50th ANNIVERSARY

1955 - 2005

1950s  1960s

1970s  1980s

Fourth Quarter 2005

1990s  2000s
Haby Cave, also known as Cave of the Lakes, was new to Texas cavers in October 1965 when Glenda Kunath posed for this picture. Unfortunately, the cave was soon closed (some say the entrance has been permanently closed with a bulldozer) and few people have been privileged to visit this cave. A cropped black and white conversion of this photo appeared on the cover of the February 1966 Texas Caver. Carl Kunath.

About the cover: This special issue features selected covers from the last 50 years of the Texas Caver. We looked at every issue (all 500 of them) and tried to choose something representative of the Caver from each decade. Unfortunately, some of the finest photographs were not well printed originally and to scan and reprint those didn’t seem like a good idea. We did the best we could with the material available.

February 1956:
Artwork by Bill Helmer. Dittoed on yellow paper. See more of Bill’s cartoon skills elsewhere in this issue.

June 1966:
Carl Kunath made this picture of the famed Butterfly at Caverns of Sonora with only the light from a flashlight. It may be the most-photographed feature in a Texas cave. The right wing was vandalized in 2006.

September 1971:
Ronnie Fieseler made this classic picture of Jon Everage during the project to gate the lower entrance of Midnight Cave.

December 1985:
Allan Cobb captured (top to bottom) Kurt Menking, Randy Waters, Bob Cowell, Joe Ivy, and Carl Ponebshek at the newly completed entrance to Honey Creek Cave.

March 1993:
James Jasek made this nice view in Oriente Milestone Molasses Bat Cave, one of Texas’ rarely visited caves. Randy Waters (near) and John Cross are pictured.

January 2002
When Mike Moore took over the Caver in late 2001, he began to produce issues with a lot of color. Here, Pete Lindsley fires off a large flashbulb for this Carl Kunath photo in Onyx Cave, Arizona.
The Texas Caver is a quarterly publication of the Texas Speleological Association (TSA), an internal organization of the National Speleological Society (NSS).

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or use the TSA website:
http://www.caveretexas.org/PAYPAL/index.php

Articles and material for publication in the Texas Caver are openly encouraged from all cavers. Trip reports, articles, photographs, cave maps, news events, cartoons, and other caving-related material should be submitted in electronic form, either via email or CD/DVD-ROM to:

The Texas Caver
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texascaver@yahoo.com

The editor reserves the right to edit inappropriate material, errors in spelling, grammar, or punctuation, and to edit for clarity. In the event of significant changes, the author(s) will be given an opportunity to review changes prior to publication.

Advertising rates: Full page is $50 half page is $25, and quarter page is $15. Full page color on back page is $75. Contact the editor for submission and payment details.

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Editors for 50th Anniversary Issue:
Carl Kunath and Jerry Atkinson

The Texas Speleological Association is a not-for-profit organization that supports cave exploration and studies in and around the state of Texas. It is comprised of both independent members and local groups of the NSS. The TSA holds business meetings 3 times a year, organizes an annual convention for Texas cavers, and sponsors caving projects throughout the state.

April 2011

Here it is at last: The much anticipated, often delayed, special issue of the Texas Caver to note a landmark not only for the Caver but for Texas caving in general. Doing anything for half a century is notable and the occasion should not pass without special notice. Also, this issue fulfills an obligation to subscribers who paid for, but never received, all the issues they were promised for 2005.

This special issue is designed as a retrospective—a look back at the last 50+ years of caves, cavers, and caving in Texas. In the next pages are some wonderful comments from a great variety of Texas cavers of all eras, a bit of history and statistics about our activities, and an eclectic selection of mostly never-before-published photos from the past.

We hope you enjoy this special issue—this trip down memory lane.

— Carl Kunath and Jerry Atkinson
Some Thoughts About 50 Years of Caving in Texas.

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times; it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness; it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness; it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair; we had everything before us, we had nothing before us; we were all going directly to Heaven, we were all going the other way.

With that timeless prose, Charles Dickens began his classic 1859 story, A Tale Of Two Cities, wherein he describes conditions at the beginning of the French Revolution. Those words remind me of the early days and history of Texas caving when we were just beginning to explore beneath Texas.

WOW! Can it be true? Is it really 50 years since the first issue of the Texas Caver? Yep. It’s all that and more. When I saw my first issue of the Caver in 1961, I thought it was a quite mature publication and I was thrilled to browse the pages—marveling at the reports and comments from others who were so very much more sophisticated and experienced than I. At the time, I had no clue about the history of Texas caving and certainly no thought that someday I would have the opportunity to participate in the production of this special issue. To my knowledge, no other U.S. grotto or state caving organization has been so fortunate as to have had a continuous (well . . . almost continuous) newsletter for half a century.

In this time, caving has changed and matured from all points of view. I think that earlier times were more adventurous and less predictable. In particular, the exploration of vertical caves was far more challenging. Texas hasn’t the massively deep, multi-drop caves of other areas but there were problems enough.

How about the hardware? Most all groups acquired flexible ladders. Many were homemade as the commercial cable ladders were, and still are, quite expensive. Exploring with ladders probably reached its zenith in the summer of 1963 when Bill Russell used eight (8!) 30-foot sections to reach the bottom of Plateau Cave in Culberson County. Eventually, ladders were mostly phased out in favor of single rope techniques. For many years, the most popular and almost universally used method in Texas was the “Texas Seat Sling system.” This is a very physically demanding method of sitting/standing and raising oneself by means of two short ropes fashioned into prusik loops. For many years, this was used without any sort of safety such as the “chicken loop” and, despite dire predictions, no one was killed. “Diaper” seat slings and prusik loops were used well into the 1960s. Later, Jumars, Gibbs, and various mechanical clamps became commonplace along with far better seat slings and chest harnesses. At first, it was not common for all explorers to have their own vertical equipment. Cavers were generally impoverished, equipment was expensive, and brake bars, seat slings, and prusik loops were shared among the group. This caused any number of interesting situations as shared equipment was passed through the cave. In any event, these SRT techniques were quite slow and limited the vertical penetration of a large group. Occasionally, straws were drawn to see which of the group might negotiate the next drop as time would not permit all to do so. And lighting: at first, the carbide lamp was almost universal. You might occasionally see someone with a flashlight, but the advantage of having a light on your head and both hands free was too compelling. At first, quite a few used cloth miner’s caps with a metal lamp bracket. The use of a military helmet liner (not the helmet) was common and, finally, the metal hard hat came into vogue. By the mid-1960s metal helmets were replaced by fiberglass, and later by various plastic head covers coming mostly from the rock climbing, kayaking, and bicycling areas. Meanwhile, the carbide lamp gradually gave way to the incandescent headlamp. At first they were the inexpensive head units connected to a battery pack on the belt, but soon many began to use the more expensive, heavier, but rechargeable “wheat lamps.” In time the incandescents became more sophisticated and the battery packs smaller. Ultimately, the invention of the LED and the circuitry to control it caused the carbide lamp to become an arcane curiosity. The incandescent bulb wasn’t far behind.

What about clothing? At first cavers wore standard clothing, most likely the oldest they owned. Tee shirts and jeans were standard. Footwear was often high-top tennis shoes. Gloves were standard, but kneepads were rare and elbow pads were unknown. Knee pads? We don’t need no stinkin’ kneepads! Elbow pads? Huh? Later, coveralls became common and for a time, bright red was a favorite among the photography crowd. Equipment was commonly carried in a military surplus bag of some sort. Wet suits were unknown. The exploration of caves such as Honey Creek and Neel’s was limited by the hypothermic conditions. Today, cavers have all manner of wonderful clothing, footwear, and accouterments that earlier cavers couldn’t have afforded even if they had been available.

How did cavers travel? Terry Raines and David McKenzie visited many Austin area caves with David as a passenger on the rear of Terry’s smallish motorcycle. Terry tells a classic story about four cavers visiting Langtry in the summer of 1962 with all their caving and camping gear crammed into a tiny Renault. Sul Ross cavers often traveled with four cavers and all their gear in a VW beetle. It was fairly common to tear off muffs and dent or puncture oil pans. Flat tires were common. There were no four-wheel drive vehicles and even pickups were rare. In fact, many early cavers had no transportation at all. It was common for proposed caving trips to hinge on the availability of ANY sort of transportation. All that began to change in the late 1960s as cavers aged and became more affluent at the same time that four-wheel drive pickups and, ultimately, the now ubiquitous SUV became available. In the 1970s, many cavers had vans but those are not often seen these days as cavers have migrated toward Asian pickups and SUVs.
Cavers come and go. It’s quite amazing to review old membership and registration lists. The juxtaposition of people is often quite interesting. The list for the 1962 TSA convention in San Angelo includes Russell, Reddell, Evans, Lindsley, Kunath, Knox, and a few others still around today. I was also surprised to note Preston McMichael, discoverer of Deep Cave, with whom I would later become a good friend. Others prominent at that time such as Meador, Vinson, Estes, Frank, White, and Hunt would fade into the shadows. The project at Powell’s Cave in 1964 was something of landmark due to the relatively large attendance. Those present were requested to register and that list is something of a time capsule for who was caving 50+ years ago (see Texas Caver for September 1964, page 127). There were 111 names on the list (including the owner). Of those, fewer than 20 are still involved in Texas caving today, even to the slightest degree, and only 10 could be listed as active members of the caving world. Texas caving was in its infancy and almost all in attendance were youngsters—many still students. The median age might have been 25. These days, the median age of Texas cavers is likely nearer 40 and relatively few are students.

One aspect of Texas caving that deserves a serious look is our access to the caves. I read through the guidebook that was prepared for visitors to the 1978 NSS Convention headquartered at New Braunfels, Texas. The purpose of this book was to orient visitors to Texas and to guide them to and through some of the more significant caves. Here is a contemporary look at the caves listed in the “Selected Caves” portion of the book:

**Airman’s Cave:** Ho-Hum . . . another rescue in Airman’s Cave. With great regularity, explorers (mostly beginning amateurs) become lost or stuck within Airman’s Cave. It is almost a routine thing and local emergency agencies are good about contacting Austin cavers to get them out with a minimum of fuss and bother. It’s a wonder it hasn’t been closed as a public nuisance and hazard.

**Bracken Bat Cave:** Now the property of Bat Conservation International. Closed for casual visits but there is a near-annual guano-gathering weekend and occasional escorted visits are available if you know the right people to contact.

**Cascade Caverns:** Was a going commercial venture with a friendly owner/manager and a relatively new visitor center. It is currently open after intermittent closures and is in great disrepair although there is currently (2010) an effort to cleanup the cave and modernize the electrical system. The last of three mapping efforts is fairly good. Diving has recently extended the known length of the cave.

**Caverns of Sonora:** Remains a successful commercial cave and has benefited from a program to remove construction rubble and other problem construction artifacts from the cave. Zero off-trail activity permitted. Still no quality map. There was a small celebration in 2005 to mark the 50th anniversary of the discovery of the decorated portions of the cave. Jack Burch, the father figure of the cave, died in 2009.

**Century Caverns:** It now seems that the name has reverted to Cave Without A Name, CWAN for short. After the death of longtime owner Eugene Ebell, it was acquired by Tom Summers and is a successful enterprise.

**Devil’s Sinkhole:** Now owned by the State of Texas. Visitation is severely restricted and no trips are allowed merely for the sport value. Visitors are bused from Rocksprings for the evening bat flight. An extensive LIDAR project has created an amazing 3-D map of the sinkhole portion of the cave.

**Emerald Sink, Langtry Lead Cave, and Langtry Quarry Cave:** Once free access is now either forbidden, sold like tickets to a theme park, or so difficult to achieve that no one wants to bother.

**Enchanted Rock Cave:** Another cave owned by the State of Texas. Overall visitation is controlled with a quota system. It is still just a crevice in the exfoliating granite.

**Fern Cave:** Closed to all but occasional well-connected trips. This is possibly the largest cave by volume in Texas and has been closed to most cavers for at least 40 years.

**Gorman Cave:** The cave and the surrounding area have been acquired by the State of Texas and is known as Colorado Bend State Park. Cavers have a working alliance with the officials and there are regular project trips. Liaison has been a bit spotty through the years but known caves are being mapped, new caves are being discovered, and it provides a structured environment for new cavers to get underground. Due to WNS, Gorman cave is currently off limits to all except bat researchers.

**Inner Space Cavern:** Continues to benefit from its fortuitous location in the shadow of Interstate 35. James Jasek and others managed to produce a quality map of this very complex cave. Off-trail visitation is severely restricted.

**Longhorn Cavern:** Remains a concession licensed from the State of Texas. Has permitted occasional off-trail exploration and surveying. Recent caving trips have been more in the nature of orienting new cavers although historic entrances have been reopened. A proposed TSA project would allow more cavers access to the cave.

**Natural Bridge Caverns:** Quite likely the most successful commercial cave venture in Texas and certainly one of the most successful in the US. Still owned and operated by descendents of the Heidemann family. There was a big to-do to mark the 50th anniversary of the discovery of the spectacular part of the cave. The three living members of the discovery party (Joe Cantu, Preston Knodell, and Orion Knox) were reunited for the first time since the discovery day.

**Terlingua Sinkhole:** This amazing feature is still accessible by contacting the people supervising the property and remains a “must see” on the “caving in Texas list.”

What about the other great caves of Texas that we enjoyed in earlier years but were not included in the above chapter?

**Amazing Maze Cave:** The quintessential 3D maze cave of the state; makes Powell’s Cave look easy to navigate. The first survey was rather poor so there is now another project on-going to remap the cave with organized trips a few times a year.
Deep/Punkin: TCMA acquired these caves and 225 acres of land in the immediate area in 2004. Through the years improvements have been made to the property and a system of visitation has been established. The caves continue to grow, at least on paper. A typical survey trip at Punkin consists of a few dozen survey shots averaging eight feet long through a maze of cemented breakdown.

Honey Creek Cave: It is the longest cave in Texas at 20+ miles and exploration continues by diving the remote sumps. A core hole entrance was created in 1985 and occasional trips are coordinated with the friendly landowners.

Indian Creek Cave: It has been closed since Fred Mason died and Dolph Briscoe acquired the property back in the 1970s. Very occasionally, someone gains access to collect biological specimens or take a water sample but in reality, Texas cavers don’t get to visit this one. Things could be changing. Briscoe died in 2010.

Kickapoo Cavern: After being closed for many years, the Texas Parks system acquired the cave and surrounding acreage in 1986. Part of the cave is open for staff-guided tours but not for recreational caving.

Midnight Cave: One of Texas’ best-decorated wild caves is still available on a limited basis. This is one of the few bright spots in Texas caving.

O-9 Well: Now controlled by the State of Texas and managed by TCMA. Joe Ivy died here in September 2000 and sort of changed the rules of visitation.

Palmito (Grutas de Bustamante): For years, Texas cavers led the effort to preserve and restore this cave. One of the side effects is that the cave is now commercial and we can no longer have our “play” trips there. Shot ourselves in the foot so to speak.

Plateau Cave: The Texas cave with the deepest single pit by far at 240 feet, had its entrance closed by dynamite in January 1975. There are no real prospects for visitation.

Powell’s Cave: After three “complete” surveys the cave is once again without attention. It doesn’t seem that Texas cavers are capable of requiting this nearly 50-year-old project.

Robber Baron Cave: After an incredible multi-year effort by mostly San Antonio cavers, the entrance was stabilized, the surrounding area landscaped and the cave is available for supervised visitation. This is one of the real success stories in Texas caving. The mystery passages are still a mystery.

