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Curvin Metzler

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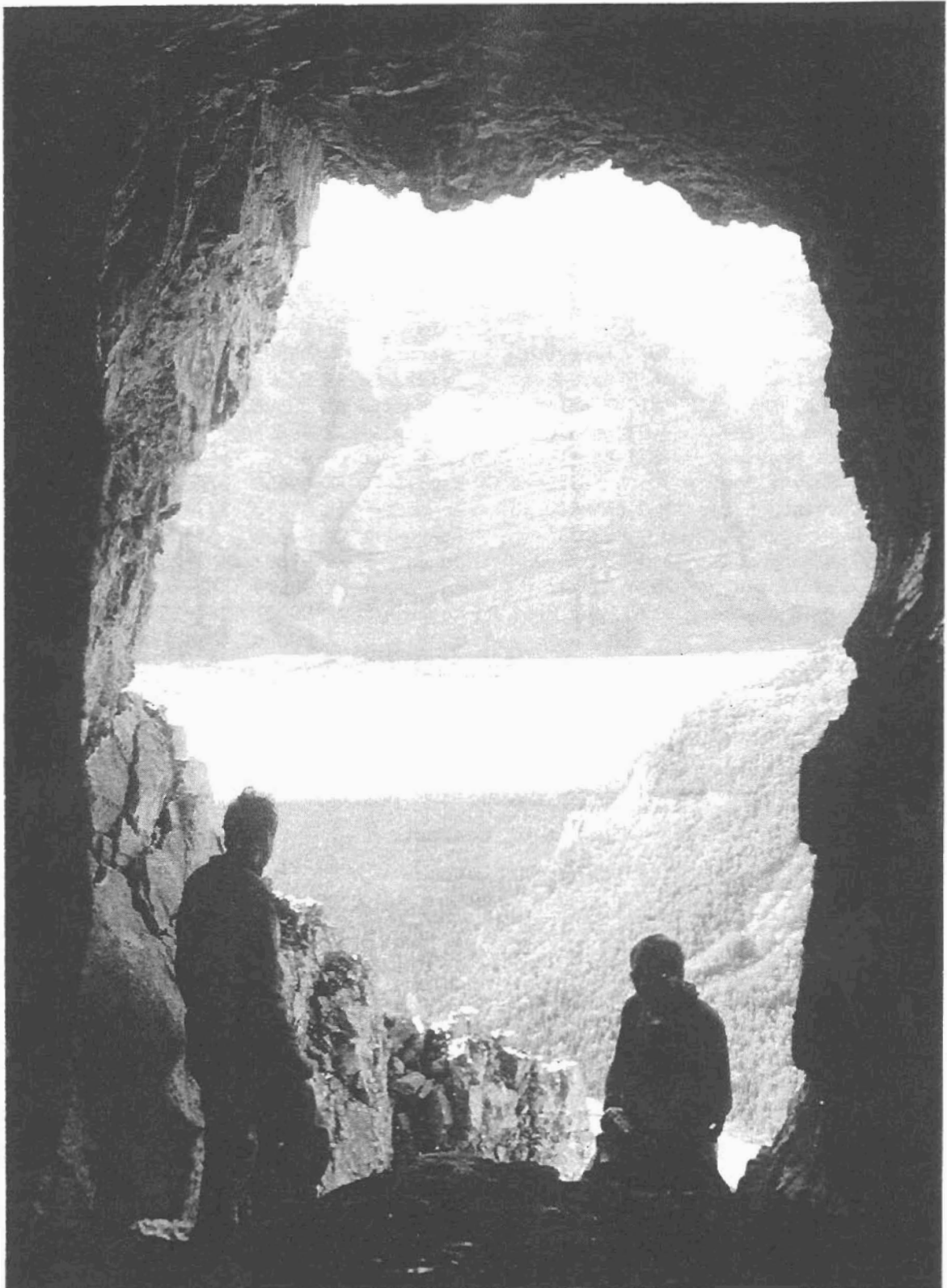
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The ALASKAN CAVER

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NUMBER 5

NOVEMBER 1992



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Leo (Saki) Zak and Pavel (Lojza) Jirasek stand in the entrance of Archway Cave. The background mountain lies across the Nizina. Photo by Curvin Metzler (1992).

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1984 Chitistone Expeditions (ChEx III)

[Editor's Note: Over the past 15 years, there have been a number of different caving expeditions into the Chitistone Mountains, one of the limestone regions of the Wrangell-St. Elias National Park. Knowledge of cave potential in this area was first introduced to the NSS and the Glacier Grotto by Joe Head in the late 1970's. His account accompanies that of the first Glacier Grotto Chitistone Expedition (ChEx I), held in September of 1978, published in November of 1978, The Alaskan Caver 3(2):1-8,14-15.

Since then two more Glacier Grotto expeditions have taken place, as well as a number of private expeditions. The results from the second Chitistone Expedition (ChEx II), held in August of 1980, were printed in Jan/Feb of 1981, The Alaskan Caver 6(1):1-13. Reports from the third Chitistone Expedition (ChEx III) have not been published until this issue (see following pages through page 13), over eight years afterwards.

Pilots Jeff Bennett and Jim Remele have flown in to the Chitistone Valley with friends or relatives a couple of

times during the summers of 1984 and 1985. As Group I of ChEx III, they were the first to enter Dark Star Cave; they were able to explore the main passage to the sump and the side passage until it got too tight (about 150 feet). A year later, using bolts and pitons, they and Kent Hudson were the first to explore what is now called Whispering Cave, 800 feet to the sump. Visiting a year later, they were surprised to discover that all of their protection from the previous summer was gone! High water flow had frayed and shreaded their ropes and webbing and worn their carabiners in half!

Winter expeditions into the Chitistones have taken place during March of 1991 and 1992. Kevin Allred did a trip solo in 1991 (see pages 14 through 18); he and Jim Nicholls made a second winter expedition early this year, although no write-up has been submitted yet at this time. The latest expedition to date was the summer expedition of 1992, in which Leo (Saki) Zak and Pavel (Lojza) Jirasek (from Czechoslovakia) joined with Curvin Metzler (see pages 19 through 21).]



Rich Hall at the entrance.
Photo by Jay Rockwell (1978).



Dave Street on the way up.
Photo by Harvey Bowers (1984).

Dark Star Cave comparisons from ChEx I (1978) and ChEx III (1984).
Note the position on both photos of the large boulder under the lip.

Group I: sometime in July
based on a recent telephone
conversation with Jeff Bennett

Personnel

- Jeff Bennett
- Jim Remele
- Todd Mueller
- Scott Mueller

Description

After seven years, this expedition is the first to make a successful attempt and actually gain entrance into Dark Star Cave. After bolting across, they entered and explored the main passage to the sump and pushed the side passage until it got to be a tight squeeze (about 150 feet).

Group II: August 11 thru 18
based on field notes taken
by Jay Rockwell and Joe Head

Personnel

- Jay Rockwell Anchorage
caving experience: third trip to the Chitistones; experienced Alaskan; President of Glacier Grotto; member NSS; expedition leader; professor
- Joe Head Fairbanks
caving experience: second trip to the Chitistones; discoverer of the area for NSS; experienced Alaskan; experienced caver and rock climber; chief rock climber; member NSS; engineer
- Jim Nicholls Fairbanks
caving experience: first trip to the Chitistones; experienced caver; two years in Alaska; developing into a competent rock climber; Vice-President of Glacier Grotto; member NSS; chief gear expert; architect

- Alyson Walker Salt Lake City
caving experience: first trip to the Chitistones; expert rock climber; in charge of expedition medicine; registered nurse

The Hike to Camp

Upon our 2pm arrival, all streams were high; Dark Star Cave looked "half full" and the Chitistone River was up quite a bit. We left the west end of the airstrip, following an old "Cat" trail and keeping to the right at the first fork. When the flood plain pinched out, we went up onto the road along the south cliff face to Lime Springs Creek.

Lime Springs Creek was tough to cross, but was wadeable with hip boots for the first and second days without getting wet. On both days we crossed on the delta near the mouth, but it was more difficult on the second day; even though the Chitistone River had gone down 1.5 feet and the crossing was narrower, it was also deeper. It was more difficult still on the last day, when the Chitistone was the lowest. Stream crossing is a dangerous operation; two should not go together, but should instead use a pole or rope for assistance.

When the water is high, the travel between Lime Springs Creek and the next stream is the toughest part of the hike. One should go up Lime Springs Creek to the stone arrows on the west side, about 150 yards up from the mouth and near the vegetation line. When the water is low, one can go down to the end of the road, then down to the river bottom, and come up along the next creek.

This trail, new to us, was discovered by Jeff Bennett, and is part of the ancient trail system. It is definitely the best overland route. Once to the top of the cliff, it is level or downhill most of the way. Arriving at the gully of the next stream, one should note where the trail comes out so it can be located again on the way out. Continuing to Dark Star Creek, we used this same old trail. Going west, it is downstream from where the trail from Lime Springs comes out.

When we arrived at Dark Star Creek, it was over its banks. We improvised bridges from fallen trees in order to get across, as old trails were flooded. We made a new trail up the west side near the water. The campsite of the previous expedition was partly flooded with no rocks or gravel visible in the stream. Streamlets coming down the cave trail ran through both of the tent sites; this camp location should not be used.

A new camp was established on the ridge further up the trail to the cave. The tents were near the trail, and the kitchen area was further to the west. The kitchen was placed well away from the tents and the trail to reduce the possibility of being bothered by uninformed guests, since it seems that whenever food is served some gets spilled. We used the brook as a source of water and a place to wash dishes. Dark Star Cave and Bucklegrind Cave could be seen from the lookout and the kitchen.

