Finally we got the rope de-rigged and all the gear loaded into the car. Then we came back to Blacksburg, and I slept for a long time.



Artwork by Beth Geiger.

## Expedition to the Caves of Gold

by Carl Bern

Jim Wilson mentioned the trip to Spanish at the very first Colorado Grotto meeting I attended. The area intrigued me immediately. Jim described the caves as wet, 33°F, with plenty of ropework and exposed climbs. What makes the trip a true expedition experience is the fact that one must backpack into the area and camp to access the caves. I chatted with Jim during the break between the program and business portions of the meeting and decided that I had to join this year's trip.

That was in February. This August I found myself cursing in Thursday morning rush-hour traffic on Interstate 25 in Denver. I had a backpack crammed with gear and a sack lunch in the back seat and only ten minutes to get to the other side of town. When I arrived at Skip Withrow's house half an hour late I apologized profusely. Not all cavers run on caver time. Even Dan Sadler, who had worked until four that morning, had arrived on schedule. I chuckle my gear in Skip's Truck and the four of us were off.

Three hours later we pulled into a dirt parking lot where we met Dennis Laird. Dennis was the only person in the group with whom I had been caving before. From there we drove up an extremely rough dirt road to the trailhead. Here we ate our lunch and then saddled ourselves with our gigantic backpacks. We spent all of a quarter mile hiking on an established trail. Then Jim led us onto a hunter path that led steeply up a ridge. We followed this path for over an hour until we reached one of Jim's landmarks and turned into the trackless woods. A little over an hour of bushwhacking brought us to our camp. It was located just below treeline at 11,000 feet. We set up our tents on level spots carved into the slope. It began to rain an hour after we arrived. The rain was quickly followed by intense hail. Such is life in the big mountains.

I was awakened the next morning by the chatter of the alarm squirrel. Jim warned me that it went off every morning at six. While I was there that little bugger was never off by more than a minute or two. We ate, packed gear, and headed up the hill. The hike is a steep one and the altitude adds to the challenge. A brief stop to check out the lower entrance of Spanish gave us a break. This was where we would exit the cave at the end of our through trip. The start of the trip was still well above us so we resumed our climb.

At last we arrived at the upper entrance. There we admired the view into the Wet Mountain Valley as our sweat dried in the bright sun. Suddenly we saw a figure with a pack down at treeline. It was Pat Malone. She had camped at the trailhead and then made the long hike in that morning. Less than an hour after we spotted her she was with us at the entrance, ready for the strenuous Spanish through trip. Pat is great; she would never admit to being tough and yet she does things like that.

Our first objective for the day was to smoke trace the Sucking Tube, an impassable entrance located close to upper Spanish. To that end we decided on positions that people would take in the cave. We would look for smoke while Jim and Skip set off two smoke bombs in the Sucking Tube. I was chosen to observe while on rope, thirty feet down 140 foot deep Frank's Pit.

We suited up for the trip. Spanish Cave is about 33°F and drippy. I wore my coveralls from B&C Wunderwear over pants and a shirt made of 300 weight fleece. I also had polypro bottoms on and carried a polypro shirt and a balaclava in my pack. For my hands I had waterproof chemical gloves over liners; these were a godsend. All this gear was for a trip on which we would be moving fairly quickly. The sun seemed a lot hotter once we were dressed for winter. One by one, everyone except Jim and Skip wriggled into the tight upper entrance to Spanish Cave.

Almost immediately we came to a dicey climbdown. This was the site of an accident in 1992. Jim took a fall while headed into the cave. It broke his hand and peeled back a little bit of his scalp. Everyone made it down safe this year thanks to Dennis who pointed out a secret foothold.

Not far past the climbdown is the top of Frank's Pit. Dennis and Dan rappelled to the bottom of the pit and then I took my assigned position thirty feet down. There was a bridge of rock across the pit at this level and I was able to stand on it while remaining on rope. Shouts were relayed to the entrance and the smoke bombs were lit. Between five and ten minutes later I spotted smoke slowly filtering out of a lead high in the pit. It would require at least one bolt for a person to reach it safely from the bridge. I made note of its location and rappelled off the bridge as the stink of sulfur got stronger. Below the bridge the room

bells out and the rappel is free. Frank's is the nicest pit I have done so far in Colorado. It looks and feels a lot like something in TAG, deep and broad and aesthetically pleasing. The temperature is a good reminder of the alpine setting, though.

A few minutes later all six of us were at the bottom of Frank's Pit and the through trip could begin. We made another short rappel between some breakdown. This brought us into a room with marmot and pack rat skeletons fused into flowstone in the floor. We used flagging tape to mark their locations so that other cavers would not trample them.

The next notable passage was the Sand Crawl. Belly crawling is not so bad when the floor is nice and soft; too bad it was sopping wet. The Sand Crawl brought us out into a small room. Here was another exposed climb, this time fifteen feet up flowstone. I got up it first and ended up in the lead. That did not last long because I missed the turn to the Black Slide. Once I was back on track I followed Pat and Dennis on the climb up to the slide. The Black Slide is a steep slope of dark flowstone that one has to traverse. The low end tongues out into the top of a tall room. Obviously you do not want to fall while crossing. Jim told me that they usually crossed it by balancing on the small slick knobs in the middle of the slope. I had seen Dennis and Pat cross the top where the close ceiling makes it possible to safely chimney across. After taking this path myself I managed to convince Jim to do the same. I am not certain that he liked it better.

Now we found ourselves at the Overhanging Dome Room. This was the site of another accident back in 1990. One must negotiate a 20 foot overhanging climbdown by use of a wet etrier permanently installed in the cave. Helen Hassemer was just below the lip of the drop when she fell, landing on her back. Luckily her pack took some of the impact. Helen was hurt but there was nothing to do but continue moving toward the lower entrance. She made it out of the cave and down the mountain. X-rays showed that she had cracked two vertebrae. Needless to say she was very lucky. This incident was on my mind as I negotiated the lip. It was awkward, but not impossible. Upper body strength is the key. If your arms are strong enough you do not have to fiddle around getting a foot in each loop of the etrier.

When everyone was safely at the bottom of the climb we took our one and only break of the trip. Dan pulled out a down parka. Even though it was damp it looked nice and warm. I never even sat down on the cold rock but it still only took me five minutes to get

chilly in this breezy room. Fortified with some food we pressed on to the Coral Slide. I was in the lead again and discovered the Slide to be a steeply sloped funnel shaped room. The funnel led down into blackness. I climbed down cautiously at first until I realized that the slide got its name from its incredibly grippy surface.

Being in front for the Coral Slide meant that I was the first one into the next section. The T-Slot is just what the name implies. It is a slot shaped like a T that is just small enough to keep your head level with your shoulders as you move forward. Oh, and the bottom of the T bells out into a black chasm that roars with water far below. I pushed forward with Pat on my heels and once we were on the other side it did not seem so bad.

Once everyone had made it across the Slot we made our way to the Second Great Room. This was a tall diagonal fissure of a room with no visible ceiling. We traversed it by some breakdown wedged thirty feet up from the floor. As we left the Second Great Room we searched for a lead that Jim wanted to check. We never found it, but Jim did not seem to mind. Soon we were at the Oxbows. The Oxbows are tall sinuous passages with fairly smooth walls. They weave dramatic curves like an old river. At one point there is a true oxbow in the passage. An overly sharp bend has actually been separated from the main flow of the passage. The Oxbows have no floor. They simply get extremely narrow at their bottom. This forces a person to chimney along above the narrow spots. I found the Oxbows to be great chimneying. Pat and I charged forward in sheer enjoyment of this wonderful section of cave

We dropped out of the Oxbows into the Register Room. After adding our names we listened for the others. As soon as they were in earshot Pat and I took off down the Moonmilk Passage. Pasty white moonmilk seemed to glow on the walls. This brought us quickly to the final obstacle of the through trip: a traverse across the nameless pit near the lower entrance. There is a crawlway on the far side of the pit. Thirty feet down the crawlway is the lower entrance to Spanish. Strong incurrents of air suck winter snows through the crawl and into the pit. Here the breeze loses its strength and drops the snow on the edge of the pit. Normally this provides a nice snowbank on which to traverse the pit. This past winter was fairly light on snow and so the snowbank was nonexistent. I checked out the new traverse and found only one tricky spot, a step around a blank wall to a muddy ledge. There was one finger hold to help

balance while making the move. It was a hanger on a bolt used to rig the pit. I looped a finger through the hanger, prayed that I would not slip, and stretched out my foot to the ledge. Pat saw that I had not fallen or dislocated my finger and so she came across the same way. We found another bolt on the other side and rigged my webbing as a handline. Soon Jim, Dan, Dennis and Skip arrived at the pit. They were also surprised by the absence of the snowbank. With the handline, though, everyone made it across the traverse without incident.

