

The FLOWSTONE

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A Monthly Newsletter of the Cullman Grotto of the National Speleological Society

CULLMAN GROTTO FLOWSTONE

October 2009
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The Flowstone is published monthly by the Cullman Grotto of the National Speleological Society. Items submitted for publication must be received by the 20th of each month for inclusion in the following month's issue.

The Cullman Grotto will exchange by request with any publishing grotto. Republication of items within *The Flowstone* is allowed provided credit is given to author and source.

Membership to the Cullman Grotto is fifteen dollars (\$15) per year for individual or twenty dollars (\$20) per year for family. Dues are payable at the first grotto meeting of each year (January) and includes subscription to *The Flowstone*. Subscription rate for non-members is fifteen dollars (\$15) per year.

The Cullman Grotto meets on the first Tuesday of each month unless the first Tuesday falls on a holiday or otherwise noted. In those cases the meeting will be held on the second Tuesday. Meetings begin at 7:30 p.m. and are held at the old L&N train depot, Arnold St., Cullman, AL. All visitors and prospective members are welcome.

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Front Cover: Neversink, Sharon Clayton on rope, Harold and Kuenn on belay. Jackson Co, AL. Photo by Perry Clayton

ECHO)))) CHAMBER

Road Update

Progress is being made repairing flood damaged roads on Pigeon Mountain. Blue Hole Road is now OPEN.

Rocky Lane remains washed out just above Pettyjohns and from the South

just past Rape Gap. The Dougherty Gap Road (from Hwy 157 down into the cove) is closed and will be for some time.

Remember that the Crockford-Pigeon Mountain Wildlife Management Area will be closed to caving the weekend after TAG. Oct 16,17,18. Also Nov.11-14 and Dec.9-12 for firearms deer hunts.

Allen Padgett

TAG Fall Cave In 09

Just wanted to update you all about the WNS tent at the Cave In this year. As always, the decon stations will be in place and we encourage you to utilize them as this is will be a critical year for WNS in TAG. We all feel sure that this deadly disease will enter our region before winters end so please take every precaution possible and decontaminate your gear and caving clothes both before coming to the Cave In as well as after each caving trip.

In addition, David Kampwerth, a Karst Biologist with USFWS (and a fellow caver) will be on hand this year to answer all your questions regarding WNS or Karst biology in general. We have worked very hard to put together all the latest information. So please come by, ask questions provide us with your feedback -

whether it's positive or negative. He will be taking this information back to USFWS in an effort to better work with the caving community. This is also a critical year for contacting your representatives on funding WNS research. I will have a list and contact information for each representative throughout the US available to you. In order to solve this crisis, we must unite and show Congress the importance of finding a cure. We all understand the gravity of losing our bat population, so please get involved.

Lynn Buffkin

Dark Well, Jackson County AL, is Closed

Some of us attempted to go to Dark Well this past Saturday. The owner of the usual access to the cave, who has been amenable to caver visitation in the past, said that they are no longer allowing access from their property. Apparently some of their neighbors, including the Dark Well landowner, are angry about cavers trespassing on their property. So please consider Dark Well and other caves in the area to be closed (this includes Swell Well).

If there are any further developments in the situation, I will post here on Tag-Net.

--angela

26.2 Caver

Congratulations are in order for Cullman Grotto member Patrick O'Diam who recently competed in and completed the 26.2 mile Dayton, OH Marathon. Pat averaged running a 9 min per mile clip. The Dayton was

Patrick's first full marathon and, according to Pat, will not be his last..

Bridge Day

Several members of the Cullman Grotto will be heading north to W.Va to rap the 800+ ft New River Gorge. Members are part of the Vbats rappel team headed up by CG members TinY & Nikki Manke. The New River Gorge is the deepest single rope drop in the eastern US.

TAG Calendar

Oct 8-11
TAG Fall Cave-In
TOTM site on Lookout Mtn

Nov 3
Grotto Meeting
7:30p L&N Depot, Arnold St

Nov 7
Grotto trip
TBA. Meet at library, 8am

Nov 7
Board of Governors Meeting
Bham Zoo Lodge. Hosted by Bham and Central AL grottos

August 2-6, 2010
NSS Convention
Essex Junction, Vermont



A Most Unusual Birthday Party

by Kuenn Drake

On Friday, September 25 we had a rather large gathering at Neversink. Our purpose was two-fold; meet up with members of the Montgomery Grotto to do some pit work, and attend a most unusual Birthday Party for Wendy Lynn at the bottom of the Pit. All told, we had around 20 people between the two Grottos and some delicious cupcakes courtesy of "O'Diam Party Rappers" delivery service.

