first time into fern
a personal experience

fraiser’s fissure
looking back at a harrowing on-rope experience

31 years of tcr tees
the making of a texas caver tradition
Texas Winners at the 2012 NSS Mayacon

Name/Grotto
- Jon Cradit/Bexar
- Josh Rubenstein/Bexar
- Marvin Miller/Bexar
- Don Arburn/Bexar, for UT
- Don Arburn/Bexar
- Galen Falgout/UT
- Ellie Watson/Bexar
- Galen Falgout/UT

Category
- Fellow of the Society
- Fellow of the Society
- Cartography Salon
- Emblem Salon
- Emblem Salon
- Navigation Nightmare
- Sit-Stand-Women’s
- Sit-Stand-Men’s

Place
- Merit Award
- Merit Award
- Honorable Mention
- 1st Place
- 1st Place
- 3rd Place

Emblem Salon, Merit Award: Don Arburn

Top row: from left: John Cradit, Josh Rubenstein, Marvin Miller
Bottom Row Don Arburn, Galen Falgout, Ellie Watson

Cartography - Tag Team Cave: Merit Award: Marvin Miller
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The TEXAS CAVER c/o Jill Orr
11705 Whisper Valley
San Anonio, TX 78230

DEADLINES

While submissions are welcome anytime, deadlines for consideration in upcoming issues are:
1st Quarter issue — February 15
2nd Quarter issue— May 15
3rd Quarter issue — August 15
4th Quarter issue — November 15

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The editor is not responsible for lost or misdirected newsletters caused by failure to notify editor in writing of address changes.

PHOTO CREDITS

Front Cover
Sean Lewis, with help from Sofia Casini, Zach Schudrowitz, Ellie Watson, and Galen Falgout:
Surprise Pit in Fern Cave

Back Cover
James Jasek: Cave Cricket

BEGINNING NEXT ISSUE

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

It’s your forum to express opinions, corrections, and compliments for the articles, interviews, and photos in The Texas Caver.

Send your emails to: editor@cavetexas.org

ADVERTISERS RATES

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For Life Threatening Emergency: 911
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The Texas Speleological Association is a nonprofit, internal organization of the National Speleological Society and represents the greater caving community in Texas.

The TSA is comprised of both independent members and local grottos, and supports cave exploration, and studies in and around the state of Texas.

The organization holds business meetings three times per year, organizes an annual spring convention for Texas cavers, and sponsors caving projects and events throughout the state.

© 2012 The Texas Caver
Most Texas cavers outside of the Bexar Grotto have never met me, yet I’m aware that my name has been getting around. Not for my caving exploits, although I have been fortunate to begin caving with, and getting to know the “other cavers” more than I ever have in the three years I’ve been with the Bexar Grotto. No – I’m mainly known for the volunteer work I’ve done for the TCMA’s Passages and fundraising events, The Bexar Facts newsletter, Bexar Grotto Secretary, and lately, Trip Chair. And since some of you may be already thinking it: yes, for that 2010 Texas Cavers calendar photo by Joe Datri. I’ve heard more than once, “Are you sure we haven’t met?” “You look sooo familiar...” Some of you know the story: I thought I was agreeing to do the graphic layout or to hold lights. Really.

Be that as it may, taking over as editor of The Texas Caver is a natural progression, as well as a challenge for me. I’ve been in marketing communications, as well as designing and edited newsletters for over 15 years. Most recently, I’ve been taken on part-time as an on-line digital producer/writer for KENS5 here in San Antonio. The Texas Caver is my first true magazine however, and I’m already thankful it’s a quarterly publication!

The first thing I decided before I even had an article submitted was that I would redesign the layout. My goal was to create a modern, light, and highly recognizable look. I hope you like it. In the next issue you will see the addition to the publication of a “Letters to the Editor” column, a forum for readers to have an opportunity to express their opinions. What you won’t see is that I’ve created a data-merge for the mailings - no midnight label parties for one at my house!

Please continue to submit your articles and amazing photos to The Texas Caver for everyone’s enjoyment. I am very encouraged by, and grateful for, the support and good wishes I’ve received from so many of you.
CELEBRATION OF NICK’S LIFE

WHEN EVERYTHING HAS BEEN SAID – JUST REMEMBER

NICOLAS J. ARBURN
1993-2012
Our marathon adventure actually began two weeks prior, as Don Arburn, Scott Trautman, Ellie Watson, Galen Falgout, and I drove non-stop to the NSS, Mayacon 2012 on June 22. I won’t recount the entire week because the memory is fuzzing already. Suffice it to say, the crew of the Great White Whale, or the Moby Truck, enjoyed their time at talks, bike riding, caving, hot tubbing, and imbibing copious amounts of fire water. I made myself a ghost by getting up early for JSS events in Nicolas Arburn’s memory. One young lady asked for him after she found out I was from Texas, and he would have been an excellent right-hand man in corralling the children or at least the young ladies. So I took a liking to West Virginia’s huddled little towns in valleys and greenery, but West Virginia put in an order of falling skies, and we were promptly evicted. That however, is a story for another time.

After leaving the convention, the Great White Whale pressed on to Kentucky, but not before the hockey puck of a Garmin GPS detoured us onto the overly scenic route. And by overly scenic, I mean it tried to take us on a tour of West Virginia’s entire northeast panhandle. However, Don’s eagle-eye and quick wit objected to yet another detour onto
yet another smaller highway and we were saved from more twisty mountain roads. Instead of travelling on Highway I-64, the Garmin tethered us to Highway 60. The redeeming factor was the New River gorge below us and the anticipation of the Gauly Bridge. My expectation of a magnificent San Francisco Bay Bridge scale structure crossing the gorge was promptly satiated by a footbridge no longer than 30 feet. Of the words of description escaping my mouth, Gauly was not one. The only “jee golly” uttered was in reference to the post-hurricane condition the previous night’s storm had left in its wake. However, the Team Moby had a full tank of diesel and we made it to Mammoth Cave in Kentucky without any further detours or extra scenic routes.

The booming boreholes and rooms of Mammoth were the bread crumbs

before we reached Scottsboro, a horrific traffic jam clogged Highway 65 for miles. After an hour, Don jumped the median and we detoured. Tired and verging on cranky, we met Sean Lewis, Sandi Calhoun, Sofia Casini, Devra Heyer, and Gill Ediger at the base of Scottsboro Mountain. That was Sunday night, but our appointment with Stephen Pitts was for Tuesday. What were we going to do in the meantime? Sean Lewis rattled off the TAG classics Stephen’s Gap, Neversink, or Valhalla as possible outings. It had been a long day for all of us, and sometime in the night or maybe it was the next morning, Valhalla had been decided upon.

Monday, July 2nd, Maya apocalypse year of 2012.

