

The Rise and Fall of the Texas Speleological Association

As the first caving groups in Texas formed and were recognized by the National Speleological Society as official grottos, there arose a loose confederation known as the Texas Region (of the NSS). Very shortly the reality of Texas' physical size became an issue. Texas caving had started in central Texas but, with time, several groups had appeared "out west." In January 1959, groups from Abilene, Andrews, and Ozona jointly proposed that the Texas Region be divided into Eastern and Western divisions. This seems odd in view of the fact that a very successful Region convention had been held in Ozona only a few months previously. This proposal seems to have died on the vine. It was not too long until the NSS withdrew its official support for Regions and the grottos were left on their own to do as they pleased. This resulted in the formation of the Texas Speleological Association (TSA) in late 1961. Nearly half a century later, we find that its history has been uneven at best.

At the outset, the principal caving groups were imbued with the enthusiasm that often follows the founding of a new organization. In 1955, the creation of a newsletter, the *Texas Caver*, was a significant landmark and a great cohesive force for Texas caving. Unfortunately, as the original staff moved on to other things, *Caver* production suffered and with it, communication among Texas cavers. The 1960 *Caver* staff struggled to produce two issues. A major positive influence for Texas caving was the resurrection of the *Texas Caver* in 1961. The new *Caver* with James Estes as editor (1961–1964) became a model of service to the cavers of Texas. Almost always on time, well edited, and with a satisfactory mix of content, it was the major unifying force for Texas cavers despite the fact that it received no financial support from the Association and was the "Official Newsletter" only by default.

The TSA has come close to disappearing several times. The closest call was apparently during the tenure of Dudley Roberts as Texas Region Chairman in 1959. There was a serious lack of communication during the year and this resulted in the resignation of Marvin Koepeke as Regional Emergency Rescue Team Coordinator. He said in his resignation letter:

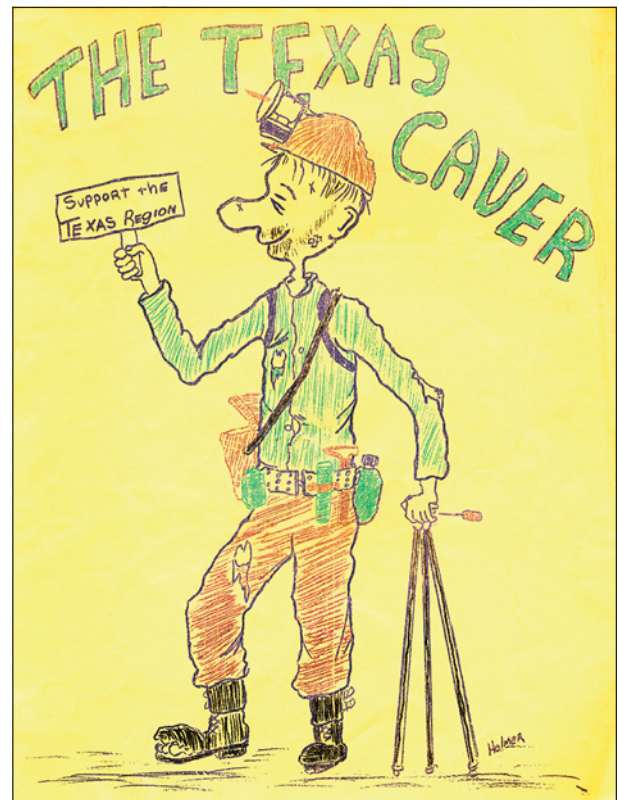
The Coordinator has tried in vain to receive information and have it published in the TEXAS CAVER about the rescue activities of the Texas Region. For several months the Coordinator has tried to find out the location of the Texas Region Convention and the tentative program schedule. On the evening of September 4, 1959, the Coordinator received a copy of the TEXAS CAVER through the mail and found he has a place on the program Saturday morning September 5, 1959.

The Texas Region convention location has been kept such a well guarded secret by the U.T. convention chairman that the Regional officers did not know the location of the convention until scarcely twelve hours before convention time, thereby making it impossible for any group or Grotto to be present or take part in the convention.

Indeed, Convention attendance was an all time low in 1959 with only 36 registrants. The situation is perhaps best exemplified in this July 12, 1959 letter from Dudley to Howard Slone,

then the Chairman of the NSS Audio-Visual Library Committee.

I can sympathize with you concerning the apathy and procrastination of speleologists. On May 14th, I wrote every grotto in the Texas Region concerning the convention and our publication, the TEXAS CAVER. To date, two months later, I still haven't received even a postcard in reply. It paints a rather sad picture. Perhaps we should organize a campaign of well-placed kicks with pointed shoes to help get some of these people on the ball.