Those from the Cullman Grotto included: Patrick, Harold, Evon, Scott, Perry and Sharon, Wendy, Aaron, Alicia and Derrick. The Montgomery Grotto included: Stan, Ted, Chuck, Collin, Lee, Chris, Anne and a couple others that I don't remember their names, sorry.



Sharon and Perry Clayton

The advanced team made it to the parking area around 4pm and went ahead and rigged two ropes. The Montgomery folks rolled in just before dark and rigged two additional ropes.

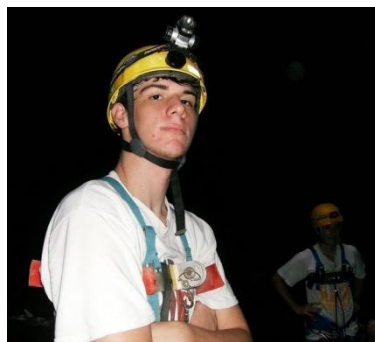
Earlier in the week North Alabama had received several inches of rain creating an interesting situation. I was the first down and was amazed to hear numerous rocks fall while cavers were making their way over the lip. I concluded that the rain had eroded the ground around the edge making it very easy to dislodge debris. Sounded like a war zone for several minutes!



This would be a new deep record for Aaron Keel (Wendy's son) and Sharon Clayton, also a record for some of the Montgomery folks as well. Everyone did a good job managing the slick rocks at the lip.

Darkness descended on the pit shortly after we had all ropes under operation. I enjoy the spectacle that night provides in Neversink. Lights moving up and down, back and forth, it's quite a scene to behold.

No major problems occurred, a couple of minor incidents including a helmet that came off when a caver inverted at the lip (which is spooky to see from below until you realize it's only a helmet), and a few gear related problems, all in a day's work.



Aaron Keel on bottom

No multi-person rappels, mainly because TinY and NikkY were at Whitesides with VBATS vertical training, however, we did manage to do several tandem climbs and a couple of triples.

Before long it was time to start wrapping things up and head out. Montgomery was spending the weekend in Jackson County and would be making an early rise to go to Tumbling Rock. We managed to get in a few more bounces and then pulled up and out.

We stopped in Scottsboro for an early breakfast around 1am at the Huddle House, got in a few more laughs and a lemonade bath for yours truly...which was totally Evon's fault!

Now that I think about it there was one injury from the trip that was note worthy. On the way back to the parking area Wendy managed to step wrong on the trail which resulted in a broken ankle that she didn't have diagnosed until days later. Got to be careful with those aging bones—they can be fragile.

Nice birthday present to give yourself, Old Gal...the gift that keeps on giving!!



Birthday "Girl" Wendy

The Cave

What if your life depended on you descending into a dank and pitch black underground cave, with no gear, not for a day, not for a week...but possibly for years? Could you survive? THE CAVE is the story of the longest ever-recorded uninterrupted underground survival in human history.

With no place safe left to go, 38 people silently slid down a muddy hole in the ground to escape the Nazis as they annihilated the Jews of Southwestern Ukraine. While the war raged above their heads, five Jewish families survived for 527 days, in two massive cave systems. It was an incredibly hostile environment, but it became a refuge from the slaughter above ground. The women, older men, and children never left the cave. The heroes were teenage boys and young men in their 20s who ventured out to collect food, chop firewood, and gather essential supplies, putting their lives on the line every time they left the cave. Theirs is a survival story of heart-stopping heroic acts and youthful ingenuity. What they accomplished is unimaginable: in the region that was the single most dangerous place on earth to be a Jew, every single person, from grandparents down to a one-year-old baby, emerged alive. This fall, four of those young heroes, now in their 70s and 80s, will journey back to Ukraine with their grandchildren to enter THE CAVE for the very first time in 65 years.

How the story was discovered

New York State investigator and well-known cave explorer, Chris Nicola, uncovered this story in the mid 1990s when he, along with a group of elite Ukrainian cavers, were mapping Ozernaja (or Blue Lakes Cave). It is the 11th longest and 2nd largest gypsum cave system in the world. Nicola, an Indiana Jones-type character with a New York accent, stumbled upon objects left by the survivors ---buttons, shoes, a grinding stone, even a house key. He spent the next seven years trying to figure out if vague rumors were true – that with no gear or training, a group of desperate people had lived in this cave for months on end, and survived. Perhaps some still remained to tell their tale. When Nicola finally did confirm the story’s authenticity, it turned out that more than a dozen survivors were still alive, one of them lived only 15 miles away.

