



the texos cover

a magazine written by and for cavers

Caving in China

amazing trip report

All in the Family Caving

dream trip realized

Government Canyon

karst survey update

THE VERTICAL WALL

-IT'S NOT A D BINER!

Bennett Lee

This is the first article of a new reoccurring section of the Texas Caver that revolves around vertical gear and activities—a place to share those discoveries and refinements we have made with the rest of the caving community. If you have a tip you would like to share, please email Bennett@BennettLee.com.

Since this the first edition, I'd like to start with something basic, specifically carabiners, because I have noticed a disturbing trend to misname a particular style. So, let's review the most common caving styles and their typical uses.

Journey Bissett on rope.
Photo by Bennett Lee



Oval



Pear



This is a D carabiner! It is not the same as a semi-round which is used for Frog harnesses.



This is a SEMI-ROUND, not a D carabiner! Do not confuse the two. They are not inter-changeable. You need a semi-round for your Frog harness—a D carabiner will not work!

Style	Description	Typical Uses	Locking
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Oval	This workhorse is the original carabiner. Its symmetric shape allows easy rotation and repositioning of loads. However, the symmetry disburses load to both the solid axis and the weaker gate.
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D	The D carabiner was created to counter the gate-loading of the oval. The shape naturally focuses loads on the solid axis of the carabiner.
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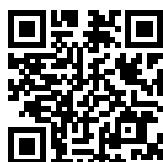
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Bennett Lee

Back Cover

Bennett Lee

FROM THE EDITOR

Robber Baron cave can still deliver a challenge. On our last trip in several nights ago, Joe Mitchell and I decided to find our way back to the entrance without our lights. We were only in Maggie's Den, so we agreed to take an indirect route farther in the cave - through the Devil's Kitchen and the Exit Crawl to the entrance. We took turns leading and talked to each other the whole way. Very quickly, we both became confident and realized it was quite easy. We're going to do it again - but next time from the Domed Passage. Never shrink from a challenge, as long as you have the skills!

EMERGENCIES

**For Cave Assistance,
 Call the Closest
 County Number:**

BEXAR	210.326.1576
COLLIN	214.202.6611
HAYS	512.393.9054
SUTTON	325.387.3424
TRAVIS	512.663.2287

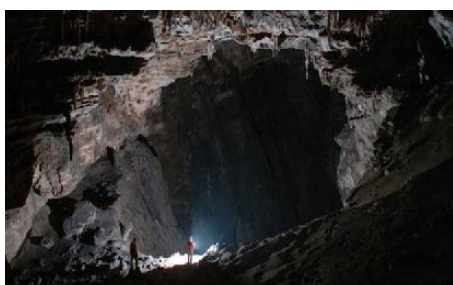
**For Life Threatening
 Emergency: 911**

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TEXAS COVER

THE BEST CAVERS' MAGAZINE
IN TEXAS

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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.

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O9 WELL SURVEY TRIP

David Ochel

We had a successful continuation of our re-survey of O9 Well in January. All previously ('98-'10 or so) surveyed passage has been re-surveyed, and the tasks that remain are: a) surveying the previously not surveyed (but explored) parts of a lead, and b) drafting the upstream part of the map.

Getting to the cave in the dark yielded a surprise: the last part of the road is now free of any obstacles that would prevent 2-wheel drive, low-clearance cars from making it to the cave entrance. Apparently a result of the vibroseis studies that were performed there last year. The grazing lessee is down to 21 cattle; he sold the rest since it's too expensive to feed them in the ongoing drought.

Saturday morning saw the slow organization of three survey teams, with the last person finally in the cave shortly after noon.

Saj Zappitello, Ben Hutchins, and Tom Rogers accepted the task to survey a side lead taking off from the main upstream passage for over 110 meters, before running into technical difficulties with gear that was inadequate for being stuck in a tiny passage frequently described on the sketch as "small muddy water" for a prolonged time. The passage continues. They proceeded to dig at a high lead in the main upstream passage, which sadly remains too tight to let humans go anywhere.

Andrea Croskrey, with Jill Orr and Matt Zappitello, surveyed the main upstream passage from where a previous survey trip had ended, toward the upstream sump, for 188.4 meters in (typically) knee-high water with a ceiling not high enough to stand, and mud (mixed with sand from what may have been calcite rafts) constantly trying to snatch everyone's boots from their feet.

David Ochel took Geoff Hoes and Bennett Lee to the upstream sump, from where they proceeded to survey out toward Andrea's team for 232.8 meters in similar conditions.

Andrea's and David's teams finally tied into each other's survey around 7 pm, completing the re-survey of all main passage of O9 Well.

While most folks made their way to the entrance (exit!) after this, Bennett and David proceeded to tour the downstream part of O9 Well. David was thankful for having practiced change-overs so much when messing around with a drop that needed re-rigging due to a frayed rope, and Bennett wished he had brought his rope walker, or at least his frog for the longer drops. They got out of the cave just before midnight.



Clean caver; dirty caver - happy cavers! Saj Zappitello on the surface, and Tom Rogers taking a break. Photos by Saj Zappitello

KIDS ONLY CAVE DAY

Evelynn Mitchell organized a very successful Kids Only caving day at Robber Baron in January. Nine caver girls showed up (chaperoned by their parents). And where were the boys? Photo Travis Scott.

L-R Front row: Phoebe Saavas, Kayla Mitchell, Alexis Moriarty
Middle row: Harper Scott, Leah Miller, Tara Guetzloe
Back Row: Erin Guetzloe, Shyanne Moriarty, Christin Miller
Photo by Travis Scott



EACH YEAR ONE MEMBER FROM EACH TEXAS GROTTO IS PRESENTED THE "CHUCK STUEHM" AWARD FOR BEING RECOGNIZED AS AN OUTSTANDING NEW CAVER. OLD TIMERS WILL ENJOY THE NOSTALGIA, AND NEWBIES GET THE CHANCE TO KNOW...

JUST WHO WAS CHUCK?

RAYMOND "CHUCK" STUEHM, 52, DIED JANUARY 31, 1980. EXCERPTS TAKEN FROM THE TEXAS CAVER CHUCK STUEHM MEMORIAL ISSUE - APRIL 1980.

HI, I'M CHUCK

George Veni

Born 52 years ago in Cleveland, Ohio, Chuck came to San Antonio with the Armed Services. He would later joke about his medal for having served during World War II, as the war had ended shortly after he completed basic training.

Time went on and Chuck became active with Red Cross, Civil Defense, the Sierra Club, TSA and maintained a 40 year relationship with the Boy Scouts.

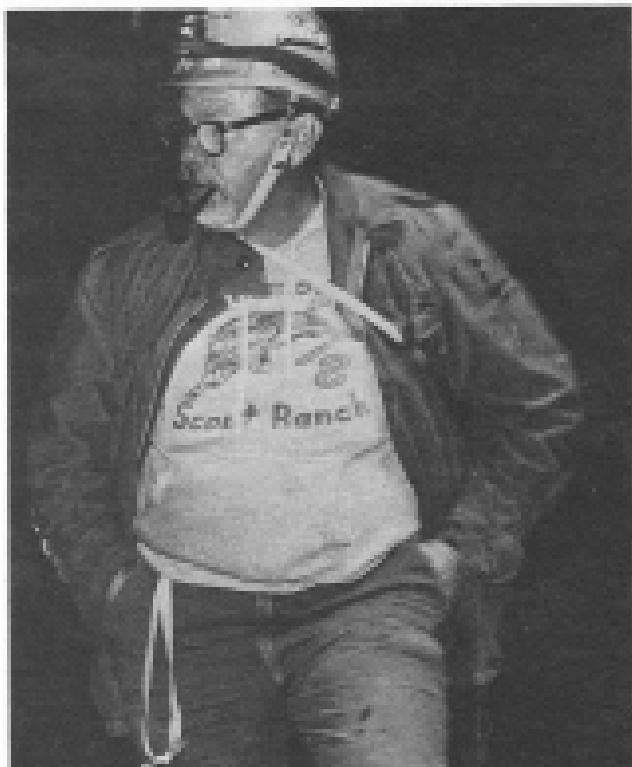
It was just over four years ago when I went to my first caving meeting at the Civil Defense Building in downtown San Antonio. I was early and the few people there were busily stapling together some mad arrangement of printed papers. I was thinking they were too busy to notice me when a large, heavy-set man broke out of formation and strolled over to greet me. He was quite a sight, wearing some strange cap, and a badly chewed up cigar protruded between mustache and beard; his clothing was covered with all sorts of strange insignia and letters - TSA, NSS, ACC - various cave scenes, but I thought to myself that the letters saying ASS seemed most appropriate of all.

