2021 ELECTED TSA OFFICERS

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The Texas Speleological Association
PO Box 8026
Austin, TX 78713-8026
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The Texas Cavers Reunion is proud to announce the 2020 Winners of the Phil Winsborough Annual TSA Exploration Awards. After much deliberation, we chose to honor Marvin Miller and Ron Rutherford for their exceptional commitment to exploration, outstanding enthusiasm, and leadership. We are proud to have them as members of our Texas Caving Family. Both awards come with a handsome cash prize. Sponsored by Terry Sayther, candidates can either be nominated or selected by a committee of reviewers. Don’t forget to nominate active explorers for next year!

Photos from top to bottom:
Surveying Spillway Cave, Government Canyon SNA
Photo Credit: Mark Ross
Photo of Marvin Miller
Rappelling into a Texas cave to help resurvey it
Photo Credit: David Ochel
Photo of Ron Rutherford
The Texas Caver

The Texas Caver is a magazine written for cavers, by cavers. It is a publication of the Texas Speleological Association (TSA), an internal organization of the National Speleological Society (NSS).

The opinions and methods expressed in this publication are solely those of the respective authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the editor, the TSA, or the NSS.

Checks for subscriptions, dues, and payments for ads should be made out and sent to: The Texas Speleological Association, PO Box 8026, Austin, TX 78713-8026.

SUBMISSIONS

Articles, announcements, artwork, maps, photos, and other material for publication may be sent to publications@cavetexas.org. Images should be submitted separately in the highest resolution available.

The editor reserves the right to edit inappropriate material; correct errors in spelling, grammar, or punctuation; and add clarity as needed. In the event of significant changes, the author will be given an opportunity to review the changes prior to publication.

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This past year has been challenging for everyone, but I am inspired by the resilience of our caving community to persevere and support each other through these hard times. The Texas Caver has a long tradition of connecting multiple generations of cavers through our shared passion for cave exploration and advancing our understanding of the underground world. Fortunately, Carolyn Fusinato has taken on the role of Graphic Designer.

We hope you enjoy these stories of adventure and discovery by Texas cavers.

Jessica Gordon
Editor of The Texas Caver & Chairman of the Texas Speleological Association

Letter from the Editor

This past year has been challenging for everyone, but I am inspired by the resilience of our caving community to persevere and support each other through these hard times. The Texas Caver has a long tradition of connecting multiple generations of cavers through our shared passion for cave exploration and advancing our understanding of the underground world. Fortunately, Carolyn Fusinato has taken on the role of Graphic Designer.

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The cave ... consists of the large overhung entrance and a short section of hands and knees crawl ...

November ...
When we started back up, we focused more on digs and ridgewalking.

And ...
The dig leads in Not My Name Cave were all pushed ... none having enough promise.

A wet but productive spring presaged more slow and steady progress in the fall of 2019 on the Government Canyon Karst Project.  
→ More details on page 12.

Photos from left to right:
Entrance of Hog Hall Cave
Photo Credit: Marvin Miller
Photo of (From L to R) Michael Polendo, Mio Spyker, and Austin Gedminas
Checking the fit of Rolling Boulder Cave
Photo Credit: Marvin Miller
Photo of Richard Silver
Digging on a lead in Not My Name Cave
Photo Credit: Marvin Miller
Photo of Kathy Lin

Cover Photo by Liz Herren
Sandy beach disappears into the dark zone of Hang Tien Cave.

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Texas Speleological Association’s

2020 Virtual Convention

The Texas Speleological Association (TSA) hosted its first ever virtual convention on October 17, 2020. This event provided an opportunity to help the Texas caving community stay connected during the COVID-19 pandemic. Registration was free for all attendees. Special thanks to TSA Vice-Chair Kris Perea for taking on the role of lead organizer of this virtual gathering and to everyone else who helped make this event a success.

by Jessica Gordon

The Official Lineup:

Noon
Lunch and Social Time

An opportunity for caving friends from all over the state to catch up.

12:20 PM
"TSA’s First-ever Virtual Convention” by Jessica Gordon

TSA Chair Jessica Gordon welcomed cavers to the 2020 TSA Virtual Convention. She gave an overview of the Texas Speleological Association and how the organization supports cave exploration and cave studies, the protection of natural and cultural resources within caves, and cave education.

12:30 PM
"It’s the Little Things" by Carrey Bull

Accidents are rarely one large bad decision but can usually be traced to a number of smaller decisions/mistakes that added up. Carrey Bull walked the group through a recreational cave trip by looking at the little things we may normally overlook in an effort to make us all safer.

To watch a recording of the 2020 TSA Virtual Convention, see: www.cavetexas.org/convention-2020

1:00 PM
"Central Texas Cave Life” by Colin Strickland

Starting at the entrance and working his way deeper, Colin Strickland showed awesome photos and videos of the commonly encountered organisms found in Central Texas caves.

1:25 PM
Storytelling Contest hosted by Bill Steele

Fellow cavers told short stories about their caving experiences. Stories had a strict five-minute limit and were about something in caving that actually happened (non-fiction, true life). The winner, Allan Cobb, received the official lineup (continued on page 10):

- "Hideaway”
  Photo Credit: Liz Herren
  Popular Vote, Honorable Mention

- "Golden Eye”
  Photo Credit: Colin Strickland
  Popular Vote, Honorable Mention

- "Sensational Sensors” (cropped)
  Photo Credit: Colin Strickland
  Third Place
The official lineup (continued from page 6):

an autographed copy of the new caving book

Hidden Nature by Michael Ray Taylor.

