

THE MAVERICK BULL

The Monthly Newsletter Of The Ft. Worth Maverick Grotto

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The Maverick Bull is the monthly newsletter of the Maverick Grotto, an internal organization of the National Speleological Society (NSS G-322). The editor invites all individuals and other grottos to submit articles, news, maps, cartoons, art, photographs, and other two- and three-dimensional goodies. If the material is to be returned, a self-addressed stamped envelope should accompany it.

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Exchanges: The Maverick Grotto will exchange newsletters with other grottos. Contact the editor.

Complementary Newsletters: The Maverick Grotto will provide complementary newsletters to persons or organizations that provide cave access (i.e. landowners)

or otherwise provide assistance to cavers. The Maverick Grotto will provide one free issue to persons interested in becoming members.

Subscription Rates: Subscription rates are \$15 per year for nonmembers and free for members.

Membership Policy: Any individual with interests, beliefs, and actions consistent with the purposes of the Maverick Grotto and the National Speleological Society is eligible for membership. Acceptance of new members is based on payment of dues and a mandatory three-trip requirement with at least three different grotto members. These three members shall act as sponsors. At least one sponsor must attend the meeting at which the membership vote is taken. A two-thirds majority vote of the members present will be required for acceptance.

Meetings: Meetings are held the second Tuesday of each month at Smokey's Ribs, 5300 E. Lancaster, Fort Worth. It is located less than one mile west of Loop 820 and next to K-Mart. The time is 7 p.m., and the food is good.

Carbide: Grotto carbide is available at the meeting if prior arrangements are

made. Carbide is free for the asking. Contact Russell Hill at (817) 220-7108 or Butch Fralia at (817) 346-2039 for more information.

Library: Support your grotto library. Russell Hill will be accepting books and magazines related to caves and caving, copies of homemade cave videos, etc., for our library. Thanks to Russell for his efforts each month to bring and set up the grotto library.

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This month's cover photo, titled *Fee Bottle Poster Boy*, is of R. D. Milhollin in Neel's Cave, by Ed Goff.
Page 4: APME cavers, San Luis Potosí, by R. D. Milhollin
Page 7: Bivouac site in Murmullos, by Ed Goff

Page 8: Profile map of Murmullos, adapted from the APME journal *Teavai*, with permission from APME.

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Christmas Party Awards

If awards are a measure of how good a year it was, then it must have been a great year for the Maverick and DFW grottos as evidenced by the awards given at the 1998 Annual Christmas Party:

I'll Abandon My Pee Anywhere Award

Barbe Barker

Best Party Boy Calvin Cagle

Bravest Soldier Award Gracie Cagle

Real Men Have Power Tools Award

Dave Cave

Resurveyed for the 100th Time Award

Dave Cave

Stuck in the Mud at TCR Award Butch Fralia

Best Caver Hand-Me-Down Award Ed Goff

I Got Your Emu Right Here Award Russell Hill

I Haven't Been Underground in Four Years Award

Terry Holsinger

Shoulda-Boughta-Cave and Not Built a House

Award Jay and Sheila

Let's All Tell the Same Lie Award

Don Metzner

It's a Three Day Weekend So Lets Go to Mexico

Award Dave Milhollin

Found Walking in the Fog Award

Bobby Moore

Pete Suckered Me Into Fitton Again Award

Mike Pearson

Ed Goff Memorial Award for Best Injury While Performing a Non-Cave-Related Activity

Karen Perry

Ex-Mobil Employee of the Year Award

Troy Shelton

Microsoft Windows Year 2000 Award

Woodrow Thomas

Congratulations (or condolences) to all.

Meeting

As usual, there was no December meeting. The January meeting will be held on Tuesday, January 12, at Smokey's Ribs, 5300 Lancaster, at 7 p.m. The program will be videos by Don Abercrombie of Neel's Cave and other Texas caves.

Announcements

Dues are due. Book reports are due.

Ed-itor's Blitherings

Hey, a new nickname: The Ed-itor. I was getting kind of tired of 'Ed Injury, anyhow, and besides, I made it through a whole year without major injuries of any kind . . . that I can remember. In fact, for me 1998 was one of the best years yet, at least for caving. From TAG to the Yucatan, I got to visit some places where the locals have a lot more to choose from underground than we do here in pitiful I mean beautiful North Texas. In addition to being a lot of fun, it brought home to me what a peculiar and amazing thing it is that we have such an active (socially, anyway) caving community here in a locality almost completely devoid of caves. (Well, except for this really great secret cave I know of that's really really close by, but I can't tell you about that.) Which brings me to the begging and pleading. I know all you great active North Texas cavers have gotten used to having one of the best grotto newsletters in the country. I'm sitting here getting humbler and more worried by the minute thinking about what a fine job Chad Fenner has done with this newsletter for such a long time. Month after month he's crafted a consistently great product out of whatever he had to work with, even when he didn't have much to work with. I'm not sure I can do the same. I need your assistance. (Thanks Karen and R. D. this month for your

articles that I didn't even have to ask for. You hardly left me any room for mine!) There are only eleven months left in which to do the best caving of the century. So go caving! Take some pictures. Bash out a trip report. Doodle a cartoon. Pen a cave ballad. Write me letters. Draft a map. Blow something up. Restore something. Test some caving gear. Review a book. Sit on a color copier. Do whatever you can, but please, HELP ME!

