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Volume 15 Number 9

## 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 on **Tuesday, September 12**, 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*

*Future PBSS events*



If you need more directions or information call our official contact person, Walter Feaster @ (915)694-1824 or (915)559-3297, or E-Mail: <wdfeast@home.com> or <wfeaster@caver.net>.

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### "PBSS Home Page"

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

Web space donated courtesy of Bill Bentley & Caprok.net ISP.



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

**CANCELED** \*\*\*September 9-PBSS Rock Haul @ CACA: \*\*

**September 9-10-Colorado Bend State Park Project**: San Saba County, TX Contact Terry Holsinger or Dale Barnard.

**October 14-15 -Colorado Bend State Park Project**: San Saba County, TX Contact Terry Holsinger or Dale Barnard.

**October 20-22 -The TEXAS CAVER REUNION**: To be held at the Flat Creek Ranch near Pedernales Falls State Park.

\*\*\***October 21- PBSS Trip to Montgomery Gypsum Cave**: Contact Noel Pando for more info: <nepando@andrews.esc18.net> or 915 523 9294.

**October 28-30 -Powell's Cave Survey Project**: Menard Co., TX. A time honored trip. Contact Terry Holsinger. 512.443.4241, <trhli@sprynet.com>.

\*\*\***November 18- PBSS "Kid Trip" to Ess Cave**: Do you have or know of a youngster who wants to go caving? Bring them along! Contact Ruel Metcalf for details. <ruellyn@webtv.net?> or 915 263 4890.

**November 17-26 -Traditional Thanksgiving trips to Mexico**: Haven't been caving in "Old" Mexico?...Thanksgiving is probably your best opportunity. Go see why Texas cavers spend ALL their holidays down south. Contact who?

\*\*\***December 2-PBSS Rock Haul @ CACA**: Contact Walter Feaster\*\*

\*\*\*\*\*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 (972)594-1183 or <cavers@gte.net>. Or possibly CRF website -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 <sherpin@caverns.com> or Allen Laman <iLove2cave@apex2000.net>.

**PBSS Rock Hauling At Carlsbad Caverns**: PBSS on going restoration in the Big Room of Carlsbad Caverns. Lots of fun. Tentative dates are: December 2. Reserve a spot now, they are going fast. Contact Ruel Metcalf at (915)263-4890 or <ruelgto@webtv.net> or Walter Feaster

## Welcome New Members

PBSS welcomes **Scott Askey** to our membership. Right now Scott is at Goodfellow Air Force Base, San Angelo, Texas. He has caved extensively in the north east and wants to see some caves in Texas.

Also **Steve Franks** rejoins our ranks after a long absence. Please don't "shun" him, he might leave again! Welcome all.

Please note **e-mail changes and additions** on the membership page.

## Cave Men of the Cornudas Revisited

Guadalupe mountain caver, Robert Nymeyer, found more than just caves in the little known Cornudas Mountain range of Southeastern New Mexico

It's been nearly sixty years since Robert Nymeyer's article "Cave Men of the Comudas" was published in New Mexico magazine. An icon of cavers in the Guadalupe Mountains, Nymeyer's forty-five years of caving inspired him to put pen to paper for the entire world to read. Currently known to contain over 350 caves including the majestic Carlsbad Cavern, the Guadalupe Mountains of Southeastern New Mexico were a vast playground for Nymeyer. In fact, his autobiography Carlsbad, Caves, and a Camera is a prevailing reference for cavers. So when he ventured thirty miles west of his cherished Guadalupe Mountains to the Comudas Mountains, it's not surprising that he would find a covey of caves, a smattering of adventure, and a pretty interesting story.

The Texas-New Mexico border splits the little known Comudas Mountains, Spanish for "horned," with the majority of the peaks rising from the Land of Enchantment. They're massive sills of syenite, a granular igneous rock, which intruded through the limestone to create enormous pyramids that Nymeyer described as "blue cones rising above the level horizon." Comprised of nine separate summits, the sharp peaks of San Antonio Mountain, Wind Mountain, and Black Mountain catch the eye of travelers who motor down U.S. 62/180 from Carlsbad to El Paso.