Hi, I am Chuck," he said, briefly taking the mangled cigar from his mouth. In 60 seconds he had ascertained I knew nothing about caving, introduced me to everyone in the room - and set me to work stapling caving publications.

SOME RECOLLECTIONS

Glenn Darilek

Chuck was a leader with the Scouts, and he carried this over into caving. From the start Chuck was outspoken and took the "Bull by the Horns" and got every project off and running.



Even though he would take the lead, he never held office in the TSA. He was asked several times to run, but he always turned it down. He preferred to let those younger than he try their hand at leadership and their small share of the limelight.

I am sure no other caver in the state has initiated more cavers into vertical caving. He was respected as a vertical caving instructor even though he rarely if ever did any vertical caving.

CHUCK

James Jasek

During the meeting a stranger to the TSA stood up and put in his two-cents worth not just once, but several times during the meeting. People around me were asking each other "Who is he?".

This was Chuck Stuehm. Out-spoken, to-the-point,

and a bit opinionated. He was either a friend or a foe. There didn't seem to be any in-between with him. After the meeting was over, I got to know Chuck. We struck up a friendship that lasted the past eight years.

A number of us got together with Chuck and formed the first organized cave rescue program in Texas. We were all determined not to have so much trouble in organizing another cave rescue. Our goal was to educate every caver in Texas in first-aid and cave rescue. Today as I look back over the entire effort, I would say that all the work Chuck put into this was very successful.

It was a natural for Chuck to be a leader in caving. He immediately organized a practice cave rescue that was held inside a cave. Here we all got first hand experience with first-aid, and actual pit rescue. This turned out to be one of the most successful projects that the TSA pulled off in many years. All this practice really paid off during our first real cave rescue when two young boys were trapped inside Dead Deer Cave in the city limits of San Antonio. Chuck was the first to arrive at the cave with a few cavers to take a look at the situation. He realized this would require a major effort by cavers, so he initiated a major rescue. This was a very successful rescue because of all the training Chuck exposed us to.

CHUCK LOVED PEOPLE

Gary Parsons

Chuck was extremely valuable and served as a catalyst in helping Frank Sodak and I get the Temple Caving Association off the ground and into the caves. I regret not knowing if he knew just how much I and others appreciated everything he had done for us.

He instilled in me the importance of safety, awareness, and confidence in equipment which enabled me and others to approach vertical caving in a confident and informal frame of mind. Chuck was a valuable teacher in addition to his other qualifications.

MEMORIES OF CHUCK STUEHM

Roger Bartholomew

I first encountered Chuck in the basement of the San Antonio Municipal Auditorium during a hurricane which had flooded the Rio Grande Valley.

There sat a man behind a table, with cigar, calm as could be, directing Civil Defense activities.

It is clear that at first Chuck was mainly interested in rope techniques. But at that 25 Nov. 1968 meeting of the old San Antonio Grotto Mr. Erwin Wesp gave a slide show on Bustamante cave (in Mexico) which no doubt had a part in catching Chuck's interest. This may be the reason why my first recorded caving trip for him was Bustamante.

The mention of Bustamante reminds me of several stories. On the Nov. 1969 trip Chuck made an ingenious backpack of an orange crate and some sticks. When we set up camp in the entrance room it turned into a sort of portable kitchen. Another time in his zeal to clean up some paper trash at the bottom of the Great Slope, he made a fire to burn it which created quite a cloud of smoke in that area of the cave.

He was an individual. He could make his own decisions about what was right without being subject to peer pressure or what people might think. I feel that the most important contribution to Texas caving was his undying support for safety and rescue. He never did the deepest pits, the tightest crawls, the hardest climbs, the greatest map, the greatest photo, or the most difficult rescue, but he was present and appreciated all of them and thought of the safety of those who did do these things. His vision was to safeguard and save human life.

I REMEMBER CHUCK

April A. Herzig

He made me feel welcome, introduced me to people who were leading cave trips, suggested that I join the grotto, and vouched for my caving skills when I applied for membership. After my caving accident in August 1975 when I broke my neck, Chuck was at the emergency room seeing that I received the care that I needed since I was living alone in San Antonio. Visitors inspired me to work harder to recover from my injuries, and Chuck was one of the few who continued to come to see me after I went home from the hospital. When I think of Chuck, I remember his old white station wagon, his cigar, and the scar from his encounter with a rattlesnake, but more than that, I think of his part in acquainting me with caving, a sport that has helped to build my confidence in myself, my trust in other cavers, and my ability to meet the challenges of life.

CAVING IN CHINA

Bill Steele

AT THE NSS CONVENTION IN 2011 IN GLENWOOD SPRINGS, COLORADO, I ATTENDED A PRESENTATION ABOUT CAVING IN CHINA GIVEN BY MIKE FUTRELL OF VIRGINIA. IN IT HE SHOWED A PHOTO OF FLYING A KITE IN A CAVE. THERE WAS THAT MUCH AIR FLOW. I JUST HAD TO ASK HOW TO GET ON A TRIP TO THAT AREA, THE HONG MEIGUI CAVE EXPLORATION SOCIETY STUDY AREA.

Having been on a caving expedition to Mexico with Mike years ago, I knew him and felt comfortable writing to him. He told me that his upcoming trip was full, but that Erin Lynch lives in China and goes often, and to write to her. I did, and a caving expedition to the Wulong Province of southwest China was planned with Erin and others over the Christmas-New Year holidays, 2011 - 2012. The caving was too good to only go once, so Diana Tomchick and I decided to go again at the end of 2012 for three weeks.

Erin Lynch is the main reason so much caving is happening in China these days. She has lived in China for over ten years, speaks fluent Mandarin, and goes on one caving expedition after another. I've caved with a lot of good cavers over the past five decades, but few move through a cave so strongly, gracefully, and smoothly as Erin. It comes from doing it all the time.

Erin lives in an apartment in Tongzi, where the Hong Meigui Cave Exploration Society has a cavers' fieldhouse, and is within the core of the Wulong Karst Geology UNESCO World Heritage Site. She supports herself by editing *Speleology*, the caving journal of Great Britain, something she can do remotely

Emily in Three Natural Bridges Karst Geopark
Photo by Chris Densham





Expedition members Left to Right: Emily Zuber (WA), Diana Tomchick (TX), Bill Steele (TX), Erin Lynch (China), Chris Densham (Great Britain), Lee Ann Bledsoe (KY)

from SW China via the Internet.

On our 2011–12 expedition there were six of us. Six people on a caving expedition with all the leads you could want means caving every day and never having to wait your turn to go underground. There were Steve Gladieux, a strapping, 30 year old (thereabouts), who at the time was living in Shanghai with a good job as a materials engineer, Emily Brosius, a friend of Steve's who traveled from Michigan, two Chinese cavers, Dr. Yu, a non-practicing physician with an excellent job with a medical supply manufacturer, his sidekick who spoke no English, sort of pushy and gruff, named Chang, and Diana and me.

The expedition was three weeks long counting travel time to and from China, on the other side of the world. It takes about three days to fly, take buses, and hire a truck for the last leg down into the Er Wang Dong valley. With being away from home and jobs for three weeks, you have two weeks for caving, and when on expedition with Erin Lynch, caving is going to happen almost every day. She's a driven machine, and it rubs off on everyone around her.

On our 2011-12 expedition we camped underground for four days. We found a new entrance to San Wang Dong from inside the cave (actually a very rare occurrence

anywhere), and did many day trips, meaning not camping underground, but getting up early and going caving as early as possible, traversing the cave as fast as safety allows, and getting out in the evening.

