

June 1965

Association of Mexican Cave Studies Newsletter, Volume 1, No. 6, June 1965

Association for Mexican Cave Studies

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Recommended Citation

Association for Mexican Cave Studies, "Association of Mexican Cave Studies Newsletter, Volume 1, No. 6, June 1965" (1965). *KIP Articles*. 332.

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**THE ASSOCIATION FOR
MEXICAN CAVE STUDIES**

NEWSLETTER

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Trip Reports

Persons: Ed Alexander
 Date: 26 May - 3 June 1965
 Destination: Chamal and Xilitla areas
 Reported by: Ed Alexander

On Wednesday, May 26, John Fish, Orion Knox, David McKenzie, and I left Austin at 7:15 p.m. and drove through to Sabinal Hidalgo where we slept for what was left of the rest of the night. The next morning we continued on to Ciudad Victoria where we separated, the others taking the car on toward La Joya de Salas, and I heading south by bus to the area around Ocampo, Tamps. During the following week I rode buses, construction trucks, trains, and horses through some of the better caving areas of Mexico. Some of these areas I will only mention briefly while I say more about others.

Stopping first in Ocampo, about thirty miles northwest of Mante, I inquired about local caves since I was only about 25 miles south of La Joya de Salas, at the foot of the sierras. Although I didn't take time to check the reports there are apparently several caves in the mountains not far from town. In 1939 a couple of these caves were excavated by archeologists from Mexico City who found a very large collection of bones and a number of artifacts. A report on this was published at that time in *Anales del Instituto Nacional de Antropología y Historia*.

From Ocampo I traveled back east, across the low range of mountains, to Chamal, a distance of about ten miles. At about noon on Friday I obtained a guide and horses from the American ranchers who have settled in the area, and set out for a sotano Americans there called Bee Cave, eight kilometers north of the town. At least half of the road which we followed could be traveled by car, and a good truck or jeep can drive to within 200 yards of the cave. The sotano opened on the side of a low hill and dropped vertically on three sides for almost 200 feet. At the top the opening is a large oval about 170 by 90 feet. On the fourth side I was able to climb down for 40 feet to where there was a large tree. To this I tied my only rope, 100 feet of nylon, and rappelled 80 feet. At the bottom of the rope was a jungle of ferns which sloped down for 30 feet more to where I could look down a final 60 foot drop. At the bottom of this drop, which will require a rope, there appeared to be a talus slope descending for possibly another 60 feet, making a total depth of over 250 feet. Except for the lack of a large arroyo entering the sotano, this cave is quite similar to the large sotanos north of Valles in the Sierra del Abra range. Although from my vantage point it was difficult to see the bottom of the talus slope, the wall of the pit cut back lower as if there should be a passage leading from the bottom.

The next morning my guide and I left Mr. Taylor's ranch, where I had spent the night, and rode our horses for about three hours to the south over a very rough trail to Cuevas Prietas. The total distance from Chamal was about 16 kms., of which only

the first five or six could be traveled by truck or jeep. We crossed several ridges on the way which exhibited extensive solution of the surface limestone. We finally arrived at two small caves and several shelters which were developed about 150 feet above the floor of a small valley. Cueva Pariso No. 1, which was further to the north, had an entrance facing northeast which was an oval, 30 feet high and 15 feet wide. Total length of the cave was only about 200 feet. Cueva Pariso No. 2 was a couple of hundred feet south of No. 1 and had a 15 feet in diameter entrance. Another entrance into No. 2 opened higher on the hill in breakdown. The cave contained two rooms 30 to 40 feet in diameter with a number of dead formations. Below these caves we visited two shelters in which the local Mexicans had found several pieces of bone which looked possibly like human long bones. However, since the terminations were all lacking, positive identification would be difficult. During the two days I spent near Chamal, the members of the American colony proved very helpful in locating caves and suggesting possible rumored caves. The best known of the caves that they mentioned is Cueva de Canon, which is somewhere west of Chamal. This cave is often visited by the local residents and is reportedly fairly large with many formations. There has been very little caving done in the Ocampo-Chamal area, and a large potential still remains.