Other Great Texas Caves

Felton, Harrison, BMC, Bradford, Fern, Fawcett’s, Cave of the Lakes, and others:

These classic Texas caves are all severely restricted and unavailable to the average Texas caver. It is not a pretty picture and doesn’t bode well for the future of Texas caving as a sport avocation. It is no wonder that the number of Texas caving clubs has declined by half from its mid-1970s peak. Where are the new cavers to go? You can only make so many trips to Whirlpool Cave, Avery Ranch Cave and “Goat Cave #17” before needing to move on. Texas has been simultaneously blessed and cursed with the situation where nearly all the land is privately owned. This both protects and restricts the caves. In recent years, quite a few of the more significant caves have been acquired by various State agencies (Gorman, Kickapoo, O-9 Well, Devil’s Sinkhole, Fawcett’s, et al) and that trend may continue.

I do agree that it is harder to find new caves these days and the increasing prevalence of absentee landowners and the ever more litigious nature of our society compound the issue. However, while bemoaning the fate of the present-day would-be Texas caver, I’ll hasten to add that there is a noticeable lack of initiative. Whereas in earlier days, cavers would actually roam the back roads, knocking on doors and inquiring about caves, there was actually a recent spate of postings on CaveTex (TexasCavers) wherein beginning cavers were whining that no one was taking them by the hand and leading them on caving trips. It’s a sad situation.

We cannot hope to do justice to the last 50 years of Texas caving in these few pages available to us for this occasion. What we can do is to set a waypoint, a point of reference to perhaps grasp more clearly where we came from and a glimpse of what happened along the way.

What better way to tell something of the legend and history of Texas caving than to hear from some of the greatest figures of earlier eras. For each decade, a few principal cavers were offered the opportunity to share their perspective from any point of view they might choose. Only about a third responded. Interestingly, many voiced a common theme which might be summed up as: “We were inexperienced, impoverished, and wildly enthusiastic. We felt the opportunities were limitless and, MAN!, what fun we had.” Here are their comments with no organization other than a rough timeline based on their most active years in Texas caving. It makes fascinating reading.

Carl Kunath

—-
The first 16 Texas Caver covers, all by Bill Helmer.
The Texas Caver

On the facing page is a chart showing the details of the Texas Caver for 55 years. It’s not enough just to have the chart for that alone will not provide a full picture of the publication that has been so all-important to Texas caving. It will not adequately tell the story of the drama and trauma that accompanied many issues of the Caver and almost all changes of Editor.

The Caver began in October 1955 as a joint project of the Balcones and UT Grottos. Later, when the Texas Region was formed, the Caver was adopted as the official voice of the Region. For the first years, the Caver was produced by a somewhat variable staff and there was no designated Editor. The first issues were usually six-eight pages and were produced by the Ditto process using multi-colored masters and yellow paper. They were always embellished with Bill Helmer’s artwork. Press runs were necessarily short and original copies are exceedingly rare today. The second issue asked for $1.00 donations to defray start-up costs of $54.15 including a $42.00 Ditto machine. The January 1956 issue contained this subscription information: “The Texas Caver is a monthly news bulletin published by the cooperation of all caving groups in the state. Its main function is to inform Texans about Texas cave activity. In order to receive this paper send your name and address along with one dollar to: The Texas Caver, 5713 Avenue G, Austin, Texas.”

Beginning with the September 1956 issue, the Caver changed its format to 8.5 x 7 inch (folded from 8.5 x 14 inch) on regular white paper and the subscription price increased to $1.50 (postage was 2 cents an issue). Pictures were included for the first time in the January-February 1958 issue. By April, subscriptions were $2.00 a year. For the next couple of years, reproduction quality varied considerably but was generally quite good. These issues are also very scarce. The Caver went through some hard times during the late 1950s and managed only two issues in 1960. In 1961, James Estes became the Editor and introduced a Caver in 8.5 x 11 inch format, offset printed. The text was laboriously justified into two columns by typing everything twice. James did an absolutely amazing job with the Caver, keeping it on a regular schedule for four years. It put new life into Texas caving.

The Caver went to Pete Lindsley and the Dallas-Ft. Worth cavers for 1965 and 1966. Here, timeliness was not quite so good and technical problems caused a couple of issues with a poor appearance.

By 1967, the Dallas cavers had enough and the Caver returned to Abilene with George Gray as Editor. For a year or two things went well and then it fell behind. By 1969, George’s editorial policies were causing some dissatisfaction and the whole affair began a downward spiral.

Commencing with January 1970, Carl Kunath became Editor, there was a new staff, the Caver had a totally new look and was once again produced on a regular schedule. Again, the TSA was revitalized.

The next few years saw the editorship rotate every year; this was probably a healthy condition. All went well until late 1976 when the final issues were produced out of sequence. By 1977, the Caver sputtered to eight issues and ceased to function as a timely newsletter. The last five issues for 1977 were not completed until 1980. For the next four years, the editorship was shared (James Jasek as principal Editor) and the number of issues reduced to six.

In 1981, James Jasek took sole responsibility, produced the Caver for an additional three years, and was again principal Editor for another year in 1984. This is an amazing record of service to the Texas caving community. James was a principal of the Caver for 15 years and was Editor or co-Editor for nine of those years. Eventually, he also tired of the mostly unrewarding grind and the Caver sputtered along as various schemes were tried to stabilize the publication: Rotating editorship, every other month, four times a year—nothing seemed to help and there was always a shortage of money.

Because the Caver had always been a voluntary subscription and not something included with a membership in TSA—a bizarre condition unlike any other organization that I am aware of—it was all too easy to rationalize not subscribing. Generally, the price of a year’s subscription was the equivalent of ten gallons of gasoline—something that even the most poverty-stricken caver could afford if desired. It was never clear to the majority that the Caver needed general support if it was to function as the voice of Texas caving. For many years, the Caver was the only practical means of mass communication among Texas cavers. Long distance telephone was relatively expensive in those days, and many students had no telephone. There was no e-mail, and word-of-mouth was not reliable. US mail was the only reasonable method of communication and the Caver, if issued on a regular monthly basis, was the ideal conduit for news and information about coming events.

In the 1990s, one never knew when or if a Caver would be produced. The situation became so bad that the TSA Activities Newsletter was started. This simple two-sided mailing was an attempt to do what the Caver was not: Inform the membership of the TSA. In time, this was also made available “on-line” as Internet connections became common in the caving world.

Mike Moore rejuvenated the Caver in 2001 and produced five very timely, well-edited issues before he was struck down by lymphoma in March 2002.

In the years that followed, the Caver was produced spasmodically by a series of Editors of varying abilities and dedication. It has finally become a quarterly publication of somewhat variable quality and no longer serves as a newsletter—that function now being served by the TexasCaver listserv, Facebook, etc. Unfortunately, the present Caver does not serve as a historic repository as it carries no regular trip reports nor does it report on important Texas caving events such as the annual TSA Convention. Recently, TSA has begun charging an extra fee for those who want a printed copy of the Texas Caver.
### Texas Caver Statistics

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* A third issue for 2004 has been proposed
Texas cavers of all eras offer their view of how things were “back in the day.”

Carroll Slemaker (Early 1950s caver and UT Grotto founding member):

My impression is that many caving trips today are occasions for some wild partying whereas I never saw anything like that 50 years ago. This was not because of any moral objections to such behavior—believe me; I have participated in some pretty wild parties in my time including late-night group skinny-dips in the ocean. Rather, it simply never occurred to any of us to view a caving trip as an occasion for a party. There certainly was a strong sense of camaraderie and bonding among the members of a group tackling a challenging cave and I can appreciate the bond reinforcement such parties could produce. I suppose this was an enjoyable aspect of caving we overlooked.

On our initial trips, small pits and entrances were climbed hand-over-hand on rope—I routinely carried a fifty-foot coil of ½-inch hemp rope for this purpose. Deeper entrance pits were negotiated by hoisting, either by muscle-power (our initial descent into Dead Man's Hole) or by tying the rope to the bumper of a car (Devil's Sinkhole). If anyone rappelled, it was by the old rope-between-the-legs-up-the-back-and-over-the-shoulder style (ouch!) and ascent was by prusik knot. But in preparing for my big trip to Mexico, a friend and I manufactured 500 feet of lightweight cable ladder and this became our standard thereafter.

The head-mounted carbide lamp (initially on soft caps for some of us!) was the mainstay light source in those early days. It was wise to take along an extra felt disc, extra tip, tip reamer, and of course a supply of carbide for any trip lasting more than three hours or so. Unfortunately, our ecology sensitivity in those days was not up to today's standards and spent carbide was disposed of in any convenient crevice. To eliminate this disposal problem and the inconvenience of occasional lamp recharging, I purchased a hand-held carbide lamp which had much larger water and carbide reservoirs. I then removed the reflector and tip assembly, made a bracket for attachment to my helmet, attached the reflector assembly to the bracket, and connected the generator to the reflector assembly by a long, thin plastic tube. The generator was carried in a canteen cover attached to my belt and the tube was run beneath my clothing and out by my neck. Supplemental light sources were candles, flashlights, and for some caves, a gasoline lantern.

In Texas and the far West (and in Mexico), unlike the East, caves were not a significant business enterprise and caving was not practiced by a large number of enthusiasts. Therefore, if you were respectful of landowners, asked permission before wandering around their property or entering their caves, reviewed your discoveries with them afterwards, and carefully closed all gates after passing through, permission would not be denied. In Mexico, my partner and I simply showed up at Cacahuamilpa with no prior notice, explained that we wanted to explore and photograph, and were given the run of the cave unaccompanied. They even left the lights on for us!

Robert McClure (Early ’50s UT caver):

In the fall of 1953 I went to my first meeting of UTSS in the large auditorium in the bottom floor of the geology building. I had met Jerry Chastain the previous summer in an English class we were both taking. The speaker was (I think) Ace Thomas. Since it sounded like fun, I joined up.

Joe Pearce (Early ’50s UT and Balcones caver; staff member of the early Texas Caver):

In early 1953, my neighbor, R. T. (Scotty) Scott would drive in Sunday afternoon, all muddy, red-faced and with a jack-ass-eating-cactus grin on his face. He had been caving all weekend. Seemed like fun, so I asked if I could join him sometime. It seems I had to undergo some kind of training, trial, initiation, or whatever to join the group. I agreed.

A couple of days later, he took me to the local Academy Army surplus where I bought used army fatigues, boots, and a liner to a WWII helmet. Also, a carbide lantern which somehow we attached to the helmet, a flashlight with lots of batteries and, oh yes, candles and waterproof matches—three sources of light. I was prepared.

The next Saturday, he took me to the McNeil limestone plant about twenty miles northwest of Austin, and drove way to the back. We got out and approached what he called Rail Road Cave. In a small hill, there was a hole just about large enough to hunker in if you stooped and duck walked. He took the lead and I followed. We finally had to stop hunkering and had to start crawling. It was a new sensation, but it didn’t get to me and I thought if he can do it, so can I. We crawled and wiggled for probably about twenty or thirty feet and came to a somewhat circular room where we could semi-stand. Total darkness. My first. I loved it. We sat and sat and sat. Finally, I asked what next. When do we leave? He said, “We’re waiting.” Soon I felt a kind of vibration, then a rumble. It increased to huge proportions. Dirt begins to fall around us. My instinct was to dash out, but if he didn’t move, neither was I. It seems there was a train above us moving cars. I don’t know how many feet above us, but I don’t think it was too much. After the train had passed, Scotty led me out and congratulated me on not panicking. It seems I passed the first test. He didn’t take into account the fact that I was probably partially frozen with fear.

But all was not over. Much remains. The next weekend, we returned to somewhat the same area to Mural Cave. This was a much larger cave with a top sinkhole entrance; probably about 20 feet from the surface to the floor. Seems like I went down a rope, sliding and braking with gloves. Mural was, or had been, a pretty little cave. Circular and 30 feet or so in circumference, it had a few formations that had not been destroyed. Yet, I was held in fascination. This was it. I was in love. I wanted more. After an hour or so, a cable ladder was lowered. You newbies do know what a cable ladder is, don’t you? It took a little practice for me to get the hang of it, but I did get the feel and clambered up to the surface. What an exhilaration! I was hooked. Bring on the next cave. Let’s go to Carlsbad! Actually, we did—several years later for a fantastic trip, . . . . But I left Scotty in Mural coming up the ladder. He was about four feet from the surface when he stopped. Actually, he froze. In a small hole in the wall, there was a copperhead facing him about fifteen inches away. Scotty had a bad leg, so he didn’t want to turn loose and drop. It was a waiting game. The snake gave up and backed out and Scotty zoomed out.
I had passed. I could go with the big boys—and I did, almost every weekend to the chagrin of my wife and two daughters. There was still a lot to learn and I hope I did. We later formed the Balcones Grotto and started the *Texas Caver*. We all became members of the NSS and the Balcones Grotto officially recognized. I printed the *Texas Caver* in my home on a mimeograph machine. Yep . . . cranked them right out on colored sheets. Stapled them together and mailed them out for two dollars a year. What a bargain. We were dumb lucky colored sheets. Stapled them together and mailed them out for a mimeograph machine. Yep . . . cranked them right out on colored sheets. Stapled them together and mailed them out for two dollars a year. What a bargain. We were dumb lucky colored sheets. Stapled them together and mailed them out for two dollars a year. What a bargain. We were dumb lucky colored sheets. Stapled them together and mailed them out for two dollars a year. What a bargain. We were dumb lucky colored sheets. Stapled them together and mailed them out for two dollars a year.

We didn’t do deep vertical or underwater. Just didn’t have the means. But we (Benny Pearson and I) often looked longingly over the Rio Grande and said someday, we’re going over there. Benny knew that was a fertile area for caving. But we had enough caves in our own back yard to look for and explore. It was a hoot!!!

**Don Goodson (Mid ’50s UT caver):**

First, I knew Jerry Chastain in high school and in college. For some reason I found myself at the "spelunker club meeting" in that large geology building lecture room in 1953. Uel Clanton was the outgoing president. Uel was finishing his Ph.D. in geology and going out into the cold cruel world and an election of a new president was taking place. Ace Thomas was there as was Roy Pietsch and a few other "old timer" geology major spelunkers. Jerry Chastain was nominated to be the new president. He made some excuse as to why he could not perform these duties—new job as photographer for the *Texan*, or some such. I clearly recall my surprise when Jerry looked out at the audience, and said, "I nominate Don Goodson." I suppose that none of the others wanted the job and since it was my first spelunker meeting, I was elected. I went on to serve two or three terms as president. Prof. Austin Phelps was the club sponsor in those days. I saw him only once—on the first spelunker outing I went on. I rode in the back seat of his old Studebaker along with his huge Great Dane. Phelps pulled up very close to a car in the right lane at the stoplight at 49th and Lamar. His rear seat window was adjacent to the driver’s seat window of the new Buick in that lane. The driver of that Buick was engaged in animated conversation with his pretty passenger. The Great Dane stuck his head out of the Studebaker window, well into the widow of the Buick, and let out a loud "WOOF" as Phelps pulled away. I can still recall the image of the driver of the Buick draped over the back of his seat, looking at the ceiling of his car, with a wide-eyed, mouth agape expression on his face. Such was my introduction to UTSS.

Later, we had financial problems in the club. The decision was made to advertise the club, pull in a lot of members, get their dues, and take them on the "spelunker trip to Hell" to run them off.

