



**GADSDEN  
GROTTO**

*Newletter*

**WINTER 2014**

# GADSDEN GROTTO

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- 1<sup>st</sup> Vice Chairman  
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Stephen Brewer
- 2<sup>nd</sup> Vice Chairman of Public  
Relations: David Teal
- Secretary/Treasurer:  
Michael Ray
- Newsletter Editor: Michael Ray
- Web Page Design: Michael Ray

## NEWSLETTER

The Gadsden Grotto *Newsletter* is published on a semi-regular basis by the Gadsden Grotto (GG) of the National Speleological Society (NSS) as its official newsletter.

All material submitted for publication is subject to editing for clarity, grammatical considerations, and to meet space limitations.

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## WEB PAGE

<http://www.caves.org/grotto/gadsgrotto/index.html>

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### March 11, 2014

Treasury Report: General Fund: \$209.77 Rope Fund: \$195.00 Treasury Balance: \$404.77.

Old Business: S. Brewer reported that constitution was completed and thanked everyone.

New Business: The ACS, NSS Convention and the SERA Cave Carnival were announced. Annual grotto reunion was discussed. It is thought that Jacob's Mountain Management gate closes on May 1st. NSS Elections were discussed. S. Brewer presented the new Zebra light.

Trip Reports: J. Loftin - Horse Cave in Blount County. S. Brewer - Wet Well and Dry Drop. S. Brewer - Frick's Open House. J. Loftin - photo shoots at the Frick's Open House and praised Sharon Brewer for the extra time she spent taking photographs.

Program: 2014 NSS Convention DVD was shown.

### April 8, 2014

Treasury Report: General Fund: \$209.77. Rope Fund: \$195.00. Treasury Balance: \$404.77

Old Business: NSS Director Elections vote was discussed. Two GG members joined the ACS April 5th, and 6 grotto members were in attendance. The ACS allocated \$300 to HCRU and \$300 to SCCI. Discussed that our rope fund be for a rope approximate 700 feet.

New Business: Grotto Reunion plans were discussed. The date will be May 9th – 11th. D. Teal said he would try to get the landowner for Clayton Cove. The Gadsden Grotto Spring 2014 Newsletter was handed out. Brewer discussed the "Cave Sim" delivery for the NSS convention. Decided we do not have the funds to support that project.

Trip Reports: S. Brewer and Julie Schenck Brown did a 123 foot pit named Turkey Buzzard.

### May 13, 2014

Treasury Report: Additions: \$3.00 decal purchase. Subtractions from funds: \$38.78 for 2 locks for landowner Kim Sides of Clayton Cove. General Fund: \$148.29. Rope Fund: \$195.00. Treasury Balance: \$343.29

Old Business: Thank you to those who worked on the grotto reunion site prep. Marrion Dodd, D. Teal and M. Ray prepped the site. D. Teal reported that the landowner was very pleased.

New Business: Membership renewal by 8 members. Grotto Executive Committee Elections: Chairman: Ken Lofgren. Vice-chair, Programs and Projects: S.

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### Front Cover Photograph

Sharon Brewer took this picture on a trip to Lula Lake Land Trust on July 5, 2014. The Lula Lake area is open the first and last Saturdays of each month. You only need to park and sign in. It has beautiful trails, awesome waterfalls, and cool caves.

## Minutes continued....

Brewer. Vice-chair, Public Relations: David Teal. Secretary/Treasurer: Michael Ray.  
Trip Reports: Natural Well visited by S. Brewer and Tye Scott. Killian Cave visited during Grotto Reunion by D. Teal, J. Loftin, M. Ray, Becky Wooten, and Ken Lofgren. Nautilus Cave was also visited by S. Brewer and Becky Wooten.  
Program: J. Loftin presented a photo slideshow.