1:55 PM “Modelling the Spread of White-nose Syndrome in Texan and Mexican Karst Regions” by Lilliana Wolf

Lilliana Wolf gave an overview of the state of white-nose syndrome in Texas and her efforts to model the regions of Texas and Mexico where we can expect the load of the fungus that causes the disease to be the greatest in the future.

2:25 PM “Does the NSS have a Diversity Committee?” by Bree Jameson

Cavers sat in discomfort together as we addressed the need for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work in society, Science Technology Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), and nature in general. Bree Jameson led an organic, respectfully uncensored, and interactive talk with a question-and-answer discussion. Attendees were challenged to lead with compassion and curiosity, to recognize the validity of experiences different than their own, and to go forth with a broadened perspective.

2:50 PM Caver Trivia hosted by Liz Herren

Participants tried to identify caves from Texas and around the world based on photos Liz Herren showed in a presentation. The winner, Justin Shaw, received a coveted TSA T-shirt and an elusive Texas bat sticker!

3:10 PM “Two River Caves of Texas” by Bill Steele

Bill Steele shared stories of exploring two river caves in Texas: Spring Creek Cave and Honey Creek Cave. Spring Creek Cave in Kendall County is 2.7 miles in length. For the past decade, the Dallas/Fort Worth (DFW) grotto has had a project involving the exploration and mapping of the tributaries of this cave. Honey Creek Cave in Comal County is 20.7 miles long and is Texas’ longest cave. The cave was steadily explored and mapped from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s. The Texas Cave Management Association (TCMA) has recently entered an agreement with the ranch owners allowing four exploration and mapping trips annually to address the 179 leads remaining on the lead list.

3:30 PM “Exciting developments at CaveSim during COVID-19” by Dave Jackson

Texas cavers who have seen CaveSim at the Texas Cavers’ Reunion (TCR) will be excited to know that CaveSim has been working on several new projects during the pandemic. They are building two new mobile caves, and both will be much more realistic, larger, and more complex than the existing CaveSim. Participating cavers received a sneak preview of the new caves and heard about the ride that several Texas cavers have played in the project. Dave Jackson also shared pictures, stories, and video from the incredible six weeks of CaveSim programs that were offered around Texas just before COVID-19, as well as the online programs that they are doing now. By bringing CaveSim to TCR, Texas cavers have enabled amazing programs for kids around the state. For more information or to help support CaveSim checkout: www.cavesim.com/support-the-new-cavesim/

3:45 PM Awards and Door Prizes

4:05 PM TSA Meeting

TSA members and non-members discussed current and upcoming TSA business.

Hopefully, the 2021 TSA Convention can be in person. But TSA will plan to offer another virtual convention if we are not able to get together in person solely.
TSA’s 2020 Virtual Convention
Awards & Door Prizes

Winner of the Storytelling Contest
announced by Bill Steele
Allan Cobb

Winner of the Caver Trivia Contest
announced by Liz Herren
Justin Shaw

Winners of the Map Salon
announced by Marvin Miller
First Time Entrant Blue Ribbon
“Adam Wilson’s Cave” by Ben Hutchins
First Time Entrant Honorable Mention
“Baby Swiss Cave” by Greg Williams
Caves Smaller than 100 Meters Long Blue Ribbon
“Twin Caves” by Ben Hutchins
Caves Smaller than 100 Meters Long Honorable Mention
“Stellas Cave and Whistler Cave” by Jim Kennedy
Caves Larger than 100 Meters Long Blue Ribbon
“Pipevine Cave” by Colin Strickland

Winners of the Photo Salon
announced by Bennett Lee
First Place
“Fascination” by Liz Herren
Second Place
“Inside Out” by Ben Dau
Third Place
“Sensational Sensors” by Colin Strickland
Popular Vote First Place
“Inside Out” by Ben Dau
Popular Vote Honorable Mentions
“Gradient” by Ben Dau &
“Hideaway” by Liz Herren &
“Golden Eye” by Colin Strickland

Photo on Opposite Page:
“Fascination”
Photo Credit: Liz Herren
First Place
The spring of 2019 was fairly wet, and the trails in Government Canyon State Natural Area (GCSNA) were closed for many of our karst project week-ends. We happily spent our time exploring and documenting the caves and shelters in the cliffs along San Geronimo Creek.

The extreme southwestern corner of GCSNA encloses a large bend of the creek within a tall curve of the cliff. In that cliff face, we have documented 15 caves, 22 shelters, two passages that may turn out to be caves if we can visit them when buzzards are not nesting, and one spring. One of those caves, Grand Geronimo Cavern, turns out to have the largest entrance of any cave in GCSNA – 12 meters wide by 6 meters tall. The passage quickly narrows down to a hands and knees crawl that is only slightly longer than the entrance is wide. Although the caves, like Grand Geronimo Cavern and Hog Hall Cave, are all short, they have interesting and varied morphologies with abundant fossils and tiny go-odles on display. So far, nine of these caves have been surveyed, and there is still more cliff face to search.

