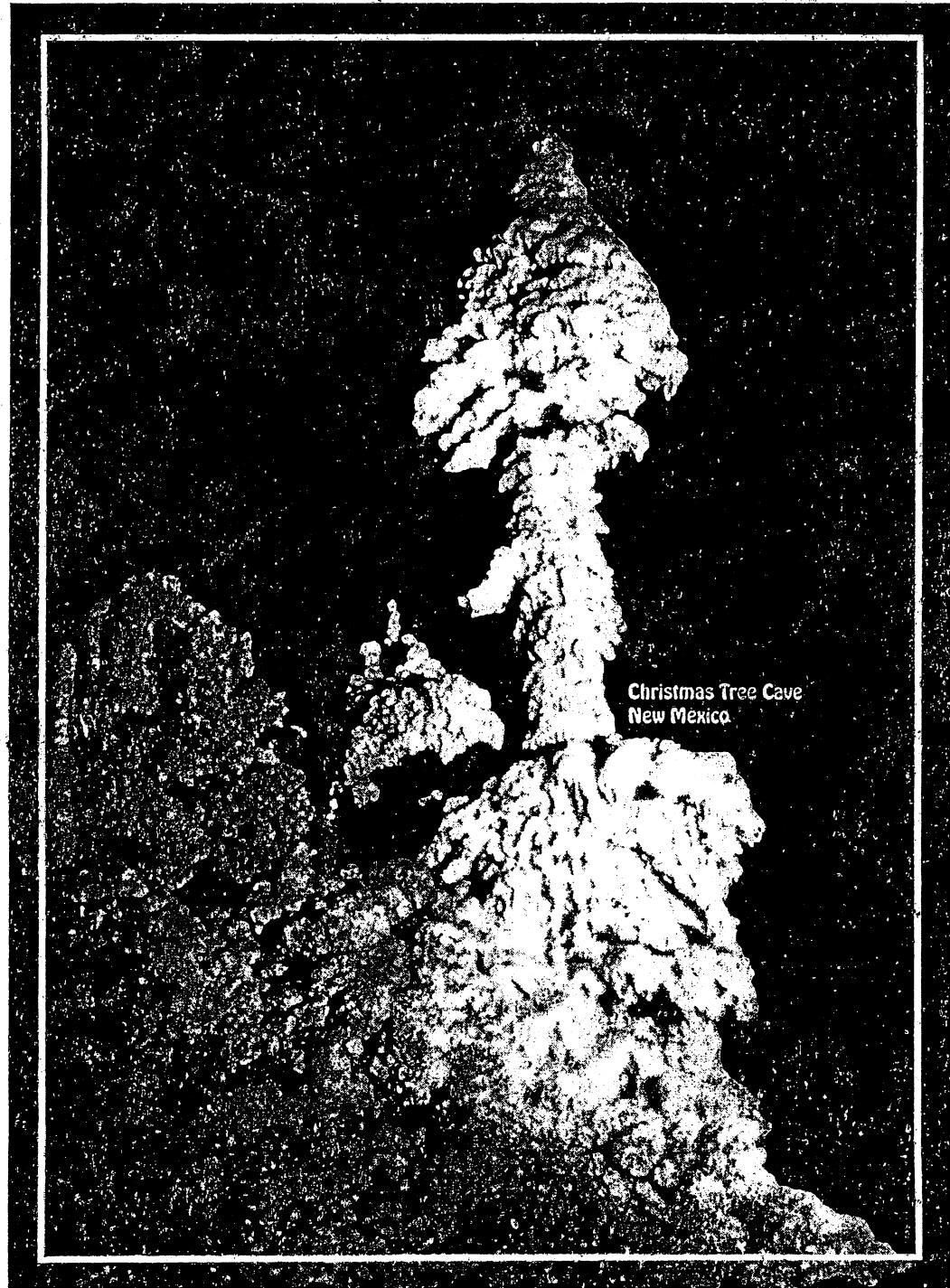


The Tech Troglodyte



Fall '00

The Tech Troglyote

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

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Cover Photo	Sandy Knapp

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The Tech Troglyote is published each semester (assuming that people bother to submit articles, which they often don't) by the VPI Cave Club, a student grotto of the NSS. All submissions, subscriptions, inquiries, donations, and comments should be sent to: Trog Editor, VPI Cave Club, P.O. Box 558, Blacksburg, VA 24060-0558.

Editor's Note

by the editor (duh!).

Well it's about time for my every-so-often pitch for articles. Of course you all know what I'm going to say, right? But here it is anyway. The *Trog* is an easy newsletter; it will print just about anything from anyone. Comics, articles, sketches, poems, love stories, horror tales, and photos of your cat in a cave. These are all acceptable contributions.

Note to prospective members:

You are required to submit an article of some sort to the *Trog* editor (that's me, remember?) as part of your membership requirements. In most cases it's a trip report, but if you feel like getting

creative, knock your socks off. However I must ask that you discuss your great idea with me first, just to make sure you're going in the right direction.

Do not be offended if I send your fabulous masterpiece back and ask for changes. I'm not usually looking for you to spend outlandish amounts of time, just that you spruce up the article by highlighting a few key points. (Do not, I implore you, go to Andy Yeagle for help in this matter.)

So with that said, please remember your favorite newsletter (the *Trog*) the next time something interesting crosses your path in a cave.



**Ice-capped trees along New Mexico's Guadalupe Mountains.
Photo by Amanda Stiles.**

See? Amanda gets *Trog* credit just for sending me this photo.

My Trip to Murder Hole (In Excruciating Detail)

by Kevin Rock

At the Friday meeting, it was announced that there would be two vertical trips going out on Saturday. One was going to Newberry's, led by Chris Hibshman and Kirk Digby, and the other was a trip to Newcastle Murder Hole, which was led by Steve LePera and Chris Rourke. Since it seemed like most of the new trainees were going on the trip to Newberry's, I decided to be "smart" and go on the Murder Hole trip. This was unfortunate for Chris and Steve because I was the only one interested in going on their trip. I'm sure they would have loved to sleep late and relax on Saturday instead of caving. Luckily for me, while we were deciding if we really wanted to go caving, someone else asked to come along. Tom Calhoun, an old VPI member, was visiting and wanted to go on a cave trip before returning home.

Bright and early on Saturday morning, we gathered at Signout and piled into my car and headed out to the cave. Once at the cave, LePera noticed that he didn't have his caving suit and clothes. This, it seems, was a blessing on our part for he was thinking of leading the trip into some muddy passages. Since he had to wear the clothes he had on, we were spared these sections of the cave. After talking to Mr. Sizer for a while and rigging the entrance, we were in the cave. Our plan was to go through the climbing section and then maybe rappel Double Wells. Once over the straddle pits and into the Meander Room, we dropped all our vertical gear because we would be coming out of the hole to the left if everything went well. Little did we know.

Once everyone was ready we headed off through the right passage and down the Elevator. This is a fun climb because it uses mostly friction between the floor and ceiling. At the bottom we attempted to work our way in the direction of the Climbing Section. As it turned out, this was harder than we thought. After a while of caving and much backtracking we made it to Slot 43. From here we weren't sure where to go. Chris went up to the right and found what looked like the remnants of a cat, which we lovingly named Fluffy. After a few minutes of wandering we

decided to go back the way we came to try a different route. About halfway back to the Elevator we started climbing up. At one point there was a little pinch where you had to squeeze between the two walls and under a rock. While I was going through the tight spot, someone found that the rock above me was loose and I decided to wiggle through as fast as I could. A little higher up Steve, found a large rock that was just waiting to be used as a portable handhold. Once everyone was up to his level and a rock call was

I DIDN'T FEEL ANYTHING UNDER ME AND HIT THE GROUND WITH A THUMP.

made, the rock was rolled out of its position so that, in the future, no one would have to see just how strong that hold was. Up and up we climbed. Then we popped back into the main passage. We came back up between the Elevator and the Meander Room. That was definitely not the climbing section. We decided to go down to the Climbing Section exit so we would find exactly where the two passages connect.

Once back to our gear, we started down the Climbing Section. A little ways down you get to what is called the Toilet Bowl. I was following Chris and was told to just slide down. Unfortunately I didn't notice that the edge was undercut just a little so when I started my "slide" I didn't feel anything under me and hit the ground with a loud **thump**. It wasn't very far of a drop but it certainly did hurt. I was a little more careful after that. Next we went down through the Rabbit Hole and worked our way down to the stream passage. About halfway down I looked below and could see something white. I figured it was just another animal, for we had seen lots of bones and skulls on the trip. (Not very reassuring, I might add.) As I got closer I realized what this white pile was. It was our beloved

Fluffy that Chris had found earlier. It turned out that we were right back where we started, at the Climbing Section. Oh, well. It was fun going that way anyway.

We decided to go up the Elevator, but we followed the stream before going up. We went past the sumps and followed Chris into an interesting climb above a pool of water in which we couldn't see the bottom. While clinging to the rock I thought to myself, "If I fall I'm going to land in that water and then the cave monsters are going to get me. This isn't good." From what I've heard there are cave monsters. That's why Dave Colatosti wants to send me into the water-filled hole in New Starnes. I mean, what's one less trainee? Luckily I made the climb and continued to follow Chris. Once on the other side we went

through a few small crawls and some climbs only to have to turn around. I would like to note that at this point Chris was leading the trip and was actually pushing holes and trying climbs. I guess the Pimento Cheese finally kicked in. Mmmmm... Pimento.... We went back to the Elevator and climbed back up. Once in the main passage, we crossed the Butt Ledge and peered into Double Wells (not to be confused with Steve Wells). At this point in the trip we were pretty tired and decided to head back out. So, after five hours underground we collected our gear and climbed out of the cave. Once changed, Mr. Sizer once again greeted us. We sat around, enjoyed the day, and talk for a while. We eventually returned home, and after I took a hot shower and ate some food, I fell fast asleep.