Democracy reared its head when it was agreed that the TSA would be directed by a Board of Governors. This was organized Senate-style with each recognized caving group allowed to have two representatives with one vote each at the business meetings. A group was recognized "upon application" and the five members of some obscure club that formed the week before had the same political clout as the 50-member University of Texas Grotto. It is no surprise that there were problems. In a letter to the Editor for the April 1966 *Caver*, James Estes addressed the issue of representation at the TSA Board of Governors meetings:

Three clubs not listed in the official February membership list asked approval by the Board of

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Governors in San Marcos so that they might be listed as voting. There arose questions concerning their approval by the Board since they have only recently been organized, and are not NSS Grottoes [sic]. In spite of these questions, the delegates accepted these clubs anyway, and added them to the roster of voting delegates for that particular meeting. Perhaps at our next meeting, we will see other clubs added, such as: The Podunk Potholers Party, the Underground Society of Guano Goofers, and Secret Selective Society of Speleological Spoofers and Spooks of Skunk Hollow (SSSSSSSH!) Then perhaps at the meeting after that these groups will have already taken over the majority voting strength of the five chartered NSS Grottoes [sic] of Texas, thereby demonstrating what could happen when we fail to define membership correctly or allow short-lived, non-dues-paying groups to be recognized officially.

By the mid 1960s it was apparent that an organization with no dues, and with a membership defined as “all persons living in Texas who are interested” was facing some serious organizational problems. Aside from such fundamental issues as how to determine a quorum and make changes in the By-Laws when the membership could not be counted, this also led to the topics of conservation and controlling access to the caves. At the TSA BOG meeting in the fall of 1964, the Alamo Grotto proposed that TSA membership cards be issued so that cave owners would have a means to verify the reputation of potential visitors. While everyone recognized the problem, there was no clear method of fairly issuing such cards. The whole topic received some lively discussion and was tabled until the next BOG meeting. Pete Lindsley was elected TSA Chairman for 1965 and it fell to him to moderate the debate which often became rather heated during the next few months. The cavers were about evenly divided on the question of making TSA a more formal dues-paying, card-carrying organization or leaving it as it was but no one was able to devise a method to make a card plan work in actual practice. Following sometimes passionate discussion, the question was dropped as being too divisive. It was generally agreed that a NSS membership card would serve to introduce and qualify cavers to cave owners and that TSA needed a good conservation and information pamphlet that could be distributed by all members. (See Lindsley’s letter of May 1, 1965.)

Meanwhile, in 1965, the *Caver* had moved from Abilene to Dallas with a new staff and, while not quite as timely, it served well as a newsletter.

In 1967, the *Caver* returned to Abilene but with a different editor. The new editor did not empathize well with the current caving community and by the end of 1968 the *Caver* had ceased to serve as a newsletter. After a year of often ill-humored discussions and diplomatic blunders, the *Caver* was moved to San Angelo and completely revamped. This was a perfect spark-plug and the TSA came alive as never before. For the next few years, the TSA had wonderful conventions and an excellent newsletter that was produced by a different editor each year. However, by the mid-1970s, the TSA was again in serious trouble as the original movers and shakers withdrew from speleo-politics, the *Caver* faltered, and the whole scene began to disintegrate.

Beginning in 1977, there were multiple *Caver* Editors and frequency of publication fell to eight, six, and finally to four issues per year. One volume of the *Caver* eventually took several years to complete as current issues leap-frogged around it. In effect it became a spasmodic digest rather than a newsletter.

This situation was directly reflected in the health of the TSA. In practical terms, the TSA was dead. In many of the next years it would struggle to effectively fill the elected offices and was often incapable of mustering enough interest to have a legitimate Board meeting.

In 1980, James Jasek pleaded with TSA members to “Save The *Caver*.” There were several responses; among them:

Enclosed is a small donation to the “Save The *Caver*” fund. If money alone will save the *Caver*, it may squeak by another time.

The *Texas Caver* is frequently in crisis conditions; nearly going down for the third time. Let me toss one final life preserver to the incipient victim:

The *Texas Caver* should be the “Official Publication” of the Texas Speleological Association. The TSA should be a group of dues-paying, card-carrying cavers. Bill Russell will be screaming and shouting at this point, insisting that TSA must remain loose, flexible, open to all, mellow, etc. I don’t disagree with any of that, but first the TSA must exist and, right now, that appears uncertain. Accept the fact that if the *Texas Caver* dies, TSA dies along with it.

