

# Mapping Cassell Cave, WV

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

May 18-20, 2001 (part 4)

([part 1](#), [part 2](#), [part 3](#))

- [Cassell Photos](#)

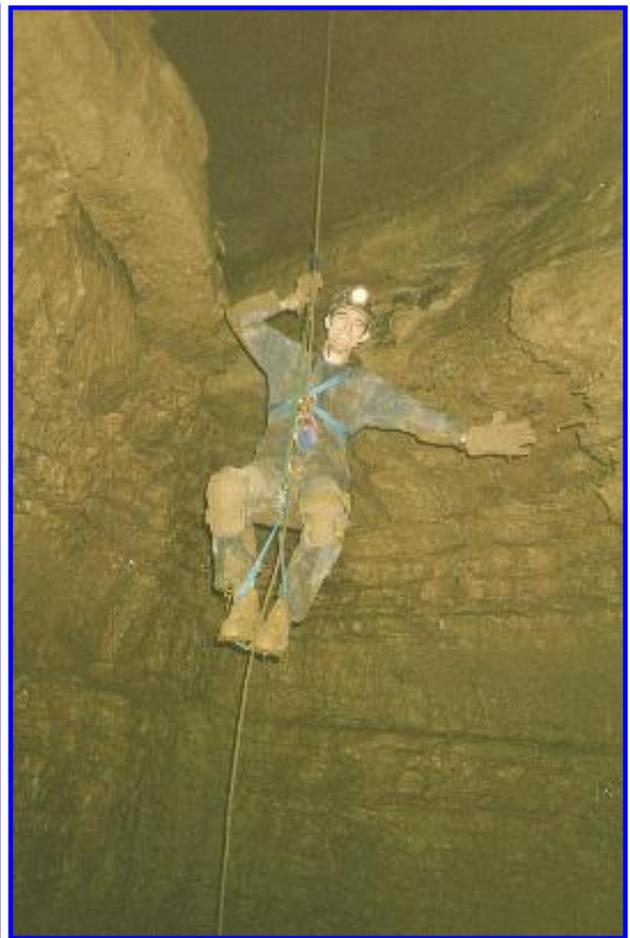
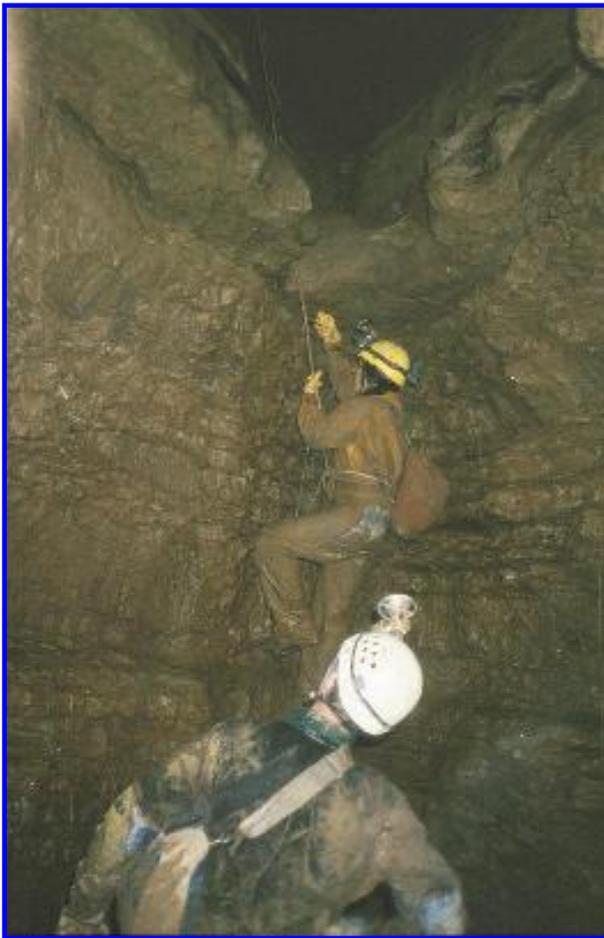


Once again Tom Kornack and I headed for [Durbin, WV](#), after getting a late start on Friday afternoon.

After a month of no rain, we were confident that the Pit entrance to Cassell Cave would be dry and we wouldn't be faced with the arduous route through the Windy entrance to access the back portions of the cave. As Murphy would have it, the rain started long before we reached the WV frontier and had increased through cats-and-dogs to a full-fledged toad-strangler by the time we crossed the first of the mountains. A thick fog made the steep hairpin turns of US33 interesting to say the least and the numerous frogs stationed in the middle of the road kept us swerving from side to side.

By the time we rolled into the Depot at midnight, it was clear we'd be making yet another assault through the horizontal Windy entrance. Most folks were asleep already so planning was put off until the morrow.