Ed

Winter Wonderland

By Karen Perry

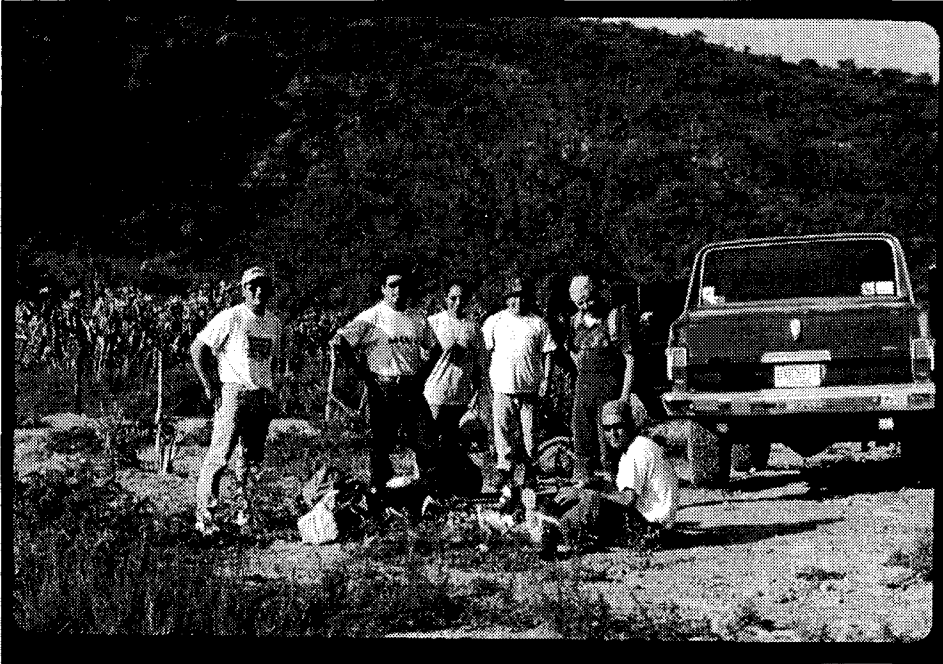
Cavers: Walter Feaster, Gralin Coffin, Mike Gray, Dwaine Moore, Kerry Lowery of Permian Basin Grotto, James ? of Pflugerville, Karen Perry

I left early afternoon on Thursday, December 10, as the weather report said things were supposed to get bad that evening. The drive to Fort Stockton was pleasant even with the rain. Arriving about 10 p.m. I found a nice, clean motel room for only \$17.95 a night. Waking up Friday morning made me glad I had come on down as there was this white stuff all over everything! I think it's called SNOW. And more was falling!

Around 10 I got brave and left the room to see this unique occurrence. At the Anne Riggs Museum I found out it would only take an hour and a half to drive to Fort Davis, so off I went. I-10 got a little scary in places, but all in all wasn't too bad. At Balmorra things did get bad. The snow was still falling and the road was two grooves of black in a blanket of white.

The Davis mountains were beautiful! Words fall short in describing the glory Mother Nature supplied. I walked around the Fort all afternoon taking pictures, visiting with the

Continued on page 9



Exploratory Trip to SLP

By R. D. Milkollin

The following is based on a journal kept during a "fact-finding" trip made to visit the cavers and caves of San Luis Potosí, Mexico, beginning November 6, 1998. The trip was made following contacts made with the help of Andres LaBarthe, a Mexican cave diver I had met and dove with on Cozumel the previous year. My host was Dr. Sergio Sanchez-Armass, a member of the medical faculty at the Universidad Autonoma de San Luis Potosí, and a member of the Asociacion Potosino de Montanismo y Espeleologica. My purpose was to get to know some of the cavers in the association, and to draw firm plans for a more involved trip planned for the Thanksgiving long weekend (see related article this issue).

The trip began uneventfully with a plane ride from DFW to Guadalajara, the city recommended by Sergio as having the best schedules of bus departures for the late arrival time the schedule necessitated. All was well until the duffel bag with all the caving

gear failed to arrive with me. The agent insisted that it would be sent directly to SLP that evening, just to go on with the trip and check at SLP airport the next day to pick up the gear. I left the vital contact info, cleared customs with my carry-on bag, and grabbed a taxi for the bus terminal at the edge of the city. The express bus was supposed to take 4.5 hours and arrive at 10 p.m., but at 9:30 we came to a complete stop in a mountain pass. The driver turned the engine off, and I got out and saw cars lined up bumper to bumper as far as I could see, winding up and down the twisting two-lane mountain road, not moving. Fog was moving in, and no one seemed to know what the problem was, although speculations flew like frisbees at a Beach Boy's concert: Rockslide, construction work, and armed insurrection were among the hypotheses offered.

