

BATS News

June 2003

From the Editor

Thanks for reading the first on-line issue of the BATS News. It's been a lot of fun to put together. Please let me know what you think of it and what suggestions you may have for future editions. The only way our newsletter can continue to be interesting, varied, and represent the interests of all BATS members, is if you will submit articles, trip reports and items of news for inclusion. So, send me the stuff you want to see in "print." Thanks to my very talented artist-friend Mike and to my very talented proof-reader-friend Meredith for their help.

The deadline for submissions will be the 25th of every month and I will do my best to publish near the 1st of the month.



F e a t u r e s

BATS News June 2003

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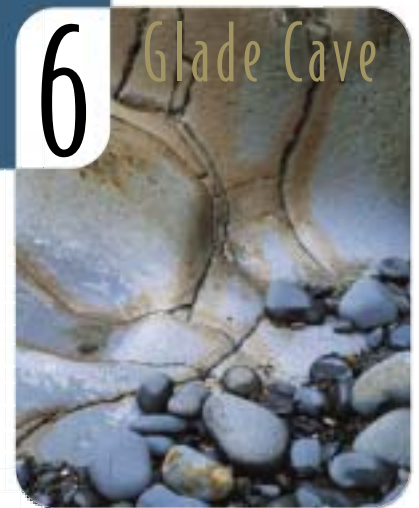
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Calendar

June 10

7:00 PM BATS Monthly Business Meeting,
Salem Church Library, Fredericksburg, Va.

July 19-20

OTR Work Weekend, Dailey, WV

July 19-27

ER-NCRC Week long Cave Rescue Classes,
Dailey, WV

August 4-8

NSS Convention, Porterville, CA

September 26-28

Fall VAR at Rural Retreat, VA hosted by the
Front Royal Grotto

September 3-4

Bridge Day Team rappel at Whitesides
Mountain, NC

October 18

Bridge Day at New River Gorge Bridge, WV

Announcements:

Congratulations to Sarah Pearce who graduates from Broad Run High School on June 14th.

Congratulations to Bobby Kinson who is the proud father of a son. Little Henry Jacob Kinson was born on Saturday, May 31st, and weighed in at 6.8 lbs.

Our newest V-BATs are Carrie Bader, Seth Lake, Lance and Robin Mitchell, & Chris Reasonover.



BATS May Meeting Minutes,

Present: Carrie Bader, Nikki Bennett, Evelyn Bradshaw, Kevin Franke, Kim Herlong, Raymond Herlong, Ken Hornung, Kelsea Johnson, Meredith Johnson, Russell Loynes, Mike Manke, Vikki Manke, Jacque Miley, Lance Mitchell, Robin Mitchell, Chris Reasonover, Allan Weberg, John Dangerfield, Dana Herlong

Unfortunately, I missed the very beginning of the meeting so I didn't get the treasurer's report (Raymond).

Spring VAR: This year, VAR was held at the OTR site, and the site flooded during the meeting. Quite a bit of work that had been done in preparation for OTR was ruined, so everyone is encouraged to go to the OTR work weekends to help fix up the site again.

Cave Trips: Allan, Robin, Lance and Carrie shared stories from their trip to Sites Cave.

President's Award: The President's Award (BATS Rock) was presented by TinY to Raymond Herlong (3 Rack Kodak) for his extreme dedication and service to BATS since its founding. TinY read excerpts from The Book, which is a small volume kept with the BATS Rock. BATS members share stories about the award winner in the Book. Chris showed a power point presentation that Lee Rodrigue had put together about Kodak's first caving trip. It was a VERY well-done piece, and kept everybody laughing.

Newsletter: The Newsletter Poll is out—and the executive committee has concluded from the results that we need a newsletter every month. So, we will have a published newsletter at least twice a year, and a monthly electronic newsletter. Allan Weberg volunteered to edit the e-letter.

Bridge Day: TinY will be getting applications out to the Bridge Day Team soon. Make sure you get with him if you want to participate on the rappel or belay teams.

Trip Planning: The next OTR work weekend is the first weekend in June. The Harper's Ferry rappel is also that weekend, on the 7th.

Speleofest, KY is Memorial Day weekend. Fall VAR will be hosted by the Front Royal Grotto at Royal Retreat, VA on September 26-28.

Projects: This year, they are offering space for grotto signs in the registration room at OTR. We should think about getting a BATS sign together. Jacque suggested we should also make a picnic table for OTR that we could leave at the OTR site. We will take a vote on spending grotto money to buy wood for this project next month.

Fundraising: We had some suggestions about how to raise money for the grotto. Carrie suggested offering lifetime memberships. Evelyn suggested having a grotto auction of caving gear, etc. Lance enhanced the idea by proposing we also auction off services that members of the grotto could perform. Carrie also suggested selling grotto T-shirts, bumper stickers, etc. If you have any suggestions, e-mail Jacque with your suggestions.

Survey Activities: TinY hasn't set a date for the surveying workshop at Endless Caverns yet. It will probably not be until after Labor Day.

Ongoing Activities: Remember, Gangsta Mappers is the 3rd weekend every other month (Breathing Survey) if anyone is interested.

Evelyn stated that she had recommended BATS for the cave conservation award.

As I Went Down In the River To Pray... OR Goonies 2: Wet and Wild In Glade Cave

by Sarah Richards

Setting: Memorial Day Weekend, 2003

Caves: Glade Cave (Sunday, May 25, 2003); Grand Caverns (Monday, May 26, 2003)

Cast of Characters: Damon DeLuca, Bobby Kinson, Russell Loynes (trip leader), Chris Reasonover, Sarah Richards and Allan Weberg

Ah, what I was thinking as I embarked on this testosterone-charged trip to Glade is beyond me. It was my first trip there, and Russ was leading his first trip ever. We met at the Hardees in Bridgewater—everyone was on time and ready for a great trip. We then took to the hills to find this little treasure of a cave. As the only member of the party who had even been to Glade before, Russ took the lead, making each turn by instinct and memory, and bringing the caravan safely to the mouth of the cave with no wrong turns.