I belong to many organizations. I pay dues to all of them—except one. Why should we expect an organization as informal as TSA to be a success and to adequately support a monthly newsletter? It’s asking a lot. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t, and it’s always a close decision.

What’s the answer? I think it’s simple:

1. Reorganize the TSA to be a dues-paying organization. I suggest \$10 annually to begin with.
2. Use the dues money to support the *Texas Caver*. Every member helps support the *Caver*—every member gets a subscription.
3. Charge members a break-even registration fee at Conventions. Charge non-members 50% extra. Make an incentive to be a member.
4. If there is money left over from the dues, use it to defray accidental deficits from Conventions and Projects. If there is still money left, donate it to the Texas Speleological Survey. Do all this before you give money to any other cause. Charity is wonderful — begin it at home.

Texas caving has been sliding downhill for many years. It is crucial that the BOG take affirmative action now.

SAVE THE TSA !!!

—Carl Kunath

Near the end of the 1970s, there was a period of worthwhile activity centered on the San Antonio cavers. Several mini-projects were initiated and sequential reports appeared in the *Caver*. Regrettably, it didn’t last and by the mid 1980s, the TSA was headed down once again. I think this decline is partly due to the emotional let down that naturally occurred following the 1978 NSS Convention in New Braunfels. Almost all of the important Texas cavers were involved in the preparation and execution of the Convention and were physically and emotionally exhausted by the ordeal. For many, it was time to get back to caving and to take a long break from politics and organizational hassles.

In 1981 TSA at last revised its By-Laws and began to sell a blanket membership that included a subscription to the *Texas Caver*. This finally ended a bizarre 20-year era where the *Texas*

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Caver had not been officially supported by the TSA and the Editor was not responsible to the TSA although it was the “official publication of the TSA.” Strange days, indeed. At last, TSA could define its membership!

This essay purports to discuss the TSA but, again and again, I find the topic drifting to the *Texas Caver*. Some would hotly debate the issue, but seasoned observers tend to agree that the two issues are inseparable. The fortunes of Texas cavers are bound to the *Texas Caver*. History shows us that a strong *Caver* does not guarantee a strong TSA but that a weak *Caver* guarantees a weak TSA. It is that simple. No organization can function

properly without good communication. If there is a healthy, cogent, and timely *Caver* then all is well. If not, the whole organization rapidly falls apart at the seams.

The next fifteen years of TSA history are distinctly lackluster. The traditional Labor Day projects were abandoned after 1970, some of the Conventions were so poorly organized that they were not worth the trouble to attend, and one never knew when, or if, the *Texas Caver* would publish. Unfortunately, this does not seem to be a temporary condition. Although the *Texas Caver* has at last achieved official status and is presently supported from the TSA general fund, it has often been ineffective

