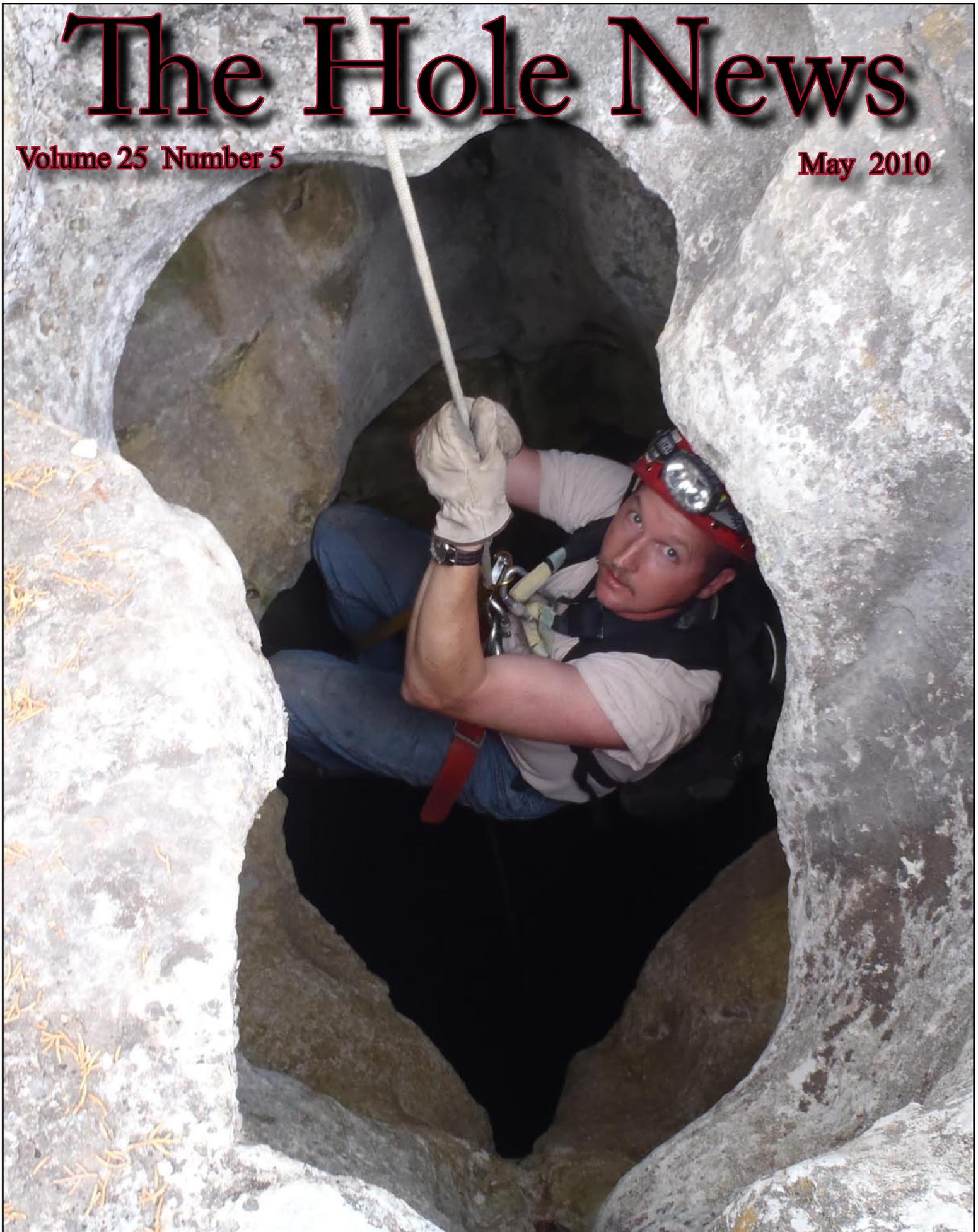
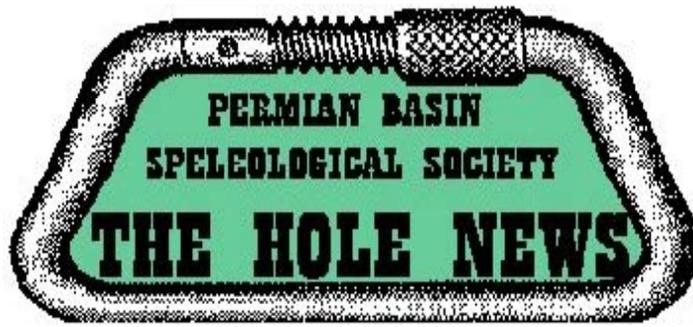