We had been warned time and again (by TinY and Meredith, to name a few) that Glade would be wet, wet, wet due to all the rain in the preceding days and weeks. Well, they were right! We slid into the cave at about 4:30 p.m. and were in ankle deep water before we knew it—each time we had a slide down, we landed in puddles. And each climb up was made 10 times harder by the mucky mud that is impossible to get a grip on. We proceeded through the cave, our trip leader surprising himself with his recollection of how to navigate the passages to get us to our destination—the lake room. There were a couple wrong turns, but with 5 other

capable (and adventurous) cavers in tow and a few copies of the cave map, there was never any doubt that we would find what we were looking for.



As we proceeded, Russ commented several times that there was way more water there than in any of his previous 5 trips into Glade. And where there wasn't water, there was lots of slick mud. And where it would have been muddy anyway, there was boot-sucking, ankle-deep (or higher!) mud covered by water up to our calves. Climbing up and down the spots with handlines, etriers, and even a rope ladder already rigged, I wondered how we would have done it without those aids.

Well, we made it to the lake room, and would you believe that it looked like a lake? From what Russ told us, this is the spot where groups typically stop and sit for snacks, water, and a few minutes of lights-out. That wasn't exactly an option this time—while there was plenty of water for all, I don't think anyone would have cared to drink it. And, there was no place to sit, as the floor was submerged right from the entrance to the room. But, that didn't stop us from enjoying the lake



Glade Cave continued



room anyway. We waded through the water—up to our knees, a little deeper to our thighs, then, yep you guessed it—up to our crotches and even deeper. Russ was amazed by all the water and took lots of pictures so that he could have proof that the lake room was really flooded. Bobby and I explored—wading further south in the cave to where we could see the water sumped, then veering off to the left to check out a little room. We left our packs on a rock, I hitched my battery belt up to my chest, and we delved forward—Bobby crouching as he proceeded and getting his chin wet; me stooping over, turning my head, and doing a full-fledged ear dip to get through to the little room. I suppose that in dryer conditions, this little room is accessible by merely crawling or stooping under some low hanging formations, but not this time. What an adventure—we were now wet up to our necks! And we were clean!

At this point, it was time to turn back. We could go no further because the passage was flooded. We started making tracks back to the entrance. But, those tracks quickly turned from foot and knee tracks to belly tracks—we discovered that the fastest method of locomotion through the crawling passages was to slide on our bellies like we were slipping and sliding down water slides. We could give a little push and slide on our wet bellies until the passage flattened out—then we'd have to start all over. The walls of the cave guided our direction of travel, so there was no steering necessary. It was just like in the movie "Goonies" except we weren't being chased by bad guys with guns and, much to our dismay, we didn't discover an abandoned pirate ship full of treasure in the lake room. The cave echoed with laughter, as we all slipped and slid like seals on an iceberg, tickling ourselves silly with the hilarity of it all. I think most would agree that this was everyone's favorite part of the trip.

We did finally stop for a prolonged break near the second entrance. We sat, snacked, hydrated, and took a brief lights-out. Allan, Bobby, and I, unable to resist the urge to sing any longer, finally broke into a rousing rendition of "As

I Went Down In the River To Pray" from the movie "Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?"—complete with harmony. Anyone who has caved with us before probably is not surprised to hear this. A trip with Allan Weberg will always include beautiful music—add Bobby and me and you're really in for a treat!

The trip concluded with the newest caver taking the lead. With only one wrong turn, Damon led us safely back to the entrance. He is well on his way to leading a trip himself someday. We exited the cave at 7:00.

Damon and Chris soon headed back home. But the rest of the group (Allan, Bobby, Russ, and me) stayed on to camp at Natural Chimneys Regional Park. The camping was great—we had a nice flat spot, far from the large groups celebrating Memorial Day weekend together. There were no picnic tables in the "primitive" sites, but we did have a fire ring and firewood was pretty cheap. We set up camp in the daylight, but forgot about dinner til after dark—finding dinner at 10:00 on a Sunday night proved to be a difficult task, but Allan saved the day when he sweet-talked the guy at the drive-up pizza window into staying open a few minutes longer. By the time we returned from picking



Glade Cave continued

up dinner, Bobby had a fire blazing for us. So, pizza, beer, and homemade brownies around the campfire were a great end to a great day. We had a little more rain throughout the night, but we just moved our little party from our campfire to the judge's stand at the jousting range. We BATS are adaptable—always willing to move the party rather than end it!

Monday, we awoke to sunshine and blue sky—and it lasted all day! What a treat after weeks of rain. We had planned to hit Trout Rocks, but even the over-achievers in the group were feeling a little too rough around the edges for another cave trip. So, we moved at a leisurely pace, taking down tents, packing up the trucks, viewing the natural chimneys, and turning cartwheels through the grass. We started the day with a breakfast of pizza and brownies (no beer this time) around the campfire and then we hit the road in search of Crystal Caverns.

Well, we couldn't remember where to find Crystal Caverns and nobody in Bridgewater seemed to know where it was, so we went to Grand Caverns instead. We were offered free admission because of our NSS membership, but fig-

ured that was no way to support the cave, so we talked them into charging us the student group rate of \$5 per person. Not bad, considering the standard admission fee is \$15 per person.

What a fabulous cave! If you haven't seen Grand Caverns, you don't know what you're missing. This cave has tons of shield formations, tall ceilings, stunning flowstone, massive stalactites and stalagmites, and lots of history. Our tour guide was a rookie who hadn't really perfected her presentation style yet (she did know how to flirt with Bobby!) and our tour group was huge, but we all enjoyed getting underground and seeing all the pretties.

If you ever have the opportunity to visit Grand Caverns, take it! Even if you're just driving by on the interstate and you have some time to spare, it's well worth the time and makes for a nice leisurely cave trip. Be sure to introduce yourself as an NSS member and you'll likely get a good deal on admission.

