

The Winds of Snowy River

A personal recap of the October 2006 Expedition

By Richard Rhinehart

Don Sawyer Memorial Hall is an impressively large chamber. Stretching a full 700 feet, the underground compartment is one of the largest known rooms in New Mexico's Fort Stanton Cave, a multi-mile labyrinth of corridors and compartments that some have called the American West's Mammoth Cave.

Standing alone on a crest of a breakdown hill in the center of the room, I could not see nor hear my companions. Yet, I had left the team minutes before at the northern end of the Hall, where efforts were continuing to excavate a vertical shaft leading down to the Mud Turtle Passage, a side corridor of the legendary Snowy River.

Discovered through a lengthy dig that ended in 2003, Snowy River is one of the most significant American cave discoveries of the young 21st century. Reached through the tortuous Priority Seven series of squeezes, crawls and climbs, Snowy River is celebrated for its white calcite "river" of stone that stretches for miles underneath New Mexico's Capitan

Mountains west of Roswell. Exploration is as yet incomplete, owing to concerns by the managing Bureau of Land Management, who believe the Priority Seven route to be unsafe for routine travel. Cavers and speleologists are eager to return to Snowy River to continue exploration and scientific study, respectively, so efforts have been undertaken to excavate an alternate route that will be safer and quicker.

Rio Rancho caver John Corcoran has directed project activities in Fort Stanton Cave for many years, and he has recruited a variety of talented and enthusiastic cavers. Though the majority of these cavers have come from New Mexico, others are increasingly participating from adjoining states, including Colorado. With this growing attention, the Bureau contributed the use of an old university farm bureau research station near historic Fort Stanton, providing expedition participants with a splendid field house only minutes from the cave.

Coloradans Donald Davis and John McLean had long encouraged me to participate in a Fort Stanton expedition. During the mid 1980s, prior to the discovery of inner Lechuguilla Cave, I regularly traveled to southern New Mexico to participate in Cave Research Foundation expeditions to Carlsbad Caverns National Park. Donald had often participated in these Carlsbad expeditions,

and so his support and eagerness for Fort Stanton convinced me to spend a long weekend this October at Fort Stanton.

Standing alone in the center of Don Sawyer Memorial Hall, I recalled my first visit to Fort Stanton, during the Thanksgiving weekend in 1976. As a sophomore college student, older, wiser cavers had told me I needed to see Fort Stanton Cave to be properly exposed to the full caving experience. High school friend Bill Maron, back from college for the long holiday weekend, agreed to take the long drive with me from Boulder.

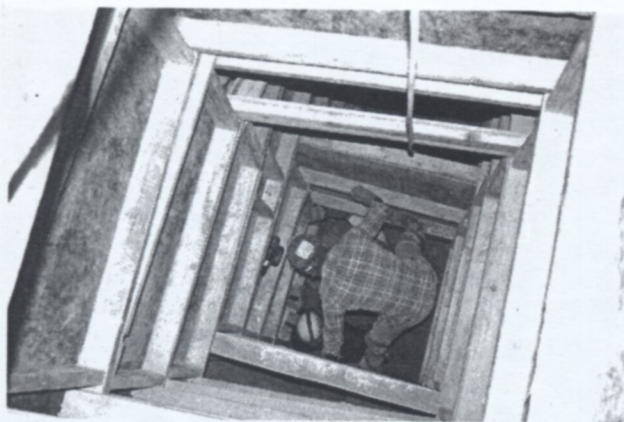
Fortunately, two New Mexico cavers happened to arrive at the cave's sinkhole entrance at virtually the same moment as our arrival. Impressed by their knowledge of the cave, Bill and I decided to join their trip rather than wandering about on our own. Promising us the full Fort Stanton experience, they first brought us to Valentine Passage, a sizable chamber that had been revealed through the Roaring Hill Dig Project by Lee Skinner and others only five years before.

More used to the small, squeeze passages of Colorado's caves, I was thrilled and amazed by the enormity of Valentine Passage, the light from my Premier carbide lamp being swallowed by the darkness. The trip from the entrance – about a mile I am told – seemed impossibly long and remote that day, even

Photo:

Donald Davis awaits the arrival of a bucket from the dig face at the Don Sawyer Memorial Hall dig.

Photograph by Wayne Walker.



It's a long way down - the timbered shaft in Don Sawyer Memorial Hall appears intimidating, but is an easy descent and ascent, thanks to the wooden shoring installed by project members.

Photograph by Steve Peetman.

though the route is mostly walking through spacious trunk passage. With the warm light from the Premier lamp feebly lighting my way, I recall clambering over the mounds of rock that filled the room. A decade later, cavers renamed Valentine Passage as Don Sawyer Memorial Hall, in honor of a Bureau manager who had worked closely with cavers in the 1970s.

Now, some 30 years later, I stood on the same mounds of rock. A rough visitor trail had been constructed through the chamber in the decades between my visits and, standing on it with my bright electric LED light on my helmet, I could finally see the walls and ceiling. The brightness of my light did not diminish my awe of the underground compartment - this room dwarfed anything currently known in Colorado.