**Saturday:** After four hours of sleep, I rose and cast about to make plans. Since the pit was inaccessible, most of the weekend's efforts would, again, be concentrated on the long south branch passage. There was a dearth of sketchers, so most teams were of four people. To help the situation for future trips, I volunteered to sketch in parallel with Lew Carroll and take numbers while Tom and Madeline Li did instruments. Our mission would be to continue the survey from beyond the Waterfall Room on the South Fork of the cave. Another team (Rafi Reyes, Bob Alderson, Barry Horner and Penelope Pooler) had been dispatched as far down that branch as they could go with instructions to survey back towards the entrance. We hoped to connect with their survey and thus extend the South Branch by a thousand feet or more.

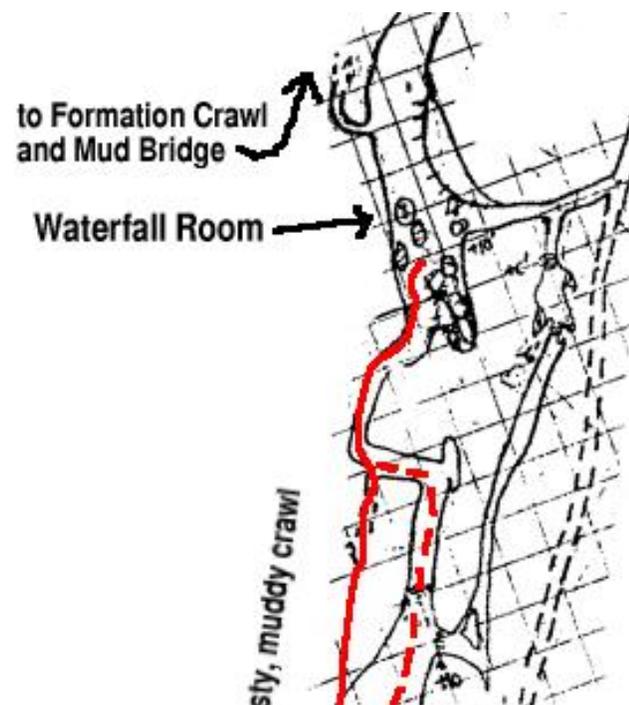


Tom Kornack and Penelope Pooler display their preferred methods of ascent at the Window Climb. Bob Alderson looks on. ([Click for more photos](#)).

Meanwhile, Bob Zimmerman was leading a team (Bob Robins, Pat Bingham, Tom Heutte) back to the Waterfall room to try to dig open the narrow crawl they suspected would connect with the upper level walking passage. Miles Drake, Rick Royer and Dan Ladd composed the tiny team which were sent into the Ballroom entrance while Charles Kahn, Joanne Smith, Dave West, Karen Wilmes and Ralph Hartley messed around with some gnarly leads near the Windy entrance. Thus it was quite a crowd that hit the entrance all together and proceeded en masse through the very 'sporting' first couple hours of cave.

The trip in passed largely without incident. [Tom performed his first in-cave rope ascent](#) and scaled the Window Climb rope with no trouble. I followed but, to my dismay, found that, under my instruction, Tom had put the rope too far to the left and it was hooked around a small notch. In order to move through this spot, the rope would have to come out of the notch at which point the chances of taking a short-rope, large-angle pendulum into the opposite wall were very high. Cursing a blue streak and sweating profusely, I managed to attach a QAS to the other end of the rope and pry my way over the lip. Not pretty. Tom belayed people up the ladder while others scaled the rope. Soon all were assembled at the top of the window and vertical gear was abandoned.

The cave in this area is on three levels and we were now at the top. We scooted under the low, dusty ceiling through the wide Cupola area making our way farther into the cave. On my