Later in the year, when we started back up in November, we focused more on digs and ridgewalking. Peter Anderson and Stephen Gutierrez were digging fools, joining digs either jointly or independently in Not My Name Cave, Loca Guerra Pit, Cliff Crack Cave, Lilyhammer Cave, and Dancing Fern Cave. The dig leads in Not My Name Cave were all pushed, with none of them leading easy to more passage or having enough promise to justify the large effort required to continue. A team also continued the dig in Loca Guerra Pit, and all concerned seemed to think it is worth continuing the effort. Peter led a team on a test dig looking for the hypothesized passage in Cliff Crack Cave without finding anything. The dig in Dancing Fern Cave needs at least a few more hours (or a really skinny caver) to see if it is going to go anywhere. Mark Ross, Joe Schaefer, Robert Smith, Adam Stevens, Mike Radcliffe, Lynn Lee, Kathy Lin, and Leta Hill also worked on surface and in-cave digs.

Ridgewalks were unproductive except for one that found a nice sink that has dig potential and a new cave. Rolling Boulder Cave had a half meter diameter boulder sitting neatly over a slightly smaller entrance in the middle of a classic bedrock solution sink. With the boulder rolled away, the pit entrance was down-climbable to the soft soil floor about six meters below. The cave ended after a short two meters of passage. Lynn Lee, Gerry Geletske, Peter Anderson, Salma Burney, Jim Funk, Liz Bready, and Richard Silver helped with ridgewalks.

Some goals for the coming year are to continue the survey and work on dig leads in Lilyhammer Cave (bad air turned back a survey trip in December), continue the rock-shaving lead following a strong breeze in Lost Potshole, and continue documenting the caves and shelters along San Geronimo Creek.

by Marvin Miller

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by Marvin Miller
In March of 2019, Michael Polendo was forging his way up a steep, brush-covered scree slope toward a large overhang with dark recesses when he became aware that something was coming downslope through the brush much faster than he was going up. In a few seconds, a feral hog barreled past him. Michael and his team continued cautiously up the slope and discovered Hog Hall Cave. The cave consists of the large overhanging entrance and a short section of hands-and-knees crawl with nicely polished rock – probably due to the touch of many pig bellies over the years. “nicely polished rock – probably due to the touch of many pig bellies”
O-9 Well: An Update

by Ben Hutchins

Texas may be the center of the caving universe, but it is not exactly a major caving destination. A staging point for trips to Mexico, absolutely! A vibrant caving community worth visiting, totally! And while we have tons of caves to keep us busy, there are relatively few classics: Texas caving trips that might make the bucket list for traveling cavers. Honey Creek, Devil’s Sinkhole, Caverns of Sonora, Punkin, and Deep all come to mind, and of course O-9 Well. What’s not to like about multi-pitch wetsuit caving! Crystal-clear water, deep potholes, rappelling flowstone waterfalls … and right in the middle of the most improbable non-karst looking pasture that you can imagine. It is no surprise that it has been a favorite for Texas-based and out of town cavers for decades.

As part of the vast University of Texas (UT) Lands System, and as the site of a fatal accident in 2000, access for cavers has been up and down over the years. Through an agreement with the Texas Cave Management Association (TCMA) that was updated in 2016, TCMA members get approval to access O-9 Well for research and management purposes. Because of that cooperation, a lot has happened in O-9 Well over the last several years, and cavers may be interested in this update on Texas’ iconic multi-drop cave.

THE ENTRANCE

Cavers who have been away for several years will notice changes at O-9 Well before even getting on rope. The old gate had been steadily falling into disrepair. Cracked concrete had made it possible to pull out the entire metal frame and access the cave, even when the gate was locked. In June of 2019, a group of cavers led by Bryce Smith, Lydia Hernandez, and Jim Kennedy set to repair the defunct cave gate, pour new concrete, and weld a new expanded metal gate. The new gate is more attractive, and even better, fully functional.

Once through the gate, cavers previously came face-to-face with the old windmill drop pipe installed through the entirety of the entrance pitch: a minor navigational nuisance. The pipe terminated in the stream at the base of the entrance drop in an unattractive aggregation of rusty metal and pump mechanics that would periodically freeze up and require cavers to come out and make emergency repairs. That earned cavers a lot of goodwill with the property rancher John Nanny, but the pipe equipment did nothing for the cave or the aesthetics of the entrance rappel. Thanks to several trips led by Bailey Olson, DJ Walker, Tom Rogers, and Jeff Harrison in late 2018 and 2019, all of the metal at the base of the drop has been dismantled and removed from the cave (along with a nice cleanup of the pasture around the cave entrance). Even better, that removal allowed John to get a crew out to remove the drop pipe so the entrance is now free of windmill clutter.

A NEW PUMP

With the aging pump becoming increasingly difficult to repair, John Nanny decided in late 2017 that it was time to install a modern solar pump upstream of the entrance where a tall dome would facilitate drilling a new bore into a deeper pool where the pump would be less likely to go dry. Based on an incorrect or misremembered cave radio location, he drilled a bore but never hit cave or water. The drill may not have been completely level because they nearly missed the canyon passage, just hitting a shallow edge of the target pool. A month later, Jamie Moon returned with a team that excavated around the bore to deepen the pool and ensure sustained connectivity with the stream if water levels fluctuated.

