

THE FLOWSTONE



Volume 32 | Issue 1 | Quarterly Newsletter of the Cullman Grotto of the National Speleological Society

Upcoming Events 2026

- o ACS Annual Meeting – April 18, 9AM – NSS HQ
- o SERA Cave Carnival – Camp Maranatha – Scottsboro, AL – May 7-10
- o NSS Convention 2026 – Corydon, IN – July 6-10 NSS
- o Jackson County Underground – August 8
- o TAG Fall Cave-In – TBD
- o Bridge Day – New River Gorge, WV – October 17

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About our grotto

- Membership to the Grotto is \$15 per year for individual or \$20 per family. Dues are payable at the first meeting of the year (January) and includes subscription to the Flowstone.
- Grotto meetings are currently held on the first Tuesday of the month at 7:30 PM (2nd Tuesday when a holiday conflicts)
- Location of meetings: 920 St. Joseph Dr. NW Cullman, AL 35055 (Church basement, East side of the building, lower parking lot)
- The Flowstone is published by the Cullman Grotto of the National Speleological Society. The club will exchange by request with any publishing grotto. Republication of any items within the Flowstone is allowed if credit is given to the author and source.



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□ Front Cover Photo

Everly (7) – Rappelling the Keyhole – Stephen’s Gap, North Alabama

Photo by a proud and nervous father, Patrick O’Diam

Grotto Officers and Appointments 2024

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War Eagle in Tumbling Rock

By Micah Sims

As some may know the grotto is helping the film program at Auburn University with a short student documentary project. The instructor Mr. Smith has been on a couple of cave trips with us over the past year to get some film.

This months photo op was Tumbling Rock Cave Preserve.

With the appropriate permits in hand (visitation and media) we planned to take a small group back to the Christmas tree and out. We meet up at the parking area and to our surprise were the only ones there.

As everyone arrived and started to gear up a couple more groups did arrive.

After sharing some history of the cave to our visitors our group of 6 entered the gate. We started our way back into the cave stopping at several of the notable places. One thing that I have walked by for many years and have never noticed on the saltpeter vats are footprints on top of them.

As we made our way back towards the king shower it was noticed that the cave is showing some signs of heavy traffic. One area that was once a really white wall that is now covered in muddy handprints.

As we neared the King's shower crashing water could be heard. There was a steady stream coming out of the hole in the ceiling.



We opted to check out the Christmas Tree first and then pop up in the King's shower on the way out.

After a short stay at the Christmas Tree we made our way back up into the topless dome and listened to the "oh wow's" from the AU bunch.

After many photos and video was taken, we exited back down through the water and started our way out.

On our way in Jake led us to a couple of places I had never visited before and on our way out he opted to take us through the water route. One of the members of the group wasn't too sure about that but went along anyway.



We made it out in record time and only encountered a couple of people as we exited, which was not common on a Saturday.

As we exited the Auburn guys gave us a "thank you" and headed on their way back south. Three of us went to eat and Harold left to meet up with the Montgomery grotto for more weekend caving.

Another good day underground...

Chills, Thrills, and Rappels: My Daughters' First Caving Adventure

By Patrick O'Diam

My oldest daughter had been asking to go caving for quite some time, but caves do not exist close to where we live. We had attempted to make a couple of trips over the last year or two, but other conflicts kept getting in the way. Finally, things fell into place over Spring Break for us to attempt a quick trip.

The morning of March 12, 2026, I loaded my four daughters into the van: Wren (8), Everly (7), Darcy (6), and Kate (4). We drove to Cullman and picked up a rope and some rappelling gear from Kuenn and then visited my mother before spending the night at my sister's house.

We had considered camping the night before, but forecasts of heavy rain and near freezing temperatures changed our minds. We had pulled permits for Limrock Blowing and Stephen's Gap. I left my younger daughters with my sister on Friday morning and headed to Scottsboro to meet Nick and Liz Shields who had also traveled from Jackson, MS along with their four sons, ages 8 – 16. We met in the Wal-Mart parking lot and then made our way to Limrock.



I was aware that heavy rain had fallen about 36 hours before our trip, but I expected the cave would drain quickly. We all geared up and walked the short distance to the entrance. There was more water there than I expected, and the morning air was still about 40 degrees. Still, excitement was high in all participants, so into the frigid stream we went we went working our way to the entrance.

At the entrance, the water was about waist deep and the wind was howling from the cave. There was a considerable amount of screams from all the kids, but all wanted to push on. By 50 feet into the entrance, the water was to my chest. Everly, my 7-year-old daughter, was beside me with water to her chin, teeth chattering, and a look of panic in her eyes.