No one seemed too bothered, so I relaxed and sat down on a boulder lining the road until traffic began to slowly move after about 45 minutes. Arrival into SLP was of course de-

layed, and Sergio had left the bus terminal before I arrived, checking at home to see if there had been any messages. I called his residence and spoke with his son, who directed me to look for him: he was short, dark, and wore a mustache, couldn't miss him. Of course we had never met face-to-face.

Sergio and I found one another, and he introduced me to fellow caver Cuauhtemoc "Cuate" Sanchez. We jumped into Sergio's VW bug and sped off into the city looking for late-night food and some other cavers who had been alerted of my arrival. We were looking at a restaurant that was obviously in the process of closing, when a taxi screeched to a stop right next to us, and out jumped Rosa Maria "Beba" Balvanera Luviano and a non-caving friend, Jose Luis. We all piled in and went to a late-night place for tacos al pastor and soft drinks, as restaurants have liquor curfews like some places in Dallas or West Texas. Jose Luis invited all over for coffee afterwards, and while there insisted that I stay in a spare room as his guest. We stayed up until about 3:30 playing on his powerful new computer, but he had been drinking all night and had a new .38 pistol, a bad combination. I insisted it was time to retire for much-needed rest when he put a neat hole through the phone right next to the computer.

Jose Luis was in bad shape the following morning, so I was unable to thank him for his hospitality. Sergio picked me up right on time, and we scurried around town picking up our caving comrades. Anticipating the worst-case scenario, each caver contributed some piece of equipment for me to use, so that by the time we were ready to leave town I had everything except a climbing helmet, and a gimme-cap worked fine to hold a headlight in the cave we ended up entering. Besides Sergio and Cuate, our SLP crew included Beba and Salvador "Chava" Gonzalez Murillo. In the rush of packing for the trip, Sergio accidentally locked the key to the trunk lock inside the VW trunk, so we were delayed a little at an early-opening locksmith, but this provided an opportunity to observe a street performer, a fire-breather. At the airport there was of course no bag, no one ever heard of the bag,

and no one seemed to know when a bag from a foreign airline might arrive. The precautions taken paid off, even without my cave pack I was ready for the caves.

We headed east into the mountains bordering the city and began climbing toward the pass near the Valle de Fantasmas (Valley of Ghosts), named for the vertically oriented rock formations that rise from the green fields and up the slopes of the mountains. The original plan had been to do a cave in these mountains in the morning and then head down to Rio Verde to meet some other cavers who would take us to the places we wanted to visit. We were running late, however, and opted instead to stop for a leisurely lunch along the way and to take our time getting to the 2 p.m. rendezvous. We were almost on time, and in Rio Verde I was introduced to Juan Cancino Zepeda, who has long been exploring for new caves in the area, and fellow caver Gustavo Samperio Verastegui. Juan is given credit for the discovery and exploration of many caves in the area, and I have seen his name on several fine cave maps from the district. He is as well an accomplished breath-hold sump diver. We transferred gear to Juan's Jeep Wagoneer and headed out. We turned off the highway after about 10 minutes and pulled up along a shallow depression next to a two-track dirt road. This was the first cave we were to explore. Inside I was told of a long water-filled passage that ended in a sump Juan had looked at, but which seemed to call for compressed air to adequately check out. As we stepped out of the truck Juan motioned for quiet, and I was suddenly aware of a loud buzzing sound. I looked closely and began to notice a virtual cloud of bees around the cave, with a significant number flying in and out of the arroyo that contained the cave entrance. Juan asked who wanted to go, and the ranks thinned quickly. Of course, I was the honored guest and was expected to go because my reason for being here was to assess the sump-diving potential, but Juan and I were joined by brave souls Chava and Beba. We slowly, deliberately, and quietly made our way through the thick vegetation in the arroyo, noting three major bee hives along the walls. We paused just be-

fore entering the overhead, and Juan pointed out a large hive he had not seen the previous trip, noting that we would have to pass within 10 feet (3 m) of the bees to get where we wanted to go. We conferred quietly and with minimal movement and decided to proceed, but as we took the first step forward the buzzing suddenly accelerated, and we all turned together and began to exit. We were moving deliberately up the slope toward the truck and our waiting friends when several of the bees began to attack. I yelled and began running, noticing several of the others chose to follow suit. Chava and I were stung on the lower scalp, and I was stung on the right wrist as well. We dived into the truck taking several swarming bees with us. I was swinging a snorkel in the air to fend off the attackers, and Chava might have suffered a mild concussion when he used his helmet to swat a bee on his scalp. As we sped away from the bee cave (Cueva de los Abejas) I had several of the confused little attackers stuck in my hair, and I had to lean out the window as I pulled them out of the tangle. This incident occupied several minutes of excited bilingual conversation, but in a few minutes we again calmed down as Juan drove us further south into the hills past the verdant fields surrounding Rio Verde (Green River).

