Perrie (Butch) Loring Fralia  
NSS 27041 FE  
April 9, 1946 – Dec. 1, 2023

Butch Fralia, who helped bring organized Texas caving into the digital age through his computer skills and database expertise, has died. He was 77 years old.

A well-known and frequent participant in activities of the National Speleological Society (NSS) Texas Region, he was a longtime director of the Texas Speleological Survey (TSS), officer of the Texas Speleological Association (TSA), and webmaster for both the TSS and TSA. Butch was also the first newsletter editor of the Maverick Grotto, an internal organization of the NSS.

A Celebration of Life is pending in early 2024 at an Arlington, Texas church.

In his professional life, Butch worked in database administration and information technology for a number of North Texas firms, including Gearhart Industries, Halliburton, Andersen Consulting, and Central Industrial Supply. Speleology was his passion away from work, along with giving back as a volunteer for the many regional and local caving organizations. He was big-hearted in other parts of his personal life, including as a conservationist and a friend to the wildlife living around his Fort Worth area home.

But along with caving, Butch was particularly proud of his family – and especially about becoming a great-grandfather in April 2019 (Hayden) and again in May 2023 (Scotlyn).

Butch is also survived by his life partner, Sharon Mastbrook; two daughters, Jennifer Carnes and husband Jerry Carnes of Alvarado, Angela Snow and husband Troy of Mansfield; two granddaughters, Morgan Carnes of Waco and McKenzie (husband Cameron) Livingston of Midlothian; three grandsons, J.D. Carnes (wife Sydney) of Richardson along with Tanner and Tyler Snow, both of Mansfield. Butch’s two great-granddaughters are Scotlyn Carnes and Hayden Livingston.

With a history of heart disease, Butch had survived congestive heart failure and received a successful double bypass in 2009, but had complications later. Early on the morning of December 1, 2023, he was rushed to a Fort Worth hospital but did not recover and died of heart failure around 5 a.m.

Texas caving with “Bear”
With his black Labrador, Bear, Butch was often spotted at TSA events where he was a mainstay and organizer of many monthly TSA projects at Colorado Bend State Park over a dozen or more years. Sharon recalled that after she and Butch met in 1992, they caved at the park for a decade or more. As a TSA member and officer, Butch also helped organize a number of spring conventions. Butch began caving in the mid-1980s after visiting all of the commercial caves in Texas and a number in Oklahoma.

“He had an impact on the caving community as a volunteer,” Sharon said. “Caving was a wonderful hobby for him, and he met a lot of great people.”

In 2008, Butch was nominated and chosen as an NSS Fellow for his work in cave mapping and documentation in the Gorman Falls and San Saba area, even before a state park was established there – along with aiding the effort to organize TSS archives, digitizing the Texas Caver archives for TSA, and serving as webmaster for both organizations.

A number of Butch’s caving accomplishments are chronicled in 50 Years of Texas Caving by Carl Kunath. For starters, Butch is listed as a contributor to the book, published in 2007. Among presentations for the 1989 TSA Convention in Fredericksburg, Butch reviewed TSA's liaisons with Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

In 1990, Butch was among the first to explore Harrell’s Cave near San Saba. He accompanied John Ben Howell, who had originally explored Harrell’s in 1934, in a return to the cave and used a rope ladder that John had built for the descent.

Butch was very active in caving at Colorado Bend State Park. He reported that the state had been the beneficiary of 2,864 man-hours of caver labor from October 1, 1991 to August 31, 1992. Almost 300 hours had been devoted to cave cleanup.

At Colorado Bend, Butch teamed up with Rafal Kedzierski and Mark Gee, also Dallas-Fort Worth area cavers, along with Keith Heuss of Austin to manage the TSA caving project.

In 1992, Butch was elected TSA vice-chairman.

That same year, Butch was chairman of the TSA Convention in Concan, with an attendance of more than 100 cavers. Two years later, he attended the 1994 NSS Convention in Brackettville, Texas. In the January 1993 issue of The Maverick Bull, the newsletter of the Maverick Grotto in Fort Worth, Butch reported on the use of some “new-fangled” devices called GPS receivers. These $17,000 instruments were capable of determining the location of any point on the Earth's surface within 10 feet.

