



The TEXAS CAVER - 2nd Quarter 2009

The TEXAS CAVER
April — June - Vol. 55, Number 2

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The TSA is an internal organization of the National Speleological Society and represents the greater caving community in Texas. The organization holds business meetings 3 times a year, organizes an annual convention for Texas cavers, and sponsors caving projects and events throughout the state.

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The TEXAS CAVER

Written by Texas Cavers FOR Texas Cavers

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Making Connections in Mexico

Submitted by Ellie Thoene

Photos by Yvonne Droms, Paul Heinerth, James Hunter and Bill Steele



I'm ready to go CAVING IN MEXICO!!!!!!

Photo by Bill Steele

Participants: Yvonne Droms, Paul Heinerth, James Hunter, Mark Minton, Bill Steele, Diana Tomchick,

I just started caving a few months ago and all of a sudden I'm in a Toyota Tundra loaded down with two weeks of food, caving equipment, and four other people who can secrete more caving experience out of one sweat gland than I will ever dream of having. I was headed to Mexico for a two-week long caving expedition in the Purificación karst. Cavers have been making similar expedition trips over the years to explore the bounty of caves and caves systems in Mexico. The first time I heard about the deep pits in Mexico, I knew that my life would be incomplete if I did not experience this.

The four of them were waiting for me in the parking lot of my friend's house in Austin where my cat stayed for the holidays. When my friend saw them she said, "I think those are your people." She was right; there they were, Mark Minton, Bill Steele, Diana Tomchick, and Yvonne Droms, lounging on the tailgate donned in various flamboyant, festive printed shirts. Mark with his hippie hair and Bill Steele working on a rugged beard, all of



We all arrived to Zaragoza just in time to share our stories and grab a delicious Mexican supper.

Photo by Bill Steele

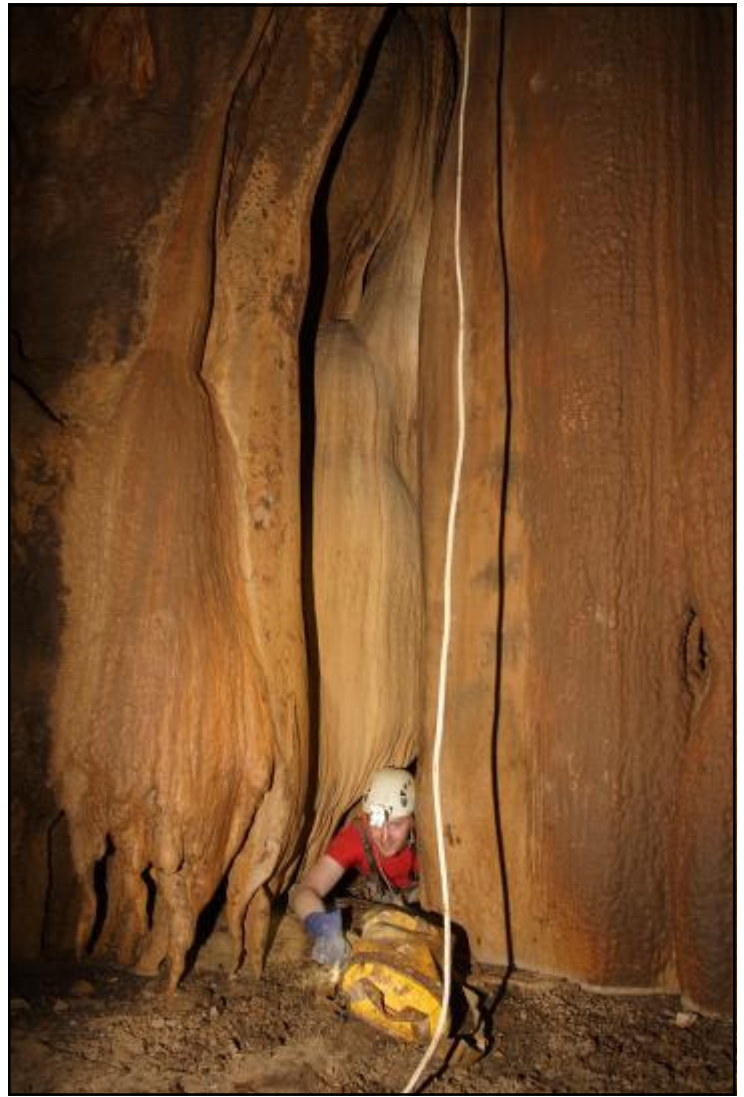


My first pit-Poza Zorillo. Photo by Bill Steele



**Yvonne Droms descends the Octopus Drop.
Photo by Bill Steele**

them hanging around just like they belonged. I had heard through Bill Steele, legendary-caver and chairman of the grotto I just joined, that groups go to Mexico several times a year on cave expeditions and that there would be a two week long expedition to the Purificación karst over Christmas 2008 going into New Year



Aaron Moses goes through the inconspicuous squeeze beneath the Octopus Drop. Photo by James Hunter



Bill Steele found a cave pearl. Photo by James Hunter

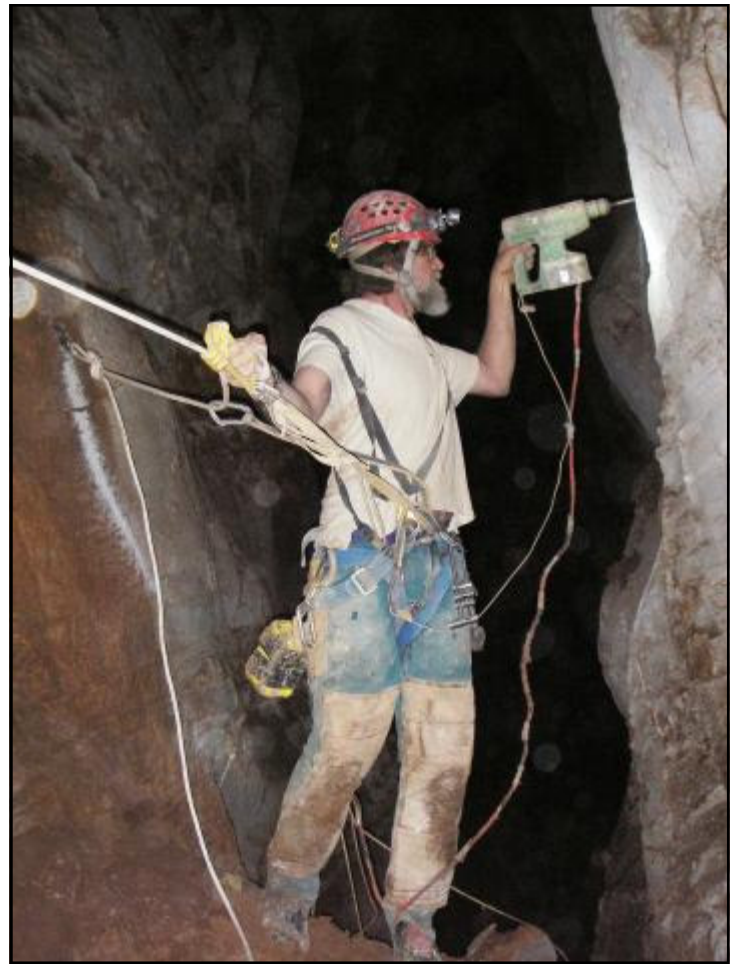
2009. When I heard that James Brown was backing out of the trip, I called his seat and was in for the ride. CAVING IN MEXICO!!!!!!

After a 9½-hour grueling pit stop at the Colombia boarder crossing, we headed into Mexico, destination: Zaragoza, Nuevo Leon. All ten members of the expedition; Paul Heinerth, Heather Levy, Aaron Moses, Tanya Pietrass, James Hunter, Mark, Yvonne, Bill, Diana and myself, came in separate groups from separate directions through separate boarder crossings but we all managed to reach Hotel Reyana in Zaragoza within the same hour. Just in time to share our stories and grab a delicious Mexican supper and plan for the long trip up the mountain the next morning.

After a daylong, 4-wheel drive up the mountain we made it to the small village of Los Toros in the Purificación karst where we would be spending the next two weeks. We spent the first full day setting up camp and practicing rope techniques on an obstacle course Mark and Yvonne set up in a tree in camp. We decided around the campfire that the group would split up to check out the various leads. One



Amazing formations in Poza Zorillo
Photo by James Hunter



Mark Minton rigs the Pure Booty Drop.
Photo by Yvonne Droms

eggs, drapery and stalactites up to four meters long. The passage leading down to the Octopus becomes steep and all of a sudden there is a tight, vertical squeeze that leads to a 17-meter drop. The pit gets its name from the long stalactites surrounding the rim that

group would do Poza Zorillo, another Soplo and people planned to ridge walk and drop pits in free time.

Poza Zorillo is a cave very near the entrance of Soplo de Los Toros. Local goat-herding girls showed it to cavers three years ago, and last year Yvonne, Mark and Charles Fromen dug out a crawl and left a pit as a lead. "Vonny's Cave" everyone was calling it. I guess no one believed that it would go. I went into Zorillo on our first day caving. Mark and Yvonne were rigging the cave and I was along for the ride and exploring and learning all the rebelayes and switchbacks, redirectionals and jumbled messes of rope. The first thing I had climbed was the tree in Bill Steele's and Diana Tomchick's back yard in Irving, TX. Two weeks later I was dropping 40 meters down the Zorillo entrance with more hope than confidence. Bill stayed on top rope guiding me step by step and Diana was on bottom rope making sure I stayed on the rope so my first drop would not be my last. Advanced caving is what Bill called it. Trial by fire is what I was thinking. Once I reached the bottom though, I knew it was for me.

Poza Zorillo is very pretty from the beginning and just keeps getting better as you go. The Octopus Drop is the first major attraction and the passage below has fried



Mark Minton surveys PURE BOOTY. Photo by Yvonne Droms



Bill drops into PURE BOOTY. Photo by Yvonne Droms



Paul hands his tanks up to Diana Tomchick after the remote and demanding dive. Photo by Paul Heinerth

give it the appearance of an octopus when viewed from the bottom of the pit. On the first trip Bill stayed on the top because he

didn't want to risk getting stuck in the Octopus Drop while others were still in the cave. Diana and I went through the Octopus Drop squeeze and down the pit to where there is a very inconspicuous opening in some columns on the ground. The structure of the cave quickly changes from breakdown to brittle white powdery walls with deposits of red and purple mud. The passage is scattered with intricate helictites, flawless soda straws and one formation coming from the ground that looks like a clenched fist. It was a total "Om" moment when I first entered the passage and saw the spectacular formations-what I imagine becoming enlightened might feel like. By the time Diana and I reached Mark and Yvonne they were examining the next drop, "Vonny's Pit", a virgin pit that we left for the next day.