### June 10, 2014

Treasury Report: Additions: \$50.00 membership dues. \$7.00 donation to rope fund. General Fund: \$198.29. Rope Fund: \$202.00. Treasury Balance: \$400.29.  
Old Business: K. Lofgren encouraged membership and discussed ways Grotto funds have been put to good use.  
New Business: Report of damage to Tumbling Rock's Totem Pole Gallery. Horse Skull Cave closed due dispute with a landowner. D. Teal won the door prize of a Bat House.  
Trip Reports: Ken Lofgren reported on Tree Root Cave during 2014 SERA. M. Ray reported on Reel Drop 4517, Tree Root Cave and Blue Balloon Cave with M. Medlin, J. Loftin, Marriion O. Smith. S. Brewer with Tim Whitehurst and Julie Schenck Brown surveyed a cave with an entrance pit of 28 feet and a second of 30 feet before it came to a dead end. Named it "Oh Well" because Julie thought the cave was going to go further.  
Trip Plans: S. Brewer - Cemetery Pit June 14th. Big Whisenant cave was discussed as a possible trip. David said needed landowner permission and no Sunday trips allowed. Other cave trips proposed to Guess Creek or Sequoyah Caverns.  
Program: S. Brewer presented some old grotto activity photos.

### July 8, 2014

M. Ray, Secretary, was absent from this meeting. Vice-Chair S. Brewer served as secretary.  
Treasury Report: General Fund balance is \$206.29. Rope Fund balance is: \$202.  
Old Business: Horse Skull Cave is now open..  
New Business: Tyrolean at Desoto falls, Saturday, July 11, fundraiser for HCRU. J. Loftin - new parking area at Horse Skull; do not use old one. J. Loftin encouraged everyone to attend the NSS Convention. S. Brewer - new SCCi cave acquisition announcement at the convention. Big Whisenant Cave is closed per the landowner  
Trip Reports: D. Teal -new pit in Etowah County named "Two Brothers and Me Cave" and survey finished on Colvin Mt. "Grand Oliver Cave". K. Lofgren - Howard's Waterfall trip with Jr. & S. Brewer. A young man who was taking a formation out of the cave. S. Brewer stopped him. M. Medlin - trip to Stephen's Gap, met people dressed like cave men and were filming and reported on a Sinking Cove pull-down trip with Birmingham Grotto.  
Program: Two short films; "Caves, the Social Underground" and "A Flash in the Dark. Afterwards, some of Alan Cressler's photos were shown.

### August 12, 2014

Treasury Report: General Fund: \$206.29. Rope Fund: \$202.00. Treasury Balance: \$408.29.  
Old Business: S. Brewer and M. Medlin - Tyrolean event. Loftin - 2014 NSS Convention. Said that 700+ preregistered for the NSS. Loftin - landowner (Mac Crook) of Weaver Cave no longer supports visiting the cave. No reason was given by the landowner.

New Business: The Grotto opportunity to host the 2016 SERA. D. Teal to look into it. M. Ray to research SERA answer timeline, guidelines and startup money. Executive Board Meet is to meet before the next meeting to discuss these issues. Grotto's bank of Generations Bank has merged with Peoples Bank. The NSS Web site was renewed by M. Ray.  
Program: Video from the NSS library. The movie is about all the new discoveries in Grand Caverns (Augusta Co, VA) in 2004-2005.

### September 9, 2014

Treasury Report: General Fund: \$206.29. Rope Fund: \$202.00. Treasury Balance: \$408.29.  
Old Business: D. Teal chair of the SERA 2016 subcommittee reported that the committee suggests that the Gadsden Grotto pass on hosting SERA 2016. Members voted to pass on SERA 2016 hosting. Report that the landowner of Weaver Cave will not arrest anyone.  
New Business: TAG Fall Cave-in is the 2nd weekend of October. Pre-registration has ended.  
Trip Reports: Charles and Shannon reported on trips to the Narrow's. S. Brewer reported that a new entrance had been found to Jess Elliott.  
Trip Plans: S. Brewer is planning a trip to Cemetery pit.  
Program: Cave Slides by J. Loftin