That was the first huge trip to the Devil's Sinkhole. It first rained that night, then turned cold and rain became sleet. A bunch of us in our sleeping bags were huddled together for warmth. Bob Holder threw a big tarp over us that kept us at least dry if not warm (I never did find out just who that cute gal was that I slept back-to-back with that night.).

Our carefully laid financial plans backfired. Almost every new spelunker on that trip became a regular. And, that was the trip on which, as I recall, the girls found out that there were BOYS in the UTSS! How many marriages came out of that club? McClure's. Kyser's. Propsma's. Hannah's. . . .

**Bill Helmer (Mid ’50s UT caver and staff member of the early Texas Caver):**

When I got to UT in the fall of ’54 I joined what we called the University of Texas Speleological Society (UTSS), which was an offshoot of the Balcones Grotto that included Roy Pietsch and Joe Pearce, with Jerry Chastain and Bob McClure members, apparently, of both. We did the first *Texas Cavers* on a color copier of some kind in Roy Pietsch's basement. My hardhat has a 2 x 6 inch professionally printed "University of Texas Speleological Society" adhesive sticker on the back with a longhorn logo.

**Danny Sheffield (Mid ’50s Dallas caver and member of the Mayfield discovery trip):**

I am a very lucky man. My first cave trip included a few minutes at the Devil's Sinkhole (at night), a few hours at another small cave (home of many bats) [Red Arrow], and Mayfield Cave. From that time on, it was always Mayfield Cave. My wife came along once and we had several trips with Bob and Bart Crisman. Our party from Dallas was usually Claude Head, Jack Prince, myself, and two or three various others.

The highlight of my caving, of course, was crossing the ledge and seeing the unbelievable beauty of Mayfield Cave. Another highlight for me was the night we had an outdoor slide show for Stanley Mayfield, the cave owner, and some of his friends out by the cave. We jury rigged an inverter on the tailgate of the station wagon to change the 6 volt DC power from the car battery to AC power for the 35 mm projector. He was so impressed with the pictures that he set up a cave tour for his friends (he would not go) and a barbecue to follow, the next day.

Another highlight was the day we had to kill a rattlesnake that was sleeping on a small ledge about 10 inches below the surface at the entrance to the cave [see page 403 in *50 Years*].

**Bill Russell (UT caver from the mid ’50s to date; Texas’ senior caver from several points of view):**

My formative years as a caver were during the ’50s just after the dawn of Texas caving. The world was not as serious, time was not as controlled, and the possibilities for the future seemed infinite. Work in Austin was plentiful, rents were low, and spending a year or two to exploring Mexico or mapping a cave was an exciting option. A group of talented cavers had assembled around the University; they had their own table in the dining room [Chuckwagon] where they met to plan trips and socialize.

Caving was new and we experimented with everything. Flashlights were too awkward, Coleman lanterns were large, hot, and delicate, but carbide lights were just right and could be mounted on a hardhat. At first most trips were north to the Gorman Falls area and surrounding counties; soon adventurous cavers realized there was great potential in West Texas. Edwards County with caves like the Devil's Sinkhole, Dunbar, and Felton became a common objective. Caving in west Texas required overnight trips and this led to difficulties as women wanted to go.
along and their movements were tightly restricted by the University. To be out overnight women had to sign out of the dormitory, and could only go on trips accompanied by an approved chaperone. This difficulty was overcome by establishing a system of caver safe houses that the women could sign out to, and when their housemother called to check, someone would assure her that all was well. It was great fun and we were hugely creative with our equipment, primitive though it now might seem. Trips to the Devil's Sinkhole, just called "The Sinkhole," used thick manila rope, a parachute harness, and a car to lower cavers. I can remember spending the night huddled together with others under a canvas tarp and a thin blanket as a freezing rain covered the tarp with ice. A norther' blew through and we were not prepared, but we went caving next day.

At the Carlsbad NSS convention in 1960, Texans discovered SRT [single rope technique], and the world changed. A vicious fight rocked the UT Grotto as the more conservative denounced the unsafe new methods. But the word was out: a small group could push the deepest caves then known; elaborate expeditions were no longer necessary.

Then we discovered Mexico. Cars, trucks, third class Mexican buses, and even trains rolled south with cavers and rope and the wonders increased: Palmito, Huitzomolotitla, Ventana Jabali, and Golondrinas. Texans became world-class cavers.

The NSS was a great help in organization and progress, but communication was sporadic and they seemed far away. So we invented the organizations we needed: the TSA to bring cavers together, the TSS to document our caves, and the AMCS to bring Mexico to the caving world.

The ‘60s were a good time to be a caver, but then the national mood darkened. Draft numbers became important and students had to get serious about school. Cavers and students joined the thousands of marchers that filled Austin streets to protest the continuation of the Vietnam War. The "all-caving all-the-time" Kirkwood lifestyle was no longer possible. Caves were the same, but the world was not.

Art Simpson (Mid-late 1950s UT caver and Chairman of the 1959 Project at Felton Cave):

I joined UTSS in the fall of ‘56, so the Texas Caver is about a year older than me, selenologically speaking. I do remember some of the covers shown on page 347 in 50 Years of Texas Caving; I mean I remember them when they first came out. But it has taken the Caver staff all the way till now to ever ask me for a written contribution. My first six caver meetings were in some nice little old lady's living room on Nueces Street where Fred Berner had arranged for her to give us a First Aid course on our regular weekly meeting night, so we could all become Qualified Cavers. After that, regular caver meetings (every Wednesday night in the Geology building) for weeks and weeks were taken up with arguments for and against removing the "Long Rappel" from the Qualified Caver Requirements, because nobody ever did it twice and we never used it in a cave. That, and arguments about staying out of trouble while taking undergraduate coeds overnight camping took up whole caver meetings. I had to learn to spell "chaperone" correctly, and to define it loosely. You might recall that, in those days, coeds had to be inside their dorms or approved rooming houses by 11:00 pm weekdays and by 1:00 am Fridays and Saturdays, else there would be a trip to the Dean of Women's office, and an 8:00 pm curfew imposed for some period of time as a punishment. The term "coed dorm" was either an oxymoron or else the punch line of a good joke.

So what was caving like back then? When I arrived on the scene, the club was well into a new plan to "qualify" people to lead caving trips. "Qualified Cavers" were considered worthy to lead others on cave trips. We had to learn knots and rigging, some first aid, and how to make Sam Goldwater's carbide lamp work. Sam's was absolutely the most temperamental lamp I ever saw or heard about. If you could survive with it, you could surely fix anything that you might ever need to, even in pitch black. We had to learn to wrap our arms and legs around a cable ladder. "Treat it like a woman," we were told. Later, I got in a lot of trouble when I tried to climb a girl that way! We had to listen to lectures from our mentors about cave conservation and rancher relations. We had to know what equipment to have along, and demonstrate proper use of same. Not much different now I would imagine, but we were perhaps a little more formal with it then. And maybe there were a few other things, but the giant killer of the whole ordeal, in those days, was the dreaded "long rappel."

We did not know about ring rappels yet; we only knew the body rappel (see page 500 in 50 Years). Here Ronnie Fieseler is taking some of his weight on his feet and on the foot-shoulder-and-elbow chimney. He is (correctly!) not wearing gloves, but note the rope still cutting hard high up under his left thigh. We were doing 30 to 50 foot drops out in free space; you can get quite a nasty rope burn in your crotch and on your shoulder that way no matter how you try to pad yourself. And indeed you must not wear gloves—you cannot always grip the rope tightly enough with gloves—so you often get a bit of a palm burn too.

One gal, practicing out on the Balcones cliffs west of Austin, rolled over backwards and made the whole descent bottom-side-up with her back toward the cliff face! Of course the safety line tender was carrying most of her weight on a belay, so he got the rope burns! She made it all the way down, though admittedly the head first landing, with both hands preoccupied, was none too graceful. And the air did turn a bit blue with great cacophonies of her colorful linguistics. She was a grad student majoring in English and she did have a fully functional vocabulary. That performance precipitated the following bit of doggerel:

Our eyes light up  
Our spirits soar 
Our hearts within us swell. 
It thrills us through 
Each time we view 
That upside down rappel.

Such daring do,  
Such savoir-faire 
Our wonder doth compel. 
We dance with glee 
When e'er we see 
That upside down rappel.

The arguments about the long rappel were all in the Caver issues of that time; it finally got resolved, not by the effusive eloquence of our debating, but by the introduction of the ring or karabiner rappel sometime in ‘57 or ‘58. There was also the coed camping
issue, about which there was nary a word in the *Caver*; we wanted no written record of who said what about that argument. Some leaned toward writing out and formalizing our policies and rules for chaperoning, etc. so as to keep the club and the University out of trouble when we got in trouble (Cuz we knew we were gonna’). Others, including most of the girls, wanted as much loose informality as the club Faculty Sponsor would allow. In fact if our speleo-fems had any one thing in common, it was a quiet aversion to convention and formality and an overt antipathy toward arbitrary regulations. The Faculty Sponsor wanted nothing to do with the whole argument. He quit coming to the meetings.

In UTSS, there was a smaller group within the group known affectionately as “Russell's Idiots.” This gung-ho guy named Bill Russell had his own little cadre of stalwart associates who caved together all the time. The rest of us took courses at UT; these guys did too, but somehow they went caving even during the week! Bill Russell was the first caver I ever saw in full regalia. He showed up at a meeting one Wednesday evening with his gang just coming in off a caving trip to tell us what they had found that afternoon. He was still in hardhat and carbide lamp, with canteen, carbide bottle, and two flashlights all on his belt, dirty coveralls, muddy boots—the whole nine yards. Now this was not in the geology building; it was in the nice little First Aid lady's kitchen on Nueces Street, just in time for cookies and hot chocolate at the end of our session.

Every few meetings there would be reports of new exploits, new caves, or the need for a new barrel of carbide; all attributed to “Russell's Idiots.” And I do mean that this was a term of endearment and sincere admiration—envy even. The derisive character of the moniker was clearly meant humorously. My freshman physics lab partner, Bob Smith, was one of them, but they were not often at meetings or club parties; they were always off caving, so I cannot name any more of them today. Tom White and T. R. Evans, I believe, joined this sub-group a bit later while they were still in high school there in Austin.

All this before I ever got near a cave! A lesser man could have wept! My first overnight caving trip was to Dunbar and to one other similar cave that I have forgotten now—maybe it was Red Arrow. I remember Dunbar as four or five medium-large rooms. As I recall, there were about 12 or 15 of us there, so some did one thing while others did another.

Being conscientious about the “rules,” I brought, not three, but five light sources. Well, I was using the borrowed aforesaid notoriously suspect carbide lamp of Sam Goldwater's. I had two good rubberized “waterproof” flashlights from scout camping days, and another little metal drugstore one, and a bunch of paraffin dipped kitchen matches and a few candle stubs. Would you believe, in simple Dunbar Cave, I needed them all! The two good flashlights were borrowed from me, underground, and run off with; Sam's lamp quit as promised; the cheap metal flashlight got squashed and I had to find my matches and get a candle lit, alone, in the pitch black of one of those tight squeeze-ways. The trip plan had been to visit Dunbar on the first day, and the second cave on the next day but Dunbar is pretty easy. We had camped somewhere nearby the night before, and we were done with Dunbar before noon, so we headed over to the second cave, finished it off before suppertime, and we still had another night and day to go. Thus there developed a serious argument among the trip leaders as to where to spend our spare day. It went on from suppertime until long after dark. I went to my sleeping bag and did not learn the final outcome until the next morning. I remember demanding to know if I was joining a caving club or a debating society!

Seems there was this wonderful new cave not too far away, where some guy from Dallas a year or so back had braved a horrendous traverse of a narrow ledge some 90 feet off the floor, to find indescribable cave beauty. (It was really 40 feet; the guy was Jack Prince (story on page 404, picture on page 497 in *50 Years*). But the word was out, and had been agreed to by all, that no one could be shown this wondrous new cave until he had previously been on at least two overnighters to other big caves, else he would never appreciate what he was experiencing, and would forever be frustrated by the fact that he would not likely find its like again. His attitude toward cave conservation had to have been incontestably demonstrated before being shown this one. So already I am a bone of contention—me and a couple of others who did not have the Regionally agreed upon prerequisites to be taken to *Mayfield* Cave. (They kept whispering so as not to let us know even the name of it.)

But we went! And I’ve been a caver at heart ever since! And this writing stops here because what happened that next day was, as you could well imagine, absolutely beyond description! It was Mayfield; nothing more need be said.

James Estes (Abilene caver from the late ‘50s until the early ‘70s; Editor of the *Texas Caver* from 1961-1964; Chairman of the 1964 NSS Convention in New Braunfels):

In August of 1957 I had never thought about crawling into a hole in the ground. That all changed within two months. While reviewing several trips I had taken to commercial caves, I decided to go to the Abilene Public Library during my lunch hour. For some strange reason I went to the magazine section and, lo and behold, there were several issues of the *NSS News*, and a copy of *NSS Bulletin Ten*. One issue of the *News* had a few items from the Abilene Grotto and immediately I began reading. There was a letter from Bart Crisman, local caver since 1953, telling about his 30-foot fall in New Mexico’s Ogle Cave. I jotted down the name, looked it up in the telephone book, and called Mr. Crisman. After telling him of my interest, he invited me over. So, with nervous anticipation, I drove over, and he met me at the door.

Oh-oh. Crisman was on crutches! He hadn't yet healed from his fall. But before leaving his home and after meeting a new friend, he had signed me up as a member of the Abilene Grotto and I sent my dues to the NSS. As a new member of the Abilene Grotto, my first caving trip was to what was then called Secret Cave, or Mayfield Cave. When Crisman told us where we were going (we had seen photos of it) one of the newer members asked, stuttering, “I-is th-that that cave with th-that big ledge we have to c-cross?” It sure was, and I went, and I did it.

Caving is one of the best and most uniquely enjoyable things I have ever done. I was an active member of the Grotto and the TSA, Chairman of the NSS convention at New Braunfels in 1964, received the NSS Fellow award, and was privileged to meet many cavers throughout the state of Texas.

Other things I remember through the years: Editor of the *Caver* for four years, attending NSS conventions at Carlsbad, Chattanooga, and New Braunfels, almost freezing to death while changing a tire at Harrison Cave, many TSA projects too numerous to mention, and those delicious chicken fried steaks at the Cactus Cafe in San Saba where we often gathered for TSA
meetings. I could write a long book on my caving experiences, and perhaps some day I will.

Yes, I treasure all those wonderful years—perhaps the better part of my life. I am now almost eighty years of age, but still in good shape. It must have something to do with breathing cave air, trudging in guano, or all that great Mexican food in San Angelo through the years.

Bob Mitchell (Noted bio-speleologist, teacher, early Mexico caver, and consummate photographer) [Editor’s note: Bob was prompt to submit this essay upon my request. I regret that it was not published before his untimely death in March 2010.]

Back in the ‘50s when I was an undergraduate biology major at Texas Tech, I met Don Hunsaker, a graduate student in biology, who was always involved in some adventure or another. It was he who was responsible for my first caving experience; he and I went to Balmorhea and did the wet and dry caves there. Not long afterwards, we went to Ezell’s Cave, and at about this same time I went with Dr. Russell Strandmann of TTU (who was to become my major professor), to the Devil’s Sinkhole. Those were the days when you tied a rope to the car bumper and lowered people into the hole! I then spent a couple of years in the Air Force and had the good fortune to be stationed in San Antonio, where we spent a lot of time going to central Texas caves. A teaching job called me to Lamar University in Beaumont in the late ‘50s, and there I met an English professor, Ab Abernathy, who was to become a life-long friend and cave-exploring buddy. It was he and I that mounted the great Sótano de Huitzmolotitla expedition in 1960. We dragged a large winch and drum of cable to the edge of the pit and lowered each other into the hole. Shortly before the Huitzmolotitla venture, I met a couple of other people, also to become a life-long friends and collaborators: James Reddell and Bill Russell.