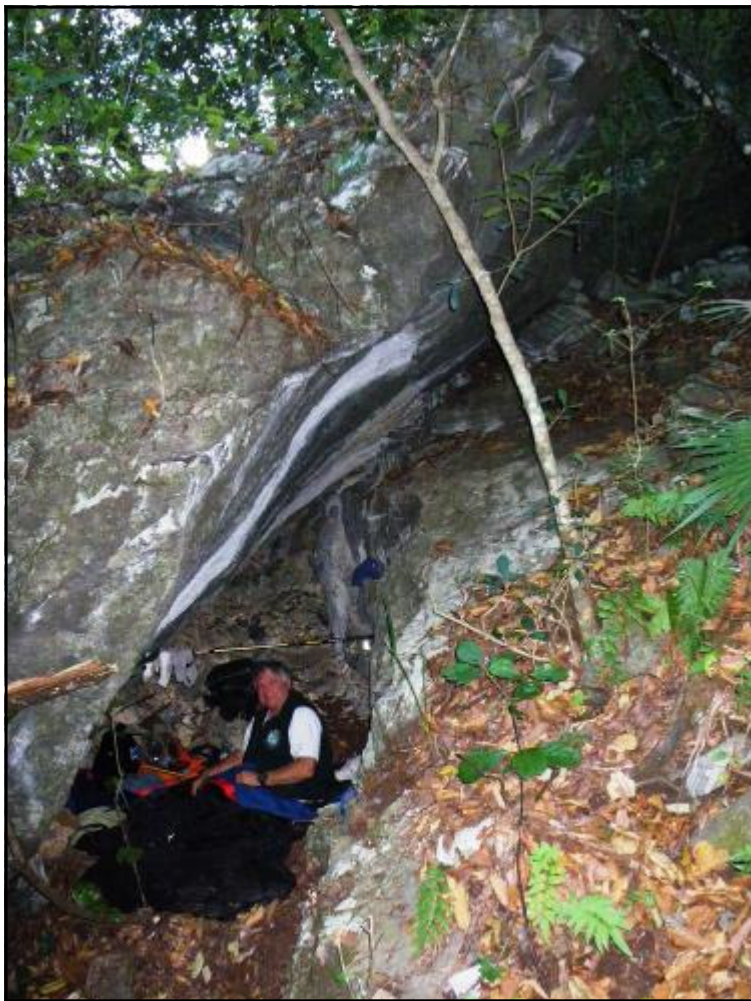
Diana couldn't make it on the next trip into Zorillo because of dehydration. Mark and Yvonne continued to rig and survey and Bill and I pimped the Octopus Drop. A cleaner drop made all the difference and we quickly met up with Mark and Yvonne who were



**James Hunter made a Christmas cobbler
Photo by Bill Steele**

rigging "Vonny's Pit". The walls of the pit sparkled gold and silver with flowstone and translucent bacon drapery spanned the ceiling. Mark and Yvonne, who didn't know me from Adam, let me have the honor of dropping my first virgin pit!!!! I sang the Hallelujah chorus as I descended and it felt like what I imagine heaven to be. My first virgin pit!!!! Mark kept on telling me how most cavers never get the chance to see and do stuff like that, to explore such grand passages and go so deep. All I can say is... it's unfortunate to be them because it was AWESOME!

Shortly after "Vonny's Pit", and down one more nasty, muddy drop was the Pure Booty passage. Bill found a cave pearl (a thing I had seen in pictures but doubted their existence), the first sign of pure booty. From there we saw a small pool with clear water, translucent formations from floor to ceiling and beautiful white flowstone covering the floor of the entire passage. We walked gently on the white flowstone as the passage continued to wind further and further into the cave. We talked and hoped that the passage would continue to go and that Zorillo would connect to the resurgence. Disappointment came when Vonnie yelled



Paul Heinerth in the Hall of the Mountain King
Photo by Bill Steele

from the front, “I see a rope”. We had connected to the Soplo Shaft, which meant that we were at the end of Poza Zorillo. Mark rigged a complex drop down into the Soplo Shaft and made it within a few meters of continuing Soplo passage with not enough rope to get him there!

At the same time, a team of Heather, James and Aaron was pushing Soplo. They had spent the night in the cave and saw our rope coming out but it was not a disappointment for them because it meant that there was now an alternate, less-muddy, way in and out. Now that they connect, they are called Sistema Los Toros. Sistema Los Toros was our Christmas present. Heather, James and Aaron didn’t come back until early morning Christmas Day. The camp spent Christmas day together. Everyone contributed something. Tanja and James provided ham, mash potatoes and gravy, Aaron contributed a 40-lb bag of Christmas candy. The Toyota truck group (Bill, Diana, Mark, Yvonne, and me) contributed baked beans, yams, and fresh mint mojitos. For dessert, Paul made a special French Canadian dish, sucre a creme de St. Jerome, and James made a Dutch-oven cobbler over the fire. Not that bad a celebration for being out in the boonies.

Around the fire a few nights before, the lot of us had decided that Paul, Bill, Diana and I would take the planned trip down into the Arroyo Luna canyon to check out the resurgence cave and see what potential it had. The burros we hired arrived the day after Christmas and in no time they were loaded up with our caving gear and Paul’s diving gear and heading down into the canyon towards the resurgence cave: Nacimiento de Los Toros. The team of four was Paul, the cave diver, Bill the Old Timer,

Diana, who along with Bill were the only ones of us who had been in the cave before, and me, the new blood. We made it to camp with a little daylight and Diana, Paul and I tried to make it to the cave to get water and have a look-see but could not find the way. By the time we made it back to camp Bill had unpacked and made the grim discovery that led to our camp being named “Camp Nostove”. So there we were, on the side of a cliff, nestled between two tall rock slabs that kept us from falling off of the cliff. Paul camped in a little cave about 50 feet away which we called The Hall of the Mountain King. We had a flat rock that served as the kitchen area and a nice little fire pit where Diana made her magic happen.

Down at the resurgence cave, I was lead tape, Diana was on instruments and Bill kept book. We had surveyed 200 meters of passage when we met up with Paul who was widening a head notch through the sump. Diana and I were able to squeeze through and made the announcement that it sumped again and so we ended the survey. While we were surveying, Paul free dove and could see that the passage beneath was large and about seven meters deep. At Paul’s suggestion, we decided that we needed to come back the next day with the tanks. The tanks were not at the cave nor were they at our camp. No, the tanks were a good hours walk up the cliff, above camp, where the burros had decided they were stopping two days before. So, we left early in the morning to go up the cliff to get the tanks and the dive gear. We then hauled eve-



Getting the burros ready for the journey. Photo by Bill Steele



The Author at the entrance of Nacimiento de Los Toros. Photo by Bill Steele.

rything down the cliff to where we had left all our cave gear the day before. The tank haul was complicated with tight squeezes and crawling up waterfalls and Paul said that it was one of the most remote and demanding dives he has done.

Paul was gone under the sump for 1 ½ hours and came back to report that he had made it to several air-bells and finally a two-meter-high waterfall where he turned around due to the cold. He surveyed about 70 meters. We headed out of Nacimiento de Los Toros and would not return for the rest of the trip.

As agreed-upon, the burros arrived at the planned meeting point on day three of the resurgence trip. We loaded up and took the rest of the day to hike back up the canyon. The hike was more difficult going up, not because of the steep incline but because I had taken a powerful blow to the stomach after foolishly standing behind a mule. When we got back to Los Toros, camp was buzzing. Soplo was still going and the resurgence group decided to take a fun trip in Zorillo to see the Soplo connection and a few muddy, sticky passages further in. That's what I saw of Sistema Los Toros, unless, in the future, it connects to the resurgence, and then I can say have seen more!

On the last day the two villagers who lead the burros down into the canyon came to our camp and wanted to show us "Poza Destilero" which means Distiller's Pit. I insisted on taking vertical gear and rope and Mark entertained my eagerness. When the young men saw the rope I had they told us we would need

much more! When we first arrived at the pit we could not see how deep it was—we could just see a large opening camouflaged with tropical foliage. The sun was hitting the entrance at that perfect, magical angle where you wouldn't be surprised if a team of fairies flew out and opened the door to paradise. Maybe it was just the altitude. They guessed it was 200 meters deep, but it was not even 20. The men set up the rope and I was on it and heading down into the pit when an owl came flying out of the pit at me screeching and dropping poo everywhere as it flew. I landed and wasn't off rope yet when another owl came flying out at me from further in the cave. The cave was very inactive but looked like it once had a lot of water flow in it. The ground was soft and the soil was rich and covered with hundreds of blue centipedes. I saw some worn helictites but turned around when I saw what I thought was another owl in a small chamber refusing to leave. Mark went in and saw that the floor of the chamber was covered with worn cave pearls but that it didn't go past that small room and that it was a bat instead of an owl. I told the story at camp about the Owl Pit and they say that it's a good omen to find an owl in a cave. Good for me.

Dropping a pit was a nice way to end the trip. Caving in Mexico is on the top five list of things to experience in my lifetime. Now that I have done it, I want to add it to the top five list of things I have to experience in my lifetime again!

Tabasco: The Other Hot Sauce - February 2009

Written by Tone Garot.

Edits by C. Brian Smith.

Maps and minor edits by Vickie Siegel.

Protagonists: Vickie Siegel, Eladio Terreros, Mike Pugliese, Laura Rosale Lagarde, Joel Jiménez Pérez, Peter Lord, Tone Garot



Tabasco, Mexico

Introduction

A trip report generally tells the tale of a particular, well, trip. This trip report will indeed do so; however, being that the adventure was a multi-week trip in Mexico makes it rather special (at least to me); for this reason, I have distilled events based upon my perceptions. A trip to Mexico is more than just a caving trip. It is an embarkation to a different world.

Mexico can mean many different things to different people: food, a place to practice Spanish, natural beauty, ingenuous natives, and plentiful solutional caves. A typical project day might consist of the following: meet a guide, go to a site, scout, survey, and then return to camp. There might also be lead pushing/digging and ridge walking. Data may entail collections of insects for biological research, photos, and data collection of archaeological specimens.

A significant reason for me going on these multi-week Mexican adventures is the people. Cavers are, in general, good people, and these longer trips really give you a chance to get to know people. You might brush elbows with biologists, hydrologists, archaeologists, geologists, ecologists, paleontologists, and enthusiasts; and even if they hail from another country and might not speak your language, there is still a common thread between you.

The people you meet on a trip like this aren't limited to people interested in caves, though. At one point we were stopped by Federales who asked us to get out of the vehicle to search it. Standard procedure . . . I've gone through checkpoints like this

one dozens of times. The Federales were polite but rather stoic. As one guy rummaged through Mike's bag, he came across a small bottle of aguadiente (caña). He held it up, laughed, showed his friends who also laughed; and said a few things in Spanish. Then shortly after the inspection, he let us go. These are human beings with thoughts, feelings, and even a sense of humor. One difference: they carry machine guns. You gotta love Mexico.

This particular Tabasco trip had us doing a significant amount of survey, while other Mexico trips I have attended also had us ridge walking, digging, and clearing entrance brush. It doesn't matter what the task at hand is—I go to enjoy myself. The mechanics of survey is serious business. You want precision and accuracy. However, there is also time for fun—jokes, singing, and laughter. There is no reason why you can't do good science and still have a good time. I find that my best experiences are when a survey teams works well together. The survey points go quickly, and the hours melt away. Of these Tabasco peeps I can say that I would readily travel with them again, and it is comforting to know that this trip is not the end of the project.

Above I mentioned food. Mexican food is utterly tasty. There's meat, there's heat, and there's "can't be beat." The food, alone, is reason enough to go to Mexico. When traveling as far south in Mexico as we did, it is highly probable that you will see the ocean, and that means seafood!

As a last introductory note, 3.5 days of driving (I had an extra day because I came out of Tucson) is a lot of driving. You get road weary. I find that audio books really help pass the time. Vickie and I listened to history, comedy, and a light kid's story. It helps.

Pre-Trip

Mexico's National Congress of Speleology was to be held in Villahermosa, Tabasco, Mexico in early 2009. Vickie was planning to attend, and as long as she was at it, she thought a dose of caving was in order. Vickie has taken over the lead of the Caves of Tabasco project. She cited that Peter Lord—who lives in Villahermosa—had at least seven new cave entrances, and there were several leads left over from the previous year.

My schedule allowed me two weeks if we caught the Congress first; Vickie and others interested were okay with that; the trip was planned. There were three of us heading down from Austin, and we would meet Laura in Villahermosa a few days later.

We were prepared for either camping or hotels. We were also equipped for vertical caves, even bringing a hammer drill. The trip was taking form.

2009 Jan 27 Tuesday

I headed from Tucson to Austin. I have done this drive quite a few times in the last two years. This particular leg of the trip was fairly quick, only about 13 hours. I tried to get as much of I-10 done during daylight as I could. I left around 6 a.m. or so, and arrived around 8:45p.m. I stayed at Crash Kennedy's place. Upon arrival, Jim gave me a dram of tequila to take the edge off. I chatted with Alex, his girlfriend Christina, and Del for a bit. Jim's parents were in town for a visit and were watching a movie. Alex and Christina took off, so I crashed in his room. I was to meet in Del Valle early the next morning, so I crashed early.

The weather was bitterly cold. It was cold all the way to Austin, and the forecast did not improve.

