

El Sotano: Adventures with Logan in Mexico

By Craig Bittinger

Please note that this is a fictional version of actual events. This story would not be possible without the AMCS newsletter Volume 3 (Page 93 and 106). Special thanks to Steve Bittinger for his help and pictures. Thanks to Terry Raines for pictures and trip reports.

In January of 1972, Craig had decided to take a semester off from being a UT student and to focus on what was important in life. This meant caving as much as possible and trying to figure out what to do with his life. School had become somewhat meaningless and a career choice and major focus of study were unclear. As Craig had previously taken a number of advance placement tests which resulted in getting many hours of University credit, the idea of taking a semester off didn't seem too bad. He would still graduate from UT on time in a total of 4 years.

After the Tanchipa trip that ended with finding Cuesta and the caves of the Tanchipa area, Craig and Logan and several other cavers continued to go caving in the Valles area. Eventually the other cavers had to return to the US to continue their college careers or go back to work. Craig and Logan remained in Valles and decided to spend several more weeks going caving before returning to the US.

The next morning after everyone else had left, Craig and Logan had breakfast at the Condesa restaurant and their conversation turned to planning the next few weeks.

"What do you want to do now that everyone else has gone?" Craig asked Logan.

"I have always liked the area around Ahucatlan," Logan said.

"I have never been there, but have heard about that deep pit there." Craig replied.

"Yes, I was involved in the exploration of Sotanito de Ahuacatlan which is 946 feet deep and fun to visit." Logan added.

"I would like to see that. What is it like around there?" Craig asked.

"The Montoya family lives nearby and are very friendly with cavers. We could stay with them and look around for more caves to explore in that area. I know of some unchecked pits near their home and there is a rumor of a huge pit 12 hours away over the mountains." Logan continued.

"That sounds great to me. It seems like we have a plan." Craig agreed.

After their meal, they paid their bill at the Condesa. They were each down to what they could carry in their backpacks. Not having a truck to store things in, they had to keep a close eye on their possessions. The backpacks had been leaning against the wall near their table while they ate. They picked up their packs and walked out the door of the Condesa.

"It seems strange to me to have everything I own on my back," Craig remarked.

"It is kind of freeing and self sufficient to not have to rely on having a car or truck," Logan replied.

They walked down to the local square where buses left for Jalpan. These buses were reminiscent of school buses. They were wildly painted and had a fringe across the top of the inside of the windshield. It was the lowest form of bus riding. There seemed to be no limit on how many people could be crammed inside and what people could bring along. This included smaller sized pigs and chickens in cages. The bus to Jalpan finally pulled up and they joined the line to get aboard. The bus driver insisted that they put their backpacks on top of the bus in the roof rack. This seemed a little scary, but the driver assured them that nothing would be stolen. There was a ticket taker/assistant on the bus as well as the driver. The assistant was in charge of loading and unloading luggage and taking the fares. They got aboard and luckily found an empty bench seat

toward the back of the bus. The driver got in and they started south out of Ciudad Valles. It was 10 AM by this point.

A cute little girl sat in the seat in front of them with her mother. She began to play peek-a-boo with Logan as they rode along. The bus would stop for anyone standing by the road and the trip was a constant series of stops and starts as people got on and off. One drunk man staggered on and collapsed into a seat several rows in front of them. He soon fell asleep and began to snore loudly. No one seemed too surprised to see two gringos riding the bus along with them. It seemed like most of the local population was getting on and off the bus and the constant flow of people made it an interesting show to watch.

A truck with a loud stereo blaring pulled up beside the bus as it passed on a blind curve. The bus windows were open and their music could be clearly heard inside the bus. The song "Born To Be Wild" by Steppenwolf was blaring. The first stanza could be heard as they sped by.

"Get your motor running,
Head out on the highway,
Looking for adventure,
In whatever comes our way"

The truck vanished ahead of the slow moving bus but the tune had caught in Craig's mind and played over and over. It seemed kind of a theme for what they were doing. Neither of them had any idea of what they would find or how things would turn out. They were putting themselves out there in the universe with the hope that something good would come their way. It was kind of a leap of faith. It was an exciting feeling and the possibilities seemed wide open.