The Hole News

Volume 25 Number 5

May 2010





May 2010

Chartered in 1984 as the 300th Grotto of the NSS

Volume 25 Number 5

Abyss Sinkhole, a personal perspective

by Bill Bentley



The Date: May 22nd, 2010.

The Place: Crockett County, Texas

The Cavers: Bill Bentley, Walter Feaster, Jacqui Thomas, Patrick Ray, and Kerry Lowery.

It has been referred to in the Texas caving world as one of West Texas best kept secrets. Located in the Northern most part of Crockett County just about 20 or so miles South from the small town of Big Lake lies Abyss Sinkhole. It can be reached from Midland within an hour and a half drive.

The small 3' by 4' entrance does

little justice to the hidden treasure of formations awaiting the curious explorer far below the surface. The entrance is hidden some 100 yards off a dusty ranch road and the surrounding cacti and mesquite trees hide the entrance. Most of that area of the county all tend to look the same.

As you rappel down the 7/16" diameter rope that has been securely tied off to the base of a small tree you feel the world changing as the humidity increases with every foot as you drop down.

Continued on pg.3

*Scheduled
Upcoming
Events*

July 3-11
Ft.Stanton Project

**July 13*
Monthly PBSS meeting

Tentative
**Sept. 11*
Comanche Springs

** indicates PBSS
club activity*

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For the first 20 to 25 feet this cave is hard baron limestone and is only about 4' to 6' wide and you notice your really in more of a crack than a shaft. You pass a constriction that requires you to maneuver your cave pack and body through. Gravity helps you slide down the rope and then after another 10 feet the crack widens out and you pass a rock that is wedged in place just above the ceiling to a room that is some 300' long and at least 100' wide or more in places.

You immediately hear water falling some place in the darkness and your eyes acclimate as your descend the remaining 45' suspended in space and on down to the floor below. The air is moist and cool and there is a faint smell of something decaying in the air. You notice a small rodent near the coiled rope on the rocks. You imagine how he entered this cave and did not survive the 100' entrance drop.

The room trends downward another 75' or so to the South end and has a few formations and a pool of water that is being fed by a shower of rainwater from dripping formations far above along the ceiling and wall. There is a crack with slick active formations blocking the way.

The entire room is a collection of giant breakdown rocks littered with smaller rocks and most of the rocks are coated with a thin slick layer of mud, making it difficult to walk around on. As you walk around though and take pictures you see a flashbulb on the floor and you speculate that it may have come from some long ago cave photographer's camera.

There are other signs of mankind's presents in this cavern as you see several long sections of tubing, bent, mangled and rusting. Going back to the basic elements that they it was made of.

After exploring for more than 2 hours and eating a snack with a cool drink you know it is time to face the rope and the arduous climb upward to the awaiting sunshine and outside.

Clanking and making a familiar sound to your ears, you think how the mechanical rope ascenders and hand sewn webbing brings back memories of some 30 years of going off into the depths of the earth and you still feel that same excitement. But now you think that is has been several years since you climbed a rope and can't even remember which cave it was that you last did vertical work in.

Nonetheless you rig everything up and

take that first step. The rope stretches and becomes taught... After a few minutes everything is working as it should and you are no longer dangling in mid air but are passing past the wedged rock and up into the crack and you see that there is no sunshine only daylight evened out by a total overcast sky.