Stay High for Dummies

by Mike Malsbury

If you haven't been to Stay High yet, I recommend it. Although it's a vertical cave, you can bypass most of the ascents up rope. Overall, it's a pretty easy cave with some nice sights and climbs.

Eileen O'Malley, Sandy Knapp, Mark Eisenbees, and I recently went there. At the cave entrance, I changed slowly to avoid being the first into the cave and having to rig. It worked. The only problem was that I had been to the cave the most recently. I was expected to recognize and know the route. That didn't last long.

We found ourselves in a room with a handful of obvious exits. None of them ended up working. The group's confidence in me had started to falter. Thankfully, Mark stumbled across the exit, literally. It was a hole in the floor.

He was okay, and we started searching for the waterfall that leads out of the cave. After following several streams, some deep and unavoidable, we came to what looked to be it. Maybe to make up for not rigging, they made me climb. I ended up knocking down a lot of chirt and loose rock; not a good sign.

"This can't be the right passage," I thought to myself.

"Does it go?" Mark asked from below.

"This sucks," I thought to myself. "The passage is too narrow. I don't remember having to

get this wet. I don't remember having to crawl through the water with a rock sticking into my spine. There's no way this could be the right passage." Twenty minutes passed. "This sucks. There's no way this is right."

"Is this the right waterfall?" asked Mark, who was waiting patiently from below.

"Umm..... I don't know. Come up and see if it looks familiar." At this point, my inner monologue packed up and left.

Mark climbed up through the waterfall, knocking loose rock and detritus down behind him. Since the climb was sketchy, I helped belay him. Another twenty minutes passed. We both agreed that this wasn't the right passage.

Mark helped belay me down, but he was stuck at the top without a belay and nothing to rig to. Innovative guy that he is, he wedged a rock between the floor and the wall and rigged a pull-down line to it. If the safety committee can do it, it must be valid technique.

We found the correct waterfall, and to our chagrin, immediately recognized it as such. We walked to the exit through nice open passage. My inner monologue even returned to berate me some.

If you want to go on a Stay High trip, ask us. We have the tourist route memorized. Of course, if we get off course, all the passages are going to look familiar to us.



"Okay... it's 'stalactite' when they hang down. It's 'stalagmite' when they point up. But what do you call it when you see one sideways like this?"

Quotables

uttered by the unsuspecting, submitted by the evil eavesdroppers

SL to crowd: "Pretty much anything fun you do to a woman is illegal in Virginia."

stranger to CJ: "So when did this nude thing start?"

CJ replies: "At birth."

MB to SL: "Once again, I went to Smokehole and came out without pants."

EOM to SL: "I wasn't banking on Reggie wearing a long t-shirt."

SL replies: "It's not long enough for Reggie."

ME to LB: "I'll smell it if you lick it."

SK to crowd: "Well if you know Suzie, you know what to do!"

SL to CM: "Yours is virgin, so we have to use it and get really dirty."

KE to ES: "That's how easy I am."

CJ to BE: "Are you going out for men or wine?"

BE replies: "Hey, as long as it tastes good...."

EOM to crowd: "Oh, well. I guess I'll just knock the balls around some."

JW to crowd: "If a fat gay guy can do it on TV, I can do it here."

RR to NO: "I'll do you one more time, and then I gotta do TJ."

SW to MB: "Philip is buttering his ass and Wil is rubbing KY on my pole."

JW to crowd: "Wow, now I've sat on Cheryl's lap naked."

BA to MB: "We were standing by the fire and Joe just turned to me and smiled, so I said, 'Well, it looks like I'm going to bed now.'"

OTR: Not Just for the Old Anymore

by Michael Cole

Every year cavers from Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania gather together over Labor Day Weekend to cave, camp, compete, and party with old and new friends. It has been an ongoing tradition since 1950. Though many attendees still cave during the weekend, many are there just for the party. People are bringing non-cavers to OTR and changing the whole atmosphere. OTR needs more cavers, especially those new to caving. There are already plenty of old farts there; all it needs now is more young cavers, especially from VPI.

OTR stands for Old Timers Reunion. Since 1978, The Roberson Association (TRA) has sponsored it. Prior to 1978, several different organizations were responsible for holding OTR. Currently OTR is held in Davis, WV, just outside Elkins, WV. TRA purchased and developed a piece of land there where Old Timers has been held for the past several years and will inevitably be held for years to come. Developments made to the property include pavilions, shower houses and the extensive sauna section located along the river that runs along the backside of the campground.

So what does one do at OTR you ask? Well there are several things to do besides drinking and partying. Though not as popular as in previous years, people go caving. There are several very interesting caves located near the TRA campsite. Such caves as Bowden, Sinks, Cass, Stillhouse, Trout, New Trout, Hamilton, and many more. One of my favorites is Sharps. The entrance is a crack in the ground that is about two feet wide and seven to eight feet deep. Once inside you climb down a huge breakdown pile into the stream that runs through the bottom of the cave. Walking upstream will bring you to a very cool waterfall that is about twelve feet high.

A cave I always end up at during OTR is The Sinks of Gandy Creek (Sinks). It is basically a stream that runs under part of the mountain. Some portions can get deep, but most doesn't rise above your knees. The passage is fairly large, but you are in the water almost throughout the cave. If entering the cave upstream, a cool way to

exit the cave on the downstream end is through the "water" exit. I never understood this because any way out of the cave involves water, but the "water" exit involves swimming because it is too deep for most to walk through. Swimming in coveralls or heavy wool is quite an experience. And yes, the water is very cold. Though not very interesting, a through trip may take a slow group only thirty minutes.

Close to Sinks is a more interesting cave known as Stillhouse. It involves more mud and a few tighter passages. Though not very big, there are a lot of cool little side passages to play around in. There is probably enough cave to keep a steady passed group busy for an hour or two. Stillhouse is located within minutes of Sinks, and a good recommendation is to go to Stillhouse and get muddy, then do Sinks to wash it all off.

The Trout Rock Caves are not too far from Old Timers. These are three cave owned by NSS that are right on the side of the road on the side of the mountain. There is Trout Cave, New Trout Cave, and Hamilton Cave. Hamilton is my favorite. It is basically a big maze. Though average passage is only five feet high, the floor is soft clay so crawling around isn't too bad. Hidden within the maze of Hamilton is the museum or clay room. It has many names, actually, but it's basically a room where people make things out of clay. I won't give any away, but I'll just say some very talented people have been to this room, and not all clay figures are appropriate for young children. Trout and New Trout are your basic caves. They've got some interesting passages, and Trout is fairly historical in that the Confederate Army used it for saltpeter mining during the Civil War. Also, excavations in the caves has resulted in finding bone deposits of Pleistocene mammals, including a saber-toothed tiger, jaguar, and giant cheetah.

All the above caves mentioned are horizontal. Though getting to any Trout Rock cave during a snowy winter can be a challenge, especially Trout Cave. But for those vertical cavers, fear not, there is vertical to be done near Old Timers. Though I haven't been to any, I know they exist.

From all that I've heard, Cass Cave is very interesting. It has some vertical in it. Windy Run Cave is also vertical and close to Old Timers.

For those not wanting to cave, there are numerous competitions held at the campsite. Rope climbing, obstacle course, survey course, cable ladder climbing, carbide lamp assembly, beer (or non-alcoholic beverage for those under 21) chugging are some of the many contests held. VPI has always made a strong showing in almost all competitions over the past several years, especially in winning the overall grotto participation award. Many VPI members win first place in some contests, usually survey contest and in the different categories of rope running (mechanical, knots, and different age groups). And cool prizes are always awarded at the award ceremony Sunday night. Ropes, vertical gear, general caving gear, camping gear, and other odds and ends are given out. Some times they give out "OTR bucks," which is basically money you can spend at the vendors.

The vendors are another great reason to go to Old Timers. Haven't bought that frog system you've been wanting yet? Well where better to buy it than from one of the vendors at OTR? The best of the best in caving equipment are there and will suite you up with whatever you want and or can afford. Can't afford gear? Another reason to come to OTR. Participate in contests to win that rack you always wanted but couldn't afford.

After a long day of caving, one thing a caver does best is party. The party at Old Timers tops all caver parties. For starters, there is plenty of beer on tap and semi-sober individuals to pour for you so you don't have to worry about being too drunk to pour your own beer. There is also plenty of music. Saturday and Sunday night there is usually a live band playing on the dance floor.

If not, there is plenty of recorded music to crank onto the dance floor and throughout the campsite. Believe me, it's loud. It can usually be heard on the opposite side of the campsite. And the dance floor is a lot of fun. No skill required to dance with other cavers, because they look just as stupid as you do dancing in an alcoholic haze. All this is located in the main pavilion. Just outside the pavilion is where the infamous fire is located. OTR is where the phrase "more wood" was started. The fire at Old Timers is huge, or used to be before the great fire builders of VPI were kicked out of Old Timers for supposedly building the fire too big. Can a caver ever have a big enough fire? Though the fire is still fairly large, just remember when you see it, it used to be bigger.

OTR parties traditionally last long into the night into the early morning. You used to wake up the next morning and go see who didn't make it back to the campsite and was passed out by the campfire. But this past Old Timers was not as active. By midnight on Friday and Saturday, the campfire ring was practically empty along with the dance floor. I don't know what was wrong with everyone. It wasn't the VPI folks, that's for sure; we were still up drinking our share of the beer. Perhaps it was the bad music, or security holding back the size of the fire, or maybe its just that the current crowd at Old Timers is too old and not able to party throughout the night anymore.

