The Northeastern Caver interviews

Clark Coolidge, NSS 1294

[Ed. note: Raised in Rhode Island, Clark is a writer who lived for many years in New Lebanon, NY before recently moving to Petaluma, Cal. His article “Recalling Knox Cave in the ’50s” appeared in the May 1974 NE Caver.]  

My first cave was Luray Caverns, on a spring trip to DC in 1948 when I was nine. Somehow I convinced my folks to take me. My cave interest was sparked by an earlier fascination with minerals. Probably one of those kids’ mineral-and-gem books had a picture of stalactites and of course I had to go there.  

My first wild cave was either Eldons Cave in West Stockbridge, Mass. or Twin Lakes Cave in Salisbury, Conn. This was in my early teens, again on a vacation trip with my folks. (They weren’t cavers and I put them through a lot in those years!)  

We used to tie an old manila rope to a tree and rappel off the cliff face at Diamond Hill Quarry in Cumberland, RI. No pads, no technique, no nothing—we just burned our ass and were probably lucky we didn’t fall. We used the same ‘method’ in places like the pit entrance to Bensons [Schoharie Co., NY—ed.] later. A high school friend was into rock climbing but actually had little experience or knowledge.  

I was introduced to the NSS by Lydia Neubuck at Adirondack Natural Stone Bridge and Caverns, Pottsville, NY. She recommended me for an Associate membership when I was 10 years old, which is why I have such a low number (1294). I did most of my early caving in NY State and the Berkshires with high school (non-NSS) friends, then gradually met NSS people here and there.  

I remember meeting Don Cournoyer, whose folks lived in Woonsocket, RI, around the time he was doing meteorology at Breathing Cave, Va., which whetted my appetite though I never actually caved with him.  

My first southern caving trips were with a guy named Bob Reen (I don’t think he was an NSS member though he knew some of them) who strangely vanished in 1958. He and I made a great southern swing in the late ’50s: Breathing, Morrill, Higginsbotham, a trip through the newly-blasted Austin Entrance led by Bill Austin himself, Boones Mill and Binkleys in Indiana, among others.  

A few years later I stayed in Roy Davis’ attic and caved Higginsbotham with Roy and Tank Gorin, and later others, during a Tennessee Cave Carnival based there. The height of my caving was in those years with those guys.  

I should probably also mention a much ear-lier (I was 14) late-night tour through Collins Crystal guided by Jim Dyer himself. He took us as far as the Trap and let me crawl through a few duck-unders telling me, “Floyd crawled through there.” Quite a thrill for a cave-crazy kid back then.  

I’ve probably been in 75 to 100 caves, largely outside of the Northeast, and all in the USA. The Northeast has the dankest darkest wettest coldest holes in my experience. I recall it being such a relief to get into the golden limestones of Tennessee’s Cumberland Plateau, for example. But the New York caves were definitely ‘the greatest’ before I knew better.  

[NE Caver: What changes in cavers, caving and landowner relations have you noticed during your caving career?] I can’t really answer this since I’ve done very little wild caving since the ’60s. Though I’m sure, from stories, that cave-owner relations have changed for the worse. I remember farmers in Tennessee in the late ’50s actually seeking us out to go have a look at a hole in the back pasture I’ve been meaning to look at’ etc. The of course they’d tell you all the wild rumors about how the cave was supposed to ‘run right through the mountain.’ Then when we got into Kentucky the attitude was suspicious: “What you wanta do that for? Haven’t you ever heard what happened to Floyd Collins?”  

[NE Caver: Compare novices now with novices when you were one. Words of wisdom for novices.] Can’t answer since I have no experience of present novices. I just remember being dangerously ignorant when I started out in the ’50s and was no doubt lucky not to have gotten into worse trouble than I did. Words of wisdom? Join the NSS!  

With the increasingly limited access to caves, some caves even destroyed or filled in, I don’t see a very bright future. When I first joined the NSS was trying to encourage interest in caving(!), if you can imagine that now.  

[NE Caver: Your thoughts on secrecy and withholding cave info.] Of course I’m from a time when there were way fewer cavers and naturally less damage, so I’m displeased to see such much limitation on location, permission, etc. But I do realize the increasing necessity for such. And I must admit that even back in the early days there were already strained owner/caver relations due to spent carbide dumped in pastures, gates left open, etc. And I’m ashamed to admit that I too smoked my name and NSS number on some cave walls. The NSS has certainly done a great job of changing a lot of such behavior.  