The bus finally turned off of highway 85 and started the climb toward Xilitla. The road was steep and incredibly curvy. The bus was carrying so many people and so much weight that it was the slowest vehicle on the road for most of the way. At one point they came up behind a truck that was overloaded and climbing the mountain at about 10 miles an hour and belching enough smoke to form a cloud hazardous to human health. They crept along behind the truck until one of the bus passengers signaled that they wanted to get off. The bus pulled over and a long line of cars and trucks sped past them. The passenger got off seemingly in the middle of nowhere and began to climb up an almost invisible trail leading up from the highway into the jungle. The bus could barely start up again once it had stopped and by the time they reached highway speeds the slow truck had vanished. They could see a large cave entrance below the road on a nearby hill as they came into town. Multiple people got off and more got on when they stopped briefly. The bus continued on out of town and through the mountains.

Finally around 3 PM they pulled into Jalpan. The bus driver stood up and made an announcement. He said briefly that the bus to Ahuacatlan would arrive about 6PM for those who were transferring at this point. The driver then left the bus.

As they climbed down from the bus, Craig said to Logan, "I am happy to be off of that bus. Why don't we get our packs and find a good place to wait?"

Logan replied, "I am hungry. Let's find a restaurant and get some food and drinks while we wait. You never know how long a 3 hour wait will really be. It could be a lot more than 3 hours. People here don't seem as uptight about schedules and things."

"I could really use a bathroom break, so let's head on to the restaurant." Craig added.

The bus driver's assistant climbed up and passed down their backpacks. The packs were intact and hadn't been robbed. They hoisted their packs onto their backs and walked uphill to a nearby restaurant. It did have a bathroom and a window seat so they could see when the next bus drove in.

After getting settled with their packs leaning against a nearby wall they ordered supper.

"I think I will have beans, tortillas and an ice cold Coke." Craig said.

"I am in the mood for a steak and potatoes. A cold beer sounds good to me." Logan remarked.

Soon they both were eating and enjoying the ambiance of a small Mexican town and the people passing by. After a leisurely meal they left the restaurant and went to sit in the town square where the bus to Ahuacatlan would pull up. There were groups of teen aged girls all walking around in one direction and teen aged boys all walking around in the opposite direction. The girls would all smile at Logan as they walked by. It made for interesting people watching.

The quiet of the evening was suddenly disturbed by the sound of an engine straining to pull a vehicle up the mountain. They got up and began to put on their packs, just in case. Sure enough, in two minutes a bus came into view. After pulling to a halt several people got off. Craig and Logan loaded their packs on top and got inside. A few minutes later the bus roared out of town. Twenty five minutes later they arrived in Ahuacatlan. They quickly left the bus, happy to have that phase of the journey over.

"Our entire day of bus riding cost us just two dollars," Craig commented.

"We got a lot for our money. I am exhausted from having so much fun." Logan said in a teasing manner.

"Where do we go from here?" Craig asked.

"Let's hike up the arroyo toward Sotanito De Ahuacatlan. Once we get out of town we can find a flat place to camp for the night." Logan suggested.

Craig heard the words, "hike up," and settled himself into a slow climbing pace suitable for a long uphill hike. He hoped that it wasn't too far before they could find a camping site. They continued to hike along as it got dark. After about half a mile they reached an area that seemed far enough from town that they wouldn't bother anyone if they set up an overnight camp. They walked off the established trail and found a flat spot. It didn't take long to unroll a ground cloth and throw out a sleeping bag. The day had exhausted them and Craig figured that he would soon fall asleep. Just as he began to drift off to sleep the sound of loud barking dogs jarred him back awake. Somewhere below them in the night several dogs were barking back and forth to each other. They seemed to be having a contest of who could have the loudest, most obnoxious bark. This continued on for several hours. Logan seemed blissfully unaware of all the racket and was sleeping soundly. The dogs finally shut up and Craig fell asleep.