Texas Region and TSA Officers

| YEAR | CHAIRMAN | V-CHAIRMAN | SECRETARY | TREASURER |
|------|-------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1956 | Roy Pietsch | Arthur Carroll | Harvey Cartwright | Nancy Austin/Ken Baker |
| 1957 | Arthur Carroll | Dave Kyser | Bart Crisman | Ken Baker |
| 1958 | Harvey Jackson | Tie: Don Widener & James Manning | Mills Tandy | Dave Kyser |
| 1959 | Don Widener | James Manning | Mills Tandy | Dave Kyser |
| 1960 | Mills Tandy | George Grey | Royce Ballinger/ Bob Littlefield | Dudley Roberts |
| 1961 | Arthur Carroll | Dudley Roberts | James Estes | |
| 1962 | Dudley Roberts | Bud Frank | James Estes | |
| 1963 | Chuck Larsen | Orion Knox | Katherine Goodbar | |
| 1964 | Orion Knox | Pete Lindsley | Katherine Goodbar | |
| 1965 | Pete Lindsley | Carl Kunath | Katherine Goodbar | |
| 1966 | Carl Kunath | Jim Estes/Bill Russell | Ollene Bundrant | |
| 1967 | Jack C. Burch | Dewayne Dickey | Ollene Bundrant | |
| 1968 | James Reddell | Tom Meador/John Fish | Ollene Bundrant | |
| 1969 | A. Richard Smith | David Merideth | Suzanne Wiley | |
| 1970 | Gill Ediger | Russell Harmon/Ron Fieseler | Suzanne Wiley | |
| 1971 | Barry Beck | Jon Vinson | Suzanne Wiley | |
| 1972 | William Elliott | Jon Vinson | Ollene Bundrant | |
| 1973 | Ronnie Fieseler | Neal Morris | Jerry Lindsey | |
| 1974 | Glenn Darilek | Mike Walsh | Barbara Vinson | |
| 1975 | Fred Paschal | Keith Heuss | Blake Harrison | |
| 1976 | Wayne Russell | Jim Clements | Ruth Darilek | |
| 1977 | Charles Yates | Dale Pate | Alicia Wisener | |
| 1978 | Jim Clements | Chuck Stuehm | Alicia Gale | |
| 1979 | Fred Paschal | Keith Heuss | Blake Harrison | |
| 1980 | George Veni | Jonathan Justice | Blake Harrison | |
| 1981 | George Veni | Jonathan Justice | Theresa Connolly | |
| 1982 | George Veni | Jonathan Justice | Patricia Herrera | |
| 1983 | Gerald Atkinson | Jon Cradit | Jocie Hooper | |
| 1984 | Andy Grubbs | George Love | Jocie Hooper | |
| 1985 | Andy Grubbs | Mike Warton | Johanna Reece | |
| 1986 | Mike Warton | Brian Burton | Johanna Reece | |
| 1987 | Brian Burton | Terry Holsinger | Andy Grubbs | Johanna Reece |
| 1988 | Jack Ralph | Joe Ivy | Carolyn Biegert | Johanna Reece |
| 1989 | Joe Ivy | Doug Allen | Johanna Reece | |
| 1990 | Joe Ivy | Catherine Berkeley | John Fogarty | Cathy Winfrey |
| 1991 | Doug Allen | Lee Jay Graves | Mary Standifer | Cathy Winfrey |
| 1992 | Carl Ponebshek | Butch Fralia | Mary Standifer | |
| 1993 | Carl Ponebshek | Carolyn Biegert | Troy Shelton | Christa McLeland |
| 1994 | Carl Ponebshek | Geoffrey Hoesse | Robin Day | |
| 1995 | Cathy Winfrey | Doug Allen | Gary Napper | Christa McLeland |
| 1996 | Cathy Winfrey | Barbe Barker & David McClung | Gary Napper | Christa McLeland |
| 1997 | Gill Ediger | David McClung | Troy Shelton | Christa McLeland |
| 1998 | Gill Ediger | Jim Kennedy | Alicia Whitfield | Christa McLeland |
| 1999 | Jim Kennedy | Terry Holsinger | Karen Perry | Aimee Beveridge |
| 2000 | Aaron Addison | Terry Holsinger | Robin Barber | Aimee Beveridge |
| 2001 | Terry Holsinger | Ron Ralph | Felicia Vreeland | Allen Cobb |
| 2002 | Jim Kennedy | Annmarie Mikelski | Joe Ranzau | Christi Bennett |
| 2003 | Terry Holsinger | Christi Bennett | Gerald Atkinson | Joe Ranzau |
| 2004 | Diana Tomchick | Joe Ranzau | Gerald Atkinson | Terry Holsinger/Michael Cicherski |
| 2005 | Bill Steele/Jim Kennedy | Jim Kennedy | Gerald Atkinson | Michael Cicherski |

as a newsletter: usually late and occasionally falling more than a year behind in publication. Tony Grieco's letter to Bill Elliott is an excellent illustration of the failure of TSA to provide useful, tangible benefits to its members. If an organization cannot provide basic services such as a timely newsletter, a membership roster, and a worthwhile convention, there is little reason to expect it to be supported, especially by those on the fringe of its area of influence.

Joel King began the *Activities Newsletter* in January 1993 to fill the need for timely communication in the absence of a regular *Texas Caver*. After three issues there was a lapse before Pat Copeland picked up the publication with November 1993 and carried it forward until November 1996 when Jim Kennedy took over until the "final" issue of April 2001. The final issue devoted five pages to yet another version of the TSA Constitution and By-Laws. The *Activities Newsletter* ended when it appeared that the *Texas Caver* was back on track. This was overly optimistic. In a way, the *Activities Newsletter* had torpedoed the already sinking *Texas Caver*. Following the death of Co-Editor Joe Ivy in September 2000, the *Caver* again collapsed and there were no issues produced for the first ten months of 2001. The next few years saw very occasional issues of the *Caver* and a succession of editors who, with the exception of Mike Moore, were derelict to some degree; occasionally disgracefully so. In the midst of this difficult period, Jerry Atkinson stepped in and resurrected the *Activities Newsletter* with the November 2005 issue.