2009 Jan 28 Wednesday

The morning started cold. I couldn't believe how cold. I drove over to Vickie's place where Mike was already waiting. We assembled and loaded gear into Vickie's Toyota pickup truck. Our plan was to go through the border crossing at Matamoros, but at the aduana (customs) Vickie learned that we had to go to Reynosa to cancel her expired vehicle permit. Apparently, Reynosa had computer capabilities that Matamoros did not.

At the Reynosa aduana, the paperwork was handled and were on our way. Unfortunately, we had to then drive through the city of Reynosa to continue, and we were flagged down by a squirrely traffic guy who told us that we missed stopping at a school cross-

ing. There was no sign, no other vehicles stopped. In short, he was looking for a bribe. This scenario isn't a speculation on my part. He said it would be more expensive if he had to write out a ticket. After some conversation with Vickie, he said, "Is it too much?" She replied back with an emphatic affirmative. So he lowered it from 300 pesos to 200 pesos. He received this money low and quickly pocketed it. This move was textbook extortion. We felt quite certain that we were targeted because of the Texas license plate. Both Vickie and I are reasonably sure that we did nothing wrong. Considering that we didn't even want to go through Reynosa in the first place (issues with the vehicle permit), we were a little miffed about this violation.

Later in the trip (on a different day), we drove by two uniformed men. One half-heartedly tried to flag us down with the same pointing gesture as the squirrely guy in Reynosa. There was no one around, no other traffic . . . just us. We kept driving. In a third town, an officer actually chased us on his motorcycle. He said that we went through a crosswalk. I remember the crosswalk distinctly, and I had just moments earlier mentioned that we should go really slowly here because of the confusing nature of the road. I didn't understand all of the Spanish between him and Vickie, but his claim was that there was a man with a flag there—entirely untrue! We think he only gave us a warning because he knew we would contest it.

Lesson: be very careful driving in Mexican towns. If anyone flags you down—and you did nothing wrong—you might consider not stopping and letting them come to you. It's probably better to accept a ticket rather than pay them off. Insist upon their name and badge number, and if you feel comfortable, take their

photo. Of course, if you don't want the hassle, just pay them. You can always offer them less. In all of my travels to Mexico, this adventure was the first (second and third) time I have run across this kind of corruption. Mexico is big. Don't miss a trip to Mexico just because of a little extortion.

Continuing with our story . . . Vickie stopped at a Pemex to get air in the tires, as one of them looked rather low. Two vehicles—driven by ambitious Mexican women—came from opposing directions and nearly ran Vickie down in their attempt to get to the open gasoline pump. Neither woman was backing down.

As frequently happens in traffic-filled border towns, some guy on the street selling wares came up to our vehicle at a stoplight and started up a conversation through the window. His

enthusiasm suggested that, again, we were targeted because of our Texas plates. He tried to be extremely friendly, put forward his fist such that I might knock knuckles, but I had an allergic reaction on my hand from the previous week (it looked bad, but it was no big deal). I said, "Hey, look at this [contagious disease on my hand]." My words got him to move along, and Vickie laughed and laughed at my ploy.

Note to self and readers, too: avoid Reynosa.



Villahermosa Restaurant - © 2009 Tone Garot

The rest of the day was fairly uneventful and devoted to driving. We at dinner at Taqueria El Paisa in San Fernando. Then, we crashed at the San Fernando Inn.

2009 Jan 29 Thursday

We started off the day with a fine breakfast in Aldama. As we were driving along, we happened upon a building that looked interesting. Not in any extreme hurry to get to Villahermosa, we decided to stop and check it out. It was an old water treatment plant that was being refurbished into a fish hatchery and ecological tourist area. People came out to talk to us and give us a brief tour.

Continuing our long drive, we eventually made it to the Gulf Coast. We stopped for lunch at Restaurant Marysol for seafood. Vickie pointed out that any restaurant that has drawings of the food on the building is probably going to be good. Apparently this venue was a touristy spot because a young man asked us for money, then walked around the vehicles in the lot. We kept an eye on him.

Dinner was camaron (shrimp) soup for me. Vickie or-

dered chicken soup, but didn't eat any. In La Tinaja, we stayed at a No-Tell Motel.

2009 Jan 30 Friday

After quite a bit of driving, we finally arrived in Villahermosa around 1:00p.m. Our room was booked in advance by Laura at the Howard Johnson Hotel. This hotel was fairly swank, with valet service (for the parking was not on site), and it was located in the historic heart of downtown Villahermosa. Since Laura was still working upon her presentation, Mike, Vickie, and I explored a bit. We stopped at a coffee shop, and soon after we ordered, it started to pour. It wasn't really the rainy season, but try telling the clouds as much. After waiting awhile, we decided to take our chances walking back to the hotel under canopies and building ledges.

Later, Vickie and Laura went to the opening presentation of Mexico's National Congress of Speleology. I believe the opening presentation was given by Peter Lord, whom I later met. Mike and I opted to skip the Congress since it would be in Spanish. Instead, we walked around Villahermosa taking photos of the cathedral, statues, architecture, and other such things. Dinner was at a place where a mass of meat rotated on a vertical spindle. Delicious!

2009 Jan 31 Saturday

We left Villahermosa in the morning. Vickie was okay to move on without seeing other presentations of the Congress. Laura stayed behind to give two presentations. Her plan was to meet up with us later, and she gave us some of her gear to take with us.

Along the way, we stopped at Cueva de Coconá—a show cave. Mike and I went in while Vickie decided to remain at the vehicle. The cave was interesting enough for 25 pesos (about \$1.75) per person.

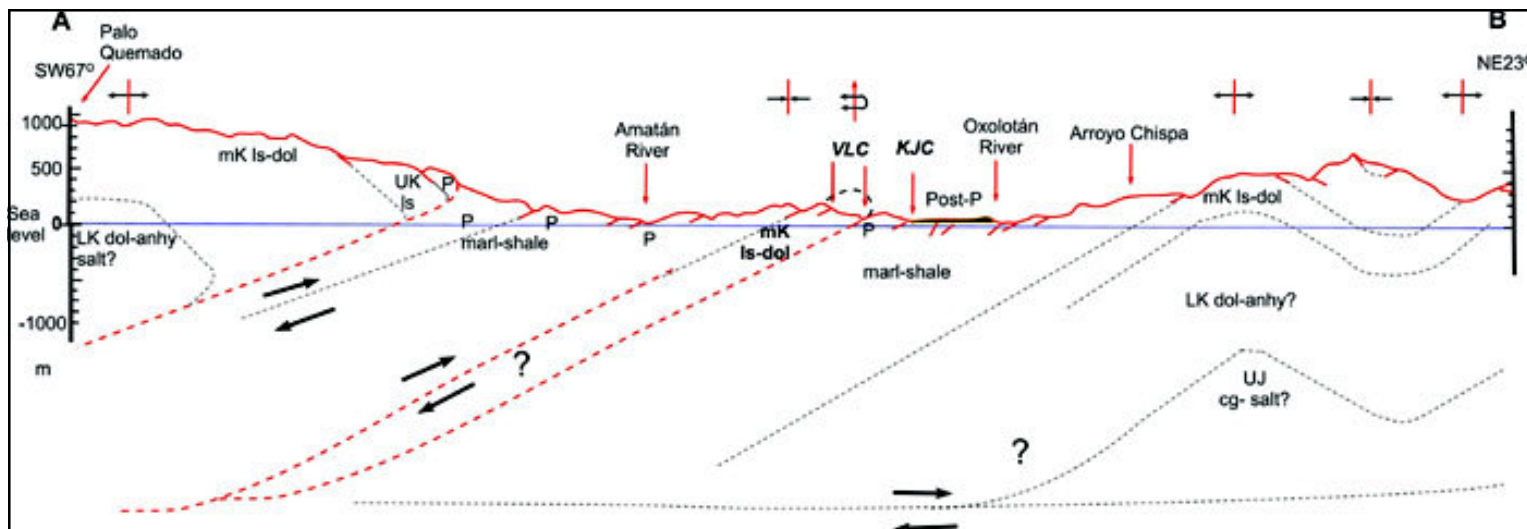
We made it to the town of Tapijulapa, which was a bit touristy, having buildings of similar design and color and nicely cobbled streets. The town square was well kept: clean with pruned bushes. There was a Tyrolean line across the river, which we vowed to try; however, we never did get around to it. We decided to stay at a nicer hotel that Vickie knew from a previous trip. The price per day was 468 pesos, which split three ways equated to about \$11 per person, per night. Although the room

was small, the hotel hosted many attractive amenities. 486 pesos entitled us to a hot shower, air conditioning, and Sky TV. Sky TV is digital satellite television. You see the dishes everywhere in Mexico these days, even in small towns off the beaten path. Satellite TV meant that we found movies in English, or, at a minimum, movies with English subtitles. On our first night we happened upon "The Scorpion King" starring Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson. Another night, we happened upon the "Mummy 2," also with Dwayne Johnson. Later in the trip while surveying, I was heard to say "I'm really hoping for another Rock movie tonight." "The Rock" became a common theme, and we even named a room or passage in his honor. Look on the included maps to see if you can find it.

There was an upper area to the hotel in which we did some work on laptops. Also, there was a porch with an amazing view where we sometimes cooked our dinners. Since the weather was clement most of the days we were in Tabasco, the porch got much use. The last amenity of the hotel worth mention was locked parking. Although we didn't leave much gear in the truck (we kept the hammer drill in the bathroom!), this luxury added peace of mind. One of the oddities of the hotel—perhaps a negative feature even—was this: most days when we returned from cave survey, the door was locked, and no one was there. We would sit outside the entrance waiting, and generally the woman would come down from the upper part of town to let us in. Our speculation was that someone would pass us along this common route then tell the woman that we were waiting. One day a boy intent on making a few pesos sat near us while we waited. He had that sort of español that was more mumble than information, and I couldn't understand a word he said. Being resourceful, he made gestures indicating sleep. I nodded, and he went to the upper part of the town. He soon returned with the hotel woman, and I gave him 2 pesos—he earned it.

Mike's nickname was soon established, which I won't mention here. If you want to know, ask him. Laura also got a nickname, but the same rules apply.

Mike and I split a whole chicken that evening. It was 60 pesos (about \$4.25), including side dishes. Being a tourist town, there was much disparity in pricing. Some tiendas (convenience stores) charged you tourist prices while others gave you good value. One example in particular comes to mind where I bought two bananas and a good sized mango—price 13 pesos. Two doors down, I bought an entire bunch of bananas, two mandarins, and several small mangoes for the same price. Speaking of fruit, the



Laura's Villa Luz Cross Section - © 2009 Laura Rosales Lagarde



Mike looking at white water - © 2009 Tone Garot

in-

bananas and mangoes down south taste amazing! Bananas in southern Mexico are nothing like the mealy, large, pasty bananas I get in Tucson. Mexico also has some interesting fruits—like mandarins that are sort of like oranges, but easier to peel and more tasty. There are also guanábanas, which make a sweet, tasty drink. I don't buy apples in Mexico because, well, I don't particularly like apples; but also because they often import them from the USA. My philosophy is that if I can buy it at home, then there's no reason to add it to my experience.

2009 Feb 01 Sunday

Around 4:30a.m., I heard a strange squeaking sound. We later found that right below us was a machine that made tortillas. It was more interesting than detrimental; that is, it never woke me up. Later that morning, a local market formed in the street below us.

We headed to the small town of Oxolotán to meet with Eladio and Joel, two archaeologists with whom we were to spend some time in caves. They didn't speak much English, and I didn't speak much Spanish, but our goals mostly overlapped; in short, we had fun. Waiting for our guide, Mike, Vickie, and I walked around the town a bit. The name "Oxolotán" comes from the native tribes prior to the Spanish language. You see all kinds of

interestingly named towns in southern Mexico. I was told that the pronunciation of the 'x' in this word is like 'sh', so it's oh-sho-latan.

Small coins are really useful for small towns like Oxolotán. The smaller shops simply don't have change for large bills.