In 1986, Butch was one of 22 charter members of the new Maverick Grotto, serving as its first secretary and editor. Butch said then, “We’ve reactivated some old-time cavers in the Fort Worth area who had become tired of driving to Dallas for meetings.”

Butch was also a founding member of the Texas Cave Management Association in 1986. But his work for the TSS represents perhaps his greatest organizational accomplishment – as a director and webmaster.

In February 2020, the TSS honored Butch for his service as a longtime officer in the organization, which maintains the state’s database of caves, including maps and other information. The plaque, mounted on a Texas-shaped block of limestone, reads:

“The Texas Speleological Survey presents this Outstanding Service Award to Butch Fralia in appreciation of his decades of service in establishing and maintaining the TSS’s website and digital assets through his entire tenure as director. He was instrumental in implementing TSS’s original database design, helping establish its current system, and was unfailingly conscientious in keeping systems up to date and secure. Butch’s stewardship of the TSS digital assets over the years facilitated the work of the whole organization in innumerable ways.”
More information on the TSS award, featured in a video of the presentation to Butch, is available on YouTube.

Early memories
Butch served in the Navy in 1965, stationed in San Diego for a time when he was in Navy boot camp. He was stationed at Treasure Island, Naval Schools Command in San Francisco. Butch later was stationed in Panama at Coco Solo, where he then had run-ins with Green Berets who were in jungle training school at Fort Gulick.

Many of the tributes pouring in on Facebook mentioned Butch’s love of photography: at parties with his camera; posting photos of raccoons, possums, squirrels, grackles, crows, starlings, doves, other birds and animals from his “crittercam” eating in his back yard (where at times he went through nine cups of dog food in 24 hours); and even enlargements of the moon.

Butch had other talents beyond caving, IT work, and photography. He reminisced about playing a 60s tune, In the Mood, while a member of the LWHS Stage Band.

In 1963, Butch got a 1951 Ford flathead six-cylinder to drive instead of a 1950 Nash Statesman, which he called the “Green Turd.” He also owned a four-wheel-drive one-ton Chevy Merry camper / pathfinder conversion.

Butch commented about his heart condition periodically, once saying about Roy Clark and his “September Song 1970,” “I’ve always thought this was the most sincere version. He’d had two heart attacks and thought his end was near.”

Butch once said, “I told my doctor that I don’t worry my end is near as I figure with improvements, I’ll live until I’m 125. It’s the quality of life I’m concerned about!”

“I’d imagine retiring and being a volunteer cave guide at Carlsbad like my friend Andy Kominsky, then maybe a docent at a state park.”

Other Facebook quotes:
“Country Bumpkin was my CB handle back when I was into it.”
About music: “Bobby Gentry, Neil Diamond, Barbara Streisand (I love her music but not her politics), Train, Sting, and others. I have eclectic taste in music. Also, I remember the origins of songs that people appear to forget they were sung by someone else other than the singer of a more modern version.”

Of John Denver, he said, “Not bad for a lad from Fort Worth, Texas.”

[Compiled by Jay Jorden, with information from Sharon Mastbrook]

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Among tributes for Butch:
It is with a saddened heart to let Butch’s friends and family know that Butch had a heart issue around 3:15 a.m. on December 1, 2023. I called 911 and they led me through performing CPR until the paramedics arrived. They worked on him for 30+ minutes until they transported him to the hospital. Unfortunately, they were never able to get his heart to resume rhythm on its own.

Yesterday, Jennifer Fralia Carnes and some of Butch’s family discussed what to do. We will have a Celebration of Life at a future date.

Thanking you in advance for all of your thoughts and prayers as we go through grieving the passing of a sweet and kind man.

After 29+ years with Butch, my sweetheart, a void will remain the rest of my life.

-- Sharon Mastbrook, posting on Butch Fralia’s Facebook account

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Butch was a stalwart of the TSS, Colorado Bend project, and so much more. I've spent much of my life trying to teach people about the vulnerability of karst aquifers to pollution, but the most clear, impactful, and concise statement on the matter that I've ever heard was made by Butch. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department made a video about caves around 1990 that was broadcast on its weekly TV series. Butch was filmed at the bottom of a garbage-filled pit at Colorado Bend, cleaning it out. As he filled a bucket with decomposing debris and skeletal material, he said, "I'd hate to think about what my drinking water would taste like after flowing through these animal bones and trash." Beautifully said!

