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Janet Bass Smith

*Mammoth Cave National Park*

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# History of Crawling Tours at Mammoth Cave

Janet Bass Smith<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Interpretation, Mammoth Cave National Park

## Abstract

Currently three crawling tours are offered at Mammoth Cave: Wild Cave (six hours) for visitors ages sixteen and older, Introduction to Caving (three hours and 15 minutes) for visitors ages 10 and older (under 18 must be with an adult), and Trog (two hours and 30 minutes) for children only, ages eight through twelve. These tours are discussed in detail below. Maps for each tour are included at the end of the paper. This history relates the beginnings of each tour.

## Wild Cave

The Wild Cave tour began on December 29, 1970 with a memo from Chief of Interpretation and Resource Management, Edwin Rothfuss, to Park technician, Keith Morgan, asking him to develop a spelunking trip. Morgan was given certain suggested guidelines: it would be for 10 people over 15 years old, it would be offered twice daily from June 4 thru Sept. 4, the length would be two to three hours with interpretation of geology, biology, research, caving techniques, and safety, and each trip would involve some crawling. The aim would be to give visitors a taste of wild caving. Morgan was to find a suitable cave, develop a trip and story to be told, develop a budget, select and order equipment. He was to be assisted by Rangers Clive Pinnix and/or Bill Ritter. Ray France and Ed Rothfuss would assist on overall planning and budgeting as needed. If approved, the tour would start in late May, 1971 when Morgan was to select one or two seasonals, train them, then guide and supervise this trip throughout the summer. He was then to submit a final evaluation report the next fall.

Keith Morgan submitted a progress report to Rothfuss on January 16, 1971. Morgan, Pinnix and Ritter had visited four caves: Long's, Great Onyx, Little Beauty, and White's. Each of these was evaluated in detail, and none was deemed suitable due

to transportation problems, no crawlways, and/or few passages of interest.

On February 11, 1971 Ed Rothfuss wrote to Dr. Joseph K. Davidson, the president of the Cave Research Foundation and a professor at Ohio State University, asking for suggestions in planning a spelunking trip. Dr. Davidson responded to this request on March 23, 1971, saying that he had reviewed with several CRF members the objectives of the proposed wild cave trip, and they suggested areas that "seem to us to fit your objectives well," and listed the following:

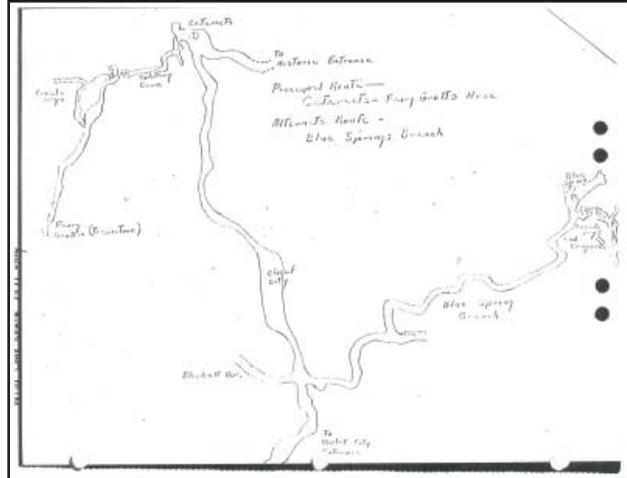
1. Either end of Robertson Ave. in Mammoth Cave. Grand Central end is dry and pleasant, but Cathedral Domes end has much more variety in cave features.
2. Other areas near the Frozen Niagara Entrance, such as College Heights Ave.
3. Ganter Cave. Boat trip to entrance provides appealing variety for the trip.
4. Proctor Cave. Great variety of cave features in a small area makes this cave especially attractive.
5. Smith Valley Cave. Cedar Sink gives added opportunity for interpretation.

He said other areas would be suitable, but some, such as Nicholson Avenue, were rather remote. They recommended Proctor, Ganter, and Smith Valley Caves, but noted they had access problems. CRF especially recommended Proctor cave, stating that “the fifteen-minute walk from the road is easy, and periodic mowing of grass in the trail would keep the tick problem at a minimum.” Davidson also said that “as areas are selected for the wild caving trips we hope that regions containing Indian artifactual material or large populations of bats be avoided.”

On April 12 Ranger Keith Morgan again reported to Chief Guide Rothfuss about the progress his team had made. They had considered three major cave areas: Running Branch, Ganter, and Frozen Niagara. They determined that the first two were inaccessible. The Frozen Niagara area might be developed into a good tour, but it had some bad characteristics. However, the team did recommend using this area as the initial experimental area while looking for other possible locations.

