

Elders of the Tribe

Bill Putnam, ACA Editor

Welcome to the long-awaited 1994-1995 issue of American Caving Accidents. In this issue you will find 148 accident and safety incident reports. During the review process, some members of the review committee asked me why certain minor incidents were included for publication. The incidents in question were those which resulted in minor injury or inconvenience, but had no serious consequence. I would like to take a few moments to discuss the purpose of this publication, as I see it. As I do, I believe my reasons for including these minor incidents will become clear.

American Caving Accidents is not just an exercise in record keeping. It serves several purposes for the Society. Yes, it is the primary record of caving accidents in North America. That is a valuable service which the Society provides. But my discussions with cavers over 17 years of caving, and over the last year as I prepared this publication, have convinced me that this record keeping role is not the most important function of the publication.

Many cavers have said to me that ACA is the most useful publication they receive from the NSS. They feel this way because they recognize the benefits to their own caving abilities and activities to be gained from reading about the accidents, incidents, near-misses, and close calls described in these pages. They realize that this publication presents them with the opportunity to learn from the mistakes or misfortunes of their fellow cavers.

When I began caving in 1980, I was fortunate to have several good friends who acted as mentors, teaching me safe caving techniques, instructing me in the importance of cave conservation, and introducing me into the community of cavers. These cavers told me dozens of stories around the campfire, or over dinner, or on the long drives to and from the caves. In the process, they passed on to me the collective experience of many, many cavers, gained over decades of active caving. What they were doing, whether they realized it or not, was fulfilling their roles as “elders of the tribe”.

You know what I mean. We may not want to admit it, but we all get older. Some of us get a little wiser in the process. Eventually, we realize that those new cavers look pretty young. Years ago, when there weren't so many of us (and of them) we knew them all and we took them into our ranks and under our wings, teaching them how to cave without hurting themselves, their friends, or the caves.

Today, the caving community is so large that we can not know everyone. My own grotto is so large that there are quite a few folks I may never cave with or get to know. Years ago I helped teach vertical training sessions. In the course of a day on the cliffs or on a training trip I would regale my captive audience with tales of close calls, nasty injuries, near misses, rescues, and fatal accidents. I wanted them to understand the consequences of rockfall in a pit, rigging the rack backwards, losing control of a rappel, or wearing a cheap hard-hat. I believed then (and I still do) that you have to have some way to take the abstract rules of safety and technique and

personalize them, in order to really understand and appreciate them. You have to know the story behind or beyond the rules.

American Caving Accidents is part of what my friend Dave Hughes likes to call “the pool of archival knowledge”. It is a collection of shared experiences that can help the reader connect the abstract rules and techniques found in books or imparted by teachers with the real world of caving that we all experience. When we read about the caver who dropped his only light down the pit and became stranded, or the one whose climbing helmet saved his life, we remember the stories. The phrases “three sources of light” and “cheap hard-hats are for cheap heads” have more meaning.

Almost 18 years later, I clearly remember many of the stories I was told by my mentors. Most were hair-raising tales of near-misses. Nobody got hurt, and they all laughed about it later, but they knew (and I learned) just how close they were to death or serious injury. These near-miss stories were every bit as important in my training as the stories of serious accidents. They taught me that inattention, miscommunication, and mistakes can happen to anyone – no matter how experienced. And they taught me that there is only a split second and one bad decision separating an enjoyable caving trip from tragedy.

American Caving Accidents is a teaching tool. It's a communication channel. It is a way for us to pass on to the new cavers the collective experience and wisdom of the tribe. We can't take all the new cavers out caving, or share stories around the fire with them. But we can publish our experiences for them to read. In the process, perhaps we will remind ourselves of important lessons that we have forgotten.

Eventually, I acquired responsibilities which limited my caving time. I became reluctant to devote precious caving weekends to teaching the new cavers. I wanted to spend the time that I had on fun things, like mapping and exploration, project caving, and so on. I wanted to spend that time with my old buddies, not with strangers. So I stopped leading the beginner trips and teaching the training sessions.

But I still like to tell the stories, on trips and around the campfire. I present programs to my grotto on safety and techniques. I have become involved in cave rescue work. When the opportunity arises, I try to be a good mentor to some of the new cavers that I meet.

I realize that I owe a great debt to my mentors. Steve Attaway, Ed Strausser, Buddy Lane, and many others taught me things that have kept me alive and caving. But the debt I owe is payable, not to them, but to the new generations of cavers. We all owe that debt.

Reading ACA is a great way for all cavers, not just new ones, to build knowledge and awareness of safe caving practices. But it is still up to each one of us to teach and promote safety at every meeting and on every trip.

How will you meet your responsibility as one of the elders of the caving tribe?