SURVEY AND SAFETY

In 2010, resurvey of O-9 Well was initiated to produce a cave map up to modern standards. Although a map for the whole cave is still in the works, the downstream section has been drafted and even won a National Speleological Society (NSS) convention Cartography Award. An adequate map is one of the most fundamental components for cave safety. From time to time, portions of O-9 Well had been left rigged. A new procedure has been implemented to keep the cave unrigged in the hopes that it will deter vandalism and prevent cavers from getting stuck and needing to use damaged rope.

Photos from left to right:
- Putting some final touches on the new trapdoor gate at O-9 Well
- Photo Credit: Jim Kennedy
- The pipe that used to run down the entrance to O-9 Well
- Photo Credit: Jamie Moon

Other caves to successfully determine a new location for John to drill later. Two weeks later, John’s drilling crew hit water at 120 feet after losing circulation twice while pushing downstream. The drill may not have been completely level because they nearly missed the canyon passage, just hitting a shallow edge of the target pool. A month later, Jamie Moon returned with a team that excavated around the bore to deepen the pool and ensure sustained connectivity with the stream if water levels fluctuated.
“Crystal clear water, deep potholes, rappelling flowstone waterfalls ... and right in the middle of the most improbable non-karst looking pasture ... “

... the lease for the pasture will be transferred to a yet undetermined new rancher.

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The Longest Cave in Texas is Soon to Get Longer

by Bill Steele, NSS 8072 FE LB CM AL

At 21 miles in length, Honey Creek Cave in Comal County is the longest cave in Texas. The Texas Cave Management Association (TCMA) recently entered an agreement with the owner of the ranch where the cave is located to allow four trips per year to Honey Creek Cave. The first trip was held on February 1, 2020. Two teams entered leads up the QA side passage, the first side passage inside the natural entrance, to acquaint themselves with the nature of the cave and to look at some of the leads. A lead list has been maintained through the years, and 479 leads are listed. Of those, over 30% of them require climbs, including some dome climbs to possible upper levels.
The trip requires swimming through a four-foot-long low airspace named Whistler’s Mother.

Also on the trip was the group that won the bidding at the 2019 TSA Spring Convention for a trip with me to Gass Hall, the largest room in Honey Creek Cave. Gass Hall is located above breakdown about 1,000 feet into the cave. To get to Gass Hall, we swam in deep water wearing wetsuits and fins. The trip requires swimming through a four-foot-long low airspace named Whistler’s Mother. On the way back toward the entrance from Gass Hall, these cavers took a jaunt up the QA passage to see some of the best formations in the cave.

As someone who has enjoyed writing about caving, I commonly encourage new cavers to do the same. Very few do. In fact, almost none do. My grotto, the Dallas-Fort Worth Grotto, had some members come to Honey Creek Cave for this first trip of the new era of exploration, mapping, and enjoying one of our finest caves. A highly enthusiastic new caver, Jenna Hay, came along and said she was interested in writing about her experience. And she did! Read the next article to find out about her first trip to Honey Creek Cave.
Honey Creek Trip

by Jenna Hay

“This trip is for the experienced cavers.”

That’s what the club members of the Dallas/Fort Worth Grotto said about their upcoming trip to Honey Creek Cave. As a new and overly eager caver, this made me really want to go. After somehow convincing Bill Steele, a man renowned for his caving experience and storytelling prowess, that I was to be trusted underground around sharp rock formations, I found myself driving six hours to the ranch where the cave is located and pitching my car tent on a Friday night.

As folks arrived at our campsite, we sat around the fire and chatted casually about the day ahead. I was impressed to learn how much the caving community relies on forming connections and building relationships. Many extraordinary caves are on private lands or are protected from folks exploring them, which means getting permission to survey a cave primarily takes knowing the right people and building trust. The caving community, although it’s spread around the world, still seems small because a lot of seasoned cavers seem to know each other, or at least of each other.

The next morning was frigid, and I had to mentally prepare myself to undress in order to redress with all of the gear. The gear for this trip seemed to be a mix of cycling gear (helmet, gloves), scuba diving gear (wetsuit, fins, goggles), and volleyball gear (knee pads). However, with all of that gear, I doubt we could have played any of those sports well. Once most people had woken up, we gathered around the fire again for coffee, breakfast, and some pan (bread that a caver had brought back from his trip to Mexico). The caving community is diverse. Around our campfire sat young folks, old folks, students in college, parents with children, men, women, black folks, white folks, and Hispanic folks. None of those details mattered or affected the strong sense of community. I think that when you gather with purpose in mind, everything else takes a back seat.

One of my favorite moments of this trip was witnessing 20 people don their scuba fins and awkwardly waddle into the water. I went straight for the salamander crawling method and just endured the wave of cold water as I crawled on the wet floor. The water in the cave quickly became deeper. As we paddled around the corner and turned on our headlamps, I got my first glance into Honey Creek Cave.

As a new caver, I wasn’t sure what to expect, but Honey Creek did not disappoint. There was crystal-clear water, intricate stalactite formations, and gorgeous flowstone. It was unlike anything I’ve experienced before. The fact that I was swimming in the dark in a cave made my adrenaline pump. It was one of those moments where I had to laugh and think, “Who knew there’d be a day I wore full-body neoprene and volunteered myself to squeeze through rocks?”