He also submitted suggested forms for a response letter to answer inquiries concerning the wild cave tour, a pass-waiver form to be used as a ticket and waiver of rights to be signed by all persons on the tour, a reservation form for organized groups of five or more persons, and a handout sheet to be made available to interested persons after the tour. Copies of those are in the Mammoth Cave files.

While he was gone on another assignment, an alternate route was suggested since the Frozen Niagara section was thought to be too congested with other tours. This route was Fairy Grotto behind the Cataracts. Later “Blue Springs” was also used as a route. These areas are reached by going in the Violet City Entrance, and involve a long walk before reaching an area of crawling. (See Map #1) Because Keith Morgan, who was to guide and supervise the tour, was gone for six weeks, the tour was not started



Map #1: Wild Cave 1971 only, Violet City area

until July 7, 1971, and the above route was used. Part of the delay was the cashier's difficulty in finding appropriate tickets. Finally the cashier used surplus tickets from the All Day Tour of several years before.

Keith Morgan's report to the superintendent evaluating the wild cave tour, dated September 29, 1971, is in the Mammoth Cave files. Following is a summary of this evaluation report.

In Section I Ranger Morgan defines the wild cave tour as an introduction to speleology (the science of cave study), and spelunking (the sport of caving). In Section II he states that the reasons for having the tour were FUN (his caps), education, and to give the visitors an opportunity to experience the cave in a setting without the crowds of the usual tours. The history of the tour (covered above) is discussed in Section III.

In Section IV he discusses the operations. The tour was offered twice daily, at 10:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m. and cost \$2, which included a fifty-cent bus fee. The tour lasted three hours, including a brief orientation session at the Visitor's Center during which helmet, battery headlamps, and kneepads

were provided. Approximately two and one-half hours were spent underground. The tour was limited to ten people, sixteen or older, in good physical condition. Suggested appropriate dress included sturdy shoes, old clothes, and gloves.

Guides were selected from volunteers based on their ability as cavers, experience as interpreters, and desire to lead such a tour. Two GS-5 seasonal park guides, a man and a woman, and a GS-6 Park Technician (who also helped supervise the trip) led the tours. He recommended that future appointments of wild cave tour leaders should be made from volunteers who were adaptable to change and had an interest in spelunking.

In Section V, dealing with the success of the tour, he reported the “unsolicited visitor expressions of interest indicate the tour was a tremendous success.” He went on to state that there were no complaints, and many said they would pay twice the cave fee for the experience. The small group size helped make it a good experience. Another great success was the lack of accidents and tort claims.

Section VI dealt with special problems. Equipment: helmets did not have chin straps headlamps had cables going from the battery pack to the light, and this cable snagged on protruding rocks. Also, the packs often fell off belts. He suggested a self-contained assembly attached directly to the helmet, or with a battery pack permanently attached to a belt that could be issued, along with the helmet, to each visitor. The kneepads were inadequate, and he suggested heavier industrial pads.

The second problem was the lack of time. More time was consumed getting to the wild cave area than was used seeing it and very little time remained for interpretation. The tour route, while interesting, involved a great deal of walking through developed passages, which was not the original intent of the tour. He suggested a longer tour, and a different route or cave.

The third problem was employee opposition to the tour itself. A few employees severely objected to the tour because they felt the Park was not treating all visitors with equal fairness by sending ten people with one guide while thousands of visitors on other tours were forced to go with three guides and 200 people. They stated it was bad utilization of manpower, but “did not seem to realize that without the special tour another man would have been dropped from payroll, leaving other tours the same number of guides.” Some of these critics were ticket sellers who had made their opposition known to the public.

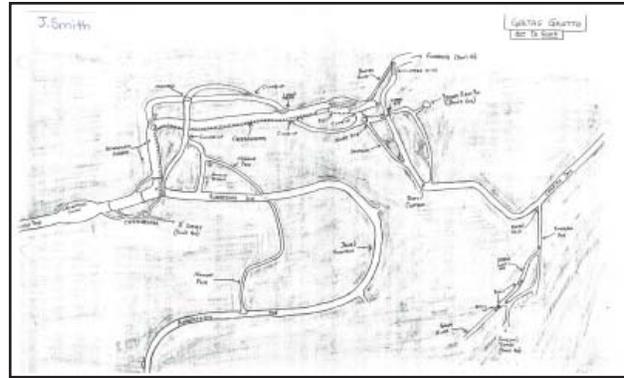
Morgan goes into detail about the financial aspect of the tour, and reported that the tour lost approximately \$1500 the first year, partly because it wasn’t started until July, but an extra guide had been hired. During the time when he was not guiding wild cave, he was guiding other tours, but it still was reported as a loss for wild cave because no tickets were sold to offset the salary. He noted that the equipment purchased could still be used, with batteries and new knee pads being the only future cost. He again recommended that the tour be continued as a longer tour, using a different route.

