

TRIP REPORT FORM

AGGIE SPELEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

DATE: 06/17/2023

CAVE: Cottonwood

STATE: New Mexico

COUNTY: Eddy

SPECIFIC AREA: Coke Table Room, Second Parallel passage

TEAM LEADER: Micheal Mansur

TEAM MEMBERS: Paige Hudson, Will Flack-Robinson, Austin Vance

TIME ENTERED: 11:30am

EXIT TIME: 6:30pm

PURPOSE OF THE TRIP

Matching and repairing broken cave formations

BRIEFLY DESCRIBE YOUR TRIP AND ANY SPECIAL OBSERVATION

After loading the car in the brutal afternoon heat of Texas, Paige, and Will left from College Station, to Austin, around 1:30pm. Arriving in Austin the team of Aggies was finally joined together as Austin was picked up around 4:30PM. Next stop New Mexico, ETA: 1:30am.

The day started early on the 17th of June, as myself, Austin, and Will, awoke to the rising of New Mexico's desert sun. We could feel the ache in our bones after roughly five hours of sleep on the rocky red-dirt ground though the adrenaline and excitement of knowing we had a day of caving ahead of us fueled our morning as we rushed to eat breakfast and pack up camp to meet Mike down the road.

We pulled in around 9:30am to the BLM headquarters, the meeting spot Mike had designated earlier that week. My heart skipped a beat as we turned the corner and I saw his truck. We were here! Finally, I was meeting Mike in the flesh, and moments away from heading out to Cottonwood cave. After discussing our travel, debriefing for the day, and signing paperwork, we were in the back of Mike's truck heading an hour up the mountain on what was quite possibly the bumpiest and most frightening drive I've recently experienced. After arriving at the top of the mountain and with a pre-cave buzz in the air, we unloaded our gear and hiked roughly 15 minutes out to the cave.

After arriving at the grand borehole of the cave we geared up to the songs of swallows as they greeted us at the entrance. An hour's hike and crawl through the cave presented bats, gypsum, native sulfur, and beautiful cave formations that Mike noted rival that of Carlsbad Caverns in size. When our team arrived in the Coke Table Room where we would spend the next few hours, we were met with the stunning walls and overhang of stalactites raining from any barren space. A little lower than waist height the room was scattered with perfect tables. In front of us on a bed of rock lay broken

pieces of speleothem, our project for the next few hours! After a quick snack our team went straight to work repairing the gem of the day: Bart, a 21 inch stalactite. Bart was broken into three large pieces so Will, Austin and I with direction from Mike, marked, drilled, and installed the stainless steel joint reinforcement pins and custom fit a speleosplint to hold the three pieces together. After measuring out a stalactijack we epoxied the joints, worked in the stalactijack, and left Bart to do the rest of the healing! Mike even noted how impressive it was that we not only accurately drilled the hole the first time, but successfully repaired a difficult formation considering its size and amount of breaks. Tis the Aggie way! After conquering the project that was Bart, we spent the next few hours searching for matches in broken speleothem, repairing the matches we found, and repairing those of past projects that still needed attention. Austin, Will, and I now each have a speleothem nearly 800 feet underground named after us, an honor bestowed if you are able to find a match! Between the matches found and previous projects that needed fixing, we completed a total of seven repairs. The day's repairs challenged both our ingenuity, and our team work. With Mike's steady direction and hands-off teaching we were able to problem solve and successfully complete tasks together. For example, while Austin worked independently to repair his namesake "Austin," Will and I worked to repair Oliver, a thin stalactite with two breaks. Oliver was so small that he required a speleocup, a tool that demanded a delicate placement under the formation with precisely distributed tension in the rubber bands. After many trials and errors, Will and I managed to create the perfect balance to hold Oliver, who aside from Bart, easily demanded the most of our attention and creativity for a repair. Austin then finished his name sake shortly after we wrapped up our work with Oliver. Austin independently measured out a custom fit speleojack and speleosplint, as well as applied the epoxy!

Around 5pm we wrapped up our work in the Coke Table Room and packed up our gear before we did an awkward crouch-walk under the low ceiling and out of the room. Mike guided us to the other side of the cave for a brief recreational trip through another one of the project rooms. Here we took a muddy slide down through a small opening into a lower chamber where we crawled our way into the canteen room. A funky room with low ceilings, carved out holes, and speleothem sporadically draping from open ceiling spaces. The canteen room had a homey feel to it, a kind of comfort that would have allowed me to stay a little longer, though unfortunately we now had to make our way back out of the cave before we lost daylight on the surface. The journey back down the mountain was certainly one that would require ample light.

That night at camp we welcomed our warmer clothes as the night breeze settled in, and greedily ate our burgers cooked on the back of Will's car. I can't speak for Will and Austin but I myself was feigning off sleep as I cleaned the last of our dishes. Wishing to be asleep in my tent regardless of the uneven ground beneath. The day's work was long but oh-so rewarding. Austin slept under the cool covering of trees in a hammock, but while Will and I watched the night sky from our tents we saw a massive shooting star, the perfect way to close out a day of caving.

The next day our team left at 8am MDT and began the long drive back to Texas, dropping off Austin in Austin (haha) around 6:30pm CST, while Will and I arrived in College Station around 8PM CST.



The view from Will, Paige, and Austins campsite Saturday morning.
Photo by Paige Hudson



Team photo before we made our way out for the cave. L to R- Will Flack-Robinson, Paige Hudson, Austin Vance, and Mike Mansur



The team makes the hike to the cave opening
Photo by Will Flack-Robinson



Photo of Mike Mansur and Austin Vance as the team enters the cave
Photo by Paige Hudson



Paige Hudson keeps Bart stable as Will Flack-Robinson drills a pilot hole for the Q-tip
Photo by Mike Mansur



Will Flack-Robinson drills the hole for a stainless steel pin as Austin Vance holds a piece of Bart steady.

Photo by Mike Mansur



Paige Hudson putting the pieces of Bart together to find the team installed the steel pin seamlessly for a perfect match

Photo by Mike Mansur



Aggie Grotto smiles after completing Bart, their first repair.

Left to Right, Will Flack-Robinson, Paige Hudson, Ausin Vance

Photo by Mike Mansur



Paige Hudson applies epoxy to Oliver, a previous repair that needed a little
More TLC

Photo by Mike Mansur



Austin Vance works independently on his name sake "Austin." In front of him
Is the completed repair "Oliver."
Photo by Mike Mansur



Will Flack-Robinson and Paige Hudson work to apply epoxy and rubberbands to Elliot.

Photo By Mike Mansur



Will Flack and Austin Vance shortly after exiting the cave in the early evening

Photo by Paige Hudson



A cute desert cactus with budding flowers that just demanded our attention

Photo by Paige Hudson



Mike stopped on the side of the road on the way back from the cave to admire the sunset.

Photo By Paige Hudson