

Spelunkers Live Dangerously



Mission accomplished: bats were there.



Are We Lost?



Fisher leads through crawl-way.



Carbide lamps light the way.



Time out over a chasm

Photos and Story by George Harrison

Spelunking, better known as cave exploring, can be as dangerous and exciting as mountain climbing, deep sea diving, and auto racing. Just ask any spelunker.

The gloomy darkness and fear of the unknown has led many people deep into the subterranean parts of the earth. Why they enjoy it, only an experienced spelunker can tell you.

The Nittany Grotto chapter of the National Speleological Society is the largest and most active cave exploring organization in the U.S. The club membership is usually about 80 students.

Rarely does a weekend go by at the University that some students are not exploring some new chasm in the mountains of Centre County.

The trip to Aitkin cave two weeks ago was rather routine to the four veteran members of the Nittany Grotto, but the amateur would probably find it a bit rough.

The purpose of the trip was to check the population of little brown bats that were using Aitkin this year for their annual winter hibernation. In 1948, before the cave was flooded, there were about 2,000 bats using the cave. In recent years, the highest number was 500.

Aitkin cave, one mile northeast of Siglerville, near Milroy, has a 3,000 foot passage. The cave has been known since the mid-1800's.

The four-member party included Paul Fisher, senior in liberal arts; Donald Berrilla, junior in electrical engineering; William Davies, senior in industrial arts; and Joseph Wible, senior in electrical engineering.

Equipment consisted of the oldest and most durable clothing available and a carbide or miner's lamp. Without this light, caving is almost impossible. A flashlight would be all right for a short time, but the batteries would soon burn out. The carbide lamp will burn for hours without refueling.

Besides being well-known for its high bat population, Aitkin cave is considered the orientation cave for new members of the Grotto. However, if this is just the orientation cave, most amateurs would find it advisable to stay away from the harder ones.

In order to get to the bat room, the party had to pass through many "crawlways" which were seldom more than two feet high and three feet wide. If one enjoys crawling through several inches of yellow mud, and likes to get mud in his hair, eyes, and mouth, then he will love spelunking.

After several false starts into wrong passages, the group chose the right one to the bat room. It took more than two hours to get to the destination, but the time and efforts were not in vain. Luck was with the group; the bats were there.

Fisher estimated that there were more than 100 bats in the room. He said that this was a good number for this time of the year. The main group of hibernators, he said, does not hang up for the winter until late October.

The bats were not concentrated in one part of the large room, but were on all parts of the ceiling and walls. Some were low enough to reach and examine closely.

A number of bats were disturbed, left their sleeping positions and flew at the carbide lamps.

After three hours and 15 minutes, the party emerged from the world of perpetual night into fresh air and sunshine. Covered with mud from head to foot, the weary group walked to a nearby stream and cleaned up for civilization.

The activities of the Grotto are fourfold. In addition to mapping and exploring caves, they conduct surface explorations for new ones, and clean out old caves.

Although many of the students are new to spelunking when they join the Grotto, once hooked, their interest usually continues long after they've been graduated. Just ask a spelunker.



A little help, please

Collegian Photo-Feature