In the file is a hand-written letter from Miriam Ash, one of the wild cave guides, to Keith Morgan evaluating the tour. Ranger Ash stated that the tour was a great success as far as visitors were concerned. However, she suggested the use of a different area and also expressed the need for chin straps for the helmets and different knee pads. She also suggested presenting visitors at the conclusion of the trip with a certificate indicating their advancement to the title of spelunker, and having available an up-to-date listing of the NSS Grottos for those people interested in continuing caving activities.

In 1972, after that first summer, a group of rangers who had been selected as wild cave guides were taken into the cave with Chief Guide Lewis Cutliff to find an

appropriate route that would last the right amount of time. These guides were Dave McGinnis, Ed Green, Brenda Brassel (who later married Dave), Sharon Madison, and Marvin Witcher. They went in Carmichael Entrance and came out Frozen Niagara, basically going through the route still in use today. The Kämper map was used as a guide. (See Maps #2 and #3)

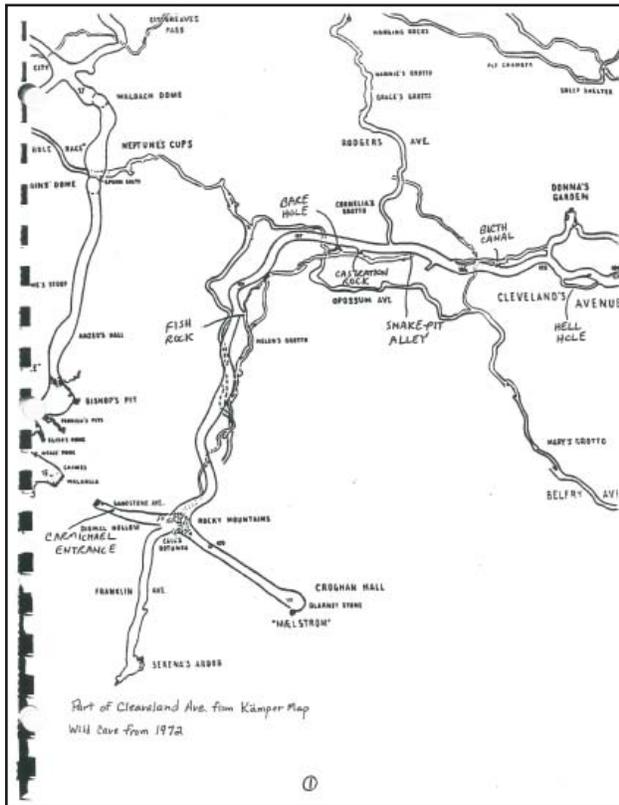
Within those areas are many variations. It is difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain which passages were used in the early tours. Many of the earlier guides do not remember the names of the passages they used, and some that are now used may have had a different name or no name at all. In the complete copy of this research is a list of the places that are possible, names of those passages, and, when known, who named them. For the first few years the Mole Hole



**Map #3:** Wild Cave 1972 to present, Gerta's Grotto, not to scale

was required. Now certain areas are off limits, but no areas are mandatory. In 1996, when I first started guiding Wild Cave, the tour came out the Keyhole and climbed up to College Heights. This is the exit now used by the Introduction to Caving Tour, and Wild Cave has stopped using it to avoid congestion in that area when Intro and Wild Cave are in Fox Ave. at the same time. Currently Wild Cave exits up Big Break above Grand Central Station, or through Fox Ave. to the Compass Needle Climpub.

In the mid 1980s Chief Guide Joe McGown made George Corrie the Wild Cave Coordinator. At that time guides had to furnish their own packs and most of the guides provided their own helmets. Most guides purchased their own kneepads or used the Rockmaster kneepads that were issued to the visitors. Corrie suggested that we give the visitor a disposable helmet and purchased new lights for the guides and visitors. Corrie also purchased Petzel helmets for the guides, although some guides continued to use their own. He purchased packs and first aid kits for the guides, and placed first aid kits along the wild cave route. The disposable helmets for visitors were eventually replaced by higher quality helmets. Corrie remained the primary lead person for crawling tours for about ten more years. Currently



**Map #2:** Wild Cave 1972 to present, Cleveland Ave. from Kämper map

Chuck DeCroix oversees and maintains the helmets, lights, and batteries.

