This is a brief synopsis of the life of Jerry Chastain, who was clearly the most famous of the early members of the University of Texas Speleological Society. After the basic facts, I will provide a few stories to provide some feeling for what he was really like.

Jerry Lee Chastain was born in Hillsboro, Texas on April 23, 1934. His father was Everett Frazier Chastain. His mother was Dorothy Jane Guinn. He was their second child. His only sibling and older sister was Patricia Jane Chastain, born also in Hillsboro on February 25, 1931. Patricia was always known to her family as Patty.

He was raised in Austin, and attended the University of Texas. His education was interrupted by a two year stint in the U.S. Army, after which he returned to UT and received his degree. He was always interested in photography. Later he became a professional cinematographer. His career began in Hollywood and was followed by a lifetime of making commercials and other films in Dallas, Texas. Some of the engagements took him to many parts of the world.

Jerry passed away peacefully at his home in Austin on October 20, 2016 at the age of 81. Jerry was predeceased by his parents and his sister. He is survived by his son, Lee Edward Chastain, daughter-in-law, Janet Chastain, and grandchildren, Madeline and Daniel Chastain.

Those are the basic facts, here are some more details. Jerry had some involvement in just about everything that happened at the University of Texas in Austin in the 1950s and early 1960s. Even after he left the Austin scene, he managed to keep his cadre of friends. The stories that follow do not do justice to all the events in which he was involved, but here we go.

When Jerry was just a small child, his father moved the family to Austin where he had a new job with the Austin Statesman newspaper as a Linotype operator. The Statesman was essentially the afternoon edition of the Austin American.

Jerry grew up in Austin. He attended Mathews Elementary School, Allan Middle School, and graduated from Austin High School in 1952. He was an Eagle Scout with Troop 5. In high school he was quite involved with the drama club, but not as an actor. He preferred to work behind the scenes. He also enjoyed playing pranks on his fellow students. This resulted from time to time in having pranks played on him.

In high school, Jerry had a small Crosley automobile. (The Crosley was made from the 1930s up to 1952. They were very small cars, almost microcars, weighing only about 1200 pounds.) On one occasion, the high school football team in concert, picked up his Crosley and carried it up to the second floor of Austin High School. It took the principal to threaten them to get them to take it back down again.

After graduating from Austin High, Jerry enrolled in the University of Texas. Originally a geology major he shifted quite quickly to journalism. Due to his long standing interest in photography, he became a staff photographer along with Frank Cricchio for the student
Jerry Lee Chastain

newspaper, *The Daily Texan*. They not only took pictures for the paper, but processed and printed them for the paper as well using the darkroom in the basement of the journalism building.

As a former Scout, he was very interested in adventurous outdoor activities and joined the University of Texas Speleological Society (UTSS) almost immediately upon attending UT. Soon after joining he found himself president of the UTSS against his wishes. He passed this mantle to another spelunker, Don Goodson, as soon as he was able to get Don, a high school friend, to join the cave club.

Even then he wouldn't give up on pranking his friends. On one occasion, he learned that a long term Austin friend, Bob Holder (always called simply Holder), would be taking a date out to a city park, Zilker, for a swim in the public pool known as Barton Springs. He found out what kind of a wheel was on Holder's car, found an old one of the right size, and filled the tire with concrete. While Holder and his date were enjoying themselves at the park, Jerry and another friend, replaced one of the rear wheels on Bob's car with the one filled with concrete.

It doesn't take a lot of imagination to visualize what happened next. After going only a short distance, the concrete crumbled and it was like driving on a flat tire. Holder got out of the car, kicked the tire, and bruised his toe. What he said is not printable in this story.

Jerry liked to be unconventional. On an early trip around 1953 or 54 to the Devil's Sinkhole, near Rocksprings, Texas, he and Lynn Allman took a stove and all the necessary ingredients down in the sinkhole with them so that they could make hamburgers and have picnic at the bottom. I think it was during this trip that he took the photograph of the Sinkhole that became rather famous.

Jerry was not the most diligent of students, however. He dropped out of school to serve in the US Army in 1956. After basic training at Fort Bliss in El Paso, he was sent to Fort Sill near Lawton, Oklahoma where he was trained as an atomic warhead specialist. After leaving the Army in 1958 Jerry returned to UT where he received a BBA with a major in Advertising.

After the Army and his graduation from the University of Texas, Jerry married Johanna Hoff in 1962. She was the daughter of a rather renowned Doctor of Physiology at Baylor Medical School in Houston. They moved to Dallas and Jerry went to work making TV commercials and theater trailers. To quote Jerry, he made those god awful “go man go … to the snack bar …” for Dr. Pepper's drive-in commercials. It was in Dallas that their only son, Lee Edward Chastain, was born.