We made our way through the windy crawl and out into the daylight. The through-trip had taken about six hours. The skies were gray and told us that the afternoon thunderstorms were on their way. Everyone hustled down the mountain and made it to the tents before the rain started.

We built a fire that night. As everyone stood close to feel its warmth Jim told us more about the legends of Spanish Cave. Many years ago stories began to circulate in the small towns in the Wet Mountain Valley. The stories claimed that the conquistadors mined Spanish Cave for gold. They used Native Americans as slaves in the mine and one could still find the skeleton of such a slave chained to the wall in the cave. No evidence has ever been found to substantiate these stories. Then sometime in the 1970's a newspaper reporter tried to encourage local people to commercialize the cave. He showed them some photographs he had taken in Spanish. The photos showed water droplets on the ceiling of a room. The way the droplets reflected the light of the flash made them gleam like gold. A town meeting was held and some cavers made an appearance to head off any efforts to commercialize the cave. They explained that Spanish is cold, wet, dangerous, and inconveniently located halfway up a mountain. They also swore that they had found no gold or evidence of conquistadors in the cave. The commercialization idea was scrapped fairly quickly after that.

Treasure hunters still come to the cave looking for the Spanish gold. Most are not prepared for the conditions they encounter and so do not go deep in the cave. Sometimes, though, they hang around on the surface scouring the ground with metal detectors. In an example of true caver humor someone suggested dropping a couple of pennies into catholes as we dug them around camp. That would give the treasure hunters something to find.

We did more caving over the next two days. On Saturday Dennis, Dan, Pat, and I went to the very back

of a cave called White Marble Halls. Jim and Skip were at a dig in a nearby cave called Davis Sink. We waited patiently and watched for smoke from the bombs they set off in Davis Sink. Twenty minutes after the appointed time we spotted smoke coming from a fissure in bedrock. The fissure narrowed to at least four inches. This was a disappointment because nothing short of full scale mining will connect the two caves any time soon. After the smoke trace we surveyed in an area called the Queen's Chamber. The survey took us on a climb up a beautiful white flowstone slope. After we had finished our work we pulled down the rope on the climb. It had been left by a previous year's expedition and seemed to be encouraging traffic on the slope.

On Sunday Dennis, Dan, Pat, and I went caving together again. Jim and Skip were occupied mapping a small cave nearby. Our job was to change out the register in Lower Spanish. We must have been acclimatizing because the trudge up the hill seemed a lot easier this day. Soon we were back at the nameless pit we had traversed on the through trip. Dennis rigged the first drop. I rappelled down first and dragged a tangle of rope all the way down the 140 foot slope. I was still on rope when I reached the top of the next drop, which is called The Jug. The natural anchor for The Jug forces the rope to hang in a tight fissure. After tying off to this giant boulder and clipping in I spotted a crack further out over the pit. It bristled with pitons from various eras. I picked a solid looking one and used it to redirect the rope. The Jug was a nice 90 foot rappel against a smooth wall. We fulfilled our responsibility by changing out the register in the bottom of the pit. Except for a group that visited two weeks previously, no one had signed in since a survey team in 1996. The pit, however, still contains ample evidence of the presence of man. Piles of laid rope, rotten wood, and other historical debris testify to the visits of explorers in the past.

We set off to explore Lower Spanish. We found the Gold Diggings. This is a spot in the bottom of the cave where someone went looking for his own particular type of gold: virgin cave. Dan followed the tunnel to its end. He reported that it blew no air, but the earth was soft and easy to dig. From the Gold Diggings we made our way to the waterfall. The passage to the waterfall is a tight and muddy tube with some slick chimneys. I felt like I had been transported back east. The Colorado cavers struggled. All the dry caves in the state had not prepared them for good clay mud. We found the waterfall, a nice fifteen foot cascade. Dan shocked us all by pulling out an expensive Gore-

Tex jacket and standing beneath the chilling water. Dennis made him stay under long enough to snap a picture. After that it was time to leave.

The trip out was uneventful except for one incident. Dan dropped the same expensive jacket from the top of the pit, scaring the crap out of me at the bottom. On the surface Pat and Dennis cruised quickly down to camp. They packed up and hiked out that afternoon, called back by real-world responsibilities. The

rest of us made a more leisurely hike out the next day. Despite years of systematic exploration there is still more to be learned about the caves of this area. Next year's expedition will focus on more cave survey and a promising dig that will require the efforts of a dedicated crew. Cavers come back year after year to work and explore. Thanks to the remoteness and alpine conditions there is still more to discover.



Artwork by Beth Geiger.

## Grotto Grapevine

by A.I. Cartwright

### THE PASSING OF A FRIEND

The sad news just arrived that Alejandro Villagomez, a long time Texas caver, friend and ex-husband of Maureen Handler, and friend of many VPI cavers, died a week ago in Mexico. It was not caving related and the details are not yet known, but they won't change the sadness cavers all over are feeling now.

### OTR AND CONVENTION

Once again, VPI kicked some serious rope-running ass at OTR, bringing home many first and second place prizes. Sue Setzler and Zenah Orndorff duked it out in knots, frog, *and* rope walker. The end result had Sue beating Z in knots and rope walker.

Unfortunately for some, on Sunday afternoon a small, impromptu More Wine party broke out in the VPI campsite. It then travelled to the Forks of Cheat Winery booth for reinforcements. The resulting rips to Steve Wells' jeans made for some good entertainment, but some cavers were soon unable to attend the awards ceremony. Those that did make it passed out in their chairs and missed the event as well.

There weren't many cavers at the convention in Idaho because of the travel distance. However the Zokaites family represented us well: every member competed in the rope running sessions! Carol still isn't certain how she got talked into that.

Sandy Knapp, Jerry Redder, and Carol Zokaites were awarded NSS Fellowships during the convention. We hoped Sandy would stop now, but she's still trying to organize the club into a caver-event frenzy.

### THE PRODIGAL CAVERS

As if seeing them only at big functions wasn't bad enough, several out-of-town VPI cavers have come back to Blacksburg to attend Virginia Tech (again). Alison Williams, Ko Takamizawa, and more recently Mark Eisenbees return in the pursuit of advanced degrees. (Of what - inebriation?)

Scott Rapier began the trend last year, returning to chase down a B.S. in Horticulture. (We always knew he was a bit off.) Philip Balister placed his employment with GE in limbo as he takes a crack at a masters level engineering degree.

Speaking of going back to school, Kirk Digby (after a ten year lapse), Chris Rourke, and Chris "Guido" Garguilo are all trying to finish up that pesky B.S. de-

gree. You wouldn't know it, though, based on the number of evenings each week Guido spends at the Ton....

In an interesting twist, Amanda Stiles *left* town to attend school... in Germany. She signed on for a one-year stint and will return to her parents' home in NOVA when she gets back to the States. Ask Wells about his recent visit.

### BLACKSBURG CALLS

Cavers from all over are moving to Blacksburg in droves. Bill Balfour has landed in Giles County surrounded by newly discovered caves and many neighborhood "dudes."

We think Mike and Andrea Futrell have moved into the Bat Ranch, but it's hard to tell. Their stuff is there, but the two have been in Borneo for the last couple of months.