Just as difficult to reach today, as they were sixty years ago when Nymeyer bounced along a rutted road from Salt Flat, the Comudas have remained virtually untouched by vandals. Most visitors coming from Carlsbad depart from Dell City where a maze of unnamed dirt roads eventually lead to the distant peaks. Driving west on County Road 2249 and turning north to County Road F 1 7 roughly takes visitors through the heart of the Comudas. But, travelers coming from El Paso on U.S. 62/180 have an easier time of finding the Comudas by exiting the highway north to County Road F I. Regardless, it's a hit and miss kind of trip and topographic maps are necessary. Many of the roads end with windmills and locked gates and may require a four-wheel drive vehicle.

Overseen mostly by the Bureau of Land Management, these remote mountains attract the attention of desert hikers in search of a greater prize. The BLM's reaction to this popularity is to gate roads, post signs, and designate camping areas in an effort to protect the lure of the Comudas. The attraction is not just nature's enchanting hills, towering yuccas, or prancing pronghorns but it is traveling back in time as Nymeyer discovered to the ancient past of Native America.

Nymeyer's article began with the exploration of Butterfield Trail station ruins at the foot of the western most Alamo Mountain. The Butterfield Trail was established in 1858 to provide faster mail and passenger service between St. Louis and San Francisco. Covering

2,795 miles, the trail dipped to El Paso to satisfy the postmaster general. After a day's ride from the Pine Springs station in the, Guadalupe, weary stagecoach passengers quenched their thirsts at the Alamo Spring station then stayed overnight before continuing their three-week ordeal. Wandering among the ruins, it seems the whinny of horses and the voices of travelers still linger in the Wind. But dust devils and desert heat remind visitors how difficult the journey must have been.

Nymeyer described the ruins as "a length or two of stone wall, crumbling and forlorn but still holding out against time" and the spring as "dry and barren." A recent visit to Alamo Mountins proved a few of Nymeyer's words are just as true as ever. Stacks of stone walls three to five feet tall still stand but ranching 'in the area has added water canals and pipes, cement slabs, and cattle tanks to the scenery. Shrubs of creosote have replaced the "wild grape vines" and thorny branches of cat claw choked the "gnarled peach tree still vigorous and active." Sadly, time and an unforgiving desert have claimed many of the memories of another era although relics like a mysterious stone marker-grave or trail-still remain.

As Nymeyer wrote, "Reports had come to us 'in Carlsbad of 'thousands of Indian paintings on the cliffs of the Comudas," he revealed the real reason for his journey. It's impossible to know for sure whether the directions Nymeyer had given were for Alamo Mountain or one of the many others. A search of many mountain slabs failed to expose any of Nymeyer's red pictographs or blackened caves but racers and centipedes keep the skittish hopping from boulder to boulder so they could've been missed.

Exploring the northwest flank of Alamo Mountain, most persistent hikers discover the thousands of petroglyphs and a few historic signatures that cover the igneous rocks. Petroglyphs, which are often confused with pictographs, are drawings etched in the outer layer of a rock. Pictographs are drawings that are painted on rocks. Upon first glance, these antique petroglyphs appear like modern graffiti but closer inspection reveals the incredible beauty of Native American rock art. Apparently, Nymeyer had been fooled by this misnomer and realized that he was not searching for "Indian paintings" but Indian carvings.

Once Nymeyer realized his error, he combed the Mountainside documenting many geometrical shapes and curious figures pecked in the weathered porphyry by his "cave men." Many of the petroglyphs at Alamo Mountain have been identified as those of the Mescalero Apaches whose territory was near the area in the mid-1800s. Drawings of horses suggest that most of the etchings date after 1600 AD. However, aboriginal pottery shards and stone artifacts indicate that humans have inhabited the area for thousands of years.

