

Caving with Power Tools!!!

Cassell Cave, WV

A survey trip with the [Gangsta Mappers](#)

July 21, 2001 (part 5)

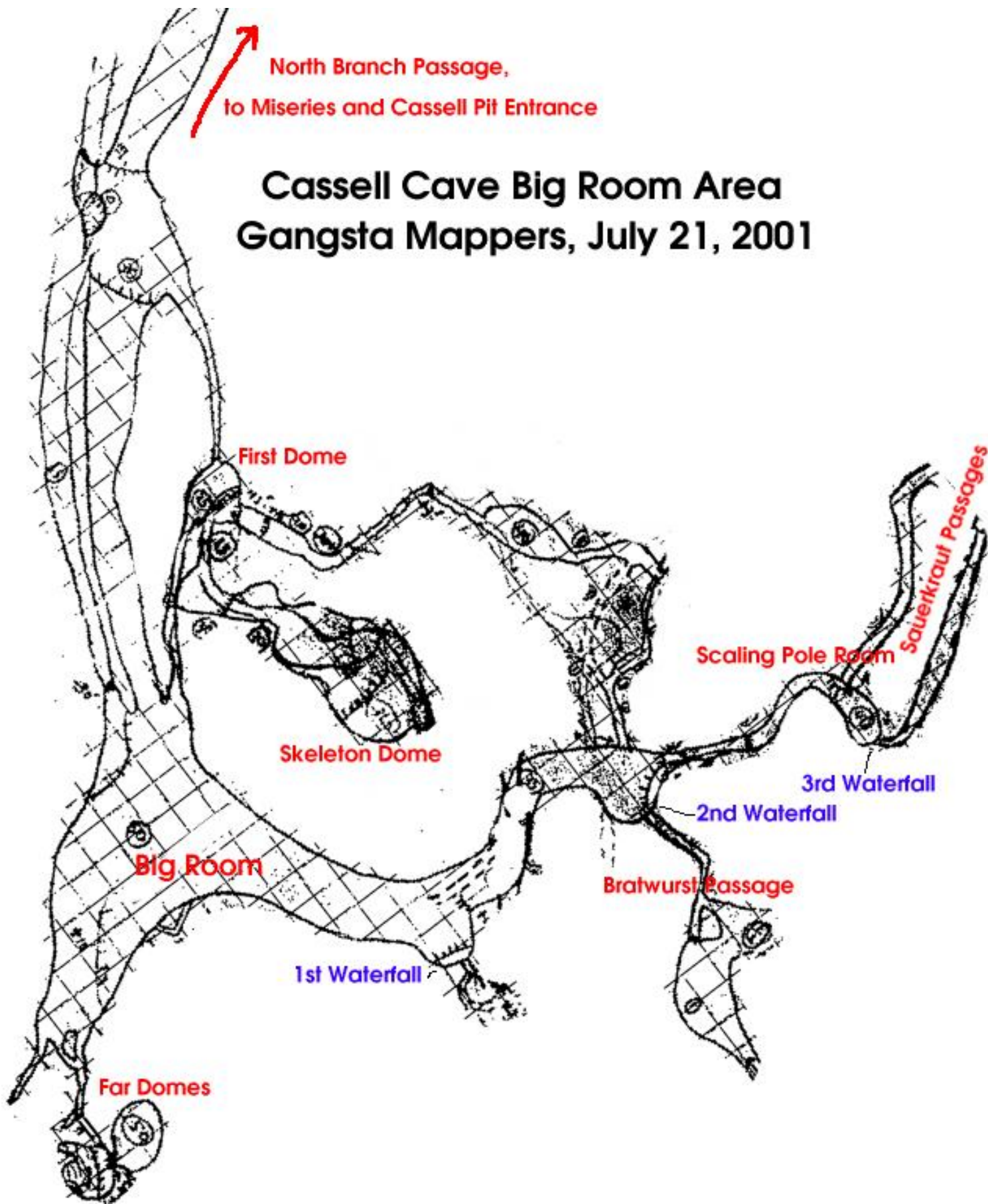
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Another two months pass, another survey trip to Cassell. Bob Zimmerman and I arrived late Friday night and found the normally quiet town of Durbin much changed. Glittering Ferris Wheels and funnelcake stands occupied the empty field between the depot and the campground down by the river. Apparently Durbin Days was in full swing. A country band played on a small stage and various folks were getting thrown around by an honest-to-god mechanical bull. By the performances of the people I saw, it must be a great deal harder than it looks! We retired across the street to the Durbin Outfitters where we crashed variously on the floor of Frank Proud's B&B or out on the porch.

It was a small group this time what with the NSS convention and various other summer goings on; only ten of us made the trip out. Charles Kahn and Stan Carts had a hankering to work on the surface dig Charles and Dave West had started on last time. The remaining eight of us girded up and rapped down the refreshingly dry pit. Our goal was to head down the little-explored North Branch from the Pit as far as the Big Room. Two vertical teams (Lew Carrol and Barry Horner, myself and Pete Penczer) would work on rigging the numerous high leads in the area and look for the several going passages in the area. The remaining crew (Miles Drake, Bob Zimmerman, Andy Yeagle, and Patrick Newman) would survey all available passage and help ferry the drills, bolt kits, ropes and other implements of destruction.