I will miss that good man.
-- George Veni; Carlsbad, N.M.

Sorry to hear about Butch's passing. …

I haven't talked to a Butch in a while, but, he was a terrific guy and a webmaster extraordinaire. For years, he maintained the Texascavers web forum, maintained the TSA website, and was instrumental in setting up the portal to view and download every issue of The Texas Caver that was ever printed. For free and on his own server!

Not super well-known for his caving (mainly with The Maverick Grotto), but, was instrumental in introducing the Texas caving community to the Internet and sharing our activities worldwide.

Unpaid, hard-working volunteers like him is what makes the world go around, and he will be missed.
-- Mark Alman; Dallas, Texas

Back in my pre-kids days (and a few years into the with-kids days), I was the newsletter editor for the local Fort Worth caving club, the Maverick Grotto - The Maverick Bull editor for seven years, back in the 1990's. After that, I spent three years as the President of Vice and then another three years as Chairman of the Maverick Grotto.

Butch Fralia had been a past newsletter editor before me, and I knew nothing about pulling together something like this, so he helped and guided me through the process. Eventually it got to the point where I would pull together the articles, and I'd head to Butch and Sharon's (they lived about five blocks away) to scan the images, then again a week later to print the final copy to take to the printer. In addition to that, Butch took me to River Styx on my son's first caving trip. Yes, I can testify that I have actually seen Butch underground! LoL

Over those 80-something newsletters over those seven years, then six more years as an officer in the club, I spent a lot of time with Butch and Sharon. Sometimes, Butch could be an old codger, but deep down Butch loved people (most of them, anyway). He loved Texas, he loved caves, and he loved serving the Texas caving community.

Butch often talked about surviving his "widow-maker" heart attack, and how few others did back then. I think he knew he should have died that day and was living on borrowed time and he lived every day like it was. I feel blessed that I got to share some of that borrowed time with him for all those years. I'll miss Butch but know I'll see him again when we all get over that rimstone dam in the sky.

-- Chad Fenner; Fort Worth, Texas

[Active in the North Texas caving community (DFW, Mavericks, and a few joint Easter trips with North Texas Speleological Society)]

I'm very sad to learn of Butch's passing. I enjoyed working with him in the 1980s and 1990s, then I went away to Missouri for years. He will be missed very much.

-- William R. (Bill) Elliott; Georgetown, Texas
Going to miss you, my old caving friend. You taught me a lot over the years.

-- Wayne Peplinski

On Friday, December 1, we lost my Papaw Butch Fralia to heart issues. I’m sad he’s gone, but I’m glad he isn’t hurting anymore. He always supported me and had great stories to tell. I loved listening to him, and talking about the family, dogs, and photography with him. RIP Papaw. You’ll be missed …

Thank you in advance for the thoughts, prayers and kind wishes for me and my family during this time.

-- Morgan Danielle Carnes

Many years ago, I was working with Butch through the nights to get our Singapore’s office system up and running. Thank you very much for your patience working with an IT idiot. RIP my friend …

-- Allan Pang Junliang

Photos

Russell Hill [L], Chad Fenner, Butch Fralia, and Mark Gee at TSS award ceremony, Fort Worth, Texas

At River Styx Cave: Butch Fralia (L) with Sharon Mastbrook, Chris Fenner, Chad Fenner, Laura Goff and Eric Ambercrombie (plus Bear, a Labrador, and Moli, a Mini Schnauzer)
Butch Fralia and Bear, his cave dog, at Colorado Bend State Park during a volunteer weekend

Butch Fralia [L] with Sharon Mastbrook, Chad Fenner and wife, Mike Cagle, Mark Gee, Russell Hill and Dale Ellison at February 2020 awards ceremony, Cousin’s Barbecue in Fort Worth, Texas
Texas Speleological Survey Outstanding Service Award for Butch Fralia

Butch Fralia in center with Meta Huzarevich [L], Michael Roger Anderson, and Cadence at the Maverick Grotto meeting on November 10, 2009. Michael, also a Fort Worth caver, died in 2014.

Butch on a recon trip at Colorado Bend State Park
Butch Fralia with Morgan Danielle Carnes

Butch Fralia in the Navy in 1965
Butch Fralia with Sharon Mastbrook; Chad Fenner with wife; Jay Jorden; Mark Gee; Russell Hill; and Dale Ellison