All in all, this was a great trip with great people. We're all looking forward to caving together again soon!



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To the Square Room and Back Again

by Allan Weberg

The BATS monthly trip for March was to Trout Cave. Trout is one of three caves in the John Guilday Cave Preserve near the town of Franklin, WV in Pendelton County. The Preserve is owned by the NSS and is a popular destination for cavers in the area. By the end of March, 8-10 BATS and friends had signed up to go but one-by-one folks started to drop out until we were left with four cavers. Four is usually the minimum number of people to go caving with. I was expecting Nikki Bennet, her eleven year old nephew Alex, and Mike Young.

We met at the Thorn Springs Campground on Friday evening and talked about our plans for the next day. Since Nikki had forgotten some of her gear we would start the day with a trip to the hardware store for replacements. While in town we met up with some of the team that were going into Sinnet-Thorn Cave just a few miles down the road from Trout.

A short drive down the road from Franklin led us to the pull-off parking area for the Trout Rocks Caves. We were soon joined by Kelly Leckie (a friend of Rafi Reyes) just as we had gotten all “geared up.” Kelly explained that she hadn’t been caving before but had hoped to be a part of the Sinnet-Thorn trip. The trip leader advised her against using Sinnet-Thorn as her first-cave experience and sent her over to us. Nikki and I quickly made sure Kelly had all the right gear and gave her a quick but thorough BATS orientation and we set off on the climb up to Trout Cave. Now, to be perfectly honest, the climb up to Trout is not really any fun. It’s steep and you get all hot and sweaty in your full caving gear. Nikki persevered to the final climb to the cave entrance and we set up a handline for folks that felt uncomfortable with the height. You can scramble up using both hands and there are plenty of hand and foot-holds but it is a sure thing that if you slip, you will continue to fall on down the side of the hill—far down the side of the hill. Nikki decided that she didn’t want to risk the climb without vertical gear and I agreed with her. Mike offered to accompany her down the side of the mountain. This was a gallant thing to do, I know, but I knew he had an ulterior motive. To say that Mike is an avid fisherman would be understatement and as they left I saw that I’m-gonna-go-fishin’ gleam in his eye.

Our group was reduced to three people—one of them eleven. We talked about cancelling the trip but decided that we would go in for a little ways and would judge how we were faring. It turned out that Alex was a very fine and safe caver and before the trip was over he and I had bond-

Trout Cave

by Nicole Bennett

Well, I didn’t quite make it into Trout Cave, but the climb up was an interesting experience. I went with my nephew, Alex, for the Trout cave trip back in March, and things started to go wrong before we even got there. I found out I forgot my entire bag of caving gear—luckily I still had my helmet because it was with my vertical gear—but I had to scrounge around Franklin for a new light and kneepads, and had to dress in the only pair of jeans I brought (the other pair were in the caving bag too). Then, we climbed up the mountain and (after spending all that money getting new gear) I chickened out on the last part of the climb. If you haven’t been to Trout, this is the part where you have to scramble up a fairly sheer part of the mountain, which wouldn’t be that bad if there wasn’t a 150-foot or so drop behind you. It’s very psychologically intimidating to all us weenies who get weak-kneed at any height above five feet or so. So, at this point I ended up quitting, never got into the cave. But I learned something important. I should always bring vertical rope and an ascender along. Allan was going to rig a handline for me, but that wouldn’t

have done the trick because I was too frightened about losing my grip on the handline if I slipped. Bringing vertical gear (at least a harness and an ascender) to caves where there are intimidating heights is a good back-up plan for anybody. Then, you have it if you need it, and if you don’t, you’ve at least covered your butt just in case.

I’ve been doing vertical work with the grotto for three years now, and have climbed stuff much higher than this with vertical gear, and I really thought I would be totally prepared for the height, even without vertical gear. So it suprised me greatly to get there and totally freak out over a climb that couldn’t be more than 15 feet or so. This just goes to show that just because you think you are prepared, it doesn’t mean you are. But these setbacks can become good learning experiences. The next time there is a trip to Trout, I plan to prepare myself both mentally and equipment-wise. I know that with correct preparation, and the backup of a solid, BATS-trained group of cavers with me, I’ll be able to tackle my fears and finally get into that darn cave.

Trout Cave continued

ed into fast friends. Kelly turned out to be a very natural caver, she moved well with good balance and confidence and so I judged that we could pretty safely explore the cave with only three people. (Another group had gone in ahead of us and a big group of Boy Scouts had come in after us moving pretty fast so we were far from being the only ones in the cave.)

Our first goal was the sculpture room. Lots of caves have sculpture rooms and cavers have varied opinions on them ranging from amusement to “it spoils the aesthetic of the caving experience.” I guess a bunch of the latter had been on a recent Trout Clean-Up Trip because when we got to the room all of my favorite sculptures had been removed or knocked down.

Oh well, so far so good, and so we continued on to our next goal, the Square Room. As we set off to find it we started keeping a count of the many bats we had observed cling-

ing to the walls and ceiling. We found them in clusters of 25-40 and had to be very careful that we didn't knock any of them down by brushing against them. We were constantly turning around to the person following and pointing out, “Bat!” As we were a small group we moved pretty quickly and soon caught up with the Scouts—lots and lots of Scouts—sitting near the climb-up to the Square Room. I enjoy squirming up the corkscrew tunnel that leads to the Square Room and when you popout into the room it does indeed look like you are inside a cube with a 40-foot high ceiling. We took a break for water and “cave food” and watched a bat doing an underground air show, marveling at his flying skills. We decided to head back out since we judged we'd just make it back to the cars by the agreed-upon meeting time. As we approached the cars Mike proudly showed us a 13 inch rainbow trout he had just caught in the stream that flows through the pasture valley floor. Nikki was napping—no fishing for her—and we woke her up to go get some pizza.