Some of us had been to Valhalla before, but the nostalgia and grandness of the light streaming from above made my day. As I descended, the light struck Devra in a red shirt with singular attention. I tried to holler down that someone should take a picture, but I forgot the difficult dynamics of sound travelling up and down a pit, and I gave up. At first I thought we would just bounce the pit, but vertical gear was shed as Ellie led the way looking for the Mega Dome Room. We muddied ourselves for a few hours, but, of course, we forgot the map. No matter, because we returned to the main room to find a waterfall room just to the right of the breakdown pile. Valhalla was also a good warm up for my first tandem assent with Sofia Casini. It was definitely a new and somewhat menacing feeling to hear the rope stretch with both our weights on it. Tandem ascents, I believe, take teamwork to become super efficient, and I’m glad Sofia was on my team. With the nostalgia
of meeting an old hole in the ground quenched, we slaked our appetites with Mexican cuisine at the Beunavista Mexican Grill. That California Burrito was massive!

5:36 am Tuesday, July 3rd, Maya apocalypse year of 2012.

I can only guess I woke so early because we had just spent a week in the Eastern Time Zone, or maybe I was just stoked. We prepared by packing the truck for our long journey back to San Antonio directly after our drop. Our early rise provided plenty of time and a disastrous encounter with the McDonald's drive through. Some teenager was not relishing his summer job, and there was much lost in translation between Texas twang, Alabama drawl, and English. Either way, we were finally fed and ready. Our guide, Stephen Pitts, met us a little after 10 am, and led the way off the paved road and onto the mud brick highway of fun. I swear there was a point I could hear banjos, but I wasn’t worried – we were going caving!

I don’t like hiking hills plain and simple, and sometimes I think I carry too much water. Given the amount I sweat though, there is never too much water. The pace was not grueling, but I soon found myself near the rear for my stint with the 500-foot brick of a rope around my neck. Luckily, Sofia was close enough to relieve me of its burden. All of us took our turn hefting that lovable monstrosity, and I’ve always found a touch of irony hiking up a hill to drop into a hole.

So is the way of things, and the entrance greeted us with tell-tale air conditioning and a stream-sized waterfall. I put on my vertical gear outside because I like flat ground, and Sean informed us we would traverse a ledge of several dozen feet. The short initial climb down eased its way under my feet, and compared to the summer swelter, the stream touched my shirt with droplets of icy coolness. We were in.

There is a dance between the stream, the cave, and tip-toeing feet to keep dry soles. During this prance, you notice the oddest trail markers. The scalloped walls sometimes reach out like smooth fangs, and at other times grant us easy footholds. The stream below collects rolled and smoothed stones from years of patient caressing. A rubber band’s strummed “bwwooong” replaced that stick’s dry crack years ago. Sofia said that rock is slick, and the splash of my right boot confirms its flowstone like surface covered by a thin layer of mud and water. My personal favorite step in the passage waltz is bracing my upper body to swing my legs forward. This heel and tip-toeing walking passage comes to a room with a waterfall if you continued and a big muddy rock for the half dozen of us to easily equip our gear.
Thankfully, Sean, Galen, and Stephen rigged the 70-foot traverse between this room and the drop room. The traverse ledge was that same ultra-smooth rock with lubricating layer of damp mud rock. From the traverse you step onto what I came to find out later was essentially a bus-sized chock stone. Galen had already tried to shoot the darkness with his powerful flashlight, but it couldn’t penetrate to the bottom. I put that out of my mind while I double checked my gear, carabineers, knots, harness, helmet, and lights. Sean knotted in our lovable monstrosity to four bolts above the drop. Then I noticed what I thought had just been another hand line was actually a backup to a behemoth of a boulder to the four bolts. This rigging could have lowered a dump truck if it had to, and I’m thankful for Sean and Stephen’s professional work. Then the question became, “Who goes first?” . . . I mumbled something like “Well, I guess I’ll go.”

It’s an interesting mix of feeling healthy fear, excitement, anticipation, and being the first one down. It’s one notch below going into combat because in this situation the only opponent is yourself, and the greatest peril is endangering another person. I’d said it and I didn’t give that little quiver inside its desired presentation as thrill. Stay calm and don’t get anyone else hurt. A minute later Stephen said he’d be going first to make sure the rope hit bottom, and a trickle of relief shed itself from my psyche. Well, being second never hurt, and Stephen’s experienced wisdom was more than welcome. I clipped in both my cow’s tails to the backup anchor line, and watched him rig in and glide into the gulf.

“Ooooooff R0000ppe”, came Stephen’s voice from the depths below. I clipped in one cow’s tail at a time until I could reach my line to the darkness.

“Hey Sofia, wanna check this out as I rig in?”

“Sure, just a second.”

First move, clip in a safety ascender. Second move, freak myself out by turning on my Apex’s spotlight with fresh batteries and look into the hole. What do I see? Nothing. Sure I can see the other wall, but into the hole I can barely make out Stephen’s twinkling light. I’m still clipped in with two cow’s tails and a Petzl Ascension, but that inky blackness just swallowed my light whole. Move three, with my left hand I hold up Don Arburn’s rack he let me borrow. I left my rack at home because of NSS convention guidance. Don fortunately has a hyper-bar so it was just like using my own. Thanks
Don. With my right hand, I lift our lovable monstrosity over the bars. Fourth move, I weight the rack before unclipping like Geary Schindel taught me, and it’s good. Here goes nothing, as I unclip the safety, undo my hard lock, and kneel my way down the V-notch my body must pass. The rack starts to pin against the carpet rope pad, but with a little leg pressure, it slowly swishes by the fibers. I’m free.

Up here it looks to me like giant shards of stone hanging on the walls. My light can catch the walls, but my body is generating a fog. Kicking on my Apex’s spotlight is like turning on your high-beams in fog. Plus I’m concentrating on getting my rack to run smoothly, so sightseeing is out of the question for the moment. I slide open the bars with my left hand and feed rope with my right. It is slightly jerky, and the feeding causes a pronounced bouncing. After popping a bar, it smooths out, but it’s still hard to tell how fast I’m actually going. There’s a point when my little three LED Fuel only illuminates me, so I click on the spotlight for reference. The reference part doesn’t work, but the rope’s weave is starting to rotate me slowly. I no longer crane my neck and just soak in what I can see through the fog. Looking down at Stephen’s faint light and trying to remember Valhalla yesterday are no help for a reference either. I could still be 200 or 300 feet in the air. At least I figured out a smoother way to use my hands. Instead of putting the rope over my right hip, I’ve hung it between my legs, and I’m using my right hand to brace and brake it, while the left hand, with short strokes, pulls some through. Now it’s all smooth and I add my sixth bar. There’s the bottom and I easily sit down on my rear. Normally I stand right up, but I still feel the rope tugging, so I actually feed more rope through before I can stand up. I’ve never had to do that before. Then again, I haven’t made a 400-foot drop before!