When our guide arrived, we headed to Cuitlahuac (another great name!). Once there, a map was spread on a vehicle hood, and Eladio and Vickie discussed cave locations as well as our goals with the guide. Soon after, we started an ascending hike supposedly toward caves. Along the way, we met up with another guy who somehow switched roles with our guide. Many sweaty hours later, we found that we weren't going into any caves today. I didn't understand the conversation between Eladio and the guide, but apparently Eladio was fairly irritated because the guide brought us nowhere. Vickie got a nasty blister that would haunt her for several more days. Then the guide brought us down through jungle to the river where we found possible cave leads across the river. We got GPS points for those, then headed out.

It wasn't all bad. I saw some fantastic jungle plants that I had never seen before.

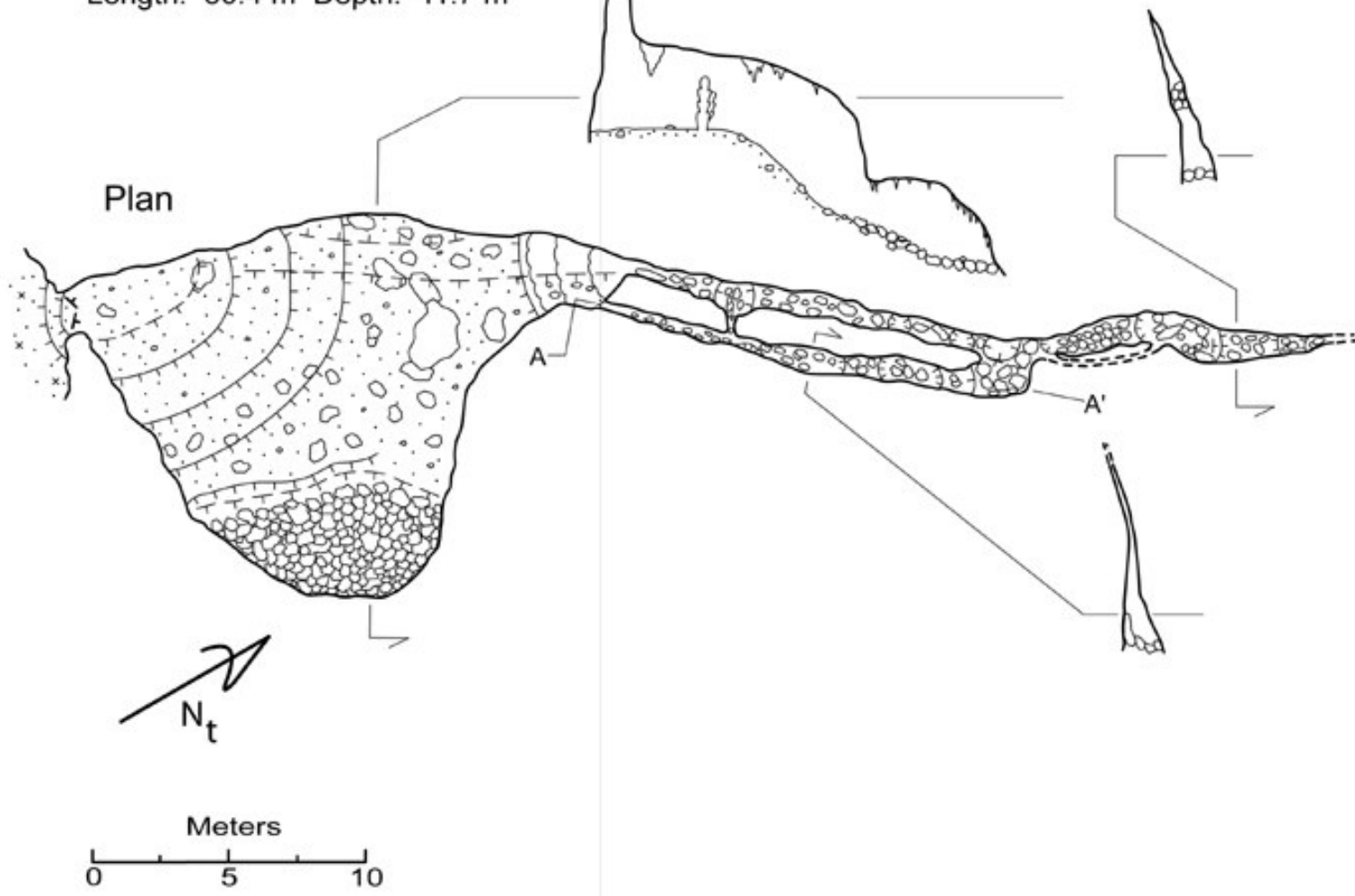
2009 Feb 02 Monday

Today was our first real day of caving!

Cueva Cerro San Antonio
 Tomás Garrido, Municipio Tacotalpa,
 Tabasco, Mexico
 ID #: TAB019

Suunto and tape survey February 3, 2009:
 Tone Garot, Michael Pugliese,
 Laura Rosales Lagarde and Vickie Siegel
 Drafted by Vickie Siegel, February 2009

Length: 80.4 m Depth: 11.7 m



Map of Cueva Cerro San Antonio (Profile removed)

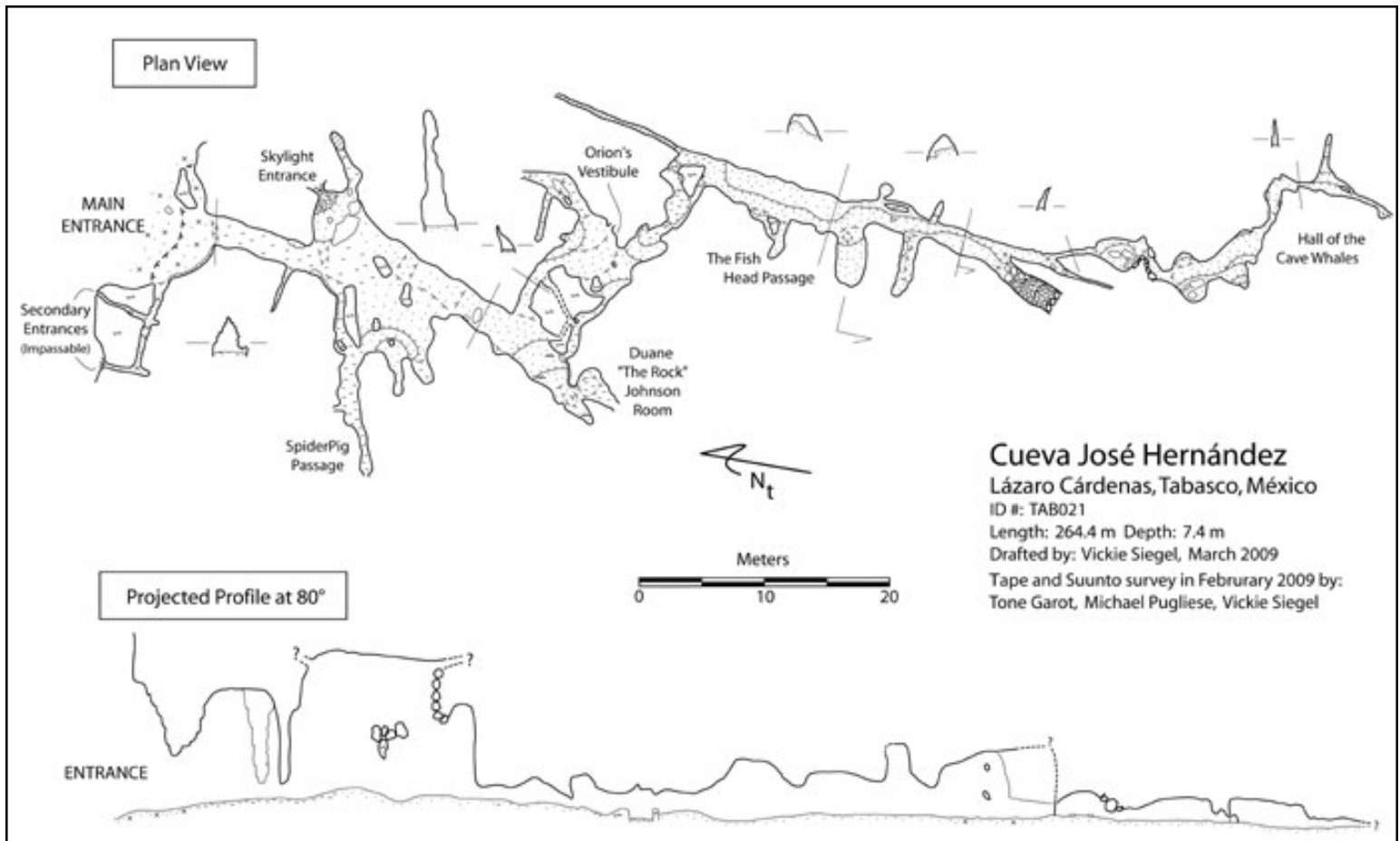
Our plan was to meet Peter Lord who would show us some cave leads he knew around Cueva de Villa Luz (Cave of the house of light). Laura dropped by our hotel in the morning, then we met the Villa Luz expedition (a trip set up for persons attending the Congress) who were eating breakfast. There were perhaps 12 to 15 of them. Vickie, Mike, and I decided not to join them for breakfast; rather, we started the hike to the cave where we would meet them.

Once in the park, we met a park official who had us wait until Laura showed up with the permit. This didn't take too long, and soon the group arrived, got ready, and went into Cueva de Villa Luz. Once they were underway, Peter showed Vickie, Mike, and me some cave leads. Mike went into one such lead and was stung multiple times by fire ants. He went into another lead that actually dropped down nicely, and because of the sulfur smell, we postulated that this lead might connect somehow to the main cave. After looking at cave leads, Mike and I went into the main cave to check out the interesting formations known as snottites. Vickie decided to stay behind. We met some of the returning cavers, in-

cluding Laura who said she would exit the cave then return shortly to show us around. Laura had a gas meter that kept beeping, but indicated that we were okay as far as breathing was concerned. Although Laura had some difficulties due to having broken her glasses, she gave us a first-rate tour of the cave showing us snottites (see back cover), fishing spiders, selenite crystals, and half a dozen dead bats.

Cueva de Villa Luz requires walking through water, which meant that our socks and boots were soaked. Mike, interestingly enough, had his cell phone charger in his leg pocket. Why? Well, that's something you should make a point to ask him. After about a week, his charger dried out and seemed to work again.

Nothing dries quickly in southern Mexico because of the high humidity. I learned this truth on a previous trip to Oaxaca, a nearby state. Therefore, the best bet for clothing was synthetic over cotton. I had spent some time sifting through clothes at a Tucson Goodwill to find apparel suitable to this peculiar and particular requirement. Note that although synthetics dry more



Map of Cueva de José Hernández

quickly, they still take some time to dry, and you can find yourself wearing clothes with a musty smell. Since we were staying in a rather comfortable hotel, I tried to use the air conditioner to effect a quicker drying time. One night the air conditioner actually started leaking water down on my head! My caving clothes smelled quite musty after the trip. When I returned home to Tucson, I needed to double wash my caving clothes.

After Cueva de Villa Luz, Laura, Vickie, Mike, and I surveyed Cueva de Las Albercas (Cave of the ponds). This was of interest in Laura's research project. There were many bottles at the entrance including broken glass. There was one tight squeeze inside the cave that we dug a bit to get through to a largish room below.

Fun happens where you find it. At a bridge over a white sulfur-enriched water, we had a lovely game of Pooh Sticks. Don't know what Pooh Sticks is? You had better re-read A.A. Milne.

2009 Feb 03 Tuesday

We hiked up to a conglomerate rock area to a cave called Cueva Cerro San Antonio that needed survey. The hike to the cave was through lush jungle terrain. The weather was a bit ominous, but the sporadic rain didn't soak us too much. The group consisted of Joel, Carlos (the guide), me, Vickie, Mike, and Laura. The survey required only some 11 points. The entrance spilled into a largish room, then continued northeast. There was a second parallel passage back. There were some nice formations in these tighter passages. When we reached as far as we could go, we tried to dig our way further. Laura was almost able to get through to what ap-

peared to be another room, but we left that lead for another day.

