

Powell's Cave

If there is a cave that Texans have a life-long commitment to, it's probably Powell's. While the activity at Honey Creek and Adams' (Sorcerer's) Cave have histories of more than 20 years, Texas cavers have been chipping away at Powell's Cave for 40 years.

It was first known as Jackpit, from the term "jack," meaning silver, and is thought by many to be the cave mentioned in J. Frank Dobie's book *Coronado's Children* as the place at which Jim Bowie buried a load of silver. Several springs occur where the cave stream comes to the surface and these served earlier as campsites on Comanche trails in the area.

Although locally famous since around 1916, the cave somehow escaped the attention of cavers until 1962. In May 1962, Dallas-Ft. Worth Grotto cavers heard about the cave and were able to make two brief explorations. It was clear that they were into a major cave and that some serious manpower would be required to explore and survey the extensive system we now know as Powell's Cave.

From the entrance north, there is an extensive low ceiling, duck walking, muscle wrecking area which leads to the second crevice passage - walking passage. We have been about 2 ½ miles up this with no end in sight. From this, passages branch off at intervals -



Lee Skinner at the survey thermometer during the September 1964 TSA project. *Carl Kunath.*

mostly crawlways about 2' high. One will branch into six, each of the six will branch into four, each of the four will branch into six more and on and on. None of these has a knee print in it.

—Katherine Goodbar to James Reddell, August 2, 1962

Unfortunately, the owner was negotiating a sale of the property and would not own the cave for much longer. The future owner, Virgil Powell, vowed that as soon as he took possession, he would bulldoze the entrance closed so as not to be bothered by visitation and liability. After some masterful diplomacy, Powell relented to the extent that TSA would be granted 48 hours over the Labor Day weekend of 1962 to explore, map and do what they could. In an amazing display of teamwork, 45 cavers mapped 19,000 feet! Powell's Cave was almost instantly the longest known in Texas.

Time has a way of changing things. Mr. Powell did not close the cave and gradually altered his view of Texas cavers. In 1964, TSA was again able to have its Labor Day project at Powell's Cave. This time the entire three-day weekend was available and the project was called "72." The participation was much larger than in 1962 with over 100 cavers attending. The attendance list published on page 127 of the September 1964 *Caver* is a Who's Who of Texas caving at that time. Portions of the 1962 survey had been marked with small metal tags. When cavers returned in 1964, they found that local treasure hunters had excavated beneath many of these markers, mistakenly thinking they marked locations for buried treasure—perhaps the fabled Jim Bowie silver.

At the conclusion of the 1964 project, an additional 21,000 feet had been surveyed and the total surveyed length stood at 7.6 miles. Dye tracing in September 1967 confirmed that Powell's was but a segment of a far larger system. Water enters Silver Mine Cave at the upstream end, continues through Powell's Cave and Neel's Cave, and emerges as Wolff Spring at the Lakeside Inn. From the entrance of Neel's it is 8,300 feet to Wolff Spring, as the crow flies. It also became painfully obvious that much of the original survey would have to be redone as inexperienced surveyors had made many blunders. Fortunately, Mr. Powell's perspective was improved when cavers generally showed themselves to be a responsible group. Permission was granted to visit the cave so long as the trips were infrequent and arranged well in advance.

In May 1967, Project 36 was attended by 36 cavers and 8,000 feet was surveyed or resurveyed. In September 1967, Project Push surveyed an additional 1,800 feet in the Upstream Water Passage. Project Washout in May 1968 drew only 15 participants, but they continued the Upstream survey another 1,200 feet and corrected survey errors in several other sections. Project Columbus in October 1968 added 2,135 feet of new survey in older areas. At this point many of the early explorers were burned out on Powell's Cave and moved on to other interests. After a ten-year lapse, Project Old and New was held in September 1978. Nineteen participants explored further in the Root Route area, discovered the Night Gallery, and added a total of about 2,000 feet of new passage to the map.