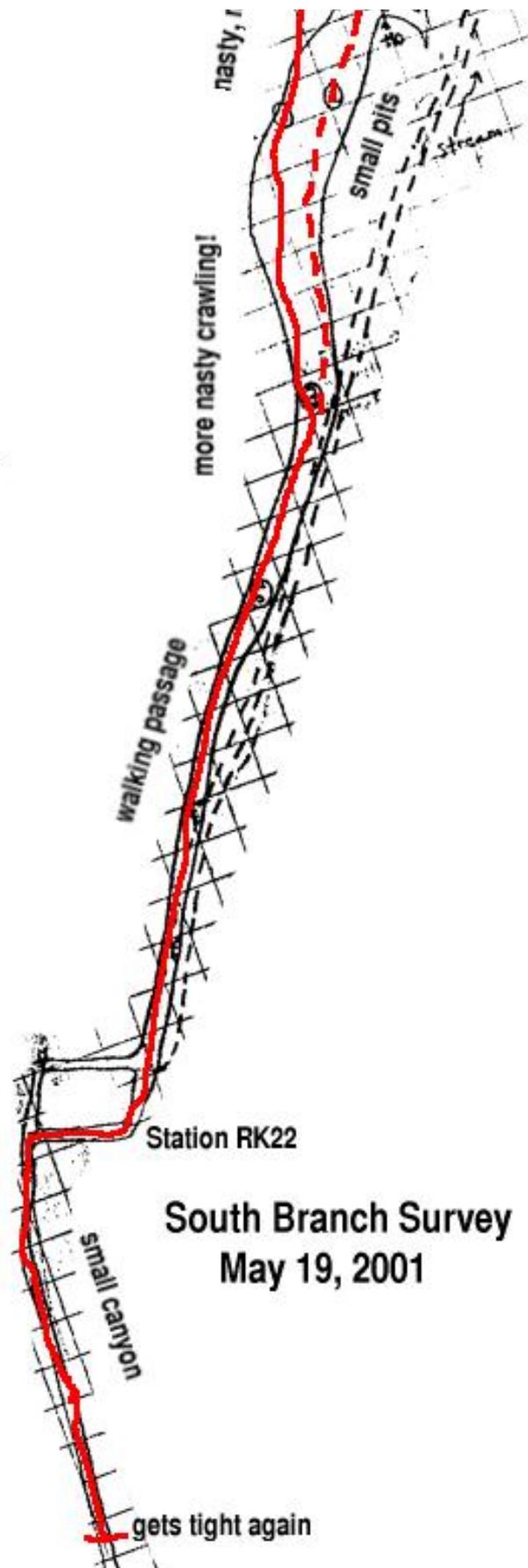


[first two trips](#) to this cave, we had surveyed this area in detail. It seemed like quite a long distance into the cave at the time, but I now realized that it was only the first chapter in a long journey to the current survey head. This is a **big** cave! Five hundred feet past the Window, we climbed down the 0-0 Bypass Fissure--a multi-level canyon cutting diagonally across the floor--which allows access to the middle level. Shortly thereafter, we climbed down the tricky blocks to the lower, stream level at the 0-0 Point.

A hundred feet farther, after wall walking to avoid the stream, I got to the Mud Bridge climb. This area is really quite pretty; the stream flows from a doorway-sized passage into a 20' diameter pool and then out through the tall canyon we'd just come through. More water falls from perhaps 20' up into the center of the chamber. The first part of the climb requires a high-step up the sharply finned walls into a small opening. Once you know the moves (provided you're at least six feet tall and limber), it's easy, but most people required a leg-up. Then you climb up a tricky, loose mud chimney to the middle level of the cave again. We paused while Lew efficiently placed a bolt in record time. Having spent over an hour placing a bolt myself, I greatly admire anyone who can do it in ten minutes. Pointers were picked up and technique greatly improved...

I was not looking forward greatly to the next bit. We split into teams and proceeded with the thousand foot long formation crawl back to the Waterfall room. To get us in the mood, the crawl starts out with a deep pool which is very awkward to skirt followed by about 50' of dusty belly crawl. Then it's more civilized hands-and-knees work interspersed with short walking sections. At length, the formations abruptly start appearing and tall folks like me have to take extra care not to knock the fragile speleothems from the ceiling or inadvertently put you hand in a fragile floor formation. Bob's goal this trip was to open up the upper level connection and thus allow people to bypass this section entirely. This will be very nice from both a conservation standpoint as well as physical effort! After a few hundred feet, the formations stop as abruptly as they start and it's back to belly crawling through wide, dusty corridor until you hear the refreshing sounds from the waterfall room.

After a short break from the taxing crawling, we set out on the final push to reach our survey start, RK22, the last station hit by Alderson, Birkimer and Horner back in [February](#). The way was not entirely clear. I lead the group into a low, muddy crawlway on the southwest side of the room under some large blocks of breakdown. It looked unpleasant, but definitely went somewhere so I persevered. It got lower and became far more unpleasant surprisingly quickly. Soon, I was lying in a couple inches of mud/water under an 18" ceiling in a three-foot-wide sewer. Uggg! Harsh language was being used to describe the situation and more of the same could be heard coming from



A section of the highly inaccurate old map showing the location of the RK survey (Feb 2001). The red solid line shows our inward path (not recommended) while the dashed line shows our exit (somewhat better). Keep in mind, this bears only cursory resemblance to the actual

behind me.

geometry! Grid squares are ten feet each.