On the way back to the truck, we stopped at an amazing cliff side that was all conglomerate rock: breakdown waiting to happen. We poked around in some holes nearby. I found one that twisted and turned some 5 or 6 meters, but it was only breakdown . . . not solutional.

That night we cooked out on the balcony at the hotel. Laura and I cooked up macaroni then mixed tomato sauce and salsa into it. It was pretty good, although Laura got a bunch of noodles without sauce. Although there was plenty, she refused to toss it and take a fresh batch! Vickie made beans and onions on tostadas. Quite delicious. Tostadas are one of my staples while in Mexico

After dinner, Joel dropped by to exchange digital images. Mike and I arranged the picture transfer to laptops using my SanDisk Sansa Fuze (w/ Mike's 8G micro SD chip). The transfer worked really well.

2009 Feb 04 Wednesday

Laura awoke early to pack her gear and get a start on her trek back home. Such is the life of the Ph.D. student. We dropped her off at a Pemex laden with all her equipment.

Joel joined our entourage, and we met the comisario of the area, Fidensio. We found him on his bicycle in the fields. The first cave we were shown, Cueva de Don Tilo, took only a few survey shots. Joel found interest in some pottery shards. The cave also had a few vampire bats and an abundance of mosquitoes; I was actually bitten three times, although I don't recall getting the bites. Vickie mentioned that she was bitten quite



Bat Catcher - © 2009 Tone Garot

a bit.

Heading back, Fidensio showed us another cave entrance from which he said fish exited. That entrance was too wet to check out that day. Fidensio was extremely gracious. He pointed out many interesting fruits and trees. He also pointed up to black forms in a tree, which turned out to be howler monkeys! We later heard their eerie cries. Sometimes you forget that you are in another world until you hear something so strange, singularly unique, so different to what you are accustomed.

The comisario then brought us to another cave, Cueva de José Hernández, named after the land owner I believe. This cave was amazing! First, we saw some cool formations and a room with vampire bats. Then Mike and I scouted one section that seemed to be a dry, sandy riverbed for maybe 150m. This particular day (for we returned other days), the water level was high enough to see a little catfish and snails. There were also many fish heads three to four inches in size. In my mind, I was calling this cave Cueva de Los Pescados Muertos; and I think Mike was calling it Jose Cueva, a variant on the real name and the famous tequila brand. Survey was really sloppy muddy survey.

We headed to Tacotalpa, which is a larger city, because Vickie and Mike were running out of cash. After an infusion of pesos from an ATM, Vickie led us to a restaurant she knew that was off the town square. The food was delicious, and we realized that horchata (a sweet rice based drink with cinnamon and va-

nilla) can be bought in a pitcher. Mmm!

2009 Feb 05 Thursday

Peter Lord met us in the morning at an agreed upon place, the same Pemex where we dropped Laura. After Vickie and Peter got permission, we headed on a hike along a creek.

As a side note, it is supremely important to obtain permission to be on someone's property. This practice is not only good form, but also it may keep you out of jail.

We checked out some sinks where we felt the water from the creek was going downward, but there was too much water to delve deeper. We continued onward, checked a few other leads, then came upon Cueva de Don Cosmè that Peter had known about before . . . a big cave. There were interesting formations, fossils, insects, bats, crawly areas, etc.

There was an upper section with some interesting formations that Peter and I scouted. Then Vickie, Mike, and I did some survey while Peter scouted another lead in a crawly area that very much reminded Mike and me of Airmans Cave in Austin, TX. We eventually caught up with Peter to survey to that crawly section. Being able to get into crawls that Peter and I could not, Mike scouted further and found an alternate way out of the cave. Through trip!

On the way back to the truck, we saw a rather largish



Remains of human bones - © 2009 Tone Garot

obvious cave entrance that we hadn't seen on the way to Cueva de Don Cosmè. Apparently, we were all looking at the vines to the left instead of the hill face on the right. Therefore, Peter and I—soon followed by Mike—popped inside to take a look. It definitely needed survey (so much survey, so little time), and it had the unique feature of a "bat catcher" snake. Fantastic!

Returning to the hotel, I meandered to the local store to find something for dinner, and I came across mole (a spicy sauce flavored with chocolate) in a jar. Both Mike and I had terrific mole at the restaurant just off the town square a few evenings back, but when we returned the next night, they were out. Here it was in a jar. It seemed like an interesting possibility for dinner.

Meanwhile, Mike was procuring large amounts of hot peppers at the store next to the hotel for his own purposes. When we later met to make dinner, he asked if he could add some hot peppers to the mix. Sure. Since there wasn't a knife handy, he just tore the peppers up with his hands. No problem there. Then he rubbed his eye. Ouch!

Mike was in a lot of pain. He did his best to wash out the capsaicin with running water from the sink (bacteria be damned!), but this wasn't doing much good. He was in agony for a good hour, I think. The mole, unfortunately, didn't turn out too well either. It was a bad night all around.

2009 Feb 06 Friday

Joel, our Mexican archaeologist friend, had asked me a few days ago if I could drive. At the time I didn't understand what he was getting at, but later I learned that he doesn't have a driver's license. Eladio was elsewhere on other business, but he left his

truck with Joel. Joel wanted us to take Eladio's truck to a cave site, possibly because it was more comfortable than sitting in the back of the Toyota pickup; or perhaps he wanted to contribute to the project. It might well have been a combination of the two.

So I ended up driving. We picked up our guide at a pre-determined place. He then directed us up and South into the mountains. The weather was fine, but the road was not. There were frequent stretches of potholes and sometimes stretches of mud. After two hours of bad road, we arrived in a small town in the state of Chiapas. I parked the truck while Joel and our guide sought a local guide from the town. It is always interesting—perhaps a little uncomfortable—to enter a town that hosts few outside visitors. Soon a small swarm of men gathered around to see what was going on. We passed a few words between us, and they mostly left us alone. Mike had an opportunity to buy some breakfast at a local shop. Shortly thereafter, Joel and our two guides returned. We moved the truck to a better location, then started our hike.

Passing through the town toward the mountains, we saw townsfolk lay out coffee berries on tarps to dry in the sun. Nearby were the remains of the berry shells . . . the remnants after the two coffee "beans" (or stones) were removed from the berry.

This hike was one of the more scenic hikes with regard to interesting plants. Hiking up and into the jungle, we saw wild coffee plants, banana trees, a host of interesting flowers, huge elephant ear plants, fungi, mosses, and other cool sights. The hill was very steep, and although the temperature wasn't prohibitively hot, it was hot enough. Coupled with the exertion and humidity, I began to sweat bullets.

Soon enough, we reached a shelter cave, which was apparently our goal. The guide's estimate on the time to reach the cave was a bit high, but I guess it is hard to estimate such distances and hike times. The view of the city below and the mountains beyond from this vantage were spectacular! The shelter cave itself was fairly small. It took only three shots to survey. Joel's interest was less toward the cave's size and more toward the three piles of human bones.

I don't know why the human bones were in piles like this one pictured. I suspect that this was a ceremonial burial ground for the native tribes of Mexico before the Spanish invasion. I have seen piles of bones with a pot on top in Oaxaca, a Mexican state further south; but those bones were from a single human under the pot. Perhaps the larger piles suggest the bones were collected and deposited after-the-fact.

Vickie, Mike, and I finished up survey rather quickly, but Joel needed much more time to photograph and categorize the piles of bones. There were also a few pottery shards. Since the three of us cavers were done, we left Joel and the guides to finish up their detail work. That was our mistake.

Heading down the mountain and back toward the town, we picked up a shadow. At first I thought that he simply wished to pass us, but when we moved out of his way and beckoned him to pass, he said no, but he continued to follow us. I guess his curiosity was strong. Eventually we reached the town again where we left our shadow behind.

As mentioned before, I find it strange, and not necessarily comfortable, to be in a town that sees few outsiders. The people were too curious about us and stared at us as we walked through the town -- due, in part, to Vickie's blond hair. We stopped at a little store to get a cold drink then sat outside while children came near to look at us. After a while, we went to sit near the truck to wait for Joel and the guides to finish their work. As luck would have it, we didn't have the keys to the vehicle; so we sat outside the truck while more children gathered



Local boy wearing my helmet - © 2009 Tone Garot

around.

As time progressed, a group of adults also gathered around us, and a few of the town's leaders began to ask questions. There seemed to be two leaders who were doing the talking, sometimes at the same time. Vickie, who knew the most Spanish, handled the conversation. Between phrases, she said "I think we're in trouble." I wasn't too worried because the conversation seemed to be more discussion than argument. A young man brought us a pitcher of something made from ground corn called pozol with three glasses. After further discussion, Vickie told us that we were going to give a little presentation. She started to empty her cave pack while explaining what each of the items were: kneepads, helmet, compass, inclinometers, etc. When she was done, Mike and I followed suit. The townspeople were, I feel, more interested than angry.

As I understand it, the leaders wanted to know why we didn't ask for permission to go to the cave. Joel, being the lead for this the cave, should have done so, but—at that moment—he wasn't there to explain. The leaders told Vickie that other people had come to this area and had taken dolls, rather largish, from the caves.

Eventually, Joel and the guides came down from the mountains, whereupon a meeting between the town leaders, Joel, Vickie, and the guides ensued. While this meeting of the minds was transpiring, I played "touch your nose" with some of the kids

outside, and Mike dealt with a town drunk. The kids laughed as the drunk pantomimed concepts such as house and sleep to Mike. I got the sense that this was not the first time this man was inebriated in front of those kids.

Eventually the meeting finished, and as I understand it, we were to drive an hour to get a permit . . . then drive back to this town with this permit. One of the townsfolk—I think the young man who gave us the corn drink—was to accompany us. Before I was able to start the truck, the inebriated man jumped into the back seat! Apparently, he wanted to go along for the ride. A few minutes later he was extricated, and we commenced our drive.

On the outskirts of town, the young man accompanying us had us stop the truck, and he got out. Vickie later explained that he said that if we wanted to go into the cave again, we would need the permit. Thus ended our possible infringement of the law. We headed back to our hotel without worrying about the permit.

2009 Feb 07 Saturday, Fish Cave survey, day 2.

I don't remember a lot about this day.

2009 Feb 08 Sunday

On this Sunday, we were supposed to join Joel and

Eladio to investigate another cave lead. We had been getting up early several days in a row to meet guides to take us to caves. The mood of our group (Mike, Vickie, and me) was such that we just . . . well . . . didn't want to. I lobbied for waking up late, having breakfast at a restaurant, then a leisurely day of survey at Cueva de José Hernández (AKA Jose Cueva). Vickie and Mike were okay with this idea.

We had breakfast at a restaurant near the town square. We all got the same thing, a sort of breakfast pizza made from a huge tostada covered with beans, vegetables, tomatoes,

ing. We speculated that the owners of the hotel wished to expand their business.

We went back to Cueva de Don Cosmè to continue the survey. The upper passage, Nosferatu, was first on the docket. I did the rigging, then Mike and Vickie came up. This passage was nasty, hot, humid and sloppy. There was sticky clay and some guano. Add to that the two spooked bats who were pinned at the very end, and you can see why I didn't want to be there. We finished up this passage quickly. Back to the climb, and before derigging, Mike took a few more professional photos.



Ferry across the river - © 2009 Tone Garot

etc. It was pretty good, albeit pricey.

We had a good day of survey finishing up the cave. There was a lot of sand and a lot of fish heads. The water level was much lower. Mike took some professional photos in the fish passage.

Returning to the hotel, and after dinner, we relaxed by watching the tail end of Gladiator followed by the Chronicles of Riddick. Sometimes the best way to relax is not to think, and any Vin Diesel movie will grant you this boon.

2009 Feb 09 Monday

We awoke early because of pounding on the build-

Mike had a novel, interesting technique for diffusing the light from his slave flashes. His idea was to put the slaves into his smelly sweat socks. These same socks had been stinking up the closet in the hotel for days, and I dare say that the cleaning woman will never get the smell out.