Glade Cave continued

Rave Reviews:

Damon Deluca reports: “Ol' Russ did a good job organizing the trip—I was impressed he found the cave on the first try. The last trip I went on we drove around for an hour or so on a treasure hunt. It was nice that maps were passed out in the beginning—good thinking. I'll have to say my two favorite parts of the cave were the mud slide on the way back (very Gooney-like) and of course, the water room.”

Chris Reasonover didn't respond to my request for trip feedback, but we're gonna quote him anyway. Chris gets an award for his snappy remark, “I do that every morning,” in response to a comment about something getting longer and shorter.

Bobby Kinson rated the trip an 8, saying that Russ was great to arrange the camping and caving, but knocked off a couple of points because Russ provided beer but no women. As Bobby said: “Good fire, good beer, and good friends”. Bobby will be a willing participant on future

trips with Russ, but on the condition that there are more girls to go around.

Sarah Richards was fully satisfied and would recommend Russ as a trip leader in the future—he not only arranged the cave trip, extended personal invitations to several people so the group would be big enough, and made copies of the map for each participant, but he also arranged camping, brought lots of beer, and invited plenty of men! She is eagerly awaiting the next trip that Russ puts together. She also wants to go back to Glade to spend more time learning it so she can lead trips there, too.

Allan Weberg credits Russ with doing a great job of organizing the trip—from reserving the campground to getting to the cave to having some extra beer. He felt that Russ was well organized and confident. “He knew the cave he was leading well, showed a lot of confidence, and even when he wasn't exactly sure where he was, he didn't get weird!” Allan enjoyed the cave, the slip-sliding, and the underwater lake room and is eager to return to Glade to explore every nook and cranny.

Sites Cave Succumbs to VBATs Visit

by Mike "TinY" Manke

The weekend started out with heavy rains in WV and the Tygart River finally burst its banks on Saturday night flooding the lower end the OTR site. 300 plus cavers at the Spring VAR being held on that site had to head for high ground up by the registration building, many wading in water, tents in hand. These events set the tone for our trip the following day.

On Sunday, May 11, 2003, a group of VBATs visited Sites

"I had always heard Sites was only about 180 feet deep so I used my 200-foot rope for the second rappel line. In previous trips I had always used 300-foot ropes."

Cave in Franklin County, WV on the way home from the Spring VAR. I was leading the trip with Allan Weberg attending as an experienced caver to assist with the group. Lance Mitchell, Robin Mitchell, and Carrie Bader were rappelling with us to record a long rappel as practice for the VBAT's 2003 Bridge Day Team. Sarah Richards was planning to do the drop but decided to wait at the lip because of an upset stomach. Debbie Frazier and Seth Lake attended the trip, also planning to wait for us at the lip. This was going to be both the longest rappel and longest in-cave drop for Lance, Robin, and Carrie.

I first rigged two ropes for the drop. My 200-foot rope was rigged and tossed into the pit on the left side. My 300-foot rope was rigged and tossed into the pit on the right side. I also rigged a different color edge line for each rope being sure to knot the end of each rope. The rappel lines were double knotted at the end, both inside and outside the rope bags.

The sound of rope feeding out of the rope bags was followed by several wall impacts. Then a long silence that preceded the deep boom of the rope bags impacting on the bottom of the cave. I had tossed each bag into the pit just shy of the opposing high side wall hoping they would find their way to the bottom without ensnaring "The Fickle Finger of Fate".

"The Fickle Finger of Fate" is a hooked finger shaped rock

projection on the high side wall of this pit. Due to the slight sloping nature of the drop, it is possible to have your rope snagged by this projection when it is tossed into the pit or as you climb up from the bottom. My rope had been hung on the flake once on my first rappel into this cave and several times the finger had snagged my rope on ascents.

When your rope hangs the finger during your rappel you end up snagged in a J-belay if you do not notice it. You

must then change over, climb up and free your rope, then change over again to complete the rappel. When the rope snags the finger during your climb, you must change over and rappel back down to get slack to whip it off the finger and start your climb again. If you do not, your climb will lead you to the finger where you will

be against the far side wall instead of the wall the rope is rigged on. Freeing the rope from this location is all but impossible. If you cross the finger or succeed in getting it free from this location you will pendulum into the opposite wall that the rope is rigged on! If you cannot change over and rappel back down to the bottom to free the rope, this is where you stay stuck until rescued! Changeover skills are an important part of visiting this cave and should be well practiced by all cavers anyway.

I asked Allan to rappel first on the 300-foot rope to the bottom of the cave. Allan was going to belay the 300-foot rope with Carrie on it as I rappelled beside her on the 200-foot rope. I asked Allan to check both ropes to insure they had in fact reached the bottom of the cave and neither had ensnared "The Fickle Finger of Fate" on the way down. Allan quickly rappelled down the drop and hollered, "Off rope, OK rope 1, OK rope 2!" We assumed Allan was then going to take up his belay position behind the large flake on the left wall about 15 feet down the slope from the bottom of the drop.

Carrie and I hollered, "On rope," and rigged in our racks. I rigged in my French Wrap Self Belay and eased over the lip on the 200 foot rope. Carrie hollered for a belay and then went over the lip on the 300 foot rope. We both rappelled smoothly past the break in the rock about 30 feet below the lip. I pointed this out to Carrie as a place we

sometimes pad the rope but on this trip had chosen not to. The rub point here is not that serious and less experienced cavers sometimes have problems with rope pads secured to the rappel lines. Everyone on the trip had trained passing rope pads tied to the main rappel line at my house, but, "Why make things more complicated"... or so I thought.

We broke into the 120 foot free hang portion of the drop with ease. I was truly impressed with Carrie's calmness as she worked her rack on the longest drop of her life. I pointed out the "Fickle Finger of Fate" and another large flake on the high side wall as we rappelled past. My rope had hung on the flake once on my first rappel into this cave and several times the finger had snagged my rope on ascents.