Leaving Chamal I traveled south to Xilitla, San Luis Potosi, arriving there on Sunday evening. Upon inquiring about caves in the cafe where I ate supper I was introduced to a man who claimed he knew of six caves and four setanos near the town. He offered to lead me to several of these the next day. On Monday morning we first headed for Cueva del Salitre, about one kilometer east of Xilitla. The entrances open in a very large sink, one at the bottom and the other higher up on the side. The upper entrance led down talus slopes to two large rooms, each about 200 feet deep. My guide and I explored the room to the left which had no leads at the bottom. We didn't enter the other room since he claimed it too ended at the bottom. The lower entrance is one large shelter room at the bottom of the sink. It is entirely lit by daylight, however, there appeared to be a possible crawl leading off about 20 feet up the back wall.

Next we walked back through Xilitla to La Cueva de la Arroyo, two kilometers southeast of the town, in the valley of the next arroyo west of Salitre. The cave opens at the base of a long bluff just to the west of the arroyo. It is reached by a long trail which follows the base of the bluff. The entrance is 40 feet wide and 30 feet high with breakdown covering the floor. From the entrance it runs in general to the southeast for about 1500 to 2000 feet. The passage varies from 10 to 30 feet wide and 20 to 50 feet high. There are many formations throughout the cave, especially travertine dams filled with water. The cave ends by sloping upward rapidly to a final dome which is at least 100 feet high. No side passages were noticed. Another cave can be seen from near the entrance to Cueva de la Arroyo. It is across the valley and above the new road to Xilitla. My guide called it Cerro de la Ventana, since it is said to have a

120 foot high skylight inside. The entrance to this cave seems to be developed under a fold in the rock strata. We also found several shelters along the base of the bluff on the way back to town.

After lunch we went to Cueva del Tapatio which is a shelter on the hill just above the town. Since it was quite small we continued hiking up the road past Xilitla for about two kilometers to Sotano de San Antonio. It is about 30 feet above the road in a clump of underbrush. Not knowing what we had found, I hung over the 15 feet in diameter hole and dropped a large rock. Over five seconds later we heard the hollow thud as it hit the bottom. I carefully stepped back from the hole and decided not to attempt entering it with my 100 feet of rope. Sotano de San Antonio had previously been entered by members of the AMOS and was found to be a vertical shaft which ended at a depth of 385 feet. On the way back to town we saw another clump of trees and underbrush above the road and immediately went to investigate. After cautiously throwing rocks in from a distance I found that the entrance was vertical for only fifteen feet, so we climbed down and explored the cave for a distance of 300 feet to where it ended. The passage ran northeast at a 30 degree slope for its entire length. One side passage was noticed just inside the entrance on the right which was not checked since it was a small crawl leading toward the side of the hill. The cave is one kilometer from Xilitla and doesn't seem to have a name.

I left the Xilitla area on Tuesday morning and headed back to Valles. I had planned to catch a train to Cerritos to check on rumored sotanos, but upon arriving in Valles I learned that the train did not leave until 11:30 p.m. I caught the bus instead to El Salto, where the Rio Naranjo cascades over a beautiful waterfall. Although this could be a potentially good caving area, the construction workers at the new hydro-electric station there could only tell me that the river flows from a nacimiento about six kilometers above the falls. After a refreshing swim I left El Salto and returned to Austin by way of San Luis Potosi, arriving home at 6:30 p.m. on Thursday, June 3.

THE EXPLORATION OF SOTANO DE LA JOYA DE SALAS

by John Fish
Austin

After making final preparations on the evening of May 26, 1966, David McKenzie, Orion Cox, and John Fish left Austin for Mexico. The sole purpose of the trip was to explore and map the very promising Sotano de la Joya de Salas. We crossed the border Wednesday night with little delay, and continued on to Sabinas Hidalgo where we slept by the road just south of town.

