

"Suprise" a Fool's Perspective

by Kuenn Drake

From the April 2000 Flowstone

One of the many things that I despise about getting older is a decaying memory, but for me March 5th, 2000 was one of those days that I don't believe I will soon forget. . . if ever. Living in an age of spontaneity, we rarely wait for anything any more, and often when we do plan, save and prepare, the event falls short of expectations. Well, on this occasion the wait paid off, magnified by 25 years of anticipation, the experience lived up to its billing. At 8 am a group from the Cullman Grotto; Harold Calvert, David Drake, Shane Drake, Patrick O'Diam, Evon Thompson, and I left the library. . . destination Surprise Pit. We would meet "Stick" Harper at the Texaco in Gunterville and be joined later by Wendy Bowen, Glenn Ledbetter, Jeff Lynn, and Derick Mitchell at the pit. It would be a first for Harold, Shane, Stick, Wendy and I.

The journey that would climax this day began for me in the early 70's when I made my first trip to "New" Fern via the Johnston entrance. That day our group passed the Fern sink entrance as the trip leaders (Ted Oliver and my father, Charles Drake) told us of its discovery and the seven second pit called "Surprise". While standing around the sink watching the water cascade down, they told us that just a few hundred feet from this entrance, in stream passage, the water plunges into darkness, not to hit bottom until 437 feet later. Wow! To a wide eyed twelve year old that was impressive. I distinctly recall saying, "anyone that would go down that hole has got to be a FOOL!!" Although, I held high esteem at that time (and still do today) for anyone that would do it, especially with the ascending techniques of that era. Three years later I would actually venture back to the brink of Surprise Pit, throw in a rock and listen for the report, and again rehearse my earlier statement.

The drive to Nat Mountain that morning was filled with stories of past adventures in Fern. David, Shane and I road together, David explained the crawl around the pit, the breakdown bridge, rigging points, and the bottom, which by the way he said, "will not be anything like you have pictured". He was right. We finally reached our destination and began the hike, all the while wondering if it was really going to happen. You know the feeling when you have waited a long time to do something. Patrick and David entered the main passage via the waterfall entrance. "You're gonna get wet anyway", they called out.

Patrick led the way and secured a safety line for the crawl. He then rigged and padded the rope. The question was asked who will go first? No one spoke up. "I think Kuenn should go first" he said. Others responded in the affirmative. "Is anyone interested in my opinion", I responded. What the heck, I have come this far so I rigged in. Just as I reached the point of no return Patrick yelled, "Kuenn", "click", "I wanted to get a picture of this one", he said. The rappel down was breath taking, literally. I caught myself taking heavy sighs multiple times. The emotions of the moment were overwhelming, the history, the memories, my eyes began to water. The spray had soaked my face. Braking occasionally to make sure I was still in control I recalled the statement about fools. I submit now, they have more fun.

David came down next, then Patrick, then Shane. Patrick descended in a spiral. The effect was great, we could see the walls as he spun, it gave us a better appreciation for the massiveness of this hole. I

assumed he was doing it for our benefit, however, on bottom he remarked that he would never use a micro on a long rappel again. "I almost got sick", he said.

On bottom we took some time to look around. Everything looked, well, freshly washed. David noticed a medical wrapper, "probably from the ill-fated descent of 98" he stated. The rushing sound of water falling and gusts of mist soon drove us from the derigging point to higher ground. We made it to the register and on to McKinney's haystack. Patrick pointed out the general direction to Torode's Hall and other anomalies. By this time the others on top would be anxious to come down so David and I headed to the rope to begin our climb. I climbed up about 30 feet and waited for him to attach and off we went. I learned quickly that "on top" can be quite a ride in itself. My right ascender did not track as well as I would have liked but it was manageable. On the way up I noticed, from a distance, what appeared to be shiny objects on the walls. I assumed that they were bolts that had been set but could not figure out the erratic spacing. Twenty feet from the top, when the wall comes within a few feet of the rope, I realized that the shiny objects were warm blooded. Tiny water droplets on the backs of bats, a new idea for Christmas decorations. The climb out was uneventful and really not as difficult as I had anticipated.

Once on top, Evon prepared to descend. Now the original plan was for Patrick to come up after Evon went down, but we decided on top that "Stick" should follow Evon. She would relay the message to Patrick (did I mention that we had no radios). It was about this same time that we were joined by Derick, Glenn, Jeff and Wendy. We received a faint "bo" from bottom. Ok, Evon's down. "Stick" began to rig in and move toward the edge when, "bo bo", not so faint echoed up. Well, I guess somewhere betwixt and between someone forgot to relay a message. This was my first introduction to the "bo" communication system. Not bad. David and I had to make a quick exit to fulfill a previous commitment so we headed out. After our departure "Stick", Harold and Wendy would successfully bounce the pit.

While waiting at the other end of the crawl I spotted a white "crawdad" moving in the water. "Wonder if he knows what's downstream", I thought, "probably not... only a FOOL would know!"

