

Spelunking

By Liz Gibbons

My father liked caves and on our summer vacations if our travels took us near a cave we toured it. My first recollection of caves is Wind Cave in South Dakota. I actually did not get to tour it as I was sick with an upset stomach. But I remember my father telling us about the cave. That ignited my imagination of what being inside a cave would be like. Over the years we toured Wyandotte and Marengo Caves in Indiana, Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico, Cave of the Winds in Manitou Springs, Mammoth Cave in Kentucky, plus other smaller caves.

My brother got the spelunking bug, and when he was in high school. A neighbor friend who was attending Purdue arranged for him to go on some of the cave exploring trips with the Purdue Outing Club. They often drove to southern Indiana which is hilly and has rock quarries. On one trip one guy, Don Peters, wanted to explore a sink hole they had found. The other guys asked Don if he really wanted to do that. He said he did. So they lowered a rope to make sure it was long enough to reach to the bottom of the sink hole. It did. They attached the rope to a harness that Don wore and lowered him into the sinkhole. Suddenly Don was at the bottom which pulled the rope in with him. When initially checking the depth of the sink hole the rope had hit a ledge. But that was not the bottom. Don reached the ledge and then fell to the bottom. Now, what to do? The rest of their ropes were not long enough to reach Don. So two students drove off to ask a nearby farmer for directions to a store where they could buy some rope. When they returned there was the farmer and a few of his nearby neighbors. The farmland in that area was rocky and hilly and farming was difficult. One farmer commented. "I hope he found something good down there 'cause there's nothing good up here." The new rope was lowered to Don who attached it to his harness, and he was pulled out.

On another trip the two students who were leading it decided to explore a narrow opening that they felt sure would open into a large space. The ceiling of the passageway was low so they crawled on their bellies, one following the other. My brother said that as he crawled he continually tested if the space ahead was big enough for him to squeeze through. He determined if he spread his hand with his thumb touching the floor and his little finger touching the ceiling there was enough room to squeeze his body through. The two guys were right. The narrow passageway did open to a huge room. My brother said what was interesting was how dark the dark was inside those caves. They had carbide lamps and flashlights, but if they were all turned off it was darker than he had ever experienced. The story of this cave was later featured in the Indianapolis newspaper. My brother was happy to be part of the group who initially discovered it.