The trail up to the caves was easy to follow due to its heavy usage, but it was tricky to find the upper end on the way back down. The trail took off from a flagged tree at the lower end of a long gravel slide coming down from just west of Bucklegrind Cave. From there it went straight down to a flagged lone birch.

Bucklegrind Cave

As there was too much water in Dark Star Cave, we attempted Bucklegrind Cave instead. Joe and Jim went in the 200 to 300 feet of wet, muddy crawl on gravel, which contained ice further in. It then pinched out with breakdown; ceiling was one to four feet high and width varied. The cave needs to be surveyed.

The cave makes about five major right angle turns. For a while it follows a fracture face striking N65E and dipping vertically. The floor is full of breakdown mixed with wet mud. At least five times during the exploration, frost-weakened rock was dislodged from the ceiling. The cave is so tight that a major rockfall could seal it up! A wet-suit or drysuit is recommended. Smooth rock floor was seen just once; and at the

very end there is only ice. Bucklegrind Cave is labeled "miserable".

Chitistone Junction Cave

Just at the top of the first large talus slope west of Bucklegrind Cave is Chitistone Junction Cave. This one is easy to reach and it is a walk-in cave--a pleasant contrast. It was surveyed going in 110 feet, and has a chimney to the outside and minor formations. The cave directly above Chitistone Junction Cave has not been entered. The top of the skylight (or chimney) has not been found; its height has not been measured.

A lot of time and energy was spent climbing the cliffs above Dark Star Cave and Chitistone Junction Cave, but only frost pockets were found. The lower 100 feet of grey, fine-grained massive limestone seems to contain all of the caves. The next layer up is a tan-colored, thinly bedded, locally brecciated limestone good only for frost pockets.

Beyond Chitistone Junction Cave is a much larger gravel slide. There is a cave-like opening at the top, but the only find was a nice view of the valley.

Sweetwater Cave

Just beyond the talus slope is a shelter cave, and above that is Sweetwater Cave. It is estimated to be 300 feet long and ends in a room, though it was never completely surveyed. Knee pads are highly recommended, as the passage is a low crawl over cobbles. We entered by belay, traversing from the northeast. We rappelled out, dropping 30 feet to the shelter cave below. The cave was named so because it was the last water source as one continues along the contact.

Forty-Foot-Up (Whispering) Cave

We tried to reach this cave high on the cliff over a wide shelter cave and beyond Sweetwater Cave. Starting from the north end, eight and a half bolts were put in before the chuck was sheared. We were nearly up to the ledge (two bolts short). Knife blades could

possibly be used on the ledge. Maybe twelve assorted knife blades would be needed. Bolts and hangers were left in place [but have since been removed]. The cave remained virgin.

Bears

Mid-August was berry time in the Chitistones, and the sharecroppers were harvesting. They were noted by Jeff Bennett on the days he was here. We spotted a bear on the other side of the river on August 11. We saw Sow Blackie and her two cubs near Dark Star Cave on August 14; though they were quite shy, they came close to us by accident later in the day. According to their tracks, bears must also be present at Peavine.

Dark Star Cave

The feature attraction of the lower Chitistone Valley caving terrain is Dark Star Cave. The impressive waterfall entrance was first brought to NSS attention in 1976. Expeditions in 1978 and 1980 failed to gain entrance into the cave, and it was not until July of 1984 that a successful climb was made.

The entrance was rigged with an old piece of goldline that was well-secured by numerous pitons and chocks. The first man in has a hard time negotiating the



Looking out entrance of Dark Star Cave.
Photo by Jim Nicholls (1978).

lip. A belay with a "newer" rope is recommended to ensure the safety of climbers and make it easier to get over the lip.

The main stream passage has a surveyed length of 380 feet to the sump. The sump may be passable at very low water. The only major side passage is a fissure on the right which has not been surveyed. Survey point S11 is where the fissure survey should start. It is located on the left side of the passage, about five feet above the water level and 28 feet before the fissure. The point was chipped into the rock and labeled.

The fissure leads to a chimney-- which should be climbed with a belay. At the top of the climb, four-foot-diameter passages lead off in two directions. These have not been explored. The formations in Dark Star Cave are small and delicate. They may be the farthest north formations of their type. BE CAREFUL NOT TO BREAK THEM!

No measurement was made of water flow. There is a place in the cave, called The Narrows, where such a measurement could be made. By measuring the cross-sectional area of the stream and then making a check on water velocity, one can calculate the output:

$$\begin{array}{rcl} \text{cubic feet} & = & \text{feet per} \quad * \quad \text{square feet} \\ \text{per minute} & & \text{minute} \quad \quad \quad (\text{cs area}) \end{array}$$

The velocity can be determined by dropping a stick in the water and timing how long it takes to move a certain number of feet. The average of several trials should produce a reliable value. We were planning on mapping the fissure and determining cfm, but after only a few hours in the cave, the 38.5° (Fahrenheit) water began to take its toll. Be advised that the water is very cold and hypothermia is an ever-present danger.

Water level in the cave fluctuates with the time of day and with rainfall. The warming effects of the sun melt snow high on the mountain, causing the water level in the cave to rise several inches. The highest daily level was late at night (or early morning). Several days of rain can raise the water level several feet, making the cave impassable.

We found that if we timed our exit for 7pm, that the sun would be shining right on the entrance. This makes for great photos. The cave trends eastward, angling away from the cliff face. It appears to be heading in the direction of Lime Springs. If one is looking for another way into the system, beyond the sump, east is where to look.

Group III: August 18 thru 25
by Curvin Metzler

Personnel

- Curvin Metzler Anchorage
caving experience: limestone caves (mostly West Virginia), lava tubes (Hawaii), glacial caves (Alaska)
- Scott Maki Fairbanks
caving experience: limestone caves (in South Dakota), sandstone caves (Minnesota); climbing; geologist
- Dan Flood Anchorage
caving experience: lava tubes (Oregon, California); climbing
- Ray Burger Peters Creek
caving experience: limestone/marble caves (California), lava tubes (California), glacial caves (Alaska); cave guide; climbing

Trip Log

Aug 18 We flew from Gulkana to May (Sat) Creek (arrived at 1100); then we shuttled to Peavine Bar. After our arrival, we packed our gear (started at noon) to the base camp which we named Star Base. The crossing of Lime Springs Creek was not easy, since we had no hip boots; but we found it best to take off whatever clothes that we needed to keep dry, grab a stick for balance, and just wade across. The stream gets higher and swifter later in the day, so it should be crossed early if possible.

At high water, we crossed at the mouth; but at low water, we crossed about 100 yards upstream. We finished packing our gear to Star Base (at about 2100) and prepared our dinner late, as it was getting dark and beginning to sprinkle.

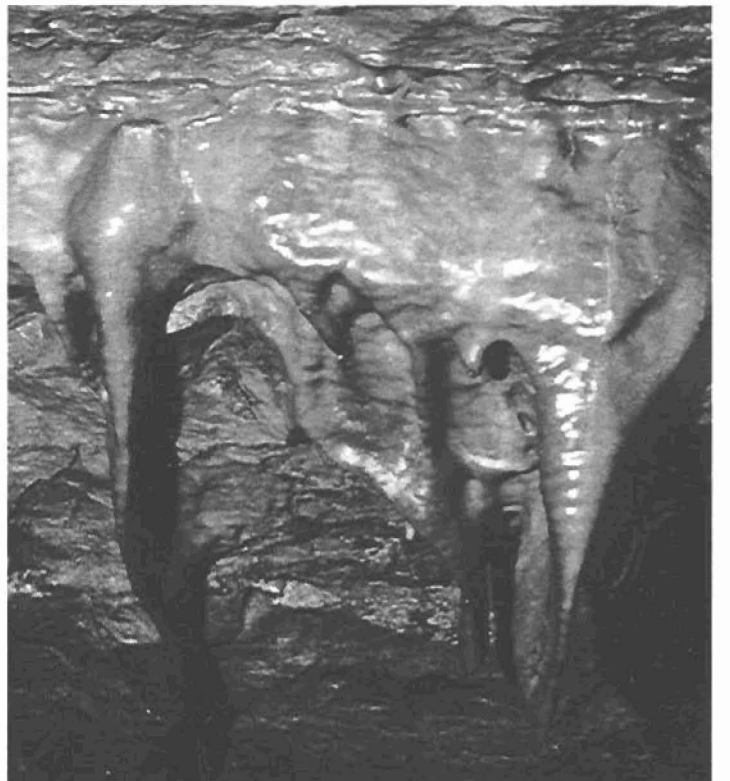
Aug 19 We slept in, had breakfast (Sun) late, and (around 1300) hiked to Dark Star Cave. Attempts to jumar into Dark Star were not successful; but we got some practice and were ready to try again. As we returned to Star Base it was getting dark.