Vickie wasn't feeling too well, and while she relaxed a bit in the cave, Mike and I did some more photography near the entrance.

Once Vickie was a little better, we went back to where we had left off when Peter Lord was with us. We did a few shots, got close to the back door, but then Vickie wasn't feeling well again, so we left early; and I drove us back to the hotel.

After some discussion, we decided it was time to head



Mike getting ready to photograph Sótano de las Golondrinas - © 2009 Tone Garot

home. We also decided that we would take an alternate route so that we might see Sótano de las Golondrinas. Some months back I had been invited to drop Sótano de las Golondrinas, but due to those pesky matters that arise in life (work, funds, etc.) I didn't go. When it was suggested that we go look at the cave, I thought sure, why not?

2009 Feb 10 Tuesday

Thus, we started our drive home. One never really looks forward to 2.5 days of driving, but it wasn't really too bad in my opinion. There are always things to see, speed bumps (topes) to swear at, gas stops, and hassles with zealous traffic cops.

That night we crashed on the beach in Veracruz. Having lived just off the Pacific Ocean for a number of years, I always find it a treat to come back to the ocean. Mike and I set up tents while Vickie crashed in the truck. I didn't sleep well, awaking several times in the night. I was in that light dream state . . . close to sleep, close to awake. As I looked out of my tent, I realized that the tide had been rising, and I somehow fancied that the waves might actually reach my tent. This state of affairs made little sense considering how close I was to the vegetation. The roar of the waves lulled me back to sleep.

2009 Feb 11 Wednesday

Since we had a higher goal than just "driving home," we took an alternate route from the one we took down. The route meant some deviation from paved roads. This yielded a bumpy ride, but we went through some visually stimulating country. Along the way to Aquismon, we happened upon a vehicle

ferry to cross the river. A ferry is just the sort of random thing you find in Mexico that makes it fun to be there. This particular one was powered by an old tractor engine. I hadn't been on a ferry in years, I think 1998 on a trip to Brazil; but that is another story. For a cost of 10 pesos and 10 minutes of our time, we floated the truck and ourselves to the other side of the river.

Eventually we arrived at the largest cave shaft in the world. It is the second deepest pit in Mexico and the 11th deepest in the world. We parked the vehicle and agreed to have two young boys watch it for 10 pesos each. The price of admission was 10 pesos, and we "hired" a guide who walked with us the 15 minutes to the entrance. Once there, we met another man who donned a harness, attached it to a nearby rock with webbing, and bid us to look over the edge after tying a rope around our respective waists. Thus adorning myself with a rope, I looked down the shaft and snapped some pictures. So this was the famous pit. It would be more fun to rappel than to simply look over the edge, but now I can say that I have been there.

Sometimes you see the most remarkable sights in Mexico. As we were driving along, Vickie and I spotted a broken-down armored truck pushed by a uniformed guard.

Finally we ended our day at a horse-themed hotel. At this point I was struggling with Montezuma's Revenge, which can make travel uncomfortable. Everyone has heard of Montezuma's Revenge, but I have been fortunate in that I have only contracted it once in my many and varied trips to Mexico. It just so happened to be on this trip. I felt like I was smuggling parasites across the border. There are plenty of resources that discuss preventative measures; I won't mimic them here. I will say that it is probably a good idea to wash fruit before you eat it, even the kinds that you peel.

2009 Feb 12 Thursday

We finished up the drive to southernmost Texas, crossed the border with little difficulty, and continued our trek through the state back to Austin. After being in Mexico for two weeks, one acquires a taste for non-Mexican cuisine. Vickie was jonesing for a Subway sandwich, and Subway is where we stopped. As for me, I was on a strictly bland diet of Marias cookies. If you have ever been to Mexico, you have probably had them. They lie somewhere between a cookie and a cracker. They are almost like animal crackers, except without the animal shape. They are readily edible when one has an upset stomach.

Arriving in Del Valle, Texas, the trip was complete. We unloaded the truck, ensured that gear went to the respective owner, and chatted briefly with Bill. I was later to meet with Alex and Christina for pad thai at Java Noodle, but that is another story.

Conclusion

Two weeks seems about the right amount of time for a caving trip to Mexico. Any longer and the trappings of work, money, and relationships can no longer be ignored. It becomes time to go home to handle all of the post trip details, like labeling images, handling GPS points, writing trip reports, drafting maps, and other data related activities. I'd say that it takes me a good three to five days to feel "caught up" from a trip, and maybe a month before I have finished all post-trip tasks. The days after a trip bring a time of contemplation—travel does indeed broaden the mind, but it takes some time for this broadening to sink in.

All in all, it was a good time. I saw some great caves, hung out with great people, had a lot of laughs, and got Vickie to laugh hysterically. What more could you want from a trip?

Longhorn Lowdown— Photos by Peter Sprouse and Lyndon Tiu



(left to right) Corinne (orange shirt), Liza, Ron, Peter, & Mike of UTG . Photo by Lyndon Tiu



March Report

by Ben Eisler—
GHG
(left)

Ten cavers, Lyndon Tiu (organizer and GHG), Peter Sprouse (survey lead, UTG), Ron Rutherford (UTG), Liza Colucci (UTG), Corinne Wong (UTG), Mike Pugliese (UTG), Mallory Mayuex (GHG), Caleb Mayuex (GHG), Ben Eisler (GHG), and Rocky Reidel (GHG), met early Saturday morning, 7-March-2009, at 8:30 AM outside the Longhorn Cavern State Park’s visitor center. The Texas Parks Ranger met us at the center with the key and escorted us over to the Crownover entrance just west on Park Road 4 from the visitor’s center. All entered the cave around 9:30 AM.

The goal of the trip was to survey and map a portion of the cave that has remained un-accessible over the last 47 years and has never been surveyed due to water levels. Due to the recent long-term drought throughout Texas, water levels have dropped in the cave, allowing limited access through a sump to a significant portion of the Longhorn Cavern cave system. A previous trip in February led to the rediscovery of this accessibility and a pre-survey re-exploration of this section of the cave.

The trip was set up with two teams of four to survey and a third team of two to explore leads. Peter and Liza led the two survey teams, while Caleb and Rocky performed the exploration. A leap-frog methodology was established with Peter, Ron, Mike,



Peter supervising Corinne's sketching techniques.



Caleb Mayuex after an unfortunate ear dip incident.

and Ben (1st team) surveying from the last survey marker (L46) before the sump that previously blocked all passage to the rest of the remaining un-surveyed section of the cave. Liza, Corinne, Mallory, and Lyndon (2nd team) traveled past the sump to a point far enough ahead to allow sufficient survey length by the 1st team. After reaching the start of the 2nd team, the 1st team leap-frogged ahead and surveyed to the end of the accessible limits of this trip. The end was marked by a second sump filled to the bottom of a large rock slab on an approximate 30 to 45 degree angle. The sump was not (yet) receded



Ron Rutherford



Ron Rutherford checking out a sump.

enough to allow further exploration. Ron reached with his feet until the water reached his ears. He reported that he could not feel any obstruction by rock or mud.

The 1st team turned around and allowed the 2nd team to fill in the gap. The 1st team surveyed a side lead that went for several meters until a restriction requiring digging was reached. Approximately 470 meters of newly surveyed cave section was added to the Longhorn Cave System, including a loop and a side lead. All exited the cave by 4:30 PM.

The cave between the two sumps was full with life, such as snails, crayfish, and millipedes.

Safety was made important by all members. On the way “in”, Lyndon pointed out two forks that could have proven to be confusing on the way “out”, and he pointed out a safer route out through a parallel passage. There was a steep and slippery slope route (Salamander Trail) that we used on the way “in”, and there was a parallel water crawl (Water Trail) that some of us opted to use on the way “out”. Everybody found themselves counting heads as cavers made their way from the entrance to the cars before the entrance was locked up.

There were no shower facilities, and most of the cavers changed in the semi-private parking area near the cave entrance we used. Remaining bottled water was used to rinse as much mud off glasses and faces as possible. After freshening up as best as possible, the group headed for dinner at “Diego’s Mexican Restaurant” near Burnet.



Rocky Reidel



Ron Rutherford enjoying various views of the mud.



Aftermath. (Left to right) Ben, Lyndon, Rocky, Mallory, & Caleb of GHG. Photo by Peter Sprouse.



May 2nd Longhorn Report by Mark Alman (right) with daughter, Allison.

Attendees: George-Paul Richmann, Gerald Geletzke, Jeremy Kent Lexi Kubiak, Natasha Lehr, Edwin Lehr, Lyndon Tiu, Ellie Thoene, Sheena McCrary, Mark Alman

It was with more than just a little trepidation that I embarked on my second through trip of this mud clogged furthest reaches of Longhorn Caverns.

After an expletive filled report to the ICS folks and swearing I would never go back into this area again, here we were on the morning of May 2nd, ready to take the plunge once again! My feelings had softened a bit since my first tirade, as it became more apparent that this cave would be needed, popular, and a very much appreciated cave trip during ICS, as more and more caves had become unavailable due to White Nose Syndrome (WNS).

I was joined this time by my partner in crime, my soon to be 16 year old daughter, Allison. I had managed to somehow peak her interest in this cave with my descriptions of the mud, blood, and the tears (mine, mainly), low ceilinged pools one had to traverse and sole sucking muck. I had amazingly walked the fine line of enticing her to come without having scared her off. Twenty five years of being a parent had perfected this skill!

We left early that morning and while Allison slept a good part of the way, I sucked down about a gallon of coffee and listened to folks calling the “Wild Card Line” on *Coast to Coast AM*. Nothing like UFO and out of body experience talk to get one ready for a caving trip!

We arrived at the Visitors Center late, as usual, to see our gang of cohorts ready to go. I talked to Steve and the staff at LCSP and relived myself of said coffee. While having everyone sign the usual waiver forms, I met new to me caver, Gerald Geletzke, from Waco, who has done quite a bit of caving in Inner Space Caverns. Lucky!

As we were gearing up, Ellie Thoene arrived from San Antonio with a fresh new victim, I mean, face in the person of Sheena McCrary. She had never been caving before and, boy, howdy, was she in for a treat today!

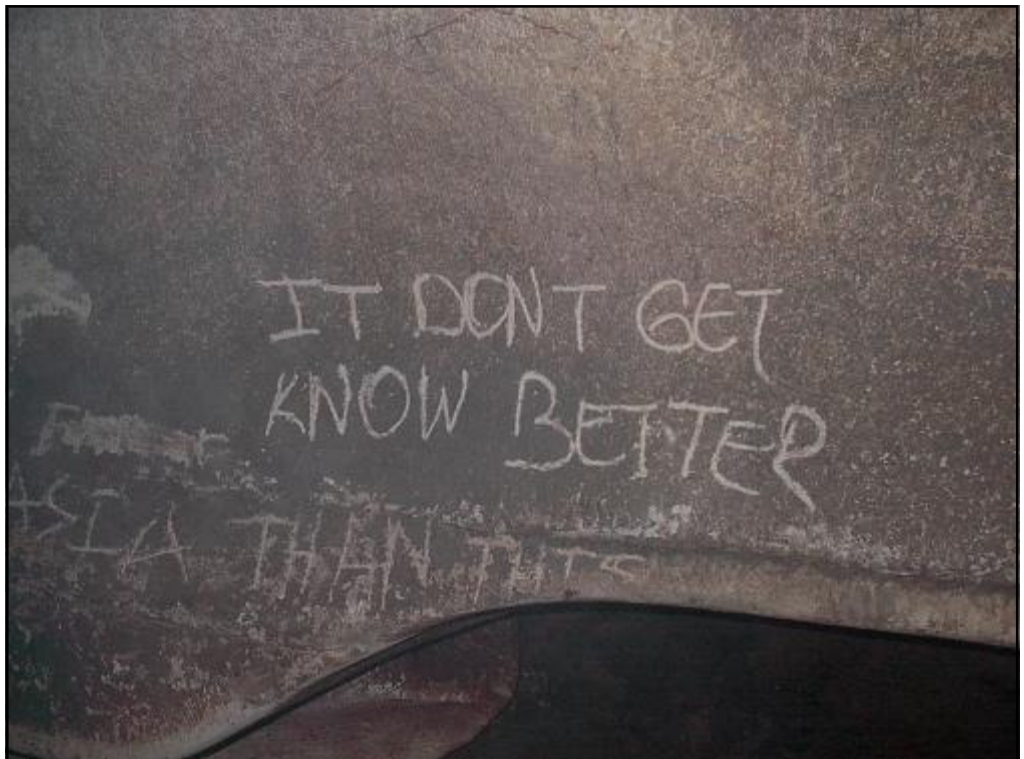
We decided to do the through trip right out of the gate, as the ten of us were already at the starting point. Edwin Lehr and I drove my truck down to the Crownover entrance, so we would have a vehicle to transport our muddy compadres back to camp in. We were finally underway at around 10:30.