Making my way back to the dig team, I came upon Buena Vista caver Donna Renee sitting alone near the entrance to the hall. My traveling companion for the weekend, Donna is a graphic artist who had become a caver after working as a guide at the Cave of the Winds. In July, Donna had participated in the expedition to the cave at my encouragement.

Finishing a lunch of salmon during a break from the ongoing dig, Donna wasn't ready to hop back into the line of cavers moving rock and dirt from the shaft. Learning that I hadn't seen the dripstone formations that filled the far end of Don Sawyer Memorial Hall, Donna suggested that we take a quick walk. Back down the trail I went, following Donna. Passing my turnaround point at the crest of the breakdown hill, we descended steeply to a relatively flat dirt floor.

From somewhere above us, I could hear the distinctive voice of Donald Davis. He had disappeared earlier with a group of cavers and had evidently gone to examine various high passageways that intersected Don Sawyer Memorial Hall. Donna pointed out the flowstone, stalactites and draperies that cover the wall of the chamber. She was right - I needed to see the decorations.

Back at the dig, progress during the day had been remarkable. Our team was inspired: just days before, during a mid-week dig, Chris Andrews and other cavers had finally excavated to a small air space where strong airflow

could be felt. This air was direct from the Mud Turtle Passage below. Once the Mud Turtle was reached, Snowy River could be safely re-entered.

With the goal so close to realization, buckets flew up the excavated shaft. Cavers were determined to remove a large hanging wall of rock and dirt immediately above the breezy dig face. The shaft itself is more than 20 feet deep, with secure timbering in place to keep it safe. Since the dig had followed the wall down into the breakdown, the teams ended up digging underneath the upper shaft, leaving the spooky wall. Understandably nervous about

the overhanging mass, the dig coordinators had carefully reburied the entrance to the breezy dig face, allowing for major dig maintenance efforts by our Saturday crew.

The debris removal process allows for timely transfer of dig spoils. At the face, the digger and an assistant fill buckets and attach them to a haul line, which brings the filled buckets to the top of the shaft. There, the full buckets are unattached from the line and an empty returned to the face. Meanwhile, the full buckets are passed down a short line of cavers to the tramway, an efficient dirt transport system designed by Donald Davis. Each face bucket is poured into a larger permanent bucket attached to a pulley on the tram haul line, and this bucket is rolled down a tightly rigged rope to a waiting dumper at the designated dump area. Being on an incline, the buckets need no encouragement to slide. I found an easy push at the top sent the bucket down with so much force that the dumper didn't dare try catching it. Donna called this position the "bucket commander" position, and the station at the bottom, "The Pit of Despair," since it was distant enough from the others that conversation wasn't easy.

A large team allowed cavers to take breaks from the rigorous passing of the buckets. I found it easy to join the line and to drop out when I became tired or needed a few minutes' break. As the afternoon turned to early evening, the massive hanging wall in the shaft was largely removed. New shoring was in place, providing a convenient means to climb up



Richard Rhinehart and John Lyles fill buckets at the bottom of the excavated shaft on the last shift of the expedition.

Photograph by Wayne Walker.

and down the shaft. I found myself in the last two shifts at the face – each shift was carefully timed to 20 minutes to allow for rotating of the team through all the positions – and I was excited to notice air blowing through small holes along the edge of the shaft. Clearing loose dirt on the floor of the shaft, I excavated a metal spike that the others said was stuck in the rock, just above the buried shower curtain and wooden planking sealing the shaft's lowest, blowing level. As more holes became evident along the edges of the excavation, it was clear that we had completed our maintenance work and had reached the seal.

Unfortunately, at that point, it was time to exit and return to the field house. I placed tools on wooden ledges on the shaft and was the last to climb up. In Don Sawyer Memorial Hall, only a few cavers remained – most were already on the mile hike to the entrance.

I lingered a moment as the last cavers loaded their packs and we headed back down Roaring Hill, to the gate securing that section of Fort Stanton. Ours was the last trip of the year, since the BLM closes the cave to all visitors during the winter months owing to hibernating bats in Fort Stanton's entrance series.

John Corcoran is already planning for the next expedition, in late April 2007. With the removal of the dig seal within the first hour of excavation of the first day of the expedition, the team should be able to follow the air downward, through the breakdown to the survey flagging marking the end of Mud Turtle Passage.

Undoubtedly, during the winter months, John and his co-leaders will design and construct some sort of environmental seal that can be easily opened and closed in the connecting shaft. Such a seal is necessary to eliminate wind flow between the two sections of the cave. Exploration will begin again once the Don Sawyer Memorial Hall route is open, and numerous speleologists have indicated an interest in beginning detailed scientific studies of Snowy River. There's talk of drilling a hole from the surface to the Don Sawyer Memorial Hall area, to allow for communications and data lines.

Making our long drive north to Colorado on Sunday, Donna and I felt fortunate to have been welcomed to a project that will be remembered in the coming years for its innovation, determination and fellowship. Long after Snowy River is more fully explored and extensively studied, cavers who participated will look back at this era with a special pride of having contributed to the better understanding of a significant American cave. ■