I chatted with Stephen for a little while until Sandi came down. She set up a camera and light to point up at the rappellers and I hope she caught some good videos. I skirted the breakdown pile to the left to where it met the wall and dropped my pack. I turned the reflective strip towards the rock and looked right for a way up the rest of the breakdown. Close to the top and attached with a chain to the rock was a PVC pipe, the register!

My frantic hands unscrewed it wondering, “Who were the last people in here?” My digits’ desperate speed wanted to leave my own mark, but alas, there was only a beat-up piece of brittle plastic and an ancient pencil. Later, Galen told me we were the fourth trip in since the cave had reopened, so I’ll just have to go back someday. I walked to the back of the chasm and found a squat flowstone mound. Perhaps the speed of the falling water made this one into the gloppy shape. The exploration proved my light was adequate enough now, but I was still plagued by my body fog. I walked down to my bag, grabbed my trail mix, and returned to the register rock for a flat enough seat. The only thing left to do was chew and wait for everyone to come down, so I shut off my light.

And then it happened. One of those moments that words escaped me and you just have to be there for yourself. My following paltry sentences won’t do justice to the moments’ gravity and serenity.
silence a Siren. There I waited for a replay and was not disappointed as Sofia dove into the darkness. When she got on the ground, I called to her, “You’ve gotta see this from up here.”

I explained the need to shut our lights off, and Sofia complied while we leaned on that oddly comfortable boulder. Ellie descended with that brilliant, fully charged Sten. Her wandering searchlight uncovered the hidden chasms below her as we craned round and round. My helmet finally slipped into a comfortable cup which allowed my neck to relax. My eyes followed Ellie’s beaming brilliance, and I convinced myself to focus on the walls. Here, there, and everywhere shadows ran from her light, and she’d occasionally settle on a distinct white wall shard about 40 feet tall. As Ellie trickled closer, she occasionally looked directly at us, and we were blinded. Blinding us only mesmerized us as if an astronaut floated to us out of the darkness. I asked Sofia if she could describe this, and her response was, “It is what it is.”

Sofia was right. I can’t bottle that experience and share the drink with you. You’ll just have to go yourself sometime. After some time, everyone had descended, and I contented myself by walking around the pit floor and taking in Surprise Pit’s immense volume. It was hard to encompass.

Eventually, we began ascending, and I returned to the rock recliner to watch. Stephen was naturally first with his smooth rope walker system. His distant headlight aided in our assessment of the pit’s volume. Then someone noticed his hands. No, not on the rope, rather, his 50-foot shadow hands reached up the wall as a zombie from the grave. Or if you prefer a more pleasant comparison is the Lady of the Lake reaching out of the water for Excalibur. Eerie though the colossal shadow hands were, they transfixed our eyes to the wall with a netherworld’s curse until his light dimmed to a sparkle and disappeared.

Devra climbed out next, and I took the time to rearrange gear and make sure everything was good to go. As I situated myself I noticed one more trick from Surprise Pit. If you’re far enough apart, someone else’s little lantern makes moonlight. Surprise’s volume diffuses enough to create a low glow, but you have to sit and wait a little. Of course, if someone puts your eye out with a light punch to the retina, the effect is wasted. That retina punch is just what we needed for Sean Lewis’s photography.

Sofia and I would tandem ascend again, but before we launched, Sean loaded us with flash bulbs and pie plate diffusers. Unfortunately, my aluminum foil on a popsicle stick with attached battery wasn’t working. We of course carried extra batteries except the rectangular nine volts. You can’t win every day, and I still admired the straightforward garage shop ingenuity. Sean instructed us on the signals to coordinate with his camera, and we’d do it about a 100 feet in the air.

“Woot! Woot! Woot!” That was Sean’s signal to stop and ready the flash bulbs. Sofia had the working diffuser below, and I took the time to hoist my bag and switch its weight to my waist belt instead of between my legs. It seemed like a good idea at the time to keep the weight in line with the rope. The only thing the bag’s tether had its weight in-line with were the family heirlooms, and this was just not going to continue for another 300 feet. Also, for comfort I’d been kicking outward as I frogged. This created a wave motion which whipped Sofia around like a miserable theme park ride. Add to that the two to three-foot stretch in the rope with every stroke. I finally settled down, and we waited for the “Fire!” call from Sean. The happiness heard below signaled they had turned out, so now it was back to following the rope. Although this time, the determination to be considerate and not nauseate my team-mate below forced me into a better frogging technique.

I’d go, then she’d go, I’d go, then she’d go. We rinsed and repeated that routine until about 20 feet below the lip. I asked Sofia to wait patiently there, while I negotiated the V wedge. It had been interesting enough at
Valhalla with her extra weight on the rope, but I’d been there before. This was new. There was no coming back from a mistake. I told myself, “Keep cool, calm, your head, and don’t rush. Smooth is fast. Fast is smooth.” The problem that beset me was using my knees to press away from rock face, then not being able to unjam them to kick adequately with my footloop. My Croll just wouldn’t go any higher.

I tried my usual trick of attaching my second handled ascender and then I’d detach my chest ascender. This way I don’t have my chest pinned to the rock, and I just walk up the rock face. I opened my Croll in anticipation of more working room, but promptly relocked it as I realized I couldn’t start walking up the V wedge. My knees were not adequately above the lip. “Slow, easy, squeeze Zach, don’t rush.” At some point I’d started narrating my steps, and Sofia asked if everything was OK. “Oh, yea, everything is fine. I’d just like you to know what I’m doing, and I’m trying to shed nervousness.”

“Totally understand,” were the best words I’d heard all day. So how am I going to get out of this? One inch at a time. Somehow I hit the right spot this time, and my Croll finally travelled a good three inches and then another three inches. I was finally crouching on both my knees in the V wedge, and I decided to detach my Croll. As my entire body shifted back a whole inch or maybe two, sheer terror gripped me until the handled ascenders arrested the dropping feeling. Wow. Let’s just clip in another cow’s tail past the knot. From then on it was a comparative breeze. I just reclipped my cow’s tails as a traverse, and the final rejoinder to the backup anchor line gave voice to a clear signal for Sofia to ascend. After Sofia called off-rope, we both flopped out on the smooth stone.

Relaxed and surprisingly refreshed, I stood to marvel the little mud graffiti gallery from past caverns. I love finding little signs of communication across time. I thought of Nick and how much he would have enjoyed this. We could have critiqued the perfect pair of size A or B mud mammares I just noticed. For those interested in them, they served as a wonderful farewell for over the edge. Devra shortly thereafter returned from the surface, and she and Sofia left early in the hopes of getting on the road. They ended up lounging at the entrance, shooting the breeze with Gill and Stephen. Five minutes after they left, Ellie and Galen crossed the edge. Galen craved a cigarette, and Ellie wanted to wait for de-rigging. After a little chit-chat, I decided to pack out my gear and return to lighten my load for the lovable monstrosity. The way out is a straight shot. The path below rekindled the memories of rubber stick, smooth rock sploosh, top or bottom routes, scalloped stone jaws, and follow the water. The waterfall’s echoes curved around the corners to my ears, and I popped my head around the bend to behold bliss – hard stone animated by soft sunlight.

