

UNDERGROUND SPORTS

By Butch Fralia

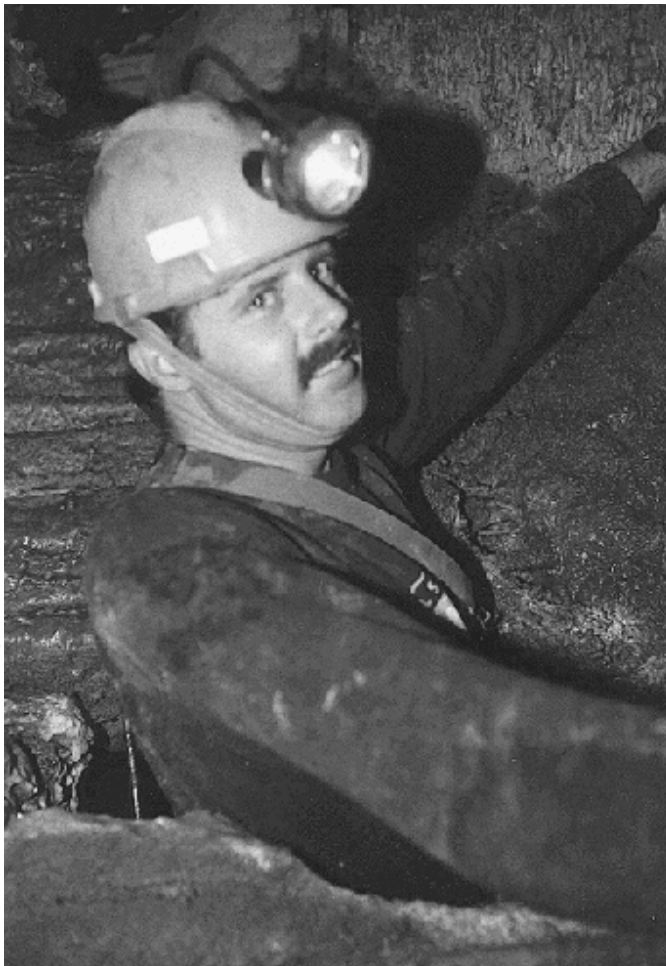
People need adventure, challenge, and the National Speleological Society (NSS), which lists somewhere to work off the physical tension it's more than twenty thousand members worldwide. accumulated in today's busy world. They participate When cavers travel to another state or country, they in sports like bowling, softball, touch football, contact cavers near their destination to arrange a cave volleyball, and weight lifting. Adventuresome people trip while they are there.

experience sports offering a higher level of challenge like rock climbing, skin diving and sky diving. These sports also provide the physical exercise that most of us are unable to get in our daily home and work environment. This article will acquaint the reader with a science and sport that offers all the above and then some.

There is a small group of people scattered throughout the world who satisfy their need for adventure, challenge, exercise and even a sense of danger, through exploring caves. Most people know this sport as spelunking, but modern participants simply call themselves cavers.

Cavers are conservationists who explore caves, contributing to the knowledge of this little known world while trying to preserve caves in their natural state. To grasp the size of this group, consider that within the total population of Texas, there are only about 400 organized cavers. Of these 400, some are not active participants.

Caving is an organized activity and that amazes many people. There are international, national, state and local organizations of people banded together in zealous pursuit of their true love; caving. There are caving publications circulated in all countries of the world and a caver has a friend wherever he or she happens to be. There is an address and phone list mailed out each year to each member of



Caver Dale Ellison in an Oklahoma cave

Caves are natural underground areas, typically occurring in gypsum and limestone geology. There are a few caves found in granite and sandstone but these are quite rare. The Texas Speleological Survey defines a cave as an opening that must be fifteen feet six inches (five meters) deep or long and is humanly enterable. Caves differ from shelters because shelters are typically rock overhangs. Most caves form through a solution process where acidity in ground water dissolves away rock. There are as many theories of cave formation as there are caves.

The above definition implies a cave can be pretty small. Caves range from the minimum of fifteen feet six inches long to the more than 330 mile long Mammoth Cave in Kentucky, the world's longest cave. One of caving's high adventure

experiences, is traveling to Golandrinas Cave in Mexico to experience the 1197 foot rappell and climb back out. That is the equivalent of a 120 story building. Some cavers experience cave diving while all experience swimming, wading, climbing, and crawling.

How many caves are there? There are about 3,300 known caves in the State of Texas with new caves found almost daily. The discovery of caves without natural entrances usually occurs during construction, mining, or well drilling. The discovery of Inner Space Cavern at Georgetown occurred during

the construction of a bridge on I-35. Most Texas Caves are on the Edwards Plateau that ranges from San Antonio to north of Austin and west from these two cities about 200 miles. There are caves in the Blaine Gypsum Plateau that extends from Central Texas, north through the Texas Panhandle, the western part of Oklahoma and upward into Kansas. The State of Missouri has the largest number of known caves with approximately 5,500. Most States in the U.S. have a few known caves.