These early caving ventures set the stage for an academic career in the study of cave animals. In the early ‘60s I headed to UT Austin for graduate work, studying the rhadinid beetles in Beck’s Ranch Cave. After a great five years at UT, I came full circle and wound up back at TTU. During my 26 years at Tech I was involved in a variety of cave-related studies and had the pleasure to be associated on one project or another with James Reddell, Bill Russell, Bill Elliott, Suzanne Wiley, Terry Raines, David McKenzie, Don Broussard and others in the Austin caving community. Sometime early in this work there came along compact cable ladders and Jumar ascenders so we no longer had to climb hand over hand out of Station C Cave!

My wife, Linda, and I spent three years in the late ‘80s in Malaysia, where I taught biology. We were fortunate to be able to enter and photograph in a variety of Southeast Asian caves, notably the great Batu Caves, on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur, as well as a couple of the Mulu caves in Sarawak.

There was a time not long ago when very little was known of Texas caves. Some interesting articles on early Texas caving topics were included in Bulletin Ten of the NSS—The Caves of Texas—that was spearheaded by NSS editor at the time, Charles Mohr. One of my great pleasures of many years ago was to visit Ezell’s Cave with Charles Mohr. Since the publication of that classic in 1948, a wealth of information has become available on Texas caves and cave life through the efforts of an endless procession of dedicated Texas cavers. But no one would disagree that James Reddell stands above all the rest of us for his life’s work in the study of cave animals.

Carl Kunath (Past TSA officer, past Texas Caver editor, current TSS board member, editor or contributor to numerous caving publications, and general hang-about since the early 1960s):

My experience in caving now spans 50 years. I was a city boy and somehow ended up in school at Alpine, one of the most remote portions of Texas. As students at Sul Ross State College we were on our own for entertainment. Fortunately, I fell in with another city boy, Grainger Hunt, and together we sought adventure.

As a boy of seven I was taken to Carlsbad Caverns on a family outing and was mightily impressed. When I was eight or nine, my summer camp group was allowed to roam through Flemming’s Cave near Junction, TX and, as a high school student, I visited Arden Cave, the only cave of any significance near San Angelo. All this encompassed the time period from the late 1940s through the late 1950s. Cavers were organizing in Austin but we hadn’t a clue about that.

Thus, when Grainger said he knew of a cave not far from Alpine, I was instantly eager and felt myself well qualified to join the expedition. Three of us visited OTL Cave in the fall of 1960. We roped together with a ¾-inch manila rope thereby assuring that if one fell in a bottomless pit, the others would follow. We soon discarded the rope and explored the entrance room without finding any more of the cave. With time on our hands we hiked over the hills for a visit to the Bird Mine, got lost returning to the car, and had a generally lack-luster outing. There the matter would likely have ended if not for the poor scholastic record of Harry Miles. Harry was an Alpine boy and had enrolled at UT-Austin. Harry fell in with the caver crowd and soon achieved scholastic probation. Harry appeared in Alpine in the fall of 1961 and enrolled at Sul Ross to improve his GPA enough to be readmitted to UT. Harry knew Grainger and when their conversation turned to caves, Harry became a mentor. There is a lot of talk these days about how alien visitation may have conferred advanced knowledge upon the natives and so it was with Harry and a handful of Sul Ross would-be cavers. Harry knew about hard hats, carbide lamps, carabiners, brake bars, seat slings, prusik knots, and a host of other things. Moreover, Harry had been to great caves such as Indian Creek. We soaked it up like sponges. With Harry, we returned to OTL Cave where we discovered and explored the lower levels. Harry pronounced us worthy caver prospects.

This was a clear turning point. Grainger and I attended the field trip to Indian Creek Cave at the Uvalde Texas Region Convention in 1961 and reached the South Siphon at the far end of Indian Creek Cave. Along the way we passed beneath a rope dangling in a tantalizing fashion from an upper area known as Alice’s Wonderland and were promised an opportunity to see this beautiful area on a future trip. Indian Creek was a real caver’s cave with pits and lakes and mud and pretty decorations. We were hooked!

The Sul Ross caving activity blossomed with the place and time. Because of our isolation, we were forced to be very self-reliant and were actively seeking information and contacts beyond our enclave in Alpine. We were thrilled to attend the 1962 TSA Convention in San Angelo and to become acquainted with such luminaries as James Estes, and Orion Knox, Chuck Larsen, and Bill Russell.

We didn’t fully appreciate at the time just how close we were to the “edge of the world.” During the next few years we
did some interesting and often challenging caving. We were among the first to visit Terlingua Sinkhole, the first cavers at Swallow Pit, the first at Adams’ Cave (now the deepest cave in Texas), the first at Plateau Cave (the deepest pit in a Texas cave) and we really got out and roamed the Big Bend area. We were very active at Langtry—hot on the heels of the U.T. cavers. We made many visits to all the major caves and discovered at least one additional cave of consequence. No other cavers had explored those remote regions of Texas.

It was a time of great expansion in Texas caving. In the next few years, the number of Texas caving groups would double and double again. When I graduated and returned to San Angelo, the local group was active and some of us began to investigate the caves near Carta Valley—at the time an almost unknown speleo-wilderness. In a nutshell, my early days in caving were a time of nearly unfettered freedom. Almost all the known caves were available for visitation and significant new caves were discovered with some regularity. It makes me sad to consider how things have changed and how difficult it is for new Texas cavers to enjoy the marvelous experience I and others had in those earlier times.

Ronald G. Fieseler (First at Dallas and later at Austin; extremely active from mid-’60s through the ‘70s. Edited the Texas Caver and the Texas Speleological Survey):

I was 16 when I explored Sitting Bull Falls Cave in New Mexico. With remarkable foresight, I knew I had found a lifelong interest. I immediately joined the NSS and got involved with Dallas-Ft. Worth Grotto members. With no caves in the area, we would often drive 6-10 hours on Friday night to get to southwest Texas, northern Arkansas, or southern New Mexico, go caving on Saturday, and drive home on Sunday.

In my first year or two of caving, the technical equipment was atrocious by today’s standards. Vertical work involved rigging ¼-inch manila rope, practicing body rappels, and using three manila rope prusik knots for ascending. We sewed pads to our coveralls where the rope passed over our shoulders, backs, and legs. It is a true wonder that we never suffered a bad fall as we body rappelled into caves and off of cliffs...at least we had sense enough to limit our drops to less than 50 feet. We progressed to homemade cable ladders, 7/16-inch Goldline, a set of two brake bars on two carabiners, and a single-loop seat sling. I even built a “whale tail” rappelling device and used it a couple of times until I wised up. For surveying, we often used military surplus Brunton compasses, usually marked in mils…wretched things! I think I experienced the ultimate counter-point to our early “low tech” caving days when I recently watched a BASE jumper casually leap into Gondorinas. After decades of gingerly crawling up to the edge of deep pits, it seemed absolutely horrifying and completely unnatural to my "Old Timer" eyes.

The annual TSA Project and TSA Convention were always popular. They were great places to meet other cavers, learn new skills, do some caving, and feel like you were part of a greater whole. The annual TSA Project has, more or less, been replaced by the Texas Caver Reunion. While the Project was designed around serious fieldwork, the Convention was a more formal affair—literally. In the 1960s and the early ’70s, it was common to see neckties and even some jackets or suits. In short order however, jungle boots, huaraches, and tie-dyed tee shirts became the common dress code.

About 1969-1970, I noted a subtle shift in leadership roles...from the older cavers in the Dallas-Ft. Worth, Abilene, and San Antonio Grottos to the younger cavers in the Student Grottos at UT, A&M, A&I, Southwest Texas State, Rice, Pan American and, of course CV SUCKS. Curiously, there was an interesting mix of old and young cavers in the new “leadership cults” of the AMCS, CV SUCKS, and the followers of Oztotl.

Beginning in the late ’60s, Texas cavers began to focus more and more on Mexico as the allure of giant caves and deep pits swept little, crawly Texas caves into the shadows. For the next 10 years or so, only the bright, shining star of CV SUCKS and the occasional beginner trips for grotto newcomers seemed to keep Texas caving on the radar screen. In the past few years, as gas prices have risen and as security hassles of international travel border crossings have increased, it seems that Texas caving has experienced a new popularity.

Logan McNatt (’60s and ’70s Texas caver, now serving as a TSS officer. Noted for his expertise in archeology and general longevity in the caving community):

In fall, 1955, when the first issue of The Texas Caver was published, I was five years old. My only caving experience was a 1953 trip to Carlsbad Caverns, and I didn't go off trail. I can still remember looking into the Bottomless Pit and watching my imagination disappear into unknown darkness. Ten years later I first heard about the Devil's Sinkhole from my brother Randy, who had joined the UT Grotto. In 1967 I saw my first wild cave (Fischer's Pit), and watched my brother rappel into unknown darkness. Little did I know that only one year later, I would begin entering that underground world myself and would find that it held far more than my imagination.

I did most of my Texas caving from 1968 through 1981, starting at age 18 with the Southwest Texas Grotto in San Marcos (1968-1971), then 1972-1978 with the UT Grotto in Austin, and 1979-1981 with the Aggie Speleological Society in College Station. After my first real caving trip—to River Styx Cave—I knew my life had been changed forever.

Time changes everything. Looking around, here is what I notice:

Caver Domiciles

THEN

Dormitories: The fall, 1967 SWT Grotto membership list shows 40 of 44 in dormitories.
Rent houses: Epitomized by 1307½ Kirkwood in Austin, the original Kirkwood Kaver House where $125/month was split by four to eight residents plus innumerable guests; followed by a Kirkwood Kaver neighborhood.

NOW

Many cavers own houses and land, (some with caves).

Caving vehicles

Mostly made in America and mostly passenger cars, including my 1961 Ford Fairlane, Mike Walsh’s Mustang, Keith Heuss’ 1966 Chevy Caprice, Steve & Dino’s 1954 Chevy, and the famous Plymouth station wagon. There were a few trusty old pickups: Brian Peterson’s Chevy; Terry Raines’ FuFu; Bill Elliott’s Chevy, and Ronnie Fieseler’s Chevy. Volkswagen vans appeared: Pete Strickland, Keith Heuss, Blake Harrison, and the Bundrants. Volkswagen beetles were common: Grainger Hunt,
Caves

THEN
River Styx, H.T. Miers, Indian Creek, Fern Cave, Devil’s Sinkhole, Deep, Punkin, Blowhole, Langtry Lead, Emerald Sink, Langtry Gypsum, Langtry East Gypsum, Midnight, Adams’, Cave of the Lakes, Gorman, McCarty’s, Dead Dog, O-9 Well, and Fischer’s Pit were open (there was limited access to Powell’s but Bradford, Harrison, and Fawcett’s were already closed). Other Destinations were available in Mexico (El Abra jungle chops) and New Mexico.

NOW
Closed or very restricted access to: River Styx, H.T. Miers, Indian Creek, Langtry Lead, Emerald Sink, Midnight, Adams’, McCarty’s, Fischer’s Pit, Blowhole, and Powell’s. Destroyed or sealed: Langtry Gypsum, Langtry East Gypsum, Dead Dog, Cave of the Lakes, and Plateau Cave. Deep, Punkin, Gorman, Fawcett’s, Kickapoo, Devil’s Sinkhole, Robber Baron, O-9 Well and a few others are now controlled by the TCMA, State of Texas, etc. Other Destinations: Mexico is currently considered too risky by many cavers. New Mexico is still OK but many caves are being closed or restricted because of WNS.

Caver Communications

THEN
Rotary dial telephones, snail-mail, grotto meetings and parties. The Texas Caver was monthly by snail-mail. I still have my first issue, December 1968, with a cover photo of the crooked broomstick in Deep Cave (now broken), articles on Mt. Emory Cave, and selecting a cave camera by Pete Lindsley. I devoured every word of every issue for years. NSS News, NSS Bulletin: Jan 1969 was my first issue, with a feature article on the recent discovery of 510-foot Fantastic Pit in Ellison’s Cave, Georgia.

NOW
Cell phones; email/Facebook/Flickr/Twitter; grotto meetings, parties. The Texas Caver is quarterly but still going after many lean years and editor changes. Now it has slick paper and color photos. It’s available online and there are approximately 15,000 back issues in storage. NSS News, NSS Journal: Still published on schedule all these years and now with lots of color. Online resources abound: TexBib, Karst Information Portal, grotto newsletters, and hundreds of cave and caver websites.
Russ Harmon taught me to rappel on double break bars at Barton Cliffs. I got my ponytail caught in the rig my first try, and he had to rescue me without cutting my hair. I do not remember what I was climbing with, but certainly nothing mechanical. The club took all of us newbie vertical cavers to the Devil's Sinkhole. Mills and I rode out with Bill Elliot in his VW Bug. It was cold and drizzly, so Mills and I slept in the bug and Bill under it. I nearly stepped in the side hole that no one had told me about. They lined us up at the edge of the pit, and plopped us over.

I didn't really get into caving until Mills and I had separated. I was working in the Pharmacy Department at UT and Terry Sayther was a graduate student there. He had known Mills and me a long time and invited me to go on a trip to Monclova, Mexico, to look at a petroglyph site with John Morrow, Maureen Cavanaugh and Bill Steele. Maureen and Bill were going to drop a pit (Illusive, I think). I went along having forgotten to bring a hard hat or even a light. It was great seeing the site, as anthropology was and is my thing. Terry later told me about a vertical practice at the Kirkwood house which was only a few blocks from the house Mills and I had bought. Pete Strickland saw me there and, afterward, called up Janie Evans asking how to contact me. Once Pete and I got hooked up, I did some serious caving. 1977-1982 were filled with fun, exciting, and sometimes arduous, trips in Texas, Alabama, Montana, and Mexico. After 1983, we went to conventions, but I mainly did only "kid-friendly" caves.

I have lots of random memories that are interesting and fun. I love caves, but have never been a "hard charging" or project caver (your basic "tape puller" in the survey milieu). I do know that you will not find a better group of people to be friends with or to raise your kids with.

**Peter Strickland (Noted for creating, maintaining, and making available the famous hot tub and sauna that cavers love so well—but make no mistake, Pete is a real caver!):**

For me, my golden age of caving, while living in Texas, involved Mexican caves. In the ‘60s a few cavers (Squire Lewis, Ed Alexander, Ron Ralph, et al.) moved to Austin to be part of the caving scene. In the ‘70s a bunch of us moved there. While we did do some caving in Texas, the focus for a lot of us from other states was Mexico.

UT Grotto caver, John Fish, had moved to Hamilton, Ontario, Canada to get his doctorate in karst hydrology under Derrick Ford at McMaster University. After rejecting the Huautla area as being too difficult, he settled on the El Abra range in northeastern Mexico. His thesis concerned trying to trace the flow of water from the various cave entrances, to the Nacimiento del Rio Choy. He had a long list of leads that he had generated by examining stereo air photos through 3D glasses. When cavers heard of the abundance of great leads, they showed up in droves to explore and map these caves. Our base camp for these efforts was a wide spot in a dirt road leading to the village of Los Sabinos, and then to what turned out to be the longest and deepest of these arroyo caves, aptly named Sótano del Arroyo.