A broad grin wrapped around my face like a boy’s first Christmas, or at least my first time into Fern.

I’d like to take the chance to thank Ellie Watson, Don Arbarn, and Galen Falgout for initiating this epic adventure for Team Moby. Scott Trautman, though you are not a caver (yet), thank you for your patience on the surface. Gill Ediger, I’m glad you’re old buddies with our guide and gatekeeper Stephen Pitts. Devra Heyer was her usual spicy and melodic self. Our gimp-kneed super trooper was Sandi Calhoun, and finally thank you Sean Lewis for planning and bringing the camera equipment. Your photos outweigh my words and ease the story for my mom and dad. Thank you all for the cherry on top of Mayacon and the Summer of 2012. Cave softly and CAVE SAFE!!!

Zach Schudrowitz, Scott Trautman, Galen Falgout, and Don Arbarn chilling out at camp at Mammoth.
A digging crew consisting of Don Broussard, Alex Benavente, Gill Ediger, Ernie Garza, Andy Gluesenkamp, Jim Jasek, Mimi Jasek, Terry Raines, Ron Rutherford, and John Schneider removed 10 55-gallon drums of debris from the entrance of Kiwi Sink on July 8. Several open voids in the fill under bedrock ceilings were opened to the north and west, heading in the direction of floodwater flow.

More work is needed to get us into people-sized passage to the north. A tarp was raised to put some shade on the dig after the morning clouds went away and the sun came out. Just as we were picking up tools, the rains began.


Today’s dig started out badly yesterday, when Terry Raines reported that the 12-volt electric winch we use to hoist the mud- and rock-filled barrels out of the pit had burned up and given out. Navy Commander Robert S. Hemperly, DDS, drove in from San Diego with a brand new winch that had the same mounting hole pattern as the derelict one. It took but a few minutes for him to make the swap, take a look at the sinkhole, and head out on his way to two years of Naval dentistry in ancient Italy, but not without providing everyone with a 3-liter sample of some olive oil he’d brought from California to hand out in Italy. Sort of a carrying coals to New Castle thing. A large tarp had been erected over the pit to keep the diggers cool, and to protect from solar radiation as much as possible. The winch was ready just as 5 barrels were filled by Ernie, Jim, and Mimi. They were removed along with one biggish rock. Meanwhile Chris, Will, and Erin spent a lot of time and effort digging mud- and gravel-filled belly crawls down in the cooler portions of the cave, trending mostly southward. Before the day was over, 5½ more barrels had been filled by the same digging crew, reinforced by Amy, Ron, and me, but were not dumped due to the remaining contingent being tired and the sun being miserably hot. The main effort was directed at excavating northward, the supposed direction of the Main Drain for rainwater in the system.

Terry Raines wasn’t directly involved due to final packing for a Belize trip he and his family left on about 2 in the afternoon but his jin-pole truck was put to good use with the hoisting business. This was Erin Brown’s first caving trip; she got muddy. Dr. Hemperly saved the day with his winch delivery. Kiwi (the owner) supervised. The neighbor walked by with a very curious look on his face but tarried not.
AMAZING MAZE

Andrea Croskrey

This 2012 trip was a follow-up to the two-day expedition Peter Sprouse led July 3rd and 4th, 2011.

On the 2011 trip, we were tasked with killing the last leads in the cave so the re-survey would be complete. Andy Zenker and I failed at our task. On the second day of survey, Andy and I were in the lower level of the cave finishing leads along the E-survey line and ended up creating two more than we could finish that day. So, with Andy unable to join us, David Ochel, Jacqui Thomas, and I headed to the lower level of the cave.

The trip started out well without too much trouble opening the gate (no snakes!) or navigating to the lower level. Sadly, I realized I forgot to pack the survey instruments, and David volunteered to run back to the truck for them while we sorted out exactly where to start.

We were surveying by 11:30 am, and I was excited to see where the two leads at G34 would take us. It turns out they would only give us 12.45 meters of survey. Oh well. I still think the morphology of the lower cave to be interesting, hinting at some sort of keyholeshaped passage that has been so filled with ceiling breakdown that only the top rounded part of the passage is visible. Cool air seems to faintly whiff up from the breakdown in the floor but the only place that indicated a downward dig, that I have seen, was an impassable crack in bedrock at the bottom of a breakdown floor funnel at G35.

Very curious…

RANCH REVISITED

Jill Orr

Early in July, I was contacted by the new owner of a 300-acre ranch in Kendall County, who was interested in having cavers come and check out a number of pits and crevices he had found on his property. We arranged that I would bring a small group for this first-look. He had been told that a group of cavers from Austin had been out to the property several years ago, but no survey results or location records had been turned over to the previous land owner.

The current owner also had been told that there was a water cave on the property. An inquiry to the TSS database found records of over 15 known caves and many more karst features, but no details about any of the features were present. We had a lot to look at, so it was decided not to do any detailed surveying this trip.

Our recon group consisted of Ellie Watson sketching, Joe Mitchell tracking pit locations and dimensions, and Wade McDaniel, Tom Rogers, Arron Wertheim, and me lead pushing, digging, and on disto.

We met the owners at 9 am and they took us to the supposed water cave first. It was plugged, so after about 10 minutes of digging, we decided to save this one for last.

We spent the rest of the morning and afternoon checking out pits the owners had flagged, and discovering over 10 more. Some of the pits were marked with numbered metal tags. Three pits turned out to be actual caves, one with a large, well decorated room and two survey stations visible. Most were too narrow for even the thinnest of us to enter.

We were finally ready to tackle the water cave. With the temperature over 100°F, we were grateful the opening was in heavy shade, and hopeful for the rumored water. It took about 15 minutes for Arron and Tom to break through, which involved moving a 4-foot concrete plug speared with rebar.

Wade was first in, and I followed shortly after. The cave was horizontal and almost immediately it was apparent the air quality was really bad. Just crawling was exhausting and had us gasping. There was a large sand mound with evidence of high water via a bottle and large square can jammed permanently into a dome. At the end of the 17-meter passage, we found water all right. A stagnant 0.3-meter pool. Tom went back to determine the distance and couldn’t reach a back wall with either his arms or legs.

With that it was Miller Time, so we headed back to the barn for cold drinks and made a decision to return in cooler weather because there is much more to explore.
31 YEARS OF TCR TEES

by Chris Vreeland

In 1992, the year we opened Vreeland Graphics, I took over a concession from our partner and friend Gill Ediger, printing and selling T-shirts at an event known as the Texas Cavers Reunion (TCR). Gill started printing shirts for the event in his backyard printing shop for the 3rd annual TCR, which was also where I printed my first of these, as we operated Vreeland Graphics out of that same portable building for our first year in business, until we moved downtown to 5th and Lavaca in Austin early in 1993.