After about an hour of driving we pulled through the small hamlet of La Loma and continued past the square down a two-track road suitable only for hardy 2-wheel-drive vehicles. Juan parked in front of a rancher's gate and asked the landowner permission to come in to talk. The two were acquainted, and we had permission to leave the vehicle in the yard while we were away at the cave. All hands proceeded to get undressed and then redressed for the hiking trip up to La Loma cave. I admired the quality of the several handmade caving accessories my hosts used, especially the caving packs. I was told that it was difficult and relatively expensive to obtain the machine-made stuff, but that Joe Ivy occasionally had carried special orders on his trips into the area. We soon were on the way up the trail, which follows a stream flowing down the heavily forested slopes. The contrast of the

vegetation here to the altiplano (high desert) surrounding San Luis Potosí was striking. The largest trees along the stream were sycamores, but many varieties flourished. The walk stretched on for about 2.5 hours, but we finally arrived at the site just as the sun was setting. On one side of a huge boulder fall the stream flowed noisily, but just around the corner there was a definite silence. The stream came out of the side of the mountain, and above it was a large, keyhole-shaped dry cave entrance. I snuck off to a large flat boulder to change my dry hiking clothes for the wetsuit I would need for the trip into the cave.

Once inside, the trip went quickly. An advance team of Beba and Juan started out at a fast pace to look for the easy handholds in the twisting, sharp-sided river canyon. We traveled light and scaled the walls at times to avoid becoming immersed in the swift waters. After about 30 minutes in the narrow but high-ceilinged cave, I noticed the water was much quieter, in fact the flow seemed to stop altogether. This terminal room was semicircular in shape, around 40 feet in diameter, with a 35-40 ft. ceiling on the downstream side, while upstream the ceiling plunged into the seemingly calm pool. Everyone looked at me; this was my cue. I assembled the minimal gear I would need to free-dive into the sump. Entering the water I was surprised that it was not really that cold, perhaps 70° F. The thin wetsuit would be fine thermal protection for the short submersion time planned. Juan admitted that he had dove the tunnel once or twice, pulling a tape in after him to a distance of 20 ft. This was a very brave move and required some considerable level of skill to assure the tape would not entangle him on the exit. The best we had for my dive was a 10 mm rope. I took one end and Juan kept a light tension on the other, pulling it out when I no longer pulled it in. The rest of the team stood on a bank of coarse gravel apparently deposited by water being disgorged from the sump during high flow episodes. I first felt around the edge of the pool to be sure there were no hidden passages, and satisfied with this, followed Juan's directions toward the entrance to the sump passage.

I submerged, wearing mask and borrowed helmet, and was surprised at the clarity of the water. The entrance was very straightforward, although a slight overhang required the diver to arch the back just a little to get in and then out. Taking a few deep breaths I dove deeper into the passage each time, looking first along the left wall, then the right, then finally pushed down the main passage as far as one breath would take me. I still don't think my furthest dive exceeded Juan's, but he was polite enough not to mention that. Several of the other cavers jumped in the water to splash about after the diving was done, then we began to head back to the entrance in small groups. Gustavo and I looked at an upper passage above the canyon, and he found a way into a small passage that opened onto a balcony high up in the ceiling of the room. I found guano deposits but no bats, and also stopped on the way out to investigate burned palm fronds that had apparently been used as torches by other people interested in seeing the interior of the cave.

By the time our team regrouped outside the cave, it was late in the evening, and by the time we finished the hike down, loaded into the trusty Wagoneer, and drove back to Rio Verde, it was early in the morning. We toasted the successful caving trip before repacking into the Volkswagen and returning across the mountains to San Luis Potosí. We were all exhausted and stopped to sleep along the highway when everyone was admittedly too tired to drive. That same Saturday morning was to be a busy one for several of the association members, for they had arranged for some miners to help in opening a small rock entrance to a pit they had found on a previous scouting expedition. I woke after a short sleep, took a cab to the bus station, and traveled for about 4 hours to the neighboring city of Leon, Guanajuato, where I could catch a flight to DFW. I count the trip a success and credit the members of the APME who met and accompanied me for turning a bad situation into a very enjoyable experience.

Cueva de los Murmullos

Cave of the Murmurs

By Ed Goff

Cavers: Jerry Fant, Ed Goff, R. D. Milhollin, Chava Gonzalez Murillo, Wayne Peplinski, Cuate Sanchez

The Thanksgiving SLP trip was planned like clockwork. We would leave right after work on Tuesday and drive through the night, picking up Jerry in San Marcos and arriving in the city of San Luis Potosí early in the afternoon Wednesday. We'd meet up with some APME cavers and camp Wednesday night in the mountains near our first objective, the 400-meter-deep Cueva de los Murmullos; get an early start Thursday; bottom the cave to gain experience for future deep exploration in the area; and bivvy there Thursday night. We'd come out Friday and camp that night near our second objective, a horizontal cave called La Loma that R. D. had reconnoitered earlier in November. Saturday Jerry and R. D. would do an exploratory sump dive in La Loma. Then Sunday we'd scurry home.

Good plan. Here's what actually happened.