### October 14, 2014

Treasury Report: Additions: Neiswenter family membership \$15, Neiswenter purchase 2 patches and 2 decals \$16 and donated \$100 to the rope fund. General Fund: \$237.29. Rope Fund: \$302.00. Treasury Balance: \$539.29  
Old Business: 2014 TAG Fall Cave In had approximately 1070 in attendance. Twelve Gadsden Grotto members attended.  
New Business: Holiday Christmas party plans began. It was suggested to be at M. Ray's home on Saturday, December 13th. Further planning will continue at the next meeting. SERA 2015 announced for May 8-10. Jamestown Tennessee. Hosted by The East Tennessee Grotto. Facebook Group - "SERA Cave Carnival 2015". SERA2015.subworks.com. Design Next Year's SERA T-shirt for prizes. P.O. Box needs paid. The new constitution allows the secretary to now perform these types of tasks. However the task was supported by a grotto vote.  
Trip Reports: Stephen Brewer took a group of 15 from Tuscaloosa to Tumbling Rock on Saturday, Oct 11th. Thirteen of the group made it to Mt. Olympus. They were 16-18 year olds from a Venture Scouts program. Howards Waterfall trip report by M. Ray. Michael Davis and friend, Michael Pearson and his six year old son Aston, Mark Medlen, and Jim Loftin were on the trip. Stephen Brewer took Tyler and Kristine Horton and Josh Shultz to Ulla Cave. Tried to get to the waterfall but failed.  
Program: By Stephen Brewer: a special program, a trip down memory lane. Photographs from Robert Crumley collection.





# TRIP REPORTS

## Clayton Cove Grotto Reunion

## SERA 2014

This year the Chattanooga Grotto hosted the 2014 SERA at the NSS headquarters in Huntsville Alabama as a test run for the NSS convention to be held at the same location this summer. The Gadsden Grotto was represented this year at SERA by Ken Lofgren, Jim Loftin, Mark Medlin, and Michael Ray.



May 10, 2014 – Killian Cave.  
Above: Stephen Brewer  
Below: Becky Wooten



Blue Balloon Cave during SERA 2014 with Mark Medlin, Jim Loftin, and Marrion O. Smith



Ken Lofgren at Reel Drop #4517 cave during SERA 2014.

Trip Reports continued....

# TAG 2014



Above: Howards Waterfall trip during TAG 2014. Left to right: Jim Loftin, Mark Medlin, Mike Davis, Aston Pearson and Debbie.

TAG bonfire pictures courtesy of Jim Loftin



Shanon and Charles Neiswenter watching the 37th TAG bonfire.



Aston Pearson's first cave trip was to Howard's Waterfall at 6 years old during 2014 TAG. His only problem was that the slow adults couldn't keep up with him.





Mark Medlin on rope.  
Photo by Sharon Brewer

**Varnedoe Cave Trip (AMD660)**  
**By Mark Medlen:**

The day began at a Jet Pep on the outskirts of Huntsville, Alabama. A small group of cavers met at the gas station and caravanned to Green Mountain. The group was Stephen Brewer, Sharon Brewer, Steve Davis, Ken Williams, Josh Shultz and I. We all parked and geared up. There was a short hike to the bluff. We could see that the trail was almost straight down broken up by small trees and bushes with sandstone ledges as you progress down. We all safely made it to the bottom of the first

steep slope. Then, Annette slipped and fell backwards and landed on her hand. We all quickly gathered around her to see what had happened. We soon knew that she was hurt badly maybe even a broken hand. So we rigged some ropes and helped her back to the top of the bluff. From there, Ken drove her to the emergency room. The rest of the group made our way back down to the cave. We rigged the first 70 foot drop to a tree in the entrance sink. This