The TCR is a 3-day event held at various campgrounds across the state every fall for past and present cavers to visit, party, and reunite. Nearly 400 people usually converge from across the state, and often coming from across the country. In 1992, I had yet to really get involved with organized caving, so I had no clue at the time that I would be printing these shirts every year for the next 20 years (holy crap!), but now I look back and realize it’s time to record all that history.

I finally went into my garage last week, and dug a bunch of shirts out of the cedar chest, then drove down to Gill’s and photographed mine combined with his – resulting in a complete photo gallery of all the TCR shirts we produced – 31 years worth.

We’ve had a few different designers over the years. They were sometimes drawn by cavers, sometimes by my staff artists, and I came up with a couple of them myself. We faithfully printed around 100 shirts each year, and dragged them out to the TCR campsite, wherever it was, set up a booth and sold them, year in and year out. The last
two years, I've finally given up the vending side of the operation. Now I print the tees and hand them over to the TCMA to sell at their booth, letting them keep the proceeds. I've been glad to contribute my little bit to the purchase and maintenance of two of Texas' finest caves, in west Texas. Hopefully, that tradition will continue long into the future.

Of course, along the way, I've had my favorites. The 16th Annual was the first one where we attempted to do something slightly different. My artist Justin Hess made the paisley pattern using a rapidograph and reversals on the camera. I think it was a 6-color print, and probably the last TCR shirt to get printed manually. I'm pretty certain we had our first auto by the next fall.

Christa Riddington is an Austin caver who designed several TCR shirts in the late 1990s, and her designs were unusual. I like the red one just because it's so weird. I know there's supposed to be frog's eyes at the top, and the general shape of the red thing is of the Oztotl symbol, but I'm not sure if it's supposed to be lava, a beating heart, or what.

By 2000 or so, I had pretty well mastered the 4-color process on discharge technique, so I did a TCR shirt using a photograph of mine. The photo is of Hoya de las Guaguas in San Luis Potosi, Mexico, just north of the town of Xilitla. I was standing at the bottom of a 600-foot pit when I took this photo of my friend Oscar Berrones descending after me. This is one of only three TCR shirts that I actually designed myself. It's cyan, magenta, yellow, and white over a discharge under-base, with the black just knocking out of the design. I've always preferred this to actually printing black ink on a black shirt even though it's difficult to get the under-base film just right. Discharge presents a different set of challenges than plastisol when printing halftones — you don't have all the dot gain that you get from plastisol because it soaks right into the shirt, but you've got to watch for ink dry-in in your highlight dots. Done right, it makes a very smooth transition out to the dead black of the shirt.

In 2005, we did another 4-color process design, based on the cool old "Greetings from..." postcards that I've collected over the years. My staff artist Debra Cammareri did this design for me, based on vague instructions as I sketched over her shoulder. It remains one of my favorite things I've ever printed. The cave formations inside the letters are from this photo that I took in Midnight Cave, in west Texas in 1997.

Caving design has an interesting history, with tons of locally-produced newsletters, grotto logos, the NSS news, and of course event and organization T-shirts. The NSS library in Huntsville houses a lot of the stuff, and the Texas Speleological Survey also has a burgeoning collection of artifacts of this sort. Hopefully, we can keep a complete collection of TCR shirts together, and archive them at one of these organizations. Now, to start on this year's design!
For those who know, Paradise Canyon Park on the Medina River is a great place in south Texas for camping and caver camaraderie. The park has grown in size since the last TCR held there; the campground now extends all the way to the downstream bridge. There will be additional bathrooms, and cabin facilities for those who want to splurge for A/C and a real bed. The rest of us will still have very nice campsites down by the river. The park has also improved areas along the river and added more picnic tables.

It’s Awesome
Expect all the usual caver activities. Paradise Canyon is a wonderful place for the Speleolympics, hot tub, sauna, swimming, awards, carousing, fun, the Big Feed, and of course - The Parade! This year’s theme: 2012 Mayan Apocalypse!

Prices, menu, and more specific information will be forthcoming.

A Bit of History
The Texas Old Timers’ Reunion was organized in 1978 by Gill Ediger, Chuck Stuehm, and Mike Walsh in order to fill a void created by the absence of a TSA Labor Day Project during most of the previous decade. It was felt that the TSA needed a fall caving event to bring Texas cavers together for fun, frolic, and social interaction - a most important aspect of the caving education and experience.

Over the years, the event grew from the original 90 participants at Luckenbach to well over 500 at recent gatherings. A few years ago the name was quietly changed from TOTR to TCR (Texas Cavers Reunion) to avoid confusion with the “original” OTR (Old Timers’ Reunion) in West ‘by God’ Virginia. Although many cavers help with the event, the general philosophy is to try to make the Reunion appear that it just happens spontaneously without any, or much direction from anyone.

General Rules
• Please bring your own reusable eating utensils to the Big Feed and take your garbage home.

• The TCR staff is not in the police business. That means everyone should police themselves and those in their clan. We have obtained special permission to allow dogs – the park generally prohibits pets. You are responsible for the behavior of your children, guests, and dogs. Because of this, please pick up after your dog (and your guests).

• People who will contribute to the general craziness are encouraged to attend; those who will detract are discouraged.

Please don’t forget that Common Sense and Common Courtesy are always the best policy.

Directions to Paradise Canyon Park
From Loop 1604 in San Antonio, take FM 471 (Culebra Rd) west approximately 7.5 miles until the road forks with FM 471 going left and CR 1281 going to the right. A sign will say “Medina Lake - 9 miles” on the right fork. Take the right fork toward Lake Medina. Approximately one mile on the left will be a sign “Paradise Canyon.” Turn left. Turn right at the next fork (CR 2615) and follow that road until it crosses the Medina River. Paradise Canyon Park will be on the right one-half mile after the river (just past Paradise Farms).
In 1962, I was a student at St. Mary’s University in San Antonio, and I wanted to go on a cave trip. I called Pat Casey, an ex St. Mary’s student and a member of the now, nonexistent St. Mary’s Caving Club, asking if he was free to go on a cave trip the coming weekend. He was willing.

Saturday morning, on the way to Pat’s house on the north side of San Antonio, I picked up a new caver, Ron Saunders, a student at the university. This was his first cave trip, and I had only been officially caving a few months myself. Pat was the only experienced caver in our small group.

When we arrived at Pat’s house, we found him in the backyard picking up the caving rope off the ground. The rope was a 200-foot section of one-half inch manila that had been laying in his back yard for some time, and was swollen to twice its normal size from being in the weather. None of us gave a second thought to using this rope as we just didn’t know any better.

On the way we stopped at a hardware store to buy 20 feet of one-quarter inch manila rope to use for Prussic slings. We needed enough for two leg loops and one chest loop. We also bought a pound of carbide for our lights.