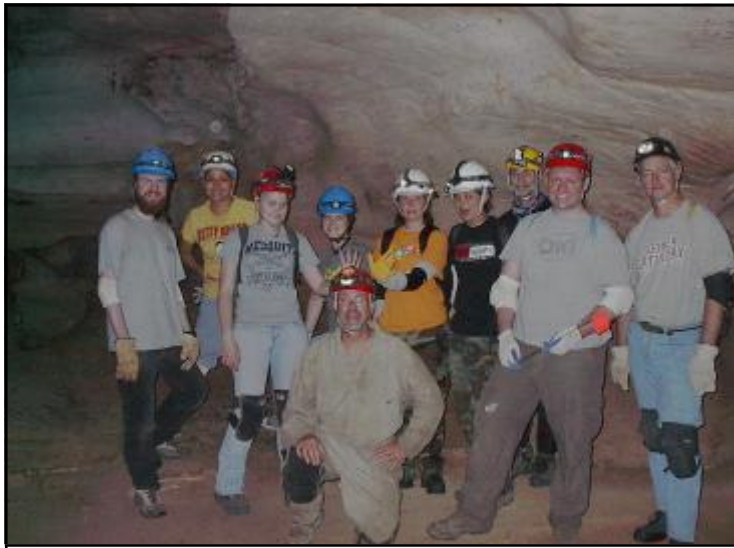
The nice thing about being a part of this project is the freedom we have to enter the cave at will and proceed back to the end of the tourist trail unaccompanied by a guide. I have always found it more thrilling to see a cave with our own supplied light than to rely on the commercially added lighting.

Using our own lights, we made our way back to the end of the tourist trail, occasionally stopping along the way to point out a feature, look down a hole, or to stop and look for ghosts, as we’ve been told this is one of the most paranormally active locations in the state. We’ll have to visit around Halloween!

We all posed for the gratuitous “before” photo of our little gang of explorers and headed off trail to “Catfish Alley”. After we first reached the pool, Lyndon wanted me to take a look to see if we could navigate on through, as the water level had come up from the recent rains and the head clearance had gone down. We decided that we had just enough clearance without having to resort to an “ear dip”, so Lyndon led the way through.

Plunging oneself into the cool water is always a shock, especially to the uninitiated, like my daughter, and several of the





other Longhorn Virgins. Everyone got through OK, thanks to Lyndon being at the front and guiding everyone through with his light and reassuring demeanor. The latter was very much appreciated by my daughter, as she had never traversed pools like this with such a minimal amount of clearance between water and ceiling. Getting wet was no problem, as she has done this many times at Jester Cave in Oklahoma.

After we were all through, it was decided that I would be the sweep, while Lyndon went on ahead to ask George to be our lead, but, to maintain a slow and deliberate pace for the chronologically challenged folks (me) and to allow the setting of flags to guide the way during ICS. This task fell to Lyndon and, I'm happy to report, a blind man could find his way through this cave after the flagging job we did!

We established a nice, slow pace and one that would allow us to catch our breathes, enjoy the scenery and some of the historical graffiti (some from the 1930's by CCC folks) and some not so historical, stop and look in the pools for critters (Lyndon reported seeing crawfish in one of the sump areas they surveyed) and seeing none on this trip, and to just check out our locations on the map as we progressed.

At one of the stops, after the second (or was it the third pool), we took a break and Allison and some of the younger cavers took great joy in making mud balls and creating their own speleothems on the ceiling of the cave. I was very pleased that after her bout of trepidation at the first pool we encountered, she was enjoying herself immensely!

We continued to make our through the passageway and Lyndon and I commented on the fact that the cave was definitely muddier, wetter, and more humid than past trips, due in large part

to the large amount of rain the area has been receiving this spring. Rain that is desperately needed in the Hill Country around Burnet and points south.

We took another break around the entrance to the Wiggles, a very narrow and tight passage that parallels the main trunk. A few of the new cavers with us suggested taking that route and Lyndon and I answered back with a resound, "NO!". This area was challenging enough, thank you.

We continued on, after a nice shot of jerky and some Gatorade, to the area affectionately known as "The Damn Dam" and the primary focus of the trip this weekend.

Lyndon was the first person across, followed by Edwin. The assumed positions on the backside in order to facilitate easier navigation and preventing anyone from slipping into the deep holes on either side of the narrow ledge one must lower themselves onto after making it across.

George and I assumed positions on the approach, and the four of us discovered a way to get everyone across with a minimal chance of injury. I wedged my body across the hole on the right side of the formation and positioned my knee to act as another step in order to reach the first rope handhold and stone foothold. George acted as guide and "bottom booster", if needed.

Once atop the formation, Lyndon and Edwin instructed all to swing their bodies around the top of the formation and lower themselves now slowly and gingerly on their bellies. Edwin made sure to guide their feet onto the narrow ledge and, then instructed



Lexi striking that First Time Caver pose.



Allison doing some remodeling to the ceiling.



“Mysterious” graffiti.

the to slide on their butts down the tube to the right to the lower passageway that continued onward.

This method seemed to work well for all, unless you were the last one across. That lucky person, naturally, was me. I’m happy to report that having better boots, this time, and cleaner glasses allowed me to get across with no adversity. Once across, Lyndon and I scoped over the area one final time, with Edwin, and decided that new and additional ropes still were necessary, both as redundant climbing aides and to replace the original rope that was visibly fraying. We also concluded that a rope pad of some sort was needed, as well.

Now that our happy gang was safely across, we continued on our way to an area that had quite a bit of graffiti on the ceilings, mainly from a 1958 survey trip. Some of the names looked vaguely familiar, especially, the initials of one certain caver, CHK. Hmm?!

As we made our wait out, I checked with my daughter as to how she was doing and if she was enjoying herself. She surprised me by stating that she was having a great time and would like to come down this summer for ICS to help out with tours! Wow, what a shocking but pleasant revelation! After Lyndon and I conferred for about two seconds, we agreed to let her come.

We slowed down around the area prior to the exit to Crownover, as Lyndon wanted to flag this area heavily, due to it’s maze like configuration and to insure that the cavers made their way to the exit to the left and not onto the sump area, that Lyndon, Peter, and George had been surveying the prior two months.

We all made it to the first rest area room, crawled to the second room, and then began the tight belly crawl to the last room before exiting out the ladder. Squeezing through here, I commented back to Lyndon, who had assumed the sweep position, “Is it just me, or does this area seemed a little wetter and a little more filled in since we were through last time?!”

Lyndon thought it had and, luckily, it was only a little. With the rains we have been receiving, we will have to check this out in June during our ICS leader training trip and, most definitely, on the first trip on Sunday during ICS week.

We all exited the cave OK and proceeded to where I had left the truck. It finally occurred to us that during the shuttle procedures in the morning, and after a 2.5 hour trip, that we would have liked to have had some lunch. Unfortunately, these were back at the Visitors Center. D’oh!!

As luck would have it, my wife always make sure that we eat well and we had plenty of food, water, towels, and Shiners to get everyone fed and rehydrated before the afternoon’s tasks.

A f t e r George, Edwin, and I grossed everyone out on by snacking on sardines (in mustard sauce, of course) and watching George dance a little gig after some ants invaded his most private of areas, we divided up into three groups for what remained of the afternoon. After George fashioned a very nice handline from some old caving rope I had, he and Lyndon would lead a group back to the sump area and try to tie and correct some survey point discrepancies that



Jeremy Kent, another satisfied First Time caver!

Peter had observed. Edwin and his daughter would take a few of the other cavers to the DD to install the new handline. They took some webbing I also had, just in case it was needed.

Allison and Lexi didn’t see any need to tag along, as we had plenty of volunteers for both tasks, so they opted for me to shuttle them back to the campground so that they could freshen up and get ready for the last tourist tour of the day at 4 PM.

After getting them back to the campsite, locating some soap and hooking up the hose for them, I made my way back to the Crownover area, a mile away. This allowed me plenty of time to get cleaned up, soak up the sun, and enjoy a little Stevie Ray Vaughn while reclining on the tailgate of the truck.

After a pleasant respite, the rest of the crew made their way out and gave a report. The sump area that they had surveyed, with some difficulty the last two months, was now sumped close and filled back with water. After deciding to not risk getting through, they had gone to the DD and helped Edwin and his group with installing the new ropework.

After getting the lowdown, we made haste back to the Visitors Center in time for the last tour of the day, where they

graciously allowed us to traipse along with the group and without having to get cleaned up beforehand, as long as we didn’t touch anybody! Supper consisted of various meats, steaks, and sandwiches on the grill, followed by a pleasant evening atop the observation tower, after a short shower moved on through.

We had more wind and rain later on in the night, but, all in all, it was a great weekend!



George, thinking of that rib eye awaiting him back at camp.

TSA Convention Wrap Up

I just wanted to thank all of you who came down to attend and thank those folks who helped make it such an enjoyable weekend!

Some thank you's to:

- * Rob Bisset for all of his behind-the-scenes efforts to, once again, pull off a great Convention!
- * Diana Tomchick and Bill Steele for lining up a wide variety of enjoyable, and useful sessions.
- * Darla Bishop for holding down the Registration table.
- * Stefan Cresar and his Crew of congenial and creative caver chefs and a great dinner, yet again!
- * Jon Cradit and Rahr Brewery of Fort Worth, TX for generously donating 8 cases of beer (that's 192 bottles, but, who's counting) and 36 Blind Salamander glasses (the kind you drink out of. These were not for the salamanders to wear!)
- * Jim Kennedy, TCMA auctioneer extraordinaire, and his lovely staff of Ellie Thoene and another young lady, whose name I do not know.

Some highlights of the weekend:

- * Over \$3000 raised during the TCMA auction to be paid towards the remaining \$8K note on the Deep and Punkin Cave property.
- * Watching many of the above items that were donated for the auction by Pete and Karen Lindsley, as they sell their house in Dallas, bought and "donated" back to Karen and Pete so they can "enjoy" and transport these items to their new house in New Mexico.
- * Jim Kennedy winning the ICS registration raffle. "Rigged" comes to mind, but, I only blame myself for not doing a better job stuffing the ballot box.
- * Excellent talks given that were very entertaining, educational, humorous and moved along, right on time.
- * An excellent preview of an entertaining caving movie by Aimee Beveridge and Co. to be shown at ICS.
- * Some delicious FREE beer was en-

joyed. The 8 glasses that were auctioned off raised almost \$100 for the TCMA!

- * Lots of meetings, legwork, and volunteers corralled for the ICS in only 3 short months! YES, they still need volunteers!
- * A superb barbecue dinner by our Caver Cook Crew. I barely had room for another Rahr beer or three afterwards, during the auction!
- * An extremely productive and succinct TSA Business Meeting. Some of the highlights:
 - Members Area and the online access to The TEXAS CAVER has been a hit and well-received by membership. Second most visited section of homepage.

(The calendar is first, barely).