Ben and Corey Shwartz, cavers from BCCS, have planted themselves (and two cats) in an apartment close to downtown. Ben is working and going to school while Corey searches for a permanent job.

Be careful! These people are slowly infiltrating the club, possibly to steal club secrets.

### MOVIN' ON UP (OR MAYBE JUST OVER)

Carol and Joe Zokaites moved to a huge house near the Life Bible College in Christiansburg. The house has a back porch extending the length of the house and more rooms than they know what to do with. They hosted the pre-Banquet party so they could show off their new pad. They were astounded to discover that increasing your house size increases the number of people who attend your parties. The real question is, who got stuck with the jar of anal lube?

Sandy Knapp has moved into an apartment in Blacksburg. She claims she loves living so close to downtown, yet most Friday evenings her car is parked outside the Ton. (She claims she comes straight from work, but given her flexible schedule it's highly suspicious.)

Jackie and Bob Hoell, in true caver fashion, plan to live in separate states for the next year. Bob has accepted a tenure-track position in Georgia, while Jackie will remain at George Washington University. Plans after the first year are uncertain, but they have a long way to go before beating Joan Johnson and Ko

Takamizawa's marital distance record.

Matt Seigler and Erica Freiberger have recently purchased a home in Pittsburgh. This is sad news for those who'd hoped they would finally tire of that state and return to Virginia.

Kirk Digby heads to NOVA for the summer on an internship. Despite the four hour drive, it won't be surprising to find him at Ton on many Friday nights.

Joe Thompson is now working a "one month on, one month off" job in Pennsylvania. He keeps his apartment in Blacksburg and "drops by" when he gets the chance. Rumor has it the job is at a nuclear power plant. Be afraid. Be very afraid.

Laine Buckwalter is now fully employed by a fiber optics and electronics company in Radford. Despite the company's secrecy during the interview and offer, she is pleased with her job.



Skye Kirchman replaces the rooster as Paul's favorite play friend. Photo by Daddy.

#### TALES OF A BASTARD

"Mr. Mom" Orndorff has accepted a job with the Department of Conservation and Recreation after an agonizing many months of suspense. Poor Wil; now he gets paid to traipse around in sinkholes and investigate caves.

He has also been key to the AEP power line struggle. Local residents pooled their money and hired Wil to analyze the impact of the power line in their area with respect to caves, cave life, and the watershed. He spent many hours dye tracing, bat counting, and ridge walking in Bland County, resulting in the discovery of new and promising caves. Many VPI cavers donated their time to the cause, but none more than Joe Thompson. Ask Joe and Wil about the stained clothing, smashed fences, and other adventures.

The power line hearing begins on May 1, so those able to head to Richmond for the day should show up to oppose the line through Skydusky Hollow.

#### DANGEROUS HABITS

And we thought caving was dangerous! One of cavers' other favorite hobbies has led to the births of two new caver babies. Adam and Tracey Hungerford introduced Seth John on September 29, 1999, and Paul Kirchman and Dabney Hammer came next with Marina Skye on December 2. Patti Kitchin and Mark Leach will soon add a third to their kid collection. Molly Lucier and Mike Newsome expect a stork delivery any day now! (We're saving space here in case Molly manages to give birth before this goes to press.)

#### HOW IT ALL BEGINS

After secretly living together for over a year, then buying a house together, Dave Colatosti and Patricia Feely have decided they may as well get married. Dave's mom made sure there was an engagement ring to make it official. Don't get too excited, though; the wedding is set for "some time in the future."

Kristin Posson managed to land one, herself. She and her finance Dan Somebody have just moved into an apartment together in the DC area.

Judy Yienger (of trampoline fame) plans to wed this June 10th to Ken Brownsburger. He's already whisked her away to a house in the mountains of Boulder, Colorado.

Allison Hedricks will marry her high school sweetheart on the same day in June. The small wedding will take place at mom Joan Redder's house, which gave Joan a good reason to inform Jerry that they're getting the whole house repainted. Jerry claims the house fix-up will cost more than the wedding and private reception.

#### OTHER OUTLETS

Dave Colatosti, the club thespian, continues his side career of local actor. This year he's been slinking around stage in *The Importance of Being Ernest* (as Ernest himself), *Arsenic and Old Lace*, and *The Prisoner of Zenda*. More plays on in the works.

The four-wheelers of our group have been busy. Lawrence Britt's red Bronco has magically become a blue Bronco. Steve Wells also purchased a new body for his wreck, but it hasn't moved from its spot in his carport since the purchase.

We blamed mid-life crisis when Craig Ferguson bought a house and a snazzy BMW. Now he's taking

it a step farther. On weekends, Craig (just call him Speed) takes to the racetrack with his silver streak in an amateur racing circuit.

Not to be outdone, Mark E. started participating in the car racing. He's also stepped up his involvement with gun shooting competitions. Hmm, driving fast and shooting.... Think he's planning a new career?

"Ophelia" Orndorff won the Miss United Way beauty pageant this winter. The lovely Ophelia even shaved her beard for the occasion, thus revealing her secret identity as Spotty Dog's long-lost twin sister. (Now if only she'll shave her chest!)

#### OCTOBERFEST

Lawrence Britt hosted his traditional Octoberfest with its usual fare of great food, *Das Boot*, and survey contest, although participation in the contest was unusually low. Must be because LePera, the usual contest organizer, wasn't there to scowl people into participating. The party was entertaining, and luckily there were no drunken trainees causing a stir this year. Thanks, Lawrence!

#### ON (SOMEONE ELSE'S) ROPE

Steve Wells, Steve LePera, and Eileen O'Malley were at the right place at the right time when someone at OTR mentioned having three open slots on their Bridge Day team. The three joined up with a grotto from Fredericksburg on their last-place spot on the New River Gorge Bridge for a day of rappelling. Happily, none of the three were nailed by passing BASE jumpers. Now there's talk of getting together a team from VPI for Bridge Day 2000 in October.

#### HALLOWEEN

This year's Halloween party, hosted by the Bat Ranchers, became the first gig for *Las Cucharashas de la Muerte*, a band mostly made up of cavers. The band played down by the creek, allowing folks to dance and hang out at the fire simultaneously.

The costumes this year were as off-beat as usual. The Steves came as a bolting kit, and by dumb luck Mike and Andrea Futrell came as complimentary tools. A group of well dressed men revealed themselves as a "hung" jury, Laine Buckwalter attended as a Rubber Maid, and Bryce Bolton made a wonderful Jolly Green Giant. (He seemed reluctant to change out of

his tights and leaves at the end of the night.) Luckily the Bat Ranch gang doesn't tire of our club because we keep coming back. Thanks, guys!

#### RINGING IN THE NEW YEAR

Debate continues over whether or not this past New Year's Day marked the new millennium. Either way, most saw it as another excuse to party. Ed and Lynn Richardson hosted their usual party but this time with a theme. Cavers dressed up as figures marking the 1900's. Unfortunately we can't give interesting examples because the night was a bit hazy for many of the attendees.

Joan and Ko hosted an Elvis Grotto bash at their house in Suburbia, North Carolina. Deserving special mention is the disco ball which Mark Eisenbees (with help) created using compact disks around a ceiling light and attached to the fan. The result was stunning.

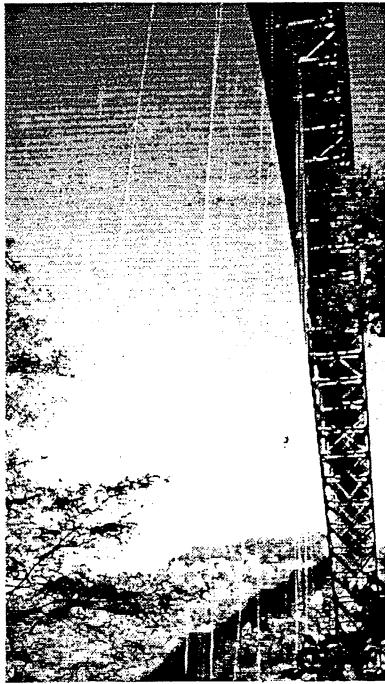
Revellers from both parties awoke the next day (eventually) to find that the world had not come to a screeching halt. Reluctantly they had to head home and go to work the following day.

