



Fort Stanton's Priority Seven Dig  
**DISCOVERY!**  
BY JOHN MCLEAN

September 1, 2001

**A**t about 10:00 in the morning, Lloyd Swartz, Andy Grieco, Don Becker and I pick up our gear, sign out and head into Ft. Stanton Cave. Our gear for this trip includes a 20-inch BMX bicycle wheel wound with wire that will act as the antenna for a low-frequency beacon. Bob and Deb Buecher will remain on the surface to locate a surface point over the current end of the dig. A CB radio with downconverter for voice communications, with a set of gel-cell batteries and extra water, make an unusually heavy load for a day trip. On the last trip, we had dug into a couple of mini-van-sized rooms in the breakdown, but the current dig was not terribly encouraging. We had collapsed one end of the lower room to stabilize a dig straight down through the floor, and after moving the rubble were looking about nine feet down a narrow slot. We could see there was an opening at the bottom going back under the south wall of the room, but it looked no more promising than many too-tight digging spots. We had run out of time and energy the last trip when we were about halfway down, and the mini-van had shrunk to the size of a Volkswagen in accommodating the spoil.

When we arrived this time, after negotiating the horrible crawl resulting from the last several trips, we found the lead blowing lustily. While I set up the beacon and the voice radio, and made contact with the Buechers, Lloyd

charged the digging face with his usual energy. Don and Andy manned the haul line. When Don's turn came to dig, he was faced with a large boulder of rather rotten limestone that would move in place, but couldn't be brought out. After chipping away for some time, he was able to move the reduced boulder into a niche in the wall of the dig. Lloyd went back in and managed to break enough small pieces off the boulder to allow us to haul it out with a rope wrap. He then moved some more rock and thrust his head into the opening. "I can see open space going down about ten feet". He then backed through the opening and we waited as we heard him scuffling down the chimney. "I'm at the top of a room — the floor is about ten feet below me, but I don't think I can get down". After hanging in the chimney in the ceiling trying vainly to locate a foothold, he gave up and dropped the last few feet into the room.

I backed into the chute, over a rock with a wonderful "breastbone gouge" in the middle, and climbed down to the top of the drop. At Lloyd's direction, I chimneyed along the top of the room and attempted to climb down one edge, only to slide out of the chimney and drop to a boulder. I wasn't going up that way. After some discussion, Don rigged the haul line as a handline, and he and Andy joined us. We were in a breakdown room about eight feet wide and 20 feet long with a crack next to the south wall that looked down into more

open space. I set up the beacon in that room and called the surface. The crack turned out to be a tight chimney down to another room that also belled out, but was a shorter drop. Suddenly Lloyd was shouting "We're through! It's passage, and there are gypsum needles here!" Sure enough, a crawlway about five feet wide and two feet high headed south off the bottom of the last room. The floor of the crawl was fresh-looking mud, but the ceiling was decorated with large starburst gypsum crystals, the largest single "flowers" I had seen in the cave. Lloyd immediately came up with the name Starry Night Passage as we broke out the survey gear, flagging tape and camera.

I set up the beacon for one last fix, and called the Buechers on the voice radio "We've broken through. We're in solution passage headed into solid limestone."

In the Starry Night Passage we headed south for about 60 feet and came to an enlarged bend to the east forming a room about five by five feet. The ceiling here was also decorated with beautiful starbursts. We continued the survey to the east, reaching a sharp bend to the northeast. Two stations past the bend we came to the apparent end of the pas-

**Photo**

**One of the first squeezes in Fort Stanton's Priority Seven Dig.**

Photo by John Ganter.



**Donald G. Davis manhandles caver's packs up the awkward climb near Menacing Dome.**

Photo by John Ganter.

sage. Don, however, looked under a ledge and found a gale of air blowing out of a continuation of the passage about three feet wide and four inches high. We had left the radios, packs and tools back at the start of the passage, but

vey as we go." Still raving, Lloyd came back. "What did you see?" I asked. "I can't describe it — you'll have to wait and see yourself." We quickly surveyed to the end of Starry Night Passage and stood amazed at the edge of a

Don was not deterred. Finding a flat rock, he began scooping out the mud, and opened a space barely large enough to squeeze through on his back. He reported, with a laconic air "Six feet to my left is a blank wall"; we groaned "—and the right is going, walking passage".

We surveyed down this passage, five feet wide and eight feet tall and getting bigger, with mounting excitement. Suddenly Lloyd began shouting "I can't believe it, I've never seen anything like it — how will we ever get across it?" I said, "C'mon back Lloyd, we have to sur-

25-foot wide and high borehole passage. The amazing feature of the passage was a pure white pool deposit that ran the length of the passage and was confined on both sides by mud banks. The mud showed ripple marks, and flow structures as sharp as if they had been deposited yesterday — totally inconsistent with the chalk-white sides and bottom of the dry pool occupying the deepest part of the passage. Once again Lloyd came up with the perfect name: "This must be the Snowy River," and Snowy River Passage it became.

We stood for several minutes taking in the scene and discussing how we might possibly explore farther without damaging the pristine pool deposit that blocked progress to the south, where we could see at least 200 feet of walking passage. Then we turned and began surveying north toward the breakdown. There were no obvious leads off the passage, and we saw only one tight but diggable lead in the breakdown that appeared to go north for another 45 feet. It was getting close to midnight, so we finished the survey, packed up and headed out. We paused on the bank of Snowy River and enjoyed the view, thinking of all the long days of digging and frustration. "This is what it's all about, folks." ■