Later he edited astronaut film for NASA down at Clear Lake City for about a year. Then Jerry and Johanna moved to Los Angeles to see how the “big boys” did it. After a couple years (1965-1966), they decided to move back to Dallas as they “did not want their son growing up in that place.” There he and another friend
Jerry Lee Chastain formed a company to make commercials where he enjoyed a long career as a producer, director, and cinematographer. Jerry told me that it was a much better paying business than making entertainment films. Among other things, he made a lot of political films and videos.

According to Jerry, once when he was running the advance team for George H. W. Bush (VP and POTUS) he instructed his photographic team, “Set up here to shoot the president as he gets off the plane.” A Secret Service agent came running over and asked if he would please stop saying “shoot the president.” Jerry also told the story of when he was pinning a microphone on Bush’s lapel, Bush said, “Jerry if you stick me with that pin I’m going to kick you in the balls!”

I met Jerry in the summer of 1953 where we were both taking a sophomore English class from a Professor Wilson, who lectured us endlessly about “not reading between the lines” but complained that we never seemed to understand what the author “really meant.” Rather quickly Jerry and I discovered that we had a few other things in common. First, and likely most long term interesting was our mutual interest in photography, a passion that we had picked up early in life. Second was that we had come within a gnat’s eyelash of being first cousins. Prior to marrying Dorothy Guinn, Jerry’s father had seriously dated and nearly married my mother’s sister, Mildred “Jack” Luker. Everett had met my aunt through her uncle, Albert Luker. Albert, my maternal grandfather’s brother, owned and operated the Grapeland Messenger, the weekly newspaper in Grapeland, Texas, where Everett had a job as a typesetter and Linotype operator. Grapeland is a small town about 24 miles from Alto, where I was born and my family lived.

Everett wound up marrying the girl from Rusk, Texas (only 12 miles from Alto) and moving off to Hillsboro, a town in central Texas just north of Waco. He had found a better paying position as a typesetter with a larger newspaper. Just a few years later he got an even better job offer in Austin as a Linotype operator for the Austin Statesman, a position he held for the rest of his life.

But back to 1953. Jerry told me about cave exploration which sounded interesting. He invited me to a regular meeting of the UTSS that fall and I got hooked on caving, too. I was not quite as active as Jerry was. I was majoring in engineering (EE) and that took up a lot of my time. Nevertheless we made 4-5 cave trips together in 1953–54.

One of these trips stands out in my memory. The cave was essentially just a great big hole underneath a highway not too far from Austin that was used to introduce new members to walking around in caves, safety precautions, etc. Jerry had gotten his hands on a supply of flash powder, which for the younger people was the predecessor to flash bulbs, which were in turn the predecessors to electronic flash. You poured some of the flash powder into a small tray situated just below a reflector. With the camera on a tripod, you opened the shutter. Then you triggered a spark which caused the flash powder to explode in a blinding flash of light.

Assembling the group, Jerry and I with cameras at the ready, set off a flash. Jerry quickly poured a new load of powder into the tray...
to take a second picture. Upon setting off the flash this time, it was obvious that there was a problem, as the big cave room was completely filled with white smoke from the first flash. These pictures looked like they were just a bowl of milk. Everybody crept out of the cave to get some fresh air.

In 1955, Jerry and I decided to make a movie of the Devil's Sinkhole. The rather famous cave near Rocksprings, Texas. I borrowed a 16mm movie camera from one of my engineering professors and we bought some World War II surplus black & white film. Realizing the distance from the entrance to the lake room where we wanted to do some filming, we concluded that running extension cords with 110v electricity would probably not give us enough light. The solution, of course, would be to run a 1200v line. For this we needed two transformers, one at the top, and one at the bottom. I asked one of my EE professors if he could assist and he quickly agreed to do so. He arranged for us to borrow the transformers from the City of Austin and wrote us a note to a friend of his there. Just before our expedition to the Sinkhole, we went down to the city, looked up his friend and gave him the note. He gave us two transformers, each weighing about 50-60 pounds. We signed a receipt promising to return them within a week, and drove off with no further ado. That could simply not be done today!

In the event we did get movies showing how to get in and out of the Sinkhole, and some pictures taken inside the cave. The video made from the film is still available.

Jerry retired in the late 1990s. Jerry and Johannna divorced in 1996. Due to failing health, he returned to Austin in 2007 to be near his son. He never lost touch with his many friends who will always remember his endless supply of stories and jokes. He was one of the best joke tellers I ever knew. I am sure he could have been a stand-up comedian if he had wanted to.

I knew Jerry well for over 60 years. We have even vacationed together several times over the years. We took a trip to China together in 2000 to visit my daughter and grand-daughter. I miss him.