I’m 61 now and haven’t much of a caving career left. I still manage the wild tours in some
show caves now and then (Wyandotte, Mammoth, Carlsbad in recent years) but that's about it. Gung-ho caving is certainly a young folks' game in the main.

[NE Caver: Your favorite cave/ trip/ cave project. Most enjoyable/ memorable/ hilarious caving experience.] One of them has to be an amazing all-day Higgenbotham trip with Roy Davis, from the Historic Entrance through to the Great Extension and beyond, with Roy driving like Neal Cassidy at the wheel. Whew! Unforgettable, and Higgenbotham became my favorite cave. I'll also never forget having one of those ghostly 'Wait for me!' experiences in the same cave but without Roy that time. Another trip into Higg yielded a stretch of virgin cave: a pit leading to walking passage with gypsum flowers on the floor, ending in a strong blow hole too small to enter but diggable (and I suppose it was in later years). I'd still like to know where that went!

My least favorite most dangerous trips were all in the Northeast. Not entirely the fault of the caves; equally due to inexperience. I recall the first time down the Bensons pit entrance turning the wrong way at the bottom and trying to force through a pinching mud/ water-filled crack [The Knothole? -ed.] way further than we should have, ending up finally back out in the sink, bloody shirt torn off and maddened by mosquitoes. A nice one.

But the most dangerous by far was a visit to notorious Schroeders Pants Cave [Herkimer Co., NY. See article in the March '90 Caver -ed.] where a friend of mine (with a death wish) tried to climb down a wet rope left dangling in the pit that later killed [Jim Mitchell in 1965] and caused the closing of the cave. My friend 'somehow' managed to climb back up far enough that two of us were able to grab him under the arms and haul his sorry self up. A truly desperate close call. I have a photo of the three of us standing soaked and miserable in a field just after that experience. I still look at it sometimes. You can see we've just been through something all-ways dark.

These same two friends once managed to lose their light ('didn't you bring the extra batteries?!') in Bensons just where the passage branches of toward Secret, and got out somehow in about eight hours by feeling their way along. But I, thankfully, wasn't along on that one.

**Mines Data and the Mineral Resources Data System**

by Steve Higham

In Sept. 1993, I wrote an article for the *Caver* on northern New England underground mines. At that time, I had catalogued reports of 143 mines in the four-state region. Since then, I have not done a great deal of field work, but every once in a while I added more reports from various sources. My database now contains the following numbers of underground mines:

- New Hampshire: 78
- Maine: 151
- Massachusetts: 36
- Vermont: 108
- total: 373

In 1998, I learned about a CD-ROM mineral database that is published by the U.S. Geological Survey. It is called the Mineral Resources Data System (MRDS). The June, 1996 version, which I own, contains 111,955 records of mines, prospects, quarries, and deposits throughout this and even some other countries.

The MRDS database has 230 fields available for each entry. That is, up to 230 characteristics may have information for each entry. Many of these fields are not applicable or are empty for a given entry, but some of the more useful are:

- Size of production
- Ore body dimensions
- Type of workings (surface and/or underground)
- Location (text)
- Owner
- Year of first and last production

Database queries can be run. For instance, a search can be made for all the underground talc mines in Vermont. The quality and quantity of information varies from state to state. In New England, the best coverage is that for Vermont. There are 34 underground mines listed in Vermont (13 are talc mines), and 51 entries listed as both surface and underground workings.

If anyone wants an MRDS search done, email me at <srlingham@worldnet.att.net>. The MRDS might also be useful for turning up limestone or marble deposits or caves associated with quarries.

On a related topic, one day while web-browsing I found several sites that mentioned organized "caving diving" in abandoned Vermont marble quarries or mines. I found a (now gone) page with trip reports from the True Blue quarry in Proctor, which mentioned fixed permanent dive lines, underwater National Association for Caving Diving warning signs, and trips through underwater shafts and rooms. There is also at least one cave diving company (<www.mad-dog.net/places/caves.html>) advertising VT. quarry dives.