#### SIVTAC GOES ABROAD

Twenty-some cavers boarded planes and invaded Belgium for a long weekend in January. Though the group saw famous works of art, elaborately designed buildings, and a fascinating culture, they were especially taken by the Mannikin Pis, a statue of a little boy peeing. Unfortunately, during the course of the stay they didn't get to see him in his Elvis attire.



Ophelia graciously accepts her crown.  
Photo by Steve LePera.



Bridge Day viewed from below.  
Photo by Eileen O'Malley.

## BANQUET

The Newport Rec Center continues as our favorite place to hold Banquet, despite the mix-up of dates this year. Traditionally on the Saturday of President's Day weekend, the Rec Center double booked their space and eventually bumped VPI to the following weekend. Attendance was high, though, and hopefully didn't prevent any out-of-towners from making the trip.

Bill Balfour presented a slide show and talk on Doe Mountain Cave (DMC), the latest cave-craze in Giles County. The DMC stories are gaining a life of their own; be sure to catch this slide show on Saturday evening at the Spring VAR.

The dinner was excellent, as Steve "Tink" Williams never lets us down. The awards ceremony highlighted the best (and worst!) of our grotto members' behavior. Here are just a few of the awards given out (hey, if you want to hear them all, you have to go to Banquet!): Matt Burnett received a golden radiator for his Bronco wannabe, the Steves received certificates for finding "The Second-deepest Pit in Virginia," Mike Horne presented himself with the Armchair Caver award, Joe Thompson received the Safe Driver award, and of course there were lots of Guano Clusters.

Banquet co-chair Wil Orndorff livened up the crowd late in the evening by performing what is now called the Millennium Dance with trainee Mandie Aldrich. If you've never seen Wil wearing only a black teddy, be grateful.

## NCRC INVASION

Several VPI cavers have recently completed advanced NCRC training and are encouraging trainees and members alike to participate in an upcoming weekend-long orientation to cave rescue. Matt Burnett, Joe Thompson, and Brad Atkinson were pleased with the extensive training and are ready to contribute their knowledge when needed. (Just keep them away from cell phones.)

## GRACE, THY NAME IS WELLS

Steve Wells, master climber himself, managed to fall three feet and knock his shoulder out of joint while caving last month. Unfortunately Steve LePera, the only other person on the trip, has no medical training and wasn't able to pop the shoulder back into place. LePera caved out and, after several hours of debate, decided to call a few friends to help drag Wells from the cave. Turns out some drugs were all it took to loosen the shoulder and it popped back in nicely.

Once back in one piece, Wells raced out of the cave and managed to beat most of his "assisters" by an hour. Within thirty seconds of his exit, Wells was drinking a beer, smoking a cigarette, and laughing about his misadventure.

On a more serious note, this brought to light a real concern which was previously unaddressed. Based on this latest experience, the club has recently passed a measure requiring anyone who goes on a 12+ hour caving trip with Wells to be a certified and current EMT.

## SPEAKING OF VICES

The club recently elected their new officers. The President is Eric Stanley, the Vice President is Chris Hibshman, the Treasurer is Scott Rapier (the new dynasty?), and the Secretary is Matt Stec. Thanks to the previous officers who did such a great job for with club (except the Secretary, who shall be banished to his kayak).

Amy Johnson, now living in Colorado, was recently elected the President of the Colorado Grotto. The time spent as VPI's secretary clearly whet her appetite for "The Big Chair." Does this mean she now gets to tell Carl Bern when he'll cave and where?

## YTR

Once again, YTR (Young Timer's Reunion) took place at the WVACS site. The campground emptied on Saturday afternoon as most of the attendees went underground. Mixed grotto trips went to Culverson Creek, Hurricane Ridge, Bone/Norman, and Organ Cave. (Apparently this year's Culverson Creek trip did not contain any height restrictions.) The rain held off until Sunday morning as most people packed up and went home.

## PICNIC

This year's picnic was mostly cold and windy (surprise!), but that didn't stop the diehards from biking to Bland on Saturday. Sandy Knapp, the only woman to tough it out, managed to sail past many of the men with ease. Later she tried to downplay it out of concern for their fragile egos.

Concerned about the unprotected keg of Newcastle's Brown Ale at the picnic site, bikers Philip Balister and Ko Takamizawa planned ahead: the tap to that keg travelled to Picnic in Ko's backpack.

Several groups of cavers actually caved on Saturday. Kirk Digby suckered Ed Fortney into taking a trainee trip to Newberry's. Despite having five trainees on the trip, they managed to exit the cave before dinner

was laid out. Another group of experienced cavers played around in Newberry's, and a two-person trip dashed from the Baines entrance to Bill's Rappel and zipped up the rope before the trainee trip made it up the Devil's Staircase.

The bonfire was especially nice given the chilly conditions, and spirits were high. So high, in fact, that the club rolled five kegs down the hill before Sunday morning.

Thanks go to Beth Geiger and the other picnic organizers, and to Mandie Aldrich for having the new club t-shirts ready for distribution at Picnic.

#### **ROPE RUNNING**

Rumor has it the rope running sessions will be in full force soon at Wil and Zenah Orndorff's place. Just as well, because Carl Bern and Amy Johnson plan to attend the 2000 Convention and think their new Colorado friends can out-medley VPI. Dig out your moldy systems and let's get motivated!

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#### **BAT HUMOR (VERY BAD)**

A vampire bat came flapping in from the night covered in fresh blood and parked himself on the roof of the cave to get some sleep. Pretty soon all the other bats smelled the blood and began hassling him about where he got it. He told them to leave him alone and let him get some sleep, but they persisted until finally he gave in.

"Okay, okay. Do you see that tree out there?" he asked, pointing through the mouth of the cave.

"Yes, yes, yes!" the bats all screamed in a frenzy.

"Good," said the first bat, "because I didn't!"

## You Can Only Be So Serious with Pants Full of Cheese

by Bob Cohen (Guru and Wearer of Lactose Tolerant Underwear)

Surprise Cave continues to pleasantly live up to its name. On a recent trip to the cave I somehow got separated from Chris' group. Bob Z. heard about a shortcut to the Heaven area. We were checking it out when I saw a lead that had my name on it. Some mysterious force drew me on, and I lost the group or they lost me. It compelled me to keep going into a passage I had never seen before. I heard a voice and thought it was Chris and our new Russian caver friend. I crawled and climbed to the voice. It turned out to be a false god named Harry who was on an early trip (big surprise) with Barbara. They were on their way out when I met them on top of the Corkscrew. However it worked, I found another way from the top of the Corkscrew to the main stream passage. Bob Z. found a shortcut to Heaven. These routes were far from virgin, but they were new to us. It's nice to fantasize about being the first, just like dating.

Some years ago one surprise the cave summoned up was quite outstanding. I had some cavers in from out of town. Mutual caver friends set it up for them to see me and go caving. They were my friends' work acquaintances.. As far as my friends knew, my guests were serious geology types. The instructions I received were, "Show them a good cave, but don't get too silly or wild." (What, me?)

We went to Surprise Cave. I decided to pack a snack for all. It consisted of an assortment of crackers in a Nalgene jar and two cans of that pressurized cheese product. This is the stuff that needs no refrigeration and will last into the next Ice Age. It comes out of a nozzle, flowerette style, like whipped cream, so it can remain untouched by inhuman cave hands. This seemed like a perfect cave food.