I looked on ahead realizing the water continued to get deeper as the ceiling continued to drop lower. I looked as if we would have at least a foot of air space, but the younger kids would be in a full-blown swim... Not the best introduction to caving! We made the wise decision to turn back and head to Stephen's Gap.



Dry clothes a heater was turned on high helped, but the short distance between Limrock and Stephen's Gap was not enough to get my daughters' teeth to stop chattering. We swapped our packs around and started up the muddy trail. Upon reaching our destination, I noticed several additional waterfalls that I had never seen before. We walked into the entrance and took all the kids down to the Pedestal. Mist and a very drippy ceiling succeeded in chilling us yet again.

I had taken the older boys with their dad to Neversink a couple of years ago, but for the four youngest kids, this was their first time on rope. I dropped a rope off the bluff at the entrance which provided about a 40' drop for them to learn to rappel. Levi (16) went down first and then belayed the younger kids. Everett (14) was next followed by Madok (9) and finally Rohan (8).

I was especially impressed with Rohan. As he backed over the edge, he looked up at me and said, "I don't want to do it!" I encouraged him and helped calm his nerves. He hadn't quite committed yet but was so close. After a couple of minutes of encouragement from everyone, he leaned on back and slipped down the rope. Once he hit the ground, I think it took him about 60 seconds to run back to the top for another ride!



Wren was next, and while I could tell she was apprehensive, she stayed calm as I instructed her over the edge. And then it happened... as she tried to get her balance, her feet crossed and she slammed into the wall, hitting her head and scrapping her elbow. She was quickly under control, and I hung over the edge calming her worries. We had discussed this possibility, so it was not a surprise to her although she wanted to cry.

She did not ask to be pulled back up, but instead went down and quickly ran back up to do it again. That made this daddy very proud! Everly was next, and she didn't show an ounce of fear on any of her three trips down the bluff.

We moved on over to the Keyhole. By this time, Rohan and Wren had decided they'd had enough fun on rope and began exploring around the hillside. We let the younger kids rappel without climbing. Everett and Levi went, followed by Madok. I was clipped to a tether at the top helping everyone get on rope.



When it was Everly's turn, I helped her work her way down to the lip. I rigged her ATC in and had her sit dangling her legs over the drop. I didn't like the angle of the rope and decided I should rotate the ATC. I had her QAS clipped in and she was firmly sitting on the flat lip, but it hit me differently as I removed her ATC to turn it.

I felt something I hadn't experienced in probably 30 years: nervousness, fear, adrenaline, excitement, and very purposeful movement. I've trusted this equipment with my life for many years, but now I was trusting it with my daughter's life. Once I was happy with direction of the ATC, I unclipped the QAS and helped Everly slide off the edge and down the 110' to the Pedestal. She was completely unphased and would have been happy to have gone again, or even climb, if time had allowed.

We then let Everett, Levi, Liz, and Nick rappel and climb, and all did a phenomenal job. By the time we pulled the rope, the sun was sitting low in the sky. We then hiked back down the mountain and returned to our vehicles.

We made our way into Guntersville where we found some supper and reflected on the events of the day before going our separate ways. Wren and Everly had earned bragging rights when they returned to school a few days later. And I bragged on the bravery of my girls to my coworkers when I returned to work.



Byers Cave

If it has been a while, we seem to forget how good a cave is, or how bad. This was the case with Byers. With as many trips as I do per year, one trip seemed to slip my mind.

It had been a few years, and I did seem to remember that it was not a straightforward horizontal cave, I did however forget just how technical it was. When they told me to bring a seat harness, safety, cows' tails, and some way of climbing, I asked Chris we are going to Byers, right?

Yes, and we will need all of that. And we did, and more.

It was a longer than normal hike to the cave than I remembered (seems to be a recurring theme here). Soon after we got into the cave, the rigging started. Mike Huff did the expert rigging for the day. I thought, man, there is a lot of ropes and stuff for a horizontal cave. As I got into all of the ropes sections, there were a lot of small, awkward downs and ups, and traverses. At one point, we got to a crawl that you had to drop down into and belly crawl for about 50 feet. But, I was the problem on this one, I didn't fit down through the squeeze to get into the crawl. I tried several spots, and different ways, no go. My chest was too thick to go through. Belly will move but bones don't.

