

How Cavers Became Allies Instead of Adversaries at Mammoth Cave National Park

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Introduction

The overall story of the Cave Research Foundation's (CRF) formative years has been told by Phil Smith and Red Watson (1981) and by Roger Brucker and Red Watson (1976). However, there is an element to this story that has not been discussed, and another aspect of this story that has not been emphasized. First, cavers and park administrators did not and maybe could not understand each other very well, and second, a park service employee gave crucial advice to the cavers that helped them gain acceptance by the park.

Having joined CRF in 1973, and first worked with the National Park Service (NPS) as a seasonal guide at Jewel Cave National Monument starting in 1974, I have gained some perspective into the respective cultures of the NPS and CRF.

A Basic Misunderstanding

One reason for the initial poor communication is that cave explorers and Mammoth Cave National Park (MCNP) administrators did not understand or appreciate each other's priorities and motivations. Park administrators had their hands full managing tour operations, a visitor center, campgrounds, picnic areas, a hotel concessioner, roads, ferries on Green River, utilities, hiking trails, fire fighting and more within over 50,000 acres of land (this is not a complete list of responsibilities). They would view cave explorers from Ohio as somewhat eccentric young enthusiasts who wanted to do something risky in the park.

The entrapment and death of Floyd Collins had occurred only 30 years before, and this was not the kind of notoriety the park wanted or needed.

Park administrators and cavers had a common interest in park caves, but of course the interest came from different angles. In order to explore caves in or near the park, the cavers had to plan trips far in advance, and travel hundreds of miles from home. They saw that NPS staff lived right on top of or near park caves, yet did not explore them. To cavers, this was inconceivable! (Yes, hear that just like in the Princess Bride movie). Here are a couple of stories about these cavers that illustrate the depth of their desire to explore.

In the early 50s, Phil Smith and Roger McClure were students at Ohio State University. They met Jim Dyer, who had moved up to Ohio after retiring from being Manager of Floyd Collins Crystal Cave. Phil and Roger decided that caving in Kentucky was for them, but they had no car. So they packed up kits in duffel bags, and hitchhiked to Mammoth Cave! One time they did not get to Cave City until the wee hours, so the few cars passing by would not pick them up. The only solution to their problem was to walk the nine miles to Mammoth Cave with the duffels on their backs! The manager at the Mammoth Cave Hotel would let them spread their sleeping bags on the porch so long as they packed up before guests started coming downstairs. On one of these hitchhiking trips to Mammoth Cave it was bitterly cold, so the man-

ager let them sleep on the lobby floor. They befriended some of the Guides, who loaned them Coleman lanterns so they could better see Dixon Cave. To park administrators, living in their comfortable homes on top of the cave, the idea that anyone would go to such great lengths in order to explore holes in the ground would be, well, inconceivable!

Here is another story, after the establishment of CRF, but it too shows that these cavers would do whatever it took in order to get underground in Kentucky. Back in 1964-65, Stan Sides would skip out of medical school classes at University of Missouri in Columbia on Friday afternoon, and catch a Greyhound bus to St. Louis with his duffel of cave gear, sleeping bag, etc. First and second year med school had Saturday classes until noon, so there was considerable risk in cutting classes due to possible pop quizzes.

Red and Patty Jo Watson would pick him up at the bus station in their VW Microbus, and then drive to Flint Ridge. Typically, Patty Jo would ride in the back with

their daughter Anna while Stan drove. This allowed Red to sit in the front passenger seat where he would cradle a portable typewriter in his lap so he could type out letters as they rolled down the highway. Red was President of the Cave Research Foundation at the time and there was much to do. This was of course an avocation as both he and Patty Jo were professors at Washington University, which left little spare time. As Red would near completion of a letter, he would ask Stan what town was coming up. Then he would finish the letter for mailing at that town's Post Office.

They would arrive late in the evening or the early wee hours, and get to bed in the little building CRF called the Spelehut or the back bunkhouse, depending on availability. Saturday would be consumed by a long cave trip that lasted well into the night. Sunday was a time for writing trip reports and packing up muddy cave gear for the return drive. Red and Patty Jo would take Stan back to the bus station in St. Louis for the long ride back to Columbia, followed by a late walk home



Figure 1. Flint Ridge cavers attend the 1955 NSS Convention. From left to right are Jim Dyer, Tony Vanderleeden, Roger Brucker, Joan Brucker, Philip Smith, Beverly Bixler, David Jones, Roger McClure, and Jacque Austin.