I ran out of room in my cave pack, so I put the two cans with the capped nozzle down in my front hip pockets of my coveralls. We were on a mellow sightseeing trip, so I thought this arrangement was fine. I forgot all about the cans after the beginning of the trip. When we all cleared the bottom of the Corkscrew, I started having a slight sensation of my lower cave like my outfit was shrinking. At first I wrote it off to putting on a few pounds. As the trip went on,

I acted as a serious tour guide to these serious folks. Everything went fine, but I couldn't shake the feeling of my suit getting tighter. At one point I slipped and slammed my leg. I braced for the pain as I hit the rock, but it barely hurt. I continued my role as guide until someone in the group said, "This cave is unusual; it smells like Swiss and cheddar." Then it hit me what was going on. A quick check of my pockets confirmed the curdled facts. The caps came off the two cans in a crawlway. The nozzles ripped a hole inside my coveralls, broke off, and filled my outfit with two kinds of cheese. I decided to hide the truth and go on with the show. This worked until I started to lead up a tight climb. My cheesy past was revealed when each leg bottom produced a different flavored yellow mass. The group realized at once what happened and produced a laugh that reverberated through the entire cavern. We all just sat down and told a whole bunch of raunchy jokes and cheesy stories..

The rest of the trip was considerably more silly. I tried to keep a straight face and point out speleothemes, but the rest of the crowd wanted more from me now. When I tried to continue, they dropped their pants in unison and made animal sounds. My surrender took the form of all of us exiting the cave in Monty Python silly walking style. They all assured me they had a great unforgettable time and wanted me to promise another cheese performance the next time they were in town. Days later my friends wanted to know how it went with their serious co-workers. I told them, "You can only be so serious with pants full of cheese."

One last note of a more serious nature. The cheese padded my leg from being hurt when I hit it on a rock. Maybe cave suits could be designed with C.P.S. (cheese protection system). Imagine pressurized cans connected to shock and motion sensors that would immediately fill your suit with cheese to prevent injury. I could see somebody taking a fall down a large pit and no one getting too concerned. They should just have a large amount of crackers and wine on hand for the clean-up.

## A Midnight Summer's Dreamlike Occurrence

by Steve LePera

Referring to anything we've ever done as a "Dreamlike Occurrence" probably paints our behavior using rose colored glasses, or at the very least beer goggles, but that's what storytelling is all about anyway. So you may feel free to substitute Hypothermic Stupor at any time in place of Dreamlike.

MegaDome is a 222.6 foot (67.8 meter) dome which was, briefly, the deepest free rappel in Virginia. The dome didn't collapse or anything, but the record was shattered nevertheless after a mere four hours when another much deeper drop was recorded in a different southwest Virginia cave.

Anyway, here's one of about a million adventures I could have written about the 76 bolt, five trip journey to the top of MegaDome, most of which involve somebody (usually named Steve) doing something stupid and surviving anyway. This version isn't likely to be as exciting or awe-inspiring as hearing Wells babble it out over the course of a dozen beers or so around 4 am at OTR, but we've all already heard that version anyway. In contrast, you may consider the following to be God's Honest Truth.

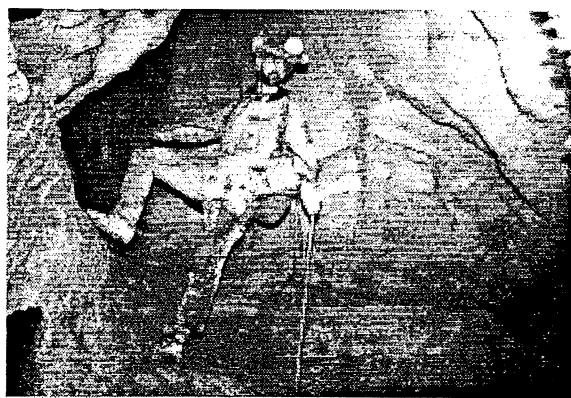
Doe Mountain Cave (37.1575 N, 80.4668 W but don't tell anyone because it's top secret, and Balfour doesn't want to have to kill anyone), is lazily called DMC by us cool cavers (and not to be confused with De-Militarized Cave, near Hanoi). My first trip was in mid-June, 1999, and we rigged and rappelled a virgin 174 foot pit. The cave is best characterized by just saying "vertical." A trip into the beginning of the MegaDome survey requires 25, 10, and 30 foot nuisance drops, two 160+ consecutive rappels, and a lot of crawling. The goal on every trip we've taken has been to connect the currently surveyed part of DMC to a second entrance. The connection by dye trace was made in fifteen minutes, but there is 600 feet vertically from the bottom of MegaDome to the surface. There is only 300 feet horizontal distance.

On three of the four previous bolting trips, Wells and myself used, in order of appearance, Chris Hibshman, Eric Stanley, and Joe Thompson to haul a bunch of extra stuff into the dome. Without their help we would have a lot less gear stranded in the cave now awaiting removal. Despite how fun the previous trips had been, none of these fellows were interested in coming back with us on our fifth, and what turned out to be final, bolting trip. So it was

Steve and Steve, a couple of Wades chicken liver dinners, a vial of Truckers Stay-Awake and ibuprofen, and a couple of 30 pound packs going for it all alone.

The final push to reach the top of MegaDome began with high hopes. On the previous trip, when Wells was coming back down the rope cleaning up gear, he'd apparently dislodged a large piece of the wall and called "Rock!" Due to the echo, and possibly due to my eardrums being frozen solid, I didn't catch what he said and replied, "What?" Wells replies, "I said ROCK!"...then there is a big kaboom from down the pit when the rock hit. Quite the delay there! We both knew the dome was getting pretty high.

So we were pretty excited about maybe getting to the top this time. We entered the cave about 7pm Friday night, and arrived at the bottom of MegaDome in less than 4 hours. We didn't waste any time heading up the first rope to our "camp", a ledge about 120 feet off the floor of the pit. We'd reached the ledge on the third trip and moved our belay up to that point from then on. At the bottom of the pit the belayer got soaked and froze in a howling wind, so the ledge was comparatively dry and warm. Joe Thompson had also hauled in a tent-shaped plastic tarp on the previous trip, and Wells and I had set that up to hide in when we were eating or resting.



LePera descends one of many nuisance drops.  
Photo by Wil Orndorff.

Wells and I were goofy as could be already. I don't know if it was the late hour or whatever, but we were having a good time and laughing it up like a couple of idiots. I should have seen the obvious: things were going to go downhill.

I can't tell much more without explaining the mess of

ropes already in place from the previous trips. There were now three ropes in the pit. The rope from the floor to the ledge was a 175 footer. We were using a 100 foot rope to "clean" the wall as we climbed, and using a 190 footer to belay the climber. As we geared up on the ledge now, the 190 was in a pile behind us and the 100 was running up and out around the corner, rigged to the last bolts we'd set on the previous trip, probably 50 or 60 feet above the ledge. All of these were tangled behind us in a ball of knots, presumably securely tied into two bolts. The ledge is recessed, so as you go up the climber disappears around a corner after about 20 feet and can no longer be seen, or heard either, actually.

Wells and I pulled all our gear out onto the floor and began the pre-climb preparations. I've seen it, and even I can't believe how much junk has been carried up to this point. But despite the appearances of total disorganization, everything required to do the climb turned out to be present and accounted for. On previous trips we were actually getting progressively LESS prepared each time, leaving behind: my rack, my pack straps, then Wells pack straps, the fifi hook, and a dump bottle. So we complimented each other on not leaving anything behind this time, then looked around for some wood to knock on.

Failing to find wood suitable for knocking, we started "assembling" bolts. Each bolt got a hanger, mallion, and nut to hold it all together, and then got clipped into a runner (two carabiners connected by a 3-4 inch length of webbing) for the belay line. These pre-assembled bolt/hanger/mallion units are hammered into the wall directly and minimize (note: minimize does not mean eliminate) the possibility of dropping some important component down the pit.

After preassembling everything, we clipped all the crap onto Wells harness and shoved him out into the pit. Since the 100 came down from above and looped back up to our ledge, Wells rappelled a little bit then changed over and climbed out around the corner and disappeared. He wasn't really on belay, but the belay line was already clipped into his harness, and I fed it out gradually as he ascended. Once he reached the top of the rope, where we'd left off previously, he clipped himself directly into the bolts, clipped the first runners into the bolts, then clipped the belay line through the runners, effectively putting himself on belay. Then he derigged the 100 and clipped it into the back of his harness. Time to start bolting!