Don Broussard got the names of 109 cavers who spent at least one night at Los Sabinos campground during a two-week period around Christmas, 1971. John Fish was in the campground each morning giving out leads, and each evening cavers would come back and turn in surveys of their pushes into these big virgin caves. Our efforts at Sótano del Arroyo eventually doubled the length of the cave to over four and a half miles, making it the longest cave in Mexico at that time.

In those days we were chopping toward caves out in the jungle that had been spotted on aerial photos but were hard to locate on the ground. On one occasion we had friends with a small plane mark the route to Cueva de Tanchipa by tossing out 40 rolls of colorful toilet tissue as they flew from the entrance to the nearest road. We explored Tanchipa to minus 515 feet. The cave entrance had a convenient sheltered area with a flat floor where you could camp without a tent, and the smoke from the fire went up and away. This became base camp for further chops, from sinkhole to sinkhole, along compass bearings derived from the air photos. We ultimately reached the Star Shaped Sink and Sótano de la Cuesta, a 572-foot pit dropping into the corner of a room 300 feet wide, 1000 feet long, and up to 600 feet high.

Upon returning to the campsite from one of these chops, John Fish met us with a request. In the name of science, he had broken off a ten-foot high stalagmite in Cueva de Tanchipa, and was looking for volunteers to carry it to the trucks, miles away. We did it, but whoever had the 40-pound base was hurting. Fish did a radioisotope study to date the stalagmite from base to top. He ultimately got a doctorate out of it all. At some point John became divorced from his first wife and married a woman who was a creationist. She converted him, and he became what to many of us seems to be a contradiction in terms: a creationist geologist.

Caving in Mexico has shifted with time and great discoveries come less frequently but while it lasted it was some great caving.

**Don Broussard (Very active Austin caver from the late ‘60s to date with principal interest in Mexico):**

When I transferred to the University of Texas from the University of Arkansas in 1968, I had heard of the Texas caver's exploits already. The cavers here were still the original hard-core who had begun the original cave explorations in Mexico: Ed Alexander, Bill Bell, Bob Burnett, Mike Collins, Jonathan Davis, T.R. Evans, John Fish, Terry Raines, James Reddell, and Bill Russell, to name just a few. I was ready to join them.

Sótano de Tlamaya had been bottomed at 1,488 feet and was the deepest cave in the Western Hemisphere. Sótano de la Joya de Salas had been explored to 896 feet deep. Bill Bell had done the longest rappel yet in the 503-foot skylight entrance of a cave called Ventana Jabalí in the Sierra de El Abra. Then Sótano de las Golondrinas was entered by T.R. Evans using two brake bars and carabiners. The entrance drop was 1,094 feet! Sótano de San Agustín had been found and explored to over 2,000 feet deep with no bottom in sight. Other caves in the El Abra were producing tens of thousands of feet of passage going ever further and deeper into the mountainous range.

A carbide lamp was the primary caving light. A flashlight with two D batteries was the standard backup. Candle and matches in a waterproof container was the acceptable third source of light. Cable ladders were still in widespread use. Single rope techniques had recently become in vogue due to the influence of Bill Cuddington.

Seven sixteenths-inch Goldline rope was the best available. The spin was not bad, once once became accustomed to it.
Austin cavers used state-of-the-art vertical techniques. Jumars were being used in a configuration usually called the "Texas prusik." One Jumar was attached to seat sling and the other Jumar was on a sling to one foot. No drops were long enough to wear out the one leg for climbing. [Ed: Matter of opinion, Don!] This was all greatly better than the homemade prusik loops I used in Arkansas. I had already purchased my first pair of Jumars and was ready to go deeper underground. Everyone was using two oval carabiners with brake bars. Often a link cut from a large chain was used to hold the carabiners together, since using another carabiner was unnecessarily expensive. John Cole had designed the first rapping rack for the descent of the long drops they had in Alabama. In 1968, I went to his garage in Huntsville and bought a rack.

Bill Russell had published the AMCS Standard Legend for cave map symbols. Cave surveys were just beginning to be in meters instead of feet. Handheld Bruntons were used as the instrument of choice. Some of the most progressive cavers were starting to use instruments called Suuntos. It turned out they were as accurate as a handheld Brunton.

In 1968, I went to help an expedition to Sótano de San Agustín led by John Fish. Austin cavers had explored to a depth of 2,000+ feet in the cave. They were next going to establish an underground base camp in the cave. Wow! Camping in a cave was almost unheard of. Eastern cavers had camped in Mammoth Cave on a big push in the 1950s. Now, Austin cavers were going to use that technique in a vertical cave—spectacular and practically unheard of. Big time caving was at hand.

Technology has improved our hardware over the years. An electric light running for 20 or 30 hours on a single set of batteries is much lighter than a carbide lamp. Seat slings are much more comfortable in addition to being more secure. A screw link instead of a carabiner on the seat sling is recommended. Two ascender attachments to the seat sling are now demanded. That is only technology; nothing truly significant. The character of the cavers doing the hard-core caving is all the same. Cavers still push themselves to their limits, and sometimes beyond. Death is a component of cave exploring. Caves are the last unexplored frontier on Earth. We go where no man has gone before.

Dale Pate (UT caver active in Texas and Mexico through the ‘70s and Editor of the Texas Caver for a time. Cave Specialist at Carlsbad Caverns National Park, 1991 to date):

I came into the Texas caving scene at a great time. It was 1970 and a number of early Texas cavers had led the way making spectacular discoveries across Texas and into Mexico. Along with these discoveries came refinements in gear and an experienced group of cavers that could and did teach what they knew. Mechanical ascenders from Switzerland called Jumars were already being used and the rack had been invented to safely descend huge pits in Mexico. While Texas cavers had already made major discoveries in Mexico, it was obvious that the country had barely been touched for caves and karst areas.

I had the privilege of learning from and being a part of an amazing group of people. These people were explorers in the truest sense, literally going into places no one had ever been. It was a way of life where exploration, survey, documentation, and research were the norm and a regular job was just a means to pay for caving trips, 4WD vehicles, and more caving gear.

I began caving the summer after graduating from high school and before entering college, but it was joining the Southwest Texas Student Grotto in San Marcos in September 1970 that introduced me to the real world of caves and cavers. After barely making it through college (I was usually too busy caving to really study), I ended up in Austin. Austin had become an international hub for caving trips to Mexico and was the logical place to live.

With many of my weekends taken up caving in Texas, I began to spend numerous weeklong expeditions in Mexico with many friends and over many years. Thanksgiving 1977 found me visiting a cave called Brinco. This was my first time to the logging village of Conrado Castillo located in the spectacular mountains west and north of Cd. Victoria, Tamaulipas. I found the area and the caves both beautiful and challenging and I found the cavers working there to be an excellent group to be a part of. When I add it all up, I spent at least a year of my life, usually a week or two at a time, in this area.

I became one of the fortunate ones who were able to make caving my work when I became the Cave Specialist at Carlsbad Caverns National Park in New Mexico in July 1991. More than 16 years later, I am still here helping to manage a couple of world-class caves in their own right: Lechuguilla Cave and Carlsbad Cavern.

As with many life-long cavers, limestone is in my blood. Lava tubes and sea caves are as well. Without caves and the Texas caving scene, I could have been one of the mundane workers in an office somewhere. Life would have been a little less vibrant and a little less exciting. I am proud to have been a part of Texas caving and the Texas Caver. I am proud to have been a small part of this amazing group of people.

Tom Byrd (Austin caver very active in Texas and Mexico from early ‘70s through early ‘80s):

I was a local kid of 17 when I walked into the UT Grotto meeting one night in early ‘73. Dwight Deal finished his talk on Wind Cave and I stood before the group, nervous, and asked for volunteers to teach a high school workshop on caving. That was it: my entry to this culture and a new avocation which would shape me personally and professionally through my continuing adolescence to this day. I didn’t know it, but my request sparked a debate that night somewhere east of Kirkwood on “non-proliferation”—a new conservation stance when grottos still had policies, politics, and politicians.

I subscribed to the Texas Caver and thus became a TSA member (for no more than an expressed interest in caves you were associated in full membership). I joined the Balcones Grotto and I joined the UT Grotto. I embraced the whole deal with fervor—a growing log book of cave adventures and new friends as I entered UT that fall.

Austin had its limestone. You could go caving right there in town or pile into a truck and go to Mexico. Austin was also the gathering place—a university town. Vietnam and the draft had fallen off and a semester’s tuition cost fewer than 200 bucks. For some, “student” was a nominal occupation. For nothin’ you could still check the box on your tourist card, but you’d best keep $5 mordida ready to get your long hair over the border. “No se admiten jipis,” as it says in the Sub-Jefe’s book. (I got over cheap—my long hair was shorn with a pocketknife after becoming involved with a rappel rack 40 feet over Barton Creek). At UT, the older vanguard explorers of
Mexico’s deep pits and the Rangeroos of Chuckwagon fame had moved on or gone "underground" but held a mystique to us newcomers. The student ranks were being joined by other cavers from the east and local Texans out of San Marcos, Dallas, Kingsville, or Lubbock, recently graduated, dropped-out or simply mobile. It would continue.

We caved all the time. Every week. We lived together, too, in our neighborhoods like Kirkwood and in East Austin near the graveyard. I don’t know how we did it. Some were hell-bent for glory in Mexico—we all were to some degree, but a few of us regarded the little caves as important as the big ones. We’d dig some dirt-booger crawlways on the Jollyville Plateau, collect critters to send to Lubbock, rappel into bad air holes in Hays or Mason County, drive all night to Alabama, McKintrick Hill, Bustamante, Valles, Oaxaca… or roll into the Carta Valley triangle late at night and listen for the whine of distant mud tires on a truck miles away and each with a voice characteristic of its owner. We’d sleep with boots-on, breaking-fast, hung-over with potted meat food product, Doritos, and beer. We came from everywhere, all walks of life (farmer, printer, carpenter, engineer, every kind of *ologist). Simply “being” in the limestone—that big slab of solid rock-earth was profound—even metaphysical. Many of you will know what I mean and I don’t have to say so.

We had our recurring seasons and routines that comprised the culture and kept it going. We had our Texas network and there were always the big Mexico caves which drew our friends from North America and Europe to rendezvous enroute and come to live among us. The fall recruiting effort—a training effort really—was a compromise with the conservationist extreme. Since Angela Palmer’s death, we had a responsibility to indoctrinate and train the interested “new blood” in the basics and modern vertical techniques. Volunteers would put posters up the first week of school (disproportionately placed near the women’s dorms and co-ops). Then the first few meetings had an introductory hook, a few local trips to Airman’s, Gorman’s and Bill Russell’s digging leads. The coming deer season would shift activity to Palmito in time to season the new cavers for Thanksgiving and Christmas trips beyond our Hill Country to Mexico or New Mexico. This repeated with new players, new places.

A surprising number of us hung-on into the 1980s with low wage jobs, continuing school or new families. From the UTG vantage point, it seemed that Texas caving was yielding to Mexico. A few individuals persisted in leading long term projects of amazing accomplishments from the exclusive expeditions in Chiapas and Huautla to the more collaborative and laid-back chewing away at the secrets of Purificación. But there were still good things happening in Texas at Honey Creek, Powell’s/Neel’s, Seminole Sink and other places out of the limelight where Austin cavers would still have hands to lend to these efforts.

**Frank Binney (Frank has been in California for a long time but spent a lot of time in Texas and is remembered for being a hard-core caver, for hosting the famous 1976 NSS BOG party, and for publishing four issues of Inside Earth—something of a landmark in speleo literature.):**

The 1970s were a time when hard-core cavers from throughout North America flocked to Texas to participate in the “golden age” of pioneer vertical caving in Mexico. It was a time when Texas-based cavers began setting exploration records around the world. It was a time when identifying yourself as a Texas caver at an eastern caver gathering could get you laid. It was also a time when Texas cavers wore wigs.

Yep, wigs. Those stylish and fashionable ersatz hairpieces purchased at your finer beauty salons—or in the case of Pete Strickland—at the discount bin of Wal-Mart. And we blamed it all on President Richard Nixon.

In an attempt to combat the USA’s growing appetite for marijuana, the Nixon Administration pressured Mexico into “Operation Cooperation” where Mexican immigration officials were expected to “cooperate” in stopping the drug trade by preventing American drug users—that is, any young males with long hair—from crossing the border.

Since just about every Austin-based male caver under 30 years old at the time sported shoulder-length locks, the new border policy posed a serious dilemma: How could we continue our caving projects in Mexico without heading to the barbershop and transforming ourselves into clean-cut Young Republican frat boy types? The answer was a shorthair wig, under which one could carefully hide his “freak flag” (ponytail, dread locks, etc.) immediately before crossing the international bridge into Mexico.

None of us could afford the high quality, realistic-looking, made-from-actual-human-hair men’s wigs that sold for upwards of $1000. Those who could scrape together $40 bought a cheaper, polyester alternative that purported to be a “natural looking” male hairpiece. Mine made me look like a fruity Las Vegas lounge lizard with a serious hair spray addiction. I wore it for the first time when I called on a West Texas rancher who I thought—in that polarized time of Vietnam war protests—might not look kindly on a longhaired hippie UT student asking permission to scout his land for caves. The rancher politely granted my request and, although he occasionally glanced sideways at my hairline, never voiced any opinion on my tonsorial taste. He may have thought I was recovering from chemotherapy or guessed that my plastic-looking coiffure was just the unfortunate fashion choice of a city kid from somewhere obviously not Texas.

When it came to crossing into Mexico, the wigs initially worked quite well. We’d stop for gas on the US side of the border, tie our long hair up under our wigs in the gas station restroom, get our tourist cards or multiple entry visas stamped at Mexican immigration, and then take the wigs off after we passed the 20-kilometer checkpoint south of the border. This routine, however, once brought us some unexpected attention from Laredo law enforcement.

An observant gas station attendant, on seeing a bunch of longhaired hippies crowd into his restroom and come out moments later all with short hair, had called the police—convinced that something nefarious was about to go down. Three or four cop cars swarmed us a block later, but let us go with a laugh when we explained were we UT science students wearing shorthaired wigs to get across the border and on to our study area.

I forget how long the wig ruse worked with Mexican border officials, but eventually they got suspicious of seeing so many young gringos cross with really bad hair and we got caught. Pete Strickland’s legendary frugality deserves part of the blame. Unwilling to shell out 30 or 40 dollars for a cheap men’s shorthair wig like the rest of us, Pete bought a bargain-basement woman’s wig from Wal-Mart for $9.95 and hacked it down to an
inch or two’s length. The result was something Harpo Marx might have worn to a Halloween party. I’m still amazed it got him across the border as many times as it did.

Then one night at the Nuevo Laredo crossing I was standing in line waiting to get my multiple entry visa stamped and Pete was standing in a parallel line in front of another officer. The guy about ready to stamp my visa just happens to glance past me at Pete, notices blonde hair sticking out from underneath Pete’s ill-fitting rug, puts down his stamp, walks up behind Pete, and yanks off the wig. Busted! We got a lecture before being sent back across the international bridge and had to drive all through the night to Reynosa to cross. After that, we usually had to pay mordidas of various sizes to cross with long hair…until men’s long hair styles entered the mainstream of American fashion and were no longer considered synonymous with drug use and anti-war protests.

