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Chartered 1984 as the 300th Grotto of the National Speleological Society

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## THE MONTHLY PUBLICATION OF THE PERMIAN BASIN SPELEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

### Next Meeting of the PBSS:

The next official meeting of the Permian Basin Speleological Society will be held **Tuesday, July 10**, around **7:00 PM**, in the back meeting room of Murray's Delicatessen. Murray's is located at 3211 West Wadley, Midland, Texas.

### *Our Agenda:*

#### *Meeting*



If you need more directions or information call our official contact person, Walter Feaster (915)559-3297, or E-Mail: <wfeaster@home.com> or <wfeaster@texascavers.com>.

"The Hole News" is the monthly publication of the Permian Basin Speleological Society. Articles and cartoons maybe reproduced by cave oriented publications that exchange newsletters with PBSS, as long as proper credit is given to the author. Please observe copy righted © articles. Items for this newsletter can be sent to the Editor, "The Hole News", c/o Walter Feaster, 4307 Harvard Ave., Midland, TX. 79703. Regular membership dues are only \$10.00 and includes one voting right, associate membership is \$ 5.00 and does not include a newsletter. Dues should be sent to PBSS Secretary/ Treasurer, c/o Walter Feaster, (address above). If you're interested in caving or even if you think you might like to try it, then contact Kerry Lowery @ (915)394-4230 or <lowery4@rcrom.net>. Or if you are not from this area and some how through circumstances beyond you're control or ours found a copy of "The Hole News" then you should contact the National Speleological Society at 2813 Cave Avenue, Huntsville AL, 35810-4431, or <www.caves.org/defaultjs.htm>.

### "PBSS Home Page"

<http://www.caver.net/pbss/pbss.htm>

Built and Maintained by *Bill Bentley*



### **Future Cave Trips, Events, and Projects:**

**July 23-27-2001 NSS Convention:** Mount Vernon, KY. For info visit [www.nss2001.com](http://www.nss2001.com) or contact Bill Carr, PO Box 1406, Mount Vernon, KY 40456. Phone: (606)256-0205 or <chairman@nss2001.com>. Register online; registration fees fully refundable until May 1, 2001.

**October 19, 20, 21-Texas Cavers Reunion :** Location to be announced.

\*\*\*\*\*Denotes a PBSS Grotto Trip\*\*\*\*\*

\*Due to permit restrictions or other limitations Grotto members have priority.\*

### **On Going Projects:**

**CRF- -Carlsbad Caverns:** Expeditions usually occur on holiday weekends. Contact Barbe Barker <cloudcaver@pvtnetworks.net> or (505) 687-4270. Or possibly CRF website -[www.cave-research.org](http://www.cave-research.org).

**High Guads Restoration Project (HGRP):** Upcoming events will take place the last weekend of each month. For more info contact Susan Herpin (505)785-2423 or <sherpin@caverns.com>.

**PBSS Rock Hauling At Carlsbad Caverns:** PBSS on going restoration in the Big Room of Carlsbad Caverns. Tentative dates for 2001 are (as you know this can change): **June 30, Sept. 15, and Dec. 8.** Contact Walter Feaster at <wfeaster@home.com>.

### **PBSS & Midland Summer MuMmers**

We have 24 seats reserved, up front and in the middle, for Saturday, July 28. It is \$15 ahead and you can bring whoever you want. I need the money by the July grotto meeting. Summer MuMmers is an old fashion melodrama where you boo the villain and cheer the hero. They have beer and mixed drinks and you can thro popcorn. It is a really good show. I know this is not a caving trip, it is a get together and party. We had a great time last year. So come join us.



## Cave of the Winding Stair

By Rebecca Lee

When Jack Mitchell, developer of Mitchell Caverns in Southeastern California, explored Cave of the Winding Stair in 1931, he would not only survive an ill-fated adventure he would live to tell an incredible story.