When cavers returned to Powell's Cave in 1978, they had to dig their way into the cave as the entrance had partially collapsed and filled with dirt during the ten-year lapse. The cave entrance (thought to have been made around 1900) was a

Powell's Cave presently has a surveyed length over 14 miles and a secure position at second place on the long cave list for Texas. Who can guess at the full extent of the system? As yet, no comprehensive, accurate map of the Powell's Cave System has been produced although it may yet occur. See the map of the Entrance Maze to better understand the difficulty in producing an accurate, complete map. There are additional karst features that are "obviously" portions of the system but have not yet been physically connected. The Meteor Crater suddenly subsided in August 1938 (some locals thought it was the result of a meteorite impact) and offered access to a short section of the same stream that flows through the Powell's-Neel's System. A water well was drilled into a lake room found upstream from the crater. Since the collapse, continued erosion has blocked access to the stream passage. Silver Mine Cave has been surveyed close to the upstream branch of Powell's Cave, but an actual connection has proved to be elusive. Thistle Sink is directly above the collapse that separates Silver Mine Cave from Powell's Cave. Silver Mine Creek at one time contributed considerable floodwater and sediment to the Powell's Cave System through a large sink in the creek bed called Egg Shaped Sink. Because of this influx of sediment, miners looking for treasure in Silver Mine Cave blocked the passage below Egg Shaped Sink with a steel plate.

Basically, Powell's Cave gave Texas cavers a "wake-up"

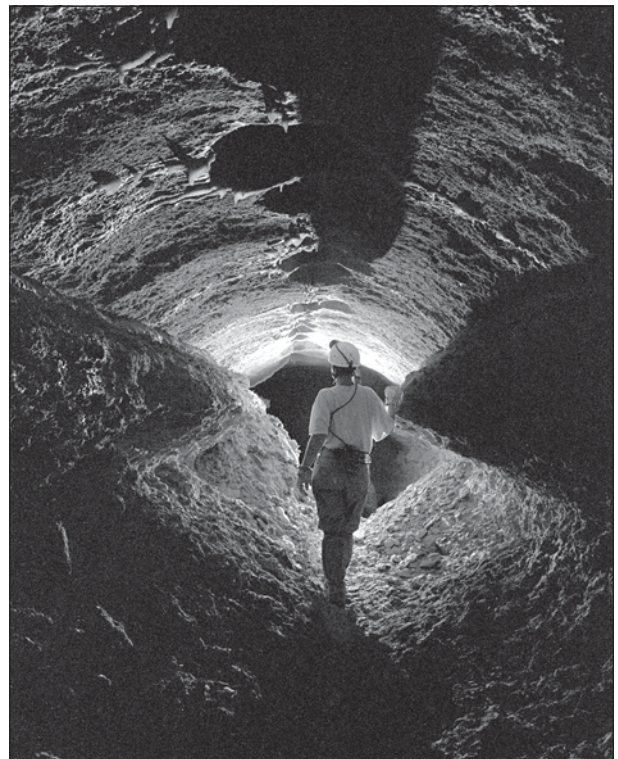


Cavers at Neel's Cave, September 1978. *Carl Kunath.* L-R: Mike McKee, Marcia Cossey, Gill Ediger, Logan McNatt.

