

The Ascent of Medville Falls

Cassell Cave, WV

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

September 15, 2001 (part 6)

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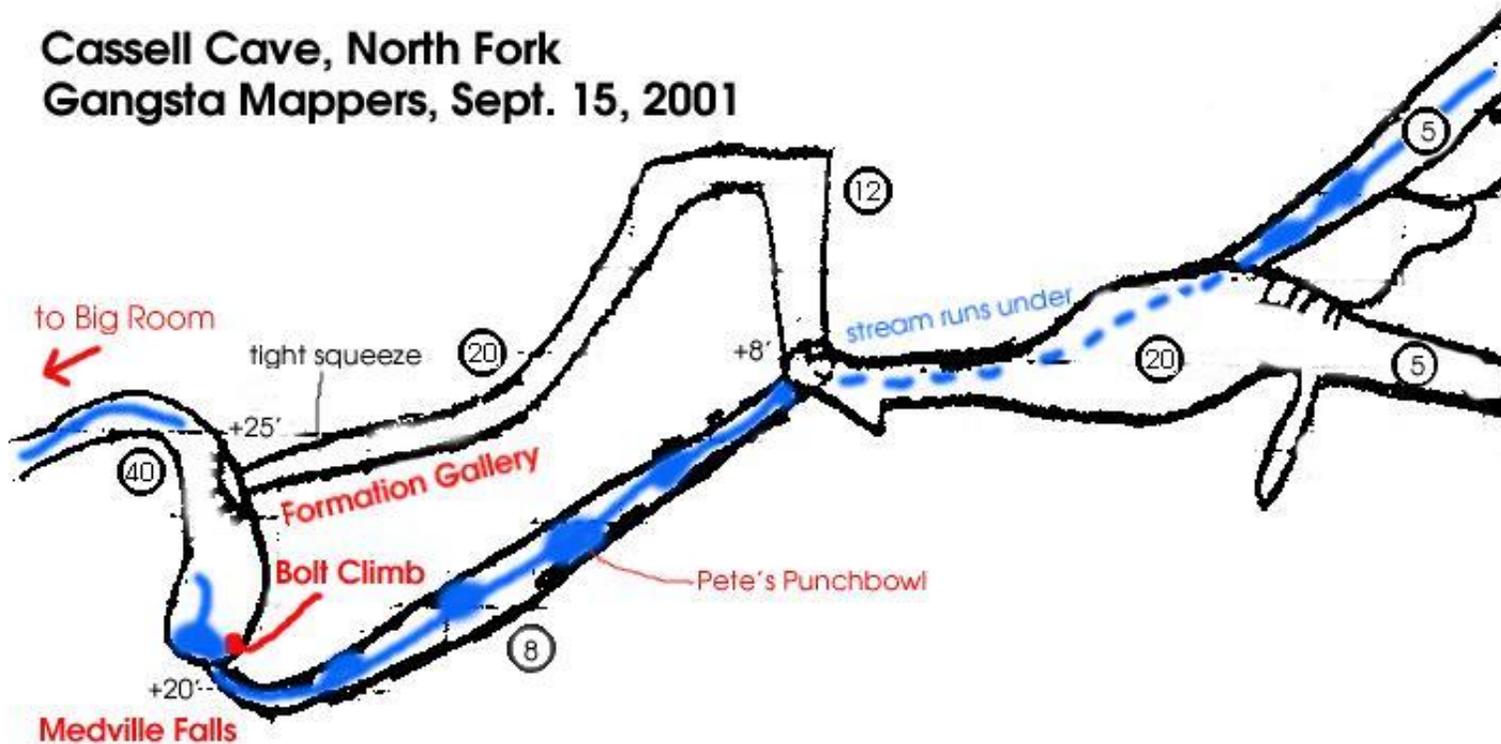


It's probably a bad sign when you say to yourself, "well, I survived another one!", but that was the feeling I had Sunday morning after the latest Gangsta Mappers expedition into Cassell Cave.

