

Mapping Cassell Cave, WV

A survey trip with the Gangsta Mappers

November 18, 2000 (part 2)



Another two months have passed and I make my way back to Cass, WV, and the [Gangsta Mappers](#). It's colder this time; leaves have fallen and intermittent snow is coming down. This time I brought my friend Tom Kornack along to partake of some serious caving (as opposed to the [tourist stuff](#) we've done together before). I also brought my own set of vertical gear since last time, I was fortunate enough to borrow a set, and I couldn't count on that again.

There was the usual driving out through the Virginias and nocturnal arrival at Cass where we were all stowed in House #135. We'd scarcely walked in the door when I was recruited by Devin for a continuation of our surveying last time. Not having vertical gear or experience there-in, Tom was unable to join us which was a shame. But he was picked up by Dave West and Miles Drake instead for some climbing-oriented exploration near the Windy entrance and pond. Catching-up was done and maps consulted as the night wore on and people trickled in.

The morning dawned grey and cold with intermittent light snow. Penelope Pooler, the third member of our team and, more importantly, the cook for the evening, had yet to arrive so we were a bit worried. She finally rolled in at 8:30 and we were on the road an hour later.

A team had already arrived at the Cassell Pit entrance and had rigged the 96-foot drop. The lack of recent rain meant that the waterfall was merely a trickle. Gear was donned and we dropped through into the warmth and humid darkness getting only minorly wet in the process. The bottom of the pit was a beautiful large room with light and water streaming in. Once the team had assembled, we squirmed through an excavated pile of boulders into a low sewer passage and headed out at speed.

As has been mentioned before, the overall structure of Cassells is two north-east to south-west trending sets of passages. The Windy Entrance serves the southern of these while the Pit serves the northern. A diagonal river canyon passage connects the north-east end of the northern system (the Junction Room) to the middle of the southern system (the 0,0 Point). Our mission was to descend the pit, traverse to the Junction Room and strike out through the stream passage to the 0,0 point. There we would ascend to the upper level (southern) passages and map a few leads we'd found last time. According to Devin, dropping the pit and taking this longer route would be considerably easier than going in the horizontal entrance and traversing the relatively tough terrain we saw last time. I'm not sure it really was less effort, but was eager to see new cave and put up no protest.

We reached the Junction room and turned a sharp right into one of the main lower-level stream passages. For a third of a mile, we were walking in high stream canyon with walls roughly 5 feet apart and a ceiling 50' overhead. The farther we went, the more water was underfoot flowing from toe to knee deep in the opposite direction. No side-passages could be found at our level and going was fairly easy if you were willing to get your feet wet... which for Devin and I, was not an attractive option. While Penelope dived right in to the shin-deep water, we stayed up on the walls as long as possible and made our lives that much harder. Periodically, we would be forced through some constriction or over some obstruction in the canyon. Personal preferences were apparent in that I usually went over things and the others usually went under. More times than not, it seemed like after squeezing through some awkward spot, a more logical and graceful option presented itself.

At length two things happened: first, Devin and I gave up trying to stay dry and jumped in the water and, second, we reached the 0,0 point. From here, we were to survey up to the upper level and tie the two halves of the survey together. Fortunately, there was an easy scramble up from that point and up we went. Devin sketched and took numbers while Penelope and I ran the instruments--she foresights, I backsights. Starting things out with a bunch of high-inclination shots wasn't the easiest, but got us in the mood for some rather... creative... shot selection. We surveyed back and forth up the canyon until meeting up with Ralph, Karen and Ken's team. After collaborating on a long, high-inclination shot, we parted company, climbed up a short rope and were in the dry, dusty upper level I had been in back in September.

Our next surveying went from the main 5' high passage up into a narrow crawlway T intersection. To the right was the crawl out to the ledge over the Window Drop. To the left lay uncharted and possibly virgin territory in a wide, low bedding plane collapse area. Bat bones and a mummified caterpillar greeted our crawling. Without even looking at the maps, this felt like the top of the cave. Very dry and dusty. I was reminded of an attic. Quite a contrast to the wet lofty canyons of the lower layer. Penelope had stayed at station GH8 while I followed Devin to another intersection where the passage became a little taller. We shot a line through the couple-inch gap between ceiling and floor.