So to all you trainees and OTR virgins, Old Timers 2001 is waiting for you. If you're not a member of TRA, no problem. There are plenty of VPI members who can sponsor you into OTR. With your help we can turn Old Timers back into the good old event it used to be; caving all day and partying all night.

Grotto Grapevine

by A.I. Cartwright

BABY BOOM

On April 26, Molly Lucier and Mike Newsome introduced Birch Lee Ambrose to the club. See Birch's first trip report in this issue.

Not to be outdone, Patty Kitchin and Mark Leach announced the arrival of Benjamin Russell Leach on July 19. Ben weighted in at 8 pounds, 13 ounces, at 21 inches long.

As if two boys weren't enough, Hoss and Laura Leiffer had Derek Owen Leiffer on September 12. Derek was 8 pounds, 4 ounces, at another 21 inches long. Derek was kind enough to stop by the Bat Ranch's Halloween party the following month.

Luckily, there's a girl on the way. Craig Ferguson and Katherine Shelor held a hasty wedding in October in preparation for Little Elvis, who's expected in March.



If you showed up five minutes late, you missed it.
Photo by Eileen O'Malley.

In true caver fashion, the bride and groom exchanged vows in record time to get straight to the partying.

SPEAKING OF WEDDINGS....

Chris Hibshman is days away from marrying his high school sweetheart, Michelle. Planning was poor, however, because the club's VP is missing the first meeting of the new semester. Michelle claims she doesn't mind all the time he spends caving; it gives her some quiet time at home.

Jerry and Joan Redder married off Allison to her long-time boyfriend Greg. The small wedding took place on the Redder's porch.



The happy couple, married at last.
Photo by someone at the wedding.

Carl Bern and Amy Johnson are finally going legit after years of following each other around out west. They plan to marry this May in West Virginia. Rest assured, however, that the fancy napkins are Amy's mom's idea.

Dave Colatosti and Patricia Feely have set their date for June. Rumor has it, Dave wanted to make it official before Patricia wised up and changed her mind. They'll get married on their property on the outskirts of Blacksburg.

F*CK ENGLAND DAY

Natalie Serbu and Jeff Jablonski hosted their annual Fourth of July weekend bash at their beach house on Emerald Isle. pure t mommicked played at a local bar, so the group got a chance to dance to some cool tunes. Days were saved for windsurfing, sea kayaking, golfing, eating, and general lounging about. Fireworks on the beach are cool as long as you stay out of target range.

VAR AND VAR

Sandy Knapp forced yet another event on the club, so VPI hosted Spring VAR at a campground at the river. There were plenty of caving trips, but unfortunately not enough beer Saturday night. Despite this, Sandy achieved her main goal of the weekend: the campground didn't flood. The crowd seemed to have a good time and danced late into the night to the tunes of Las

Cucarachas de la Muerte, VPI's attempt to prove we can do more than just throw wood on a fire.

The cockroach band was so good that they were invited to play at the following Fall VAR in West Virginia. This time, though, the band site wasn't as good and the crowd wasn't as interested. Perhaps that was okay by Matt Burnett, whose head was still pounding from the previous night's entertainment.

OTR/NoTR

VPI walked away from the OTR awards ceremony with the Overall Grotto Participation award again this year. VPI folks took many first, second, and third place prizes in the vertical contests, again as usual. This crowd is obviously not drinking enough beer on Friday night. Chris Hibshman and Sue Setzler won the individual overall award for women and men, respectively. TJ and Naomi Ordnorff showed the other kids how rope running is *really* done.

Dave Colatosti celebrated his last Old Timers as an unmarried man. He was very involved in the More Wine Party, and ended up puking in a porta-a-john.

Meanwhile, the original crowd of More Winers partied at the campsite several miles down the road. The weather was more forgiving this year, so the "who can get their vehicle stuck in the mud" competition was cancelled.

CONVENTION

This year's convention, held at the OTR site in West Virginia, was a boon for everyone. Ben Shwartz and Mike Ficco blew everyone out of the water with their announcement of Omega Cave, the location of which is TOP secret.

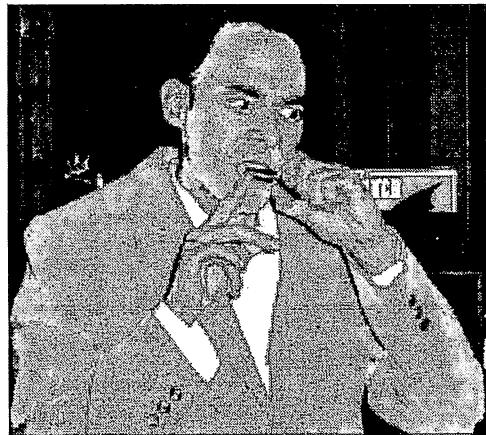
Carl Bern's photo of Amy Johnson coming through a crawl won him a blue ribbon in the Photo Salon, and Ray Sira received Honorable Mention for the creation of his Why To Cave map.

In addition to placing in some of the vertical contests, VPI won the Medley competition. They just wanted to make sure Carl and Amy know which is the *real* grotto.

HALLOWEEN PARTY

This year's party, hosted as usual at the Bat Ranch, was the biggest it's been in for quite

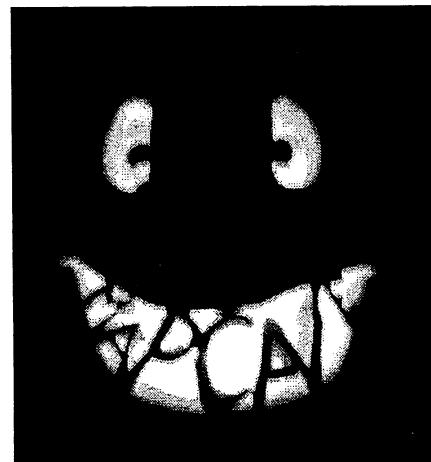
awhile. *Las Cucarachas de la Muerte* played until the wee hours, and kept such cave club characters as the Scotsman and Charlotte the Harlot in a dancing frenzy. Rumor has it that the band is about to break up, because Steve LePera wants to launch his solo career playing the mouth harp.



David Byrne never played so well.
Photo by Nathan Sharp.

Among party attendees were Scott the mechanics, a magician, Kurt Cobain (complete with shotgun), Little Red Riding Hood (pursued by the wolf), a bat sticker, two Jesi, and some very scary-looking women. (I didn't know women's shoes *came* in that size.)

This year also brought out the pumpkin-carving talent. Ben Shwartz and his wife Cori provided their contribution.



Even the pumpkins were dressed well this year.
Photo by Nathan Sharp.

TRAVELIN' FOOLS

Cheryl Jones joined Bill Stringfellow for a week-long rail car trip. Apparently the cars are small, giving the two ample time to get cozy. String kept

the SIVTAC listserv readers entertained with daily reports.

Bob Simonds and Cletus Lee packed their "funny-looking bikes" and headed for Central Europe. Why Central Europe? Because they're crazy, that's why. They totalled 600 miles, got lots of amusing attention on their bikes, and claimed to have a wonderful time. They also think American drivers should take lessons from the Hungarians.

In keeping with the tradition of skipping out on families during the holidays, a group of mostly VPI spent Thanksgiving week caving in New Mexico. Read their journal in this issue.

Another tradition, the SIVTAC winter weekend abroad, herded cavers to Paris this year. Reports are just now coming in, so stay tuned....

THEY COME, THEY GO....

Natalie Serbu has moved into a friend's house in D.C. and has begun some serious job-hunting while she temps. She seems to be enjoying the excitement of the big city life. Despite leaving Jeff at the beach, Nat and Jeff are still an item, much to the disappointment of many caver men.

Kim Hansen has moved out of Dave Cinsavich's house and into her own apartment across town. Perhaps the high schoolers dropping their cigarette butts in the yard became too much. This leaves Dave free to join his family's cruise as a swinging single. (Moms, hide your daughters.)

Meanwhile, Kirk Digby has moved his junk into Pam Mohr's place. They somehow managed to fit it all, including the two cats.

Amanda Stiles returned to the U.S., but not to Blacksburg. She's living with the folks in NOVA looking for either a cool new job or a cool new grad school.

Kathy Lamb has officially moved to Blacksburg. She's shacking up at Bob Simond's place on top

of the mountain and adding to the pet count.

Signout has moved to Steve Wells' house. Matt Burnett and Mark Eisenbees keep their eye on things now that Kirk Digby has given up his duties.

Steve doesn't seem to mind having Signout, mostly because he's never home anymore. He joined up with Joe Thompson as a travelling bio-hazard, cleaning nuclear reactors for weeks at a time.



Wells is stylin' in his plastic yellow suit.

Photo by Joe Thompson.

Jason Obenshain had to return to NOVA, but luckily still keeps VPI cavers informed about every single detail of his daily life through the club listserv.

After much scientific study and careful observation, a team of top scientists declare that Wil Orndorff is still The Bastard.

DON'T GET HURT!

In September, many VPI cavers attended an NCRC Orientation to Cave Rescue. Matt Burnett helped organize the two-day event which took place at the Newport Rec Center. The class learned some basics about the cave rescue hierarchy, practiced stokes-handling techniques, and participated in a practice rescue in Tawney's

carbide \kar-bd\ n: a compound of carbon with another element

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What do you expect from a CD that came free with a box of cereal? -Ray

Cave. With any luck, VPI can stay on good terms with the NCRC folks.