Pat knew of a cave near Fischer, Texas, in the northern part of Comal County. However, since we didn’t know where the cave was, we drove to the country store in Fischer to ask directions. This store was a step back in history with its wooden floors and pot bellied stove. To my knowledge, this old store is standing to this day in the same spot and is a local landmark.

After a discussion with an elderly gentleman there, we had good directions to the cave - it was just down the road a piece and very close to the highway. He told us the owner didn’t mind people entering the cave, so we drove to the cave without contacting the owner.

We parked along the side of the road and walked the area until we found the cave. While we were standing near the entrance, a narrow deep crevice, the owner drove up and asked what we were up to? We told him we were students
from St. Mary’s University, and we wanted to go in the cave. He said, “Sure, go ahead.”

Pat and I got the rope and other caving gear out of my car. To test the rope, we tied it to a tree, stretched out the rope, and the three of us pulled one end to see if the rope was strong enough to support our weight. It seemed OK.

Then Pat showed me how to rappel. I didn’t have the slightest idea about vertical caving, nor did we even call it vertical caving back then. He tied the rope to a branch high up in a nearby tree, and showed me the technique of body rappel. The technique was simple. Pat tied a manila rope loop around his right leg and clipped on an oval carabiner. The rope from the tree went down through the carabiner and up over his left shoulder then under his butt for added friction. He used a shoulder pad under the rope to absorb heat generated by the rope passing over his shoulder.

Pat showed me the scar which ran from his shoulder to halfway down his back that he got while rappelling into the Devil’s Sinkhole. He said the pad slipped off his shoulder halfway down, turning the rope blood red. I don’t recall what Pat told me about how he got up and out of the Sinkhole.

His story didn’t make me feel all that good, especially since I was about to enter my first deep cave. But I watched as he showed me how to tie the Prussic knots and how this crude climbing system worked. I am not sure I even got a chance to climb using the knots, but I did get a fast lesson in rappelling from the tree, and it was very awkward. Then, not to waste any more time, we began to rig the pit.

The entrance was a long narrow two-foot wide crack near the center, dropping straight down around 125 feet, and we had no idea if the rope even reached the bottom. The rope was tied to a nearby tree and the end lowered into the pit. We placed a large log over the entrance so the rope would lay over the log. This allowed the rope to be free of the cave wall and make rappelling easier. We had a 30-foot cable ladder with us, and we rigged the ladder to make it easier to get into the cave, and then rappel to the bottom.

I was elected to go first. I rigged into the rope with the simple over the shoulder rappel and began climbing down the ladder. About 20 feet down, the cave opened up to a shaft around 10 feet in diameter with a ledge large enough to stand on, making it easier to begin the rappel.
just stood there, scared out of my mind looking at the walls of the pit disappearing deep into the earth. To this day, I can close my eyes and see the blackness and those pit walls in my mind.

I know now this was a very dangerous method for rappelling. If either of my hands had lost their grip on the rope, or the rope had slipped off my shoulder, it would have been instant death.

It must have taken me 10 minutes to work up the courage to swing out over the edge. Once I stepped off the edge and felt the rope holding me, all fear was gone and the only place for me to go was down. I made a slow rappel, making sure to keep a good grip on the rope and to prevent too much heat from building up on my shoulder.

After a long rappel, I came to what I thought was the bottom, stopped and got off the rope. I didn’t realize I was on a large ledge around 25 feet from the bottom of the pit. Pat was now on the way down so I waited for him to join me on the upper ledge.

After a few minutes, I was able to see Pat on his way down the rope. When he got to where I was standing, he noticed the cave continued down, so he continued his rappel to the bottom. Moments later he yelled up to me there was no need for me to come down, as there were no passages leading off the bottom.

Pat then rigged into the Prussic slings and climbed up to where I was waiting. Since I had never used knots before, he rigged me into the rope and allowed me to climb up first. We used three one-quarter inch manila slings, one for each leg and one for a chest loop. I still remember the pain from the chest loop that stayed with me for two weeks after the trip.

The climbing method was simple: hang in the chest loop, raise up one leg, push the Prussic knot up the rope, then stand on the knot. Then pull up the chest knot and hang again. Then raise the left leg, pushing up the knot and standing. Each time I stood, I was able to go up the rope about two feet. It was stand, hang, stand, hang, time-after-time.

The method was easy, but the manila rope was so worn and swollen, the knots got super tight and had to be loosened before they could be pushed up the rope. It was slow going and the chest loop was
digging into my arm pits and into my back causing much pain. About 50 feet up, it became really hard to push up the knots, and around 80 feet up, I began to hurt all over as climbing began to be a terrible chore.

When I was 10 feet or so from the ledge, all of a sudden leaves, twigs, and small stones began to rain down on me. Then I heard the metal sound of a clink, clink, clink, swoosh! I continued to climb up and finally got to the ledge and the ladder. I removed the Prussic slings and lowered them down to Pat. I remained on the ledge as I waited for Pat to climb the rope.

After about 45 minutes, Pat joined me on the ledge and he was so angry, his face was red and I could not imagine what was wrong. The clink, clink, clink, swoosh was Pat’s machete falling into the cave. He said it just missed me, and he had to duck out of the way as he could see it heading straight for him as it whizzed down to the bottom of the pit.

Pat was too tired to rappel down to the bottom to retrieve the machete, so he just left it there. After 15 minutes, Pat had calmed down, and we climbed the cable ladder to the surface without a safety line. We didn’t know about using a safety line.

When we were on the surface, we found that our young friend had been using the machete to chop the bushes around the pit entrance. He could have easily cut the rope, and I would have been killed. Pat got even angrier when Ron never said he was sorry.

Many years later, the Alamo Grotto found what they thought was a sword at the bottom of the cave. I never said a word because I didn’t think that anyone would have believed me.

When I look back at this trip, I shudder to think of the unsafe caving techniques we used and how easy it would have been to lose our lives. But back then, it was good trip, home safe, and getting clean!
CAVER IN THE HEADLAMP

An Interview with Internationally Recognized Expert Caver: Philip Rykwalder

By Linda Palit

PHILIP RYKWALDER HAS BEEN CAVING FOR OVER 18 YEARS, IN 25 STATES, AND 5 COUNTRIES. HE HAS LOGGED 2200 CAVING TRIPS, DISCOVERED OVER 300 CAVES, AND PUBLISHED OVER 20 ARTICLES ON CAVING.

Philip has made numerous significant cave discoveries in the remote Bob Marshall Wilderness of northwestern Montana including some of the deepest caves in the continental United States, among them: Virgil the Turtle’s Greathouse Cave (1,586 feet), Tickle Me Turtle (980 feet), Flathead Alps Cave (649 feet); and in northern Mexico explored newly discovered deep caves ranging up to 339 meters (1,112 feet), including the deepest in the Mexican state of Coahuila.

How did you start caving?