Thursday morning we awoke to a beautiful sunrise scene with mountains and a small ranch immediately to the west. After a quick breakfast we drove to Cd. Victoria where the road leading southwest to Juamave was taken. The winding mountain road furnished many spectacular views en route. Several small caves by the road were checked.

On arriving at Juamave our intention of hiking the thirty-five kilometers across the mountains to La Joya was explained to the natives who were astonished at the proposal. A man named Raoul proved invaluable in making arrangements for renting burros for our equipment and hiring a guide. We were fortunate to have Orion along because he speaks Spanish fluently. Plans were made to leave early Friday morning, the 28th, on a seven day trip to La Joya.

The next morning we were up at four-thirty and ready to leave at six. The cool morning made the five mile hike across the desert pass with ease. We began joking that the trip might not be as hard as had been expected. We were to soon change our minds as we climbed the mountain and followed a ridge up several thousand feet. This side of the Sierra Madre Oriental is very dry and hot. The fauna is also much different from the eastern side of the range. A karst area was found on the way up the mountain. Also several Indian middens were crossed by the trail. Along the highest part of the ridge a Spanish moss forest was encountered. Orion was becoming sick from the heat, altitude, and drinking too much water. Finally after hiking all day at the awkward pace of the burros, we arrived about seven o'clock at the village of La Joya de Salas. The beautiful enclosed valley has been described in a previous newsletter. It was now a lush green and the fields were being worked. After briefly inspecting the sotano, everyone quickly went to bed, each with his own idea of what the cave would do.

Saturday morning we were awakened about seven by a light sprinkle which fortunately did not develop into a rain. It was time for the rainy season to begin, however, and the hundred villagers were in desperate need of rain since the lake was nearly dry. As soon as the shower ended it was decided to immediately prepare to enter the sotano. We had spent the night by the schoolyard only a hundred yards from the sotano. While Orion was driving a belt at the entrance, David, John, our guide, and a friendly villager carried our equipment to the edge of the cave. We were greatly impressed by the dimensions of the entrance and the sound of rocks striking the bottom. A 295 foot rope was unbraided, secured to a hanger, and the equipment lowered to a ledge 87 feet below. The mapping equipment was then taken out and the entrance surveyed. Orion sketched, David manned the Brunton, and John the steel tape. The entrance is a rectangular slot with a short fissure of tension at each end. The entrance dimensions are 115 feet by 25 feet. A natural bridge crosses the entrance into two parts, one part 70 feet long and dropping sheer for 250 feet, the other dropping to the ledge previously mentioned where the rope was retied for the next descent. Finally at 11:30 we entered

the cave to stay. Lunch was eaten on the ledge before continuing onward. All of our activities until the time we disappeared from view at the bottom were closely observed by more than thirty villagers. Two natives even went down to the ledge hand over hand on one of our ropes (they did not trust the belt) and were pulled out by several men.

After lunch Orion rappelled first to the bottom of the entrance to take photographs and receive equipment. John lowered the equipment from a belay position and then he and David followed Orion down. The floor was strewn with rocks and dead birds and animals. Two short solution cavities contain fill, an unpromising fissure at one end remains unchecked, and two passages roughly twenty feet in diameter join on the other side of a partition. This was obviously the path water took. Intensive fauna collecting was done at the entrance which resulted in the second recorded finding of the beetle tribe, Sphodrini, in the New World. This species is at present being described by Dr. Tom Barr. A complete faunal list will be included in a future bulletin.

The passage leading to the next drop was found to be an even 100 feet. About halfway down the passage a pool of water was encountered across which the gear was relayed. Here also the passage began to take the shape of a fissure about 25 feet high. The passage entered the side of an estimated 200 foot fluted domapit which had red flowstone walls. A 200 foot rope was tied off around a large boulder 20 feet from the drop and Orion began rappelling. Orion reached a ledge about 40 feet down and thinking he saw the bottom continued his rappel. However, what he saw was only another ledge, and, far from a white handkerchief tied to the rope's end swung freely in space. We then decided to drive a belt at the edge of the drop to gain additional rope. The equipment was lowered to the ledge and finally to the bottom of the drop which totaled 170 feet. The room was a fissure about fifteen feet wide at the bottom that widened at the passage level and continued up out of sight.