Wil Orndorff got himself into a nasty predicament while canoeing, caving, and playing in Pennsylvania when he accidentally poked his leg with a rusty wire. Strangely, the alcohol he put into his system that night wasn't able to stave off the infection, and he wound up in the hospital with a swollen leg. The leg is now fine, but I'm not sure about the ego. (He didn't take kindly to, "Hey, it's pus-boy!")

BRIDGE DAY 2000

VPI managed to put together their own Bridge Day team this year, and actually got a spot on the bridge. The final crew: Steve LePera, Craig Roberts, Mark Eisenbees, Eileen O'Malley, Dave Colatosti, Ko Takamizawa, Eric Stanley, Pete Sauvigne, Mark Ruocco, Kirk Digby, Jim Pugh, Ray Sira, and Philip Balister. Pam Mohr and Matt Mead were on hand to shuttle the rappellers up to the bridge after each drop. Communication worked well as there were several amateur radio geeks on the team, the most recent being Mark E. (KG4KCN - Kill Cave Nerds).

After much scientific study and careful observation, a team of top scientists declare that Melba Williams does indeed prance.

THE REAL NEW MILLENNIUM

There were three major club parties for New Year's Eve. In Blacksburg, Dave Colatosti and Patricia Feely offered ice skating on their pond as a fun alternative to travelling. Joan Johnson and Ko Takamizawa hosted the Elvis Grotto annual to-do, and of course Ed and Lynn Richardson held their usual event. At the Richardson's, Sandy Peterson took a spill on her way to bed one night, and spent the next few days hobbling on loaned crutches. Once home, she went to the doctor and discovered she had fractured her leg in two places! Ah, the beauty of alcohol-induced numbness.

ODDS -N- ENDS

Paige Baldassaro bought herself a motorcycle. It's probably too late to consider her a dropout, be she's definitely sporting a leather jacket nowadays.

Lynn Pirie has graduated and is now working at an elementary school in Pulaski teaching Special Ed courses.

The club gained two new members. Kevin Rock and Mike Cole join the ranks of voting trainees, still worthy of abuse but able to dish out a bit of their own. Kevin has taken it seriously, and we can't seem to make him take a weekend off from caving.

Carol Zokaites finally got some state funding for Project Underground. She plans to share office with Wil Orndorff in Radford. Will they actually get work done, or spend the days chatting about their favorite cave trips?

After much scientific study and careful observation, a team of top scientists declare that Matt Burnett is still a total geekboy. Fortunately his reputation is saved by having a sexy bullet head.

Eileen O'Malley joined the ranks of vehicle-rollers in August. She hydroplaned off I-81 and did a few loops before landing upside down. She was unhurt, but was suddenly interested in having all the latest safety features in her replacement car.

Steve LePera and Philip Balister donned ugly spandex to compete in bicycle races this past summer. The two managed to eventually cross the finish line, and neither of them were dead last. They did look pretty dead-tired by the end, though. Next summer will show if their biking is real or just a phase.

VPI has bought the domain name www.vpicave-club.org. Check out the club site from the new, improved URL!

First Trip Report

by Birch Lee Ambrose

Hi. This is a report on my first cave trip. My name is Birch Lee Ambrose, and I am Molly Lucifer and Mike Newsome's son. It started last Wednesday, April 26 (2000). I was hanging out inside the cave, where I'd been for about nine months. I'd been thinking that it was about time to leave, but I wasn't looking forward to the tight squeeze I knew was on the way to the entrance. I was still waiting, because the entire entrance passage was blocked off by a sump. At about quarter to twelve, the sump started to drain. The passage walls seemed to get tighter, too. I decided to head out.

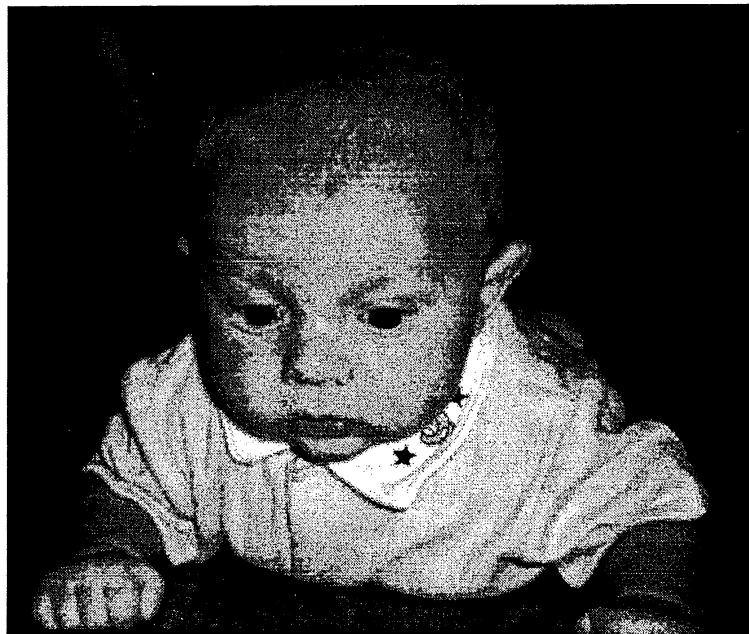
First, I checked out the passage. I could see that it was not a straight tunnel, like it is in some other cases. Instead, the opening where you first enter is a transverse ovoid. Then, the passage changes to be elongated in the up-and-down direction, before changing to a circle at the exit. The entire passage is very tight, but there is a very tight and solid squeeze where you have to pass the sacrum and the front pubic bones at the same time.

The pressure to leave was getting very intense, so I headed out. I entered the passage at a side angle, twisted to accommodate the midsection, flexed my head down to get through the squeeze at the sacrum, and ended up coming out face down. Since the outlet faces more backward than downward, I also had to bend a bit and come out at an angle facing Molly's back. After my head was out, I had to dip and twist my shoulders to follow a similar path – but since my head was already out, this amounted to doing a very gymnastic head-body twist.

It was a tough trip, but I finally got out at 12:12 on Friday morning (April 28). There were a whole bunch of people there, and they were very into checking me out to see if I made it OK.

I weighed 8 pounds, 9 ounces, and they measured me at 21.5 inches. A few minutes later, some of my caver friends (Steve and Steve) came in to say hello and take a few photos.

Like many great trips, there were a lot of times during the trip where I was pretty uncomfortable – but I'm really glad I did it!



Birch on eyeball level with the Bat Ranch cats.
Photo by Mike Newsome.

Breathing Cave

by Dale Parrott

On July 7, 1967, Bob Vocke of D.C. Grotto, Jim Dawson, and myself left for Breathing Cave, located in Bath County, Virginia. After only thirty minutes on the road, the temperature gauge on Dawson's Ramblin' Wreck read "EXPLODE." Replenishing the radiator's water supply carried us another five minutes. Finally we figured out the wire lead to the thermostat had come off and was touching the engine block! After spending a couple of hours in Staunton looking for a store that had something to quench our thirsts, we headed for the cave.

Mr. Lockridge, the owner, kindly gave us permission to enter. On the road going up Chestnut Ridge to the cave, we hit a bump and to our great dismay watched the gas gauge needle swing from full to nearly empty. We expected the ground to be covered with gas, but not a spilled drop was to be found. The car was still going so we watched as the gas needle swung from half full to full and back to empty again. So what if the car was running on air?

After our merry adventures in the Rambler, we turned our attention to the cave. We assembled some rope for the descent into the second siphon and entered the cave. We made our way through without incident to the "Serpentine Way" where we chimneied up about 60 feet and crossed over the passage. Even with the belay provided, it was difficult to make that big four foot step across the chasm.

From there is it a slippery climb up a mud slope to a crawl that opens into a window. One must bridge over a fissure passage on the other side of the window. Even though the fissure drops 120 feet into the first siphon, it was a lot easier than the traverse at the top of the Serpentine Way. Finally we rigged a rope into the pit going to the second siphon. At the bottom of the pit there is a long, steeply sloping crawl to the stream. We connected several lengths of handline together to aid us on the way out. The siphon is at the end of a long, very wet crawlway. This crawlway becomes smaller and smaller and has plenty of jagged rocks on the bottom. And for further complications, there is a couple of inches of water in the crawl.

After retreating from the crawl, we paused and refreshed ourselves with chicken spread and Vienna sausages. On the way back we checked out part of the rainwell area. It is a maze of tight fissure passages and crawlways - hardly the place to go caving. We also took the Nutcracker route instead of the usual bypass. Things got rather tight at that point. Upon seeing a fresh boot heel in the mud, Vocke exclaimed, "I wonder what dumb clod left this here!" After making our exit from the cave, Vocke was a bit surprised to find one of his boot heels missing!

We had spent about 7.5 hours in Breathing when we changed our grubby clothes, packed up, and made our way back to Aqua Campground for more fun and frolics at the Speleo-go-go.

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.

Thanksgiving in New Mexico - A Patchwork Journal

by the trip members

INTRO, BY BOB COHEN

I had the pleasure of caving in New Mexico over the Thanksgiving week. My friend Sandy Knapp invited me to join her and friends from the V.P.I. Grotto. I drove down to Blacksburg, Virginia. After much traffic and road rage, I arrived at Sandy's for a very short nap. At 3:00 a.m., Eileen O'Malley, Steve LePera, Amanda Stiles, and John Deighan appeared with John's truck. I was stuffed into Sandy's vehicle with my gear, and the six of us were off for a 30-hour haul to New Mexico. I've seen non-cavers go insane at such a trip. It's a good thing we are cavers.

Our first planned stop was the Wal-Mart in Carlsbad, New Mexico. Here we took on supplies and headed up the mountains. A primitive campsite near the fire tower was our home for the next five days. It felt good to sleep in a stationary setting – a tent – although I kept waking up, assuming it was my turn to drive.