First it looked as if at the last minute Wayne would have to work on Wednesday and wouldn't be able to make the trip at all. Then he called and said he could go but didn't have transportation to my apartment in Dallas. So we switched the rendezvous point to Wayne's house in west Fort Worth. R. D. and I met there and the three of us had our gear loaded in the Suburban by 8 p.m. And man, did we have some gear. Camping gear, hiking gear, caving gear, scuba gear. And 400 meters of rope. We were seriously wondering where Jerry and his stuff would fit, to say nothing of the two Mexican cavers, also with gear, who were supposed to ride with us from SLP to Murmullos. But at least we were off . . . No, we weren't. Important papers had been forgotten, and we had to drive back to R. D.'s apartment in Arlington.

Finally, a little after 10 p.m., we were on the

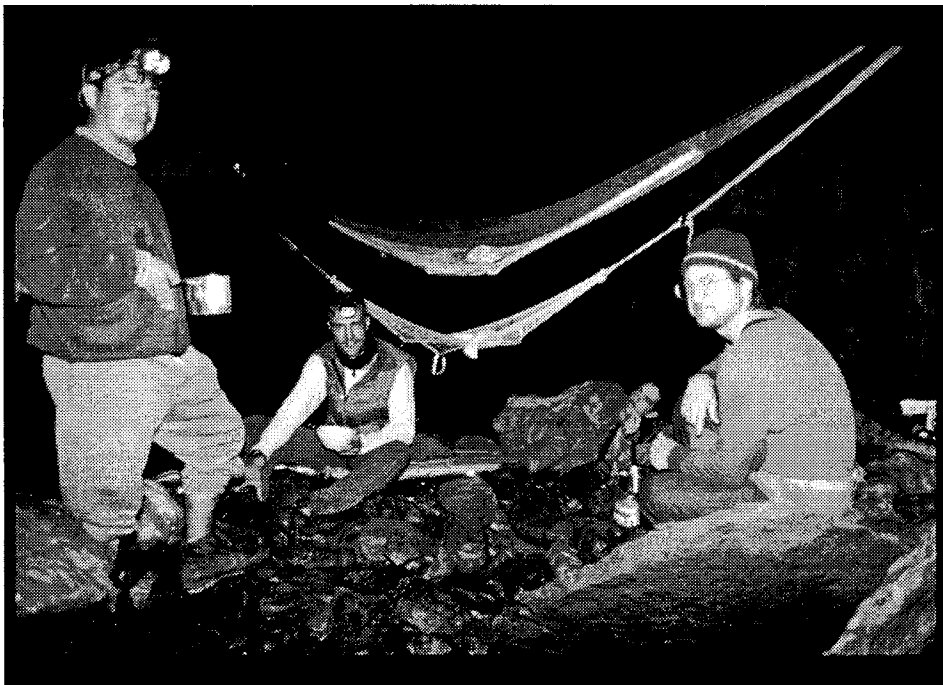
highway. We phoned Jerry from Austin and he met us a little after 2 a.m. in San Marcos, where a dense fog enveloped us. We managed to cram in his gear, scuba tanks, and some more rope, but we had to sacrifice the rear floorboard to the big rope. For the rest of the trip, the rear-seat passengers would either be in the lotus position or lying side by side like sardines in a tin, one on the seat and one on the rope.

Jerry, having had some sleep, took over the driving. Fortunately his training as a pilot made him comfortable hurtling along at 70 mph in near-zero-visibility fog, so we didn't lose any time to the weather.

I woke up as we rolled into Laredo. We made our way to the Nuevo side, where we discovered that other important papers had been forgotten and I was unable to get a vehicle permit. That meant a trip back through the front lines of the drug war to request a copy of the registration receipt from the county courthouse in Laredo.

Finally equipped with our holographic windshield sticker, we could make some time. We headed south, skirting pollution-shrouded Monterrey, where the sheer mountains ringing the city can no longer be seen at all; driving into the afternoon, past Saltillo, over the passes toward Matehuala in the gathering dusk. We were slowed by traffic, potholes, and a few missed cuotas (tollroads). When we arrived in San Luis Potosí we had been traveling for just under 24 hours.

We phoned Sergio Sanchez-Armass from a Pemex station, and he and Cuate Sanchez met us at the city's Coca-Cola factory. We followed his darting Beetle through town to a restaurant where they introduced us to some local cuisine. Then the Beetle led us on another wild ride through town, and we found ourselves at



Chava, Cuate, Jerry, and R. D. (l. to r.) enjoying room service in the Murmullos Hilton

Sergio's house. That's when things took an unexpected turn. Wayne phoned his wife to say we'd arrived and were ok. As he held the phone to his ear, he turned ashen and his eyes widened. His daughter was in the hospital, apparently unconscious, having suffered some kind of seizure. We reassured him as best we could, and Sergio made some phone calls to arrange for him to get home immediately. At 1 a.m. on Thursday we put Wayne on a bus for Mexico City, where he would catch an early flight to DFW.

Our expedition now numbering three, we spent the night on the floor in Cuate's elegant house. The next morning Cuate and Chava took us for a tour of the city in Cuate's open-air VW Thing. It brought back memories of my own Thing days back in college. We stopped at the office of INEGI, a sort of USGS, Census Bureau, and government bookstore all rolled into one, and bought some maps. Then we went to the plaza and ran around from cathedral to cathedral to government building to museum until we decided that maybe it was time to start thinking about going caving.