Despite the advent of Internet communication, the Texas caving community is not nearly as close-knit as it once was. The fundamental issues of fashioning a vibrant organization of Texas cavers remain unresolved after countless revisions of Constitution and By-Laws during half a century of debate and struggle. What happens from this point is anyone's guess. Recently, there have been a few bright spots, notably the increased activity and awareness in the area of cave preservation and management. In fact, today the entire caving community is far more aware of its impact on the caves and is far better attuned to the complex, long-term relationship between caves, cavers, the environment, conservation extremists, and the general public. There were some horrendous negatives associated with the glory days of Texas caving. In earlier days it was thought that if no major speleothems were broken, the cave had been adequately conserved. Carbide was dumped (not even buried) in the cave—sometimes in the most outrageous places. Footprints appeared everywhere. Foreign materials were left in the cave. Names were smoked on the walls. In short, some early cavers were often speleo-slobs. Much of this was merely ignorance but the damage was the same. Let us not forget that, as a country, awareness of the environment and our impact upon it is a relatively recent phenomenon. In recent years, the Texas caving community has taken steps to redeem its tarnished honor with numerous conservation and restoration projects. Hope springs eternal.

Back in the 1980s when TSA was at something of a nadir, a few of the officers, past and present, made comments about the duties of members and officers:

Duties of a TSA member: "To be as big a pain in the ass as possible and as difficult as possible [in order] to keep the officers and committee heads on their toes."—John Gale.

Duties of the Chairman: "... the TSA Chairman's job is to keep track of those few people who show an ongoing interest in the 'organization' and to encourage them to take charge of TSA activities. He is the nucleus of the organization, and

should write letters, and encourage them [general membership] to help the vice-chairman in any way possible, pressuring everybody to be timely; to send out meeting announcements well in advance of meetings, call and get people to meetings, etc. In short, to expend the requisite energy to see that other people get the job done."—Gill Ediger.

"Apply diplomacy as needed to mediate major disputes. . . . Try to keep distant grottos from feeling alienated/neglected."—Jerry Atkinson.

Duties of the Secretary: "Heavy-duty job! This is a CON-STANT activity position."—Jocie Hooper.

Duties of the Treasurer: "The Treasurer needs to be attentive to details and very responsible. Procrastinators and idle minds need not apply."—Jerry Atkinson.

Duties of the officers (general): "I keep wanting to tell you that TSA doesn't really exist, but that's a bit misleading. . . . To suggest that it is an organization is even on the very fringe of reality. Officers create the 'organization' in whatever manner they dream up."—Gill Ediger.

"... the executive council is in a position to do the most harm to TSA by not doing their jobs or by doing a half-assed job. If they can't handle it they should step down immediately, and let someone step in who can and will. [They should be] responsible enough to keep up so no one gets mad at TSA because you didn't fulfill your obligations."—Alicia Gale.

One of the early proofreaders of this chapter pointed out to me the overall negative tone of this essay and I had to agree he was right. It IS a lengthy catalog of what did NOT go well with TSA. It is a fact of journalism that bad news and trouble get more attention than happy stories but I really did not intend for the story to be so one-sided. TSA definitely has had its good times. Its highs have been very high indeed. Through its auspices, there has been a Convention nearly every year for almost half a century. Most of them were worth attending and a few have been very exceptional. The TSA has also hosted three NSS Conventions in Texas; each better than the last. There have also been a good number of large Projects; some of them at caves that might not otherwise have been available to large groups. Those are the sorts of things that a political organization ought to be doing for its membership. Beyond that, TSA has had a touchstone effect. It has provided a measure of continuity through good times and bad. It is a meeting place and melting pot for the various organizations that operate under its maternal umbrella. The *Texas Caver*, Texas Speleological Survey, Texas Cave Conservancy, Texas Cave Management Association, and all the grottos, clubs, and societies that have caves as their focus benefit, however indirectly, from the fact that TSA exists. If there is an overall negative tone expressed here, it is probably because I am disappointed that TSA has not blossomed more. I always imagined that TSA would inexorably progress rather than often regress. Perhaps, for an all-volunteer organization with a widely disbursed membership on the margin of viable size and with many of its members being poverty-stricken students, the goals should be more modest. Broadly speaking, the TSA's function should be to provide Texas cavers with organizational benefits not otherwise available. TSS is the database and archive of caving information. Local groups fill the need for trip organization and equipment pooling. It is the large group activities—conventions, projects, conservation efforts, political activities and the support of a timely periodical—that require organization beyond the local level. Whether individual Texas cavers are wise enough to discern and obtain these benefits remains to be seen.