pit drops you into a room that slopes down to a small canyon where second 20 ft drop is located. From here, we found a short crawl that opened into pit dome with a waterfall. The pit was about 40 ft deep. There were two bolts on the wall above the drop for an easy rig point. At the bottom of this drop we found a canyon leading down to a tight spot. Once through the tight spot, you are standing on a ledge above a 70 ft pit. We found one bolt set in the wall about head high that everyone was very concerned about. The rig was then backed up to a large handle in the canyon. At the bottom of this drop, we found a cave register on the wall. We continued down a long winding tight canyon passage. The passage opened up into muddy and decorated passage and continued for another 1000 feet or so. I routed near the end and caught back up with Steve Davis and Ty Scott. Sharon took our pictures as we climbed up. We soon all emerged into the hot outside world. We made our trek up the mountain. Ken and Annette were waiting on us. Her badly injured hand was in a splint but not broken. She was in good spirits.

**Varnedoe**  
**By Sharon Brewer**

After a week of listening to my husband work on getting permits, emails, and communications worked out on the cave trip to Varnedoe Cave in Huntsville, Alabama, it was time to "DO THIS."

Because my mind tends to think through all the possible scenarios, I lean towards the apprehensive side of any endeavor. As the day kept getting closer, I would swing back and forth between staying home or going. I faced more doubts about going when a friend was denied a spot on the trip. The permit allowed for eight and absolutely no more. At the time, I was settled on the decision to go so I stuck with it.

As we were trying to get gear together, Stephen was very careful not to mention the messy house. Most of the time, all I need is one argument about the messy house, piled up chores, or tons of pictures I have, that need processed, to cause me to stay home. It is easy to become overwhelmed by all I want to achieve.

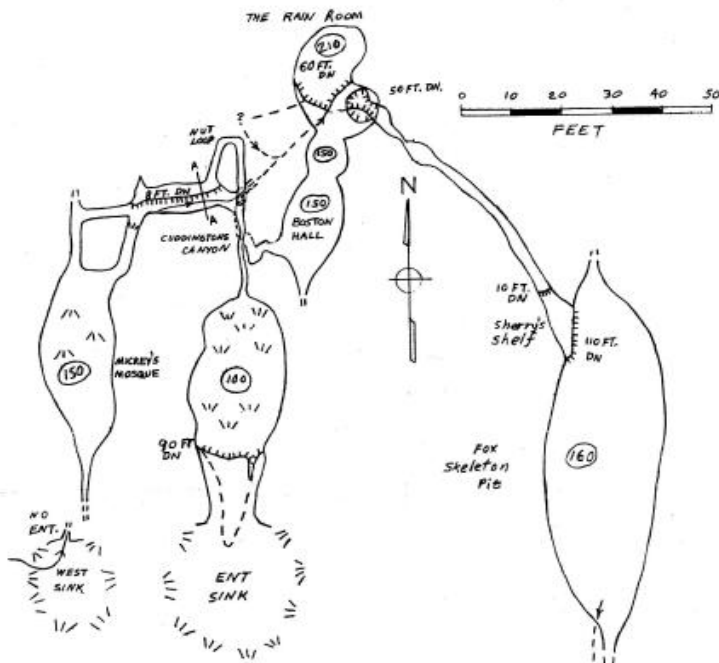
So with a "GO" decision, I started to pack. I gather the gear beginning with my feet. Once I select the proper footwear, I move up towards the helmet. This way I do not forget the essentials like kneepads or the extra pair of socks. Once the helmet is on the pile, I gather lights and batteries working the process. I sort through other gear that I need based on the trip. An example is a trip with a long or strenuous hike requires my walking stick. Lights and batteries lead into the camera gear as well. Then food is thought out and packed. Somewhere in all the packing that it takes place, I always rethink my decision to go.

The night before, it was decided that we would be going into entrance one with the "open air" pit. I grew excited and confident that I could handle the bulk and weight of my camera gear without having to squeeze in tight, uncomfortable passages. With the trail being less than half a mile, I became even more confident in the "GO" decision.

