THE FLOWSTONE



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

Upcoming Events 2026

- NSS Convention 2026 – Corydon, IN – Jul 6-10 NSS
- Jackson County Underground – Aug 8 – Tickets are required
- TAG Fall Cave-In – Oct 8 thru 11 – Cloudmont Ski and Golf Resort in Mentone
- Bridge Day – New River Gorge, WV – Oct 17
- Bats, Beer, and Bluegrass – Oct 17 – Frick's Cave

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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

Josh and Melanie – Holiday Hole, North Alabama WMA
Photo by Kuenn Drake

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Guffey Cave By Harold Calvert

This year, SERA is hosted by Birmingham grotto, and Montgomery grotto asked if they could help with leading trips. Of course, they said, we can always use help.
So, Montgomery volunteered to lead horizontal trips. Kyle is scheduled to lead a trip through Guffy. He asked if I knew the cave well enough to show him. Yes, was the answer. I have been in the grotto for 31 years now, and I was going to Guffy way before then. Good, he said, "You lead and I'll take notes."

The day of the trip, we had some extra people, several new grotto members and friends of theirs. Also, Chris, Cade, and Mike wanted to check out the lower stream passage to the left of the junction room. I had been there only once, there is water, sometimes shoulder deep or deeper, and nothing to see.

As we made our way into the first part of the cave, we noticed a smell. Apparently, a large raccoon had been abusing his restroom privileges. And he had been eating pretty healthy. There were many large "landmines" to maneuver through. Finding our way to the ladder, everyone made it safely down. I am skeptical about the ladder; it's the same one that was in there 40 years ago the first time I visited. And, in one spot it's tied together with cordage. It really should be replaced.

I took them through the usual route, through the pump room, through the breakdown and into the large room after that, down the right side into the crack to bypass the crawl, and into grand central. They had fun trying to squeeze through the rock formation with the hole through it. A couple actually made it. This is where the group split, Chris took his group through the fall room and to the left, working his way into the lower stream passage. We went right to check out the decorated passage, until it got into a low crawl, then we backtracked to grand central and down to the big fall room.

Going straight across, takes us to little Italy and spires of Guffy. Also, the cave register is in serious need of replacement. We moved on, admiring the large formations, and over to the art room. The new people were amazed to find such a place deep in a cave. They spent a little time and added to the collection. At one point it had gotten quiet, and we could hear the other group talking from the stream passage. Apparently, there is a connection there somehow that isn't mapped.

Once Kyle had all the notes that he needed, we made our way out of the cave, retracing our way in. With the last one out, Kyle went to close the gate. With a little difficulty. It got stuck and wouldn't drop into place, nor would it come back out. We made a tourniquet with rope and used a car jack handle to twist it and break it loose.
With the gate secured, we made our way to the cars, and off for food in Guntersville.

Kyle got his notes and directions for the trip but feels that he needs one more trip to secure the route. So, it looks like there will be another trip there soon.



Mandy Takes a Holiday By Micah Sims

🏳 Racing the Clock at "The Kingdom"

With April winding down, the seasonal window to access "The Kingdom" (WMA) was rapidly closing. Seizing the final opportunity, a small crew from the Cullman Grotto mobilized for a multi-pit excursion up the mountain.

The Trek Up: An Oil-Pan Killer

The expedition kicked off at Mr. Drake's property, where we loaded up ATVs—an absolute necessity given the brutally steep mountain roads that are known to destroy truck oil pans. After some highly creative ATV Tetris on the trailer, our trio hauled out to North Alabama to rendezvous with the rest of the gang.



Once united, we navigated narrow backroads to our staging area, unloaded the wheelers, and packed them to the absolute gills with gear. The initial ascent was steep, rocky, and—thankfully—dry. We all knew a wet surface would turn this climb into a wild ride, a theory we'd later test on the way down. Once past the grueling incline, the upper trail smoothed out into great shape.

⬬ Pit 1: The 160-Foot Free Drop – Mandy's

Our primary target was a spectacular ~160-foot pit that no one in our group had dropped before. I had scouted the location back in the late '90s with Vic, but we lacked the ropes to drop it back then.



The entrance requires a tight squeeze around a massive boulder. Past that restriction, a short down-climb opens into a small "waiting room." The rig point sits on the wall directly over the void, offering a pristine, completely free drop from the bolts. While this cave features an additional lower drop, we opted to skip the deep exploration and stick to pit-bouncing. Armed with Jake's high-powered headlamp, we completely illuminated the massive chamber, snapped some great photos, and ascended back to the surface.