The basic idea with a bolt ladder is to reach as high above your head as you can and place a hole with the

hammer drill. You then tap the bolt assembly into that hole and tighten it down. Next, an etrier (pronounced a-tree-a) which is a webbing ladder, and a runner holding the belay line are clipped into the mallion. You can climb up the etrier until you're able to snag yourself by the fifi hook (small thing like what Captain Hook had on the end of his arm, except we rig ours on our seat harness) into the hanger or mallion itself. Then you reach above your head again and place another bolt. It sounds pretty simple, and if you were climbing a flat, dry, solid piece of limestone, it would probably take five minutes a hole to drill and set each bolt, and then climb up to the next level. But it winds up taking an average of about 10-15 minutes for each placement. The tangle of webbing, rope, carabiners, drills, wrenches, ice-cube trays, and normal vertical gear all snag on each other and anything else nearby larger than 1/4 inch, and generally slow everything down. Sometimes you can climb on handholds or ledges above and beyond the last bolt placement and get a "Wells" step up the wall. Of course, sometimes the handholds or ledges are crap and you take a fun ole' factor 2 fall... that's when you wind up barely even reaching over your head to place the next one. On average you wind up taking 3-4 foot increments up the wall. If you need to traverse to the side, that just slows you down even more. I made Wells do all the traversing because it was much harder than going up.

The thing about belaying something like this is, who knows what's going on up there? You can't see or hear much. Every few moments there is some kind of gear clanking about, or the belay line tugs, or some rock comes whizzing down the pit. So I begin to daydream about the 100x100 booming borehole we'll find at the top. Like the ocean, water rushing down the drop blends all these noises harmoniously together. It's very relaxing, and combined with a lowered core body temperature, I begin to believe I am at a very cold beach, and should possibly put something on over my bathing suit. But the women are so beautiful, who would want to leave? I believe that one may be looking at me, and she....

RRRRR-PAP-PAP-PAP-PAP-PAP! Wells is drilling another hole in the wall. I am cold, but the belay line is still tight and I haven't fallen off the ledge. All is good. Then the drilling is done, and there is some clanking. It really does echo a lot. I am thinking about how big the pit must be for such a great echo. Let's see, how many bolts have we set... at this point just over 60. I bet we average at least two feet per bolt, even including traverses... that would be a 120

foot drop. Hmmm, I bet we average better than that. Our drop is 180 feet if we just average three feet a bolt. Plus, we didn't even start on the floor! This is going to be a good pit, with lots of booming borehole at the top. Oh yes....

OUCH! My head fell sleepily into the formation behind me. And I am still cold. But the belay is still tight and secured to me with a carabiner. Now I'm trying to figure out how many times I've heard the drill go, but I can't remember....

RRRRR-PAP-PAP-PAP-PAP-PAP! Hungry now... need food soon. Sleepy. RRRRR-PAP-PAP-PAP-PAP! Something is happening... wakey wakey.

"LEPERA! Hello!?" from above. Big echo now; a terrible communication problem is evident.

"What?"

"How....much....rope....left?"

I look out into the pit and see what's happening. The 100 foot rope is swinging around, freely, about five feet below the ledge. He goes any higher, no way to rappel back down to the ledge for Mr. Wells.

"None. Come.....back.....down!"

I can't hear the response exactly, but after some shuffling around I hear, "SLACK! Hello? LePera!" I give up some slack and he gradually rappels back down the 100 foot rope (which has again been rigged into the topmost bolt). The belay is left running through the top two or three runners, but on the way down Wells removes all the other hangers, mallions, and runners for later use.

"So, how close are we to the top?" I ask.

"Close...just a few more bolts."

"You said that last trip."

"It's true this time."

"Well, we need a longer rope." We both laugh out loud, because longer rope equals bigger pit. I'm cold and stupid and we're both hungry, so we get under the plastic tarp and cook up a couple of MRE's, and gradually warm up and begin to feel better. Ok, not exactly. First we eat, then we fall asleep in some uncomfortable position, then we wake up miserable and

stiff. THEN we claim to each other how much warmer we are and how great the tent was and how glad we are to have it. Anyway, we're not dying and the battery still has some juice, so we work up a plan to continue climbing. We decide that we can just pull up the 175 we used to get up to the ledge, tie the end of it to the bottom of the 100, and Wells can just pass a knot on the way back down. We figure he can rig the 190

we're using as the belay line once he gets to the top, then rappel the 100/175 back down to the ledge. Cool.

We get out of the tent, only to discover that the tent really was warm and comfortable after all! Outside the tent is horrible, and I want to go home. No such luck; Steve "Don Quixote" Wells puts his gear back together and disappears up the rope again.

RRRRR-PAP-PAP-PAP-PAP! Groggy groggy. MRE was yummy. RRRRR-PAP-PAP-PAP-PAP! Wish I was in the tent again with a yummy MRE. RRRRR-PAP-PAP-PAP-PAP! Was that the fourth hole? I bet the battery is going to die four feet from the top and we'll have to come back

and do this again. Miserableness. Horribletude. I smile because it's so fun caving with Wells.

This goes on for what seems to be about 4-5 hours, at which time I have no clue how many bolts have been set. RRRRR-PAP-PAP-PAP-PAP! That has to be, like, seven holes.

What the hell is going on up there? The noise in the pit has suddenly changed from a constant roar of the waterfall to intermittent. About 3-4 seconds of nothing, then crashing of water, then nothing again. Wells and I try to communicate but it's hopeless. So I sit. And sit. Finally, again the intermittent waterfall noise, then again a long wait. Then he's pulling on the belay line so I start letting slack out. And some more.

Finally, after a LONG time, Wells appears rappelling down the 100/175. He's totally soaked and completely stupid with cold. As he's crossing the knot I begin to realize we have a problem. He's rappelling down the rope that we're supposed to use to get back down to the floor of MegaDome. There is no rope going from where we are (the ledge) to where we want to go (the floor of the pit). I can see that Wells has been to-



Wells amidst the tangle of ropes. Photo by Steve LePera.

tally hosed down...water is still draining out of his caving suit in a steady stream. By this time he's worked his way over toward the ledge, and I see by the look on his face we're both thinking the same thing.

"There is no rope to the floor," I say as he gets off rope shivering.

"Uh-huh."

"This is not good," I reply. We're laughing a little, but it's not funny.

"You have to fix it," he said.

I knew that, thanks. I have no idea what he tied at the top, why he came down the wrong rope, how many bolts are there or anything. So I'm trying to get some information, but Wells has become a blubbering idiot at this point and can only stand there shivering.

"F-f-f-fix it," he mutters.

"Well, what's going on up there?"

"F-f-f-fix it."

"What's tied off to what?" I prod.

"F-f-f-fix it."

This conversation is useless. Now I just think to myself, "This is not good," instead of saying it. And the solution to the problem is as hideous as it is obvious... I need to climb up the 100/175 that Steve just rappelled down and do what we'd originally planned: rig the 190 at the top and bring the 100/175 back down to the ledge, so we could then rappel to the floor. I will get just as soaked as he did. I will be just as cold as he is right now. What a lovely way to end my life.

I just stood there trying to think up some kind of clever way out of this while Wells went to the tent to strip off his soaking clothes and wring them out. When he reappeared he still didn't appear in very good shape. And he still didn't provide very many details about what the rigging and bolts currently looked like at the top.

So I got all of the stuff he'd had previously clipped to his harness and took it with me because I wasn't sure if I might need to use the wrench to remove a hanger, or what. I felt I needed everything just in case. After I got all this stuff together, Wells was doing a little better and explained that he'd placed a bolt right at the top, but then drowned the drill in the waterfall and it had stopped working. He'd gotten soaked in the whole process, and the result was the 100/175 rope was rigged such that as you climbed, you pretty much had to climb in the waterfall.

The last thing I did before leaving the ledge was double check that Wells was actually clipped into something and wouldn't tumble off in my absence. Then I had to do the same as Wells had done, rappelling away from the ledge, then switching over and climbing up the 100/175. Pretty much the moment I finished changing over, I swung out across the pit and under the waterfall. Lovely.