After 40 feet the fissure narrowed and dropped 8 feet to two pools of water and a short passage to the next drop. The ledge was difficult to negotiate because it was undercut and the rope frequently slipped into a narrow slot. Measurement showed the drop to be 37 feet to what was christened the Cathedral Room because the walls of the fissure resembled a Gothic arch where the rope was hung. This, the only dry room in the cave, became our base camp. An evening meal was prepared and then we sacked out, eager for more exploration the next day.

Since we were very tired, we slept much later than had been planned. The temperature throughout the cave varied between 77° to 81°F so that we were quite comfortable. Out of the far end of the 70 foot high Cathedral Room was an eleven foot chimney to a 50 foot drop into a beautiful red flowstone covered fissure room about 130 feet high. Two small unimportant passages about 3 feet in diameter lead out of this

cycle-shaped room. David, being the first down quickly eliminated these passages, and found a slightly larger passage across the length of the room. It was observed that in some places the walls were chipped and beaten as if the cave had been flooded violently at times.

The chosen tubular passage extended nearly a hundred feet but ended in a dirt fill. Two slots in the floor led to the only formation room in the cave. It was decided that Orion should go first on the basis that he had better luck than David. The rope hung over a flowstone formation and fell free for 54 feet to a flowstone bank 25 feet above a deep lake. At first appearance the lake offered the only route. Orion waded and swam through the water only to have David find an upper route through the formations. A roughly elliptical shaped room was encountered with a crevice and numerous holes in the floor. However, straight ahead David found a dome pit in which rocks seemed to fall forever.

Following the initial excitement, John returned to camp for a 350 foot length of rope. After several minutes consideration David dubiously decided to explore the pit as Orion and John heckled him about the rope being too short. David rappelled to a ledge 60 feet below where the rope lay in a huge pile. He then talked Orion into coming down to help. Loose rocks were cleared, the rope entangled, a bolt driven to aid in clearing the ledge, and David was on his way again. In the excitement of the moment, David described the pitch as the "most fantastic thing" he had ever seen. As usual the room was a tremendous fissure that widened nearly out of sight at the top. When David reached bottom, he reported that the room looked like a blind pit. There seemed to be no promising passage out of the room. We then returned to camp, our hopes greatly dimmed, but determined to check every possible lead the next day.

We spent some time the next morning taking pictures and surveying, but we quickly got on to the business of checking all possible passages. Nothing was found at the top, but two passages were explored at the bottom. One small water passage led to a connecting dome which had a passage up on the wall that drained into the dome. The other passage was at the lower end of the room and contained a tiny stream which ran toward the room. Exploration upstream yielded nothing good. The only possible lead left was an elliptical 2 by 3 foot hole in the floor near the big room into which the water ran. John rappelled 15 feet through a small waterfall to a mud and gravel floor. John followed the fill slope around a formation to the deepest point in the cave, 892 feet below the surface. The depth makes the sotano the second deepest in Mexico and the fourth deepest known in the Western Hemisphere. Somewhat disappointed that we could not go deeper, we returned to camp to eat and sleep.

The next day, our fourth in the cave, we returned to the surface. The only major difficulty encountered was lifting the rope and other equipment up the pitches. With the aid of

the Mexicans who pulled our gear out the entrance, we were able to leave the cave 76 hours after entry. When the ropes were measured, the last big drop was found to be 231 feet making the dome pit about 280 feet. After obtaining refrescos from the store and eating a good meal, we sacked out for some much needed rest. It was exhilarating to breath good mountain air again.

We awoke the next day stiff and sore, but we decided to hike around the valley for awhile. A large karst area was found and two caves checked. We also had an interesting conversation with the school teacher about his students and how the school was operated.