After perhaps 60' of this nastiness, the passage broadened considerably to about 25' and dryer ground could be seen under an even lower ceiling. Figuring that dry ground was preferable to wet, I headed left. Tom joined me followed by Madeline and Lew. All were baffled by our predicament and we lay about on ground which, on second inspection, wasn't exactly dry either. We were soaked through and through and quickly getting cold and exhausted. Tom reconitered the way forward while I looked back and to the left hoping to find a better passage. My searchings (performed on my belly inch by inch) turned up a couple rough, mud-sided pits with flowing water at the bottom, but these didn't seem to go anywhere. Tom found that our muddy passage kept going in our previous direction of travel but didn't improve much But there were survey marks so we were clearly on the right path. We pressed on and wallowed another 60 feet through nasty mud puddles which were, if anything, deeper and colder than the previous batch.

At long last, with aching forearms and chilled torsos, we emerged into a more conventional, utterly delightful walking passage. This continued for another 140 feet to station RK22, the current survey head. At this point every one of us was absolutely drenched and getting pretty chilly; polypro was doled out to those that needed it most. We decided that surveying in this condition was probably a lost cause and we should head for home. But, having come this far I felt it would be a shame not to look around now that the going was easy. So I hared off into a narrow, ten-foot-tall canyon and followed it for a while hoping to bump into the advance party who were supposedly in that area. No sign of the party was found so I turned around and prepared to head for home.

Fighting cold with activity, we headed out. Instead of going through all the same mud puddles we hit last time, however, we stuck more to the east. This route wasn't exactly easy either and involved a lot of belly crawling though at least it was dry this time. Sure enough, we went right past the mud pits I'd seen before and disregarded as not a viable path, then continued on through a place where I hadn't seen any passage at all. It just goes to show how confusing caves can be I guess. Just before gaining the Waterfall room, we merged with the mud passage I'd originally headed down. There's no way I would have seen the 'correct' way without prior knowledge! Some detailed map work on my part probably would have saved everyone considerable suffering.



Madeline, Lew and Tom looking thoroughly slimed but a lot warmer now.

The Formation Crawl warmed us up significantly and by the time we reached the Mud Bridge, we had pretty much returned to normal. I was still quite cold any time we stopped moving for too long so we didn't dawdle. We returned to the upper level and prepared to rappell the Window. At this point, Tom discovered he had left his bag of vertical gear somewhere back in the cave. Fearing it was beyond the Formation Crawl, or worse, back beyond the Waterfall room, we elected to continue out and hope that someone would bring it with them. Worse came to

worse, we could pick it up next time back there. But things didn't bode well. I had a nerve-wracking rap and then stood around getting very very cold while Lew, Tom and Madeline descended via the ladder. Again, we were much warmer as the startlingly three-dimensional bit of cave between there and the entrance was negotiated. After a few hours, we were back out and enjoying the warmth of the West Virginia evening. Everyone was feeling better though a bit bummed about not surveying a single shot.

But it was nice to be out early (7:30) and have a short (nine hour) trip. We returned to the Depot for a wonderful batch of Chili made by by Tsai-Hong Hartley. At length I set up a bivy out on the train platform and had fell soundly asleep.

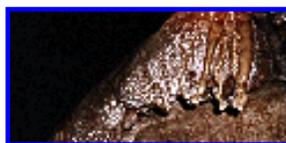


The Gangstas relax after a hard day's caving. Tom Huette, Ralph and Tsai-Hong Hartley, Pat Bingham and Bob Zimmerman.

**Sunday:** The last team (Rafi, Penelope, Barry and Bob) had returned after 16 hours in the cave and confirmed earlier reports that a small black bag full of vertical gear had been left just at the top of the Mud Bridge climb. Furthermore, since this bag implied people were still in the cave, a couple of key ladders had not been removed. The ladders were within half an hour of the Windy entrance and wouldn't take much to pull. Furthermore, the Mud Bridge isn't **that** far in and a trip that far to rescue a couple hundred dollars worth of gear (which had only seen one use!) was more than worth it for a pair of [starving grad students](#). As everyone else muzzily got things packed up and headed for home, Tom and I, with the gracious help of Pat Bingham, headed back for the cave hoping to get in and out quickly.



The day was fairly warm and it wasn't raining. Still, donning fantastically muddy, clammy cave gear was a horrible experience. Once inside, we moved quickly and began to quite enjoy ourselves despite previous misgivings. In two and a half hours, we made it back to the Mud Bridge. Tom climbed up and regained his errant gear. Reversing our course, we mosied out of there feeling pretty good. Back at Times Square, we took a short side trip to see the Lake with all its fine formations. Pat taught us the basics of bat identification (mostly Pipistrels with a few other mystery bats) and we discussed various geological topics. I kicked myself for not bringing my camera this time. Finally, we pulled the last two ladders and exited after a short five and a half hour cave trip. All in all, it had been quite a positive day. Wrongs were righted, karma was restored, sore muscles were excercised, and good caving was done.



[The Home Cave](#)



[Neithernor](#)

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