Except for the basic route, many details of the tour have changed over the years. Ticket prices have continued to rise and currently are \$48. Since 1998, due to safety concerns caused by several accidents, two guides are required at all times, over-the-ankle footwear with aggressive tread is mandatory, and certain areas of the tour route have been deemed off limits.

The White Nose Syndrome (WNS) protocol has completely changed the dynamics of all the crawling tours. Now visitors are taken to the “dorms” where they are issued coveralls and equipment, and boots must be soaked in water/Lysol solution at the end of the tour. This has impacted the time of the tour, sometimes starting about thirty minutes later getting into the cave.

In July, 2012, WKYU-PBS’s Mainstreet segment on the Wild Cave Tour, led by Jackie Wheet, won an Emmy award.

#### **Guide Data:**

First rangers to guide in Violet City (1971): Keith Morgan, Miriam Ash

First rangers to guide in Cleaveland Ave area to Frozen Niagara (1972): Dave McGinnis, Ed Green, Marvin Witcher, Brenda Brassel McGinnis, Sharon Madison Ganci

Longest continuous guiding: Keven Neff, guided from 1976 to 2010

Oldest person to guide: Janet Bass Smith, guided from 1995-2010 (age 74)

#### **Trog Tour**

The Trog tour began in 1974 when Guide Brenda McGinnis, at the request of the Chief of Interpretation, planned the tour, and was the first guide. It was two and one-half hours, and was designed for children ages six to twelve. Later the lower age was raised to eight. At first there was only one

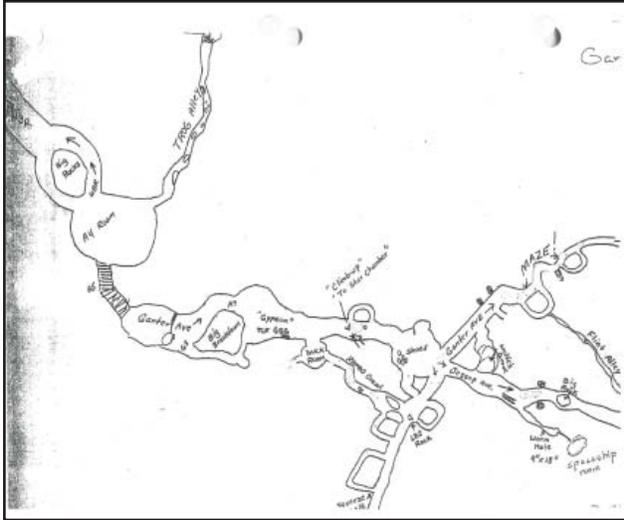
guide; now two guides are mandatory regardless of the number of participants. A minimum number of two visitors is necessary for the trip to go. Currently the tour is offered in the summer, or by special arrangement for selected groups at any time. It is limited to twelve participants between the ages of eight and twelve. Before the White Nose Protocol began in 2010, visitors were requested to wear ankle length, durable pants, and sturdy shoes. Beginning with the 2010 season, participants are loaned coveralls to wear during the trip. An adult chaperon must be present for the first fifteen minutes of the activity, and must pick up children at the end of the activity. Before the white nose precautions, participants were allowed to keep the helmet after the trip. The length of the tour has been increased 30 minutes (to 2 ½ hrs.) to allow time for fitting children with coveralls.

The first tours went to Dixon Cave or White Cave. The participants were met at the Amphitheatre, and walked to the cave. Because of the long surface walk to and from the cave, the walk was used as a means of teaching the participants the relationship between the surface and the cave. Later the guides had the choice of White Cave or Gratz Ave., under Gothic Ave. Since 2009 the tour always goes to Ganter Ave., entering through Trog Alley at the bottom of the Steps of Time, or through the opening to the left of the trail in Wooden Bowl Room. (see Map #4)

#### **Explorer Tour**

In 1989 Zona Cetera and Keven Neff suggested, and in the spring of 1990 made a formal request for a crawling tour to fill the age gap between the Trog Tour (8 to 12 year olds), and the Wild Cave Tour (minimum age of 16). They suggested Ganter Ave. as a possible route.