As we neared the bottom of the 120 foot free fall section of this drop I noticed Allan's light peering up from the darkness at us. This struck me as odd because the belay station at the bottom of the drop is down a slope about 15 feet and behind a large rock flake on the left wall. This is the only safe belay station in this cave because

of the narrowness of the pit at the bottom. Any other area exposes the belayer to rock falls from above. The slope itself at the bottom of the drop becomes a bowling alley like area when rocks hit the slope and go tumbling down to the horizontal section of the cave.

Allan then hollered up that he did not think he was at the bottom of the drop. He had rappelled to the first 20-foot long mud slope and found both rope bags. It had been 2 years since Allan and I had visited this cave and he had forgotten that this first mud slope was still 50 feet from the bottom of the drop. He had realized this when he could not find the rock flake to belay behind but we had already hollered, "On rope," and were over the lip.

I confirmed to Allan that he was still 50 feet from the bottom of the drop and commended him on being selected to belay Carrie. This commendation was because of the way I had trained him to belay when he participated in the NSS Basic Vertical Course at my house. He was belaying with his QAS (Quick Attach Safety) applied to the rope high enough to prevent him from falling down. Using this method of belay, the belayer is prevented from releasing the rope should they fall or be struck by a falling rock that had injured the rappeller. The rappeller is prevented from falling by the weight of the belayer should they slip and fall. Using this method Allan was still safely attached to

the rope even though he was not at the bottom of the drop! Score: 1 for VBATs, 0 for Sites Cave!

As Carrie and I arrived at the first mud slope, I advised Allan to rig his rack into my rappel line below me and continue the rappel to the bottom. I had extensive experience tandem climbing and rappelling with Gordon Birkheimer so this was not a concern with me. Allen rigged his rack to my rope and disappeared over the edge of the slope on his way down the last 50 feet of the drop. Score: 2 VBATs, Sites Cave 0!

As he loaded my rope, I was pulled up off the mud slope by his weight and hung on my locked off rack in the cen-

The NSS Basic Vertical Training Course prepared all of us for the adventures of the day. Completion of this training course earned each of these trips participants the honor of calling themselves VBATs! VBATs 9, Sites Cave 0!

ter of the cave. I asked Carrie to stay very still to keep from kicking mud off of the slope onto Allan below. Then I felt the rope stretch as Allan's rappel came to a sudden stop. Allan hollered up that he had hit the knot and rope bag at the end of the rope and he was still 20 feet from the bottom of the drop! Ahggggg... short roped by the 200-foot rope!

I had always heard Sites was only about 180 feet deep so I used my 200 foot rope for the second rappel line. In previous trips I had always used 300 foot ropes. Sites must be closer to 200 feet of a drop because we had used the minimum of rope for rigging a tensionless hitch to the rig tree.

"No problem," Allan hollered, "I will just change over to the 300 foot rope and rappel to the bottom." This he did with no difficulty and soon I was being lowered back to the slope as Allan transferred his weight to the 300-foot rope. As I went down to the slope, Carrie was lifted up past me by Allan's weight being loaded onto her rope. "This is cool," she exclaimed as she hung from her locked rack at an angle in the middle of the drop above the mud slope.

Allan completed the rappel on the 300-foot rope and again took up his belay position. This time he was behind the rock flake on the left wall and out of sight and rock fall from Carrie and I on the muddy slope above him. Score: 3 for VBATs, 0 for Sites Cave!

Sites Cave continued

Carrie unlocked her rack and eased over the edge of the mud slope. This area of the cave is narrow with a bowl shaped crevice that you must walk out and over because it is too tight for most cavers to fit through. It is also way too tight for 2 rappellers to fit through at once.

As Carrie negotiated the crevice, I noticed just how much water from the previous two days of rain was running down the cave wall and accumulating in the mud on the slope. It was not enough to create a sprinkle, but plenty enough to quickly fill your footprints in the mud. As each footprint would fill with water, the already saturated mud would loosen and begin to slide down the slope. "Rock" I hollered as a fist size wave of mud slid over the slope edge down towards Carrie.

"Ouch," Carrie hollered as the mud splattered over the top of her helmet. I explained to her what was happening with the water in our footprints and she quickly completed her rappel and got off rope. Score: 4 for VBATs, 0 for Sites Cave!

I followed by changing over from the 200 foot rope to the 300 foot rope and rappelled to the bottom of the drop. Not a big deal at all considering the thousands of change overs I had practiced in my front yard and while teaching the NSS Basic Vertical Course to all of the VBATs. Score: 5 for VBATs, Sites 0!

From there I hollered, "Off rope 1, off rope 2; Rope 2 is too short," at the top of my lungs. "WHAT?????" was the reply from top of that long dark shaft above me. "Rope 2 is too short," I hollered again, this time answered by, "OK."

Lance and Robin had understood me the second time at the top of the drop that rope 2 did not reach the bottom of the drop. Lance now had a dilemma to ponder. He and Robin could rappel by themselves down the 300-foot rope one at a time or they could rappel together as husband and wife, with him changing over to the 300-foot rope to complete the rappel. Lance decided to rappel the 200-foot rope with his wife on the 300-foot rope so they could do the rappel together. After all...he was a VBAT and it was only a rope-to-rope changeover. No problem, he had practiced that at my house!

"HMMMMMMMMM," I thought, "What are Lance and Robin up to?" I figured it at 50/50 that they would heed my warning on the short rope and rappel separately on the 300-foot rope or rappel together and do the rope to rope changeover on the slope 50-feet from the bottom of the drop. As I heard both of their voices exclaiming how beautiful the rappel was, I knew the answer. From the belay station with the 300-foot rope on belay I hollered for both

of them to stop on the first mud slope 50-feet above me.

As they landed on the slope, their feet dislodged a large wave of water soaked mud and debris from the slope. "Rock," they hollered as the wave of mud impacted the second slope at the bottom of the drop. I watched with amusement as several rocks rolled by the rock flake from behind which I was belaying. I hollered, "Rock," down the slope to warn Allan and Carrie of the danger. The sound of the rocks smacking into the far wall at the bottom of the mud slope soon followed.