The high desert up in the Guadalupe Mountains is beautiful and so are the caves. Most of them require a substantial hike to reach. We may have done more walking than caving, but both activities are well worth it. Most caves there have a vertical component, so the hike includes carrying rope and the usual vertical stuff. I often lagged behind on the hike (big surprise). When I caught up to the crew at the cave, the entrance drops were already rigged. Slow sometimes has rewards. Being last out of a pit makes up for this – you have to de-rig and carry the rope.

The caves in New Mexico are awesome. Formations right out of fairy tales fill huge rooms from ceiling to floor. All you have to do is follow flagging tape, and you get a grand self-guided tour. After experiencing only one of these rooms, I guarantee you will feel near the point of delightful visual overload.

We tried to get in at least two caves a day. Even with great directions, we still had trouble finding the caves fast enough to fill our quota, but, hey, a bad day of caving is better than falling into a bunch of cactus.

SUNDAY, BY STEVE LEPERA AND EILEEN O'MALLEY

We arrived in the Guadalupe mountains on Sunday afternoon. The scenery on the way up was gorgeous, as was the view from across our campsite. We ooohed and aaaahed for a bit and then set up camp. Out went the gear, up went the tents, and John cleaned snow out of our firepit.

Okay, time to get to Hidden, the first cave of the trip. We all crammed into John's truck and started our four-wheeling adventure. It wasn't long before we encountered them... the Dragon's Teeth.

The Dragon's Teeth are about 50 feet of jagged cobbles on steroids that must be crossed on the way to every cave we planned to visit while in the mountains. The Dragon's Teeth. Sounds pretty terrible when you say it, and Sandy must have said it 100 times between Blacksburg and New Mexico. And they grew larger every time, leading right up to the time when John's tires were up against them. Looking down at the little things now, however, they just didn't look so bad.

But The Teeth are insidious in their placement. If the front right tire went up onto a Tooth, the left rear one fell into a Cavity. The dragon had some seriously poor dental hygiene if you know what I mean. With all six of us and our gear in the vehicle, tearing the bottom out of the Pathfinder seemed inevitable. According to John, we survived due to his skill alone and continued on towards the gate leading over to Hidden Cave. I figured, since it was still early in the evening, that the Dragon had just eaten a Suzuki or something and was waiting to get us later.

We found the "parking lot," which is basically a small bare spot in the woods. Everyone changed into their cave clothes and arrived in stages at the cave entrance. The hike to the entrance was a snow-covered route downhill through the woods. Luckily there were boot tracks in the snow for those lagging behind in the quickly fading daylight.

Steve and John had the entrance rigged by the time the last straggler arrived. Steve went down

first. "You know," he called up the 30 foot drop, "I don't think we rigged in the right place." So John and Bob re-rigged and the rest of us went down without a problem.

At the bottom of the drop we saw a cool bat hanging on the wall. He was a bit too high to really get a good look at, but we could tell he was one of those funky-shaped bats with a weird protrusion that we just don't get to see in Virginia. Too bad he was out of photo range.

Hidden Cave was, for some of us, our first exposure to New Mexico caves. The rooms were filled with beautiful, white, pristine formations. Everywhere you look are soda straws and very fine tendrils of helectites. It was also filled with flagging tape trails, which is perhaps how the formations stay so nice.

**BOB HAD BLUDGEONED
A PILE OF FIREWOOD
EARLIER IN THE DAY.**

We wandered around this upper level for awhile, taking in all the sights. Then Steve made an interesting discovery; there was another entrance hidden away and sealed off by a huge metal door. That was certainly curious.

Eventually we made it back to the rope, where we hopped on to descend to the lower level. (You can rappel straight to the bottom if you like.) This level had more of the same pretty stuff, and also had the largest section of rimstone dam I've ever seen. The rimstone dam was almost a foot high and curved around for about twenty-five feet. The water had long since disappeared.

After wandering the lower region for awhile, we decided it was time for some chow. We frogged and knotted our way out. At the top of the drop, New Mexico treated us to a clear, star-filled sky. We hiked back to the truck in groups, changed,

and went back over the Dragon's Teeth. Luckily the Suzuki was a filling meal, and we were allowed to pass without too much of a struggle.

Back at the camp we started the campfire. Bob had bludgeoned a pile of firewood earlier in the day so we'd have a nice ready stack. Sandy and Amanda cooked up some fine spaghetti with sausage links on the side. Despite the cold, we stayed up late by the campfire eating and discussing our upcoming trips.

MONDAY, BY STEVE LEPERA

The camel died quite suddenly on the second day, and LePera fretted sulkily and, buffing his already impeccable nails – not for the first time since the journey began – pondered snidely if this would dissolve into a vignette of minor inconveniences like all the other holidays spent with Sandy¹.

The morning was bright and sunny, but cool. Our camp water was frozen across the surface. The campground which had been a muddy swamp the night before when we went to sleep now was solid, and until it began to thaw around 10am fooled us into thinking we might be able to keep all of our gear neat and clean the entire trip. Despite the obvious advantages, at no time did we ever manage to leave camp before the ground thawed.

Someone made breakfast of coffee and oatmeal on a Coleman stove while the rest of us milled about summoning motivation to disembowel our packs from the previous night, sort things out, and cram it all back in again. For the first time, I turned on the antique GPS loaned to me by Philip Balister.

The GPS was confused by its sudden appearance in New Mexico and protested by staring helplessly at the sky for fifteen minutes. Bob got out his newly purchased GPS and the race was on. But a freshly awoken, bleary-eyed Bob proved no match for the antique; while Bob was still stuck in curious menus titled "MP Load Letter" and "Moon and Fish Chart," the antique device positively confirmed that we were, indeed, in camp.

¹ Minor rewrite of Gail Cain of San Francisco, California's 1983 winning submission to the Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest. See <http://www.bulwer-lytton.com/> for more great ways to start your new

I was in short order able to save this important location and name it CAMP. We were about 1422 miles from Balister's house, another important location stored within the GPS.

This day we were headed to Deep, a cave known to have an inconvenient entrance skree slope requiring 100 feet of rope followed by a more significant drop requiring a 350 foot rope. We all slowly loaded our gear into John's Pathfinder, vacuum-packed ourselves in also, and headed out, again over the damned Dragon's Teeth. They looked a lot less evil in daylight, but we still dragged a few times as we crept across. We crossed these rocks twice a day, every day, for four days, begging the question, "Why didn't we camp on the *other* side?"

After a relatively short ride, we parked on top of a plateau right at the fenced boundary between the National Park and the National Forest. To our left was a breathtaking panorama of ridges armored like triceratops, limestone spires along their spine, mesas breaking into valleys, cliffs dropping deep down into desert chasms. On our right was a sheer precipice thrusting out above a wide canyon, and below was a dry river bed lined with rolled white rocks... from our height the cobbles looked like a roadbed. Your eyes followed the canyon out into the abrupt infinity of the flat desert plains we'd crossed driving into Carlsbad. Truly worth the price of admission right there.

So we took some worthless photos, which of course didn't come out anything at all like what the camera was pointed at, and returned to the vehicle and readied ourselves for the hike. Now sadly without the camel, we were forced to make John carry the ropes. Plus his own gear, of course.

Bob and Philip's GPS both verified we were not in camp anymore, so guided by some treasure-map quality directions and a crappy topo, we set off 1-2-3-4 steps this way and 1-2-3-4-5 steps another way, following some kind of a trail along the ridgetop. The trail was reasonably clear and marked frequently with rock cairns, but especially in very rocky terrain (of which there was plenty) it could become difficult to find. Despite this, we wound down a bit and headed out into a steep-sided drainage which looked like the right

place to be. We crossed several outcroppings which may have been the landmark identifying where to turn off the path and hike down slope looking for the cave entrance. Because I am always right and no one else can ever manage to do anything correctly without my assistance, I eventually insisted we turn around and look behind us for the cave, as the topo clearly showed the cave could not possibly be out in the direction we were headed.



Amanda climbs next to the historic (read: scary) ladder.
Photo by Steve LePera.

To make a long search story short, an hour later we found the cave just ahead of this point in the trail. I called this location DEEP on the GPS.

We all kitted up, rigged a short webbing hand line down to a twig of a tree, where we then rigged a 100 foot rope down the skree slope and into the entrance of the cave. There is a narrow ledge along the right-hand wall and a gaping black 300 foot deep hole to the left. We decided to stick to the right. We all followed the ledge across to a flat area where everyone sat while we rigged, which is an adventure in itself.

The 350 foot rope was brand new, and had been living on a spool right up until this trip. Bob and Sandy, playing the roles of two people who have never been vertical caving in their lives, pulled all the rope off the end of the spool (instead of spinning it like they should have) and stuffed it directly into a rope bag the night before we left. This created the greatest tangle of spaghetti I've ever seen when we pulled it back out and tried to toss it over the lip, which turned out not to be a lip at all but merely a shelf leading to a second lip, which was also not actually a lip but indeed another shelf leading to another shelf which led to the drop. After the rope was in a total knot, it was quite clear that we should have rappelled with the rope still in the bag, but it was far too late for that now with the rope tightly twisted into a self-induced knot on the first shelf below.

I rappelled down and inch by inch threw the rope onto the second shelf (where it knotted itself again of course). It took about an hour to finally get the mess over the side of the actual drop, where it finally hung free and unwound enough to deal with. Despite the warm cave temperatures in New Mexico, everyone began to freeze at the top of the drop while I sweated below. In order to keep group spirits high, Sandy set herself on fire beneath her heat tent, burning a hole between her breasts through two polypro layers and a sports bra. I could hear the laughter below, but figured it was directed at me and continued fuming at the rope. (She was unwilling to repeat the show later despite my pleas.)