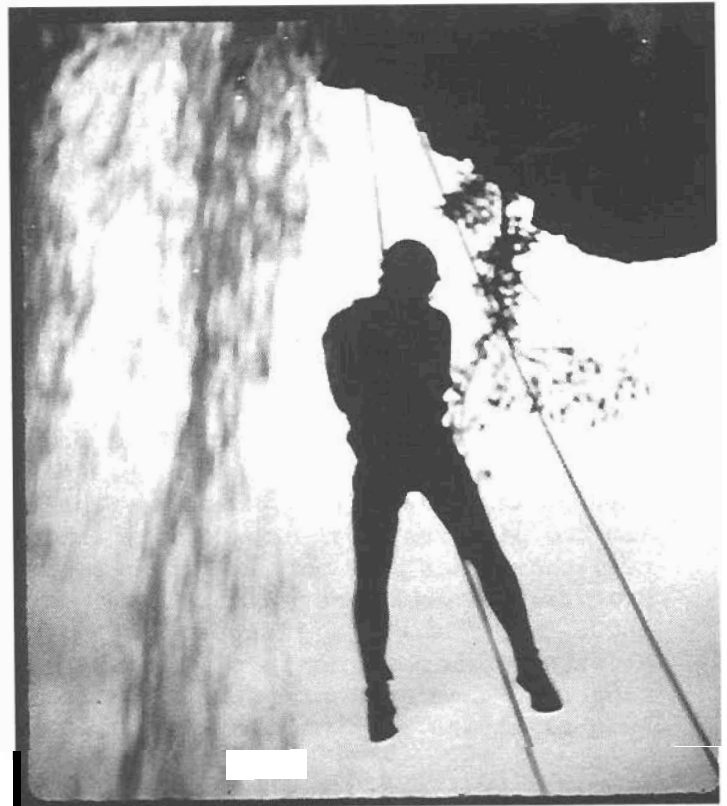
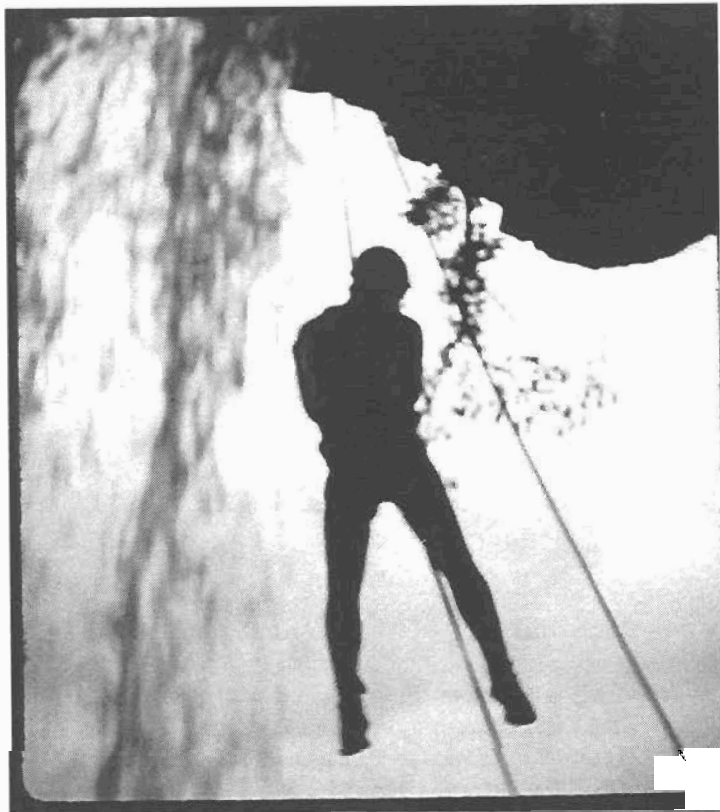
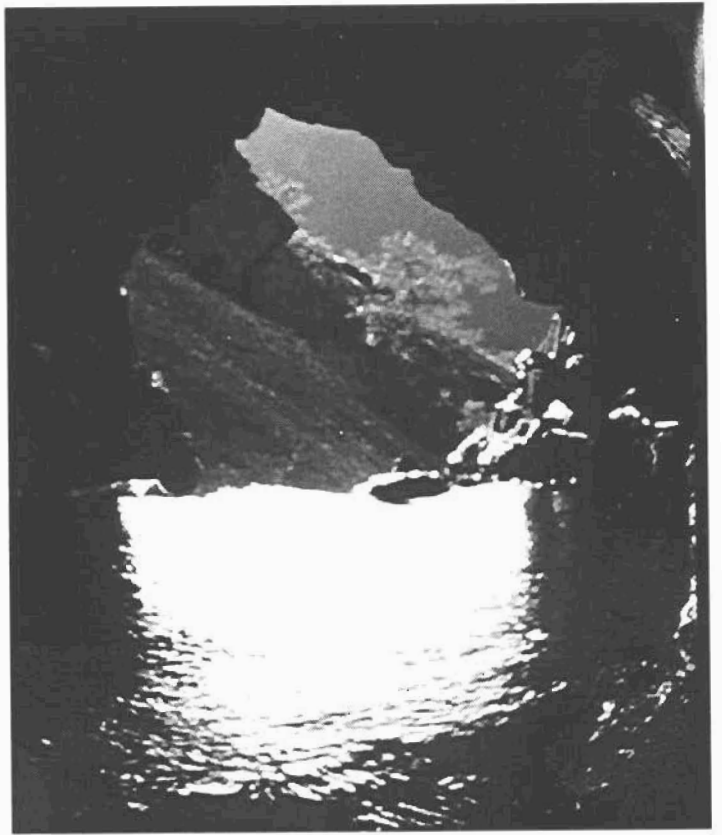
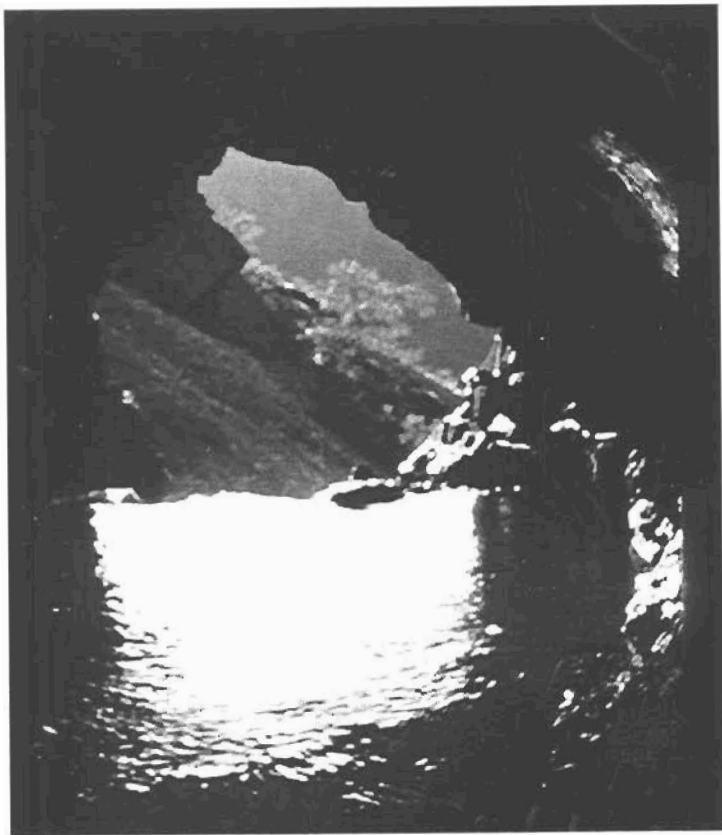
Aug 20 Today was another late start (Mon) (left Star Base after 1300).

We hiked up toward Dark Star, but then followed the base of the cliffs counterclockwise around the mountain. We went past Bucklegrind Cave and Bar Cave, then on to a crevace cave about 40 feet long and about a foot wide. Next we reached Chitistone Junction Cave, but we did not explore above it for Upper Chitistone Junction Cave. We also found a small cave just beyond Chitistone Junction Cave, up about 20 feet, above a small ledge.

We hiked on until we came to a huge talus fan below an open area of high overhanging cliffs. Near the middle of the arc of cliffs is a shelter cave, but we were unable to climb close enough to check it out. Next, we arrived at Sweetwater Cave, but we decided to return another day to explore it. Then we came to another shelter cave about 30 feet up and next to a large rock spike. On the far side of the rock spike are a couple of small openings. Continuing around the mountain, we passed a shelter cave containing lots of small, dark feces, a tall crevace cave, another shelter cave with feces, and then Fern Cave. Once again we returned late to Star Base.

The following pages contain stereopair images from Dark Star Cave taken during Group III of ChEx III. Following page: some formations; top of the next page: the view out; bottom: rappelling back down. Photos by Curvin Metzler (1984).





Aug 21 (Tue) Once again we left camp late (after 1300). We decided to continue exploring around the mountain. Beyond Fern Cave, we found another huge talus field below an open area surrounded with high overhanging cliffs. Along the base of the cliffs were contained numerous shelter caves with many pockets of calcite.

Continuing, we passed sections of rock with a large slot weathered out from the weaker layers. Then we came to a new cave which we named Chlorophyll Cave, due to the large amounts of green algae growing on the rock walls far into the cave. The cave was measured roughly to be 42 feet long with an orientation of N62E. Hiking on, we passed numerous shelter caves, then turned back near a talus field with a large boulder resting near its tip. On the way back to Star Base, we noticed bolts leading up to a cave about 40 feet up a cliff (we had missed this cave yesterday).

Aug 22 (Wed) Today began again at the usual early hour (1300). We made yet another attempt at Dark Star Cave--but this time we were successful. I was the least experienced at climbing, but I was the only one who had not been drained of strength from previous attempts. So it was finally my turn to attempt to pass over a lip of rock on an old piece of gold line. But with the help of the rest of the group, I was able to negotiate the lip. New ropes were secured so everyone else could jumar right over the lip with much less trouble.

Once inside, we explored the main passage to the sump, and the side passage through and beyond the chimney. There are two passages at the top of the chimney, though one goes only about ten feet. However, the other one (on the left) goes about 160 feet to a fissure. We took pictures of formations in the cave, then rappelled down and hiked back to Star Base as it was getting dark.