🌩 The 100-Foot -Holiday Hole and Tarp Shelter

The second scheduled stop was a pit that opens as a narrow crack on the hillside. However, after evaluating our timeline and the shifting weather, we chose to bypass it and head straight for our final target: a beautiful, open-air ~100-foot drop.



Just as we began rigging the lip to a nearby tree, the skies opened up. Anticipating the weather, we deployed a small tarp to create a makeshift tent, allowing the crew to stay dry while waiting for their turn on rope. To ensure maximum safety, we rotated the drops so that a safety monitor was always stationed at the surface.

⚡ Slip-and-Slides and a Lost Tesla

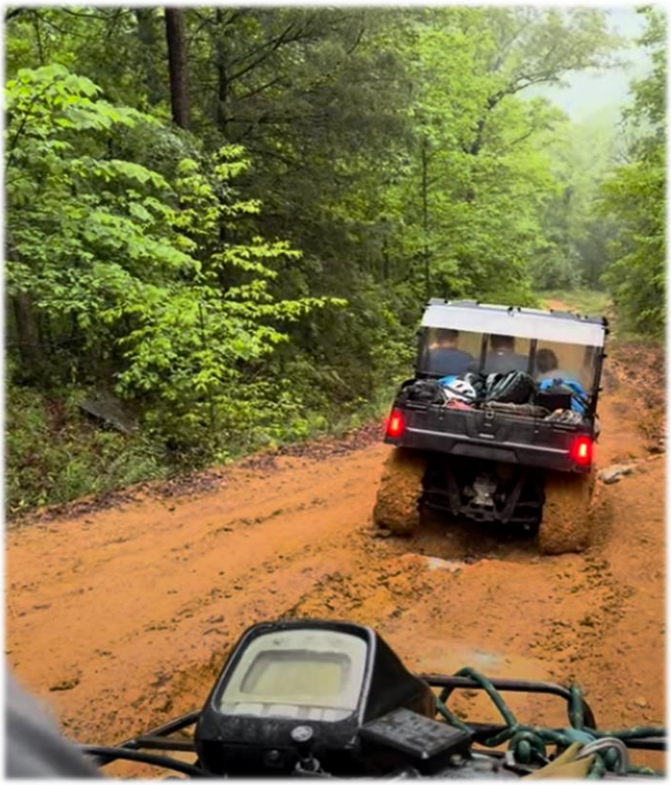
By late afternoon, the rain intensified, signaling it was time to pack up. After a final round of photos, we loaded the muddy gear onto the ATVs and began our descent.

The steep section of the road had transformed into a literal slip-and-slide. We slid our way down the mountain, successfully reaching the trucks unscathed but thoroughly splattered with mud.

As we secured the rigs for the drive home, a lone Tesla unpredictably rolled down the rugged road. The driver was flying solo, hunting for a nearby horizontal cave entrance. We offered him some crude directions alongside some very strong words of warning about the terrain. Leaving him to his mechanical fate, we pulled out just as the skies unleashed a torrential downpour, heading off to find some well-deserved food and a warm ride home.



Holiday Hole



Melanie recounted afterwards, "what sticks out to me from this trip was Micah's epic driving skills up and dow that muddy trail, and MacGyvering a tent for us to huddle under in the rain!"

The Caves of Laugarvatn By Scott Murphy

This is the first cave we visited in Iceland, a guided trip. A rock shelter at one point and the people living here dug it out over time. On the left side they kept their livestock. There was a hole dug through the wall to let the heat of the animals come through to keep the living quarters warm. They did have a wood burning stove also. Not sure where they got the wood to burn. There are hardly any trees here!







Key Historical Facts

- **Early Origins:** The exact creators of the caves are unknown. Local folklore suggests they may have been carved by Irish monks prior to the Norse settlement of Iceland in 874 AD.
- **Shepherd Shelters:** For centuries, local farmers and shepherds used the caves as temporary shelter for themselves and their sheep due to the excellent surrounding grazing land.
- **20th-Century Inhabitants:** In the early 1900s, two young Icelandic couples sequentially converted the caves into fully functioning homes to farm the land independently.
    - *Indriði Guðmundsson and Guðrún Kolbeinsdóttir* lived there for one year starting in 1910.
    - *Jón Þorvarðsson and Vigdís Helgadóttir* moved in in 1918, living there for four years and raising three children born inside the rock.

The Caves of Laugarvatn (Laugarvatnshellar) are a pair of historic, man-made cave dwellings carved into soft volcanic sandstone tuff in South Iceland. Located along the popular Golden Circle route between Þingvellir National Park and the town of Laugarvatn, they serve as Iceland's last inhabited cave dwellings

Vertical Upskilling By Harold Calvert

War Eagle cave. A great cave with not so great of a name. It's a matter of opinion I guess.