The drop itself was quite nice after the multiple shelves, leaving about a 100 foot free rappel to the floor of a great cavern. Along side you the entire way was a historic wire ladder used during the original exploration of the cave. Imagine 300 feet of barb-wire fence type wire wound up around rotted out sticks of wood, and that is what the ladder was. Very scary.

We spent about two hours looking around. The room at the bottom of the drop opened up into a second, slightly smaller cavern with a ton of formations. There were some decorations similar to those we see commonly in the east, but for the most part they were a lot different. This cave was totally dry, and all the formations were dusty with white powder. Your light seemed ten times brighter than usual because so much of the sur-

roundings were white. Many walls were covered with formations that looked more like yarn than rock.

While the first climbers started out, the rest of us heated up some leftovers from the night before on a Whisper Lite I'd dragged into the cave. Worked great and kept the last of us at the bottom of the drop toasty warm without sacrificing any of our clothing.

Bob, Amanda, and Sandy started hiking back to the car while Eileen, John, and I derigged everything. All of our lights were failing like crazy due to dead batteries and blowing out in the freezing wind. Yes, night had fallen in the desert and the temperature had fallen significantly as well! The GPS indicated we were not at the car, and promptly ran out of batteries. No one had a compass. Fortunately, while we were farting around looking for rock cairns in the dark, Amanda and Sandy actually walked back from the car and met us. Which was a good thing as we actually returned to the car without having to resort to Marco-Polo range-finding techniques.

We were hungry and irritable, and still cold by the time we got back to camp, but all was cured by roasting the camel over a big neo-VPI quality campfire and cooking up some instant rice and beans on the Coleman stoves. We could see every star in the crystal clear sky, and fell asleep quite easily before we knew what hit us.

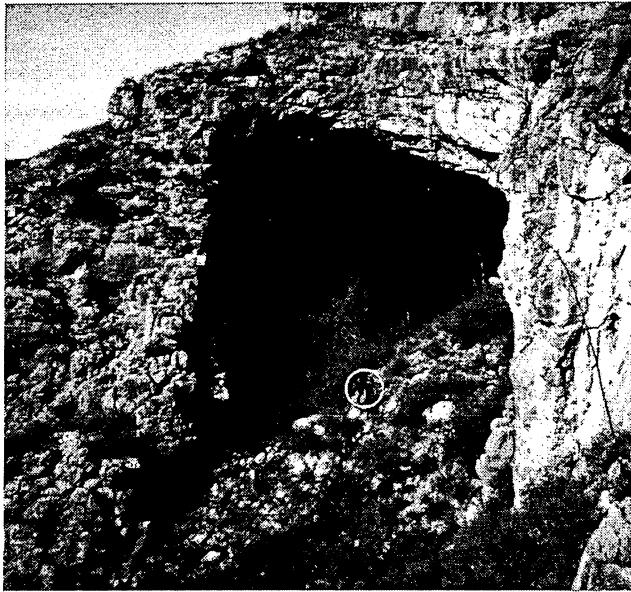
TUESDAY, BY SANDY KNAPP

We had pancakes and sausage for breakfast. We planned to do Gunsight and Sentinel, since they're within hiking distance of each other.

We drove back over the Dragon's Teeth, took the first right, and parked at the end of the road at the Gunsight camp area. This looked like a nice campground with Stonehenge-like lounge chairs around a campfire. We hiked down the Gunsight ridge for about an hour to get to Gunsight. The trail leads straight to the cave; don't let the step log throw you off.

The entrance to Gunsight is huge. We spent about an hour poking around, but could've spent more. We spotted what looked like pottery high up on a giant boulder, so we went for a closer look. It was an owl! He glared at us while Eileen took a few photos, but it was hard to get close to him. Then he swooped away in annoyance.

After that, we started the twenty minute back-track to Sentinel. Luckily Bob saw the 150 foot rope lying on the ground outside of Gunsight at about the same time that Steve realized that he had forgotten it. By the time we got to Sentinel it was getting late, so we decided to forgo the big drop and left the 350 foot rope at the top of the ridge. The 100 foot rope was inadvertently left up there too, although we did plan on using it.



The entrance to Gunsight Cave. Note Sandy and Amanda standing within the circle for scale. Photo by Steve LePera.

At the cave, we backed off the 70 foot rope to a big rock/chockstone and did a few wraps around a tree at the top. The drop was about 30 feet. We used a 30-foot handline to traverse a pretty room. After the traverse we set another handline and did a 15 foot arm rappel into the pretty room. We found the piton that I was told about, but could not traverse the room like my informants had claimed. We needed the rope that we didn't have. If we rig at the piton, we would need a 50 foot rope. If we rig farther back, which is what Steve and John recommended, then the 150 foot rope would do it. The instructions I got said there was another drop of about 100 feet farther on and then the 250 foot pit. We need better instruction about this 100 foot drop next time. I had not read the directions close enough beforehand, so we probably wouldn't have had enough rope to get to the 250 foot pit anyway. We heated up leftover rice and beans and told funny stories after coming back across the traverse. It was a mild evening when we got out. We hiked back to

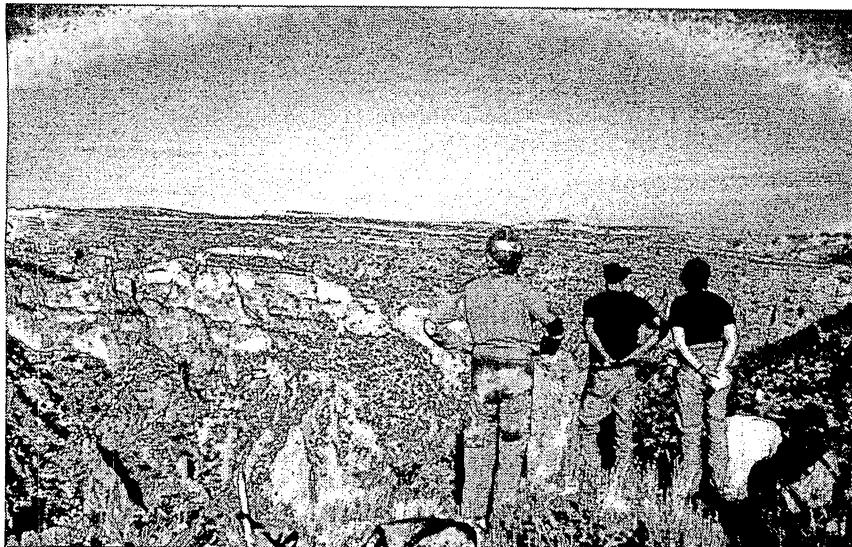
the car and were in great spirits and passed around the hot tea and schnapps. Back at the camp, we made a big fire, ate some potato soup, and went to bed around 1:00 am.

WEDNESDAY, BY SANDY KNAPP AND JOHN DEIGHAN

The big plan for the day was to find Pink Dragon Cave. It was another beautiful day. John chauffeured us back over the Dragon's Teeth, past the Gunsight turnoff, and then right at the fork. Sandy got the permit from the Forest Service, but they said Pink Dragon was pretty hard to find so did not provide directions. Now, I realize that a single sample can't be used as proof of a general rule, but I can state unequivocally that in this instance, finding the cave was more difficult without directions than it would have been *with* directions. Well, good directions anyway. Sandy did get some directions from John Lyle, and there is some disagreement between us about whether they were "good" or "bad" directions. We didn't find the cave. I rest my case.

The trail headed due east, down a hill and then over two major hills. The instructions then said to go down a draw until it hits a cliff, and then look for a trail that should take us to Double Canyon. We reread and re-interpreted the instructions several times, and ended up on an outcropping that looked like it could be overlooking a double canyon. Down to our right was a massive-looking entrance, and there was sort of a trail. (That entrance was never found, and may have just been a shadow.)

John and Steve scouted out another draw that went down to the canyon floor and found Pink Panther, Damn, and Pallet Caves. Pink Panther and Damn were gated. The rest of the group followed John and Steve down a steep, slippery trail. We looked around some more and decided, since it was going to be dark in an hour, we should call it a day and head back. Hiking along these ridges seemed more sketchy than anything else we'd done, and we weren't sure we wanted to be there after dark. There was some disagreement (i.e. a fight almost broke out) about whether to go back the way we had come (through probably the only jungle you'll find in the New Mexico desert) or find a better route back. We climbed up a little higher and followed the rock ledge back to Double Canyon and then



It's gotta be out there somewhere.... The search for Pink Dragon Cave.
Photo by Eileen O'Malley.

out. We were bushwhacking in the dark and it sucked. Once out of the jungle and onto an actual trail, we stopped at the shoe repair rock and heated up the leftover potato soup and ate crackers and summer sausage. (Take two bites of soup and pass the bowl. Hey, you took three bites!) In another 45 minutes we were back at the car and drinking hot tea with schnapps.

Since we got back a little earlier than any of the other nights, we walked up to the fire tower for a look-see. Susan from the restoration camp was staying in the cabin and she invited us in. Sandy had heard there would be a group doing cave restoration in the Guads on Thanksgiving day, so she had emailed Susan a week or so before leaving Blacksburg to volunteer us. We thought it would be fun, a chance to see some more caves, and good PR for the club. (VPI can always use good PR.) Susan never replied, so we just figured we'd run into the group Wednesday evening at the main camping area.

So we chatted with Susan for awhile. Turns out Susan forgot to mail out the usual reminders, so only two other people planned to be there. With such a small turnout they decided to just play around in one of the caves the next day. Then we explained our trek across the ridges and she told us we had overshot Pink Dragon.