Saturday, July 26, 2014, we had gear in the car, a good night of sleep, and a day of adventure ahead of us. We stopped by the neighbor's house to feed some animals and still managed to be on the road before seven.

On our way, we stopped for gas and snacks. We got to the meeting place along 431 just south of Huntsville at the Jet

(Continued on page 7)



**VARNEDOE CAVE**  
**ALA. NO. 660** Sheet 1 of 3 PLAN, PIT COMPLEX  
Est. Dist. & Compass Survey by  
W.W. Varnedoe & Donal Myrick of  
the HUNTSVILLE Grotto of the  
National Speleological Society  
15 May 1966 C

1966 Map Drawing

## Trip Reports continued....

Pep five minutes before nine. Ken Williams, Annette Bongiovanni, Josh Schultz, Ty Scott, Mark Medlin, and Steve Davis were waiting on us. A few introductions and we were off.

Making several turns and following directions given to us by Julie Schenck Brown, the property manager for the SCCi Varndoe Cave, we went right to the parking lot.



SCCi Varndoe Parking Lot  
Photo by Sharon Brewer

The typical “pack this, leave that” last minute adjustments were going on all around. People were pulling on boots and locking vehicles. The guys discussed the drops, and shuffled ropes and gear to make sure we had the gear for the four drops. We headed through a short length of chest high brush to a nice wide trail in the woods. Not seeing any Poison Ivy, I felt like a dunce for wrapping my legs in white trash bags. Someone informed me, “Don’t worry. We will be in the dreaded Poison Ivy zone soon enough.” I was hiking along, more like walking, being and feeling happy, taking pictures from behind with a happy lot of friends in front of me. Nice level trail, no poison ivy, the shaded cool weather, and did I say nice level trail. Then it happened. I caught up to everyone to see that the trail had ended. I should say the part of the “nice level” trail ended.

Everyone was looking to the left in amazement at Steve Davis because he had made a wrong turn. He was going where no man wanted to go. One second we are happily skipping along, and the next second, we are being told by the little yellow trail sign that indeed Steve was right. I think I heard a few, “No hand lines?” “Dude!” “Seriously?” One by one, we followed where the yellow signs told us to go.

As we went down what some call a trail, the poison ivy became thicker and thicker. Since I am allergic, I was very careful to avoid any contact. The white trash bags had long been torn off of my legs and stored inside my kneepads.

About mid point to the cave, Josh and I caught up to Annette

who was sitting on a rock grimacing in pain. She had fallen back and hurt her wrist trying to break the fall. We were all pretty sure it was broken. A big knife was brought forth to fashion a splint from a poplar sapling and an ace bandage.

We went from a group of cavers to a rescue team in a matter of minutes. The objective went from fun to serious safety. We all

knew that any one of us could have had the injury on that trail at any moment. A quick fall, turned ankle, or even snakebite could turn us into the patient in a flash. We knew the number one goal was to get her out to a hospital.

While a rope was tied to the first incline, Annette was helped into her harness and was given her handled ascender to assist her with the climb out. Once full rescue mode was in place, Ken was “tender” with Mark being second tender and support.

Steve, Josh, and Ty relayed and retied ropes along the trip out. Steve Davis and I waited at the site of the injury knowing that we were not essential to the safety team. If we were needed, three quick whoops were all we would need to hear.

Steve and I talked and became acquainted while we discussed mutual friends, cave trips, and rescue techniques. Several in our group had some degree of rescue training, and a few are signed up for the Huntsville Cave Rescue Unit training in August.

It was decided that Annette would head to the hospital with Ken, while the rest of us would continue on the cave trip. Since Josh

and Steve had ridden with Ken and Annette to the Huntsville area, a plan was agreed upon. If we were finished caving before they were done at the hospital, Ty would drive Steve and Josh to the vehicle at the hospital. If Annette was done at the hospital first, they would wait at the parking lot for us to climb out.