A few of the cavers helped me and a few others duck under Whistler’s Mother, which is a low dip of the ceiling coming within three inches of the 20-foot-deep water. To go past it you had to submerge yourself and swim under it or float through it horizontally while keeping your nose above water. I’ll be honest. I was nervous. I had tried holding my breath during famous underwater movie scenes and I always “died” before the scene ended, so I wasn’t confident in my breath-holding abilities. Thankfully a quick shove and pull from my fellow cavers made it an easy experience.

We eventually reached a waterfall in the cave’s main passageway, which Bill instructed us to climb over and then continue climbing up in or
der to find Gass Hall, a giant room in the cave that he himself named. This was the first time during the trip that I was afraid. The vertical climb up to Gass Hall was steep, muddy, and narrow. One caver accidentally went up a different, much narrower chute and had to come back through to try again. Somehow, I was first in line to climb up the muddy, rocky shaft to Gass Hall, and despite the anxiety that naturally came with climbing in scuba boots, I couldn’t help how awestruck I was by the sheer size of the space.

Gass Hall is massive compared to the rest of Honey Creek. The ceiling is at least 30 to 40 feet tall and tree roots have found their way through the ground to hang suspended in the cave air. The approach it took to reach this gem of a room is truly impressive. For lack of better words, I was humbled by this experience. I realized how little I really know about the world beneath me.

In summary, my Honey Creek Cave experiences were phenomenal, from paddling through the main passage to identifying fossils in the cave’s winding walls in side passages. The only thing more fun than the cave itself was the people I got to explore it with.

Photos from left to right:
Caver vehicles ranged from 4WD trucks to this claustrophobia test
Photo Credit: Bill Steele
Photo of car pool vehicle from Dallas / Fort Worth
We camped by the shaft entrance, but most of us used the spring (natural) entrance on the other side of the big ranch
Photo Credit: Bill Steele

In April 2018, I flew to Hanoi to meet up with my friends and Texas cavers, Kris Peña and Will Quast. They had already been in Asia for a month, the beginning of a year-long trek. They met me at the airport. Kris held a sign that said “Cave Nerd.” That tickled me pink as I had always wanted someone to greet me with a sign at the airport. We took a sleeper bus to Hanoi and then a day bus to the city of Phong Nha. Phong Nha was a sleepy village 20 years ago. The villagers sustained their living by hunting. They would carry huge tree trunks on their backs, walking from a valley up a mountain and back down the mountain to deliver trees to the valley on the other side. The Vietnamese tenacity and strength are still seen in the locals today. Now Phong Nha is an eco-tourism town. They call themselves the Hollywood of Vietnam. The name Phong Nha is attached to the mountainside in huge white letters, bright as the sun at night.

We came for the caving of course. The majestic karst in Phong Nha is around 400 million years old, the oldest in Asia. Phong Nha Ke Bang National Park is a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site, created to protect the around 300 caves in the area. Son Doong, the largest known cave passage by volume in the world, is located in the park.

In 1991 a local farmer named Ho Khanh discovered Son Doong Cave. Today he runs a homestay with his nephew Nick.

Halfway across the world, in a valley deep in the Vietnamese jungle, is a cave entrance. In the monsoon months, the valley had to be evacuated due to torrential flooding. If you stood on the valley floor during that flood, you would have water surging right above your head. That is where Hang Tien Cave lies.

Texas Cavers in Vietnam
by Liz Herren

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In April 2018, I flew to Hanoi to meet up with my friends and Texas cavers, Kris Peña and Will Quast. They had already been in Asia for a month, the beginning of a year-long trek. They met me at the airport. Kris held a sign that said “Cave Nerd.” That tickled me pink as I had always wanted someone to greet me with a sign at the airport. We took a sleeper bus to Hanoi and then a day bus to the city of Phong Nha. Phong Nha was a sleepy village 20 years ago. The villagers sustained their living by hunting. They would carry huge tree trunks on their backs, walking from a valley up a mountain and back down the mountain to deliver trees to the valley on the other side. The Vietnamese tenacity and strength are still seen in the locals today. Now Phong Nha is an eco-tourism town. They call themselves the Hollywood of Vietnam. The name Phong Nha is attached to the mountainside in huge white letters, bright as the sun at night.

We came for the caving of course. The majestic karst in Phong Nha is around 400 million years old, the oldest in Asia. Phong Nha Ke Bang National Park is a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site, created to protect the around 300 caves in the area. Son Doong, the largest known cave passage by volume in the world, is located in the park.

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We stayed there with fantastic views of the karst and Son River. Every morning, the locals would harvest seaweed from the river, and early every morning, the locals would harvest seaweed from the river and by midmorning, the dragon boats would tote tourists to Phong Nha and Tien Son Caves. It was so relaxing just to watch the boats float by and the clouds play amongst the towering pinnacles as we ate our breakfast of eggs and noodles by the riverfront.