When I was 14, my best friend, Eric, and I rode our bikes all over the neighborhoods around our Nashville, Tennessee homes. I remember riding past an entrance up on a hillside a number of times before we actually decided to enter it – and I believe we took my BB gun in the first time. After that we bought the classic Tennessee caving book, Caves of Tennessee (Barr, 1961), and that eventually led us to the Nashville Grotto and the NSS.

Who are your caving mentors and how have they helped, guided, and inspired you?

I have a number of mentors, including Peter Sprouse, Charley Savvas and a few other Texans. My earliest mentor was Geary Schindel who I met when he lived in Tennessee. The person who really showed me how caving can be a high endurance sport was Georgia caver, Alan Cressler, whom I met in 2003 in Arizona.

What is an early caving memory that was important to shaping you as a caver?

Most of my stronger memories involve fear for some reason. In 1995 when I started driving, my best friend, Eric, and I made a goal of doing all the caves in Davidson County, Tennessee, where we lived. I think there are like 160 caves or so there. Although we did not meet that goal, we caved virtually every day, and we met dead opossums and raccoons that scared us with their glowing eyes; we got messed up on rope in pits, and had all sorts of misadventures that scared us. It was great fun.

What cavers do you admire and why?

I admire ambitious cavers who have big goals and work to make them a reality. These people include Bill Stone, who is among the most ambitious cavers; Marion O. Smith who has explored over 7,000 caves; George Veni; and those who have stuck...
with caving for 30, 40, and even 50 years. They all inspire me to think big and make my dreams a reality.

How do you describe the role of caving in your life?

Caving has connected me with people who have shown me that life can be adventurous and fun. My role models from the world of caving lead lives filled with excitement and they know not to accept a mundane life – and they have inspired me to never be bored. Life is what you make of it – so make the best of it and have a blast!

What is your favorite type of caving?

I love challenges and in caving that translates into a love of deep vertical caving. In Muzquiz, Mexico, Peter Sprouse found an area where we explored caves 300-400 meters deep every two to three days, which was thrilling. Add in a raging river and a handful of 30-50 meter waterfalls, some cold temperatures, and I’m in heaven. I can’t think of many things in life that are more difficult.

Deep caves motivate me to be in control of my fears and emotions, to stay in shape, and they have also taught me how to lead people toward a common goal.

Where have you gone caving?

I’ve caved in about 25 states within the U.S., Canada, Mexico, Guatemala, and Ukraine. My favorite area is northern Montana because it combines the adventure of backpacking with cold, deep caving, and the payoff is phenomenal. I dreamed of finding the deepest limestone cave in the U.S. and never dreamed that I’d actually come close to hitting that target.

What do you consider to be the most difficult type of caving?

Alpine caving because it tests your everything – your gear, decisions, clothing, skills, food choices, and more.

What is your deepest cave experience? Most difficult?

The deepest cave I’ve been in is J2 in Oaxaca, Mexico where on a multi-day survey trip, I got down to 1,200 meters, which was a great personal accomplishment for me. My most difficult on-going adventure was a cave we found in Montana. The alpine caves in Montana are around 3°C, the approach is 20-30 miles each way, and the caving pushes me to my limits, which is why I love it.

I started doing long, remote backpacking trips in northwestern Montana in 2003 and after two years of freezing in the cold caves owing to inadequate clothing, I was finally prepared enough in 2005, which was fortunate because that was the year we found our first significant cave, Virgil the Turtle’s Greathouse Cave. We bottomed the cave the following year at 1,586 feet, and our efforts there are ongoing as we try to connect other caves to make a 2000-foot deep cave system.
What caving rules do you believe in or always follow?

I have three rules that are strictly followed: never put your head underwater, no dynamic moves (running, jumping, etc.) and never go downhill head first. On rope, I have another suite of rules that is much longer. I will say that my final rule is: only break one rule at a time (which I learned from Joe Ivy).

What was the most frightening caving experience you ever had?

The scariest experience I ever had was on December 31, 2011. I was in Sotano de Tlamaya in Mexico (447 meters deep), with one other person. While exiting the cave, the two of us got off rope to stretch our legs on a big ledge about 70 meters below the entrance. My partner let go of the main rope, and it swung about 10 meters away from the edge of the ledge. Imagine being in the middle of a 150-meter deep pit with no rope – it was scary. I always assumed that I’d either fall or drown – not that I’d starve to death stranded on a ledge. Eventually, after a few hours of panicking, we came up with a solution, but it was a frightening experience.

What is your favorite caving event? Why is it your favorite?

I’ve moved away from caving events because my favorite part of caving is the actual caving – and most events are more about partying than caving.

Why do you keep caving? What keeps you going back to caves, again and again?

Sometimes I wonder why I stick with caving, but when I stop for even a week or more at a time I get itchy to get underground. Caves are like adult playgrounds filled with adventure and lots of new and interesting things to look at. No two are the same, and there are new things to learn everywhere.

What aspect of caving do you consider your passion?

My passion is going to places that no person has ever been to before – first exploration. Where I live in Tennessee, I often have to climb or dig, but I still find a number of new caves each year. I have started to boat to caves which has given me access to new places. Caving is fun and adventurous – but when I see an opportunity for a discovery I get inspired.

Describe your ideal caving partner.

Around 2005 Matt Oliphant told me that cavers must be safe and they must be able to get along with others socially – and those two rules stuck with me. I want to explore with friends who are safe and conservative in their caving.

What caving organizations do you advocate, participate in, or believe in?

I really believe in the NSS because it unites cavers. There are many factions and divisions within caving, but the NSS brings everyone together under a single umbrella. I also support groups that buy or manage caves for protection, and I have dreams of starting my own caving non-profit one day to protect the unique organisms that live in caves, including salamanders, insects, bats, and more.

Any comment on “caver politics?”
I don’t participate in caver politics, even though I realize that is a political stance to many.

How does caving influence the rest of your life?

I religiously keep the weekends for caving, which keeps me from overworking.

What was one of the funniest caving experiences you have had?

In 2004 I was in Arizona with a string of cavers including Alan Cressler. We all went into a small crawl entrance single file behind Alan, who was talking to someone, but I couldn’t figure out who it was. About 20 minutes into the crawl, it became clear that he was talking to a buzzard who he was trying to make feel at ease with us being there. Eventually, the buzzard got cornered and it used its defense mechanism of puking. Puking might not sound like much of a defense, but vomit from decayed meat instantly triggered the puke mechanism in many of us, and we all found ourselves crawling backwards over our own puke, which I found hilarious.

Caving gear – any favorite pieces of gear or most useful thing you always carry when caving?

I do not have a single favorite piece of gear, but I do have favorites for different situations. Derrin drums are fantastic for wet caves, bobbins are my favorite descender, the Petzl Omni is a great piece of gear and I really like non-locking bentgate carabiners with a keylock nose.

Gear must work with me and for me and when something lets me down, I ditch it immediately – I’m not going to tolerate poor gear. Often I find myself making my own gear, including cave packs (I have around 18 currently). I’m a big fan of modifying gear to meet my needs.