So we planned to return again in December 2012 – January 2013. Diana and I can both manage three weeks away from our jobs that time of year. We invited 24 year-old Emily Zuber of Washington State to go with us. Emily was planning to ride her bicycle from Anacortes, Washington to the Grand Canyon in the fall and take two months to do it, so she said she thought she would be in excellent shape for a

Loading the hired truck at Er Wang Dong at the end of the expedition. Photo by Bill Steele





Emily Zuber with Tongzi center rope stash. Photo by Bill Steele

caving expedition to China. We've been on two expeditions to Mexico with her, and know her to be an excellent caver, always a pleasure to be around, tireless, energetic, an excellent cook, and strong. I used to go caving with her father, Ron, back in the 70s in Montana, and her brother Adam has been to Mexico with us on an expedition.

Diana and I used American Airlines frequent flyer miles to get to Shanghai. We met Emily in Chicago and flew from there non-stop to Shanghai in a 14½ hour flight, arcing over the North Pole and Siberia. I used Marriott Rewards points and got us a nice room for free near a subway stop.

The subways in Shanghai are fantastic. Buying a ticket is easier than in any subway in the U.S. I've been on, with touch screens in either Chinese or English, quick and simple to operate. The subways themselves are brand new, punctual to the minute, clean, and safe. They're safer than U.S. subways because there is a clear plastic barrier at the edge of the platform.

We roamed around Shanghai for

two days seeing various sights, eating street vendor food, and taking photos of funny and strange things. We had an early morning flight across China on a China East airliner, which was a brand new Airbus that smelled like a new car. In Chongqing we took the subway to a bus station and connections clicked as we made our way on to Wulong, then caught a mountain bus, really a ten passenger van with cargo space, which wound its way up a curvy mountain road to the city of Tongzi, where the Tongzi Cave and Karst Center is located.

The Tongzi Cave and Karst Center is a three room storefront given free of charge to the caving project centered there because of the good work being done. It's a secure place to store project caving gear, and there's a lot of it. This is a well provisioned caving project, more impressive than even the Cave Research Foundation's 50-year plus operation exploring Mammoth Cave, the world's longest cave.

Everyone who goes caving at the Tongzi Center must pay an expedition fee no matter how long they are there. Members are good at applying for grants and are generous with their own funds. The caving is excellent and those who cave there are appreciative and ready to rise to whatever financial need arises. We hit the Tongzi Center like a tornado

Plowing with an ox. Photo by Bill Steele



and packed to go caving for two weeks. Erin is very organized and detailed. She had both paper and mental lists of everything we needed.

One thing we needed to do was to go to the Tongzi police station to apply for permission to be in the area. In tourist areas or big cities either your tour operator or hotel makes a copy of your passport and reports to the government your whereabouts. In the hinterlands you must report to the local police station, fill out a form, give them your passport to make a copy of, all pretty much routine. Or so it had been the year before. This time Erin took us to the police station, and left us to do it like we had the year before. But right away something seemed different. Last time we filled out the form, they made a copy of our passports, and we were on our way. This time something seemed wrong. We began to worry. The lady behind the glass carried our passports out of sight a couple of times. Then out came a uniformed police officer with regalia on his uniform that told me he was a ranking guy. He spoke some English. Diana's passport had been issued in Houston, and he wanted to know if we were from Houston. We said no, and tried to explain that that's where her passport was issued, and then he said, "Yao Ming, Houston, Yao Ming! You love him? You love him?" He was talking about the Chinese basketball

Typical meal with the Wang family. Photo by Bill Steele



star who used to play for the Houston Rockets. I'd noticed a billboard he was on right there in Tongzi.

"Yes, we love him," we said, saying what we needed to say, and we were free to go.

We spent one night at the Tongzi caver fieldhouse. The next morning a hired truck pulled up out front and we loaded it with food, bottled water, lots of rope, drills, hardware, and our personal caving gear. Then off we went to the edge of paved streets and beyond, winding our way on rough rocky and muddy roads carved into cliff faces and eventually into the Er Wang Dong valley.

At the village of Er Wang Dong we unpacked the truck and moved into the Wang family's farming village home. We had different rooms than we did the prior year, but plenty of room, with British caver Chris Densham and I using the back bedroom, and the four women using the front bedroom. It sounds fairly posh saying it that way, but here's



Rice paddies near Er Wang Dong village, looking toward Tongzi on the distant mountain. Photo by Bill Steele

another way of saying it: housing was costing us 5 yuan per person per day, or \$1 US, and you get what you pay for. One night I heard a rat on the plastic sheet stapled on the ceiling and spotlighted it with my caving light I had handy for going to the latrine. The latrine was almost as bad as the year before. The only thing better about it this time was that it was not in the pig sty with large hogs getting excited when you enter, probably because

when humans enter they know one of three things is going to happen: they're going to use the latrine, they're there to feed them, or they're there to fetch one for slaughter.

Erin told us that she had not succeeded in obtaining the key to the Er Wang Dong entrance, so all of our trips would be into San Wang Dong. The Er Wang Dong entrance was right behind the farmhouse in which we were staying, and the San Wang Dong entrance was down the valley, about a 15 minute fast walk between terraced fields.

Underground camp. Photo by Chris Densham



Our first trip into San Wang Dong was to stage gear and supplies for our underground camp planned in a couple of days, and to take photos. We traveled through large passageways in the cave for 1½ hours, dropped off the camp supplies at an intersection of passages, and followed Erin through a maze of barely walking-sized passages to a tiankeng entrance (a big surface pit), coming to it about 80 meters off the floor 80 meters or perhaps more from the surface above. Erin told us that friends of ours from Texas and California had



Left: Bill Steele fixes Erin Lynch's pack with a Scout knife awl and cable ties. Right: Erin Lynch. Photos by Diana Tomchick

done some work in this entrance. From Texas Jean Krecja, Vivian Loftin, David Ochel, and Charlie Savaas had been there. From California it was Nancy Pistole and Matt Oliphant.

The next day was December 21st, the day some people thought the world would end according to the Maya calendar. Oh well, it had been a good time while it lasted. But what if the world didn't end? What if something happened to disrupt civilization and we were trapped in China, unable to return home?

Now that would be a problem.

We had a hearty breakfast prepared by Mr. Wang's wife and in the early afternoon went caving again. It was another supply run for our underground camp, and once we dropped off the supplies, Emily and Chris started rigging a virgin pit while Erin, Diana, Lee Ann, and I surveyed up the slope on the entrance side of the first rope drop, in immense passage with tree trunk-sized formations. No cavers had ever climbed up there before.

Erin, Diana, and I cranked up our Scurions and looked around, thinking that there may be an upper level around a corner. But it was highly exposed and was left for another day and some bolting gear.

The next day we awoke and the world seemed to be the same. I figured the Maya calendar had been misinterpreted after all. Good. Lee Ann Bledsoe was heading back to Kentucky for Christmas, so she got on the back of a motorcycle for a ride to Tongzi to start her bus rides to Chongqing and then 17 or so hours of airplane flights to Nashville.

The rest of us watched the farmers cut up two hogs they'd killed while we were eating breakfast. The plan was to stay on the surface for a feast early in the afternoon and late in the day go into the cave for our five day underground camp.

After the feast, which included fresh and delicious pig liver, fish we didn't try because Erin warned us that it was probably from the Yangtze River and the world's largest mercury plant is upstream from the closest access to it, and a large pomelo melon for dessert which was very good. Erin told us that she

Left: Bill Steele in underground camp. Center: Erin keeping book. Right: Ancient human barefoot footprints in "One Man and His Dog" passage. Photos by Diana Tomchick



wasn't feeling well so we delayed going to our underground camp and the rigors of the six or so hour gear haul it required until the next day.

The next day we went into San Wang Dong for a day trip to move the pile of camp supplies and gear farther into the cave. Then we went to the "One Man and His Dog" passage to take ceiling heights throughout with a laser disto range finder and to check out a lead.

The "One Man and His Dog" passage fascinates me. It's far into the cave, past caver-explored and rigged rope drops, yet at some point in the past, somehow, a man (or a big footed woman) and a dog got to this passage with its cathedral-sized dimensions. The caver path in the soft, fluffy dirt parallels a set of barefoot footprints that go to the end of the large passage where it splits and drops deeper. At one point the (ancient?) person stood and turned around several times. Our read on that was that he or she had lost the dog and was calling for it in all directions. It's a mystery how the person and the dog got here. There may be or used to be another entrance they used that is unknown to cavers today.