That is why I call the 40-foot long steep slope at the bottom of the drop "The Bowling Alley." It is only about eight-foot wide and so steep and wet it is difficult to climb without holding onto the walls. If you are anywhere on this slope when rocks fall down the drop, they will continue down this slope and bowl you over! To stay safe, you must be behind the rock flake, or to the left or right of the slope in the horizontal section of the cave below.

I hollered for Lance to stay very still on the mud slope and for Robin to continue her rappel past the bowl shaped crevice to the bottom of the pit. This she did with ease and was soon safely to the right at the bottom of "The Bowling Alley" with Allan and Carrie. Lance quickly changed over to the 300-foot rope as planned and smoothly completed the rappel. Score: VBATs 6, Sites 0!

Lance and I joined Robin, Carrie, and Allan in the horizontal section of the cave and I pointed out some of the pretties there. We resisted the temptation to visit the rest of the cave because we had three fellow cavers waiting for us at the lip. We planned our ascent order and put it in action to get back to our waiting friends as soon as possible.

Allan climbed the bottom mud slope and ascended the 300 foot rope to the first mud slope 50 feet off of the cave floor. He quickly changed over to the 200 foot rope and made himself comfortable on the slope to await Lance and Robin. Score: VBATs 7, Sites 0!

Robin and Lance scrambled up "The Bowling Alley" mud slope with Robin taking refuge behind the rock flake belay station. Lance got on rope and quickly climbed up to the first mud slope to join Allan and made himself comfortable. Robin then climbed up tandem on the 300-foot to join Lance and Allan on the mud slope 50 feet off of the bottom of the drop.

Carrie and I listened to a wave of mud impacting the bottom of the drop as Lance, Robin, and Allan hollered, "Rock!" The water had again accumulated in the mud on the slope and their six shifting feet had sent more of it down the drop. Carrie and I watched from the right of the

Sites Cave continued

slope as three rocks sped by us down the Bowling Alley to impact the wall across from us.

Allan, Robin and Lance ascended to the top of the drop. Lance changed over to the edge line at the top and did the walk around past the lip for the 300-foot rope rigged to the right of the pit. Robin followed through the walk around while Allan scrambled over the lip to the left on the 200-foot rope. "Off rope," they hollered to Carrie and I, still at the bottom of cave.

"On rope," I replied and Carrie and I scrambled up "The Bowling Alley" to the bottom of the drop. I peered up the drop looking at the silhouette of "The Fickle Finger of Fate" against the blue sky. It was pointing menacingly at the 300-foot rope in my hand but a gently wiggle of the rope showed it was below the finger and not hooked on it.

I quickly rigged my rope walker and ascended 50 feet up to the mud slope as Carrie took refuge behind the rock flake belay station. I changed over to the 200-foot rope and made myself comfortable to await Carrie so we could climb together. Score: VBATs 8, Sites 0!

Carrie got on rope and started climbing. I watched as her rope pulsed up the drop with each frog motion. Each time it pulsed, it would slap the back side of "The Fickle Finger of Fate". As she neared the top of the 50 foot climb to the first mud slope, the pulsating rope missed the back of the finger! Carrie's rope was now securely hooked behind the notch on top of "The Fickle Finger of Fate"!

I pointed this out to Carrie as she climbed to the top of the slope beside me. The clear blue sky silhouetted the finger perfectly. Along the rope the fingers crooked hook bisected it into 2 distinct angles from the top of the drop to Carrie. Continuing the climb from here would be hazardous to Carrie's health. "Sooooooooooooo what do we do now?" she asked. "Simple, just change over to my rope above me and I will free your rope from the finger," I explained.

This change over Carrie did with ease. As Carrie hung from her QAS on my rope above me, I whipped her rope to snap it clear of "The Fickle Finger of Fate". That done, Carrie easily changed over from my rope above me back to her rope. Score: VBATs 9, Sites Cave 0.

As we continued our climb, I pointed out to Carrie the advantage of her Frog climbing system over my Rope Walker. On this mud slope 50 feet off the cave floor, I was

having to self start again because my rope weight was negated by the rope contact on the mud slope. Carrie effortlessly climbed above me in her Frog system as I struggled with another self start and muddy rope.

We chatted casually as we climbed the rest of the drop. Soon sunlight, blue sky, and the sounds of our caver friends greeted us at the lip. "What took ya'll so long?" they asked as we crossed the lip. I explained Carrie's encounter with the finger. "No Problem," Allan replied, "Lance has been entertaining us with his impressions while we waited for ya'll."

Pulling the ropes and de-rigging went quickly as we discussed our adventure. Getting off rope before getting to the bottom of the drop, short ropes, mud blobs and snaring the "The Fickle Finger of Fate" leading to eight changeovers by our crew. Robin was a little bemused because she was the only person on the rappel that did not have to do a changeover.

I beamed with pride then as I do now writing this trip report. "Why?" you may ask. As the title implies, Sites Cave Succumbs to VBATs! About everything imaginable had gone wrong on this trip that would have led many cavers to disaster! I did not witness a raised eyebrow or concerned voice the entire trip! Everyone on this trip had completed the NSS Basic Vertical Training Course that I teach. Every challenge encountered they took in stride and simply put their training and experience to work to safely negate the challenge.