Last month four members of Cullman grotto took a trip to the cave, a trip long awaited by one member, Todd, that had less than a great trip on the last time there. War eagle has a lip that is more difficult than most when ascending. Todd climbed with his new BMS chest roller plate. It malfunctioned going over the lip and he nearly went into a heel hang. The catch broke internally and flipped open. Say what you will about new gear, but we have had three grotto members have the same problem with this plate. They turn loose when stressed, with not much pressure.

He wanted a chance to do it with better gear, he has a different plate now and it functions flawlessly.

We all rappelled down and were surprised to find that the water level was lower than expected. So, we were able to do more of the cave. We made our way to the upper formation room for some pictures, then made our way down to stream level. As we were following the stream, we found quite a few fish that had been washed into the cave. Several bass, a few unidentified fish, and a Sculpin. A strange looking fish indeed. We also found many huge orange salamanders, bigger than any I have ever seen. And they swam on the top of the water like a snake.

We also found some gypsum flowers that I had never seen before in this cave.

With our time running short, we turned the trip around and headed for the entrance, making our way to the rope. I went up first to help others with the lip. One by one the others made it out without too much trouble. We made it out before dark, and back to the land of heat and humidity. With another successful trip, the only thing left to say was "Let us go down from this place".

And with the word spoken, we were on our way to the cars, in search of a Mexican restaurant. That's why we go caving, right?

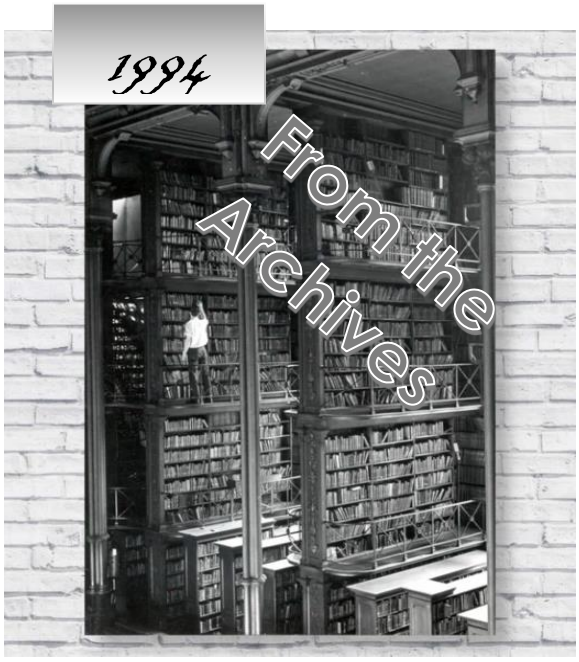
Editor's Comments: Cave Wildlife, Streams, and Adaptations

The creatures found during this trip offer a fascinating look at how surface animals interact with underground ecosystems.

- **Washed-In Fish**: The bass and unidentified fish found by the group are "trogloxenes" (accidental cave visitors). Swept in by high waters or floods, surface fish usually cannot survive long-term in total darkness due to a lack of their normal food sources.
- **The Sculpin**: Unlike the bass, certain species of sculpin are highly adapted to cave life. These fish have reduced eyes, less skin pigmentation, and enhanced lateral line systems to detect vibrations and navigate pitch-black water.
- **Giant Orange Salamanders**: The "huge orange salamanders" swimming like snakes were likely **Spring Salamanders** (*Gyrinophilus porphyriticus*) or **Cave Salamanders** (*Eurycea lucifuga*). In dark, damp cave environments, these amphibians can grow significantly larger than their surface counterparts.

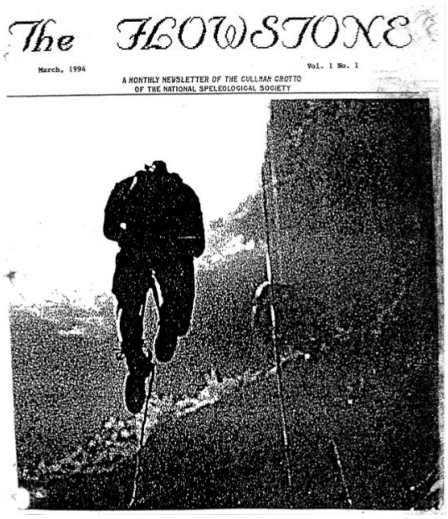
Gypsum Flowers: Rare Cave Formations

The gypsum flowers discovered are fragile, beautiful mineral formations made of hydrous calcium sulfate. They grow from porous cave walls where water pressure forces mineral-rich solutions out of tiny pores. As the water evaporates, the gypsum crystallizes. Changes in the growth rate cause the crystals to curve and twist, perfectly mimicking the petals of a flower. Because they are incredibly brittle, even a slight draft or a careless touch can shatter them.