What purpose do caves serve? Caves recharge the water table. In areas where there are caves, run off from rainfall drains into caves. Within hours, the surface water can be in the water table. Within hours, the water that just fell from the sky may be pumped out of the ground. Consequently, the reader can quickly see the conservation and protection of caves is important. There are approximately seven-million people that get their drinking water from the Edwards Aquifer.

What animals live in caves and do you ever run into snakes? There is within a cave a differentiation between the twilight zone and the zone of total darkness. The twilight zone is the area in which light from the entrance is still seen. The zone of total darkness is the area of the cave where no natural light occurs.

Many animals make their home in the twilight of the world, through ignorance and misunderstanding. This animal is one of our best means of insect control. In Texas, bats consume as much as 300,000,000 tons



Author Butch Fralia with a non-poisonous

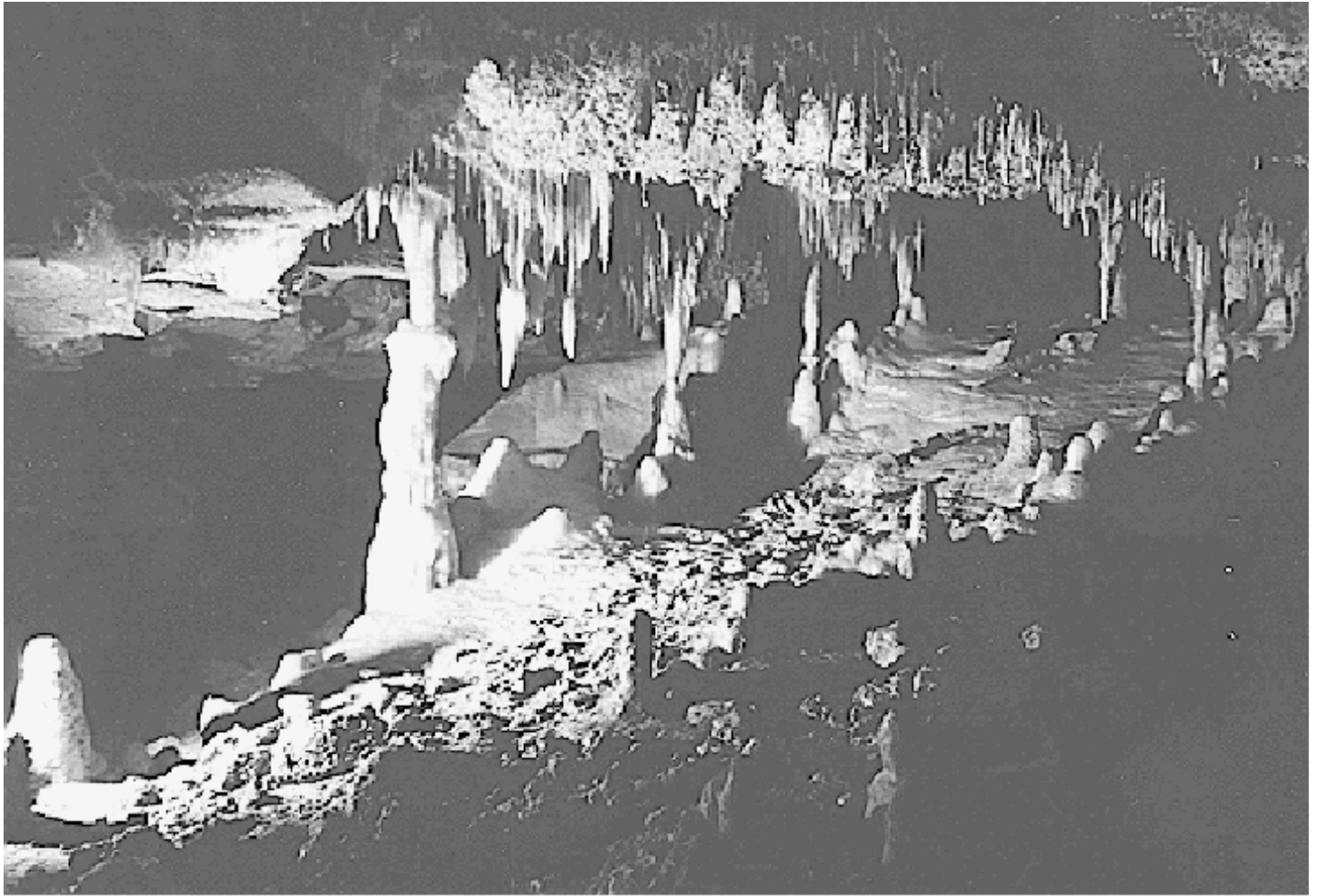


**Cave Salamandar in Fitton Cave
Arkansas**

or whatever. Some animals that may be found in the twilight zone are Bears, Birds, Buzzards, Cats, Coyotes, Opossums, Porcupines, Snakes and Wolves. The presence of these animals depends upon the frequency of cave visitation, weather and wildlife indigenous to the area. When present, these animals seldom represent a threat to cavers. Cavers throw small rocks into cave entrances to warn wildlife of their arrival and flush them out.