Eventually, Mark and Stephen came back down to where Steve and I were waiting, and we all continued on to the cave. Ty and Josh had gone back to the parking lot because they were still assisting with Annette’s pack and gear.

After rigging the ropes and getting things in place at the entrance, Ty and Josh showed up. Ty had a turtle shell that he placed on top of a walking stick declaring, “This turtle shell is to protect us from any more bad luck!”

The descending began and I was fifth in line, in front of Steve Davis. I was watching the others and their technique, as well as the struggles they faced. I noticed Mark had his pack hanging from a cord on the harness and immediately knew my plan to put my backpack on my back would not work. I would create a top heavy situation that would not be good.

With a renewed plan to hang the pack from my harness, I asked to borrow a carabiner from Josh. He pulled out several that were hanging together on a cord. WOW! Stainless Steel carabiners can add some weight to the weight of the aluminum, let me just say

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pack. Compared to

## Trip Reports continued....

“wow” again!

I heard the “OFF ROPE” call and rigged in. With my forty pound pack clipped to the back of my harness, I tried to move closer to the lip of the drop. I watched Josh go down and was determined I would gear in with gusto, stay focused on safety, and

zoom down like a pro. It was not to be.

My six bars barely moved. I fought with the bars, wrestled with feeding the rope, and went to five bars. It moved but way too fast for not being over the edge. Afraid of full weight with five bars speed, I went back to six bars. I had figured my forty pound camera pack would offset the loss of fifty pounds in the past year, so I didn't think it would matter in the rappel. I was wrong.

Another factor was that this was my first time to have a huge pack tied off to my body while descending. My mind begged for the lip to get closer so I could go full weight and at least start moving. It was the worst rappel ever. It was painful and frustrating trying to bounce to get the rope to feed through. About two-thirds of the way down I tried to feed some more rope in and it was taut. I wondered what was going on, I yanked on it and discovered that my belayer was across the room pulling the rope at an angle rather than it hanging straight below me. I am not sure if the belay angle was the problem but it was the worse rappel of my life. I was so excited to get off the snail slow rope. I knew the climb out would be better than the ride down.