George Veni (Bexar Grotto caver and one of Texas’ first professional cavers. President of the TSS for many years and now leading NCKRI in Carlsbad, New Mexico):

I’ve been lucky enough to have a long and varied career, figuratively and literally. I began in 1975 and through 1982 focused on exploration, with notable Texas contributions in making Sorcerer’s Cave the deepest in the state, the beginning of making Honey Creek Cave the longest, connecting Neel’s Cave to Powell’s Cave by diving, and detailed exploration of caves in Bexar County. I also enjoyed numerous trips to Mexico, especially in the thermal underground river at Grutas de Bexar County. I also enjoyed numerous trips to Mexico, making Honey Creek Cave the longest, connecting Neel’s Cave and Airman’s. Mexico was where it was happening, and caving there was the reason that I packed up and moved to Texas. Brinco and Huautla were in full swing and Austin was the talk of the cavers across the country because of those projects and others.

One thing that surprised me upon moving to Texas was that most of the big names in Texas caving didn’t go caving anymore. They were older than me, but they were still young men, most in their early 30s. They were still around, coming to grotto meetings, TSA conventions, and the Old Timers Reunion once it started, but they didn’t go underground much anymore. The reason this surprised me was that where I had come from and caved before moving to Texas (Indiana, Montana, Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, and Georgia) the preceding generation of cavers, the contemporaries of the big names in caving in Texas, still caved and caved hard. They kept up with innovations in caving gear, the new ropes being developed at the time, and still loved discoveries underground. It wasn’t the same in Texas, and that was something I didn’t expect to find.

Then came the ‘80s and a revival of Texas caving; it was the dawning of the era of exploring Texas’ longest caves: Honey Creek and Powell’s. On one of my first trips to Powell’s I went to the end of the Crevice. The three-hour journey to the end of this long passage reminded me of trips to areas of Flint Ridge Cave, Kentucky. No one had been out there in almost 20 years and we found tin cans and footprints from the first cavers who had been there. Then there was the stream passage. It was legendary due to its wetness, mud, and strong current. A trip to the end was said to be the toughest caving trip in Texas. It came to be routine going out there, and though it was pushed hard, it was never connected to nearby Silver Mine Cave.

Honey Creek Cave became my love. I relocated to San Antonio in 1980 due to starting a career, and this fine cave was a mere 25 miles from where I lived. Throughout the ‘80s and halfway through the ‘90s we pushed this water cave longer and longer until it became the longest cave in the state, a distinction it retains to this day.

I’m still active in Texas caving. The Lone Star State is my home of over 30 years now. My daughter was born here, as were my grandkids. I’m less than 12 months away from turning 60 years old, yet I’m still in good enough condition to go on long caving trips, and I still like them. I’m the chairman of the D/FW Grotto, and have served as an officer of the Maverick and Bexar Grottos, and as chairman of the TSA. There’s still good caving to be done in our state and I plan to be actively involved in it.

Jerry Atkinson (One of Texas’ more energetic cavers and noted for his ability to actually complete a caving project. Former TSA officer now serving as Editor of the Texas Speleological Survey and a Director in the TCMA):

I started caving in Austin back in 1976 as a freshman at UT. By 1977, I was caving in either Mexico or Texas nearly every available weekend; usually spending the spring semester caving in Mexico, working in Colorado during the summers for

Bill Steele (Transplanted Indiana caver known for his participation in the Huautla expeditions and enthusiasm for Honey Creek Cave):

I moved to Texas in the spring of 1976 and lived on Kirkwood Road in Austin during its heyday of expedition caving activity. It seemed like there was little Texas caving going on at the time. My recollection is that the majority of caving going on in Texas then was in Travis County in caves such as Whirlpool and Airman’s. Mexico was where it was happening, and caving there was the reason that I packed up and moved to Texas. Brinco and Huautla were in full swing and Austin was the talk of the cavers across the country because of those projects and others.

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the USGS, and returning to Austin for the fall semester. I continued this rather vagabond schedule for five years, finally succumbing to graduation and a career in petroleum geology. I was poor as a church mouse with no permanent address for most of that time but I wouldn't have traded it for anything. We were exploring new systems that were longer and deeper than anything yet found in Mexico and the thrill of it was intoxicating. The memories are still fresh and alluring: living in the back country of Mexico for months at a time, often in ramshackle field huts, shooting the breeze late at night by the light of a kerosene lamp; chopping through hot, trackless jungles in the El Abra in search of gaping pits seen on aerial photos; waking up in the pitch black of a cave camp wondering about the day and hour, or even where the hell I was; sauntering down the street at Kirkwood on a November evening to see what new expedition was getting ready to head south for the holidays; the continual “musical chairs” of couples partnering and parting within the caving community, often with interesting repercussions. Caving was a much more sensual affair in those days.

Being poor as we were, equipment purchases were a big deal. One of my proudest initial equipment acquisitions was a brand new helmet and carbide lamp I found in Airman’s Cave that someone had abandoned on a previous trip. It was one of those cheap SpeleoShoppe fiberglass shells with an elastic chinstrap. Pretty cheesy by today’s standards but I was plenty glad someone had ditched it. One of the biggest changes in caving hardware in those days was head apparel. I wasn’t the only one caving with an inferior “brain bucket.” Cavers often wore flimsy hard hats without internal padding or 4-point suspensions. It was only after Blake Harrison fell in Sótano de San Agustin and was saved from serious harm by his new Ultimate helmet that we all had an epiphany. His helmet showed up at a grotto meeting one night and it only took one look at the fractured shell to convince us that our more inferior hard hats were ¿ no bueno! Within a short period of time, most members of the grotto were sporting shiny new Ultimates.

Bill Bentley (Founding member of the Permian Basin Speleological Society and active caver for 30 years):

When I was doing most of my big time caving during the 1980s, it was a part of my life that meant everything to me. I lived for caving. I wanted to visit and see as many caves as was possible. I lost track of the trips and later often wished that I had kept a journal. I networked as best I could back then both to get possible. I lost track of the trips and later often wished that I had

Looking back at that trip and others in the past, it occurred to me that it was the cavers back then who have all since become life-long friends that really made those experiences and the excitement of discovery blend into my golden years of caving in Texas.

Travis Scott (Former mainstay of the A&M grotto and one of the best of the present generation of Texas cavers):

I entered the world of caving at the same time I entered my college career. My time was split between studies and caving. My approach to caving was guided by college grotto caving activities and the naivety of my age. Climbing the ranks to ‘lead A.S.S.’ in the Aggie Speleological Society had me planning and attending trips most every weekend to caves around the state and eventually, to Mexico. These trips were typically large groups going on play trips. Each one was filled with college-style camaraderie, good times, and great memories. Our caving group branched away from caving with lots of kayaking, backpacking, and general camping trips thrown into the mix. It could be said that these were the prime of my caving days—trips every weekend, loads of fun, no real work, just play, and fun with good friends and good caves. But saying this leaves out the later years of caving: the more productive, and as a result, higher quality caving years. These are the years that continue today, albeit at a less frequent and somewhat calmer pace.

As I became more involved in caving, I stumbled upon The Caves and Karst of Texas. I began asking cavers about access to many of the caves in the book only to find out that hardly anyone had been to some of the nicer caves, and if they had, it had been many years ago and access had since been lost. That is when my caving purpose began to change from “play” caving to tracking down older, nicer caves, and locating new ones. I quickly had to learn the fine art of landowner relations. However, I lacked the ability to give anything back to the landowner for the gracious access to their caves. So I began to learn survey and photography. Without realizing it, my days of large group trips going off to party and play, with some caving mixed in, became smaller, more goal-oriented trips. My sketching ability got stronger, and my photography improved. Both of these skills allowed me to access a lot of great caves, and to join in many other people’s trips.

This era, my “other” prime caving era, has rewarded me with trips to some amazing caves in Texas. I have visited many of those caves in The Caves and Karst of Texas that had first inspired me, many of which cavers had not visited in more than 20-30 years. These kinds of trips have often led into small projects to resurvey, fully explore, push leads, and photograph these long lost Texas treasures. New cave hunting has also been important. There have not been too many significant finds, but it is always fun nonetheless. Most trips these days require a good bit of survey, drafting, photography, and the ever-joyous management of small projects. All of this subsequently requires a lot of legwork, computer time, drafting, and lately a lot of data collection. Mapping, for most, has moved on from the days of hand-drafted maps on velum. Now mapping has become taking the digitally drafted cave maps and overlaying them on different datasets to create interesting surface maps, assess the cave’s directionality, or compare it to surrounding land boundaries, features, or other caves. With the availability of parcel data, the effort to track down caves and their new owners is becoming very map/data oriented. Data and GIS have become ever more important tools—tools I never expected to use, but I don't know how I did without them before!
Rather than a closely-knit group of local friends, my caving group has become mostly the Porcupine Grotto—a mix of cavers with different talents from around the State who, working together, can do amazing things. Trips are less frequent than they used to be and the caves are typically further away. The quality of the caves makes up for the distance and lower frequency.

This style of caving has afforded me the opportunity to meet a lot of amazing people (landowners and cavers) around the state and see some amazing parts of Texas that most non-cavers don’t get to see. I have also been able to join some great projects led by others. I regret that all this keeps me busy enough to prevent me from joining many of the bigger caving trips around the State, but is definitely rewarding.

The timing of the two eras fits perfectly in my life. I suppose that the next chapter will include teaching Harper, my 4 ½-year-old daughter, the caving “ropes” (literally). My only real complaint about it all is how far I live from the caves, and that pesky job holding me back 70 percent of each week. It could be a lot worse!


Mechanical adventures were far more common in the earlier days of Texas caving. We did what we had to do. When we see photos such as this, we marvel that anyone survived to tell the tale. Ronnie Fieseler, March 1973. Carl Kunath.

Caver trucks, May 1976. It was the era of cheap gasoline and speleo-bumpers. From left: Craig Bittinger, Bill Hinson, Fred Paschal, Bob Oakley, Carl Kunath, Ronnie Fieseler, Gill Ediger, Jon Vinson, and Bob Lloyd. Carl Kunath.
## TSA OFFICERS

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<th>YEAR</th>
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<td>1991</td>
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<td>Carl Poneshok</td>
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<td>Robin Day</td>
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<td>Cathy Winfrey</td>
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<td>Gary Napper</td>
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<td>1996</td>
<td>Cathy Winfrey</td>
<td>Barbe Barker &amp; David McClung</td>
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<td>1997</td>
<td>Gill Ediger</td>
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<td>1998</td>
<td>Gill Ediger</td>
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<td>Jim Kennedy</td>
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<td>Christi Bennett</td>
<td>Gerald Atkinson</td>
<td>Joe Ranzae</td>
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<td>2004</td>
<td>Diana Tomchick</td>
<td>Joe Ranzae</td>
<td>Gerald Atkinson</td>
<td>Terry Holsinger &amp; Michael Cicherski</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Bill Steele &amp; Jim Kennedy</td>
<td>Jim Kennedy</td>
<td>Gerald Atkinson</td>
<td>Michael Cicherski</td>
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<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>John Brooks</td>
<td>Kara Dittmer &amp; Ed Goff</td>
<td>Andy Gluesenkamp</td>
<td>Michael Cicherski</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>John Brooks</td>
<td>Jacqui Thomas</td>
<td>Mark Alman</td>
<td>Michael Cicherski &amp; Darla Bishop</td>
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<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>John Brooks</td>
<td>Robert Bisset</td>
<td>Mark Alman</td>
<td>Darla Bishop</td>
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<td>2009</td>
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<td>Robert Bisset</td>
<td>Denise Prendergast</td>
<td>Darla Bishop</td>
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<td>2010</td>
<td>Mark Alman</td>
<td>Ellie Thoene</td>
<td>Denise Prendergast</td>
<td>Darla Bishop</td>
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<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Mark Alman</td>
<td>Ellie Thoene</td>
<td>Denise Prendergast</td>
<td>Michael Cicherski</td>
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## TEXAS CAVING CONVENTIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>PLACE</th>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>CHAIRMAN</th>
<th>ATTENDANCE</th>
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<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>Rocksprings</td>
<td>September 15-16</td>
<td>Arthur Carroll</td>
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<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>Boerne</td>
<td>September 28-29</td>
<td>H. M. Koepe</td>
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<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>Ozona</td>
<td>August 30-September 1</td>
<td>Mills Tandy</td>
<td>~60</td>
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<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>Fredericksburg</td>
<td>September 5-7</td>
<td>Dudley Roberts</td>
<td>36</td>
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<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>None. Informal meeting at the NSS Convention in Carlsbad, NM (51 registered from Texas)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>Uvalde</td>
<td>November 4-5</td>
<td>Dudley Roberts</td>
<td>40</td>
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<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>San Angelo</td>
<td>November 10-11</td>
<td>Ruben M. Frank</td>
<td>45</td>
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<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>Georgetown</td>
<td>November 2-3</td>
<td>Orion Knox</td>
<td>57</td>
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<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>None. TSA hosted the NSS Convention in New Braunfels, TX (of 352 registrants, 117 were from Texas)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>San Angelo</td>
<td>April 3-4</td>
<td>Carl Kunath</td>
<td>87</td>
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<td>1986</td>
<td>San Marcos</td>
<td>March 26-27</td>
<td>Bill Russell</td>
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<td>1987</td>
<td>Boerne</td>
<td>April 8-9</td>
<td>Dewayne Dickey</td>
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<td>1988</td>
<td>Kerrville</td>
<td>April 27-28</td>
<td>John Fish</td>
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<td>1989</td>
<td>Georgetown</td>
<td>April 19-20</td>
<td>David Merideth</td>
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<td>1970</td>
<td>San Marcos</td>
<td>April 11-12</td>
<td>Russell Harmon &amp; Brian Peterson</td>
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<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>San Antonio</td>
<td>April 24-25</td>
<td>Alamo Area Chapter, et al</td>
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<td>1972</td>
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<td>April 29-30</td>
<td>Jon Vinson</td>
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<td>1973</td>
<td>San Marcos</td>
<td>April 28-29</td>
<td>Southwest Texas Grotto</td>
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<td>1974</td>
<td>New Braunfels</td>
<td>April 27-28</td>
<td>Craig Bittinger &amp; Mike Walsh</td>
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<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>Utopia</td>
<td>April 12-13</td>
<td>Wayne Russell</td>
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<td>1976</td>
<td>Driftwood</td>
<td>May 1-2</td>
<td>Jimmy Clements</td>
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<td>San Marcos</td>
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<td>Dale Pate</td>
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<td>Austin</td>
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<td>Chuck Stuehm</td>
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<td>1979</td>
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<td>Keith Heuss</td>
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<td>1980</td>
<td>Helotes</td>
<td>April 19-20</td>
<td>Jonathan Justice</td>
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<td>1981</td>
<td>Uvalde</td>
<td>May 2-3</td>
<td>Jonathan Justice &amp; George Veni</td>
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<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>Wimberley</td>
<td>May 22-23</td>
<td>Andy Grubbs</td>
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<td>1983</td>
<td>Comfort</td>
<td>May 21-22</td>
<td>John Cradit</td>
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<td>1984</td>
<td>Longs Ranch, Kingsland</td>
<td>May 19-20</td>
<td>George Love</td>
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<td>1985</td>
<td>Inner Space Caverns</td>
<td>May 18-19</td>
<td>Mike Warton</td>
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<td>Driftwood</td>
<td>May 17-18</td>
<td>Brian Burton</td>
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<td>Uvalde</td>
<td>April 30 – May 1</td>
<td>Joe Ivy</td>
<td>50+</td>
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<td>Fredericksburg</td>
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<td>May 5-6</td>
<td>Catherine Berkley</td>
<td>~100</td>
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<td>1991</td>
<td>Lone Man II Ranch</td>
<td>April 27-28</td>
<td>Doug Allen; Lee Jay Graves</td>
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<td>1992</td>
<td>Concan</td>
<td>May 2-3</td>
<td>Butch Fraia</td>
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<td>1993</td>
<td>Brackettville</td>
<td>May 1-2</td>
<td>Carolyn Biegart</td>
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<td>1994</td>
<td>None. TSA hosted the NSS Convention in Brackettville, TX (956 registrants + 95 unregistered)</td>
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<td>1995</td>
<td>Kendalia</td>
<td>May 20-21</td>
<td>Doug Allen</td>
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<td>Wimberley</td>
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<td>Dave McClung</td>
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<td>Pat Copeland</td>
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<td>Knox Ranch, Wimberley</td>
<td>May 6-7</td>
<td>Greater Houston Grotto</td>
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<td>May 3-4</td>
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<td>May 22-23</td>
<td>Metroplex Cavers</td>
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<td>Fort McKavett</td>
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<td>Jim Kennedy</td>
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<td>Knox Ranch, Wimberley</td>
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<td>April 14-15</td>
<td>Jacqui Thomas</td>
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<td>2008</td>
<td>Kerrville</td>
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<td>Robert Bisset</td>
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<td>2010</td>
<td>Cedar Park</td>
<td>March 27-28</td>
<td>Ellie Thoene</td>
<td>150+</td>
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There have been four NSS conventions in Texas, each bigger and better than the last. We were due for another in 2008 but had to wait for the 2009 combined NSS/ICS.