The next morning we were on our way back to Jaumave by six-thirty. We reached halfway mark and the top of the mountain with no difficulty. After lunch it was decided to walk on ahead because of the burros slow pace. The long slope down the mountain seemed never ending and the desert had to be crossed at 2 o'clock in the afternoon. It was with the last of our energy that we reached Jaumave and collapsed in the Rio Guaya-lejo. After a quart of water and four cokes apiece, we began to feel better. When the burros arrived two hours later we packed our things in Orion's car and left for Austin.

Additions to Membership List

55. Anderson, Eric 517 Loma Vista Tempe, Arizona 85281
56. Anderson, Richard 49 Hubbard Ave. Red Bank, N.J.
57. Andrews, William M. 1015 Tates Creek Rd. Lexington, Ky.
58. Barr, Thomas C., Jr. Dept. of Zoology, Univ. of Ky.,
Lexington, Kentucky
59. Beach, Ray 2782 Sacramento San Francisco, Calif.
60. Biffle, Earl 26 Lake Rd. Fenton, Mo. 63026
61. Bolinger, C. Loren 1 N 500 Bloomingdale Wheaton, Ill.
62. Burnett, Bob P.O. Box 7672, UT Station Austin, Tex.
63. Cooper, John 3304 Hilton St. Baltimore 16, Maryland
64. Cuddington, Bill Route 1 Laceys Springs, Alabama
65. Duke, Jim 1700 Sabine St. Apt. 3 Austin, Texas
66. Gove, John R., III. 313 Silver Pine Dr. Hendersonville,
North Carolina
67. Haarr, Al 50 Clover Dr. Delmont, Pa. 15626
68. Klekamp, Tom Greater Cincinnati Grotto, 5605 Pamlico Ln.
Cincinnati, Ohio 45243
69. Laidlaw, Kenneth N. P.O. Box 35 Berkeley, Calif. 94701
70. Nagy, Bobbi 332 W. Nittany Ave. State College, Pa.
71. Ralph, Ron 5660 Robertson Ave. Carmichael, Calif.
72. Sawin, Fred Texas Instruments, Box 5012, Sta. 43.
Dallas, Texas
73. Smith, Robert A. P.O. Box 13335 Univ. Sta. Gainesville, Fla.
74. Sproul, Mason 2502 Plateau Rd. Charlottesville, Va.
75. Thrailkill, John Dept. of Geology, Univ. of Kentucky.
Lexington, Kentucky. 40506
76. Tozer, William 3340 Meadows Ct. Apt. A-2. Indianapolis,
Indiana

77. Ulfeldt, Stanley 5415 Palm Dr. La Canada, Calif. 91011
 78. Vogel, Peter 115 Central Park West. N. York 23, N. York

ANNOUNCEMENT

The editorial staff of the AMCS NEWSLETTER has decided that since interest in the AMCS has become so widespread that it will endeavor to print a bulletin. This bulletin will contain articles pertaining to the speleology of specific caves and cave areas and include maps, scientific, and bibliographic information. It will be published as often as enough information is available to warrant it. One and possibly two issues of the BULLETIN are scheduled for publication this year (1965). The NEWSLETTER will be mimeographed monthly and serve primarily to keep AMCS members abreast of current activities in Mexican cave exploration.

The AMCS Newsletter is published monthly by the Association for Mexican Cave Studies, P.O. Box 7672, University Station, Austin, Texas 78712. Membership in the AMCS is \$5.00 for the calendar year, with memberships starting at the first of each year. Persons joining after the first of the year will receive all back publications of that year.

Members are urged to submit articles for publication. Maps submitted for publication should be of a type suitable for copying onto a standard or legal size Ditto master. Longer articles with more detailed maps are invited for publication as a bulletin. Trip reports are requested from all trips.

Editor.....Terry Raines
 Staff.....John Fish
 T.R. Evans
 James Reddell