Emily and Chris rigged down a drop off the bottom of One Man and His Dog while Diana, Erin, and I took ceiling height measurements and surveyed a virgin side passage. Three of us got out of the cave at 11:00 p.m. and Emily and Chris at 1:00 a.m. Their pit had dropped down to a surveyed passage.

The next day was Christmas Eve, and we went into San Wang Dong to camp for five days. We each carried a large camp pack with which to divide

up the gear we had stashed in the cave. The trip to the underground camp took 5½ hours, which passed without incident, but was hard work.

At the camp, the same one we'd camped at the year before, we each found our sleeping spots, Diana and I going back to the upper penthouse we'd used the year before and no one else had since then, while Chris and Emily shared the flat floor of the kitchen area. Erin took to a hammock which I had carried to China in my luggage that had been custom made by Mike Ficco of Virginia.

For the next five days we caved from the underground camp. The first trip Emily and Chris went up a 30 meter wall on a 8mm rope just beyond the water source 10 minutes from camp. Diana, Erin, and I went to the Dr. Scholl's area to check out some leads indicated in the survey notes. The area is named Dr. Scholl's because the dirt on the floor is soft and fluffy and makes your feet feel good.

We went down a 15 meter freefall drop and found this area of the cave to be very windy and chilly due to being near a large tiankeng. That it was winter was evident. Our leads didn't do much, though we did survey a lower level for hours until it pinched off and we got cold.

Back at camp, Emily told us about how the 30 meter drop rigged with an 8mm rope was a pain at the rebelay. She got to the top first and the rope was rubbing across the lip above her. Chris added a bolt which took out the loop at one of the rebelay. The next day Chris and I went up that rope and I found out for myself what a challenge it was.



Bill Steele pauses and looks into virgin cave. Photo by Diana Tomchick

Chris and I rigged a pit series descending off the top of that 30m pitch to a very tight slot. Later Diana and Erin surveyed it and Erin pushed the slot. When Diana got back to camp, I had already changed out of my caving clothes into my camp clothes and my hands were cramping badly. Diana shot a video of my left hand as it continued to cramp, forming a claw. It can be seen at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mk4hoTLpUcE>. I was likely dehydrated from not drinking enough water, as well as from crossing challenging rebelay on 8mm rope, and tying knots and rigging.

During the night my dehydration hit again and I woke up with an agonizing cramp in my hamstring muscle. I yelled out loudly and couldn't straighten it out. Eventually I got the cramp worked out, drank a liter of water, and went back to sleep. In the morning I found that the others, minus Diana, who was

sleeping next to me, thought that amorous things were going on in the penthouse. It was quite the opposite.

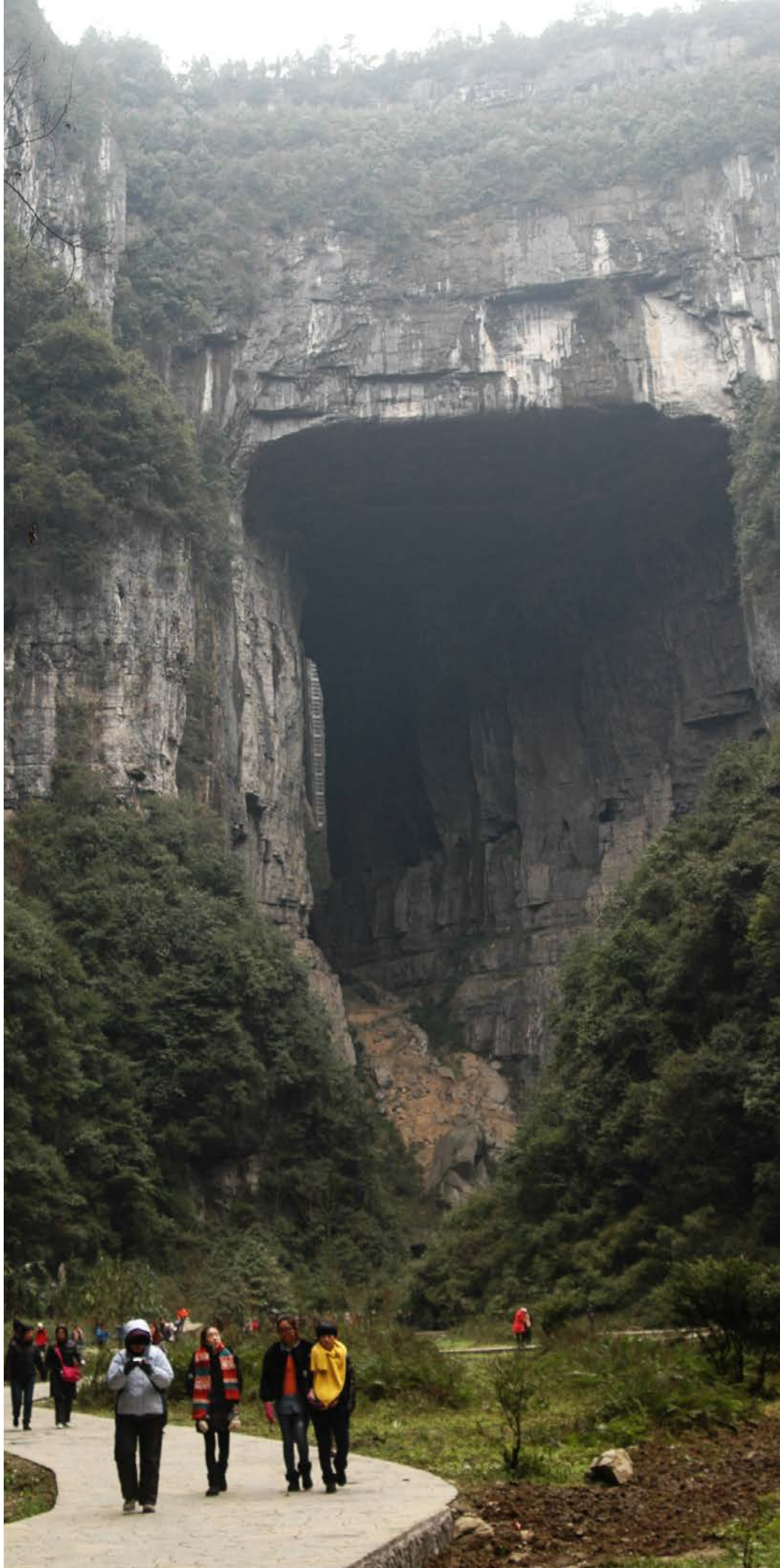
For two more days we went caving from the underground camp. Chris did two aid climbs in Dr. Scholl's with me belaying. Diana, Erin, and Emily surveyed down the Yellow River pit series (named so because that's where you could dump your pee bottle), and we slept long hours in our quiet underground camp. For meals we ate oatmeal for breakfast, shrink-wrapped spicy Chinese peanuts and Snickers for lunch, and freeze dry dinners brought to China from the U.S. We had tea and coffee, too.

On December 29 we broke camp and headed out. It took 5½ hours again to travel the distance from camp to the entrance. It was very late when we reached the night sky.

There were a couple more day trips in the cave and some surface hikes before we packed up from Er Wang Dong village and relocated to Tongzi, where on the return home pavement begins. Erin had moved out of her apartment in the city of Wulong (population around 200,000), with plans to move to Tongzi (population around 50,000). We saw one apartment she was considering, but by the time we left she had not made a decision.

We were in Tongzi for market day and had a fun time walking around and marveling at the strange sights. We came upon a fast-talking, snake oil folk remedy salesman-type man selling antler and horn potions off a blanket laid

Diana Tomchick walks along the path through the Three Natural Bridges National Geopark. Photo by Bill Steele



on the curb of the street. I was a little bit disgusted by his wares, but I did take photos of him, and thankfully he didn't seem to mind.

There was a tourist site we wanted to see: the Three Natural Bridges National Geopark. (<http://www.naturalarches.org/gallery-china3bridges.htm>). We hired a van with driver for the day. It was a three hour drive each way to this equivalent of a U.S. national park. Our driver waited for us as we spent over two hours walking a Land of Oz-type paved path through a gorge containing three of the four largest natural bridges in the world.