Those attending the banquet at the 1964 NSS Convention in New Braunfels were treated to an amazing stage decoration by Erwin Wesp of the San Antonio Grotto. Bryant Lilly archive.

The 1978 NSS Convention at New Braunfels was a real free-wheeling affair. Here, revelers enjoy a refreshing dip in the clothing-optional waters adjacent to Landa Park. Carl Kunath.

Visitors to the 1994 NSS Convention at Bracketville, TX were faced with an amazing array of choices for caving and entertainment destinations. Joy Kennedy.
Returning home from the 2005 Ft. McKavett Convention, I asked my wife, Glenda, for her impressions. She has been attending TSA conventions off and on since 1964 and I was curious what she might say.

First, recognize that Ft. McKavett joins a very short list of Texas caving conventions held west of the 100th meridian. Of the 46 TSA conventions held thus far (every year since 1956 except 1964 and 1993) only four have been in the western portion of the state. The 1958 convention was hosted by the Ozona Grotto and there have been two conventions in San Angelo: 1962 and again in 1965. No one seems to know exactly how San Angelo was selected for 1962, but in 1965 it was because I was Vice-Chairman of the TSA and living in San Angelo. In both cases, there was a local caving group at San Angelo College and the college made its facilities available to us without charge. Now, the 2005 convention at Ft. McKavett joins that list. I’m sure the PBSS group also appreciated that.

So, the first thing Glenda said was that it was nice to travel only 70 miles from our home in San Angelo rather than the usual average of around 200 miles. Not since the convention was held in San Angelo in 1965 had it been so conveniently located. Besides the favorable location, what made a strong impression? Her response was quite unexpected: “You guys used to talk about caves. I sat out there with you for three hours Friday night and all you talked about was GPS, digital cameras, and computer stuff. I didn’t understand a word of what you said.” She is right. There is so much more technology in our world today that it tends to squeeze out the nuts and bolts of our caving experience. It made me think and pause to reflect on the changes that time has brought. What has changed in the 40 years since the convention last “went west”? Compare and contrast, as your high school English teacher might have instructed. Here are a few random thoughts encompassing 40 years of TSA conventions:

Rarely is there “competition” to host the annual convention. Almost always it is a default situation: whoever is willing to do the work determines the location based on their preference, convenience, and budget constraints.

In 1965, attendance was 87; a big improvement from the five prior years when it dipped to a low of 36 for the 1959 gathering in Fredericksburg (there was no TSA convention in 1964 due to the demands of the NSS convention at New Braunfels). The 2005 convention drew about 125—a remarkable attendance for a convention held in about the most obscure location possible and advertised only by means of CaveTex. The facilities at Ft. McKavett were secured at the bargain rate of $200, camping and porta-potties included. So….Convention attendance increased a little less than 50 percent over 40 years.
Interestingly, there were a few people present in 2005 who were also in the crowd 40 years earlier. Unfortunately, the Caver no longer publishes a list of convention registrants, but it did so in 1965. I can find only five names that match faces seen in 2005: Orion Knox, Carl Kunath, Glenda Kunath, Pete Lindsley, and Bill Russell. I suspect Terry Raines was there in 1965 but failed to be registered.

Somewhat distressing is a longer list of those present in 1965 who have now passed on to that great crawly in the sky: Al Brandt, Luther Bundrant, Blair Goodbar, George Gray, Tom Meador, Calvin Perryman, Robert Schroeder, Dick Smith, Bob Willis, and probably a few others I am unaware of.

Now, other than the people, what has changed in 40 years? The 1965 convention was a more formal affair. The group was welcomed by Dick Howard, the City Manager of San Angelo. Nothing like that in 2005. In the morning session for 1965 (shortened due to delays at breakfast and an overly long BOG meeting), Pete Lindsley spoke about Laubach (Inner Space) Cave, and Bud Frank spoke on the sediments in Texas caves.

By contrast, in 2005 there were seven speakers in the morning session [my italics paraphrasing the general topic]: Garry White on Youth Group Caving Issues; Pete Lindsley told about the !Button Temperature Dataloggers; Jacquie Bills with Cave Softly; Linda Palit with the latest from TCMA; Allan Cobb updated events at Kickapoo Cavern State Park; Charles Pekins spoke about management of cave Myotis at Ft. Hood; Andy Gluesencamp with an overview of Eurycea in central Texas.

In 1965, Abilene Grotto opened the afternoon session with a slide presentation on cave conservation and Chuck Larsen spoke about cave mapping. There was a short break for door prizes that included a 97½-pound sack of fresh guano and an actual door. Talks resumed with Mike Bundrant on cave safety; Dewayne Dickey with geo-biochemical reactions related to speleology; a preview of the coming project at Deep Cave by James Estes; James Reddell with a talk about cave salamanders of the Edwards Plateau; a slide series about caving safety presented by the Dallas-Fort Worth Grotto. The sessions ended at 5:30 and most adjourned to Luby’s Cafeteria for food and the Photo Salon presented by Chuck Larsen. Luby’s was thrilled to give us exclusive use of one of their dining rooms in exchange for the income from feeding a bunch of cavers. The Salon entries (and there were many) had been judged by professionals: transparencies by the Famous Photographers School in Westport Connecticut; prints by Dallas area professionals John Messina, William Langley, and George Drews. I don’t know how many total entries there were but 32 entries from eight photographers were awarded prizes. Camping was available at the college lake house and a fairly rowdy party ensued. It should be noted that dress for the entire occasion was a bit more than casual. Pictures in the Texas Caver show Chuck Larsen with a sport coat and Bert Olsen, James Estes, and Dewayne Dickie with coat and tie. No tee shirts are seen and slacks are far more dominant than jeans. Jim Estes commented in the April 1965 Texas Caver: “Wow, you would have flipped at some of the dressed-up cavers. […]” It was perhaps the first time that TSA members really got with it and looked nice for a change. That is, most of them. And most people liked it better that way. It all goes to show that Texas cavers can be decent and mature.” A field trip to Arden Cave was available on Sunday.

The 2005 afternoon session included: Blowing Sink by Andy Gluesencamp; caves of Coahuila by Peter Sprouse; Hawaii Survey — 2005 update by Bob Richards; Geary Schindel on Edwards Aquifer water tracing; the exploration of Bowie Springs Cave by Logan McNatt and Jerry Atkinson; and a final impromptu tale of adventure at Cattail Canyon in the Big Bend by Geary Schindel. TSA held its business meeting at the conclusion of the formal presentations and a catered banquet was served at 7:00. The next three hours were occupied with drawing for door prizes, announcing the winners of the photo salon (only five transparencies were entered and about two dozen color prints were displayed at the awards), and the auction of donated items benefiting the TCMA acquisition of the Deep and Punkin Cave property. A field trip to Powell’s Cave was available on Sunday.

Here is what I think emerges from all this:

♦ All registrants should receive a name badge.
♦ Today’s conventions are far less formal affairs. That informality occasionally manifests itself as a sparse audience for some of the presentations and far too much chatter within the audience.
♦ Today’s conventions present far more information: Twelve speakers in 2005 compared with nine in 1965, some of which were merely “canned” slide shows.
♦ ALL of the 2005 convention presentations were digital. So far as I know, there wasn’t a slide projector on the site. It looks like film is moribund.
♦ ALL of the prints entered in the photo salon were produced from digital files and all were color. It appears that b/w photography is history. The photo salon, while better supported than in most recent years, is but a shadow of its former greatness. The salon judging, being “internal” lacks the prestige of judging by professionals. The “people’s choice” is a great idea as it allows popular opinion to select a winner without being too picky about the technical quality — “we know what we like!” The “best of show” winner was said to be digitally composited. Is that legal?
♦ There were no cave map salons in earlier years and the present support is minimal. Only two individuals submitted entries this year.
♦ Some topics and areas of interest never seem to die. There were two talks about safety and conservation in 1965 and two-three in 2005. There were talks about cave salamanders at both conventions.
♦ The 1965 convention had no publications available with the exception of some representation by staff members of the Texas Caver and the Texas Speleological Survey. In fact, there was little cave literature in print at that time. Today’s cavers are blessed with more caving literature than most can afford.

Which was the better convention? I think 2005 is the hands-down winner. There was a lot more of what cavers seem to want in a convention. It was in an interesting, albeit remote, area. There were many interesting and well-prepared presentations. The vendor area gave visitors a chance to purchase caving baubles and enhance their libraries or at least see what is available. The camping area was adequate, and the weather mercifully cool. It was not a perfect convention and probably not as good as 2004 in Burnet, but better than 40 years ago in most ways.
How popular is caving in Texas? Beginning with zero groups in 1950, Texas caving rode the crest of a national interest in being outside (so to speak) and by the late 1960s there were 27 recognized groups. Then the whole thing sort of crashed and burned as the youth of America played video games and hung out in discos. Currently, we are about where we were 30 years ago but we are missing Abilene, A&I, Balcones, CVS, and a few others that made a real difference in Texas caving.

Ho-hum. Just another routine Texas cave. NOT!
If you get out and look around, every so often you will find something extraordinary. This amazing gem was completely virgin when it was first explored in 1965.

George Yeary is moving very carefully in this exceptionally delicate area.

*Carl Kunath*
The Labor Day caving project was a well established tradition in Texas caving for many years. When it faltered and failed after 1972, there was a six-year period without any event to replace it. The Texas Old Timers Reunion (now called Texas Caver Reunion) was designed as a non-caving event—an opportunity for cavers to gather socially.
My! How things change with time!

Of the top 10 longest known Texas caves from 1950, 7 do not make the top ten list for 2010. Of the top 10 deepest known Texas caves from 1950, 8 do not make the top ten list for 2010. In 1950, a cave had to be 3,000 feet long to make the top ten. By 2010, it needed to be 11,300 feet long.

Here is an interesting graph. The 180 number from 1948 is the count based on what was reported in NSS Bulletin Ten—The Caves of Texas. In 1955, Texas caving really came alive with the advent of the Texas Caver and with the Texas Cave Index providing better communication and record keeping. In the 1960s and 1970s The Texas Cave Index morphed into the Texas Speleological Survey and records moved from hand written note cards to IBM punch cards. The real change occurred in the mid-1990s when personal computers and GPS technology made databases and feature identification and location a manageable technology. In the past 20 years there has been a great increase in projects and caving-for-hire efforts that systematically search an area for karst features. Kickapoo Caverns, Government Canyon, Ft. Hood, Colorado Bend, and Devil’s River/Amistad are good examples of search and discover programs that have added hundreds of items to the total. In earlier years, the totals were predominantly caves*. The current totals include all “karst features.” The present number of caves is slightly less than 5,400.

*In Texas, the Texas Speleological Survey defines a cave as “A naturally occurring, humanly enterable cavity in the earth, at least 5 m (15.5 feet) in length and/or depth, and where no dimension of the entrance exceeds the length or depth of the cavity.”

The TSS is presently housed on the third floor of this building on the Pickle Campus of the University of Texas in north Austin. Carl Kunath.
Jack C. Burch is seen here in a June 1957 photo of the Helictite Room in Mayfield Cave (Caverns of Sonora.) Notice the nearly pristine condition of this area. James Papadakis.

Another kind of historic photo. There are several “register rocks” in Kickapoo Cave. On February 3, 1888, G. Cook of Co. H “19th Infantry signed in. He was likely stationed at nearby Ft. Clark in Brackettville. Carl Kunath.


More history: Texas cavers took the lead for years in the Amigos de la Gruta program to assist with the restoration and preservation of what has now been partially commercialized as Grutas de Bustamante. The final effort was in 2003. Seen here are Rune Burnett (L), Norma Robles (Mayor of Bustamante), and Philip Russell. Carl Kunath.

Here’s the kind of caving history that we don’t like to think about. These marvelous works of nature could once be seen in Caverns of Sonora. They are now broken or vandalized—not by careless cavers but by destructive tourists. Carl Kunath, 1960s.
A rare photo of some very early Texas cavers at Devil’s Sinkhole circa 1951. L-R: Roy Pietsch, Bob Hudson, William “Ace” Thomas.

Not all cavers were willing to cross the dangerously exposed ledge at Mayfield Cave (Caverns of Sonora). Here, UT caver Larry Littlefield climbs a home-made ladder while Don Goodson looks on from the left. Circa 1956. Bill Helmer.

When UT cavers went to Devil’s Sinkhole for the great diving expedition of January 1956 there was a good photographic record of the event—all black and white it was thought—until now. Mel Huebel.


For many years, the standard method of visiting Devil’s Sinkhole was by means of a parachute harness powered by an automobile. This early 1950s photo of a UT trip shows how the rope ran through a pulley attached to the old guano mining platform. Dave Hanna collection.

This decal from the mid-1950s is probably the first emblem of a Texas caving group. Carl Kunath collection.
Here is a very historic document. This is the attendance roster for the second meeting of the fledgling University Speleological Society organized only a few days before. This is the root of organized Texas caving. Of the 34 listed, a few names and current locations are known to me: #2 William J. Wright (Abilene), #5 Bennie Pearson (Fredericksburg), #13 Thomas Joe Pearce (Cedar Park), #30 Carroll Slemaker (California), and #31 Roy Pietsch (Dallas). Some others were important to the early days of Texas caving but whose fates are presently unknown: #9 George Shelley, #19 William M. Thomas, #21 John L. Riggs, and #23 Bob Hudson. Are any of these names familiar to you?

Without question, the greatest invention in the history of mankind is beer.
Oh, I grant you that the wheel was also a fine invention, but the wheel does not go nearly as well with pizza.
—Dave Barry
Back in the day, high school students often ventured off to the local caves in search of adventure. There must have been hundreds of trips similar to this one. This February 1, 1958 group from San Angelo is in Arden (Schlinke’s) Cave about 25 miles from town. Their dress suggests they were not experienced cavers. Notice that the only light is held by the “guide.”