Afterwards, we went up the fire tower. It wasn't very interesting at night, but what else did we have to do? Someone picked up a capped bottle

on the way back and stuck it in the fire. Oops, bad idea. As Amanda was trying to move it out of range with a stick, it exploded and glass went flying. Luckily nobody got hit. We had spaghetti for dinner and then went off to bed.

THURSDAY, BY EILEEN O'MALLEY

Thursday morning we awoke and had our usual breakfast (it was always either oatmeal or pancakes). After that it was time to break camp and head down from the mountains. We thought this would be a leisurely morning, but Mother Nature had other plans. Before we knew

it, the predicted rain came and hurried our pace. The rain turned to hail, the hail turned to snow, and the packing turned frantic. The snow falling across the ridge tops made for a beautiful scene, but we didn't have much time to watch.

We burned the last of the trash, packed the last of the food, and shoved everything into the vehicles. The road near the top of the mountain wasn't bad, but as we slowly descended the roads became a muddy mess. As Sandy's Outback slipped around on the roads, she decided to put on the snow chains she'd brought from Blacksburg. John, confident in his Pathfinder, didn't need no steenkin' chains, but we all hopped out to help Sandy. Steve helped Sandy with one side, while Amanda and John worked on the other. (Mostly John stood there supervising while Amanda did all the work.) I took pictures and tried to stay out of the way. Bob, the wise guru that he is, stayed inside the warm car dozing. Too bad Amanda's side had such problems; she ended up laying full-length in the mud underneath the car. (Luckily she had on her nice, new, expensive rain gear.)

We almost decided against driving along the scenic route because the snow and fog didn't lend much of a view. Fortunately, about ten miles down the road the fog lifted and the snow stopped. We had an incredibly clear view of the surrounding mountains, albeit very windy and cold. We stood for about thirty seconds at each

overlook, then raced for the warmth of the cars. Next stop, Sitting Bull Falls. This place is a state park, complete with \$5.00 parking fee. A volunteer from the park came to chit-chat for awhile. She told us about the huge rainstorm that passed through earlier that morning, but by then the day was bright and sunny. Ah, how nice to be in the warmer lower region!

We all walked across the cemented pathway to check out the falls. John grabbed his helmet and light. As John headed up towards the falls, the rest of us decided to have lunch first.

"We're going to eat lunch, and then go into the cave," we called to him over the noise of the falls. "Okay," John replied.

So back at the parking lot, we started reheating chili. Sandy counted out even piles of leftover crackers. As clouds passed over the sun and the breeze picked up, we huddled over our plastic bowls and spoons in these family picnic huts. We waited awhile for John, but when he didn't return we started fighting over his untouched lunch. We were thinking that there must be lots of cave there, since he still hadn't appeared. Finally he wandered back as we were cleaning up our lunch. Turns out he thought we said we were coming right back with our gear. He spent five minutes in the cave, got bored, and spent the rest of the time climbing around outside near the falls.

As the sky darkened, our volunteer friend from earlier walked past. "Is it supposed to rain again?" we asked peering at the ominous-looking sky.

"Oh, no. This morning's rain was just a fluke. It hardly ever rains around here." About ten minutes later, we were changing into our caving gear in a pouring rainstorm.

The Sitting Bull Falls cave is, of course, behind the waterfall. John and Steve scurried up the rocks and past the drench-zone. Bob, however, was having problems getting up. The rocks were slippery and very wet, and he couldn't seem to find the right footing. While he entertained us with lots of cursing, I followed Amanda and Sandy up an alternate route. (Reminder: don't try to follow John and Steve's routes in or near a cave.) The cursing seemed to help, because we all made it into the cave. Inside was very small, no

more than two or three bedroom-sized rooms, but the formations sparkled with condensation. Very lovely! There was also a small room, completely sumped, which we weren't willing to enter. We poked around for awhile and wasted time taking photos, but there really isn't any more than ten minutes worth of sightseeing in there. It was cool to peer out the entrance and see snow falling past the waterfall against the backdrop of the sky.

When we left the cave, LePera was cold, wet, and (you guessed it) grumpy. I tried to wheedle him into smiling, but to no avail.

Back at the parking lot, we changed our clothes in the dry rest rooms and warmed ourselves with the air dryers. What a luxury! With the rain/snow still coming down, it was easy to decide that tonight would be our one night stay in a motel. That seemed to cheer up LePera (especially when he ended up sharing a motel room with me *and* Amanda). So off we went to Carlsbad.

As if spending four days camping, hiking, and caving in the mountains wasn't enough, just trying to find some Thanksgiving dinner was an adventure. We all showered at the motel, changed into warm clothes, and piled into the vehicles in search of dinner. With our hearts set on huge plates of Mexican food and jumbo margueritas, we approached Lucy's Mexican Restaurant... which was closed. As was the next restaurant we drove past, and the next, and the next.... C'mon, it's only 6:30 in the evening! Finally we found Furr's Cafeteria, and there were people seated inside. We parked and went up to the big glass doors... which were locked. Luckily, Sandy spotted people coming out another door, and she and Bob slipped inside before the door could close. She approached the cashier. "Sorry," the woman said. "We're closing."

"But we're hungry, and everything else is closed." Sandy pleaded.

"Well, I guess you can come in if you hurry. The food line shuts down in a few minutes, so you won't have time for seconds."

Sandy opened the door, and all four of us, plus a family of four in a similar plight, filed past the cashier. The cashier scowled at Sandy.

Well we're no fools. No time for seconds? No

problem. We loaded up our cafeteria trays as high as we possibly could, risking pulled muscles and back sprains under the weight. One of us was given the Senior Discount; it's up to you to figure out who.



Our fancy dining experience on Thanksgiving night.
Photo by Eileen O'Malley.

Once the cafeteria kicked us out, we headed back to the motel and our reserve of beer. We spent a good bit of time piled on the beds discussing the next day's plan. John's great scheme involved visiting four caves in one day; you'll read how well that turned out. Finally, the lure of cozy mattresses, fluffy pillows, and warm blankets became too much to deny.

FRIDAY, BY AMANDA STILES

I woke up Friday morning with the feeling that something was amiss. I was not wearing every piece of clothing that I owned, the ground was too soft, and the ceiling was way too high. Aha! I was in the motel room! I was warm, I was clean, and we had four new caves on the agenda for today.

We packed up our stuff, pulling the still slightly wet cave clothes and equipment off of sagging hangers and the backs of motel chairs. We packed our cave packs, packed our day packs and packed the two abused, stuffed-to-overflowing cars in the parking lot. It was breakfast time, and for the first time in days somebody else was going to cook, and better yet somebody else was going to do the dishes.

We went all out. This would be no measly breakfast, no half cylinder of oatmeal or half dollar

pancakes, but a full Best Western buffet. Greasy bacon, salty hash browns, and those oh-so-good straight from the plastic bottle scrambled eggs. We stuffed ourselves, hopefully amazing the waitresses with our stacks of plates and rapid to and fro to the buffet line. But really, we were probably lost in the hungry holiday crowd who felt like they hadn't gotten enough to eat on Thanksgiving, either.

Our first stop that day was the Park Service station in Carlsbad. Eileen and Sandy planned to thank the people who had given us the permits and all the much appreciated information on the caves. Unfortunately the guy wasn't out of that office; he worked right at Carlsbad Caverns. We hoped he would be working when we showed up at the caverns on Saturday.

Then we drove to Slaughter Canyon to begin our hike to the first cave.

Slaughter Canyon Cave is the site of the Carlsbad Caverns "Wild Caving" tours, so the path was well defined as it headed up the side of the canyon. It took us a while to get motivated after our big breakfast, and we spent a long time reorganizing our stuff and getting into our cave clothes. We lingered and enjoyed the sunshine, took a score of silly pictures, and it was late morning by the time we finally headed off towards the cave.

It was a nice hike up the canyon, slightly steep but we weren't in a huge hurry. It didn't take long before we found the entrance to Slaughter Canyon Cave (also known as New Cave). We knew that Wen cave should be nearby, and we walked up and down the path searching for the side path that should be there. We heard a yell from Lepera that he had found a cave, but that it was not the right one. This cave said Cave 32 on the sign, and worse yet, it was gated. We were confounded. It seemed to be in the right place, but the gate and the name were not right at all. We spent some more time searching around and then discussed what to do. We could move onto the next cave and hope it was not gated also, or we could go back to the car and check the permits for a combination.

We decided to check the permits for a combination, worried about the chance that the other three caves could also be gated. I ran back to the car with a heavy heart, positive that this was a

silly idea, there would be no combinations and we would just have to move onto the next cave. Much to my surprise, upon looking at the permits in the car window, there were combinations to two of our four caves. Elated, I wrote them on my hand and hurried back to tell everybody at Cave 32. I called out the combination as soon as I got within shouting distance, but to my dismay, as I approached the cave, I realized it wasn't working. I called up different combinations. Maybe I had written down the wrong number? Maybe I had reversed something?

I cursed myself for leaving the permits back at the cars. When I reached the actual cave entrance I was presented with Bob and John who said, "At last, someone with good eyesight can check the combination!" Never in my entire life have I been accused of having good eyesight and I stopped to bask, record the comment, and asked them to repeat it a few times before crouching into the entrance to try my luck.

The combination failed despite my eagle sharp eyes, and I was deflated. I tried the reverse numbers as well, I tried look-alike numbers, I even made up a few combinations. Then Bob mentioned to me that with Master Locks you have to push up before you pull down to open. I tried the original combination again... and it worked! We were finally allowed access to Wen cave, our first cave of the day.