Like a pendulum, I swung regularly back and forth through the water. My hands were frozen almost immediately. Each time the water hit me, I'd kick out to the side. Between cleanings, I had just enough time to take a breath and a step up. Except to make things more interesting, the belay line had become twisted around the line I was climbing and had so much friction, Wells couldn't pull it through. So each step up I took, I had to pull that amount of rope through the runners and feed it back down to the ledge. Take a step, pull the rope, swing through the water, take a step, pull the rope, swing through the water... over and over. Near the top, things got even better. Because the belay line was twisted, it was running over a bunch of muddy rock ledges on its way up and back down. Each time I pulled on the belay, a bunch of rock crashed down on my head. "Thanks, Steve. I love this! This is GREAT!" I'd call out, although I doubt he could hear me.

I'm leaving something out. I wear glasses, and between the waterfall, the muddy rock beating me in the head, and all the steam rising off of my body, visibility was about 8 inches. And that was only when my pathetic intermittent Petzl Mega felt like being on. My carbide cap lamp... forget about it! So I climbed right into the knot at the top before really even knowing I was there.

And this is when it got fun. I couldn't see, couldn't hear anything Wells said, if he did try to say anything, and couldn't feel anything below my elbow. Even though I was probably thinking clearly, I was thinking, "What if I'm not thinking clearly?" Ugh. Anyway, I got my upper body out of the water and discovered that there were three bolts traversing across the top of the dome, the last of which was in the waterfall, and that's the one everything was currently tied into. My goal in the end was to rig a butterfly into the bolt farthest from the waterfall to make future ascents a little dryer, and then put a second butterfly in the second closest bolt, and lastly to remove all the crap from the bolt in the waterfall and rappel back down.

I'd like to detail more of exactly what I did here, but I can't really remember. I was super cold and my

hands were like stumps, so tying knots was horrible. Untying the existing knots, which had already been weighted, was totally impossible. I had to keep unscrewing mallions to move knots from one place to another. I kept thinking, "Don't drop the rope down the pit or we are stuck here until the body recovery." Then I'd think, "What are you clipped into?" Sometimes I think I had the end of the rope clipped into my harness about three times I was so paranoid, but so many things had to be moved and tied and clipped that I really had no idea. I suspect that a video of this whole business would be truly horrifying to my mother. "You are no longer my son," she would cry! Fortunately, it all got "fixed" as Wells had requested, and I rappelled safely back down to the ledge. He was in a lot better spirits than I was, and so began laughing as soon as I arrived. I was soaked like I crawled

up out of a swamp. Wells pointed out that my Mega lamp head was filled up 2/3 of the way with water. Perhaps that explains some of the intermittent operation; I don't know.

I pretty much put my trust in Wells every trip to get me out of situations like this, and he got all our gear together while I tried to dry out and warm up. We were both slap-happy and tired and cold, and we couldn't stop laughing. Everything along the way out was hysterical, including our decision to turn the exit into a "sport trip."

Instead of going out the normal way, we took the alternate "wet" way, which we'd never tried. What the hell... we were already soaked!

So we left the cave and lived happily ever after.

## Cave Club Trends

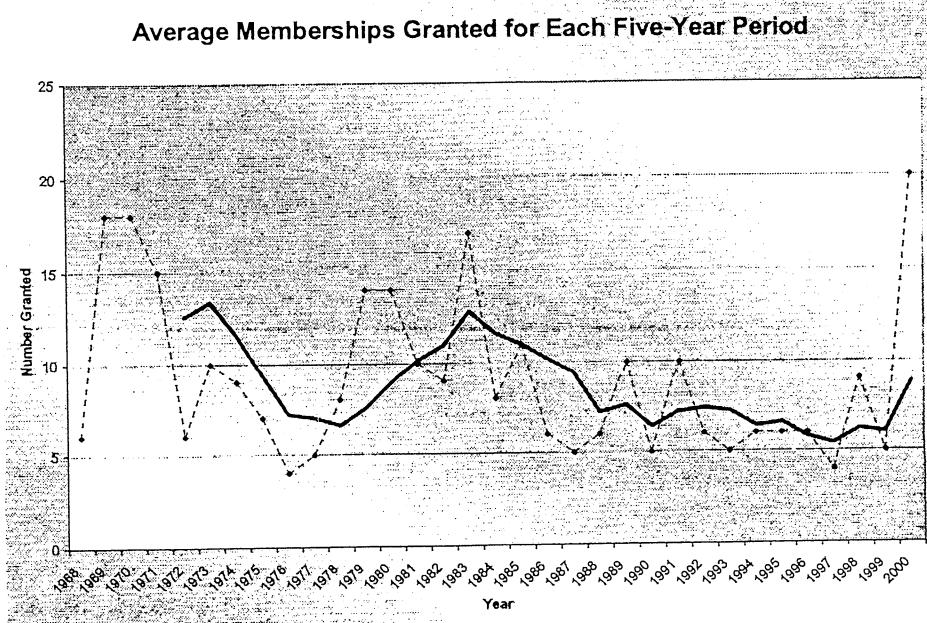
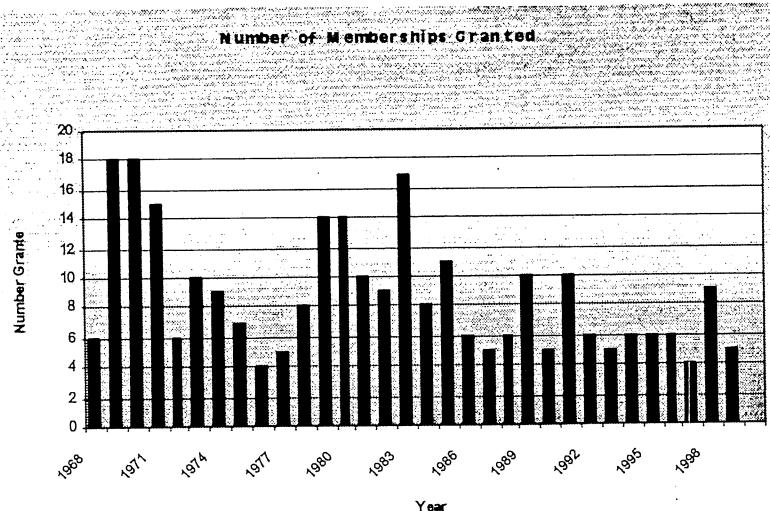
by Katherine Shelor

In the Fall semester of 1999, Lawrence Britt posted an interesting email to the listserve. It included the Roll Book Record documenting all of VPI Cave Club members from the beginning. From 1968 on, the dates of membership were included. It has been said that membership is cyclic. I wanted to see the trend for myself, so I produced the following graphs.

The first graph is simply a bar graph of the number of memberships granted per year. This graph seemed to have a declining average. To analyze this assumption,

the second graph was constructed. This shows one line of the memberships per year, and a second line (dotted) showing the average for each five years. As you can see, membership is declining to almost as low as 1976 membership! We need to see numbers like 1969, 1970 and 1983.

Note: The first recorded VPI # and membership date was 103, so before 1968, the average memberships per year appear to be 8.5.



**Quotable Quotes**  
eavesdropped and submitted by various folks



- SL to KD: "We need the special beer-holding bra attachment."
- SK to EOM: "I'll bet he bought you a mountain. Probably Mount Rainier."  
EOM to SK: "Yep. I think I'll rename it Mount Eileen."
- SW to crowd: "People have died just like that, but I never worry about it."
- AW to MB: "I slept with all of them."
- DC to RS: "That was a great award, the blue silk ribbon."  
LB to RS: "Speaking of that, I have some pictures for you."
- BG to crowd: "I'd rather it be condoms than Kirk's dirty socks."
- SL to SW: "You know what his first job is when he rolls into town? Fixing my crotch."
- DC to DB: "The tighter the crack, the better."
- DC to group: "We need to decide who's driving on this trip."  
SK to DC: "The pilot, I hope."
- CF to KS: "You should do it in DC and make money."
- JR to JR: "Do you want to suck the head? *I'm* not going to suck the head."
- SL to DW: "If there's a crack, Kirk's been in it."
- EOM to SL: "See? When Hobbes was done he walked off, sat down, and went to sleep."  
SL to EOM: "Well, that's what *I* do when I'm done."
- BG to JG: "If you fuck D\*\*\*, I'll fucking kill you!"
- SL to BB: "It was only a matter of time until he got hurt in that cave."
- JO to KD: "Is the Ed on this trip the one they call Captive Ed?"

