RECALLING KNOX CAVE IN THE 50's

by Clark Cooledge

I believe I first heard stories of Knox Cave from Don Cournoyer (then living in Woonsocket, R.I.) or Don Peters (then active in the Boston Grotto), who told of the recent breakthrough to the Alabaster Room. They said the cave was being operated by one Warren Enck, so I wrote asking permission to visit in June 1956, & received this letter:

"Mr. Enck worked for me a few months. Did not do as agreed and I hired others. First of Feb. this year the Caverns, rink, and 8 acres were leased to David Meese, 128 Maple Ave., Altamont, N.Y. Spelunkers still are permitted to explore. Since Enck was here about 3 miles more cave has been discovered beyond the Gun barrel. See enclosed map. Discovery was made Sept. 29, '54 & Oct. 3. Survey took 5 GE engineers 8 hrs. Oct. 16. Oct. 24 over 3000 ft more was traveled and many other reports have been made. The Gun Barrel is a tight crawl 48' long.

D. C. Robinson, owner"

So, in late June of 1956 my two Providence highschool caving buddies (Dave Berger & Ray Fletcher) & I drove to Knox Cave and met D.C. Robinson (or "Robbie" as he was called), who was an amazing old guy. The elderly, he one day raised a huge slab of limestone over his head to show us. His fondness for his cave was apparent and he loved to tell long rambling tales of early NY State caving to anyone who'd listen. He told us of huge "lost" rooms "just off the main cave" big enough that "you could drive a haywagon through 'em standing on top of the load with a pitchfork at arm's length and still not touch the walls or ceiling". These, he said, were available to anyone who could find and move "the right rock somewhere along the walls of the Big Room". He even offered a reward for discovery of same. Products of wishful thinking no doubt (Robbie really had the caving spirit!), but nonetheless teasingly possible, for in such joint-controlled cave systems as Knox, who knew what lay "just one joint over"?
As Robbie had said, the cave & rink were being run by a David Meese. The rink was going every night full blast. The cave lighting & stairways were in good condition. But there were few visitors. We had access to the cave day & night, and spent many hours following every lead and jamming into every crack we could find at all possible.

Negley was usually hanging around the rink & office (tho we never saw him in the cave). I remember him as a small furtive man who liked to insinuate that he had found passages unknown to other men. He mentioned a passage at the extreme north end of the Alabaster Hall, which he said could be followed for "a long distance" until finally one could crawl into and "lie down in a passage directly under the road and smoke cigarettes and listen to the cars go by". Naturally we checked this out, and the only passage he could have been referring to (a continuation of the joint north of the Alabaster Room) soon pinched out in a clay fill obviously never disturbed in human history. He also mentioned the same "huge rooms" Robbie had mentioned, but located them similarly "off the Big Room". We searched for these too, finding only a tight descending crawl at one side of the "Fallen Giant"-block which soon pinched out beneath breakdown. Negley's tales soon seemed to us total nonsense, even the barest mention of "Negley's Lost Passage" being enough to bring sardonic smiles, if not outright pandemonium laughter.

A more realistic mystery at Knox in those days: Did the south end of the Canyon Passage connect with the north end of Bat Row? We suspected both passages to be portions of the same joint, collapsed between by the entrance sink. But, despite Robbie's "GE engineers", no accurate survey of the cave existed at that point, to my knowledge. Did the hole at the top of the Canyon Passage terminus chimney continue above the breakdown into an upper level sequence of passages? We finally gave up attempts to scale the chimney, after bringing down too much loose rock for comfort. We then checked into the joint hole above the entrance toward this end, but found it quickly pinching out in clay.

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The "Minchner Map" of Knox Cave (continued)

Minchner is said to have found a room in the vicinity of the Clay Indian shaft which was visible through a narrow fissure but unenterable. He was unable to relate its exact location, but it may have been any of several rooms and passages now known in Knox Cave. In fact I have a small sketch map of the Clay Indian area, drawn in 1962, showing the room with the scaling pole indicated. It is labelled the "Mincher Room".

Minchner and Negley were contemporaries in Knox Cave exploration. They most probably met at one time as is suggested by the appearance of Negley's name on the map. It would be enlightening to talk to Minchner about the early exploration of the new section of Knox Cave.

References:


RECALLING KNOX CAVE IN THE FIFTIES

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My sketch map of Knox Cave was partly based on the mimeo-ed map I got from Robinson (long since lost by me, it lacked much definition on the newly discovered passages), and further filled out in considerable detail from my experience of the cave. Names for rooms & passages are those in use at the time. The distances, of course, are innaccurate, no compass/line survey being taken. The length of the Alabaster Hall, for instance, being much longer proportionally than it is shown. And the possible conjunction of the ends of Bat Row and the Canyon Passage thru breakdown at that point purely speculative.

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