Aug 23 (Thu) We left camp at the normal time (1300) and hiked around the mountain to Sweetwater Cave. We belayed into the cave and

crawled through to the small room at its end. In the small room there was a small (six-inch) passage up in the back from which water flows into the cave. On the floor of this room is another small (six-inch) hole with a strong breeze blowing from it. Sounds of water dropping suggested there may be a larger room below. We crawled back out of the cave and returned to camp. Along the way back, we sighted Upper Chitistone Junction Cave but could not reach it.

Aug 24 (Fri) We left camp "early" (1100), hiked up to Dark Star Cave.

Some of the group went back to the side passage, climbed the chimney, and continued to explore the left passage. They dug a little further, so the passage is now estimated to be 170 feet long. We rappelled back out, taking our ropes with us, but left some webbing with a couple of loops inside to help future groups get over the lip on the gold line.

Once back at Star Base, we took down our camp and (around 2000) started packing everything back out to the airstrip, which we reached very late (after 2300).

Aug 25 (Sat) Two of us hiked back towards Star Base to retrieve a wet suit top which was dropped on the hike out. Lime Springs Creek was higher, muddy and swift, and seemed to be considerably warmer, probably due to all the rain. However, there seemed to be a strong odor of sulfur in the vicinity of Lime Springs Creek.

Group IV: September 1 thru 4
based on field notes taken by Rich Hall

Personnel

- Rich Hall Anchorage
caving experience: third trip to the Chitistones; previously caved in West Virginia, Virginia, Maryland, New York, Vermont, Pennsylvania, and Alaska
- Harvey Bowers Wasilla

caving experience: second trip to the Chitistones; previously caved in West Virginia

- Dave Street Anchorage

caving experience: first trip to the Chitistones; previously caved in the DC area

- Mike Mauser Anchorage

caving experience: first trip to the Chitistones; previously caved in New Mexico

Trip Log

September 1 We were up at 5:30 (had arrived at the Dry Creek Campground about 11 last night). We had breakfast at the Ahtna Lodge, were at the airport by 7am and flew out at 8:33. Upon reaching the Chitistone Valley, we headed for the caves taking the old road and then the river bed, using waders a few times though we could have waded. In less than an hour (by 12:15), we reached our campsite, where we had lunch.

We arrived at Dark Star Cave at 2pm and everyone was in the cave by 4pm. It took some time, since none of us had done any vertical work in the past six years, although we all have had past vertical experience. Inside the cave, Harvey and Rick took some pictures with Dave while Mike started checking out the side fissure. The fissure and the passage at the top were surveyed, adding 310 feet to the length of the cave. Air was blowing into the cave from a fissure near the end as the passage headed for Bucklegrind.

Harvey went through the "near syphon" at the end of the main passage--there was a foot of air space and the passage was 30 feet long. He measured 100 paces (as compared to 150 paces to the entrance), giving 250 more feet of cave. In the last 60 feet the size of the passage increased from 10 feet high and 12 feet wide to 14 feet high and 20 feet wide. A 4.5-foot-deep sump with two inches of air stopped him at a large room; there were no side leads. This

brings the length of Dark Star Cave to 940 feet! There are no known leads other than digs. All of us exited the cave by 8:30pm--talk about cold, wet, and tired!

September 2 We slept in late--8am.

We were on the trail by 10:50, and Rich pointed out known caves as far along the contact as Fern Cave. We checked the crystallized amphitheater and passed a small cave opening with a cairn, suspected to be the marker from the previous group for Chlorophyll Cave. By 2pm we had passed the furthest point of the previous group, near the large amphitheater at 3200-foot elevation.

We could not continue to follow the face to our goal of a possible cave seen from the airplane. Instead, we descended to 3020 feet to get around the greenstone face. We went up to a cirque along the contact at the 4300-foot level. It was the wrong cirque, half a mile short of the cave. We left for our return to camp at 5:30, going over tundra, scree, alders, alders, alders, woods, and gravel. We reached camp at 8:30, exhausted.

We concluded that there are three options to get to the cave: 1) follow the contact, which is not passable; 2) follow the tundra slope, which means lots of alders and ups and downs; or 3) go down to the river, follow the old



The main passage of Dark Star Cave.
Photo by Harvey Bowers (1984).

road wash toward Dan Creek, and go up through the woods, which involves going through lots of woods. It may not be possible to get to the potential cave in one day.

The valley where the previous group stopped may need more checking, and the contact beyond that could use some checking. Our goal was beyond and we did not check as we went because it would have required climbing up and down around greenstone outcrops. What looks like a large "T" above Forty-Foot-Up (Whispering) Cave looks like a huge cave entrance from the river.

September 3 But cavers are NOT reasoning creatures and time heals all wounds. We set out at 10am for what is now dubbed Big Disappointment Cave. We chose to follow the river, then climbed through the woods. At 4pm we arrived at the cave, and found it to be an 88-foot frost pocket. We returned



Big Disappointment Cave.
Photo by Group IV (1984).

to camp at 8pm as it started to rain.

On the way back, we noticed a large delta of limestone coming into the Chitistone River just below Forty-Foot-Up (Whispering) Cave. This may be natural runoff from under the scree or it may mean that there is an underground component to the cave. We estimated the size as .05 cubic feet per second; it deserves checking.

September 4 We left camp at 10:30am and reached the airstrip at 11:45. We then left on a trip to Grotto Creek at 1pm. It is a beautiful canyon; at the end is a grotto with a 20-foot waterfall. This is worth the trip if one has a few hours and the river is low. We returned by 4pm and awaited the plane due at 5pm. We touched down in Gulkana at 6:15pm.

Thoughts on Gear Quantity

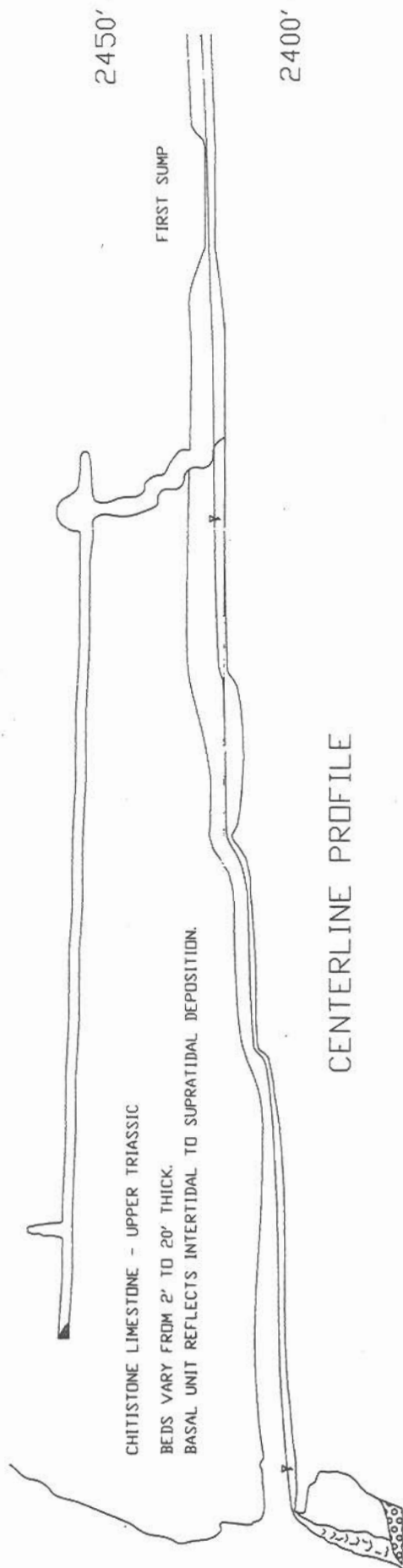
Due of the "too much gear" problem of the second group, we attempted to pack as light as possible. Therefore:

- 1) It took only 20 minutes to sort out what was going on the plane—all of it;
- 2) We still had to shuttle from May Creek due to poor runway conditions at Peavine;
- 3) We thought of things we wished we had;
- 4) We hiked to camp in one quick trip (low water helped on quickness).

Resolve: Each person should be limited to the weight they can carry in one trip and then it will all meet the size and weight limits of the plane. □

Correction

The Alaskan Caver 10(6):14, December 1990, credited Rich Hall for a pair of photographs printed uncredited in The Alaskan Caver 3(2):8, in November 1978. Both credits should be to Jay Rockwell.