The tour was offered in the summers of 1990, 1991, and possibly 1992. It was replaced by the Introduction to Caving



**Map #4:** Trog Tour 2009 to present, Ganter Ave.

Tour in 1993. It was a three and one-half hour trip, developed as a crawling tour for children from 13 to 15 years of age. The route was the Historic Entrance to the Wooden Bowl Room, and then it exited the Wooden Bowl Room via Lost Ave. to the Sick Room, took Harvey's Avenue to Main Cave, then to the drop-down in Indian Ave. to Ganter Ave, and exited below the Steps of Time. It then exited back around Giant's Coffin and returned to the Historic Entrance. (See map.)

The tour was offered each Saturday and Sunday during the summer season. The cost was \$3 per person, and it was limited to 12 participants and one guide. Each participant had to be in good physical condition and able to crawl and climb. Each participant was asked to wear old clothes, sturdy shoes (boots were suggested), and a belt. Gloves were recommended. It was discontinued because the demand was not there to warrant its continuation.

### **Introduction to Caving Tour**

The Introduction to Caving Tour started in 1993 as a replacement for the Explorer Tour, and was to serve as an introduction to safe and correct caving techniques. The

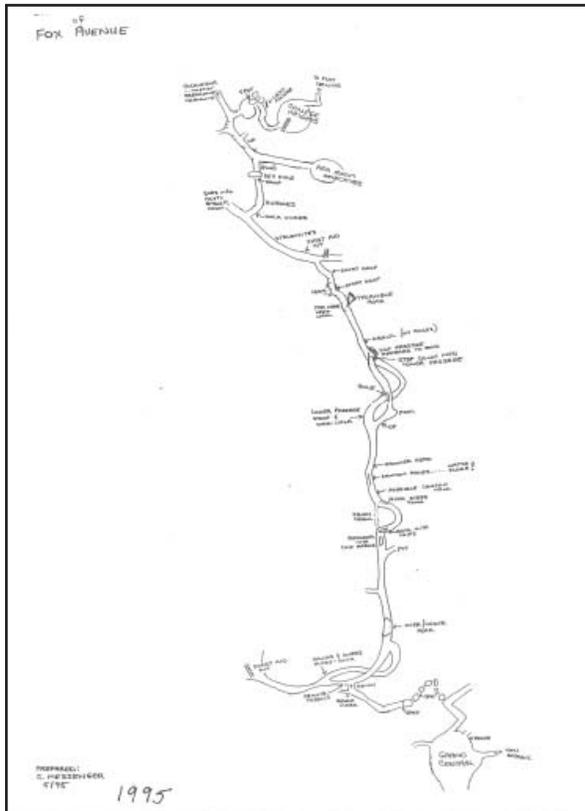
tour began with a slide presentation in the auditorium which included information about the hydrological creation of caves. This was followed by a demonstration of safe caving equipment, rules, and safe caving techniques. No one seems to know exactly when the slide program was discontinued, but probably around 1996 or 1997.

The tour was designed to be a family tour. In 1993 it was limited to twenty people, was three hours and fifteen minutes in length, and covered one and one-half miles. The park furnished a helmet, light, and kneepads for the visitor, and the visitor was allowed to keep the helmet. Participants were requested to wear jean type pants with a belt, and sturdy shoes.

Since 1993 the number of visitors has remained at twenty, but the age limit has changed. According to the ISP dated 1993, visitors could be as young as eight, but sixteen-year-olds and younger had to be accompanied by an adult. An ISP dated February, 1994 again states that this activity was limited to 20 participants, at least eight years of age (under sixteen must be accompanied by an adult). The ISP dated February 1996 lists the minimum age as ten years, and those under sixteen must be accompanied by an adult. The ISP dated March 2009 keeps the minimum age as ten years, but now participants under eighteen must be accompanied by an adult. The 1993 ISP states that the trip would trail when there were six or more participants. All following ISPs state the trip always trails. In 2009 boots were required, and since the white nose protocol, visitors are no longer allowed to keep the helmet

In 1993, 1994, and 1995, the tour route was an area off Cleveland Ave. The group came in the Carmichael Entrance, and could exit either at Carmichael, or go up the elevator. The route covered the Maelstrom at the Rocky Mountains; Serena's Arbor was an option. (see map)

In 1996 the tour route was changed to Fox Ave. and is currently in that area. The tour enters through the New Entrance, crawls through a hole off the Subway called The Test Hole, leading into Grand Central Station. The group then climbs down Big Break into Big Gypsum Ave. and into Fox Ave. (see Map #5)



**Map #5:** Introduction to Caving Tour 1994 to present, Fox Ave. under Big Break