Back, L-R: Judy Henderson, Loye Trusler, Edie Cherry, Judy English, Sammye Nutt.
In the right photo L-R: Linda Armour, Loye Trusler, Linda Price, Patsy Taylor, Judy Henderson, Carolyn Kimmey, and Joe Funk, the intrepid guide. Joe’s family owned the adjoining ranch and the cave was just across the fence. Mike Ellington.

Members of the UT grotto had great fun in Valdina Farms Sinkhole. Seen here from left are Fred Berner, Bill Helmer, David Kyser, Ken Baker and an unidentified graduate student (with a cloth cap) who was doing some sort of research project about the bats. The water was described as “foul, with a floating layer of dead and rotting bats.” Bill Helmer archives.

RIGHT: Speaking of water, how about this 2000 picture of Linda Palit and Rebecca O’Daniel-Hutchins watching Seco Creek being swallowed by Valdina Farms Sinkhole! Geary Schindel.
In December 1957, Bill Helmer and Don Goodson made a special trip to get some color photographs in Mayfield Cave (Caverns of Sonora). The winter weather drove them to establish camp in an area near the present-day register sign—not too far from the historic entrance and before the Pit Room. In this picture, Helmer is seen in the camping area amid the accoutrements of that trip. Notice the shiny new carbide lamp on Goodson's helmet and the tarnished spare nearby. Notice also the full size glass sugar container, Holsum sliced white bread, V8 juice, and regular suitcase used as a seat. Bill has an NSS patch on his shirt. Coleman lantern and socks on the clothesline make it feel like home. Years later, Bill was working for Escapade magazine in New York and got a chance to sell a feature story about the cave which appeared in the February 1962 issue. This is surely one of the first non-sensational type caving stories to appear in a US magazine. Bill Helmer archive.

LEFT: Here's a great shot from June 1957. The high school grotto in Ozona was in a great situation to explore new caves. No one had been before them in many cases. Pictured here at the bottom of Abyss Sinkhole in Crockett County (L-R) are Ronald Carnes, Jim Burton, and Royce Ballinger. They did the 88-foot entrance pit with a home-made rope ladder tied to a rope with knotted foot loops. Mills Tandy.

Abyss Sinkhole, June 1957. Upper part of entrance drop rigged with foot loops tied into manila rope. Royce Ballinger.
Cavers arose incredibly early to secure these parking spaces along Guadalupe on the west edge of the U.T. campus. They used their trucks as eye-catching billboards and did their best to attract new blood into the caving community. *Tom Byrd.*

It was an all day relay feeding parking meters and answering questions as (L-R) Jill Dorman, Paula Goode, Beth Everett, Terri Treacy and Sherri Larason make the scene. Blake Harrison and Gill Ediger are lounging on Phil Winsborough’s truck. *Tom Byrd.*

Time passed and “suddenly” the TCMA was having its 20th anniversary celebration. *Carl Kunath.*
If you read 50 Years of Texas Caving, you may recall the story of the Cowboy Caver Bar-B-Q. At the time of publication, no photos were known of the incident. Only recently did this photo emerge showing the poor late sleeper, already tortured with loud music, and now covered with brush as another tormenter approaches with a fire starter torch. Jeff Horowitz is at left. Two others and the fellow about to be immolated were some hangers-on at Bob Lloyd’s auto shop in Justin, TX who thought they wanted to be cavers. It was their first and last trip. Dale Pate.

TSA Board of Governors meeting at the McKittrick Hill project in 1970. TSA officers (from left) Fieseler, Ediger, and Wiley conduct official business while Carl and Glenda Kunath pay close attention. Compare and contrast: Paper and pen—no laptops. Film camera—no digital cameras. Incandescent flashlight—no LED lights. The guys still had hair. Some things never change—the meeting is lubricated with cheap beer. Ronnie Fieseler archive.

Many of the Austin area summer caver parties have been supplanted by get-togethers at the Strickland pond. Jerry Atkinson, Katie Arens, and Bill Russell are seen chatting on top of the dam. Notice the large Oztotl molded into the back of the dam. Carl Kunath.

Bob Oakley (L) and Jon Everage, AKA “belly bumpers” had a great time dancing at the May 1974 TSA Convention. Carl Kunath.
One fine day in July 1971, a large jug of Rhodamine B appeared and here we see cavers gathered in the front yard of Terry Raines’ house on Carolyn Street in Austin. Very shortly thereafter, the Littlefield Fountain on the campus at U.T. was quite colorful. L-R: Ronnie Fieseler, Dave Honea, Terry Raines, Don Broussard (with jug), Neil Morris (white shirt), Craig Bittinger (behind Neil), unidentified female behind Craig, Jill Moody Ediger in blue tie-dye, Jon Vinson (hat), maybe Susan Hardcastle Fieseler between Don and Jon.  

Texas has been blessed with some wonderful cave owners. Among the very best was Tom Harding, owner of Midnight Cave. Tom had many interests and many talents but above all he loved the land and was always active in the affairs of his ranch. May 1970.  

A collection of classic tee shirts going back as much as 40 years. Carl Kunath donated these to the TCMA auctions and they realized several hundred dollars for a good cause.  

Charles “Squire” Lewis is one of the people we miss in the caving community. Squire is seen here at the 1968 NSS Convention in Springfield, MO.  

This 1969 group appears to be loitering around a blasting machine. Actually, they are working with a gravity meter in the area over what is now called Inner Space Cavern. L-R: Gill Ediger, Neal Morris, Dick Smith, Bill Bell, Jerry Broadus, Steve Bittinger, and an unknown.  

View from 1967. Do you think the segments have now joined?  

These photos are the result of the efforts of Carl Kunath. He has been a great supporter of the caving community and has contributed many photos and stories to the TCMA over the years.  

Texas has been blessed with some wonderful cave owners. Among the very best was Tom Harding, owner of Midnight Cave. Tom had many interests and many talents but above all he loved the land and was always active in the affairs of his ranch. May 1970.  

Carl Kunath.
December 1971: Print shop in a bus. For a time, this converted school bus was the home of Speleopress, a Terry Raines enterprise. Here, Jan Lewis applies opaque to negatives while Terry looks on. That is Glenda Kunath at the front of the bus beneath the Spanish inscription that translates: “I drive and God directs me.” I’m not sure of the purpose for the scale (foreground, far right). Terry started printing in 1968 and is still at it today. For a long time, nearly all the Texas caving literature came from his printing press. Did you know that Terry has been printing the NSS News for many years? Carl Kunath.

Glenda Kunath is looking into the impressive entrance of Terlingua Sinkhole in Brewster County. Overall depth is about 200 feet although the usual rigging point is about 75 feet. Although it’s not as deep as Devil’s Sinkhole, the view may be more impressive. This is one of the few classic Texas caves still easily visited. Carl Kunath.
Richard Bilbrey (L) and David Wood are seen here after a visit to Blowhole Cave in December 1965. How much of their equipment do you think came from REI, Bob & Bob, or Inner Mountain Outfitters? BTW, please notice the ground condition of the ranch. Many years of too much livestock. Carl Kunath.

In November 1967, Keith Huess' camera fell to the bottom of Sótano de Venadito. David Honea found what was left in April 1971. Carl Kunath.

This was the setup used to negotiate the 50-foot core hole entrance at Laubach Cave (Inner Space Cavern) in November 1963. No one died. Pete Lindsley.

For many would-be cave photographers, the whole process was a real challenge. Here, Ronnie Fieseler “tests” a flash bulb. Carl Kunath.
Devil’s Sinkhole, March 1968. James Reddell (L) and Terry Raines illustrate the *haute cuisine* typical of the period: Peter Pan chunky peanut butter, Welch’s jelly, Bimbo bread, and peppers. Carl Kunath.

Ed Alexander was one of the original cooks for the Texas Caver Reunions. Flat Creek 2000. Tom Byrd.

In July 1968, there was a three-day expedition to La Gruta del Palmito to photo-document the cave for an AMCS bulletin that was “imminent.” Here, T.R. Evans is in the lead with a case of flashbulbs strapped to his pack as the group plods up the 88 switchbacks from the parking lot to the entrance. Next in line are Carol Westmoreland Russell, Terry Raines, Russell Harmon, and Bill Russell. The cave is now commercialized and trips such as this are but a fond memory. Carl Kunath.
Ed Fomby (left) and Ronnie Fieseler at the 180-foot entrance to MFP. How long has it been since anyone visited this cave? Ronnie Fieseler archives.

James Reddell surveying in Natural Bridge Caverns, circa 1962. Notice the period caving attire and the interesting tripod configuration for his Brunton compass. Terry Raines.

Louise Power and Jay Jorden look on as George Sevra creates another of the original CVSUCKS tee shirts with a cardboard template and a can of blue spray paint. No fancy silk screens here. This is the true caver way. Circa 1970. Carl Kunath.

Craig “Three-Boot” Bittinger with his creation. Craig sewed a Jumar to a spare boot, carried it in his pack, and put it on his foot as required. Great idea and it worked like a charm. Circa 1970. Ronnie Fieseler.


Left: Ronnie Fieseler felt that simplicity was the key to efficient caving gear and developed the surgically implanted lamp bracket. Carl Kunath.
Heard on the street in 1966: “Golondrinas? What does that mean? It’s where? How deep? Wait a minute, that pit can’t be that deep! No way!” Times change. Now you have to buy a ticket just to peep over the edge.

Oh, you thought Terry Raines was born in a Mexican cave? Everybody has to start somewhere.

Sales of publications and caving gear have become a regular part of all Texas caver gatherings almost from the beginning. Here, is a scene from the 2009 Convention at Kerrville. Carl Kunath.

Often, cavers must spend many hours to make their vehicles “ready.” At TCR 2009, this “caver ready” vehicle was immediately available for service. Carl Kunath.

Headquarters for Project Deep, 1965. This was about as organized as Texas Labor Day projects ever got. Carl Kunath.


Dear Orton,

Are you going to Bustamante on the 19th or 26th? The reason I asked is that on the 26th I am going to have a holiday from school and if you had room and if everything worked out I would like to go with you since I have never been to Bustamante before.

Please write as soon as you can.

Best wishes,

Terry Raines

808 West 32 St.
Austin 5, Texas
October 11, 1962
No retrospective of Texas caving is complete with mention of the Siffre experience at Midnight Cave. There are lots of pictures of various aspects of the expedition but most do not convey the amazing activity that went on above ground. Michele entered the cave on February 14, 1972. Two days before, on February 12, the preparations were being documented by a French television crew “for the folks at home.” Pictured here, from left are: Nathalie Siffre, Michele Siffre, Gérard Cappa, Carl Kunath, Jacques Chabert, and an unknown (plaid shirt) who was perhaps part of the TV crew. The tent is at the top of a hill about 50 feet above the upper entrance to the cave and houses the biometric monitoring and communication equipment. Carl Kunath archives.

At left is a selection of caving gear used in Texas in the 1970s. Things have changed. No more Goldline or carbide lamps. Incandescent lamps, Brunton compasses, and cable ladders are rare. Brake bars on carabiners and diaper-type seat slings are obsolete. Prusik loops are museum items. Cameras are carried in Pelican cases rather than ammo boxes. Metal and “crash helmet” head wear is out in favor of lighter plastic. Far fewer pieces of cheap military surplus items. Carl Kunath.
Midnight Cave has been a premier destination for Texas cavers since its discovery in 1969. It certainly rates as one of the best decorated caves in Texas and benefits greatly from having enjoyed “protected” status from the beginning. In this 1997 photo, Jennifer Townsdin is seen admiring an extravagantly decorated area near the back of the cave. Chris Vreeland.

An extreme wide angle view at Devil’s Sinkhole, the iconic Texas cave. Travis Scott.
In 2006, the Texas Caver Reunion was held at the Gass Ranch (Honey Creek Cave). As a courtesy to the owner, cavers agreed to cut down a bunch of the cedar and other undergrowth in the Reunion area. The result was an evening bonfire that would cook Ramen noodles at 50 feet. Even the Aggies loved it. Carl Kunath.

Wrestling matches at TCR have become a tradition. It started off in a wading pool filled with Ramen noodles. Noodles are slick and “clean.” Compare this 2003 photo at Honey Creek with that on the right at Paradise Canyon. Carl Kunath.

TCR 2007 at Paradise Canyon. No more Ramen noodles. Now the medium is bentonite, a type of clay used in drilling fluids that is at least twice as slick as noodles and way more bizarre in all respects. Carl Kunath.

“Among a goodly number of Texas cavers, caving is more than a hobby — it is a lifestyle.”

Climbing has been a mainstay activity at TCR, but in earlier years, there were many other activities. *Carl Kunath.*

Another popular activity at TCR is the squeeze box. How low can you go? *Carl Kunath.*

Left: Now discontinued, the blindfolded carbide lamp recharge contest was a popular event. TCR 1979. *Carl Kunath.*

The difference between genius and stupidity is that genius has its limits.

—Albert Einstein

Bill Elliott completed a difficult Speleo-Olympics course at the 1982 TCR. *Carl Kunath.*

Peter Strickland’s hot tub has become an important fixture at Texas (and many NSS) caver gatherings. This was the 2005 Texas Caver Reunion at Flat Creek. The Speleo-Olympics is in progress across the river. *Carl Kunath.*
Peter Sprouse is standing in the entrance to Cueva de Infiernillo. If you look very closely you may be able to see Jerry Atkinson on rope about 70 feet below the entrance. This is a cave that had a major influence in the caving world last century. Dale Pate.

Unusual “leopard spots” floor in Dragoo Cave, February 2008. This is another of Texas’ rarely visited caves. Carl Kunath.

Bob Mitchell is often noted for wonderful close-up images of tiny cave insects. Here is a rare albino bat. Bob Mitchell.

The Back Cover

Whoa! Here we are on really shaky ground. Here are the photos of 25 people who made a significant difference in Texas caving. How were they chosen? This was a difficult selection to say the least. One of the main criteria was that their contributions to Texas caving have been ongoing over a long period of time. Ten years is about the minimum tenure and many have two to four times that amount. These are the people who explored the caves, made maps, produced photographs, published reports, inspired others and acted as sparkplugs in their groups. They are, in short, the people without whose contributions we would not have Texas caving as we know it today.

Top row, left to right: Jerry Atkinson, Bill Bentley, Allan Cobb, Gill Ediger, Bill Elliott
Second row, left to right: James Estes, Ronnie Fieseler, Bill Helmer, Bob Hudson, James Jasek
Third row, left to right: Orion Knox, Jean Krejca, Carl Kunath, Pete Lindsley, David McKenzie
Fourth row, left to right: Kurt Menking, Linda Palit, Dale Pate, Terry Raines, James Reddell
Fifth row, left to right: Bill Russell, Dick Smith, Peter Sprouse, George Veni, Mike Walsh

If you pay attention, you may get a group photo of a rare conjunction of people. Seen here L-R at the 2005 Texas Caver Reunion are; ABOVE: Terry Raines, James Reddell, and Orion Knox. RIGHT: Jimmy Walker, Bill Russell, Jerry Atkinson, and Fritz Holt. Carl Kunath.

A solemn group gathered at Flat Creek on December 6, 2009 to honor the memory of Ed Alexander. Ed’s friends came from all walks of life. There were easily 200 people there; probably more. Many brought photographs or other mementos of their relationship with Ed. The unique memorial service was conducted by Humberto Fernandez, a long-time friend from Ed’s adopted home in Real de Catorce, Mexico. Carl Kunath.

Grosser’s Sink is a nasty place. (L-R): Russell Harmon, Nick Lucas, Jon Vinson, and Don Broussard made a fun exploration during the 1969 Kendall County TSA Project. Carl Kunath.