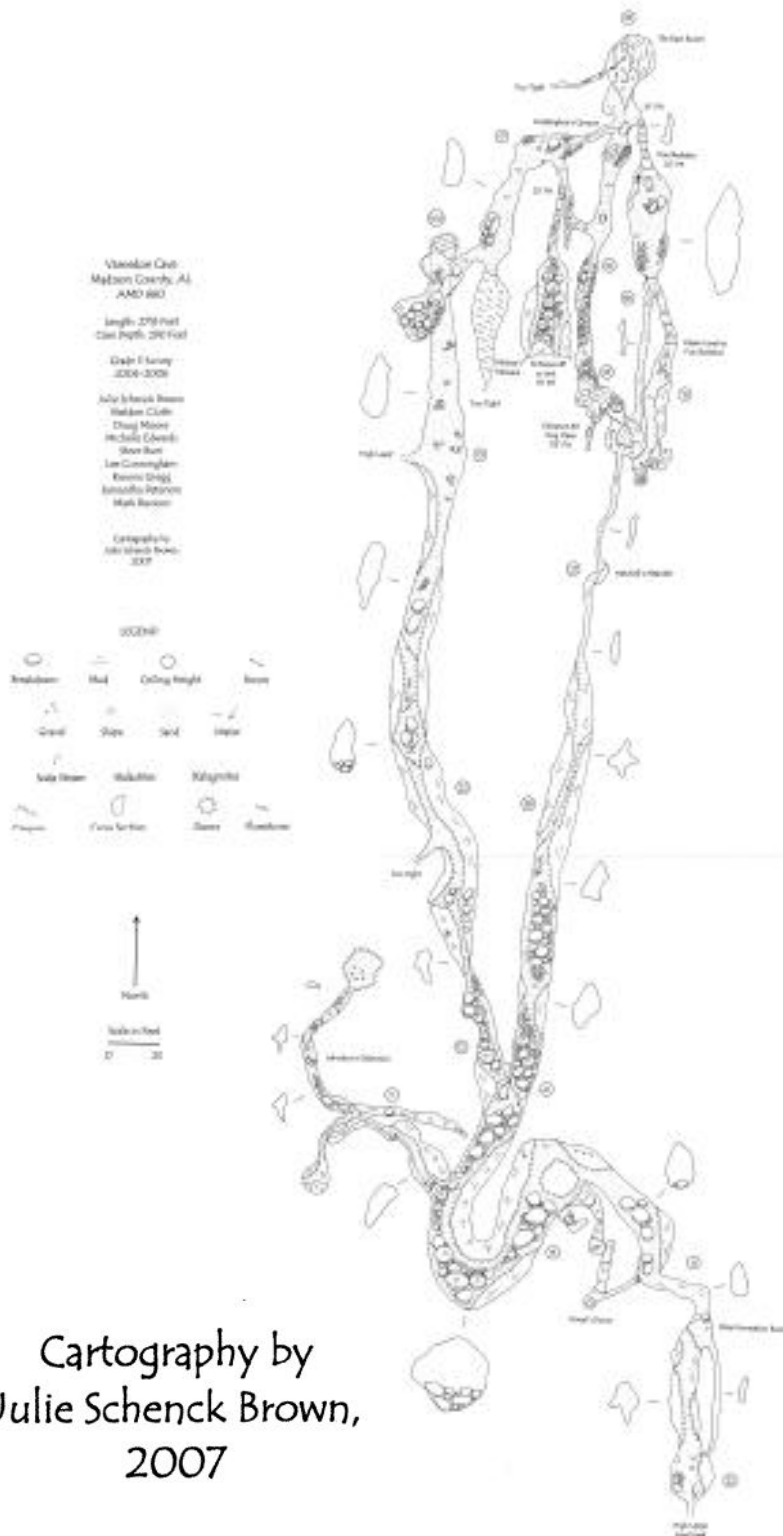
Once I was down, I whipped out my camera to try to get Steve's descent on film. The first photos I got were very interesting. Because of the movement of the rope and exposure time, there is no evidence of a rope in the pit. There is just a pile that does not move on the floor.

The second image has the rope curved in that one instant that someone's light hit it for exposure. I continued to play with my camera in the entrance pit while the other five pushed on. I had a lunch of 3 tablespoons of peanut butter and half of an MRE wheat bread slice.

Two and a half hours later, I decided to pack up my gear systematically before everyone came back. I do not like to be the one slowing the group down while I pack my gear single piece by single piece. Plus, my legs were getting tired of going back and forth up the incline to be the subject and reset my camera, and I needed to save some leg energy for the climb out with a Texas.

About fifteen minutes later, I had most of my gear packed, and I heard voices coming. I snapped a few pictures of Ty, Steve, and Mark coming up from the second drop. Ty was not in a hurry to climb to the top with the surface heat waiting. Steve climbed out first shouting that the lip was “fun!”

I went second having a pretty smooth, calm ascent. I was making sure not to hurry myself and get all flustered. The Texas worked pretty well until I got to the lip. Inch by inch, I kept calm and tried to work different angles and movements to allow the rope to come up and away from the rock allowing the as-



Cartography by  
Julie Schenck Brown,  
2007

## Trip Reports continued....

center to move up. At one point, I used my rack as a leverage to keep the rope out. Steve had to come down and help me by reaching down and moving my upper ascender as I used both hands to push away from the lip. "SWEET" and free! Steve is da man!

I left my pack at the bottom tied to the rope so I could pull it up. Steve encouraged me to let one of the younger, stronger guys get a workout by hauling it up for me. I hollered down, "OFF ROPE!"