Animals found in the zone of darkness (not including bats) have entered the cave in some manner and adapted to the environment. Animals occasionally fall into caves, wash in during heavy rainfall, or relocate to the cave accidentally, in another manner. The surviving creatures adapt to the environment and, over time, usually lose their coloring and eyesight. The most common creatures in this category are insects such as crickets. There are species of cave spider and cave scorpion but these are rare and pose little threat to the caver. The other creatures are usually fish or salamanders.

The most well known of cave life and the most significant to man is the bat. Bats have been the brunt of man's need to destroy his fellow citizens



Heavily decorated area of Fitton Cave - Arkansas

of insects nightly! Bats are virtually harmless animals who deserve much better than they've received at our hands.

Do you ever find any artifacts or treasure? There are caves in the Yucatan Peninsula used by the Mayan Indians for ceremonial purposes. In these caves' explorers find artifacts such as baskets, mummified bodies, and statues. There is a cave in France with paintings created by prehistoric man. In Mammoth Cave, explorers found remnants of cane torches which carbon dated to be about 7,000 years old. There were also footprints believed to be left by a man and a woman. These footprints are about seven miles into the cave, which was farther into the cave than any previous discoveries. Most caves visited by cavers have yet to yield more than an abandoned moonshine still and a few bones. Occasionally, an explorer locates bones from prehistoric animals.

What is the most dangerous thing about caving? Caving isn't as dangerous as most people would like to believe, but there are indeed hazards.

Anytime caving involves technical climbing on rope or free climbing on rock, there is an element of danger. Cavers are much different from rock climbers in they climb wet rock. Rock climbers will usually pack up and go home if the sky becomes overcast. Cavers do the same thing underground that mountain climbers do above ground. Many would not attempt mountain climbing because they are afraid of height. In the dark underground there is no sensation of height while climbing.

By far the most danger faced by a caver, is climbing in loose rock or breakdown. It's possible to move a small rock known as a keystone and bring down a rock slide. This situation is common and it requires extreme caution. Again experience plays a role in the actual danger faced by cavers.

Another danger for a caver is getting inside a cave that is subject to flooding. An earlier statement noted that caves provide a direct path into the water table from the surface. To be inside a cave during a rain is hazardous to your health.



Back lit soda straw formations with helictites formed on them - Pink Panther Cave - New Mexico

Cave-in is an overstated danger. A cave, being a naturally formed geological feature, has been in place for millions of years. All cavers experience a level of concern or fear early in their career when moving in tight places. However, the likelihood of a cave collapsing on the day a caver visits it is very small.

It must be stated that the above situations apply to caves formed in solid rock. Occasionally caves form through the erosion of gravel and sand, or by rocks wedged in a fissure. These caves are indeed dangerous and avoided by cavers. There have been cases in recent years where boy scout groups and others have chosen very unstable areas to experience caving with predictable results.

How much does caving equipment cost and what type of equipment is required? Caving may be inexpensive or very expensive depending on the equipment the caver chooses. Caves form in the most out of the way places so there is a requirement for

camping equipment. Motor homes, and travel trailers are virtually useless since they usually cannot be taken into the areas where there are caves.

With camping equipment purchased or already owned, remaining equipment cost can be inexpensive. A well equipped caver may invest as little as \$125 and as much as \$5,000. Basic caving requires a hard hat, preferably one approved by the Bureau of mines. Each caver must carry three sources of light (minimum). These may be either carbide or electric. Lug-soled boots of some sort; hiking boots, hunting boots, or jungle boots are acceptable. A sturdy pack to carry in food, water, and equipment may be needed. To those involved in climbing, technical equipment adds about \$300 to the bill. For those crazies involved in cave diving, the sky is the limit.

What type of rules do cavers have? The first rule of caving is never cave alone! To become injured in even a minor way can be lethal without someone to help exit the cave. The minimum number of people in



Gypsum Formations in a limestone cave - Fitton Cave - Arkansas

a cave should be three. Follow land owner rules while on their property. After exploring a cave, leave it as you found it, take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but foot prints, and spend nothing but time.

Dealing with land owners can be both

rewarding and exasperating. There are land owners who have caves of which they are very proud and very protective. They only allow people to explore their caves whom they know or can show some proof of belonging to a caving organization. Some land owners are superstitious about their caves. They believe the devil lives in them and they have to protect your soul. They believe they have buried treasure that they won't seek themselves but don't want anyone else getting either.

Caving is a high adventure sport that provides a different view of the world. It is literally seeing the world from the inside out. It is visiting wildlife on their terms and on their own ground. Caving is an activity that obviously isn't for everyone, but those who participate dedicate much of their time to it. There are three unexplored areas in our universe; Outer space, the ocean, and the underground world of caves. Exploration of space and the ocean, belongs to an elite few, but the exploration of caves is open to those of limited funds who wish to participate.

For more information on caves and caving organizations in your area, contact:

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