The Flowstone - 1994

1994 was the inaugural year of the Cullman Grotto and the first newsletter for the grotto. Below are just a few highlights.


The FLOWSTONE
March, 1994
Vol. 1 No. 1
A MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE CULLMAN GROTTO OF THE NATIONAL SPELEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

The 1994 issues (Volume 1, Nos. 1–10) of *The Flowstone*, the monthly newsletter of the Cullman Grotto of the National Speleological Society (NSS).

The document chronicles the group's early structural formation, monthly business meetings, trip logs, cave maps, and safety and conservation efforts across Alabama and surrounding caving regions.

Find this year and many more newsletter articles at: **www.cullmangrotto.org/1994-2000**

Key Sections & Contents from 1994

1. Grotto Administration & Official Charter

- **NSS Chartering**: The May 1994 issue proudly features the official charter from the National Speleological Society, formally designating the Cullman Grotto as an internal organization on March 12, 1994.
- **Leadership & Meetings**: Regular monthly meetings were held on the first Tuesday of each month at the Cullman County Public Library. Key officers through the year included David Drake (Chairman), Louis Adams (Vice-Chair), Mary Adams (Secretary/Treasurer), Shane Drake (Horizontal Committee Head), and Scotti Arrington (Vertical Committee Head).

2. Cave Trip Reports & Scouting Operations

The newsletter documents a highly active vertical and horizontal exploration schedule, featuring narrative accounts of several prominent regional systems:

- **Limrock Blowing Cave (Jackson County, AL)**: Featured in a January 1994 log tracking an intensive multi-hour wade-in trip alongside a local Boy Scout troop, as well as a later December tracking exploration.
- **Surprise Pit & Torode's Hall**: Multiple expeditions detailing the challenging 404-foot drop into Surprise Pit and navigation through the tight crawlways leading to the massive subterranean formations of Torode's Hall.
- **Stephen's Gap**: Documented as an excellent introductory location for teaching vertical rope techniques and executing open-pit rappels.
- **War Eagle Cave & Lamon's Cave**: Extensive multi-thousand-foot crawlways and deep pools mapped out by members.
- **International & Historic Excerpts**: Includes external caving lore, such as a multi-page historical feature on the notable first descent of Mexico's massive *Sótano de las Golondrinas* pit in 1967.

3. Subterranean Maps & Surveys

Hand-drawn "Tape & Compass" survey maps are integrated throughout the newsletters, providing specialized blueprints of cave networks:

- **Limrock Blowing Cave** (AL311)
- **Lone Bat Cave** (scouted and mapped by D.M. Drake)
- **War Eagle Cave** (AL565, detailing "Roaring River" and "Haystack Hall")
- **Beech Spring Cave** (AL347)
- **Moses Tomb** (AL729, structural breakdown of the 230-foot pit)
- **Trenton Well** (AL1400)
- **Tumbling Rock Cave** (detailed sectional and horizontal view blueprints)
- **Natural Well** (AL5)
- **Ledbetter Cave** (AL319)

4. Safety, Conservation & Training Focus

- **The Echo Chamber**: A recurring safety-oriented column reinforcing crucial safety rules—such as carrying three distinct, dependable light sources, checking group medical histories, and strictly ensuring vertical rope proficiency before attempting extreme drop-offs.
- **Caver Quiz**: A 13-question safety assessment prompting members to reflect on landowner permission, emergency contacts, recognizing hypothermia, and conservation ethics.
- **Land Access Issues**: Outlines the closure of *Newsome Sinks* due to public vandalism and details the Grotto's proactive efforts to coordinate a conservation gate project with local property owners.
- **Accident Reports**: Includes sobering safety warnings from outside grottos, such as an extensive incident analysis regarding a fatal rockfall tragedy at Caballo Cave, NM.

5. "Birds of a Feather" creator David Drake

"Birds of a Feather" was original comic art and a regular feature in The Flowstone. It was often a satirical comedy focused on shared interests, joint grotto expeditions, or anecdotes of cavers, who were represented as birds.