Chris Nicola will be the survivors’ guide when they return to the cave this fall. He will also be doing further archeological research in Blue Lakes Cave with one of the survivor’s grandsons, who has become a cave explorer, too.

The Darkest Days

By Chris Nicola



Stermer family in 1943, courtesy of family

In the spring of 1944, a group of 38 Ukrainian Jews emerged weak and jaundiced from a cave they'd used for nearly a year to escape the horrors of the Holocaust. Nearly fifty years later, one caver began his quest to bring their story of survival to life. By Carey Ostergard

In 1993, veteran caver Chris Nicola became one of the first Americans to explore Ukraine's famous Gypsum Giant cave systems. While there, during an expedition into the tenth longest cave in the world, his team came across two partially intact stone walls and other signs of habitation. Local residents, who revere the Gypsum Giants as national treasures, told Nicola that a group of Ukrainian Jews spent months in the cave evading the horrors of the Holocaust. No one seemed to know who had survived, however, and some questioned whether any had seen daylight again. Fascinated, Nicola grew determined to learn how people with no prior caving experience or specialized equipment were able to live in such a hostile environment for so long.

Ten years later, after an extensive search, Nicola located six of the cave survivors, most of them members of the extended Stermer family. The story they told was even more remarkable than the legend Nicola had heard while in the Ukraine, involving not one cave hideout, but two, and nearly two years spent underground. "There may not be another story like this," explains Michlean Amir, reference archivist of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. "Such a large group of people avoided digging their own graves or being shipped off to concentration camps by successfully utilizing a natural phenomenon."

Last July, Nicola and writer-photographer Peter Lane Taylor traveled 7,000 miles to western Ukraine on assignment for *Adventure* to learn how the group, which numbered 38 in all, was able to survive below ground for nearly two years. Their first stop was Vertheba, a well-known tourist cave where the families spent their first six months. There, the Jews struggled to find enough water and suffered from the toxic buildup of smoke from their cooking fire. Then on May 5, 1943,

after narrowly avoiding capture at the hands of the Gestapo, the families relocated to a previously unexplored cave located beneath land owned by a local parish priest. It was called Popowa Yama, or Priest's Grotto, and it would be the Jews' refuge from the Holocaust for the next 344 days.

By piecing together interviews with the survivors and artifacts they found while in Ukraine, Nicola and Taylor were able to develop a clear picture of the Jews' underground life. The fruits of their findings appear in this month's issue. Below, *Adventure* asks Nicola about uncovering this forgotten story of courage, loyalty, and survival.

We have all heard extraordinary Holocaust survival stories, what about this story makes it so unique?

It was the sheer magnitude of their survival and how they survived *together*. In my opinion, the western Ukraine was the worst place on Earth for Jews to live during World War II. Hitler was on one border sending in troops whose sole purpose was to eliminate all Jews, and Stalin was on the other enforcing a scorched earth policy by burning everything that couldn't be moved. The chance of a Jewish person surviving at all was less than 5 percent. But what made this story different, and what is rarely seen in any Holocaust survival story, is how these families stayed virtually intact.

How did you get in touch with the survivors?

After ten years of extensive research and a lot of dead ends, I came across a number of sophisticated Internet search sites for the Jewish community, used by thousands of Jews to look for missing relatives. I thought if I put the right words on my own Web site [www.uaycef.org]*—*such as "cave" and "grotto"*—*then someone searching would pick up on them. Sure enough, in 2002, I got an e-mail late at night and couldn't believe my eyes. It was a message from the son-

in-law of Sol Wexler. He said his father-in-law survived the Holocaust by hiding in a cave. I was so excited—I was afraid to even touch the print key in case I were to accidentally erase it. I calmed down, responded, and got to meet Sol Wexler. He eventually led me to the others.



CAVE MARKINGS: Caver Chris Nicola finds written evidence of the Priest's Grotto survivors.

After you met them, what did it take to organize an expedition?

We interviewed the survivors extensively and worked closely with the Ukrainian caving community to arm ourselves with as much information as possible. Our idea was to retrace the exact routes the families took from the first cave [where they were ambushed by the Nazis after six months], through their flight into the woods, and then finally to the sinkhole and Priest's Grotto—their home for the next year. At one point we even ended up on an ox cart on the same road they followed.