I had to backtrack and found an alternate route through. It was tighter than the lower crawl, but at least I didn't have to squeeze into it. It was shoulder width wide, had an upper notch just big enough for my head, and a slot underneath me about 8 inches wide that wanted to grab everything, and also tried to suck me through the whole time I was crawling. There was no room for moving, I had to pull with my fingers while pushing with my toes. A lovely time indeed.

We eventually made it to a large room with enormous formations. Quite a contrast to the rest of the cave that I had seen so far. We toured the large rooms and admired the formation areas. I asked Chris, what time did you set for callout? I said 5 to begin with but changed it to 6. It's only 2:30 right now. I told him, we are in trouble, we won't make it out by 6, you need to go ahead and beat the callout time. I always tell him to make it 12, maybe he will listen now.

He rushed out of the cave and made the callout, then came back in to help get everyone out. There were not enough short ropes to rig everything, at two points, webbing was rigged which was fine going down. But we had to climb it also. I had never tried climbing webbing with handled ascenders; it works, barely. Sometimes it slips or doesn't grab. We all managed to get up with them.

Once out and packed up, there is still about a 3-mile hike back to the cars. It's a good thing that there was cell service at the cave entrance, and someone brought a phone, or we would be in a rescue, just from cutting it close. We exited the cave and arrived at the cars at 9pm. By the time everyone changed and was ready to leave, the only thing left open was the waffle house, but that was enough for us after a long day. And then there's the 3-hour drive home.

I will definitely remember Byers cave the next time someone suggests a trip there. And maybe sit that one out. It's too much work and not enough payout for me.

by *Harold Calvert*



Anniversary Caving

By Harold Calvert

What got you into caving?

For me, I had just graduated high school, and like most teens, had already gotten bored. A friend mentioned that someone had told him about a cave, and we need to go check it out. Nobody had lights, so a visit to the KMart was needed. The first thing we found were D cell flashlights, in bright colors. You know the kind, the ones that you had to bang around to get them to work. One for each of us, cost 1 dollar including the batteries. What a deal!

The cave he referred to was Bryant Mountain cave, only a few miles from our houses. My first cave. We went , poked around in there for a couple of hours and came out.

That's all it took; I was hooked and knew that I was a caver.

The next weekend, someone told us about another cave, and we were off to another adventure. Not far from us was an old rock quarry with a cave connected to it. It was a late afternoon; we decided to go check it out. Yup, with our dollar flashlights, and same batteries. You know where this was going. We got stuck with no lights. There was a series of things that led up to the no light trip. We hadn't told anyone we were going caving, didn't have extra lights, and had the car parked way off of the main road.

Realizing all of this, we sat down, wondering how long it takes to die in a cave. Nobody would be looking for us in a cave or see the car. We eventually went to sleep. I woke first, and turned to my friend, I can see you! We were close enough to an alternate entrance that the sun shone in enough from the east that we felt our way out, climbed down a quarry wall, and swam across a pond to get to the cars. We definitely dodged a bullet on that one!

That was the beginning of my caving career, in 1976, and I have been caving ever since. For my 50th caving anniversary, I plan to go back to Bryant cave, now Sims cave, to celebrate such a long and eventful hobby.

Along this journey, I had the good fortune to run across the Cullman Grotto and found out just how much I had been missing. They are a vertical grotto, and I was quick to join in. With a few members saying that I never would make a vertical person, I made arrangements to take classes. With an elderly gentleman, that I had no idea who was,

It turns out that guy was Bill Cuddington, the father of rope work as we know it today. Needless to say, I got some excellent training. And later would get to go on a trip with him to Mexico for a big pit.

Through the grotto, I have gotten the opportunity to do many things that I never imagined I could do. Nor have the opportunity. There were trips to the deepest pits in the states. The deepest free fall pits in Mexico, El Sofano de las Golondrinas, and many other pits there. Caved in many states, rappelled coast to coast. Done Black canyon of the Gunnison, El Capitan, rappelled into the Grand Canyon. Lead groups to Whiteside in North Carolina, and bridge day in West Virginia. Our grotto would do "cavations" that we would spend a week in a different area and cave there. I've gotten to see new caves that no one has ever seen, we blasted them open. More places than I can remember.

A favorite trip that I will never forget is to Hoya de la Luz. That was an expedition to do. We hired sherpas with horses, and a guide. It would be a 3 day trip into the mountains of Mexico. After a full day of hiking, we got to the pit, but the clouds that we hiked through had settled into the pit. The next day we sent a rope down , into the cloud. Would it be on bottom? We hoped so! This turned out to be the most amazing rappel I have ever taken. We would rappel down to the cloud, go through, break out underneath the cloud to find out it was raining in the pit. From the cloud we just went through!