Back in Tongzi we were leaving the next day. The weather was turning cold and we worried that snow and ice might keep us from leaving in the morning. We had reservations in Chongqing at a five-star J.W. Marriott hotel, free to us because I was again using Marriott Rewards points I build up with my job. I was treating everyone and looking forward to the "porcelain throne" after two and a half weeks of squatty potties and the horror latrine at Er Wang Dong.

The next morning our fears were realized when we awoke to snow and ice on the streets. Could we leave the mountains? With packs



Above: Tongzi sidewalk antler, horn, and potion salesman. Below: The new subway in Shanghai. Photos by Bill Steele

on our backs and lugging wheeled ones behind us, we walked the quiet main street of Tongzi to the noodle restaurant where the van/bus out of the mountains parks and leaves once it is full with ten passengers. Sure enough, it arrived, chains on the tires, and soon it had its ten passengers, and we were on our way.

Connections clicked along as we arrived in Wulong, immediately boarded a bus for Chongqing, and in Chongqing got in cabs and arrived at the posh J.W. Marriott hotel in the financial district of this thriving city of over 20 million people. Soon we were drinking 13% alcohol beer and swimming in a pool designed to look like a Roman bath. After our swim we overheated in the sauna and then ate a wonderful and fun-filled hot pot dinner at a nearby restaurant recommended by a Marriott staff member from Romania.

The next morning we flew out of Chongqing to Shanghai, where we had a five hour layover before our 14½ hour flight to Chicago. For fun we decided to ride the Maglev bullet train from the Shanghai airport into

the city. It was nearly silent and smooth and cranked up to 431 kph, or about 260 mph. Then we took the subway to the French Quarter, ate our last meal in China at a hole-in-the-wall sidewalk restaurant, and rode the bullet train back in time for our Boeing 777 flight home.

The entrances of Er Wang Dong and San Wang Dong were discovered by British caver Duncan Collis and American caver Erin Lynch in 2001. They backpacked for two hours past the rice paddies shown with this article after an arduous mountain bus ride. The entrances were well known by the few people living near by, and nitrates had been mined from them in the 1930s, and perhaps earlier. At this point in time San Wang Dong's explored length is 67,826m (42 miles) and it is the second longest known cave in China. Er Wang Dong is 45,674m (28 miles) in length and is the fourth longest known cave in China. They are very close to each other and likely will be connected eventually. The resulting cave will still stand as the second longest cave in the country. They are very long dongs indeed.



ROBBER BARON CAVE HOSTS THREE GENERATIONS

Mimi Jasek

CAVERS

MIKE HARRIS - INTREPID TRIP LEADER, SAN ANTONIO

JIM JASEK - GRANDPA, WACO

MIMI JASEK - GRANDMA, WACO

AMY LOUISE JASEK - DAUGHTER, ROUND ROCK

LOUISE JASEK CALDER - GRANDDAUGHTER, AGE 5, ROUND ROCK

WALT THOMAS - AMY'S FRIEND, AUSTIN

PROLOGUE

Ever since Amy and Louise moved back to Texas in August of 2010, we had been hoping for some opportunities to go caving together. Having grown up in a caving family, Amy loved it. Louise had gotten her first taste at age three by going into Avery Ranch Cave and Dies Ranch Treasure Cave at an open house in Cedar Park, Texas, courtesy of the Texas Cave Conservancy. She wore her mama's old childhood caving helmet - the smallest metal woman's military helmet liner we could find back then - which kind of gave up the ghost and died after that trip! She seemed to take to it quite well, and in this past year had been a visiting spectator at Kiwi Sink on several occasions, although she stayed far away from the edge of the hole. (Except when tagging along after young Jack Gluesenkamp! That child gave my old heart palpitations more than once!) Playing in the stream bed, digging for shells, and playing with Grandma and Kiwi were more to her

liking. But finding a good cave for all of us to test her real affinity for this thing we do was difficult, until our good buddy Mike suggested Robber Baron Cave in San Antonio, one of the Texas Cave Management Association preserves. It only took almost another two years to get all of us free at the same time, and have the weather cooperate, to pull off the trip.

THE TRIP

That Saturday morning dawned drizzly and cool, but the weather report said it would clear up and get warmer. We headed down to Round Rock from Waco to meet up with Amy, Louise, and Walt in time to say hello, and be on our way to meet Mike at the cave around 11:30 am. Amy said Louise had been wild all morning waiting for us, a good indication of her excitement level for the day. We traveled in two cars, for Amy figured she would possibly need to leave San Antonio as soon as the trip was over in order to get Louise home. With a child only used to afternoon hiking

and swimming adventures, she was not sure how well that first really long day of traveling and caving would go.

We arrived at the preserve early enough for Amy and me to hike down to the local H.E.B. grocery store to use the bathroom facilities before Mike arrived. Once he got there, introductions and paperwork were taken care of, and gear was provided to Louise and Walt. **Thank you, Bexar Grotto, to which Jim and I belong, for sharing!** When all were set, and the guys had taken care of their needs as guys usually do, we entered the park and began our descent into the sinkhole by way of the curving stairway cut out of the earth.

Since I usually bring up the rear on any trip due to being slower at everything these days, Mike was already working to get the gate unlocked by the time I caught up with everyone. This was Walt's first wild cave trip, having previously been in Linville Caverns in North Carolina on a commercial tour as his only other experience of getting underground, but he seemed quite ready for the adventure. Once Mike got the gate open and went in, Amy followed, with Jim right behind so as to take pictures as Louise came through the opening. Before going in and while her mama was entering the cave, Louise asked several times if it was all that little (gate opening size), or



The group in Robber Baron. Photo by Mike Harris

did it get bigger inside. Although we reassured her, until she was finally inside I had the impression she was not too sure of what to expect, but she was not about to miss anything. I waited at the gate as Walt helped her down the last slope - pretty slippery that morning - and helped her through to Jim waiting on the other side. Once in, she took off with mama and Mike, Walt and I entered, then Mike came back to secure the gate for the duration of our visit.

Now, if you have never been to Robber Baron with one of the preserve guides as your leader, you have really missed something. Mike, being one of those guides and cave historians, as well as a really good

friend, was an absolute blast to be with. Besides his understanding of caving technique - some of which he passed on to Walt and Louise for their benefit as well as that of the cave - his knowledge of the cave and its history made the trip so much more than just being underground, as any who know him and his quick wit understand what I mean. Mike really made this adventure for Amy, Louise, and Walt extra special.

Having only been in Robber Baron on one other occasion, and possibly only as far as the Graffiti Room years before (Thank you, Rick Corbell, another good friend with the same aforementioned preserve guide qualities!), with no detours or side

passages taken at that time, I was unfamiliar with the cave. Since I was in the rear, too, I was only marginally able to hear the wonderful stories that Mike told as he guided us through. However, I could tell that Amy, Walt, and Louise were drinking it all in and loving every minute. The high shriek made when sighting a roach at the old entrance during Mike's story there also confirmed the attention being given to all that was going on around her by our littlest caver. For me and Jim, just being underground with our family was enough. As far as I know, we went along the Entrance Hall, up into the Dinosaur Room, down to the Bedroom, over and back along the Lighted Passage to the Graffiti Room and beyond, back along the Male Passage and up the Main Stem to the Lighted Passage again. In the Graffiti Room is a hole up in the wall into which Mike said he stuffed any young explorer who would let him for a photo op. Jim and I watched in disbelief as Louise actually let Mike, with help from Walt, stuff her in there! What a sport - and she balanced herself up on her hands while both Jim and Mike took several photos, and Mike took a family photo of all of us and Walt. (Kodak Moment, anyone? Christmas card next year?)

Somewhere along the Lighted Passage is this little off-shoot that turns sharply back parallel with the LP and quickly has a tunnel you can go down to reach the LP again. It is quite small at the end coming back out into the LP, but we got some really great pictures of Louise being able to almost sit indian-style when hitting the perch into the LP again. Of course mama, Amy, had to see if she could do this, and the resulting picture was really awesome! Oh, to still be that small! Then it was decided that I had to try



Amy and Walt exiting the Bedroom. Photo by Jim Jasek

this caving feat. Walt took me around, and all of a sudden I looked into the tunnel to see this little hand and arm waving and could hear Louise's voice saying, "Here it is, Grandma. This way." Of course, my exit from the tunnel was full body, sideways, arm down on the floor type, but I made it.