Motifs of homed characters and zigzagging lines believed to symbolize the Apache deities of wind, rain, thunder, and lightning are abundant around Alamo Mountain. In fact, there are so many of these depictions that Alamo Motmtain could have been holy. But none is more unpressive than those of the Wind God sub site located half of a mile northeast of the Butterfield Trail station. Here the Apache God of Wind is honored with several tall, horned images that can only be described as breathtaking. Their diamond shaped bodies and sticklike limbs stand sovereignty among rows of dancing crooked lines. This collection of engravings is more evocative and inherently intriguing than any other site.

Standing in the faded footprints of the natives and staring into the chiseled eyes of these intricate creations sparks the imagination to dream of a time when land tamed men. Even Nymeyer's imagination was sparked **(Continued page 2)**

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when he speculated that the artist of a "war canoe" traveled over barren land to a distant coast only to return with peculiar "stories of navigators."

As nature takes her toll on the old Butterfield Trail station and as the petroglyphs fade with time, the Comudas Mountains will remain. While they collect a wealth of interesting stories and hint about the lives of prehistoric men, these mighty towers of earth may stand forever. Nothing can keep the curious like Robert Nymeyer from wandering down a few dirt roads searching for the one that leads him there. Hopefully when he finds his way, he will respect the mountains that compel him and help protect what is perhaps one of the best-kept secrets in all of New Mexico.

Rebecca Lee

(See Rebecca's map next page)

**Caverns of Sonora Revisited Again**

On August 13, 2000, Tom and I met in the tiny town of Sonora to.... well.....you know, it's been a long time for us living in separate towns and all. Sonora is approximately half way between Carlsbad, NM and Corpus Christi, TX so this was to be our weekend meeting place. We thought it would be a nice place to meet. After all, the number one criteria was there- a cave!

I never know how to talk about Caverns of Sonora. When I worked as a ranger at Carlsbad Caverns National Park, I would tell visitors who were traveling through Texas to be sure to see Caverns of Sonora. I would tell them it is the best commercial cave in Texas. But, it's not the best commercial cave in Texas. It's the best cave in Texas. I fully realize that now after visiting it for the millionth time (maybe not that many times but a lot). It wasn't that it took that many visits to the cave to come to my senses. It was the fear of commitment. I've never had a problem committing to a person or a job but committing to a cave was scary. There was always that possibility that another cave more beautiful and spectacular than Caverns of Sonora would be found. Also, I haven't visited that many caves in Texas. Perhaps there is one or two that can rival Sonora. But now, I don't care. I've finally seen the light shining through the helictites. To me and to many others, Caverns of Sonora is the best little cave in Texas.

With that said, let's talk about Caverns of Sonora. It doesn't matter that the tour guides are not cavers or are not that versed in caving. They do a good job. But, let's face it. We don't go there to learn much. We go there to see much. And much is what you'll see. It doesn't matter that the tours are not cheap. They are worth every penny. It doesn't even matter that the cave is so far from anywhere. Most caves are. What matters is what the cave has to offer- an incredible array of formations that send chills up the spine of anyone who can recognize a miracle.

What's so great about it? How about 90% active rooms full of long, delicate soda straws each one with a drop of water just waiting to plunge to the cave floor? How about formations that are white? Not off white, almost white, or antique white. They are white. How about gnarly helictites that defy gravity in ways never thought possible such as the famous Butterfly which is a union of two fish tail formations grown from one base? Or, the hundreds of serpentine formations that are seemingly charmed from the walls like cobras? How about a

river of moon milk? Enough said. How about a pool of crystal clear water that curves itself from one room into another and calls itself Horseshoe Lake? How about the rare dog tooth spar that grow wild and abundant? How about curtains and cave bacon that add just the right touch to every room? How about the thousands of stalactites and stalagmites that are coated in crystals so outstanding they look like snow covered Christmas trees?