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950 N

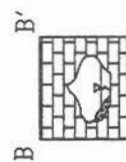
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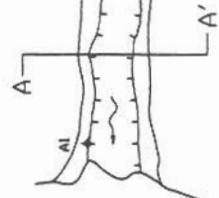
DARK STAR CAVE

CHITISTONE CANYON, ALASKA

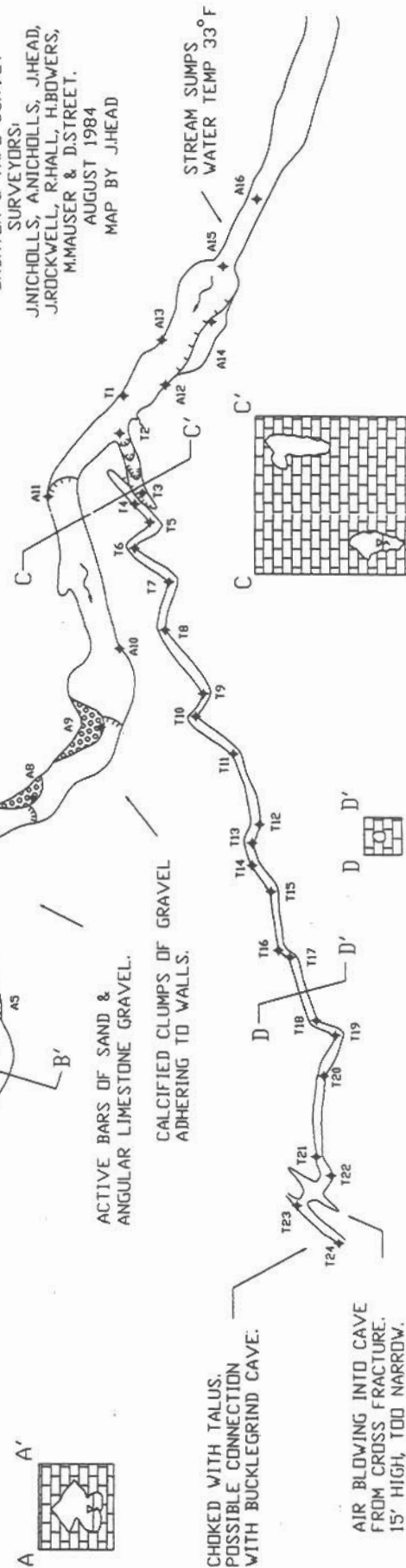
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J. NICHOLLS, A. NICHOLLS, J. HEAD,
J. ROCKWELL, R. HALL, H. BOWERS,
M. MAUSER & D. STREET.
AUGUST 1984
MAP BY J. HEAD



1350 E

1300 E

1250 E

1200 E

1150 E

1100 E

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1000 E

A Winter Chitistone Solo

by Kevin Allred

Trip Motto: "Why Get Up!"

For eleven years I have dreamed of actually going caving in the seldom visited Chitistone Canyon in the Wrangell Mountains of Alaska. From written and oral descriptions the country is rugged, wooly, and magnificent, and the caves so far investigated were thought to be the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Besides often inaccurate and exaggerated rumors, the basic facts were enough to prompt interest: cavernous limestone containing large springs, numerous openings, and over 4000 feet of relief in "The Last Frontier".

Last year, when I mentioned to Jay Rockwell that I wanted to go in, he laughed and said, "With all the easily-accessible caves on Prince of Wales Island?" But when Harvey Bowers began organizing a fall expedition, I signed

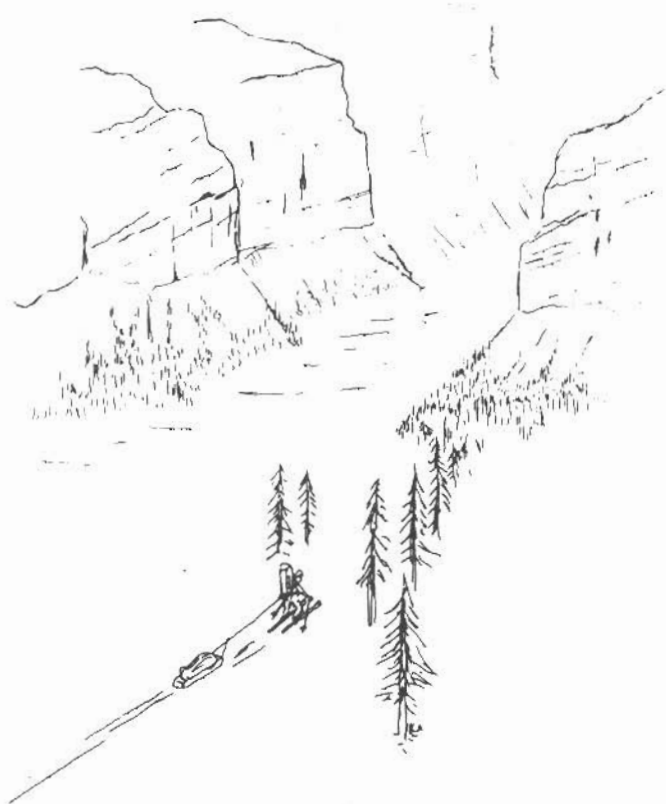
on in spite of other important commitments, such as supporting my family. The fall trip was aborted, along with another organized by Harvey and Curvin Metzler to be held in March. The winter trip fell through from lack of snow machines drummed up by Boy Scout participants for what could have been an over-200-mile trip.

In early 1991, I became determined to go in regardless of reasonable obstacles, and reserved a March 27 flight from Gulkana to McCarthy and then on to May Creek. This remote airstrip, packed down from weekly mail flights, makes landings possible on the four-foot-plus snow pack. The purpose of the trip was to investigate Dark Star Cave and Whispering (Forty-Foot-Up) Cave at a time when they would pose the least flood danger, and to build upon the knowledge of the area already gleaned by several individuals of the Glacier Grotto. The last trips which the Grotto [and others] took into this area back in 1984 and 1985 were not [yet published], so some valuable information [was not available].

The Approach

After the long drive from Haines, I arrived at Gulkana a day early, took the 26th to ski a bit on the corny snow, and visited the Wrangell-St. Elias Park headquarters at Copper Center to learn more about conditions. While there, I received warm cooperation from most personnel, except one official who seemed to resent any visit to Park land for numerous ridiculous reasons including that "there is a good chance there is gold in the caves!" At present, permits or permissions are not needed before going into the Park due to light (very light) use. Some air carriers report to Park Headquarters any clients heading into the Park.

The flight the next morning was cancelled because of sloppy snow. Temperatures were unseasonably warm. On March 28, it cooled off and the hour-



Entrance to Chitistone Canyon.

Drawn by Kevin Allred.

long flight 105 air miles into May Creek went great. But while taxiing at the end of the strip, one ski plunged through the crust, and it took a while to get the plane free for a take off. Here I would begin the 16-mile ski with 120 pounds of gear including rock climbing, ice climbing, caving, camping, skiing, swimming, and survey gear. I was prepared for every eventuality except death. Carlene would call a rescue in three weeks.

I met Bill McCarty and Fred Denner, two of three of the year-round bush residents of the area. Fred traps for his subsistence and told me where his trapline snow machine trail wound to the entrance of Chitistone Canyon. My plastic sled (toboggan) held 85 pounds, and the remainder of the gear went in the backpack. The ski to Chitistone Canyon took a day and a half and I stashed the gear on the river flats for a quick cruise up the canyon to Lime Springs Creek, which was mostly snow-covered. Wind was sporadic where I was, but roared up on the peaks. Small, dry snow avalanches plummeted off 500-foot cliffs and often did not reach bottom, as wind dissipated the snow into fine plumes which went up again or elsewhere.

The Chitistone reminded me of the Grand Canyon, but here lacked the multitudes present in the desert version. For the remainder of the day, I took two trips to haul 85 pounds up 1000 vertical feet to the Dark Star Cave entrance. It could not have been possible in such time except by the use of skis with full-length seal skins. Snow was about five feet deep with a thin crust. Above the timber, snow was windblown and rock hard in places. The steep snow-covered scree slopes made me a bit avalanche wary, especially spotting small trees bent down from snow creep. Fortunately, it was a cold day and the slopes were in perpetual shade. The opposite south-facing sunny side of the canyon was streaked with many fresh avalanches.

At Dark Star Cave, the reported fixed rope (a goldline) still hung on the 30-foot drop after six or seven years. The lower end was anchored under some six feet of snow and ice. The first

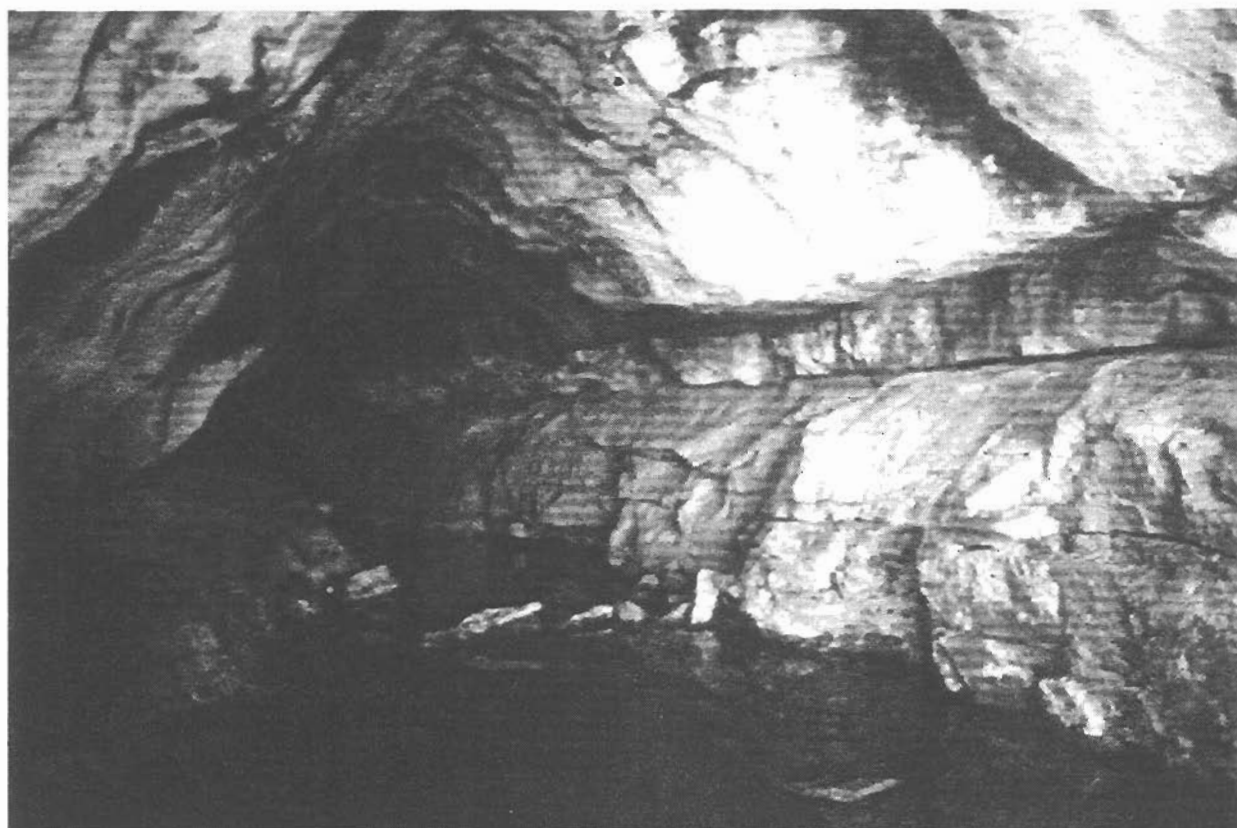
surprise at this cave was that it was still flowing, about 0.6 cubic feet per second. The second surprise was the incredible hollow ice apron which completely encased the 30-foot waterfall. In many places it was thin enough to see the waterfall within! The plan was to camp under the protecting overhang next to the waterfall to where I could quickly and easily get in case of hypothermia or injury in the cave. This turned out to be useful for another reason I was yet to discover...