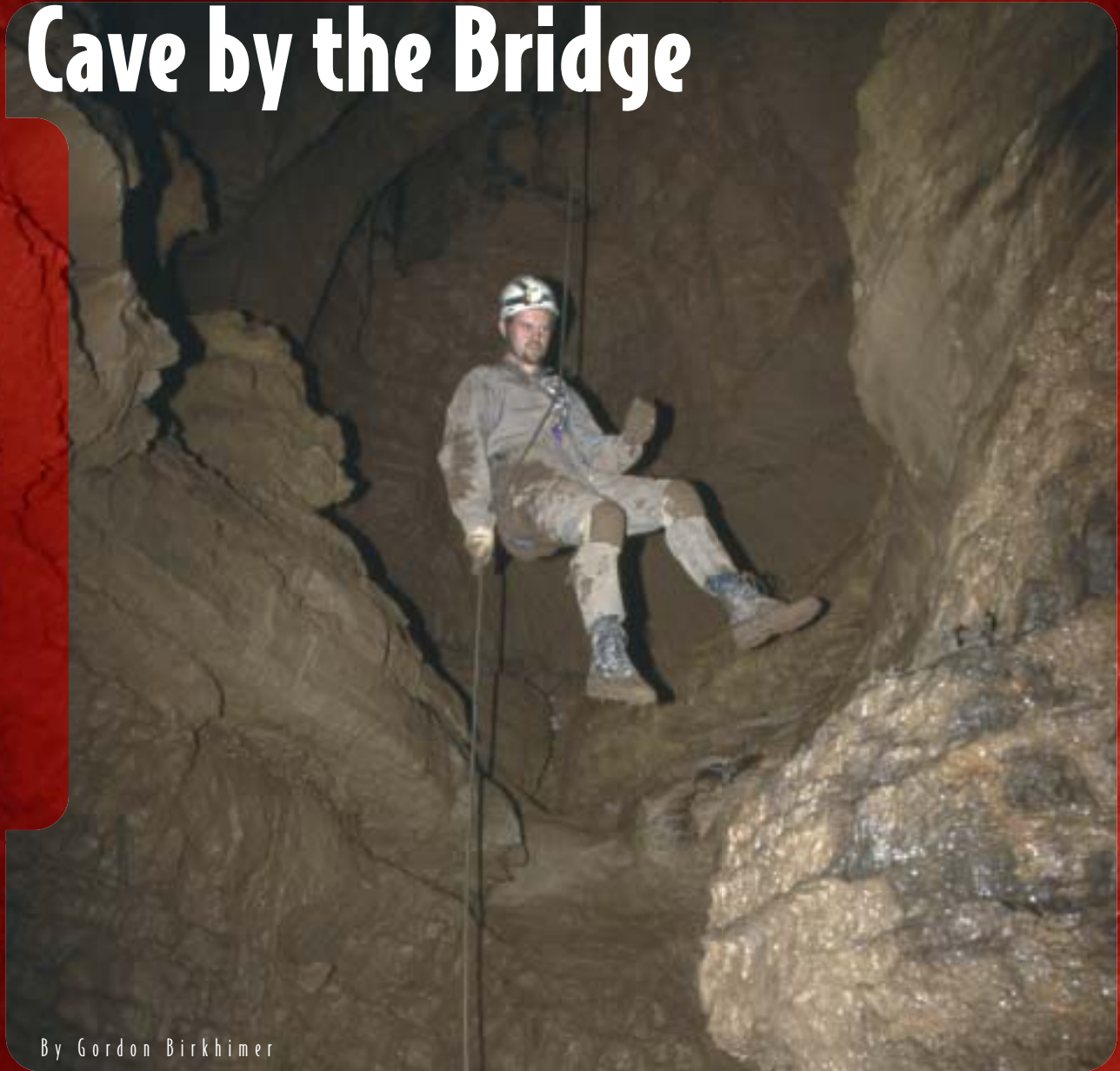
A great impersonator once said, as his instructor climbed a 200-foot pit, "The cave don't care." It does not care if you get off rope in the wrong spot 50 feet above the floor! It does not care if you rappel into a knot and rope bag 20 feet off the floor! It does not care if you are short roped! It does not care if mud balls hit you! It does not care if its rock features snag your rope on your climb! It does not care if you are unprepared for the hazards of the underworld as you attempt to explore its depths on rope.

One thing we all care about is the safety of ourselves and caver friends on rope. The NSS Basic Vertical Training Course prepared all of us for the adventures of the day. Completion of this training course earned each of these trips participants the honor of calling themselves VBATs! VBATs 9, Sites Cave 0!

See ya on rope!

Small White

Cave by the Bridge



By Gordon Birkhimer

Sometimes when you translate certain words from one language to another, they grow, or become much larger than their original meaning. In the case of **Cuevacita Blanquita de la Puente**, the name of the cave grew as we named it, becoming much larger in words than the cave's actual boundaries. Although the small 71-foot cave is more than a mouthful to say, it provided us with a good day of adventure and camaraderie.

Mexico continued

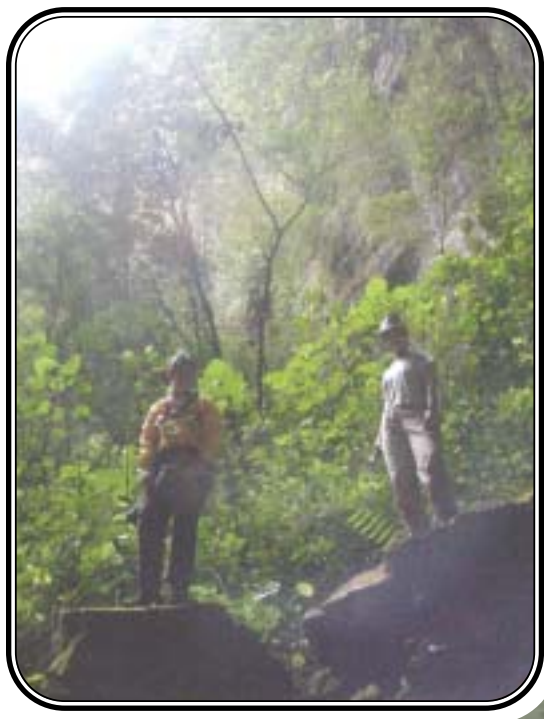
Since arriving in Aquismon on Friday, December 27th, Mel Eady, Mike "TinY" Manke, and I had been busy investigating the Big Bird Pits of Mexico. We had worked as a team with a group consisting of Frank Abbato, Shruti Mantri, Dennis Melko, and Paula Grgich, along with two Texas cavers, Robin Barber and R.D. Milhollin. Our team safely completed what is called the Holy Trinity of Aquismon: Sotano de Cepillas (421 ft.); Hoya de las Guaguas (663 ft.); and Sotano de las Golondrinas (1094 ft.). Frank, Shruti, Dennis, and Paula had now departed for home and we were looking forward to getting involved in some survey project work.