Onward from there we surveyed a number of other low, wide crawls paralleling the taller passage in this very sandy region. Sometimes we could see through narrow cracks back out to the main passage. At length, we reached a dead end with a small aperture through which we could see the main path. A little shoving of sand around made it big enough to worm through and we were done.

There were several other leads to check. One of them ended up in the top of the Cassells stream passage. Various ledges on either side could be seen continuing, but travel in that direction would be very dangerous. Another passage nearby was a rapidly narrowing canyon with a very passable upper corridor. The floor was solid and continuous and it bent out of sight, again, in the direction of the stream canyon.

Back at one of our intermediate survey stations, we continued down a slot and ended up sitting on a ledge at the top of the stream canyon about 50' off the floor. More ledges could be seen heading down the canyon as before. But this time, a passage opened up directly opposite us on the other side of a 3' wide gap. No footprints marred the mud here and the rocky shelves were untouched save by a Little Brown bat preening himself from the underside. Eager to survey virgin

leads, I urged us to take a few shots. Everyone was tired at this point and wasn't keen on taking that short-but-potentially-very-long, precipitous step over the canyon. Never-the-less, I proceeded over the void and poked my head in. The virgin passage stayed about 3' high and perhaps 4' wide for about 30 feet before turning slightly to the left. Water had obviously flowed out at some point from this system as the mud below me was carved into various sinuous patterns. Noting this down as one for another day, I headed back and we started our retreat from the cave.

Bidding farewell to the upper reaches, we rappelled down a short rope at the 0,0 point and started slogging through the canyon no longer caring that our feet were getting wet. Since I had been a little more nimble on the downclimb, I was a bit ahead of the others and had a chance to enjoy the canyon by myself. The water was clear and flowed past my boots at a fairly lively pace with a faint burbling sound. The walls had that particular organic, carved look only found in caves such as this. I walked quietly ahead enjoying the unexpected reflection of my light from the water on the walls far ahead. For the first time, I really had a chance to take in my surroundings and the beauty of this cave. Every now and then, I would stop and look upward at the soaring ceiling and hypothesize about some potential passage up there invisible from down here and accessible only through some rather rugged maneuvering. A distinctive rain-on-metal-roof sound heralded the approach of the two cataracts in the corridor where the stream dropped a foot or so over sharp black rock. Alien black nodules the size of my fist protruded from the walls here and there looking like fossilized bats. The whole experience was peaceful and satisfying.

But everything grows old and the trip out started to seem a whole lot longer than the trip in had been. The stream became less omnipresent and we squeezed back through the same troubling spots we had been through before--again missing the more obvious, easier routes. Emerging in the Junction Room, we side-tracked to see a beautiful dome with formations and a rope leading to the Ball Room area; another trip for another day.

At long last, we popped back up through the boulders and were in the pit. Some of the vertical gear had vanished implying we were the second group out of the pit (of three). The waterfall was a bit more active now and gone was the shaft of light streaming in. Eager to get out and eat, we donned gear. Just then Rick, Bob and Barry appeared and settled down to wait as we exited. Devin made the climb and I followed, getting rapidly soaked. I climbed as fast as possible through the pouring water and my frog system worked flawlessly. I was soon past the water and starting to feel the cold outside air. Stars could be seen sparkling above. Another 20' brought me to the lip and a little maneuvering had me standing outside. Penelope started up and I headed for the car to change and warm up.

Soon we were back at Cass downing mighty portions of Penelope's Jambalya (with THREE different kinds of fish in it!) and comparing notes with the others. Despite the fact that we only surveyed a couple hundred feet, it was a very good trip. We entered our data in the computer and marvelled at how the map had grown. Bob announced that the total surveyed portion was now at 4.15 miles. Halfway there? We'll see...

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