Inside Dark Star Cave

On Saturday, March 30, I got up fairly early as usual and the temperature had cooled further to 16° (Fahrenheit). I prepared for the cave and wore the dry suit over lots of pile synthetics. Footwear was: 1) wetsuit booties, 2) bread bags, and 3) rubber boots. I used three light sources on my person and three or four more in the pack. At the top of the goldline, several pitons and a couple of chocks made a secure-looking anchor.

I soon realized that having a more detailed map would be useful. Strangely enough, Joe Head, first caver to report the cave, had produced a nice map which hangs on our wall at home. I spent over 15 hours in the cave and surveyed the entire thing including a previously unmapped section beyond the first sump, which is seasonable. Harvey Bowers is apparently the only one to push past the first sump. He could not recall just how the cave ended. I found a terminal sump after a couple hundred feet of walking stream passage. The end looks pretty bleak—I got into it up to my neck and the ceiling continues down at a 20° angle. My feet were about three feet below the water surface.

After the survey, I corrected some tape blunders and took some quick photos. At 2:30am it was 17° outside; I could not rappel down the tight fixed entrance rope, so I descended on ascenders. Stuff was freezing like crazy. Wet carabiners and zippers had to be hand-warmed to work. I was worried about being able to exit the drysuit and envisioned taking



View down the main passage of Dark Star Cave.

Photo by Kevin Allred (1991).

it into the sleeping bag or cutting the thing open to get out. It was not too much of a problem, though. Travel very far in wet gear with this cold would be like wearing a full body cast! It was good the tent was at hand!

Later, during explorations of Whispering Cave, I moved camp to the other site, which receives welcome afternoon sun. In the morning, I took the rock-hard survey data into my sleeping bag to melt and review it for blunders. The total surveyed distance was 922.2 feet in 43 stations. I returned to the cave to make observations and was pulling outwards on one of the pitons when it fell out. The next one in line came out with my fingers; the rest were sound. Apparently, frost widens one of the cracks.

Whispering Cave

On April 1, I traversed across the hard windblown slopes towards Whispering

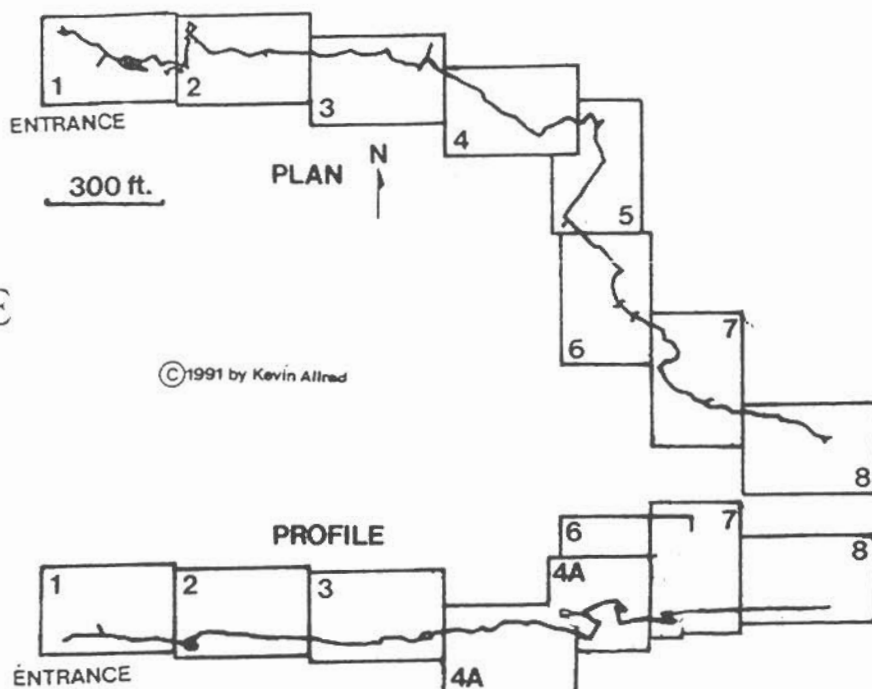
(Forty-Foot-Up) Cave. The Sweetwater Cave entrance had no ice or water, and I found that it has an overhang below it similar to Dark Star Cave and Whispering Cave. At Whispering Cave, the first to climb to the entrance 60 feet up the overhanging cliff face had left a white laid nylon rope hanging from what appeared to be just one point of attachment. I decided to chance the fixed rope--a real dumb mistake. But what else do you expect on April Fool's Day?

After a trip down to the flats for the climbing rope and a few other items, I found myself bouncing on the rope in question wondering what the situation was above. I was soon to find out, for when I ascended past a bulge at the top, my fears were justified--the single anchor was one raw drive bolt. I was horrified when I noticed part of the shank was exposed from shattered rock and the bolt was canted down! Now, some folks place great trust in bolts. I am not

WHISPERING CAVE

CHITISTONE CANYON
WRANGELL-ST. ELIAS NATIONAL PARK
ALASKA

Brunton and Tape Survey April 2-6, 1991, by Kevin Allred
Map drawn by Carlene Allred
Total Survey Length - 3,279.5 feet



one of them for various sundry reasons. After a very gingerly descent, I headed for the flats after the lead rack and vowed to pull the old rope.

On April 2 it had warmed from 12° to 19° and was overcast. I began the first part of the self-belayed rock climb at Whispering Cave. It followed the abandoned Petzl bolt route, made by Jim Nicholls and Joe Head in 1984, past a two-foot-diameter hole in the wall. Jay Rockwell had mentioned a wild rumor that the climbers who had first entered the cave had gone into a hole on the way up and come out further up. After digging away drifted snow, the tube and vertical fissure within led up past a crackless section and back out a 1.5-foot-diameter tube to a horizontal crack stretching 25 to 30 feet to the offending bolt and cave entrance! The bolt did not look so bad with a long line of bomb-proof protection strong enough to catch a falling hippo. Swinging inside, setting an anchor, and cleaning the pitch was soon accomplished and I geared up for the cave.

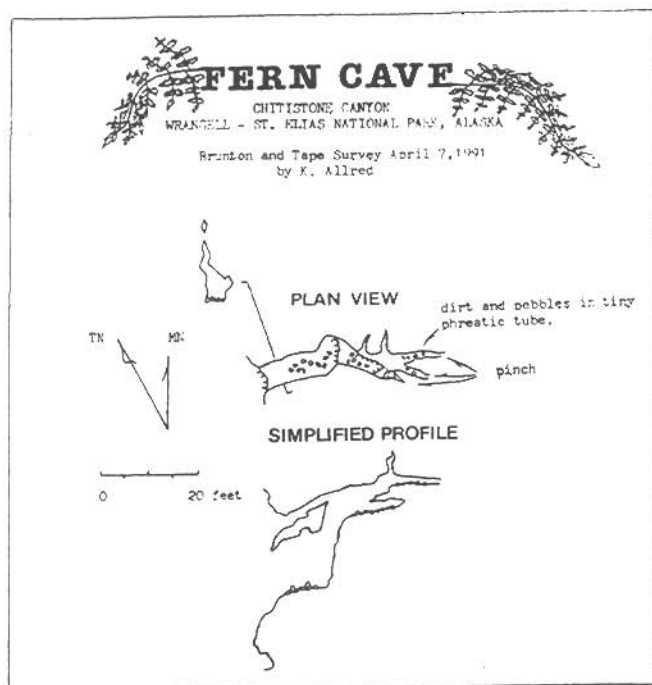
Just inside past sentinel-like ice stalagmites up to 2.5 feet tall, the ceiling drips to just 1.5 feet above an ice floor of unknown depth. The cave was taking in air, and there was a slightly audible whoosshh. At a small side maze

were boot tracks in the silt just above the ice--evidence that this portion of the cave had not flooded since the exploring climbers years ago. One of them, Jim Remele, told me they were stopped by a sump about 800 feet inside. After the maze portion, the floor ice appeared sunken in like it was on the verge of collapse. There was fear of breaking through into water or some abyss, so I anchored a rope and clipped on an ascender just in case. I was just too remote to mess with more unknowns. The ice fell only a foot and a half.