Robin and R.D. were staying with Mike Walsh at his Casa Aquismon. We had learned Robin is a bona fide NSS Cartographic Salon Award winner. Naturally, we were anxious to get her some data so she could employ her carto-

graphic skills. And, Walsh wanted to offer Robin the opportunity to map some potential caves that he felt needed to be discovered and surveyed. He recommended taking a look in Sotano de la Puente, because in his opinion, there might be caves that needed to be documented there.

On Thursday, January 2nd, Robin, Gordon, Mel, TinY, and R.D. set off to explore this relatively unknown sotano, to determine if caves do exist there. We drove up the Aquismon-Golondrinas road and passed the first road on the right leading north, which is the La Linja Road. Immediately after that is the La Laja Road, which is the next road on the left leading south towards Cueva Linda and Tamapatz. The sotanos are about 0.2 of a mile past the road to La Laja. Located in close proximity to Sotano de las Quilas, as seen in the aerial photo that Walsh provided us, Sotano de la Puente is roughly twice the size. Both are equidistant from the road on opposite sides of the valley where the road climbs gradually up to Sotano de las Golondrinas.

We knew where Quilas was, since we had explored that one with Paula, and Dennis, on December 28th when we walked to the large pit near the top of the mountain. We observed a large number of parrots living in the pit. Quilas is the Huastecan (Indian) name for these birds. The huge entrance of this sink is 246-feet wide by 377-feet long with a total depth of 387 feet. The entrance is so large that sunlight penetrates to the sloping sink floor supporting a complete jungle forest habitat, just like a mini Hoya de la Luz. We found at least two caves at the bottom of the lower slope.



Cuevacita Blanca de la Puente Municipio de Aquismon San Luis Potosi (SLP), Mexico January 2, 2003



It is interesting to note the depth of the pit and the size of the entrance opening are the determining factors as to the vegetation that proliferates within. For example, Quilas with its depth of 300 feet and wide opening, provide enough light to accommodate an entire jungle habitat complete with mature trees on the sotano floor. Sotano de las Guaguas had a huge entrance opening, but at 500 feet, the depth was significantly greater, thereby reducing the available direct sunlight. There was actual vegetation present on one slope, which receives the most sunlight, but the plants there were stunted and only reached a height of about 4-5 feet. Sotano de las Golondrinas, which is easily twice the depth of Guaguas, may provide only minutes of direct sunlight each day. Seeds in this sotano do sprout, but they only achieve inches of height in total growth. The floor of Golondrinas is extremely green, but the predominant vegetation growing down there is moss and varieties not requiring direct sunlight.

Walsh gave us directions to go past where we parked for Quilas, and look for a trail on the left, which we found. We geared up and hiked about fifteen minutes up the mountain trail, until we reached the top of the fenced rim of the sotano.

Sotano de la Puente was much different than Quilas in that it was possible to walk to the bottom of the sotano, without using rope to rappel to the floor. It was easy to walk down the gently sloping grazing land on this side of the sotano. In front of us, directly across the sotano, we faced the majestic headwall, hundreds of feet of sheer rock face rising into the sky. On that side of the sotano, an impressive rappel could be had of more than 300 feet. The grassy grazing land eventually gave way to the trees and vegetation of the jungle about half way down the slope. Now we were into the huge jungle covering the sotano walls and floor. Local farmers have been clearing unwanted vegetation to promote coffee production. There were downed trees and coffee plants everywhere.

Machetes were the tools of the day as we split into two teams circumnavigating the headwall in a quest for unknown cuevas. Mel, Robin, and I moved to our left as we faced the headwall, while TinY and R.D. traveled to the right. Our team found several small caves formed by water action and some shelter caves, but none were significant enough to survey.

Traversing near the headwall through thick vegetation on uneven surface with cliffs and crevasses was quite difficult. After completing our designated half of the sotano, TinY yelled to us that he had located a cave, so we moved in his direction. Sound does strange things in those sotanos. TinY sounded deceptively close, but it took us over 15 minutes of bushwhacking to reach him and R.D. When we got there, we observed a cave that you could get your toes in from out of the sunlight.

Of course, it didn't take very long to survey our little cave. Tiny kept book and sketched as we measured, read instruments, and fed him data. It's possible this was a virgin cave since we observed nothing to indicate prior human visitation. We finished surveying and then came the difficult part—naming the cave! We felt it should have the word white somewhere in there as a reference to the beautiful white color of the formations. It should have the word small, no maybe little would be good, or possibly tiny as part of the name. It took longer for us to name the cave than it did to actually survey it. Finally, everyone agreed to something like "Sotano de la Puente's Cuevacita Blanquita", which translates roughly to "Basement of the Bridge's Little White Small Cave". Mercifully, Robin has simplified the name to Cuevacita Blanquita de la Puente, which is the name you see on the map. Translated to English, that would be "Small White Cave by the Bridge."

The small cave located within the enormous sotano helped me appreciate the meaning of the term "diametrically opposed." Here we were in sunny Mexico, the land known for vast expanses of subterranean cavities with mile after endless mile of unexplored passages through the porous limestone, and we diligently documented a 71-footer. I guess it's our Gangsta Mapper upbringing that makes us the way we are.

We hiked out of the sotano in the evening light and made it back to town for a typical Aquismon night of cerveza y comida (beer and food). We had reserved the last week in Mexico for exploration and surveying. We hadn't done badly on our first day. Unknown to us, we had yet to explore the Caves of La Ventana and the Caves of Otate in the coming days.