We took the dragon boat to Phong Nha and Tien Son Caves. The woman who rowed the boat was a tiny woman with the strength of a giant. Halfway down the river, the engine died. She hung precariously upside down over the side of the boat to fix the engine. Successful, we continued until we came upon an unassuming cave entrance. We thought the boat would dock, but we kept on rowing into the cave. Once inside Phong Nha Cave, we floated silently in awe of the massive cavern. The only noise was the swish of the oars and the click of cameras. Halfway through the cave, we started to hear the echoes of singing. The singing grew louder and louder. We heard haunting melodies of a traditional song coming from a boat of a local woman. It was one of the most incredible experiences we have ever had. We traversed the end of the cave by foot through 30 meters (or more) of tall passage. Once out of Phong Nha Cave, we walked up 200 stairs to Tien Son Cave. Located 100 meters up the mountain, Tien Son is a much older, kilometer-long dry cave. Just below the cave, there is a temple dedicated to Cave God Tien Su. The local people revere the caves and have festivals every year to celebrate the water.

That afternoon we pedaled around town on the bikes provided by the homestay. We were pedaling down the street when we heard two little girls shouting “Stop! Stop!” I thought something was wrong as the girls ran toward my bike. They jumped on the back and started shouting “Go! Go!” through their giggles. I had fallen for a tourist trap! They just wanted a ride to their house. I couldn’t stop laughing. Later some boys tried to do the same thing, but by then I was seasoned and knew better!

The next day, we rented a motorbike and rode to the countryside to visit more caves. We walked across the street to a home where they filled the bikes with petrol out of two-liter plastic bottles. They kept telling us we only needed two liters, but in hindsight, we should have gotten three as we almost ran out of gas.

We rode out to the country to visit Dark and Paradise Caves, dodging random cows lying in the road. Dark Cave was fun but kind of hokey. We ziplined to the cave and then we kayaked back. Some poor girl stopped about five meters from the zip line platform, and they had to go rescue her. They asked us to go another kilometer in the cave. To us it was a horrifying idea, but once in the cave, it was apparent that we were walking through smooth mud and it was not an issue at all. After Dark Cave, we traveled to Paradise Cave (Thien Duong Cave). We entered into a giant cavern with around 100 stairs meandering down into a room. It was pretty amazing. All we could see was the entrance room. Then the trail curved to the right and became so stunning that it stopped us in our tracks. Paradise Cave is now on our “Top 10 Favorite Caves in the World” list. The formations are unique, the passage is massive, and the lighting is spectacular. I cannot stress how much you need to see this cave if you ever make it to Vietnam. On the drive back from Paradise, Will spotted a void in the rock on the side of the road. We pulled off and climbed down into the cave. It was a large cavern with a river flowing through it. The insane amount of water it would have taken to carve out the massive caverns in this area is mind-boggling.

After playing average tourists for a few days, we joined an Oxalis tour. Oxalis is the local adventure-ecotourism company that explores the biggest caves in the park. The employees are mostly from Phong Nha village, and the company gives back to the local community. Hang Tien was our cave of choice. Actually, Son Doong was our cave of choice, but the en-
Congrats!

to the winners of the 2020 Texas Cave Rescue Scholarship (TCRS), honoring the memory of William H. Russell.

The 2020 Recipients Were:

- Amanda Comer
- Amy Morton
- Clayton Rowden
- Kraig Fenton
- Sean Lewis

grateful thanks to 2020 TCRS supporters, and many others, for supporting safe caving and cave rescuers!

Inner Mountain Outfitters,
Estate of Jack Wilson, Bev and Jonathan, Dale and Denise, Joe Ranazi, Jennifer and Ken, Meg and Carrey, Jean, Kristina, and Jay, Matt Schram, Texas Speleological Association, Texas Cavers Reunion, Bill Steele

Both caves are part of the Tu Lan system, which has 10 caves in all. I always thought my Zebra light was a powerful light. It was like a match in the colossal darkness and 90-meter tall passages. The cave contains football fields full of rimstone dams and cave pearls. We ate snacks at the edge of a gaping pit and then returned to camp.

The bad thing about hiking downhill two kilometers to the valley is that you have to hike two kilometers uphill to return to the vans. It was completely worth it. They met us with a cold beer at the top. Now that is customer service! As we drove away back to Phong Nha, we were sad to leave the jungle behind, but we all knew the jungle would never leave us.

Fishermen harvest seaweed on the Son River in the early morning.

Photo Credit: Liz Herren
Remembering Departed Cavers

by William R. Elliott

I recently completed most of the tributes that I can do for now. In January and February of 2020, I posted 56 more pdfs, for a total of 126 pdfs (127 cavers). We still have about 32 “lost cavers,” meaning we don’t have much information on them yet. See them listed on the website. Thanks to the 90 folks who wrote tributes and provided photos over many years—their names are listed on the web page. Carl Kunath is recognized for writing many caver obituaries and tributes accompanied by his great photos. In 2010 Ron Miller authored a web page, “In Memory of Texas Cavers,” from which I borrowed information. Susan Hardcastle Beaty, Dale Pate, and Frances Fehrlebach assisted me with difficult research into obituaries, news articles, and death certificates. Susan has agreed to be my coeditor in this project! Maybe we will get more coeditors and contributors.

We have continued to post obituaries and find lost cavers, but I want to gradually turn over “The Hall” to someone else. I will continue to host the page within my cavelife.info website for a while to keep it going. There is an ongoing need to maintain these tributes for sentimental reasons, history, and safety training.

There have been 14 cave-related deaths in Texas (8) and Mexico (6) since 1960. Two other cave drownings occurred in Florida involving cave divers who had caved in Texas or Mexico. I have not included cave-related deaths from the general public in Mexico.