You are breathing hard and deservedly so as you know you should have practiced and swear that you will practice before you ever do this again.

At 50 years old you think "I am still in good shape, only just a little out of shape." You rest and know that it won't be much farther, 25', then 15', and finally you are at the entrance and completely exhausted you think I can not climb another 10 feet, but you know you would if that was what it took.

After struggling in what seemed like an eternity on rope you unclip and roll over on the surface. It is warm and the rocks hurt as you lie there drenched in sweat on them. The wind is cool and it feels good. You then yell down to the others "off rope" and proceed to take off your gear. Another cave under your belt and you feel proud that you have been able to do what you enjoy.

More on page 4



Kerry contemplates the entrance



The light at the end of the rope

Same Trip, Different Caver

by Jacqui Thomas

My very first PBSS cave trip was before I joined PBSS. Actually, that cave trip was the main reason why I joined PBSS. The trip was to Abyss, in the afternoon of the Spring Convention hosted by the Permian Basin Speleological Society at the Caverns of Sonora. I think that was in 2001. I was camped near some PBSS members and talked with them a bit Friday night. Not much, because they were busy hosting Convention, but they seemed nice.

Saturday, after most of the members had taken care of what they were meant to take care of, some were breaking camp and a few were putting together vertical gear. I was told they were going caving before some of them had to go home, by the way was I “vertical” and did I want to come? I assured them that I was vertically competent and would really like to go caving with them. Lori Hales, their training person, said she’d like to check me out before I went in and I was fine with that and still really wanted to go caving with them.

After that great trip with really welcoming (and funny and smartass and irreverent and you know who you are) cavers I handed my check to somebody I think then treasurer Barry Hayes and have only very rarely regretted the decision to be a PBSSer.

That was such a great trip. Abyss is reached through a nearly Alice in Wonderland hole in the rock amid a stretch of West Texas limestone, mesquite, “cedar” and cactus that looks like just about any other stretch of that part of Texas. It has a nice vertical drop, a bit technical but by no means exhausting. It is an interesting cave with an interesting history, beautiful calcite-lined pool with water falling into it

from somewhere and breakdown to crawl through. There are lots of pretties through a tall crack in the back, some of them quite large. A niche containing a cascade of draperies ends in a rolling calcite floor with a hole in it. The hole leads to another hole which is small enough and at an odd enough angle to be a mystery. Exploring ends with a just-hard-enough climb out and great company.

This first trip to Abyss Cave had a lasting effect on me, in large part because of that question: “Are you vertical?” followed by the polite but insistent “I’d like to check you out.” I will always check people out. Politely but insistently. Which brings us to:

Vertical Training

I agreed to be the contact person for this trip to Abyss. After talking with the rancher I knew there would be a trip even though we still had some timing to work out and I announced that anyone planning to go on this trip had to be vertically competent.

Sunday May 16th was announced as a vertical practice day in the trees of my back yard. This was a good thing for me because I now had a reason to finish putting the new ropes up there. Tensioning my highline would take more than one person and what a great way to end a vertical session, with a rebelay course including a slide from tree to tree. This is what I told potential attendees, anyway.

Patrick Ray drove down from Odesa, arriving on my doorstep at 8 am. Patrick rock climbs and has done some frogging a few years ago so our training was more of reminding and practice. Kel was kind enough to loan us his vertical gear and helmet and we spent some time adjusting before heading for the trees.

I have a pretty much permanent rope that is anchored to an oak tree with a fire-hose-wrapped chain (thanks, squirrels), goes up to a pulley (same squirrel-resistant anchor) and back to the ground. There is a second pulley rigged next to the first one. This is for the 200 foot “treadmill” rope. One end of this rope is wound through and locked off on a long rack which is attached to the anchor chain. I climb the standing line with the other end and run it through the pulley, then change over and come down. Treadmill ready for action.