Cuate and Chava suggested *tortas* (sandwiches) for lunch and said they'd take us to the best place in town to get wonderful things for

making *tortas*. Imagine our surprise when we found ourselves in a Wal-Mart parking lot. The SLP Wal-Mart turned out to have excellent fresh breads and cheeses and meats and a ridiculously large staff of courteous ladies eager to slice, wrap, and feed you samples of anything you pointed at.

After lunch we girded up and drove west into the hills toward the Valle de Fantasmas, following Cuate and Chava in the Thing as they bounced down the dirt road (lucky for them they had their own car). They pulled over a few times to point out karst features and caves along the way. Then suddenly we stopped. This was the parking place for Murmullos. We spread out our oceans of gear and painstakingly recoiled the 400 m rope, which weighs about 75 pounds, into two coils. We carefully packed our big cave packs and donned our gear. We knew this would be a serious trip. As we hiked up the gentle hill to the cave, weighed down by bulging packs and festooned with ropes, the sky was getting dark. It was 7 p.m.

The entrance to Murmullos, in a small sink near a little ranch house, is a tunnel about 5 ft. wide and 5 ft. high. It opens into a small room, and from there a short crawl leads to an-

other room. Here the first pitch, the *Tiro Facil* or Easy Drop, descends about 25 ft. down a steep slope with two or three ledges, from a single bolt in desiccated flowstone, to a room whose floor is a shallow pool. The hanger had been stolen from this bolt in the past, so the SLP group had gotten in the habit of removing it as they left the cave. We put a new hanger on and rigged the drop. We tried to maneuver the big rope coils down without getting them wet, but plop, one of them fell into the water.

From here, walking passage bends to the left and then the floor abruptly ends, rounding off into blackness. Against the left wall is a smallish boulder with a single rusty bolt in it. We stood here awhile, contemplating what lay below. Chava picked up a fist-size rock, tested its weight in his hand, and gingerly lobbed it out into space. We counted seconds. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Then an eerie crescendoing whooooooSH through Seven. Eight. WHAM. It hit bottom with a sound like thunder. Cuate told us this had been his first cave. Yeah, it's a great beginner cave, he said.

We attached a rope to the rusty bolt and rappelled another 25 ft. to the real jumping-off place, a wet, drippy ledge about the size of a queen bed. A 3-ft.-wide slot at the end of the ledge makes a convenient spot to get on rope. From there it's 700 ft. straight down. Chava rigged the main rope around a 3 ft.-diameter column overlooking the ledge and attached a pulley on a length of webbing to a bolt in the opposite wall to redirect the rope over the center of the slot. He slowly paid out the rope through the pulley and down into the pit, using two rack bars to keep it under control.

Cuate went first, disappearing almost immediately into the void of the dark-walled *Tiro de los Murmullos*. About 10 minutes later we heard his cheerful voice crackling on the walkie-talkie. He was at the ledge 620 ft. beneath us, rigging a rebelay for the last 80 ft. Looking down over the edge we could make out a tiny pinpoint of light far below. R. D. went next, and when he was down I inched out beside the slot, an ascender clipped to the short rope that hung down from the rusty bolt above and doubled as a pigtail for the big pit. I threaded

the brand-new rope through my rack, clipped an ascender above it, and unclipped from the pigstail. I stood up, removed the ascender above my rack, and sat down with my weight on the rope. There I was. I waved goodbye. Chava said "See you in hell!" It was surprisingly easy to feed the rope through the rack, starting with 4 bars and 620 ft. of rope weight, and soon I was out of sight of the rigging. A drop of 600 ft. is a completely different experience from a drop of even 300 ft. There's enough stretch that the rope can be whizzing through the rack while the wall in front of you fails to move, then with a little friction applied the rope will stop on the rack and the wall will start to move upward as you bob down like a weight on a spring.

The rope hangs free all the way to the ledge, only about 4 ft. from the wall. The wall is dark gray and smooth, interrupted every 20 or 30 ft. by a beautiful horizontal band of calcite. A few spooky wormholes open in the wall at various points, ranging from inches to about

8 ft. in diameter. If you turn and look away from the wall, you can't see the other side of the pit.

After several minutes I felt solid rock under my feet and fed the rope-stretch through until I was standing on the ledge, which is about the size of a couch, with only blackness visible above and below. The rope was rebelayed on two shiny bolts. I switched over and continued down, and soon I was on the water-scoured floor of the pit. Before I could get off rope I heard a familiar sound: whooOOSH! I lurched against the wall and covered down with my hands covering my face as a rock landed somewhere very close with a resounding WHAM.

At the bottom of the Tiro de los Murrullos is canyon passage, 10 to 15 ft. wide and interrupted by a 15 ft. rappel, that leads in about 75 ft. to a large room, the *Salon de los Dados* or Hall of Dice, named for two huge cubic breakdown blocks. Looking up, you see immense overhanging canyon walls soaring out of sight, with water-sculpted curves and bulges, some of them neatly sheared off by time and gravity as if a giant knife had sliced a peak from a stiff meringue. Flood debris can be seen on the walls 50 and 60 ft. up. We began to detect bad air here and noted a gap under a butane lighter flame.