Photo likely by Bill Austin.

with his duffel of dirty cave gear. Monday morning early saw Stan back in class for his medical studies. This routine happened several times a year. Now it is about 50 years later, and Stan is still active with CRF.

When Adversaries Worked Together

Adversaries can of course become allies in extremis, and during the 1954 Crystal Cave expedition there was a forest fire, which expedition cavers helped the park to put out (Lawrence and Brucker, 1955). Another example where the adversaries worked together was in the case of a man trapped in a cave near Sulphur Well in 1955 (Brucker & Watson 1976). The park was contacted for help, who in turn asked Bill Austin, Manager of Crystal Cave, to help. Bill used a car jack and boards to raise heavy slabs of rock off of Mr. Fancher and save his life (Roger Brucker, personal communication). These incidents with positive outcomes may have helped to soften hard feelings between cavers and park staff where that existed.

A Crucial Bit of Advice

Central Ohio Grotto cavers had no luck getting permission from MCNP to explore and map caves in Flint Ridge. The cavers tried rebranding themselves as the Flint Ridge Reconnaissance, a special project of the National Speleological Society (NSS). This way, their stature was elevated from being a bunch of cavers from Ohio to an arm of a national organization (Figure 1). To build credibility, a group of the cavers attended a December 1955 American Association for the Advancement of Science meeting, and Brother Nick Sullivan, then president of the NSS, presented a paper by Roger Brucker on the Flint Ridge Caves (Brucker & Watson 1976). With this elevated status, negotiations with the park could potentially be more successful, and a national organization could also talk with NPS officials at the Washington and Regional levels. At times it seemed like progress was being made, but then permission would still be denied. Part



Figure 2. Ranger Joseph Kulesza in uniform at Mammoth Cave National Park. Photo courtesy of Mary Jo Veluzat, his daughter.

of the difficulty was the strained relationship between the park and Floyd Collins Crystal Cave owners. The week long NSS Expedition in Crystal Cave in 1954 put these two organizations in the same folder, as far as the park was concerned.

Park Ranger Joseph Kulesza (See Figure 2) understood this problem and advised the cavers to establish a science-based organization (Brucker and Watson 1976). Ranger Kulesza had spent a lot of time playing cat and mouse with explorers going into park caves illegally, and perhaps realized the futility of this situation. According to Dr. Stan Sides, Joe Kulesza was the first park employee to realize that cavers were best managed as partners and allies. He had a genuine interest in the discoveries being made by cavers, and was park superintendent when the Flint Ridge Cave System and Mammoth Cave were connected in 1972. Cavers formed a good relationship with Mr. Kulesza. For example, Stan Sides would visit Joe Kulesza at his home after a CRF expedition to give

him the news of any discoveries. Here is another touching example: Roger Brucker visited Mr. Kulesza just before he passed away. They had worked together for many years, and Roger told me that after he left the nursing home, he wept.

By taking Mr. Kulesza's advice and forming a science-based organization called the Cave Research Foundation in 1957, the cavers put some apparent distance between themselves, the NSS, and Crystal Cave management. As Ranger Kulesza predicted, this science-based organization did reach an agreement with the park to survey and explore caves on Flint Ridge. That was in 1959 and the foundation is still supporting research of many kinds including cartography of park caves.

Concluding Thoughts

Park administrators, law enforcement rangers, and non-guide cave explorers went through some difficult years characterized by poor understanding, poor communications, and lack of agreement. Ultimately though, with some crucial guidance from Ranger Joseph Kulesza, the Cave Research Foundation was established and agreement was reached. This initially rocky relationship has been mostly positive in the intervening decades. In 2013, the relationship between Mammoth Cave Guides and non-Guide cavers came full circle when CRF fielded the first all-NPS Guide exploration and survey team during the October CRF Expedition (Olson, 2014). Finally, in Red

Watson's satirical "Jaws" spoof called "Maws" (Watson 1976), cavers and park staff at Big Cave National Monument are lampooned equally. At the conclusion of the story though, "Ranger K" and the "Speleologist" are allies, which is a good and fitting end.

References

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