Even without treadmilling (climbing while someone controls the rope running through the rack, so the climber stays the same distance from the ground) this is a good setup for teaching, because if the climber gets in trouble with a changeover or gets hung up somehow s/he can be lowered to the ground. Patrick mastered the fast changeover from climbing to rappelling and back again in almost no time. He then worked his way up the rope long enough to approximate getting out of the cave and wasn’t even breathing hard.

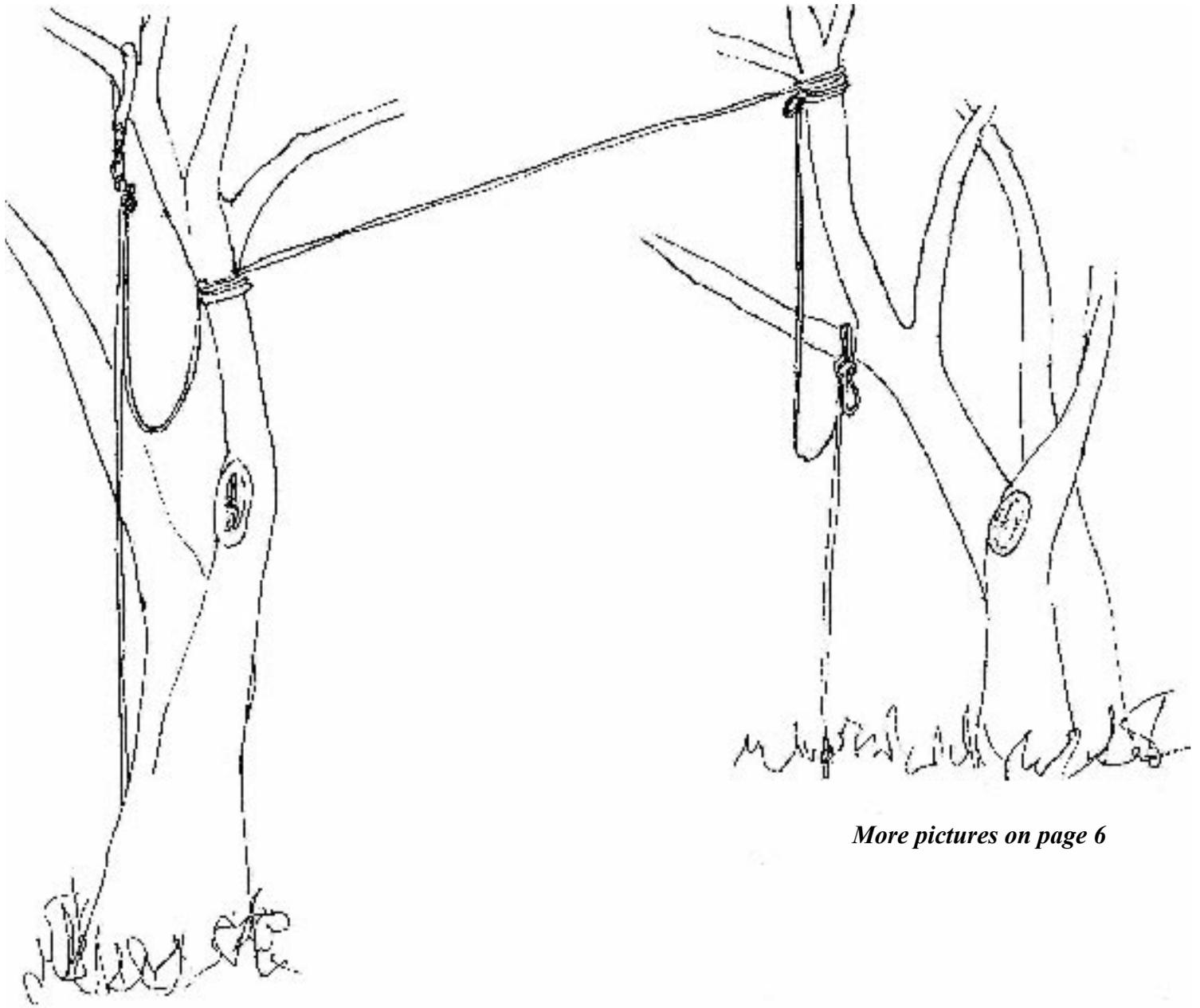
The highline goes from about 15 feet up one oak across the yard about 30 feet to the live oak next to the house. To get to it you have to climb a rope to a rebelay, cross over to another vertical rope, climb that, then stand on the tree branch to clip cowstails into the highline. The other end of the highline is a vertical rope up to a loop and by standing in the loop you can rig to go to the ground, or up another rope then down to the ground.