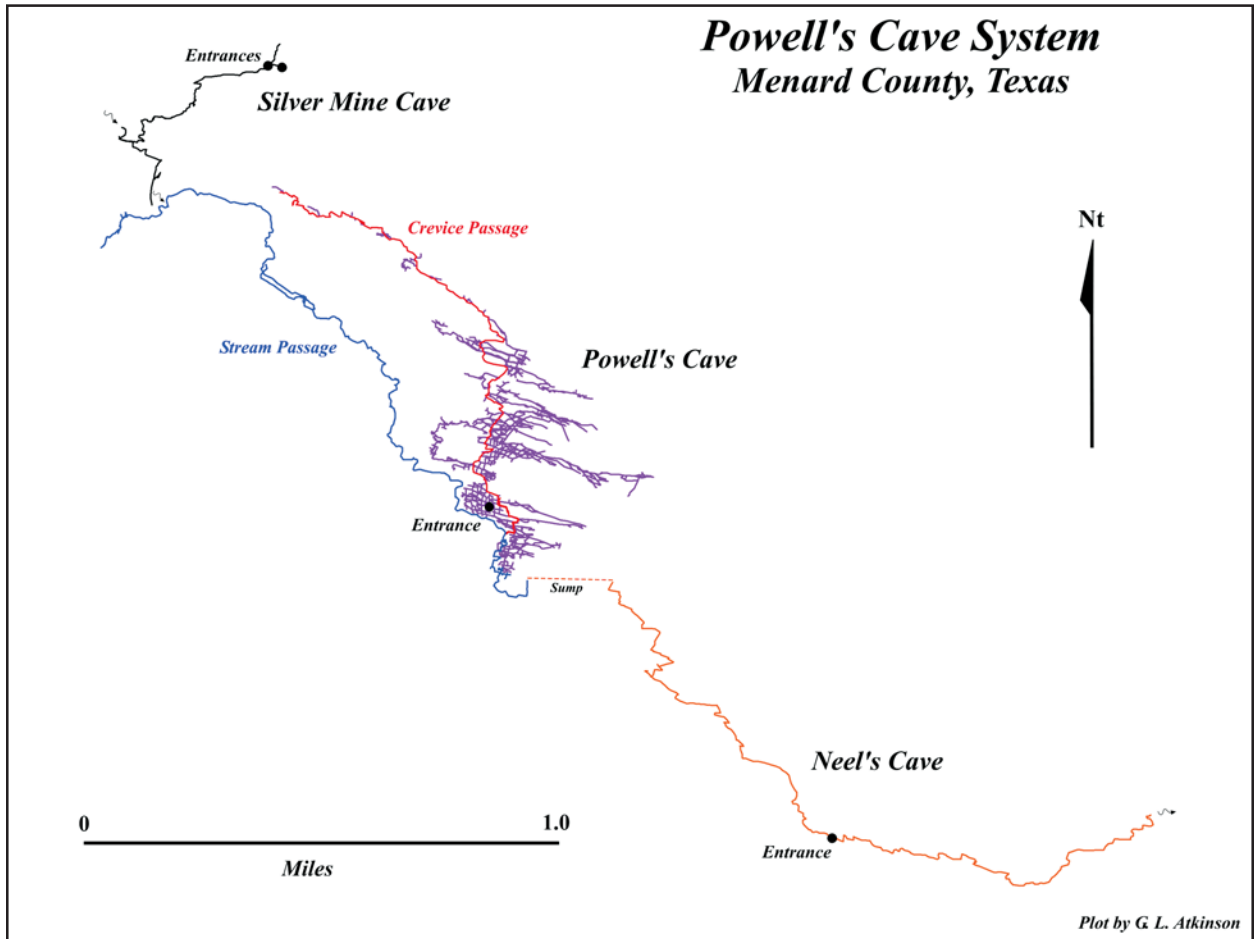


Scouts and Leaders at the improved entrance. November 2003. *Jerry Atkinson.*

In the Pipe: Kevin Jackson. First Row From Left: Bennett Lee, Walker Drewry, Blake Kohutek, Matt Ozerov. Second Row From Left: Zack Lockart, (Leaders) Ted Lee & Mike Drewry.



Sara Dierk in the Crevice Passage of Powell's Cave. *Terry Holsinger.*



Composite view of the Powell's Cave System from Silver Mine Cave to the surveyed end of Neel's Cave.

call. It clearly demonstrated that mass assault techniques wouldn't automatically result in a usable survey and that coordinating such efforts was beyond abilities of the era. In fact, all of Texas' major caves have been surveyed by far smaller groups working over a period of years, usually with only one or two leaders. Powell's cave may yet prove to be the exception to this rule.

— Carl Kunath with contributions from Jerry Atkinson and Bill Russell.