Having secured the future of Mitchell Caverns as a tourist attraction, Jack began combing the limestone slopes of the Providence Mountains in search of more caves he could open to the public. He wandered into the mouth of Gilroy Canyon and from there would stumble across a small opening high on a ridge. Excited yet alone, Jack returned to his mystery cave with 1,000' of manila rope, a block and tackle with a bosun's chair, some wood beams, and four assistants.

The men wedged the wood beams used for a platform into a crack that seemed to fall for miles. Jack tied himself into the bosun's chair and three men lowered Jack into the pit. As Jack descended, he absorbed all of the beauty this cave had to offer. He knew he had found a treasure. His exploration complete, Jack returned to the chair and jerked on the rope to signal the men to pull him up. The rope began to spin quickly as Jack was hauled toward the surface. It spun so violently that Jack passed out just before he tied himself to the chair.

Three hours later, Jack awoke to the sound of his friend's voice. His friend climbed down as far as he could when the rope stopped sliding and the men realized something was wrong. The rope spun so tightly that it wouldn't pass through the pulley. Jack was able to unwind the rope as it sent him plunging toward the cave's floor. Once at the bottom, Jack decided to try to climb the crevices along the cave's walls in an effort to escape. He even carved toeholds in the rock walls. Jack reached the level of his friend who climbed down to save him. He then climbed into the unwound chair and was hauled the rest of the way out of the cave. This story was dramatized in Death Valley Days some time later.

On April 30, seventy years after Jack's ordeal, Tom Kaler, and I were joined by our familiar caving partner Ruel Metcalf (Kerry Lowery where were you?) for what turned out to be an adventurous trip to Cave of the Winding Stair. In fact, the trip was almost more ill-fated than Jack Mitchell's.

As we entered the cave, we rigged a hand line for skirting the edges of a deep fissure that extended further into the mountain. We had two 200-foot ropes we expected to use to rig the four vertical drops. Tom was carrying one of the ropes over his shoulder and under his arm as he inched toward the tie off for the first rappel. It's a tricky place to rig a rope with most of the rigging secured only to a small limestone protrusion. Tom realized he needed to rappel a few feet through a narrow crack to reach Jack's beam platform.

As Tom lowered himself through the crack, the coiled rope round him and his backpack wedged tightly between the walls of the fissure. Tom was stuck and what was worse was that the rope shifted to around his neck. The more Tom slipped, the tighter the rope cinched, and Tom was beginning to choke. Tom screamed for help and Ruel and I who were several feet away scrambled along the edge of the crack to reach Tom before he strangled himself and died.

I reached Tom first and immediately began to loosen the rope's grip. As the rope finally moved, Tom slipped through the crack his feet landing solidly on the platform. Just as suddenly as Tom was snared, he was freed. It took only seconds for Tom to recover and before long we were joking about Tom's near hanging. Needless to say, a lesson was learned.

After that adrenaline-pumping episode, the rest of the trip was uneventful. The first rappel through the tight fissure opened to a huge passageway and ended 65' down at a pile of jumbled boulders called the Broken Rock Room. From there, a short 25-foot rappel led to the sloping corridor where Jack ended his descent. Here, a signature clinging to a stalactite reads, "J.E. Mitchell July 31."

A crawl through the Gopher Hole that cavers dug open years after Jack was there popped us into an incredibly flat walking passage lined with aragonite and popcorn called the Coral Corridor. The Chicken signaled the next drop of 50' into a corridor with a floor of Swiss cheese. It's easy to drop through the wrong hole. We fed the rest of our rope through a tiny opening and one by one squeezed through for a free rappel of 130'. This was the eeriest of all of the drops. As you penetrate, the cave sinks deeper below the surface and all you think about is the arduous climb out.

Once at the "bottom," a place Jack never knew existed, a short crawl led to a room with an obvious manhole in the thick crust of the floor. Through the manhole is the Register Room and finally cavers, much like Jack, can leave their names on paper in the cave to declare Cave of the Winding Stair conquered. We too conquered Cave of the Winding Stair but not without a near mishap. Moral of the story? Cave safely and never put a rope around your neck.