At this point Mike said he was going to give Amy and Walt a workout, and took them on the trip to the back of the cave by way of The Great Southwest Passage to sign the book in the Last Passage. Since this was not something Louise could do, Jim

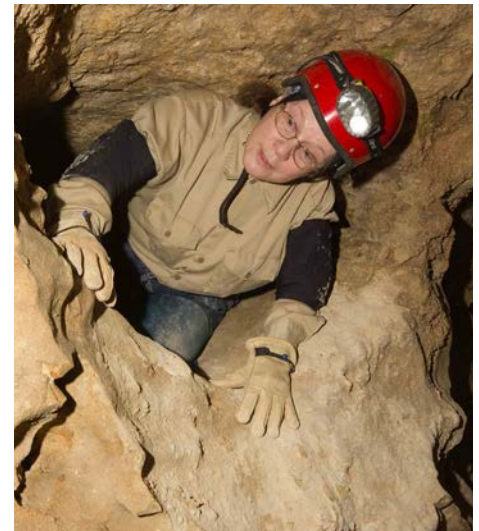
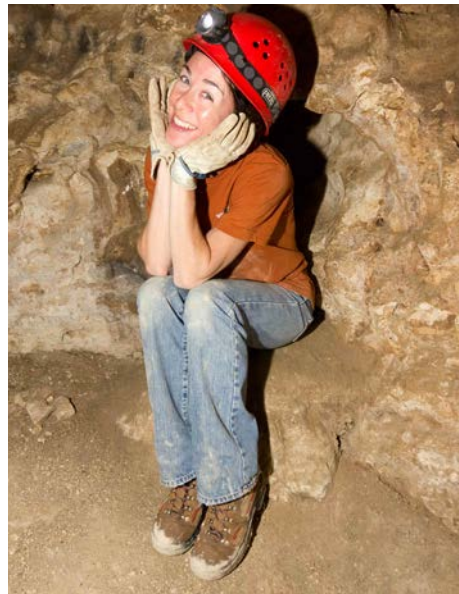
and I stayed with her in this area of the Lighted Passage. We explored around as far as Jim was willing to go without a map until Louise suddenly said, "Grandpa, could we find a place to sit and hang out for a while?" She had been going full tilt for some time in the cave, so of course he said yes. We went back to the area of the perch at the end of the tunnel, and all sat for a while. Louise wanted to play 20 questions, so she and I did this until Jim got up and started exploring again and taking pictures. At this point our little caver wanted to snuggle. I leaned back against the

perch at the bottom of the tunnel, put my legs out, and she got onto my lap and outstretched legs. I decided to see how she would take to total cave darkness, and suggested we turn out our lights. Although she usually has a star chart turtle light or star chart camp light on in the dark in her room, she agreed and was really OK with it. I told her this was one of my favorite things to do - sit in a cave in total darkness and soak up the sounds, smell, and just being underground. She said, "But Grandma, the cave isn't making any noise." Right. I said not this one, but some do. At one point Grandpa got a little too close to us down the passage, and she told me he was ruining our darkness time!

Mike, Amy, and Walt finally returned from the far reaches of the cave, all were reunited, and we began our way back to the entrance. At some point Mike got Louise, Amy, and Walt to come look at another little passage. He said it was a short cut out of the cave, and made them take it. Louise went right in after being assured it was really a short cut and that mama would join her; my caving kid looked in and said "more crawling?"

Jim taking a photo of Louise and Mimi. Photo by Mike Harris





Mimi: Get down how? Photo by Jim Jasek

Left to right: Like daughter like mother. Like mother like daughter. Photos by Jim Jasek

in this voice that meant “you’ve got to be kidding” before following her daughter; then Walt slowly followed after trying to turn around and follow me. Tired, anyone? They did all make it out of the cave before the rest of us, into warm sunshine I might add, and were out of the sinkhole and changing clothes by the time we got out of the park. Once all were cleaned up and changed, and grotto gear returned to Mike, we got down to the serious part of the trip - where to eat and how soon! Amy wanted to join us, so we left the park to regroup at a nearby Mama’s Restaurant.

As always, the relaxation, camaraderie, and much needed food that the after-trip meal provides

Hanging out with grandma. Photo by Jim Jasek



did the trick for all. Everyone let each other know how much they enjoyed the trip, pictures were shown, Louise and I had a great time coloring and chatting, and much fun was had by all. Tired, but happy and full, we all went our separate ways home with hopes of repeating the experience again.

EPILOGUE

Our Sunday was as usual - clean up gear and get all done that is required before I go back to work on Monday. Amy said her arms were sore; Walt told her his legs were sore; and according to mama, Louise was so tired that she was being a difficult little monster! Even with all that,

the trip had been totally worth it!!

Favorite sayings from the trip: At one point early on, someone said something to Amy about how well Louise had taken to wild caving. Reply: “Of course she has - it’s in her genes! I wouldn’t have expected anything different!” Amy to Walt before exiting the cave: “You going to say no the next time I ask you to go caving?” Reply: “NO!”

So, we finally did it. Trip planned, executed, finalized, and successful. To be a caver is a very different kind of thing to be, even to those acquainted with the activity. To have been cavers for as long as Jim and I have been - and still be active - is really something, I think. To have a child who still enjoys it as an adult and parent, and to now have a granddaughter who seems to also like it, well that’s just plain amazing to my way of thinking. Nothing in life is a given, and nothing should be taken for granted. So, thank you Robber Baron Cave, and of course our buddy Mike, for giving us an experience that was truly priceless. I can’t really think of a better way for a caving family to spend a Saturday, and hope there will be more in our future.

TCC WINTER CONFERENCE 2013

Mike Walsh, TCC President

THE TEXAS CAVE CONSERVANCY WINTER CONFERENCE WAS ESTABLISHED IN 2007 TO ASSIST NEW CAVERS. THIS YEAR, A NUMBER OF NEW CAVERS TOOK ADVANTAGE OF THE TOURS, WORKSHOPS, PROJECTS AND SEVERAL OF THE TEN CAVES AVAILABLE. THERE WAS EVEN A WELL ATTENDED EVENING VISIT TO AVERY RANCH CAVE LED BY JAY JORDEN.

Cavers from around the state began arriving on Friday, February 22, to camp at the TCC Headquarters and to party. Freddie Poer and Martina Correa Mar prepared the TCC Campground for the visitors. Freddie Poer and Mike Warton raised the Texas flag and we were ready to party.

Most of the activities started around 10 AM on Saturday Morning, February 23. Lynda Beck and Martina Correa Mar prepared coffee and breakfast for the cavers on Saturday and Sunday mornings. As usual, this was a great way to start an exciting day. The weather for the weekend could not have been better.

This year, two special tours were conducted. One was the Cedar Park Karst Tour led by Mike Warton, and Christopher Francke led the Cedar Park Digging Discoveries Tour. We had a special guest on the tours. Rose Farmer, Travis County Preserve Director attended and was observed taking a number of notes.

Rose led the special visit to Blizzard Springs. Since it is located on the edge of the Twin Creeks Golf Course,

she arranged for golf carts for the cavers. This is the major spring that drains the Buttercup Creek Cave System. The system is the home to both the Jollyville Plateau Salamander and the *Rhadine persephone* Beetle.



BABE Pit-Galveston Aggie Caver. Photo by Jim Jasek

Eric Flint headed up the Dies Ranch Cave Digging Project on Saturday. Cavers were able to remove a number of buckets in the effort to connect Dies Ranch to BABE Pit. BABE Pit (Bad Air at Both Ends) has high levels of Co₂. Two weekends before the TCC Winter Conference, Mark Gee and R.D. Milhollin installed a temporary hose to determine if Mark's system could clear out the bad air. It was successful and thanks to their efforts we were able to set up the TCC system.

Christopher Francke, Mike Walsh, Mike Warton, and Spencer Wood installed a four inch flexible plastic hose that will provide the fresh air to use in the new TCC BABE Pit Project. We will be using the cave as an underground laboratory to study cave related CO₂ removal techniques. The air hose will make it possible to study the cave, cave life, and the air quality, and perhaps make the connection to Dies Ranch Cave.