First up was 300-plus feet of belly crawling through the aptly named Miseries but it soon opened up and we cruised through 1500 feet of huge trunk passage in short order. We poked around for a bit getting the lay of the land. Three waterfalls entered the area all of which lead to apparent passage. In addition, there were perhaps half a dozen high leads on the east and west sides of the Big Room. Lew and Barry bolted their way up the first waterfall and found it to be a small, dead-end alcove.



Pete and I found a series of three high leads near the second waterfall which looked promising. A bit of free climbing left us an overhung six feet below the first of these holes. One bolt and an ettrier let me scramble

up in. What should I see but a small virgin alcove which lead up in two directions. To the left, a climb over a boulder lead to a small ledge high on the wall with some soda straws, but nothing else of great interest. To the right, a narrow passage lead about ten feet to the second of the opening we'd spied from below.

While Pete messed with his drill (a lovely Hilti hammerdrill which could sink a three-inch hole in solid rock in under a minute), I checked out the free-climbing options. The second waterfall emanated from a lovely opening blocked by a large column. A very sketchy ledge lead out to it from the left. I skirted out on loose material to a couple of exciting underclings. With some rather fancy footwork and very alert nerves, I traversed under a large block (about 20' off the ground) and found myself next to the column from which the second waterfall fell. Beyond the column was a large bathtub-sized pool of water about two feet deep and quite clear. The walls were fairly smooth and quite steep. Beyond this were about four more of these oval pools with steep sides connected by narrow streams. Looked sort of like a string of sausages. Perhaps this was the "Bratwurst Passage" we'd been looking for.

Lew and Barry at this point had headed for the Skeleton Dome area to rig a couple more climbs and traverses. They later appeared at two of the high, eastern leads and reported that they connected to the Skeleton Dome through some pretty tight crawls.

Pete put in three bolts on the traverse and we began the lengthy process of rigging a safety line across the hairy terrain I'd soloed. At length, we pushed into the Bratwurst and found that the pools ended in a large one and a 4' waterfall. The rest of the passage was wide, low and looked quite wet. Another option was a squeeze up to the left avoiding some glorious soda straws and a rather wet floor littered with intact, fallen speleothems. Clearly, this place hasn't been visited much. Gorgeous!

We next turned our attention to the obvious passages high up on the walls at the far end of the Big Room. Lovely flowstone draperies hung from one about 25' up. To the right, the third waterfall splashed down from a sizeable passage also 25' above. According to what we remembered from the old map, these two leads connected some ways in and lead to a section labled 'profusely decorated'. Our options were three; we could free climb up the walls, set bolts and incrementally aid up the wall, or use a scaling pole. The 30' chunk of iron pipe lying in the room spoke of the time 35 years ago when some brave soul had ascended by pole to plumb the depths above. But both of us lack the extra-large, forged brass cahones required to use a scaling poles and the free-climbing option was way, way out of my league. Clearly we would have to sink bolts and work up the wall that way.

The rock around the flowstone lead was clearly calcite and inadvisable to bolt into and the rock under the waterfall was wet, rotten and stretched the bounds of the term 'rock' quite a bit. But a wide arrette to the left of the falls looked possible. I sank a bolt as high up as I could reach (perhaps seven feet or so) and was almost done when the battery on the drill died. Select choice words were said and we went out in search of Lew to see if we could use his drill. Lew and Barry were found above the First Dome (a singularly beautiful area of waterfalls and flowstone) coming back from the Skeleton Domes and he loaned us the drill. Back to the 3rd waterfall only to discover that Lew's drill was weak and ineffectual. Ten minutes of concerted drilling yeilded no more than a quarter inch of hole. The entire rest of the crew soon showed up to watch Pete use novel aid-bolting techniques and give many suggestions, helpful and otherwise. A fresh battery helped a little and the hole was sunk a bit further, but we eventually gave up in disgust.

Time was fleeting anyway, so we all packed up and headed out seeing various sights along the way. The Miseries going out were far more miserable than going in. All the trampling feet had raised the muck index much higher plus I was pushing Lew's drill and climbing gear (all 20 pounds of it!) as well as my own. I'm really bad at belly crawling. We reached the pit and people ascended slowly out of it. By the time everyone was out under the warm, starry sky watching the mothes with glowing orange eyes, it was 12:45 am. Thirteen hours of trip, though it certainly didn't feel like that. Back to the cars and back to Durbin where everyone slept like babies.

We didn't get everything done we'd wanted to, but most of the passages are rigged. Next time, hopefully we can finish the 3rd Waterfall climb with a fresh battery. Bob wants to haul transmitters in for the radiolocation team

on the surface to nail down the positions of the North and South Branch passages. Much will have to be done in September. Until then...



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