It was amazing, because after hearing the story I was able to recognize special things I'd missed before. For instance, one of the survivors, only four years old at the time, said she remembers playing with a bright, shining crystal in the cave. One of the largest crystals in the world is close to their campsite inside Priest's Grotto, and chunks of it will sometimes fall to the ground. When we saw the crystal, we realized that that was where she used to play.

What other artifacts did you see differently after you'd heard the survivors' story?

The millstone really struck me. I am in my 50s but pretty strong, and I couldn't even move it. Yet Nissel Stermer carried it on his back for three or four miles. That millstone was their life. They used it to grind grain to make bread, which was the main part of their diet. Nissel must have gotten a lot of strength from his family. I think it's like the stories about mothers, full of adrenaline, gaining superhuman strength to lift cars or bend metal to save their children. Nissel knew this millstone would save his entire family. That hit me like a brick wall.

Unlike the families, who knew nothing about caves, you are an experienced caver. What do you think were the greatest obstacles to their survival?

Cavers wear specialized clothing. Without it, hypothermia is always a problem. When the families worked, cut wood, or leveled the ground, they would sweat. As the sweat evaporated, their bodies cooled down. Ironically, their hard work worked against them and could have put them in a hypothermic state. They also had to contend with bats, a source of disease; malnutrition; smoke from their cooking fire contaminating water sources; and getting lost in the dark labyrinth. The smoke in particular was very dangerous. The four-year-old girl almost died from smoke inhalation in the first cave due to poor ventilation. The Jews had no choice but to learn to adapt quickly and along the way developed some absolutely ingenious ways to overcome these hardships.

Can you give some examples?

The first cave was horrific, but they were smart enough to build a spectacular escape exit. They dug up through a soft spot in the ceiling and enforced and camouflaged a hatch so farmers wouldn't find it or fall through. It saved their lives. In the

second cave, which was much more suitable for living, they set up designated areas for cooking and sleeping, they used the natural ventilation system of the cave and built walls to channel the smoke away from other areas. The families also had an elaborate password system for the men who would go



Chris Nicola examines artifacts left by the survivors in Blue Lakes Cave. Photo by Peter Lane Taylor

out of the cave for provisions. They had a good password and a bad password. The good password meant everything was OK; the bad password meant an enemy was forcing them into the cave. They had few candles, so light was limited to three short periods each day. After enough time spent wandering in the dark, they memorized the feel of the cave floor on their bare feet. It was like directions in braille.

What artifacts did you find in the cave?

The cave was a time capsule. We found medicine bottles, dozens of shoes, buttons, and other wonderful things that reflected their daily life. The Jews left all of their personal effects in the first cave, so in Priest's Grotto, all they had left were tools. When we were digging around we came across a railroad spike. One of the survivors had told us it was their

most valuable tool because they used it to chisel stone. We also found a key under one of the beds, where people today hide their valuables. Peter and I think it was a key to one of the families' houses and they were keeping it safe for when they could use it again one day. But when the family finally came out of the cave, they never went back to retrieve anything. They left it all in the cave in case they ever needed to return.

What is it like to spend a substantial amount of time underground?

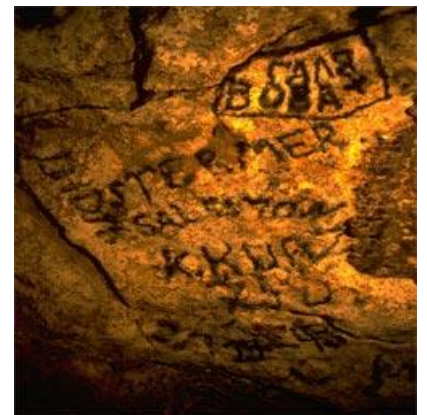
When you first go into a cave, you feel like you are in the smallest area you have ever been in your life. Your heart pounds, and you sweat. You have this horrible feeling of confinement. It is very important that you get acclimated or you will get tunnel vision, which prevents you from focusing on the important things such as hydration, staying warm, and not getting lost. The families never got completely comfortable because they knew they could be ambushed at any time. One survivor said her heart stopped every time the men left to replenish supplies because she never knew if they would see them again. Not seeing the sun for almost a year was also very hard. But at that time, if they saw the sun, it meant they were in great danger.

I've heard stories of Holocaust survivors always carrying food so they will never have to be hungry again. Do the Priest's Grotto survivors have similar habits?