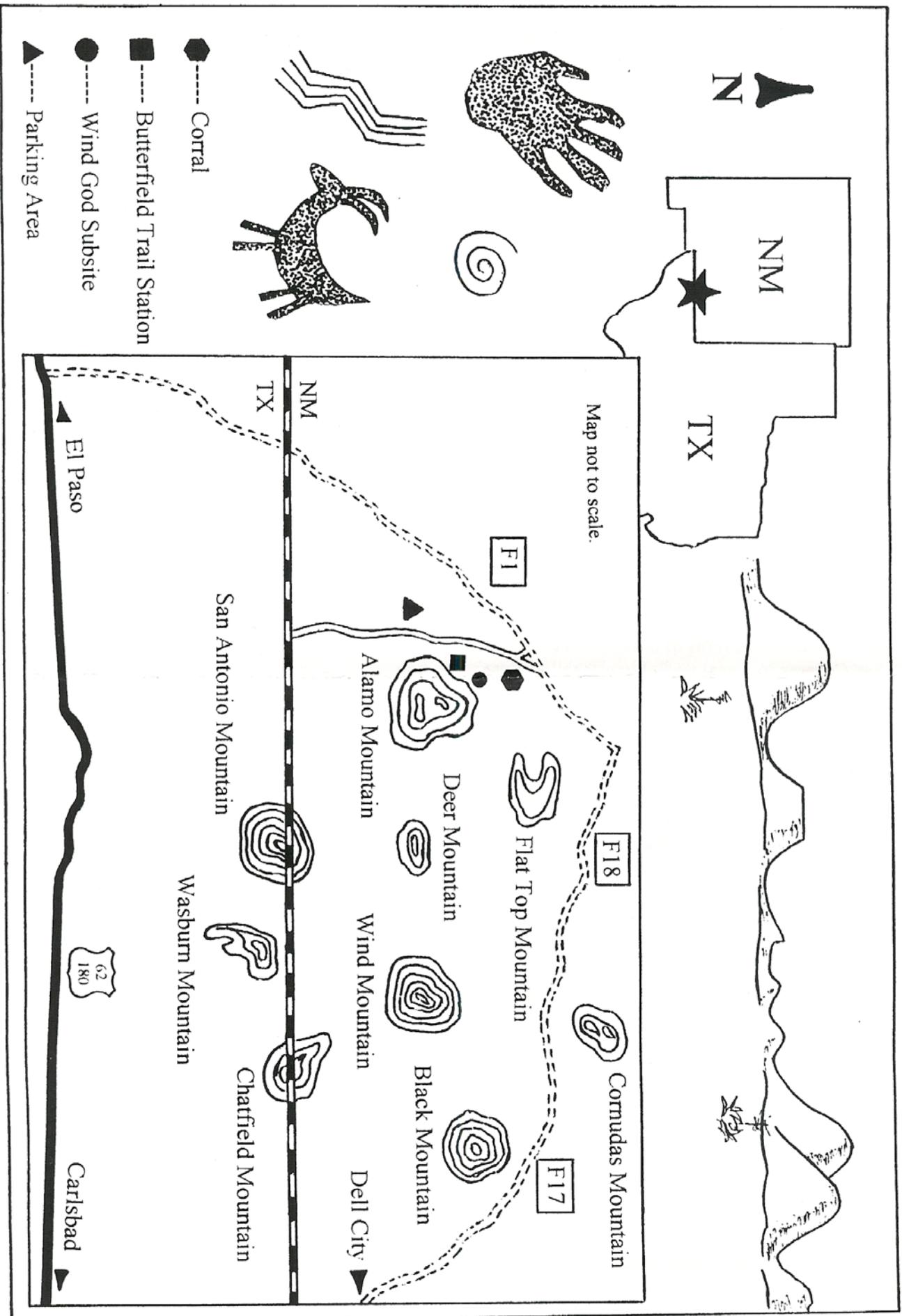
These are only a few of the many things that Caverns of Sonora has to offer. There are so many and they are so beautiful that the right words are never found to describe them. If you haven't visited this cave, you must. Then, you can write a trip report about it and prove me wrong.

Submitted by Rebecca Lee

**Abyss Sinkhole**

Space reserved for trip report

# Cornudas Mountains



Map by Rebecca Lee

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\* denotes new members

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