To tension it, though, I went up the down side, and clipped my cowstails into the chain anchor. I rigged a Petzl Basic back to a pulley anchored to the

other trunk. Patrick tensioned with the redirected rope from the ground while I tightened the highline around the tree trunk. It took longer than I thought it would but we still had time to each do a ride across and have a light lunch before

Patrick had to head back to Odessa.

We had a good morning, I got in some always advantageous practice, and I felt really great about Patrick going on the Abyss trip. So did he.



More pictures on page 6

Jacqui's backyard tree rigging





Yes, Walter has the proper shoes on



One of the many pretties in Abyss



A happy crew

PBSS May 2010 Meeting Minutes

The May meeting of the Permian Basin Speleological Society was held on May 11 and opened at 1910 (7:10 pm). This month the gavel (wooden hammer) was present and was used enthusiastically but, I think, appropriately.

The treasurer reported that we have the same amount in the treasury as the last two months, \$751.40. No new members, no expenditures.

We discussed information received from the NSS that is summarized as follows: a.. The NSS has developed a mission statement and a vision statement and the Board has approved both. b.. We have received a short questionnaire from the NSS membership and marketing committees. Each of us is meant to copy and paste it into an email with our answers. This has gone out on the PBSS remailer and continues to be available to members. The questionnaire is an effort to work up some kind of NSS demographic and it really does need the information. c.. The NSS has published its updated WNS statement. It and other WNS information are available on the NSS website.

We listened to a report from the Five Mouth dig which included the addition of Charles Goldsmith as a landowner-invited dig leader. As a result there will be more digs and anyone from one region's dig team will be encouraged

to participate in any dig. The first Charles-led dig will be the weekend of 05 June. The Five Mouth dig will continue to be a project of the PBSS.

The necessary liability release signatures for the Abyss trip will be mailed Monday the 17th to be received by the landowner before we arrive. The landowners for the Montgomery trip have also requested advance releases and there was some discussion of this trend toward liability-releases-in-advance. *ed. note: The trip to Montgomery has been cancelled.*

The cancelled Carlsbad Rock Haul was discussed and there will be no more PBSS rock hauls for now.

Ropes were discussed and the drop into Abyss is 60 feet so Jacqui will bring her relatively new 100 foot rope. Also hardware.

The Montgomery trip in June will be attended by Bill (trip leader), Walter, Kerry, Herman and Lori. Bill gave us some history behind PBSS's relationship with Montgomery's Gypsum Cave, which goes way back to the days of the Haynes brothers and their wire-and-stick ladders. ***Trip cancelled***

Bill is working on a trip to Comanche Springs cave in Fort Stockton and we picked the date, 11 September 2010.

Because Abyss and Montgomery both require good vertical skills and we don't have an in-cave training in the works there will be a vertical practice Sunday the 16th in Jacqui's trees in Sonora.

The meeting closed at 2023 hours (8:23 pm).

Respectfully submitted,

Jacqui Thomas

Photo Credits

Cover Photo:
Kerry drops into Abyss.
By Bill Bentley

All other photos courtesy
of Jacqui Thomas and Bill
Bentley



PBSS Home Page
<http://www.caver.net/pbss/pbss.html>
Built and maintained by Bill Bentley