There was a wave of five caving deaths from 1971–1975 and another wave of five from 1990–1994. For ten years, on average there was a cave-related death about every 4 years, but thankfully none since 2007.

Here is the tally:
8 Texas, 2 drowned, 6 pit-related
6 Mexico, 4 drowned, 2 pit-related
2 Florida, 2 drowned
16 total

The web page provides some insights into caving safety. Overall, 50% of the cave-related deaths in The Hall were caused by drowning; 75% of the cave-related deaths in Texas are ascribed to untrained or poorly trained cavers in pit accidents, but even advanced cavers died a couple of times. The last death in Texas by an expert caver was Joe Ivy’s tragic climbing accident in O-9 Well in 2000. In Mexico 67% of the cave-related deaths were from cave diving. Christy Quintana died in 1999 in Mexico, in a vertical-caving accident involving a falling rock, and Chris Yeager died in 1991 when his rappel rack detached from his seat sling.

“The web page provides some insights into caving safety.”

We have on record two accidents in Texas and Mexico where vertical cavers were hit on the head by a falling rock so massive that a helmet would not have helped. Another caver tied his rope to an old iron stake, which broke off. It is important to clean the edge of a pit before entering and be sure your anchors are good. It is better to tie off to a vehicle than to an old anchor, a small rock, or a single bush. Remember to park your vehicle perpendicular to the rope, set the brake, and chock the tires. Pad the rope at any sharp edges. Training, forethought, and redundancy are hallmarks of safe caving.

I would like to remember here some of the very interesting cavers in The Hall who are not known to most current cavers. We also found information about a few lost cavers, and it’s good to know what happened to them. We have had many talented, amazing people in our ranks, so please visit the web page to read about them.

Deaths & Other Remarkable Cavers

→ Next Page
DEATHS 2019–2021

Walter D. Feaster, 17 December 1950 – 3 February 2021, 70, Midland, nSS #31624. He was a tireless cave surveyor and conservationist. [Pictured on Page 38]

Dr. Solveig A. Turpin, 31 August 1916 – 17 July 2020, 83, San Antonio. Great cave archaeologist. See her 1991 Texas NSS Convention article: Lower Presque Prehistory: The View from the Caves.[Pictured on page 38]

Wayne Burks, 22 September 1943 – 7 July 2020, 76, nSS 11992, River Oaks (Ft. Worth), Texas, DFW Grotto.


Mike Hennessy, 15 March 1955 – 6 January 2020, 64. SWT caver in the 1970s with John Chelf.

Carmi Blum, 1944 – 4 January 2020, 76, UT Grotto.

Kerry Rowland, 1957 – December 2019, 62. Missouri caver who also explored Texas and Mexico caves.

Bennie Pearson, 28 August 1929 – 27 October 2019, 90, nSS 1847, from the old UT Grotto.

Dr. John Fish, Fall 1942 – 24 October 2019, 77. John was a famous caver from 1963–1977. He disappeared from caving for years, but he popped up again at NSS Conventions. His contributions to caving and karst hydrogeology were legendary. [Pictured on opposite page]

Lee White, 17 April 1988 – 15 September 2019, 31. A talented technical climber, he was highlighted in the October 2019 issue of The Texas Caver for a challenging dome climb in Natural Bridge Caverns. Lee died in an automobile accident in North Carolina. [Pictured on Page 38]


Margaret Hart–Keys, 3 May 1955 – 23 August 1997, nSS 9411. Skilled caver and later a hydrogeologist for the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission. See the revised obituary with a very nice photo of Margaret by Peter Keys. [Pictured on Page 33]

Jim Quinlan, 1937 – July 1995, 58, nSS 3021. A PhD grad in geology from the University of Texas, Jim did important karst hydrogeology studies around Mammoth Cave, Kentucky, and in many countries. He was famous for his Christmas cards about various geological subjects, and some of them were even cited in journals.

OTHER REMARKABLE CAVERS, PART ONE


A. Richard “Dick” Smith, 22 September 1929 – 3 July 2019, 91. A great Texas caver and geologist who was the leader of the Texas Speleological Survey (TSS) for years. Recipient of the first TSS Outstanding Service Award in 1997. He held the record for the number of Texas cave maps drafted and reports written. He was murdered in his front yard by an unknown assailant. We received news that A. Richard’s older son, Geren, passed away in Phoenix recently, but we have no details yet. [Pictured on Page 38]

Photos from top, left to right:

Richard O. Albert, 1969
Photo Credit: Robert W. Mitchell

John Fish, 1965
Photo Credit: Orion Knox

Photo Credit: William R. Elliott

Photos from bottom, left to right:

A. Richard “Dick” Smith, 1967
Photo Credit: Carl Kunath

Sandy Deal with her children, Tara and Craig, 1979
Photo Credit: Dwight Deal
Texas cavers are pleased to announce that this November through 5th, 2021 the 23rd biennial meeting of the National Cave and Karst Management Symposium (NCKMS) will be held in San Marcos, Texas. We think attending the conference is a perfect way to celebrate 2021 as the International Year of Caves and Karst. Read on for more information and visit our website, symposium2021.nckms.org, for the latest information.

2021 National Cave and Karst Management Symposium
by Carolyn Fusinato

Who is the National Cave and Karst Management Symposium for?
We think that it is for everybody. However, if you love caves, are a cave owner or a cave conservationist, are a teacher who wants to learn more about caves for the purpose of teaching about them, or are a researcher who conducts research on caves and their ecosystems, you are especially invited to attend.