The way got larger and soon it was mostly walking passage through classic round phreatic tube averaging at least five feet in diameter. I began a five-day, 111 station survey blitz which would lead through 3279 feet of spacious passage and some booming canyon! Most side leads remain unentered. A small stream follows the corridor near the end of the survey. The cave heads southeast half way through the mountain ridge. I should stress that this cave has many flood-prone areas that could easily cause entrapment at any time during spring, summer or fall. We just do not know enough about this system to chance any but winter trips. I would think the last week of April would be the latest safe period.

Numerous interesting features were noted throughout the cave. It continues beyond the survey as walking passage with no end in sight. The survey was most pleasant, as most walls were dry. Whispering is already the second longest cave in the state!

On the last day available for survey and exploration, I derigged handlines in the cave and took the advice of Rich Hall to survey Fern Cave, a small fissure nearby. The plan had been to continue on the survey in Whispering, but my feet were very sore--apparently from too many days in tight, damp wetsuit booties. The drysuit zipper was also damaged.

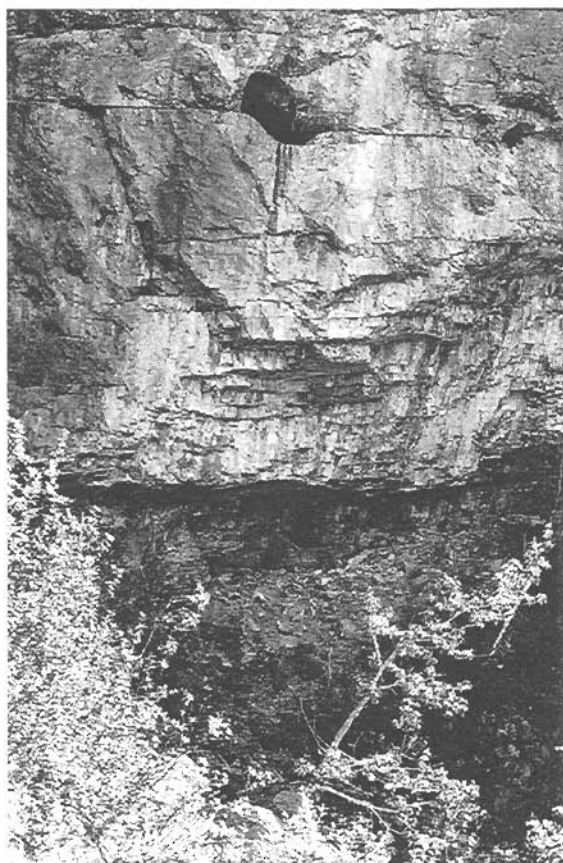


On Monday, April 8, I broke camp for an early start and descended straight down the mountain before the sun triggered the continual rockfall and increased avalanche danger. Once again on the flats with all the gear, it was incredibly easy skiing on a firm crust. Arriving at Dan Creek sometime later, I accepted the invitation from Fred and Irene (his partner) to stay the night. They proceeded to prepare a feast fit for a king: moose steak, bottled beets, rice casserole, and fresh hot sourdough

bread. It was like heaven after surviving on freeze-dried pseudofood for the last two weeks!

The last night I spent in a public use cabin at May Creek, where during the night I was awakened by a mouse crawling over the back of my head. The flight back out was spectacular, and we went over some limestone containing a large entrance just west of Kennicott Glacier.

Although I would have liked someone along and wished to do more skiing and exploration of the awesome country, it was a most rewarding trip and answered many questions about cave potential in the Chitistones. It also has presented new mysteries...I want to go back, and soon! Special thanks to the following people who provided me with information about this caving region: Jim Nicholls, Harvey Bowers, Jay Rockwell, Curvin Metzler, Joe Head, Bob Bastasz, Rich Hall, and Jim Remele. □



Entrance to Whispering (Forty-Foot-Up) Cave.
Photo by Jay Rockwell (1984).

Summer 1992 Chitistone Expedition
story and photos by Curvin Metzler



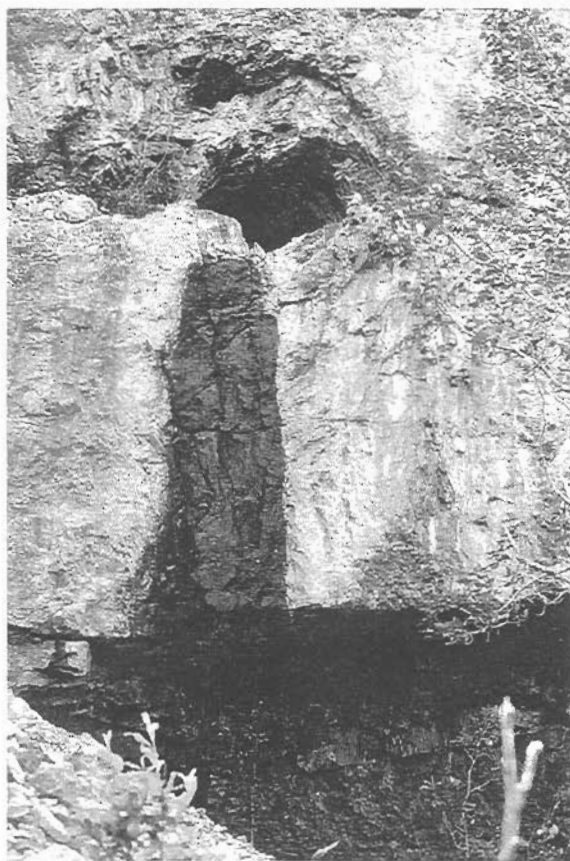
Saki and Lojza at Sweetwater Cave.

During the summer of 1992, I was fortunate to have spelunking visitors from Czechoslovakia, Dr. Leo (Saki) Zak and Pavel (Lojza) Jirasek, as guests who joined me on numerous caving adventures all over the state. The adventures we had together from their arrival in early June until our parting in August will be described in a later article. The following is an account of our expedition in the Chitistone Valley of the Wrangell-St. Elias National Park during the week from June 24 through July 1.

On June 24, we flew into the Chitistone Valley, past mile-high limestone peaks covered at the 3500-foot level by recent snowfall, and landed at Peavine Bar. After arrival, we packed in our gear and set up our base camp just below Dark Star Cave. We had more gear than necessary, so it took more than a single hike in with everything. As we traversed the final ridge before Dark Star Cave, we were approached by a bawling moose calf in search of its mother; she was watching intently from not far below.

After setting up camp, we took the usual sightseeing hike around Dark Star Cave, as well as other well-known caves of the vicinity. The next couple of days were spent alternating between exploring

further along the contact and hiking to upper meadows and behind the mountain. We explored Sweetwater Cave; then, while the Czechs climbed high along the ridge, failing (as others have) to reach a cave seen above Chitistone Junction Cave, I hiked far along the contact. I closely hugged the walls at times, and managed to make it to upper portions of Boulder Creek without losing too much altitude along the way. I found some small solution tubes en route, but gave up searching the last amphitheater in order to reach camp before my time deadline. At one spot, I spotted some giant boulders containing objects (about four inches wide) which may be trace fossils.

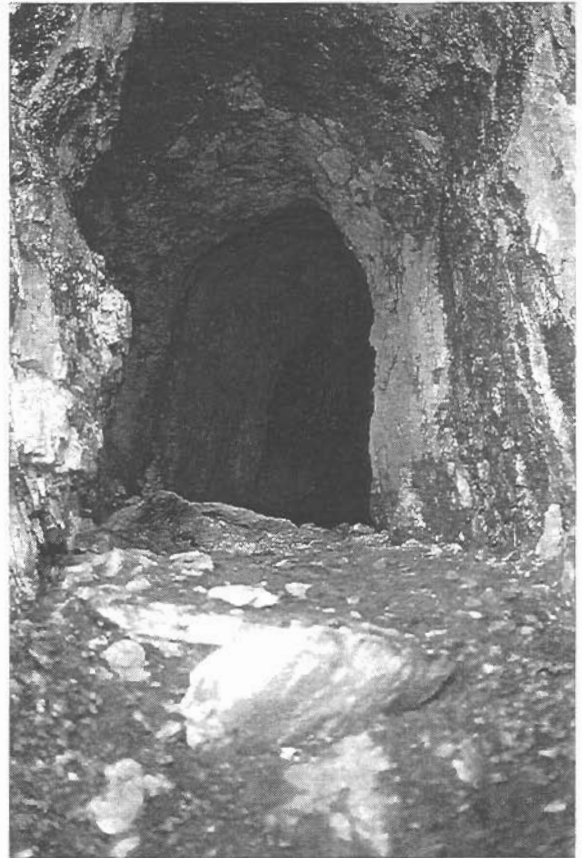


The entrance of Sweetwater Cave.

On June 26, while hiking above Dark Star Cave, we found Archway Cave--which is an impressive 90-foot-long passage, with a 14-foot-high entrance, that looks like a subway tunnel going into the side of the mountain (see cover). The floor at the far end was covered with broken rock, fractured by frost action. The cave, unfortunately, did not appear to continue beyond the blockage.

A few explorations above Dark Star Cave also yielded a walking route to the "back" side of the mountain, which was really not the back side but rather a cirque. Curiously, the melting ice and snow is trapped in a large bowl high above the level of known caves on the outside of the mountain. Although there is a stream gully which runs down to the valley floor far below, much of the melt-water cannot follow this route. Instead, it finds a way through the ridge via cave passages, and eventually exits in places like Lime Springs or Dark Star Cave.