The main part of the *Salon* is off to the right, with a breakdown floor riddled with treacherous holes. The canyon continues to the left, veering down out of sight at a steep angle. The way onward is through one of the holes in the floor, about 80 feet deep, rigged by encircling the rounded top of a boulder with webbing. Just a few feet beyond the bottom of this is a 140 ft. drop, rigged on a single bolt, into a shallow pool. We didn't have a rope left that was long enough, so Cuate tied Jerry's 9 mm rope to one of the 11 mm ropes, and we crossed the knot.

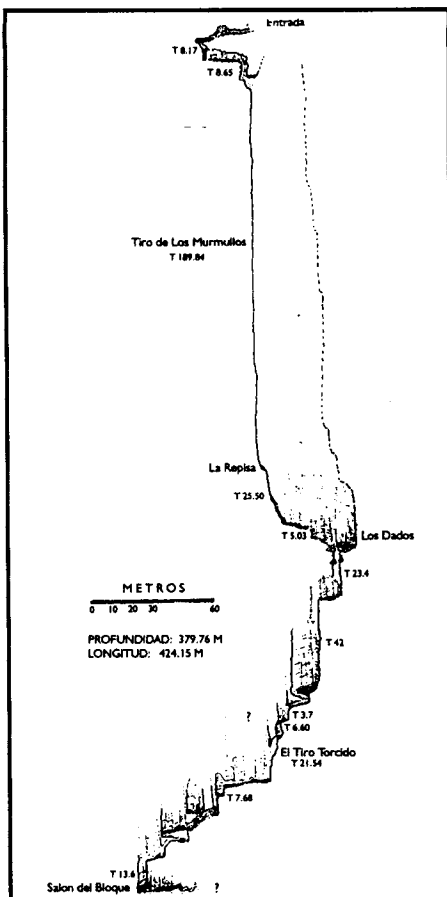
We were now in narrow canyon passage. Thirty ft. or so around a bend brought us to a 12 ft. drop, then another 30 ft. to a 20 ft. drop, then just a few feet to a 70 ft. drop that involved another knot crossing. Each of these was rigged on a single bolt. The 70-footer ended in another room with a pool for a floor, and a bank of wet cobbles leading into more

narrow canyon passage.

Here the canyon got tricky. The walls were thinly coated with slick mud. Ahead it was unclear whether to descend to the canyon floor, continue chimneying horizontally, or climb up some. Cuate and Chava, having bottomed the cave before, made several tries to move forward but were unsure of the way. They hadn't seen it muddy like this before. "Bien peligroso" (quite dangerous) I heard Cuate remark from out of sight around a bend. A consensus was reached that we would go no farther. We were about 1150 ft. underground, 10 rope pitches from the surface, and just about out of rope. The CO2 had increased with depth, and any movement induced hyperventilation.

We went back to the room with the cobble-banked pool. Jerry inflated his mattress and lay down on the rocks. Cuate and Chava set two bolts in the walls and hung hammocks, and R. D. and I unrolled our ThermaRests on muddy ledges. It was nearly 6 a.m. on Friday. I had trouble sleeping in the bad air—the feeling is similar to altitude sickness—and was chilly, so after a few hours I sat up and busied myself making preparations for the trip out. I attached a third light to my helmet and made some adjustments to my Frog. At one point everyone got up and fixed some food, then went back to bed. It was probably after 11 a.m. when I started out first, carrying a couple of short, unused ropes, followed by R. D. The rest decided to keep sleeping, thinking the two of us would slow them down with our Frogs.

The trip out was strenuous, with the high CO2 level, a heavy pack, and little sleep. R. D. and I rested at the bottom of the big drop, then I drank my last water, ate a Power Bar, and started up the rope. He joined me at the ledge, and we started climbing tandem, trying to stay 20 to 60 ft. apart. Time seemed to stand still. We'd climb and climb and look up and see nothing but rope. I found resting painful, and when we were probably within 200 ft. of the top I asked R. D. if I could stop waiting and climb on out. He said ok, which was a mistake, since he got bounced around and hit the wall a few times. I heard him yell up from below, "I think I've lost the use of my arm!"



I looked up as I climbed. Suddenly I was startled. There was something floating next to the rope! What was it? I looked again. Oh. The knot at the end of the pigtail, 50 ft. away. I climbed up to it, reached for it—and the air turbulence from the motion of my hand dislodged it from the knob over which it was draped. It swung out of reach. I had to cross the pulley and haul myself up to the rig point. I had been on rope for an hour and 40 minutes. R. D. followed, and we sat down and tried to keep warm while waiting for the others. When Jerry came up, R. D. and I decided to go to the truck and get some water and food and return to help haul the rope. We went up the remaining two pitches and found ourselves outside in the chilly night. We started walking and were almost immediately lost. We wandered around systematically for an hour and a half, then gave up finding the truck. Luckily we hadn't lost the cave. I was quite dehydrated and cold by now. I set up my stove and used my fleece bag liner as a heat tent. We had huddled over the stove for a few minutes when R. D. said he was going back into the cave. I leaned over my stove for perhaps half an hour, then it occurred to me to wonder what an eerie caped figure stooping over an eerie light would look like to a local shepherd walking around in the predawn hours, and I started wanting to be back in the cave too. I went back in to the top of the first pitch and waited with my stove, feeling too ill from dehydration to get back on rope. At some point I dozed off and woke to the sharp odor of burning fingernail. My hand had drooped into the flame. At last I heard voices. It had taken each caver about 2 hours to climb the pit. Cuate and Chava had been slowed by derigging, and the process of hauling the rope up the big pit had been a tedious and somnolent one for the four taking turns: 20 pulls, 20 winks, 20 pulls, 20 winks. I helped pull the ropes and packs up the *Tiro Facil*, out of the cave, and out of the sinkhole. Then we headed for the vehicles.