What does attending the symposium offer?
This year’s symposium planners are excited to have Austin Water – Barton Creek Springs Preserve as our host! Some other goodies the organizing committee has lined up for participants include a Monday Social and glass-bottom boat tour of Spring Lake, where karst waters well up from San Marcos Springs to form the head of the San Marcos River and a tour of nearby Natural Bridge Caverns, site of the Tuesday Howdy Party. There will be field trips all day Wednesday focusing on the hydrology, biology, and land use conflicts of central Texas karst. Some field trip options even include short visits inside non-commercial caves, so please bring your properly disinfected cave gear. The committee is also putting together some free pre- and post-conference trips to bigger and better caves a little further from San Marcos, including some with vertical and wet suits options. Last but not least, Dale Pete, NPS National Cave and Karst Program Coordinator from 2007 to 2017 and Cave Specialist for Cedarbell Caves National Park from 1993 to 2002, will be the featured banquet speaker on Thursday night.

May I contribute to the symposium?
The symposium planners are now accepting papers for the 2021 National Cave and Karst Management Symposium. The theme for this symposium is “Endangered Species, Endangered Caves, Endangered Aquifers”, however authors are encouraged to submit papers on all topics related to the management of caves and karst resources. The abstract submission deadline is September 15, 2021 and the full paper submission deadline is November 1, 2021.

Can I register now?
Online pre-registration is available now through October 25, 2021 and may be purchased for $220. During the event registration will increase to $250 and will be available for purchase at the door. Many sessions, field trips, and workshops are also open to the general public through day pass options which range from $30 to $75. Day pass options may also be purchased prior to the event online or at the door during the week of the event.

Will Covid-19 restrictions mean that the symposium cannot be held live?
We hope that the COVID-19 pandemic has run its course by next fall, and the symposium-organizing committee is planning for this conference to be in person following national health guidelines as they are set requirements of the fall for your personal gatherings. If necessary, preparations will include indoor protocols that have become the new normal during the pandemic such as signage to request attending wear masks, floor markings for standing distance for lines, floor markings for preferred in building foot traffic flow, and safe distance seating so that we can gather as safely as possible. All attending the conference is at your own risk and those who attend will be asked to sign a formal statement releasing the symposium from liability in the event that they become sick or injured. The organizing committee is also preparing to offer a virtual conference if gathering in person is not possible, much like the 2020 Virtual Convention. The committee will make the decision of whether to hold the symposium live or virtual sometime later in 2021.

Where to stay during the symposium?
Yes, spouses and families are also welcome. If they do not wish to attend the symposium, there are plenty of local attractions in the area that are listed on the symposium website such as exploring San Marcos street murals and local history, spending time at the Meadows Center or Wonder World Cave & Park, shopping the San Marcos Premium Outlets Mall, kayaking, tubing, exploring local parks and trails, and more. Remember that Day Pass options are also available so that anyone who wants to can participate in field trips, socials or banquets as long as they register for the individual events.

We hope you will share this information with your local grots and hope to see you in the Texas Hill Country this November!
Federico Bonet (pronounced “boh--net”), 18 October 1906 – 10 June 1980, 73. A famous Spanish/Mexican cave scientist, he published important papers on the cave geology and biology in the Sierra de El Abra, Xilitla area, and Cacahuamilpa. He was influential to early Texas cavers working in Mexico. See obituary by James Reddell.

CAVING FAMILIES

You can read above about the Deal family, Sandy, Dwight, Craig, and Tara Deal from Alpine. The Goodbars also were famous. First on the scene at the corehole near Georgetown, Texas, Blair was the first caver to be lowered down the highway department’s 24 inch core hole into Lahunach Cave (later Inner Space Cavern). If you saw Blair, you immediately looked for Katherine, Jim, Nancy, and Ellen. Jim discovered a rusty tin can on the side of Bone Sink 1 that may have filtered down from the old Georgetown dumpsite. Jim served as the Bureau of Land Management’s Senior Cave and Karst Specialist in Carlsbad, New Mexico, for many years. He was given the NSS Honorary Member Award in 2003, and the Karst Water Institute’s KWI Karst Award in 2012.

Luther and Ollene Bundrant were in the Alamo Grotto in the early days, in San Antonio. Luther was the TSA rescue coordinator in 1970–1971, and Ollene was the TSA Secretary/Treasurer in 1966–1968 and 1972. Luther, Ollene, and son Mike assisted cavers at Mexican customs on their way to Gruta de Palmito, Bustamante, after the 1964 NSS Convention in New Braunfels. Luther passed away in 1993 and Ollene in 2014.

LOST CAVERS

We need basic information on cavers who passed away. We really would like to have a person’s full legal name, birth date, date and place of death. Chip Carney was a geologist who may have died during field work in Alaska in the 1970s or 80s. Chip was a former UT Grotto member from Houston who worked in the Sierra de El Abra in Sótano de Montecillos (Pichijumbo) in the 1960s with Don Erickson. See many other lost cavers on the web page. Obituaries are being posted as often as we can get the basic information.

Remembering Departed Cavers. Other Remarkable Cavers, Part Two (to be continued ... in the next issue of The Texas Caver)