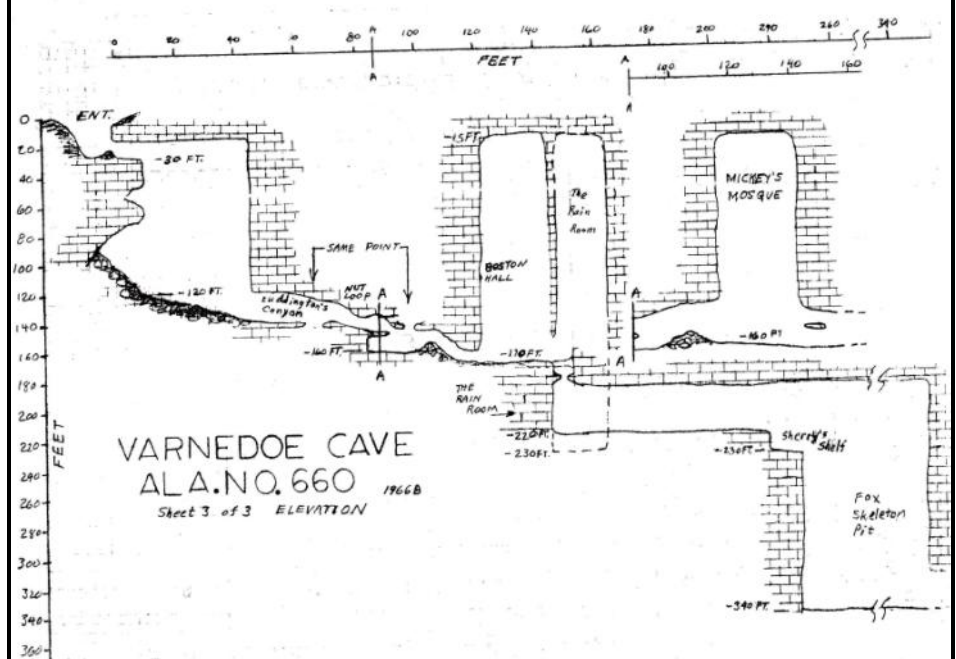
The next guy hollered back, "Aren't you going to pull up the pack?"

"No, we are going to let you pull it up," Steve replied.

"How am I supposed to do that," was the next question.

To which, Steve answered, "You climb the rope first. And, when you get up here, you can pull it up."

I was so thankful for the wonderful arms that just grabbed the rope and



SCCi Varnedoe Cave entrance pit  
Photo by Sharon Brewer

pulled. When he felt the weight, there were a few exclamations, "Wow, what is in the pack," but he kept right on pulling my pack up.

A little later, we realized all the extra weight of the pack was the stainless steel carabiner that it was hauled up with.

We all climbed out, and Ty checked his phone for any updates on Annette. To our surprise and delight, her wrist was not broken. They were waiting on us in the parking lot. We digged, packed up, scanned the area and climbed the "trail."

I helped Stephen by hauling his second pack. I was glad to be able to help him since he is under doctor's orders not to lift more than forty pounds until his hernia surgery. We all seemed to trudge our way up the mountain. I was last and slower, so I have no idea how much rejoicing took place when the wide "nice level" trail was spotted. I do know that I loved having the rope still rigged at the last steep stretch. The guys had left it rigged from helping Annette earlier.

Back at the car, Annette and Ken greeted us with, "Well, how was it?" At that moment, the only thing we could think about was the horrible climb out, the poison ivy, the ticks, and the heavy packs on our backs. Once we shed the packs, we were able to remember the awesomeness of such a great adventure.

We loaded up, shut the gate after the last car, and headed to the Mexican Restaurant near Hampton Cove.

Life is more about the people that travel with you on the trail than all the mountain tops you see along the way! Great people make the mountain tops awesome!



Howards Waterfall trip during TAG 2014. Left to right: Michael Pearson, Aston Pearson, Mike Davis, Debbie, Mark Medlin and Jim Loftin.  
*Photo by: Michael Ray*

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