Vertical caving – what system do you use or teach? What is your favorite pit?

I use exclusively the frog; I love it. My favorite pit is likely the deep one in Ellison’s (183 meters).

What is your next caving goal? How will you reach it? Is it the doing or the aspiring to do that inspires you?

My next goal is to visit the deepest cave in the world, which I should be able to do within the next few months or years. Beyond that I’d like to start an organization that protects caves with cave-adapted bugs in them.

What is the best cave meal you ever had?

Onion soup and coffee in one of Tennessee’s hardest caves, Dorton Knob Smokehole.

What do you like to do after a long caving trip?

Take it easy for a day.

What have you learned through caving – about yourself or about life?

I have learned that people are the key to the world. They can help you attain your goals and they are where enjoyment lies.

What cave would you most like to visit in the future?

My sights are set on the deepest cave in the world, Krubera, and I’ve been in contact with a group in Kiev to make that happen as early as summer of 2012. I want to go there because it represents one of the most significant challenges in all of caving.

Do you have any advice for the next generation of cavers?

My advise is to set your goals high and then find ways to attain them. Never settle. Find mentors who have been there and follow and learn from them. Do not reinvent.

Any advice for new vertical cavers?

Get your own gear, get it tuned well, don’t let anyone readjust your harness, and climb lots of rope. Like 100,000 feet of rope. Learn to wear your gear in caves, keep it all tidy, and always put it on the same way every time. Put your descender on its own gear loop, and the ascenders on their own gear loop (I prefer descender right, acenders left because I rappel right handed). Develop habits and stick with them.

What do you want to leave as your caving legacy?

I want to write books on caving and have a whole string of articles documenting my discoveries, and I also want to influence newer cavers. I’d like to be known for conservation, for my efforts to protect caves with cave-adapted organisms, my exploration, and my passion for caving.

Anything you would like to say to cavers in general?

Please write and publish more.
Because of work and other commitments, I wasn’t able to get to the NSS convention until late Monday afternoon. I hit the ground running and plugged right in. The Howdy Party was that night. I set up my tent near Groad Hollow, the name always given to the Texans’ camp, and was within sight of “Chinatown,” where my new friends with the Hong Meigui Cave Exploration Society had a red Easy-up canopy with a mirrored disco ball and flashing lights. There was a lively party there every night.

Everything went great for four days. The weather was pleasant. It was so sunny that I was glad I had my new Larry Mahan Texas sombrero, and I was really looking forward to the Friday night awards banquet.

For the first time as the new sub-committee chairman for the Lew Bicking Award on the NSS Awards Committee, I was going to be able to go to the podium and announce the winner. The NSS considers this to be its third highest award, but to cavers, particularly those who pride themselves as cave explorers, the Lew Bicking Award is the most coveted and highest award for caving there is.
All was set. The Awards Banquet is the climax of the NSS convention. It’s the last night. I went to the Metal Activity building when they first opened the doors at 5:00 pm and reserved seats at the front table for whatever Texans wanted to join me up front. The dinner started and moved along. Our cue came and the awards presenters moved to stage-right behind a partition.

Just as the first awards, which were The Fellowships, began to be announced, the projector went out. I figured they’d get it back working right away. I had submitted a photo of myself in low airspace in Twinkie’s Palace Cave, that Ellie Watson had taken, and it was to be followed by a photo of the recipient of the Lew Bicking Award, and to be shown as I announced his name.

Then the lights went out and the room, with 1,200 cavers, went pitch black. Later, two sliding garage door-type doors at one end were opened - and it was amazing what was happening outside. There were lightning flashes and very strong wind. Trees were being lashed like palm trees in a hurricane. I thought about my tent, but being the Eagle Scout that I am, I never leave it for the day without zipping up all the doors and tightening the lines. And it’s a Marmot tent with a good rain-fly.

What I did not think about were branches, limbs, and whole trees being blown over and falling on tents and vehicles. When the storm had passed and I went to the campground, it was like a tornado had passed through. In fact, I thought maybe one had. Had the storm passed through when the campground was full of people, had almost all of them not been in the metal building for the awards banquet, I am certain there would have been fatalities.
Back to the awards banquet; before the sliding doors were opened and the ferocity of the storm hit, when only power had been lost and the lights were out, Awards Committee members took their turns going to the podium. The banquet emcee shined a caving headlamp on their prepared remarks and they did their best to shout out their prepared words to be heard by 1,200 people. As it came to my turn, second to last, I realized that none that went before me would be a tough act to follow. I have a loud voice, and I’m used to public speaking. But I did learn something – it’s one thing to shout, to be heard up a shaft hundreds of feet deep that you’re off rope, but it’s quite another to read at full volume. I managed to do it, and was complimented later as the only presenter who was heard, but it wasn’t easy. And the award recipients were short changed. Their moment in the spotlight lacked a spotlight, and for the most part their names had not been heard; however, their names and accomplishments will be published in the NSS News, so all will be fine.

What’s more important is that everyone lived through the storm, and they would not have had the storm not hit when it did.
LONGHORN CAVERN’S RE-ILLUMINATION

RIBBON CUTTING FOR A NEW LIGHTING SYSTEM INSIDE THE HISTORIC CAVE MARKS A NEW BEGINNING IN PROTECTING THE CAVE’S DELICATE ECOSYSTEM AND A MORE THRILLING EXPERIENCE FOR VISITORS.

Staff from Texas Parks and Wildlife, Longhorn Cave Tours, Inc., area chambers of commerce, as well as volunteers and dozens of guests were on hand at Longhorn Cavern State Park in June to cut the ribbon and ceremoniously “reopen” the popular Hill Country destination, following a major renovation of the cave’s lighting system.

Some $700,000 of low-voltage quartz halogen lights, sophisticated switches, and miles of new wiring provide not only dramatic new views inside the cavern, but the system’s low heat output is better suited to help protect the cave’s delicate ecosystem balance. The renovation marked the park’s first lighting upgrade since the original incandescent bulbs were installed by the Civilian Conservation Corp during the 1930s.

“This is fantastic; it’s like coming down into the cave for the first time,” said Terry Rodgers, superintendent of the Inks Lake Complex, which oversees operations at the Cavern, which is operated by a private business contract concessionaire, Longhorn Cave Tours. “The new features outlined in the light are incredible.”

Once home to mammoths, ancient peoples, Confederate soldiers, and allegedly even Old West outlaws, Longhorn Cavern State Park today attracts tens of thousands of visitors to its 645 acres above and below ground. And park operator Michelle Devaney thinks that the improvements will help draw even more folks.

“The new lighting system puts into place a way for visitors to go through this cavern and see the features illuminated in a way that brings to life the geology and beauty. Taking out the old lighting also helps to protect and preserve this amazing resource for a long, long time,” she said.

For more information about Longhorn Cavern State Park, call (830) 598-CAVE (598-2283), or visit www.longhorncaverns.com, or www.texasstateparks.org.