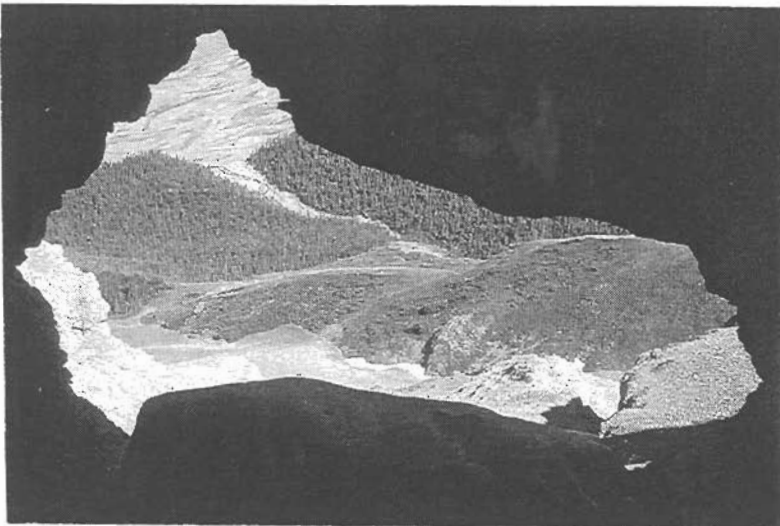
Other finds during a few hikes up the back side of the mountain included an antique wooden-handled shovel, most likely from the days of the Kennecott Copper Corporation. Once, while hiking without our packs, we unexpectedly found a small cave entrance which looked promising. But since we had no sufficient light source with us, I tried using my polarizing filter as a mirror to reflect sunlight into the cave. It worked surprisingly well, in case anyone ever has



Entrance passage of Archway Cave.

the need to improvise a mirror. We ended up coming back later and I dug for over an hour; but by the time I finally had enlarged the entrance almost enough to get inside, I decided that it was only a frost pocket and abandoned the task.

One of our goals was to find a way to the very top of the mountain, and one gorgeous sunny day we made it! First, we climbed up and around the ridge above the known caves, and then continued up a long, wide stream gully. After we reached a snowy bowl area, it seemed that every potential route would end up being too dangerous or impossible without the use of a rope. But finally we climbed on a ledge, slipped by a couple of rather precarious boulders, and discovered a dripping waterfall which we could chimney. It

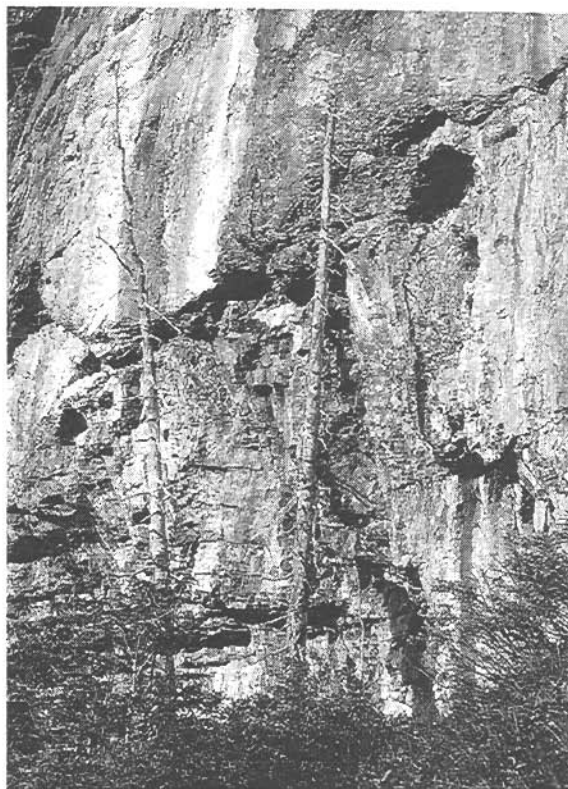


Lime Springs Creek from small cave.

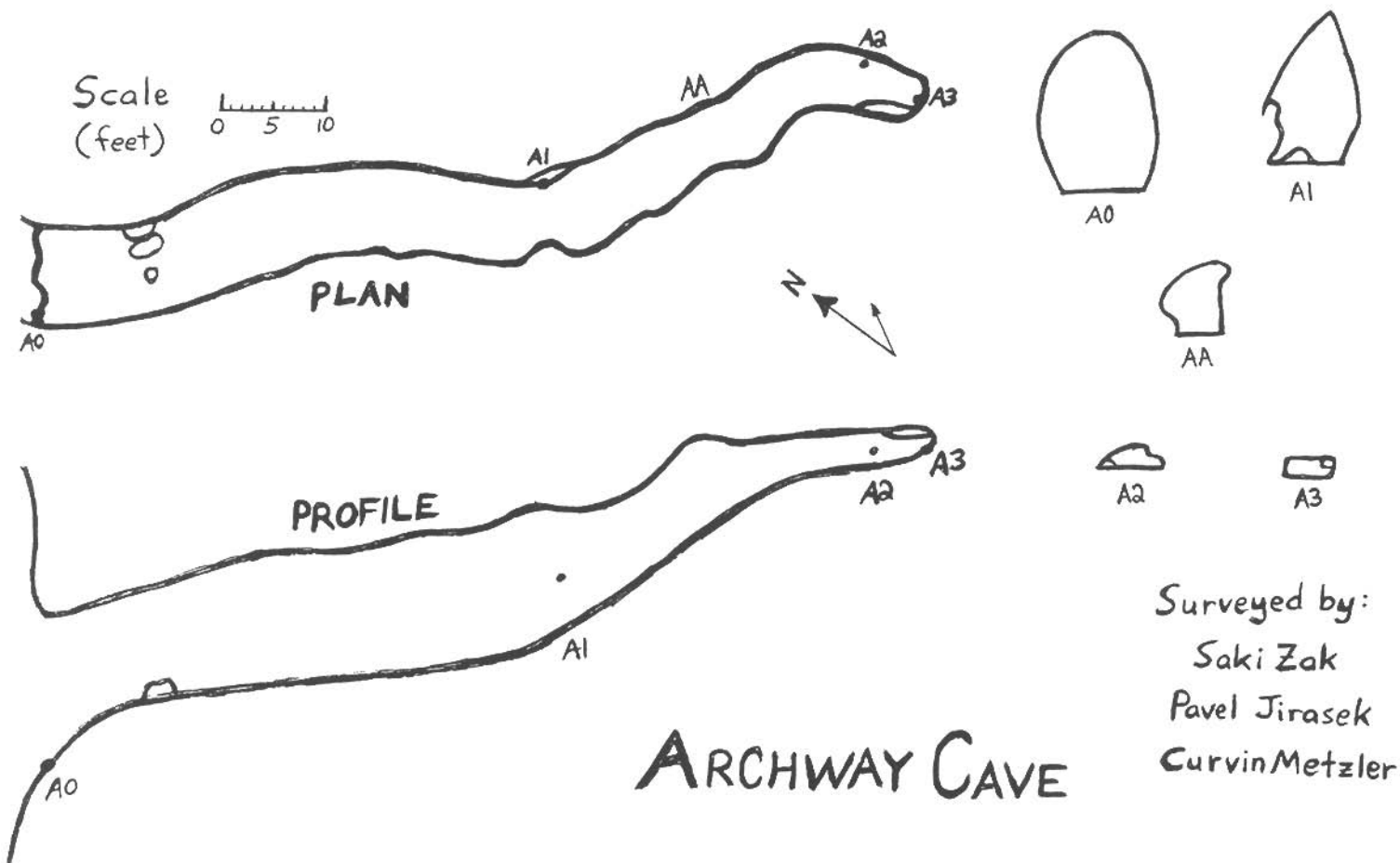
was a bit tricky, but led to the flat, grassy, sheep-grazed meadow which is the very top of the ridge.

We decided to try another way down, since the slippery waterfall route we had just climbed up was most likely not the safest way to return. We headed down a steep talus slope, stepped down over a few ledges, walked down some more talus slopes, crossed part of a snowfield, crawled through a frost pocket (came out a different opening further across the snow), slid down a snow-covered chute back to the bowl, and hiked back down the gully to camp.

After breaking camp and packing our gear back to the airstrip, we got ready for our final night in the Chitistone Valley. Saki and Lojza decided to camp inside one of the abandoned buildings located there. They were awakened in the middle of the night to the growling and hissing of some large mammal, with a light spot on its back, checking out their food. From their description, it was probably a wolverine. □



Entrances high up on cliff face.



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▣ SouthCentral Area Meetings

SouthCentral Area Meetings usually are held at 7:30pm the fourth Wednesday of each month. However, **we currently are in need of a regular meeting place!** There was no November meeting; instead of the regular December meeting, we will have our **third annual Christmas potluck.** It will be held on **Thursday, December 10,** at **6:00pm** at the home of **Jay Rockwell, 2944 Emory Street, Anchorage, AK 99508,** telephone **277-7150.**

▣ SouthEast Area Meetings

SouthEast Area Meetings will be held at **7:00pm** on the **first Monday** of each month. The meeting place is the **Alaska Public Health Service Building, 3054 5th Avenue, Ketchikan.**

▣ Northern Area Meetings

Northern Area Meetings are held in **Fairbanks** by demand; contact **Mike Mauser** at (907) **456-6953** for more details.

D U E S a r e D U E !

It's that time of year again--time to show your support and appreciation for all the news and information which has been collected and distributed via The Alaskan Caver during the past year. If your mailing label shows a 92 instead of a 93, it's time for a subscription renewal, as only **one** issue remains in the current volume. Renew now, so you won't miss a single exciting issue of your favorite action-packed newsletter. Besides, we need the funds in order to produce this newsletter on into next year, so please renew now. Just do it!

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