- NO DUES INCREASE!
- A complimentary TC will now be sent to any prospective caver thinking about joining the TSA.
- A new (and cheaper) printer of the TC has been found and will be utilized for the next issue.
- The Convention ended up in the black and may have actually made a little money!
- A \$2200 donation to the ICS for 8 registrations for foreign cavers to attend this once-in-a-lifetime event who may not have been able to do so.
- A \$500 donation for the NSS' Rapid Response Fund to be used towards White Nose Syndrome Research and Containment.
- New and repaired survey equipment that can be used on various TSA projects. A \$400 expenditure.

Mark Alman— TSA Chairman

From Lyndon Tiu

It turned out to be a very educational weekend in Kerrville. There were brains involved here. I learned a lot from the talks at the convention.

I had always been curious about sinkhole formation. My curiosity was answered by two great presentation by Dr George Veni and Andy Grubbs. Both presentations talked about the geology and dynamics behind sinkhole



formation.

There were presentations about exploration trips made by fellow cavers.

Bill Steele talked about his exploration trip to Sistema de los Toros and how they discovered that two separate caves were actually one interconnected system. Peter Sprouse, Geoff Hoese and company spent a few weeks in Oxaca, exploring caves in the area. They talked about archaeological artifacts they encountered, such as human bones and pottery. They also spoke of the insect mishap they encountered while hiking through the bush. Dr Diana Tomchick showed us a photo documentary of her trip to Las Grutas de Guerrero. She showed how government road building projects have made more places accessible in the area.

Orion Knox talked about the grand new developments over at Bustamate. He showed pictures of how much has changed. This came complete with oohs and aahs from the audience, especially from the ones who were there when it was still wild country, and that one would have to hike up the steep mountain side to get to the cave. Today, an air conditioned bus takes cave tourists up. The cave entrance starts off as a concrete covered walkway that ends with air locks. Past the air locks are steel truss walkways with guide lights along the edges. The formations were spectacularly highlighted with a well designed lighting system.

There were presentations about caving projects from both the TSA and TSS. The TSA Longhorn Cavern project, which started off as a dig to prepare the cave for ICS trips, turned into a cave exploration and survey project when a 470m segment was re-discovered past a sump exposed due to a year long drought. The TSS presented a very promising new project in the Amistad National Recreation Area. Many caves were found and mapped there in the past, with a lot of potential for many more undiscovered caves.

There was a presentation by a new caver, Ellie Thorne, who happily shared her dream of wanting to be a caver, how she contacted the DFW

grotto and how she was mentored by Bill Steele. Now, she is a CAVER!

Probably, the most anticipated talk was from Jim "Batman" Kennedy, about WNS. Quite a sad moment to hear that bat colonies in the NE US are being wiped out and no one knows why. A lot of research is being done to determine the true cause. In the meantime, the best that cavers can do to help is to make sure we disinfect our caving gear in-between caving trips. Also, do not use gear used in areas with known occurrence of WNS, in areas without WNS.

Jon Cradit talked about the once in a lifetime opportunity for Texas cavers to put on a great shindig during the ICS. He showed us some ways we can keep cavers clean (and disinfected) after a caving trip.

The weather had been cloudy and windy most of the day, with a sprinkle of rain in the mid-morning. The sun eventually peeked just before dinner. Stephan Creaser and crew prepared a great feast. The TCMA auction that followed was just plain great entertainment. I found quite amusing is the fact that you can bid for someone else to take the goods. That you can bid for the person who donated the item to take it back. That complete junk can be worth so much. Anything to help pay the mortgage is fair game.

There was great shopping to be had. Caving gear, clothing and book vendors were out in full force. David Locklear was out in full force too and he was not selling junk. His stuff were mostly brand new, barely used items (mostly flashlights).

The wind did not let up all night, but at least, it did not rain. The fire was kept going into the early morning hours. Alcohol and XXX was freely passed around.

A great taco breakfast was provided by the TCMA the next morning. Quickly followed by an ICS and a TCMA meeting.

Next stop, the venue of the 15th ICS! Dr Veni gave some a quick tour of the campus, showing people what to expect this July. Till then, hope to see you back in Kerrville!



The Carbide Corner



This edition of The Corner highlights one of the exploits of longtime caver, **Mark Minton.**

Shaman Cave Ceremony

O v e r
Christmas-New
Year 1973-74 I
was with a small
group that did
some caving near
Huichihuayán in
San Luis Potosí,

Mexico. Cueva del Brujo, along with nearby Cueva del Aire, were known to the AMCS but had been rarely visited. As its name suggests, Aire has good airflow, so this seemed like a good project. A local guide took us to Brujo first, and accompanied us a short distance into the cave. Almost immediately we saw evidence of ritual use. There were coins and various plant leaves and flowers placed at several locations along the passage. When I started to pick up one of the plant bits, our guide said, “¡No lo toque!” Apparently it was bad juju to handle the offerings. As we proceeded deeper into the cave, our guide left for the surface.

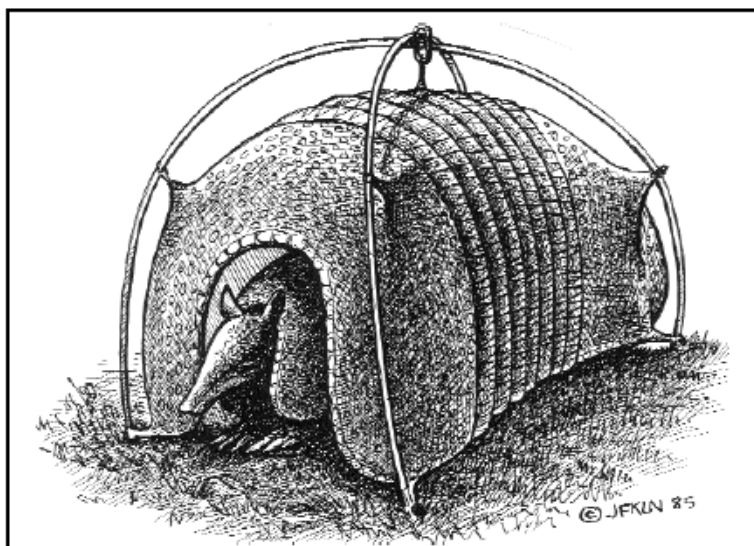
We passed through some nice formation areas and then some vampire bat guano crawls. Soon the passage started to open up, and we found ourselves in a large, sloping, complex room divided up by breakdown and formations. At the bottom was a small, muddy sump. As we explored upward following the air, we began to hear something like distant voices. As we got closer it became obvious that they were in fact voices, but they didn't seem to be coming toward us. Again we encountered coin and plant offerings like those we had seen near the Brujo entrance. I crept up behind a large formation and peered around the corner. To my surprise there was a group of men standing around a makeshift altar, chanting. Not wanting to disturb them, I quickly ducked back down, but apparently not before a small boy had seen me. We were in the process of retreating when the boy caught up with us and said we should come meet the brujo. Busted!

It's not every day that one meets a genuine shaman in a cave, but that is exactly what we did. The local boy led us up to the group of men, who interrupted their ceremony and greeted us warmly. We had been afraid that they might be upset that we were in the cave; that we might have somehow interfered with the gods and cast some pall over their rites. But in fact they were very friendly and actually invited us to join them! They had set up an altar made of stones with broken cave formations at the corners. A small dead animal lay on a cloth in the center as an offering, and the men were walking

around the altar chanting in Huastec, drinking caña and sprinkling a bit of the caña at various points around the circuit. They showed us the routine and we followed suit, not really knowing what we were commemorating or beseeching.

To us, the ceremony seemed to go on forever, but we noticed that the bottle of caña was almost empty, so we stuck it out, getting more tipsy all the while. Just when it seemed we would be done, the shaman produced another full bottle from his bag, but we begged off. We said we had to get back to our camp because our friends would be concerned. They graciously accepted the excuse and we parted friends, having experienced a part of native life few outsiders ever encounter. We climbed out of the nearby Cueva del Aire entrance, having established the connection with Brujo and completed the through trip. (As far as I know the cave has still not been fully surveyed, so the project awaits anyone interested.)

Editor—If you are a “chronologically-challenged” caver, like myself, and have been caving for 30 years or more, unlike myself, send a short bio to me, as well as an interesting story, incident, memory, anecdote, or what have you that you think may make for an enjoyable read here at “The Carbide Corner”. I'm always looking for material and this is a great way to share a favorite caving experience and embarrass your friends, with all of the new cavers that have recently joined the TSA, but, may not know you.



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Bartley Wayne Crisman (NSS 2781)

Photo by Carl Kunath.
Obituary by James Estes, Carl
Kunath, and Bryant Lilly.

It is with great sadness and a heavy heart that we convey to you the news of Bart Crisman's passing. Bart was born September 27, 1932 and lost his battle with pancreatic cancer on March 7, 2009 at home and surrounded by his family. Bart was 76 and had been a cave enthusiast for most of his life.

In June 1958, Bart was injured at Ogle Cave when a cable ladder failed. One of the Carlsbad hospital staff was a gal named Jaylene. They were soon married and remained so for nearly 50 years. Bart is survived by Jaylene, sons Kyle and Kern, and a daughter, Keri.

For many younger cavers in Texas it is especially unfortunate that they had never met or had the opportunity to go caving with the man we knew simply as Bart. He was always in a good mood, got along well with everyone, and understood much more about the caves of Texas than many. During the memorial service, a surprising number of references were made to Bart's involvement with caves and cavers. The minister remarked, "He was the only cave man I've ever known."

Bryant Lilly recalls: "Bart never saw a cave or a caver he didn't like. He would enjoy a small San Saba County crevice as much as a larger cave." James Estes remembers his first meeting with Bart: "I was in the Abilene Public Library seeking information about caves. They had a few copies of the *NSS NEWS* and one of them contained a short article about Bart's accident at Ogle Cave. I saw that Bart lived in Abilene so I looked up his address and went straight to his front door. It took a little time for someone to answer, and when the door opened, I was greeted by a tall black-headed fellow, grinning and using crutches. In spite of that, I wasn't going to leave until Bart signed me up for the grotto."

Bart and his brother, Bob, began caving in the mid-1950s when they stumbled across a copy of *NSS Bulletin Ten - The Caves Of Texas*. As Bart once said, "We noted that Devil's Sink-hole was the deepest cave in the State and therefore we felt obligated to pay a visit." They descended the 140-foot drop using an old wire ladder with rotting wooden rungs and no belay line. The two were avid cavers and contributed much to the camaraderie of Texas caving. Perhaps the most remembered caving experience was the original exploration of the Caverns of Sonora, then known as Secret Cave or Mayfield Cave. It was Bart who named the "Butterfly."

Stories of these adventures brought friends into the Abilene NSS Grotto, and included Ray Archibald, Dwayne Dickey, Jim Estes, George Gray, Robert Hale, and John Lanier. For some of these new troglodytes their first spelunking trip was Mayfield Cave—and the memorable crossing of "The Ledge."

Through Bart's efforts the grotto grew but was purposely



**Bart Crisman at Caverns Of Sonora, August 1964.
Carl Kunath photo**

kept to a maximum of less than ten members at any given time. This was for important reasons: landowner relations, cave safety, and conservation of the caves. The grotto lasted many years, and was one of the foremost Texas cave organizations during the 1960s. The Abilene cavers checked out many cave leads and surveyed caves in San Saba County, Sutton County, and several gypsum caves in Northwest Texas, as well as making several visits to the Guadalupe Mountains of New Mexico.

In 1964, the grotto, along with the other members of the Texas Speleological Association, sponsored the first NSS convention in Texas (New Braunfels), and were rewarded with the largest attendance of any NSS Convention up until that time.

Bart had knee problems later in life that curtailed his active caving but he remained interested and particularly enjoyed several visits to Caverns of Sonora with Jack Burch, James Estes, Carl Kunath, and Bryant Lilly when they were able to stroll leisurely through the cave on their own private tour.

Bart was among the earliest of Texas cave photographers and some of his photographs of Caverns Of Sonora and Harrison Cave remain among the best ever done.

We have lost a great friend, a fine gentleman, and an important figure in Texas caving.

We are diminished.

James Estes (NSS #4168F)

Carl Kunath (NSS #6230F)

Bryant Lilly (NSS #---6724)