In 1965 cavers from the Potomac Speleological Club and Philadelphia Grotto were compiling the first map of the cave exploring some of the high leads using scaling poles. For those unfamiliar with this technology, it's basically a long pole constructed of sections of metal pipe with a cable ladder hanging from the end. You wedge the bottom end securely, position the top end in a constriction, and send the lightest, bravest caver you can find (the 'pole monkey') *veery* gingerly up to the top. It's a fast way to get to inaccessible leads, but definitely not for the faint of heart or uninsured. On July 10, 1965, PSC cavers were using a scaling pole to gain access to the many high leads in the [Big Room](#) area of the North Fork. While climbing up to one lead, Doug Medville fell twenty feet and landed on his head when the scaling pole buckled. Unconscious and bleeding profusely from a gashed forehead things looked grim. Fortunately, he regained consciousness and was evacuated under his own power.

Thirty six years later, an old scaling pole (possibly the same one used by Medville) can be found lying at the base of a waterfall in the eastern-most reaches of the Big Room. Two leads appear 20' and 25' above on the northern wall. The lower lead is a narrow crack from which water pours down into a small pool. The higher lead, an overhanging shelf draped with flowstone curtains, shows a diagonal mark on the wall (possibly from the scaling pole) and the remains of a tattered rope draped below. According to Doug Medville himself, this is the place where he had his brush with the afterlife. *"Oh yes, that's the place. After I fell and recovered consciousness, I dozed on that old rope for the night - it was the only thing between me and the floor and sort of kept me warm. Should be a coil of Goldline."* Thus we christen the waterfall 'Medville Falls'.

Cassell Cave, North Fork Gangsta Mappers, Sept. 15, 2001



Last time, Pete Penczer and I had eyed these two leads, but had to postpone the project pending charged batteries for his Hilti hammerdrill. This time we arrived prepared; two heavy batteries (each good for, in theory, 19 bolts), two ropes, the Hilti and various arcane and wonderful aid-climbing gear were laboriously transported down the pit and through the Miseries. According to the 1965 map, these two leads in the Scaling Pole Room connect a short distance beyond thus requiring only one climb. The higher lead, while dry, was overhung and would involve placing bolts through fragile flowstone of unknown durability. The lower lead would involve negotiating the waterfall. After some discussion, we opted to set a series of bolts up the arete five feet to the left of the waterfall and then to traverse to the right once we were above it. The rock on the arete was good at least as far as we could see and the overhang was not too great to deal with.

I had set the first bolt as high as I could reach from the ground in July with the waning juice from the depleted battery. Pete donned vertical gear, slung hammer, wrench, bolt bag and drill from his harness, and mounted the etriers hanging from the first bolt. Using the dynamic rope brought for the task, I belayed from the ground. Pete was using a novel piece of hardware called a 'Stick-Up' imported from Italy. This two-foot metal rod allows you to cantilever yourself out and up from the bolt allowing you another foot or so of reach. Much more efficient, though a bit confusing for the first couple bolts.

The drill behaved admirably with the fresh battery producing a three-inch deep hole in something like 15 seconds. Rock dust flew everywhere and we became quite smug. A second bolt was quickly set and aid gear--stick-up, etriers, and all--was moved upward. Again, the stick-up allowed about four feet of reach above the last bolt. Pete sank two more bolts and then came down for a breather. Already we were fifteen feet off the ground.

My turn! I donned ascent gear and transferred the many pounds of hardware to my harness then ascended the static line to the highest bolt while Pete belayed. Time to turn theory into practice: find a bolt placement on the rock above. Hammer lustily to clean off the surface and make sure the rock is solid. Bring out the drill and, holding it as high as possible, sink a hole perpendicular to the rock face (surprisingly easy). Pull the drill out (surprisingly hard) and use the puffer to clean the grit out. Rest for a minute. Fish around in the bag to find a bolt and hanger. Insert these in the hole and then hammer to drive it into the hole. Avoid hammering the bat which occasionally flies between the hammer and the wall. Rest a bit more. When the bolt is in all the way, break out the wrench and tighten the nut, but not too tight. Clip the belay rope in with a quickdraw, use the long etrier to step onto the new bolt, and move the whole stick-up assembly upward. Finally, step into the etriers again and climb up. Clip yourself to the top hole on the stick-up and lean back. Lather, rinse, repeat.

