

## **A Good Day**

### **Trip Report by Patrick Clapp**

There are two mental hurdles I had to overcome when I decided to take up caving. The first, that I would willingly crawl into a hole in the earth and try to squeeze myself through small passages into small rooms while above me lay layer upon layer of (mostly) solid rock. The second hurdle would be my fear of getting stuck in a place where I couldn't turn around. Scout Cave, offered me the chance to face both of these.

Most likely named for the regular visitation by scout troupes looking for their 'crazy' badge, Scout Cave is an ideal location for new cavers to cut their teeth. Although Scout has a large walk-in entrance, upon arriving, my guides decided that they would take this opportunity to 'drop' the entrance. That's jargon for entering a cave with the assistance of vertical gear (ropes and harnesses). So, with a "why not?" attitude, they hooked up their gear, tied their ropes and proceeded to descend the 20' entrance. I waited at the bottom with a camera, having walked in a few minutes previous.

We proceeded into the cave proper with the entrance out of the way. I began learning some of the vocabulary associated with being underground. Scout had a slightly sloped 'breakdown', a section of dirt and rubble leading deeper into the cave. And, moving deeper into the 'walking passage', so named because you could remain upright, I began to notice the sounds of the cave. Scout was still alive. The ceiling was dripping, albeit intermittently, there was water coming in from the roof of the cave.

Pondering the dripping water led to my first introduction to formations, soda-straws. It was then that I realized that caving nomenclature was fantastically descriptive: flow stones, soda-straws, shields, rim stone dams, pools, the appearance of each of these structures is fully evoked by their names. Stalactites and stalagmites seem paltry names when compared with popcorn and boxwork.

Scout contained a host of treasures, and I was snapping pictures left, right, up, and

down. Some of them even came out (remember, it's dark in there). As we started to make more of an effort to move into the cave, I asked "Which way do we go?", and was met with, "You lead." Okay, I thought, "Let's go this way.", and proceeded to lead the group along a (very obvious) 'loop'. There were a few spots that gave me a bit of worry, although only because I had yet to see how small a passage had to get before I couldn't 'push' it (more of that caving lingo).

After an hour or so of sweating and struggling through passages whose walls had been worn smooth from the passage of time and water, we returned to the entrance room. I was greeted with, "Are you ready to see the rest of the cave?". There's more? Oh yeah. I had barely scratched the surface.

The next segment took effort, both physical and mental. Because I noticed the passage on my own, my guide said he would go first (sparing me from spending my later years in an asylum). This passage was not a walking passage. It was a grunting, sliding, squeezing-through-by-wriggling-while-on-your-side-for-30-feet passage. At the end of it, after pulling myself weakly through the final opening, somewhat slick with mud, I remarked, "Ugh. It's like giving birth to yourself!" Essentially true, I certainly felt as weak as a newborn. At that point it was on the reward for making the journey through the crawl. Continuing, I was met with a passage, a turn, and then a room 14 feet from floor to ceiling (aptly called the 14 foot room) with passages leading off in all directions. I chose one at random, interested in going up. As it turned out, my guides had never been down that direction, although they knew what lay at its end.

A soda straw – a delicate, small, hollow tube formed by deposition – takes years upon years upon years to form (the ones I saw formed at the breakneck speed of an inch a century). The Pool Room in Scout Cave was our final destination, one selected purely by chance. It was a small room, half of which was taken up by a pool and the other half with barely enough room for three people to sit quietly and enjoy the secrets of the earth. The ceiling was carpeted in soda straws, and it was a fantastic reward for the effort, sweat, and bruises collected on the way in.

And then: the way out. We stopped off near the 14 foot room for a caving tradition.

Everyone clicked out their headlamps and we experienced true darkness for about five minutes. True darkness is a funny thing. Your eyes are so used to a constant barrage of input, that, when met with a condition of zero input, they will attempt to provide images and colors for you. It can be a dizzying experience. You know the wall is several feet away, but your eyes are trying to build one only inches from your face. We drank some water and had some beef jerky, and with a warning "Light coming on!", we were once again ready for movement. After the 14 foot room, we had two choices on how to return, we could go back the way we came, or we could try another passage that perhaps met up with the birthing crawl. Feeling confident, I started into the squeeze (for me) to connect to the birthing crawl. I met my match. I ran right up against my second fear that I mentioned above. I was in a position that, were I to continue, I would find retreating very very difficult. I made my retreat at that point and decided that I would exit the way I came in. It wasn't so bad going back through. And, upon returning to the suddenly extremely large (it's all a matter of perspective) walking entrance, I felt that I had accomplished something. I was right; I had been in a cave. And any day you can get into a cave is a good day.