## Way Back

submitted by Lawrence Britt

### Report Upon W. N. SOUTHERN'S CAVE

Based upon Actual Exploration and Survey by the  
V.P.I. Grotto, National Speleological Society

Made to  
LeRoy Williams  
700 Park Street  
Christiansburg, Va.

By  
Earl M. Thierry  
Blacksburg, Virginia  
September 4, 1947

[Table of Contents, List of Figures, and actual figures omitted.]

#### SOUTHERN'S CAVE INTRODUCTION

The V.P.I. Grotto is a student branch of the National Speleological Society, an organization devoted to the scientific study of caves. This Grotto, known around the Blacksburg region as The Cave Club, is composed of students and instructors at Virginia Polytechnic Institute who are interested in discovering, exploring, and investigating all caves in the surrounding area.

The V.P.I. Grotto offers a cash reward for information concerning any caves over a half-mile long and within a 30 mile radius of Blacksburg. A prize of \$5 for every mile of cave is offered, with the stipulation that the cave must be previously unknown to the Grotto. (See Fig 1.)

On June 14, 1947, Mr. LeRoy Williams of Christiansburg, Va. informed the Cave Club of a hitherto unknown cave on the farm of Mr. W. N. Southern one and one-half miles south of [cave location omitted]. The cave had never been visited by a member of the N.S.S., but it was supposed to be quite large, with many rooms and several long passages.

#### INVESTIGATION

On June 22, 1947, an advance party of 5 Grotto members followed Mr. Williams' directions and located the cave without any difficulty. The cave was situated in Elbrook Dolomite and was entered by way of a small hole 2 feet wide and 3 feet high. A sheer drop of 25 feet just inside the entrance necessitated the use of a rope, all other passages were negotiated without assistance. (See Fig. 3.) The cave was completely explored and, due to the difficulty of estimating distances underground, was thought to approach the one-half mile minimum of the Club's reward offer.

#### SURVEY AND DETAILED EXAMINATION

On July 20, 1947, a large party of Grotto members returned to the cave for the purpose of making a survey and examining in detail the various features of the cave. A rope ladder was used to negotiate the 25 foot drop at the entrance. A surveying party of four then proceeded to survey the cave with a Brunton pocket transit and a steel tape while two other parties examined the passages and calcite formations in more detail.

#### EXTENT OF THE CAVERN

The main passage of the cave runs in a general north-northwest direction and the far end of this main passage is 635 feet from the entrance and north 39 degrees 30 minutes west of the entrance. Due to the 25 foot drop and the gently sloping floor of the cave, the far end lies 85 feet lower than the entrance. The entrance is on the south slope of a small hill so the extreme end of the cave lies more than 100 feet below the surface of the ground. The total length of the passages is 1335 feet

#### HYDROLOGY

The cave has no stream flowing through it, but, in spite of this fact, it is extremely damp and contains much seepage from the red clay soil above. The floor is flooded to a depth of several inches in two places and the last half of the main passage is lined with several inches of wet, red clay which is very viscous and plastic.

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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.

## **FORMATIONS**

In spite of the profusion of sticky clay in most of the passages, the cave has numerous small calcite formations of great beauty. Most of these formations are a muddy brown in color but several white crystalline stalactites and stalagmites are found in the main passage, while the left wall near Station 48 is covered with a glistening coat of white flowstone. The cave also contains several small formations of rimstone, but no helectites, oolopholites, oolites, or cave pearls are present.

## **BIOLOGY**

No cave life was observed, even the usual bats and salamanders were absent. No insect traps were set so it is possible that the cave contains some minute insect life that is not easily observed.

## **FOLKLORE**

The numerous initials and markings on the walls of the cave are ample evidence that the cavern is well known to the people living in the immediate vicinity. However, no folklore was volunteered by the owner or any neighboring farmers, so evidently none of the usual tales of murder, suicide, or buried treasure are linked with this cave. The cave had no specific name so the Grotto named it after the owner, Mr. W. N. Southern.

## **COMMERCIAL POSSIBILITIES**

The formations present in this cave are numerous but so small in size that any commercialization of the cave as a tourist attraction is extremely improbable. The small size of the passages and the generally muddy condition of the cave further decrease its commercial possibilities. The drop at the entrance and the muddy interior also prevent its use as a storehouse.

**From the Signout**  
 compiled by Kirk Digby and Steve LePera

VPI cavers and their guests logged in 2876.5 caver hours from 5/1/1999 to 4/25/2000.

5/8/99	Starnes	Eric Stanley, Dave Colatosti, Chris Garguilo	These lead climbs were so sketchy... we could hear the Indiana Jones music playing.
5/15/99	Pig Hole	Kirk Digby, John Deighan, Phil Benchoff, Dave Lamb	Caving with John is Superfun!
5/22/99	Tawney's	Joe Thompson, Rosie Thompson, Joel Bergstein, Ruth Groling, Matt Burnett	Why can't FEMALE nerd cavers burn their shirts as a light source?
6/19/99	DMC	Sandy Knapp, Joe Zokaites, Ray Sira	"Sandy, your left breast is flashing."
7/10/99	James	Chris Rourke, Matt Finarella	Matt went lame and Rourke, well he's always lame.
7/12/99	Pig Hole	Kent Wilson, Steve LePera	"It's over there...."
7/22/99	Newberry's	Kirk Digby, Steve LePera, Chris Rourke, Damian from Poland	Polish cavers are much better than Polish rope.
7/25/99	Scooter's Boneyard	Steve LePera, Eileen O'Malley, Matt Burnett	We dug and found mud!! I mean we didn't find anything. Yeah. Stay away from our mud damnit!
8/7/99	DMC	Steve Wells, Steve LePera	Snake rescue team at it again.
9/17/99	Miller's Cove	Rick Altman, Janet Altman, Kirk Digby	I can't believe we have no beer.
9/18/99	Stay High	John Deighan, Mike McAvoy, Katherine Shelor, J. Philips, Beth Geiger, Seth Pritchett, Brad Atkinson	We came, we saw, we got muddy....
10/9/99	Smokehole	Beth Geiger, Becca Geiger, John Deighan	Becca says carbide tastes like Pop rocks. "Ouch....damnit!"
10/10/99	Links	Chris Hibshman, Marie Holder, Matt Burnett	Chris did the high way, Marie tried the middle, and I took the low road.
1/13/00	Becky Knob & Morgads Pit	Wil Orndorff, Virgil Brack, Matt Burnett, Steve Wells	3 hours of caving. 3 hours of driving
1/23/00	New Castle Murder Hole	John Deighan, Andrew Oberhardt, Jason Obenschain, Jeff Leech, Pete Sauvigne	If you go that way, you probably won't even break your leg.
1/29/00	Clover Hollow	John Deighan, Eric Stanley, Jason Obenschain, Clewn Taylor, Tim Bratton	No fair padding your in-cave time by taking an hour to tie your seat!
3/24/00	DMC	Steve Wells, Steve LePera	See below....
3/25/00	DMC	Ben Schwartz, Chris Rourke, Eric Stanley, Matt Burnett, Alison Williams	Beer will be purchased... oh yes, it will be purchased.
4/1/00	Wilburn Valley Cave	Jim Pugh, Gary Movak, Bess Tenant, Chuck Waller	A real cave trip.
4/22/00	Newberry's	Kirk Digby, Chip Mullins, Ed Fortney, Mike Malsbury, Kevin Rock, Jason Obenschain, Bobby Zokaites	"It's a good thing we had Bobby along to watch out for me!" - Sgnt. Fortney