To my surprise, this process didn't feature nearly the level of terror I'd been preparing for and was in fact quite a lot of fun. After one bolt, I was face to face with large chunks of loose rock, some of which was coming off in my hands. I was eye-level with the top of the waterfall to the right and on the far side of it, a vast expanse of smooth rock could be seen. A few whacks with the hammer revealed it to be much more solid than the rock in front of my nose, so I started the traverse. Reaching far and standing half in the etriers and half on a small, wet ledge with a knee wrapped around the blunt arete, I

managed to sink a hole and pound in a bolt (no bat this time). But actually transferring operations over there proved to be nigh impossible. I finally ended up standing on a small ledge with water running down my back partially in one foot loop, clipped into, but not weighting the stick-up and swearing like a sailor. Another bolt three feet above the last let me at least get out of the water and from there (just as I was getting the hang of it!), I was able to step up and into the upper corridor. Whee! I set two more bolts to serve as anchors and Pete ascended up, unfortunately through the waterfall (we should have thought this through more).

It was exceedingly nice to see the new territory. We were standing in a stream passage narrow at the bottom but wider above. The walls were smooth and vertical with no ledges for walking and the water was cold and clear (until we stepped in it at which point the water was cold and murky). One boot print could be seen much eroded in a sandy section ahead. A slight breeze blew down with the water implying more cave ahead. Small, white speleothems could be seen cluttering up the ceiling here and there. Pete lead the way and we traversed around or across several small pools as the passage became wider. The largest of the pools, dubbed here 'Pete's Punchbowl', was eight feet in diameter and quite deep with steep sides and no chance of staying dry. I contemplated stemming across with feet on one side and hands on the other; but a slip would result in an ungraceful belly flop into cold water and didn't look that appealing; better to wet the feet than the whole body. As Pete stepped into the pool, a large block fell from ahead and sent huge waves sloshing around. "Great," he said, "Now we have a stepping stone." I traversed that damn pool five times and never once found that submerged step. Uggg!

Shortly, the stream passage was blocked by more large pools. An upper level passage of surprising size cut across diagonally and we negotiated the tricky climb up to it. Bending to the left, we headed back toward the other, drier lead seen from below. Formations everywhere! We worked our way through a narrow, tall passage lined on all sides including the floor with untrammelled cave corral. More startlingly white draperies and speleothems surrounded us on the ceiling and walls. Squeezing through a tight spot between some blunt stalacmites and some translucent but razor-sharp bacon we came out to the ledge seen from below (I'm calling this the Formation Gallery until someone comes up with a better name). A large column covered with delicate white pockets sat proudly on a higher ledge looking like some deep-sea creature. On the flowstoned boulder at the edge, there were further remains of the old Medville-era rope now black and the consistency of jelly.

Time to rig the rope. We went back to the waterfall (traversing the Punchbowl for the second time) and Pete descended cleaning off all the bolt hangers and quickdraws we'd left on the way up. Unfortunately, I'd painted us into a corner with my upper bolt and we ended up leaving the hanger and a carabiner still attached. I brought a different static line, traversed the Punchbowl a third time, and set about rigging it from the Formation Gallery. Pete was eating an MRE down there which featured chicken and smelled wonderful. Back through the squeeze and the Punchbowl (that's a fourth time, folks) to de-rig the first static line and take the hangers off the bolts there. One final time with the pool (#5) and I bid the wonderful formations adieu for today. The rapell from the Gallery was smooth and free-hanging. This would have been difficult to bolt up to.

Citing hunger, fatigue and sodden socks (courtesy of the thrice-damned Punchbowl!), we unanimously decided for retreat over the surveying we'd talked about. Gear was packed and we retreated quietly back to the Miseries and to the pit. Other folks were headed out the newly-rediscovered Gunbarrel entrance so we had the rope to ourselves. After a long, wet ascent, we found ourselves shivering under the spectacularly sharp, bright stars. SAFE!



[The Wilderness Journal](#) [Neithernor](#)

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**North Branch Passage,
to Miseries and Cassell Pit Entrance**

Cassell Cave Big Room Area Gangsta Mappers, July 21, 2001

