

Dead Dog Cave!

This is an expanded post of my history article for the September 2018 issue of the Northwest Austin Civic Association (NWACA) newsletter (<http://nwaca.org/newsletter/>)

Recently the world held its breath as boys and coach of a Thai soccer team were stranded in a cave. Our neighborhood had its own cave drama, albeit not on the scale of the Thai soccer team. I'm referring to Dead Dog Cave[1], its entrance now buried beneath Luby's parking lot near Steck and Mopac Service Road.

The cave was first brought to the attention of cavers about 1958. A gentleman exploring a sink hole crossed a ledge which gave way, climber and rock falling to the bottom of the sink. Subsequent exploration and removal of dirt, rocks, and dog bones (hence the name) revealed a cave 175 feet long, with a depth of 91 feet.

The cave features tight crawl spaces only 8 inches wide; not for the claustrophobic! At one point a narrow vertical passage opens in the ceiling of a walking-size passage. The walking passage extends 15 feet to a six-foot drop into the "Big Room," a room 60 feet long, 30 feet wide, and 30 feet high. Big by Travis County cave standards. The drop into the Big Room is undercut and unclimbable without climbing aids. Inside the Big Room, from a fissure issues a small stream creating a waterfall which falls to the floor creating an area of flowstone. The water flows to a small drain at the lowest point in the cave, 91 feet below the surface.

Even though relatively few braved the difficult path to the Big Room, the cave had a reputation among cavers. The cave also had a reputation among teens!

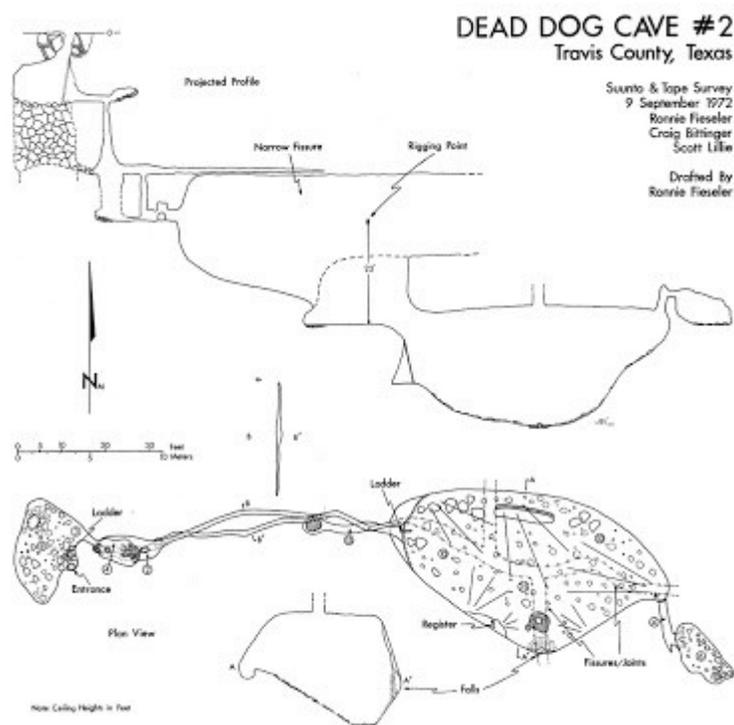
July 5, 1978, three teenagers from the neighborhood decided to visit the cave. The trip was uneventful until the three attempted to exit. The boy in the lead became pinned in a two-foot-wide passage, 25 feet from the surface by a cave-in, rocks crushing his legs several inches below his hips. The exit thus blocked, his friends behind him were trapped as well. It was about 8:30 pm when the call went out for help from an adult who had gone with the teens, staying near the entrance, presumably for just this reason.

First on the scene was the Fire Department but they were unable to free the boy using a rope, at which time cavers from the Austin Cave Club were called in for assistance. The plan then was to dig out the loose rocks holding the boy in the narrow passage. The most effective implement was a coffee can from the Red Cross truck that had arrived to provide refreshment for the rescuers. After hours of digging the boy was freed about 12:30 am as applause rang out from a crowd of hundreds of onlookers. "All I could think of," said the boy "was that if the rest came down I would be dead."

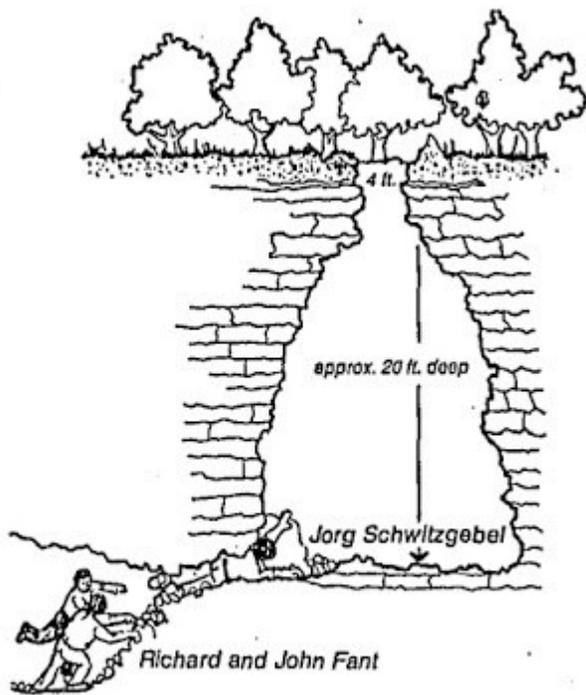
That was not the first incident at Dead Dog Cave. Another gentleman told me he got

stuck in 1959 when he was a 10th grader at McCallum High; once again cavers came to the rescue. But speculation on the 1978 incident was that construction activities for the extension of MoPac had destabilized the cave leading to the cave-in that pinned the teen. State highway engineers made plans to close the cave with concrete. Cavers talked with engineers, and they agreed to include a manhole cover to permit access to the cave. Unfortunately, when Luby's was built, the significance of that manhole was not appreciated and was paved over, cutting off access to the infamous Dead Dog Cave!

Photos



Profile and plan view of Dead Dog Cave



Staff Graphics by Sharon Roberts

3 youths were trapped nearly 4 hours in cave.

Graphic depicting the three trapped youth, *The Austin American Statesman*, July, 7, 1978

Footnote, References

[1] The cave is officially known as Dead Dog Cave #2 (yes, there is a Dead Dog Cave #1), and also as Steck Cave. Here I'll refer to it simply as Dead Dog Cave. My thanks to Jerry Atkinson for his help on this article, and William Russell for use of his write-up, "Major and significant caves and karst features of Travis County, Texas." Texas Speleological Survey, Austin, Texas (in publication 2018).

Kelly, Lee. "Cave-in won't stop teens: Better preparation planned for next exploration", *The Austin American Statesman*, Nov 19, 1978

Turner, Allan. "Youngsters avoid injury in cave-in; entrance sealed", *The Austin American Statesman*, July 6, 1978

Turner, Allan. "Cave where 3 trapped one of hundreds here", *The Austin American Statesman*, July, 7, 1978

For more on caves in Texas, Texas Cave Management Association, <https://www.tcmacaves.org/>



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