Steve and John rigged the rope for a short rappel into the cave, and one after the other we rappelled down. It was a comparatively small cave, but like all the others we visited in New Mexico, it was filled with amazing pretties. The rest of us filled out the register while John, having discovered a way up into the ceiling, climbed around the top making fun of us.

Realizing it was getting late in the day, we spent only about 45 minutes in the cave before using our frog systems or knots to climb out. The next cave on the list was Christmas Tree Cave. We had fairly good directions to the cave, and we knew that the first step was to get to the bottom of the canyon. Where we stood, we could see the trail we needed winding away. We could either hike down the canyon the way we came, in the opposite direction from Christmas Tree Cave, or we could go straight down the sloping side into the

canyon and reach the path that way. Which way do you think we went?

The hike down was quite steep, and made slightly nerve racking by one type of cactus. This cactus could range from the size of your fist to the size of a small pony, and it looked just like an aloe plant except it was completely rigid. It was more like an aloe plant made of stainless steel or better yet, long sharp pointy teeth. The images of losing your footing and tumbling into this unforgiving plant filled my head as we scrambled down the slope.

Eventually we reached the bottom of the slope and the area below was wide and flat and covered with small vegetation. Much of the ground was rocky and looked like a river flowed through at times, or at least flash floods.

The trail was well marked with cairns, and as we hiked the sky slowly deepened into dusk. Our group spread out, and we hiked alone. We had seen a dark area on the opposite side of the canyon, which we thought might be Helen's Cave, and Sandy went to check it out. I could see her as a little blue speck high up the canyon's side.

It was getting dark as the path bent around an outcropping in the canyon wall, and I could see Steve and John's headlamps high up on the slope. We could see a path, and Eileen, Sandy, Bob, and I began the hike up after them. It was a steep path, and we kept losing the trail, but it was easy to see our destination high up in the distance where two lights bobbed mockingly. Eventually we reached a flat area near the cave entrance and stopped to organize our gear before going all the way to the cave. There was a small animal hiding in the rocks near the cave that may have been a ringtail.

It was a short rappel into the cave, and we walked around inside. It was a bigger cave than Wen, and there were lots of places to explore. I found the "Christmas Tree" to be a bit of a disappointment. Any formation that you have to squint at and ask, "Do you think *that* is the Christmas Tree?" is not a good namesake for the cave. Perhaps "Triangular Shaped Rock" would have been a more appropriate cave name. This was a picture cave, so and Steve and Eileen set up some interesting cave shots using the camera flash and several slave flashes.

We climbed out of the cave and began to reorganize our stuff for the hike down. We heard a yelp and a very unhappy Bob joined us with a large collection of cactus needles sticking out of his butt and thigh. After the necessary jokes were made, I used Sandy's leatherman to pull the needles out, one by one. It was a painful process, and I don't think that they all came out, attested to by Bob's intermittent yelps on the hike down, as a new cactus needle twisted around to stab him.



Bob tries to pick the lock on the cave gate.
Photo by Eileen O'Malley.

We reached the bottom of the slope and began the hike through the valley of the canyon, back to the car. By then it was dark and getting pretty late. There was no way we could find the other caves at night (we had trouble enough in the broad daylight.) So much for doing four caves in one day! It took a long time to reach the car, and the terrain changed back and forth from gravel to large rocks to a wonderful smooth section of waist high waving grass. Eventually we reached the car, repacked, and stuffed ourselves inside.

We drove to look for a campsite, and I drifted off to sleep. When I awoke, I realized that we had given up on the particular campsite we had originally planned on, and were parked in a sandy area not far off the highway. It was cold out, and we rushed around to get the tents up and the fire started as soon as possible. There was little in the way of firewood, so the plan was to cook dinner and get into the sleeping bags as quickly as possible. We warmed up as we ran through our meager pile of wood we had collected, and we hurried to put extra gear back in the cars for the night. It was a strange place to camp. The highway was angled so that it looked like the trucks

were headed straight towards us; suddenly they would reach a bend in the road and drive away.

It was the end of a long day. We headed off to the tents and fell asleep to the rumbling noise of Mack trucks barreling down the highway.

Note from Bob:

All through our rambles to and from the caves, a number of us had to stop and pull spines out of various parts of our body. Of course it was dark when we exited the underground. It was quite easy to fall down the rocky trails even with headlights. It was a good thing there were always plenty of cactus type plants to arrest our fall.

We just finished Christmas Tree, which was our last cave on our itinerary for this trip. This is the one to save for the finale with its huge rooms stuffed with amazing Southwestern formations. The ropes were packed, and I was the last one to leave the entrance area. I turned around and thanked the cave as I do in these moments. The cave said you're welcome in a way I am yet to understand. I immediately fell butt first into a patch of fine hair-like spined cactus.

Before I had time to fret, I had my overalls down and presented my posterior to our beautiful young female paramedic. With a flashlight and a leatherman tool, she did her duty. I was accused of landing on that cactus on purpose. For the record, I did not. However, I know my unconscious mind is capable of rolling me uphill through an entire hillside of spiky plants to gain the attention of such a beautiful woman.

SATURDAY, BY EILEEN O'MALLEY

After another breakfast of oatmeal and whatever else needed to be finished off, we did a final vehicle pack and set off for Carlsbad Caverns. Only a few of us had been there before.

First we wandered around the administrative area looking for the building where the rangers hang out, so we could return the signed permits and say hi to Stan Allison, my contact person. While searching we met a group of cavers who were heading into the cavern for some clean-up work, so we talked to them for a few minutes.

We eventually found Stan, and he and Sandy chatted for a bit. Names flashed back and forth. Do you know this person, from so and so who worked at such and such cave? Of course! Good

friend of mine! What about so and so from such and such? Oh, yes, they used to work at such and such before he and so and so went to such and such a place. Turns out they had both been on the same restoration trip many years before. This conversation gave quite an insight on the range and the closeness of the caving community.

After that, it was time to find the main tour building and do our first “cushy” cave trip of the week. We should've enjoyed the easy, effortless trip, but Steve and I kept looking around the entrance discussing how much fun it would be to rappel in. Over there? No, I think you should come down there....

I'm not going into much detail about Carlsbad Caverns. Impressive does not do justice. Huge is

an understatement. You must all go there and see it for yourselves. It makes any cave you've even been to seem like a mouse hole. Don't even flinch over shelling out \$6.00 (or \$12.00 if you're dating LePera) to take the self-guided tour. It's worth every penny.

Take the Natural Entrance tour and forgo the elevator down. The natural entrance path winds down and around, past more and more interesting things, until you reach The Big Room at around -850 feet. Go through the Big Room and the rest of the cave. There are formations of every type, in every size, and most are sparkling white. Around each bend is another amazing display of speleothems.

From the Signout

compiled by Steve LePera

VPI cavers and their guests logged in 1858.4 caver hours from 5/1/00 to 1/19/00.

5/03/00	Newberry's	Steve Wells, Steve LePera, Matthais Wolter	LePera remembered the rope pad... the second time he entered the cave.
5/21/00	Pighole	Brad Atkinson, Allison Barth, Dave Lambe	Dave does 1st and last trip on knots.
5/25/00	Links	Beth Geiger, Mike Malsbury	It is not pierced! Mike's a liar.
7/08/00	Stomppbottom	Jim Washington, Joan Johnson	Found it - bat machete.
7/15/00	Smokehole	Chip Mullins, Andy Yeagle, Kevin Rock	It's hard getting lost without Brad.
7/25/00	Speedwell	Matt Burnett, Rance Edwards	This is the passage I caught histo in.
8/19/00	Giant Cavers	Eileen O'Malley, Matt Burnett, Chris Rourke	I see your calf, Ray, and I raise you two dogs.
9/06/00	Miller's Cove	Steve LePera, Wil Orndorff, Terri Brown, Don Anderson,	Guess who? First belay in 37 years and first fall ever.
9/16/00	Starnes	Matt Burnett, Elliot Darchicourt, Chris Perez, Luke Whitlock, Jay Monty, Kevin Campbell, Rob McClinton, Peter Boyer, Brandon Harris	"This is nice but next time can we do something like Links but smaller?"
10/14/00	Newcastle Murder Hole	Chris Rourke, Steve LePera, Kevin Rock, Tom Calhoun	"I've never seen so many bones and skeletons!"
10/20/00	Bridge Day	Eric Stanley, Dave Colatosti, Ray Sira, Pete Sauvigne, Eileen O'Malley, Kirk Digby, Mark Eisenbees, Ko Takamizawa, Mark Ruocco, Craig Roberts, Philip Balister, Steve LePera, Jim Pugh, Pam Mohr	Deep drop without car wreck! Way better than Mexico.
11/12/00	James	John Deighan, Mike Malsbury, Travis Coad	To the sump, to the sump, to the sump, sump, sump.
11/18/00	New Mexico	Sandy Knapp, Steve LePera, Eileen O'Malley, John Deighan, Amanda Stiles, Bob Cohen	6 cavers, 7 days, 8 caves, and lots of Dragon's Teeth
12/02/00	Starnes	Kevin Rock, Kirk Digby, Matt Burnett, Dave Colatosti, Andy Yeagle	Too bad that cave didn't live forever. But then again, what cave does? (Besides Murder Hole and Newberry's)
12/13/00	Munsey Twins	Joe Thompson, Kevin Rock, Kirk Digby	It's about 10 feet to the wali since Kirk is 3 feet tall.
1/14/01	Miller's Cove	John Deighan, Kevin Rock, Travis Coad, Jason Obenschain, Glenn Taylor, Chris Hibshman, Aaron Thomas	Jason, is that urine in your carbide bottle? (Answer: yes)
1/19/01	Tawney's	Joe Thompson, Wil Orndorff	No Indians?