Through the years, I have been lucky enough to experience things like this, but also to have some not so lucky times. Hailstorms on rope, Lightning storms, strong wind, torrential rain. Even folks getting sick on rope. Not great when you are on bottom climb! And I wouldn't change a thing about any of it, nor anyone I was with.

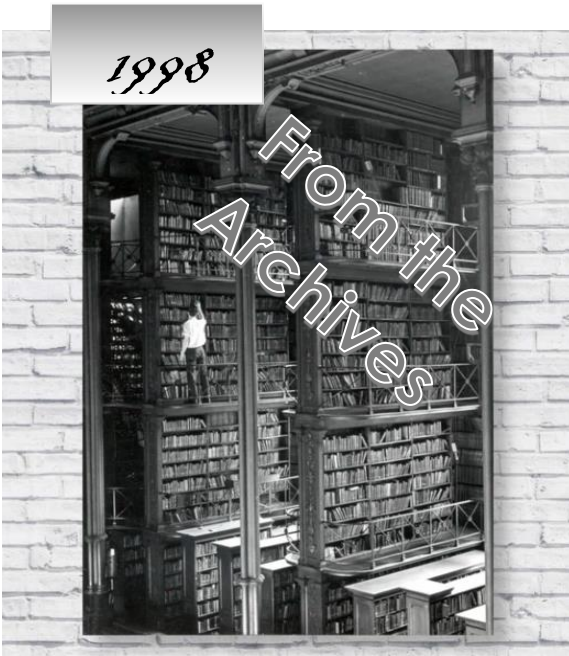
I have found out that my grotto people become family to me, and we rely on each other to keep us safe. Every time you get on rope, you are putting your life in someone's hands. It has to be someone you trust.

Well , I guess I've rambled on enough about my habit, I'm grateful for the ones that have been on this journey with me. I just turned 68, and have no desire to give it up.

So, you guys will have to put up with me! See you on a long rope underground soon!

Let us go down from this place...



Danger Below! By D.Drake

the size of stoves sat perched on loose gravel, held in place only by very conspicuous and unstable mud supports. We were hoping and praying that a thunderstorm didn't come rolling through while we were in the cave, for it looked as if the next "gulley washer" would completely transform the room we were sitting in.

As the scenario continued to unfold, Patrick was carefully and methodically rigging in for descent. The important issue of motionless behavior cannot be stressed enough. Every movement sent something tumbling into the black void. None of us had ever done the pit, so we had no idea whether the pit remained roughly the size of the small room we were in or became a voluminous, dark void like so many other TAG pits. We only knew that we had 300 feet of rope in the pit and one fist-sized rock or smaller, could slice it like a machete.

Patrick softly worked his way to the edge of the tight, canyon-type lip and slowly lowered himself to begin the rappel. The walls of this narrow opening were razor sharp. He lowered himself to a gravel covered ledge 20-30 feet below the lip. A rope pad is highly recommended at this ledge, however, keeping the rope on the pad is very difficult. From here the pit bells and becomes another beautiful TAG specimen. A small stream that, during wet weather, shoots a healthy column of water into the cavern, enters the pit at about the ledge level and cascades to the flat, rock strewn floor some 200 feet later. Rigging in for ascent is also done very, very carefully so as to minimize the chance of knocking some of the loose rock from the ledge and also to try to keep the rope on the pad.

The last glimpse we had of Patrick was of him going over the lip. Two, still, quiet minutes passed when suddenly a ten pound rock released from somewhere to the right of Cammon and tumbled off into the pit. "ROCK", Jon screamed, it was all he could do. "This could be tragic", I thought. The next sound we heard was the echo from the rock striking bottom. We waited breathlessly, for what seemed like an eternity, for some type of communication from below.

"Hey!!!!!!!" came the much welcomed response. "I'm O.K."

At that moment, a silent prayer of thanks was offered I'm sure, by all present. Pat's climb was quick and careful and his words as he "lipped" the pit are worth repeating. "It's a beautiful pit but I don't want anything to do with it ever again. I'm getting out of here now!" I could tell he was greatly upset. His hands shook as he speedily removed his gear. The rock had slammed into the wall only 20 feet above his head and had shattered, spraying him with stone pieces in the process. Jon and Jonathan, both equally unnerved, opted for better judgment and exited the cave with Patrick. Being the idiot that I am, and displaying the sense God gave professional wrestlers, I bounced the pit.



This article was extracted from The Flowstone, October 1998. More articles @ CullmanGrotto.org.