We had been in the cave for 38.5 hours. I pulled a huge water bottle from the truck and sucked it down. As soon as I started to rehydrate my strength returned and I felt fine, though sore. Without taking any water that I

noticed, Chava began merrily sipping mescal from a plastic bottle hung around his neck.

We drove to a beautiful mountain camp called Tlachtli, owned by a friend of the SLP cavers named Miguel Torres. Miguel, a gracious host and physical education instructor, turned the food in our cooler into a delicious meal *a la Mexicana*, then festively marched us all over his property on a grand tour of cave entrances; ropes rigged in trees to make ingenious American-Gladiator-style games that we were invited to play; and a majestic 40-meter-high rappelling rock that we were challenged to climb.

The news that a ruptured gas pipeline had closed the road between us and La Loma seemed providential, because although Jerry had decided not to dive, R. D. still had every intention of going on with the sump dive later

that afternoon despite obvious exhaustion. He was resting in the back seat of the Suburban when we broke the news to him. "Oh well," he murmured and was instantly asleep again.

With La Loma out of the question, we had nowhere to go but home. We said our goodbyes at Tlachtli and followed Miguel's pickup back to San Luis. We drove on to Matehuala, where we spent the night in a motel, skipped supper, and fell asleep watching *Aliens* dubbed in Spanish. Sunday was a marathon drive. I was the last one home after dropping R. D. off; I unlocked my front door at 3:30 a.m. Monday morning. To our great relief, and of course to Wayne's also, his daughter turned out to be all right.

[Ed. note: Look for Wayne's musings on Cave Trips That Almost Were in an upcoming issue.]

Winter Wonderland

By Karen Perry

Continued from page 3

park rangers, listening to stories of the Old West: stories of Indians, Buffalo Soldiers, and settlers. It could not have been a more perfect day. Easy drive back to town as the snow had stopped and was now melting. A quiet evening and good night's sleep.

The wake-up call came at 7 a.m. Saturday and it was time to load the truck, get breakfast, and head for Amazing Maze. This was a TCMA work trip as well as a chance to see the cave. The TCMA managers only do one trip a year to this cave, and I can see why. The cave is HOT! Instruments showed the temperature in the cave to be 78° F with humidity at 82%. Inside it is tight, crawly, very dusty, and not real pretty, but it sure is fun. I don't suggest going all that way for just this cave, however.

After the gate repair (that's another story), Mike and Dwaine took me over to ESS Cave around Iraan. I got to break in some of that vertical gear I'd been practicing with since April. It's a short drop and can be free-handed on rope if you know the drop or are

tall. My short legs just don't reach all the footholds. Better safe than sorry.

This too is a cave that had become a party cave and has been severely trashed by the local yahoos. The Permian Basin Grotto has taken the cave on as a project and installed a nice heavy, bat-friendly gate. (We did not see any bats this trip, just the bones of a dead snake.) ESS is a typical Texas maze cave. It is shallow, has tight, tall passageways, crawls, and what once were pretty formations. Plus, I met Hercules! This cave is worthy of at least one trip. The PBG use it as a training cave for new members or those individuals who think they may want to become cavers.

We finished up, did a temporary fix to Mike's flat tire, and I was off to Sonora. Spent the night at Bill's visiting till 3 a.m. over a bottle of Merlot. Went through the cave on Sunday morning with Bill and then began the long but pretty drive home. A good trip made even better because Mamma Nature got a whim and blessed me with a beautiful, though short-lived, white winter wonderland to play in for Christmas.

C A L E N D A R * O F * E V E N T S

January 16, 1999, TSS Board Meeting. Contact Jim Kennedy (512) 443-8198

February 12-14, 1999, Colorado Bend State Park Project. Contact Terry Holsinger (512) 443-4241, trhli@sprynet.com, or Butch Fralia (817) 346-2039

February 14, 1999, TSA Winter Business Meeting. Contact Gill Ediger (512) 441-0050

February 26-28, 1999, Powells Cave Project. Contact Terry Holsinger (512) 443-4241, trhli@sprynet.com

March 12-14, 1999, Colorado Bend State Park Project. Contact Terry Holsinger (512) 443-4241, trhli@sprynet.com

July 12-16, 1999, NSS Convention, Twin Falls, Idaho. Contact David W. Kesner, (208) 939-0979