Featured Article from 1994 (In the original format)

AL3506 - Lone Bat Cave has since been registered with the Alabama Cave Survey - March 1998

RIDGEWALKING IN S. MORGAN CO.
David M. Drake
29 JAN 1994

Patrick O'Diam **David Drake**
Kuenn Drake Shane Drake

We were to meet at Kuenn's house at 11am after I got off work, however upon arriving home, I found everyone at the barn behind my house (just a stones throw away from Kuenn's). One of Shane's cows, "Lump", had decided that Saturday was a great day to give birth..no problem right? WRONG! After having raised five or six other calves, the old cow decided she had role played "mom" quite enough and would have nothing to do with this little bull. Fearing the calf would die without the much needed colosterum provided by the mother's milk we, along with Dad, went to work to try and make the cow let the calf nurse. This was eventually accomplished and we were finally off to ridgewalk, albeit a couple of hours later than planned.

Our original plan was to search a hill just north of the county line. Through the years we had traversed the hill several times, both together and individually, and knew of a couple of small caves and at least one short pit, but I was the only one who had done any surveying across the valley on the hills to the west, and several natural indicators led me to believe there was a hole in at least one of them. So westward we went.

After parking Kuenn's Jeep at an abandoned service station we headed south up the mountain. About half way up, Pat and Kuenn decided to walk a bluff line to the south while Shane and I continued up the mountain. The next 40 minutes or so were spent checking out the numerous small sinks and bluffs that adorn the eastern slope of this particular hill. After about an hour I noticed that I hadn't heard or seen the others for quite sometime. I finally made audible contact with Shane who was up top with a big smile on his face. He had followed a small stream bed down the western slope and had come upon a decent sized sink. "I think we've got us a cave" were his words as he and I went to check it out.

The entrance is a 15' climbdown into a small room. Shane was the first one in, I remained outside in case he needed help climbing back out. He reported seeing two large passages that looked like they went but both were interrupted by pits, so Shane climbed back out and we topped the mountain to try and find Kuenn and Patrick who had the rope and gear.

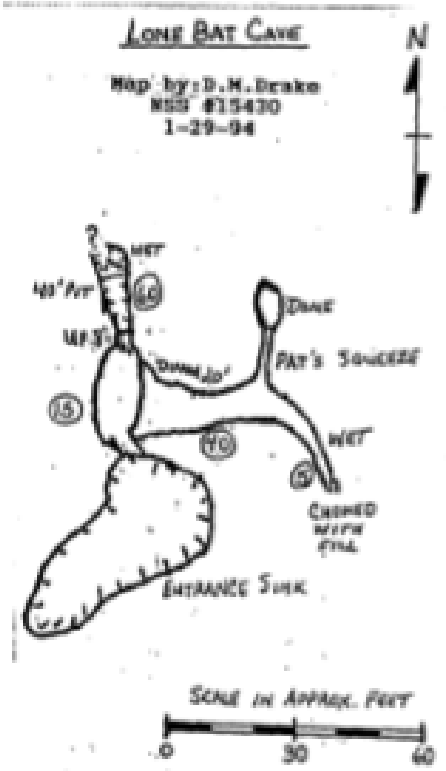
We finally made contact and told them what we had found. They in turn told us of a smaller sink they had discovered with a tight crawl at the bottom that seemed to be sucking air, however our find seemed more impressive.

We returned to the sink and all dropped into the small room. One passage headed east and had a 20' drop that Pat rigged, but before he decended Kuenn said "I think I can

climb it", which he did. Once down he started off down a high narrow canyon which was wet and cold and the home to a lone gray bat, but after a thorough drenching from water seeping through the rock from the stream bed above, he made the hasty decision that it was too wet and cold to push that day (our dry clothes were back at the Jeep), and it looked like it might be choking off anyway. On the way back out he did notice a tight passage to the north that he couldn't slide through, so Pat rappelled down (the easiest way to do this drop) to investigate. He was able to push the passage into a small dome room.

The second passage was an impressive one headed north. After an 8' climb one was peering into a well sculptured 40' pit, the bottom of which was divided by a jagged, razor sharp 8 to 10' wall which was just high enough to keep from telling what was on the other side. Kuenn chimneyed out across the top of the pit as far as he could go but was still unable to say for sure what lay beyond the wall. This pit, although a short one, would be difficult to do at best, and getting to the other side of the wall may be impossible, however if one studied the situation long enough and had about 80' of cheap rope they didn't mind wasting (the wall would cut it to shreds) a way might be devised to get to the other side; but there is no promise that the passage even goes. Needless to say we elected not to do the pit and instead decided to try our luck at finding another entrance. One was not found.

The four of us were pleased with the find, however we were not the first. A set of AA batteries were found discarded near the entrance and there was what appeared to be a survey mark in the wet canyon to the east. However, traffic in this cave is sparse and I'd be willing to bet the pit is virgin. A nice little hole in our own backyard...oh, and by the way, mother and calf are doing fine.



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