One of the survivors admitted to doing just that, carrying food with her. She explained that when they lived in the cave, they decided at one point that only the men who ventured out for provisions would get extra rations, so the others were constantly hungry. Also, one of the survivor's children said that he noticed his father and two uncles have 16-foot ceilings in the entryways of their homes. I think that's preferable to the small hole they entered feet-first for a year!

Do you think that people today could survive like the families did?

Modern-day people who sit at a computer all day? I would say no for two reasons. First of all, these were hands-on people. They were carpenters and merchants who had to provide for themselves, especially during the occupation. They also grew up knowing the history of the caves in the area and that ancient people lived in them, so they knew it could be done. Secondly, the Stermer grandmother taught her family not to trust authority. At one point, before they fled to the caves, all Jews were told to meet in town and register. The grandmother decided they were not going to go. The family worried but they obeyed the grandmother. That day, in five separate towns, the Germans rounded up thousands of Jews and many were never seen again—it had been a trap. I think people today often don't give themselves the right to question authority.



Survivors' names written in Blue Lakes Cave in 1943. Photo by Peter Lane Taylor for National Geographic Adventure Magazine

Why isn't this story more widely known?

When the families first came out of the caves, they had no idea if they were going to need to go back again, so they kept it a secret. When the Stermers immigrated to Canada the secret left with them. Later, when they were ready to tell their story, no one believed them. Their friends who survived the same Holocaust had

very different experiences. They had numbers on their wrists and slept on bare wooden floors covered in lice. The families in the cave slept on warm beds, rarely got sick, and still had their family members with them when it was over. I can understand why some people didn't believe them and why they never told the story again.

What have you gained from this experience?

Talking to survivors put a face on the horrors of the Holocaust. I wasn't looking at 60-year-old black-and-white footage of death camps. I was looking into the souls of people who survived it. Individuals get lost in the large numbers. But looking into the eyes of the survivors, and then looking into the eyes of their children and grandchildren, was a real and very personal experience. When we came back from Ukraine in July of 2003, Peter and I showed the survivors and their families the slides we took inside the caves. At the end I put the picture of the names they wrote on the wall of the cave. Everyone was speechless. Not just the survivors, who had never mentioned this, but their children and grandchildren. Many eyes filled up with tears. Right below the names was the year 1943. For the first time, the children and grandchildren saw concrete evidence of how their grandparents and parents lived and survived in that cave. It was wonderful to give that back to them.

What is your next step in this story?

I think we owe it to the survivors and their families to protect the caves and the artifacts there. It is history and a story with some amazing lessons: family, loyalty, survival, and perseverance. We took photographs of what we found and mapped their locations. But it should all be preserved and cataloged by professionals to ensure that other generations can see the amazing way they lived and struggled to stay together.

DESOTO FLOODS

FORT PAYNE, AL (WAFF) - Recent rain have swollen streams all over the state.

Desoto Falls is among them. Cynthia Stinson visited Desoto Falls to see the surging water.

She was there as a pontoon boat got pushed over the falls. Stinson wrote to us at WAFF 48 News to share her photos.

She says she talked to one woman who lives in the area who said she had not seen the water this high since Hurricane Opal.



**Minutes of the Meeting of the Cullman Grotto of The National Speleological Society
September 1, 2009**

The regular monthly meeting of the Cullman Grotto of the National Speleological Society was called to order on Tuesday, September 1, 2009 at 7:30 pm at the Depot by Harold Calvert, chairman. 10 were present.

The minutes of the previous monthly meeting were read and a motion was made by Kuenn Drake to accept the minutes as read and seconded by David Drake.

Trip reports and photos are still needed for the newsletter. A special assignment was given to Tracy Calvert to write a trip report.

A motion was made to impeach Evon as secretary for her extended absence from meetings, but the motion failed to be seconded. Patrick will continue as interim secretary until she returns.

Safety coordinator Mike Manke discussed the practice of placing knots in edge lines. He recommended placing a figure 8 at the end of each rope and following up with a butterfly knot about 5 feet from the end.

A treasure's report was given.

There will be an Executive meeting held in October to vote in new members of the grotto.

The TAG Cave-in will be held October 8 – 11, 2009. Bridge Day will be on October 17th.

The monthly grotto trip will be to Stephen's Gap on the 12th of September.

There being no further business to come before the meeting, the chairman declared it adjourned. A program of photos of previous Mexico trips was shown.