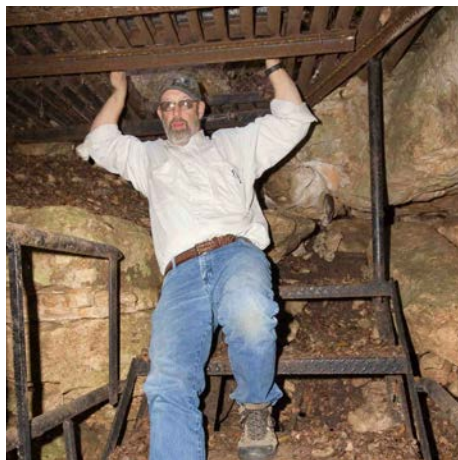
Most of the Saturday afternoon activities centered on the TCC owned Dies Ranch Cave. Several short cave related workshops were scheduled to take place. This included a cave related emergencies workshop, the BABE Pit Co₂ clean up workshop and a basic cable ladder workshop. Several new cavers requested a basic vertical workshop next year.

Cavers visited most of the ten caves available for the weekend; however, BABE Pit was the muddiest and the most popular. The twenty-five foot pit was rigged with a cable ladder to assist the cavers [Ellie Watson and Jill Orr free-climbed BABE Pit at the end of the day]. Mountains of mud, big walking passage, a fun cave and clean air all added to the enjoyment. Chad Johnson was on hand to ensure that cavers changed into clean clothes before walking around the neighborhood.

Texas Caver Cook Crew member Stefan Creaser served the evening meal behind the TCC Headquarters. This year the meal was Texas Frito Pie and Baked Potatoes. The Frito Pie was even served out of the bag. Lynda Beck set up the great Potato Bar, and Mimi Jasek brought her fantastic Apple Desserts. As usual, the beer and soda water flowed.

We even had an evening guitar performance by Walter Beck, Bob Finger, Christopher Francke and Jay Jorden. Jay's performance of "One Ton of Guano" was, once again, a hit. Several cavers indicated that they like the new format where we use the TCC owned Dies Ranch Treasure Cave as a gathering point.

This TCC event is structured toward new cavers, so please let them know next year. Also, we were asked to remind Texas cavers that the TCC Winter Conference is always the last weekend in February. The date for next year is February 22-24, 2014. Thanks go to the volunteers that helped make this one of the best TCC Winter Conferences. Come out and help us in our cave work projects or just pass the word on to some of your new people. Thanks to all who helped make the conference a success!



Bob Finger in Dies Ranch. Photo by Jim Jasek



Steve Gutting in Blizzard Spring.



Rose Farmer, Mike Warton, Mimi Jasek, Chris Francke. Photo by Jim Jasek

NEW TCC LIFETIME ASSOCIATES

Since the TCC Winter Conference is our largest caver event we use it to see what we have achieved since the last event. There have been a number of changes within the Texas Cave Conservancy. One of the changes is that the TCC has shifted much of its activities to our ongoing study of the caves that we manage. TCC Data Manager Christopher Francke has carefully documented much of our cave related scientific activities. This past year, we estimate that the TCC has conducted over 50 work trips.

As a result, we now have a number of new TCC Lifetime Associates. To become a Lifetime Associate it is necessary to assist us in over 40 hours of work projects. I am honored to add the following cavers to the list of TCC Lifetime Associates:

Stefan Creaser	David Harding	Jaqueline Lambert
Galen Falgout	Lydia Hernandez	Dinh Lin
Eric Flint	Aubry Jenson	Bob Marshall
Gerald Geletzke	Chad Johnson	Casey Tucker

Thank you, everyone for all of the work and time that you spent underground. Your fifty or more trips have greatly contributed to the TCC Scientific and Educational efforts. You are the hardcore cavers that get things done. The Boulevard Cave Map is just one of the great accomplishments that you made.

GOVERNMENT CANYON KARST PROJECT UPDATE

Marvin Miller

FROM TURQUOISE SINK, TO BLOW HOLE CAVE AND BIG DOME CAVE, THERE HAVE BEEN SOME INTERESTING DISCOVERIES HAPPENING AT GOVERNMENT CANYON IN THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS.

The first of these was heralded by the report from a bird survey team of finding a large hole in the ground. The location was not far off the main trail but was in an area that had not yet been ridge-walked. When Donny Roland, Tom Rogers, and I went to check it out we found an obvious recent collapse of the roof of a chamber. We could see why the bird survey team, as it had been reported, had not wanted to get too close to the edge. There was no solid exposed rock anywhere around the edge. It looked like a hole had been punched straight through 20-30 cm of topsoil and another 20 cm of rock into the void below. The roof had obviously been very thin. From the side of our approach we could see a wall of creamy white limestone dropping about 5 meters to a floor. The hole was about 3 meters in diameter and belled out immediately to the dimensions of the room below.

We walked around to the far side and were startled to see a very green, moderately-sized, oak tree down in the hole. The tree had obviously fallen in the collapse, but enough soil and root structure had survived intact, and the tree was very much alive. The

top part of the trunk had apparently broken off because there were no mature branches, but most of the trunk, stretching to within about 2 meters from the surface, was covered in half-meter long green, leafy shoots. From the same side of the hole we could see down a long talus slope to a dark hole under the far wall.

We didn't like the idea of hanging a rope over the loose soil and questionable rock of the edge. Luckily, there was a large oak standing (perilously) close to the edge that extended a large limb over the hole. We rigged from a nearby tree and threw the rope over the limb. We also ran the tail of the rope back over the top of the pit and secured it on the other side so that we could pull ourselves to the edge when we ascended.

The drop into the cave landed us at the foot of the tree. This was also at the top of a breakdown slope of rock and soil that lay almost at the angle of repose heading down into the cave. About 10 meters down the slope it went under the far wall. The sun was beaming down into the cave and the cream-colored limestone walls made for a surreal kind of feeling. The walls of this upper chamber were very loose and frangible and identified the strata as the upper Glen Rose.

We started surveying, and while I was sketching, Donny and Tom explored the rest of the cave. The

cave went only about another 6 meters past the far wall, ending in a short drop in mud and rock fill following the far wall down. At this point a small water channel entered from the wall and water was drip, dripping into a small pool and running on down into the breakdown. As I got to this point sketching, Tom got into the hole and started pulling out rocks. In short order he had lowered the floor 1.5 meters. It may be a good dig to continue with tools. However, the breakdown slope looming above would require shoring to make it safe.

An interesting green lichen-like substance covered several square meters of the upper chamber headwall. On later trips to the cave, this green growth seemed to be maturing into a darker shaded moss and was covering more of the wall. We decided on the name Turquoise Sink for the cave. The color on the cave wall was part of the reason for this. The other was the understanding that with the large opening, the topsoil at the top of the slope, and the uniquely different environment just 5 meters below the surface (cooler, more humid), a fascinating ecosystem is going to grow in the cave. In a few years the green jungle of ferns and other plants growing in the cave around the oak tree will provide a wonderful contrast to the light-colored walls and the darkness of the continuing cave.

In April of 2011 we found a



Tom Rogers in Turquoise Sink. Photo by Marvin Miller

cave during a ridge-walk at the far northern end of the park. A good breeze was coming from entrance so we named it Government Canyon Blow Hole. Some air flow has been noticed at points in the cave on various survey and exploration trips since then, but never again to the extent felt on that first day.

The day after finding the cave Donny Roland, Joe Schaertl, and I went back to start the survey. The entrance is a tube less than half-a-meter wide that drops about half-a-meter to a 2-meter crawl, that then drops another meter to a loose dirt floor. The floor had to be dug out a little to get under the wall, but from there a large piece of breakdown slopes down to the center of the low-ceilinged room. The room extends towards the northeast about 20 meters. The right wall is dominated by massive breakdown, while the floor rises in soft dirt fill to the left wall 13 meters away, requiring

squeezing or digging to reach it.

Approximately mid-way along the length of the room the floor slopes down to a hole that leads under the breakdown. The passage under the breakdown runs along the cave wall for about 12 meters. At the northeastern end it funnels down – sloping steeply for 2 to 3 meters along the wall to a tight vertical slot.

This slot was plugged with rock when we first found it. The narrow confines of the area even made it doubtful that it could be dug. But we felt airflow in that lower part of the cave so Rick Corbell spent a day there with a team digging. A hole was soon opened in the floor of the slot. Donny Roland and I went a month or two later, in April of 2012, to have a look at it. We were armed with a hammer drill and Donny's rock-shaving kit. The space was too tight for Donny so I did the drilling and pounding.

In several hours we had removed some of the larger edges. Sierra and Sarah Ostrov were with us along with their mother, Petra, and my daughter Christin. Before I had the crack large enough for me to get through, 14-year old Sierra offered to go down and have a look. Christin followed her and they reported that the cave opened up. After a bit more work I had it large enough for me, and I left Donny bemoaning his situation as I too descended to see what we had found.

The climb down ends about 2 meters below on a ledge. The ledge extends to the southwest 5 meters and drops off, still following the cave wall from above, approximately 3 meters to a floor below. The room associated with the floor is about 9 meters long, follows the general trend of the cave, and is centered on the ledge above. The walls are about 2 meters apart and ceiling height varies from 1 to 2 meters. A pit continues



Christin Miller rappelling into Turquoise Sink. Photo by Marvin Miller

down, climbable over several steps, to a small room characterized by a deep, soft floor of decayed leaves and other organics, with a ceiling only a bit over a meter high and nice white stalactites hanging from it. The stalactites and the ceiling have bits of leaves pasted everywhere. This is the bottom of the cave and it floods.

Back up in the larger room below the ledge, at the southwest end the passage turns right and doubles back under the breakdown block that forms the ledge above. A squeeze leads to passage between breakdown that soon connects back out to the larger room.

This lower part of the cave was surveyed by Joe Mitchell and Joe Schaertl in two trips. The length and depth of the cave are 120.8 meters and 20 meters, respectively. Due to the airflow felt on the discovery day, and airflow present in the constriction to the lower levels, the boundaries of the lower levels probably need to be pushed some more to see if the spaces that surely



Leah Miller having fun with clay in Turquoise Sink. Photo by Marvin Miller

exist somewhere can be accessed. Government Canyon Blow Hole is currently the 3rd longest surveyed cave in the State Natural Area.

Our latest big find is Big Dome Cave. Big Dome Cave was discovered back in 1994, in the early days of the project. That is, the sinkhole was discovered and documented but no one ever went back to dig it out. Many of the early features, found before the days of inexpensive GPS, marked with a best-guess X on a topo map in the thick ashe juniper brush of Government Canyon, are effectively lost. In reading through the old feature reports I sometimes note one that sounds especially promising or easy to relocate. That was the case with feature 19-22. On the feature report form it was described as "Small sinkhole 3' x 3' 6" layer of organic debris, then clean rocks, easy digging." That doesn't sound all that promising but the location was marked at the side of a drainage and not far from a boundary fence. When located in close proximity to a prominent geographical feature such

as a drainage, it is more likely that the team knew where they were, and therefore the marked location is fairly accurate. This proved to be the case with 19-22 as we found the sink within about half-an-hour on the November, 2012 trip. It was a good-looking sink in the stream bed with a well-developed drain. Just upstream about 3 meters was another smaller sink.

Donny Roland, Niki Lake, Obed Rodriguez, and I started the dig at the larger sink. Rick Corbell, Jacqueline Lambert, and Casey Tucker finished it up the following day and actually got into the cave through the smaller sink. They explored the approximately 10 meter diameter entrance room and found a 2 meter drop, followed by another 1 meter drop into a 7 meter long room that had 3 pit leads and a fourth passage stepping down at the far end of the room. Jacqueline and Casey explored down one or two of the climbable pits – the third one required rope – and found going cave. They weren't prepared to survey so they left the cave without going further.

I returned with Donny Roland, Mark Malesky, my wife, Lisa, and my daughters, Christin and Leah, to survey the cave on December 1. We had gotten the story of the cave from Rick, who had sent a lot of nice pictures of the entrance room, but had not gone further than the top of the 2-meter drop. Rick had mentioned some possible leads off the south of the entrance room, but somehow he had not gotten a sense of excitement from Jacqueline and Casey over what they found in their further exploration. We expected a nice Government Canyon cave, but nothing that would take us more than a day

or two to survey. We found different.

In our first reconnaissance we quickly determined that the pits were the way to go. We ran a survey line in 9 stations from the entrance into the room at the top of the pits. While I was sketching, Donny found a 3 meter down-climb in a nice sculpted canyon. He soon started exclaiming from below about a large room. He was pretty excited. As soon as I had sketched to the last point, we all went to see what he had found.

The climb-down opened at the bottom to a sloping floor of cemented and loose breakdown with a ceiling about a meter above. The ceiling got higher as we went down, and then

Government Canyon Turquoise Sink. Photo by Marvin Miller

flattened out after 6 meters to extend over a large room with the floor continuing to slope down to the far wall about 9 meters away. The room was dominated by a huge breakdown block. Where it had fit in the ceiling was evident, and the section of ceiling that remained had a large crack extending along the bottom side and was separated from the rock layer above by several cm. We named this room the Breakaway Room.

Donny's instincts led him under the wall at the far side of the room and into going passage 2 meters wide and 1 to 2 meters tall. Soon he was excitedly exclaiming about a large dome. Leah, Christin, and I caught up to him and looked in wonder at the

creamy white walls that soared up in our lights. The ceiling of the dome had some nicely defined channels that led to passage off both ends of it. At floor level the dome was about 4 meters long x 2 wide. At the end, the continuing passage dropped over a short flowstone slope to a floor several meters down. It was a short drop but didn't look possible without a rope. The room beyond was roughly triangular in shape, with sides 4 to 5 meters long and what looked like the possibility of continuing passage in the far wall.

After some photographs, we left the dome and headed back to the Breakaway Room. Leah said, "Big Dome Cave!", and the name





Casey Tucker in Big Dome Cave. Photo by Rick Corbell



Government Canyon, Blow Hole Entrance. Photo by Marvin Miller

stuck. We took some more photos in the Breakaway Room and then headed on out of the cave.

On December 2, Donny, Mark, and I were joined by Rick Corbell and Dustin Voigt. We surveyed from station 9 at the top of the pits, down the down-climb, across the Breakaway Room, and along Ramblin Roland passage to the drop off at Big Dome. The last station was number 18. Donny set a couple of bolts and rappelled the short drop. He was disappointed in finding that the passage didn't continue, however, the consolation prize was a pit, blocked by breakdown and rubble

Donny Roland in the Breakaway Room. Photo by Marvin Miller



that he estimated at 9 meters deep. There was airflow up out of the pit. There are other leads going down where the Ramblin Roland passage leaves the Breakaway Room that may connect to the same area below.

Out in the Breakaway Room I crawled south from station 15 to the wall about 9 meters away. There in the corner was a hole partially plugged by breakdown. A slight breeze blew in my face and beyond it looked like larger space. I marked it as a lead in the survey notes. Also close to station 15, there was a large crack between two huge slabs of breakdown. I went in to investigate and found that space existed under the breakdown slab. As I crawled on in I called to Rick who was back out by 15. Soon I was essentially underneath him. He couldn't see my light and I couldn't see his. The passage jogged to the left past an alcove with some interesting formations, and then turned right. That's as far as I went, but the passage continued in the beam of my headlamp. Another lead.

On January 6 we were back for another day of survey. Donny led Bennett Lee and Jill Orr to survey a sloping pit that led down into darkness from the room at the top of the pits. I took my daughter, Christin, to finish the survey past Big Dome down the short drop and to the pit lead in what Donny called

Little Dome. We then went back to the Breakaway Room to run some tape to the south walls to finish the survey of that side of the room. We found three leads that require some hammer work to get through. There will be some squeezing, but they all look promising.

We soon heard the other party, and they were surveying to connect into the Breakaway Room with only their third shot. Their lead hadn't opened into the glorious passage we had imagined. It took a while to sketch in the remainder of the room, and by the time we were done the day was done. While Bennett and I sketched the others checked leads. Jill climbed past some delicate formations and about 5 meters down a pit to passage that was blocked by breakdown. It's a possible dig. Several crawling leads ended after a short distance, and the two remaining leads from the room at the top of the pits were checked and also don't go into any continuing passage. It looks like we will be doing some pounding and rock-moving on the next trip.

Trips to Government Canyon SNA are scheduled on the first weekend of every month except the hot summer months, and activities typically occur on both days of the weekend. Trips are also announced in the TSA calendar on the TSA web page and on the Texascavers email list.

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