The light of the morning sun had them up at 6AM.

Craig opened his eyes and saw that Logan was already awake and looking in his pack.

"No wonder farmers always get up early. It is hard to sleep in with the sun in your eyes." Craig complained to Logan.

"Some people came down the trail and woke me up as they went by. Let's grab some breakfast and start hiking. It is better to hike uphill before it gets too hot," Logan replied.

They both began to scrounge around in their packs and Craig found some Gorp and a few last pieces of beef jerky that he had left over. Logan pulled out a Bollilo and a piece of cheese. Before long they were ready to start their climb. They hiked along at a good pace for about an hour. The trail was slightly uphill, but not too steep. At the end of the relatively flat portion of the hike there was a local store and several small houses. Looking ahead the trail seemed to start switchbacking up the side of a mountain.

"I'm hungry. Why don't we pool our money and buy a large can of sardines. We can split them and have a filling meal full of protein." Logan suggested.

"I'm hungry too. I like your idea. Let's do it," Craig said.

Logan walked up to the store front and bought a box of animal crackers as well as the can of sardines.

They made the purchase and then sat down in the shade to enjoy their feast.

"I like cooked sardines in a can as they should be safe to eat," Craig said. He was always worried about eating the wrong thing in Mexico and ending up with the "Touristas".

Logan looked carefully at the can. The label was all in Spanish. It said something about Sardines in oil and tomato sauce. He pulled out his P38 can opener and worked his way around the large oval shaped can. The smell of sardine oil filled the air. He finally got the top mostly off and bent it up out of the way. He pulled out his pocket knife and speared a large sized sardine. He picked it up and took a bite. "MMMM, delicious!" He said.

Craig got out his pocket knife and speared the next one. It was good in a fishy, oily way. As he pulled his out of the can he noticed that there was something strange sticking out from under the next sardine.

"What do you think that is?" He asked Logan and pointed to a dark, string-like object in the bottom of the can.

Logan got his pocket knife and pushed the next sardine over. It revealed more string and then a mass of string. He slid his knife under this and lifted it up. It seemed to be a mass of tangled strings. "What in the F ____?" he said in amazement.

"I wonder if it is a piece of the net they used to catch the sardines?" Craig replied.

Logan disgustedly threw the piece of net onto the ground. He had a sour look on his face. "What kind of quality control do they have in Mexican canning factories? Little or none, I would guess."

"Do you think they are safe to eat?" Craig asked.

"It is too late now. We may as well just enjoy our feast and try to forget about the net." Logan suggested.

"Well I guess they were all cooked, so it must have been sanitized." Craig said, trying to convince himself more than Logan. "I am still hungry and we did pay for the meal," he added.

They finished off their meal, shouldered their packs and headed up the trail. The trail did begin to climb steeply up the mountain and switchbacked back and forth as they gained altitude. Two hours later they finally reached the top and sat down for a break.

"You know we are not very far from the entrance to Sotanito de Ahuacatlan." Logan said and gestured at a clump of trees a few hundred feet away across a field.

"I'd like to see that," Craig replied.

"Maybe we can find somebody to watch our packs while we go down for a look." Logan continued.

A few minutes later two local kids came by. They were friendly and looked fairly honest. After talking for a few minutes, the kids agreed to guard their packs for an hour while the cavers went into the pit. The deal was made that they would be paid in Animal Crackers. One handful each up front and one handful each when we returned. The kids followed them over to the entrance, while contentedly munching on the crackers.

They tied off the 150 foot rope that they had brought with them. Logan rappelled down first and soon yelled up, "Off Rope!"

Craig came down second and was shortly at the bottom of the 70 foot entrance drop. The bottom sloped steeply down to an adjacent room. Logan had his light lit and Craig soon joined him. There was a pit in the center of the room. The edges of the room all sloped down steeply into the pit. It reminded Craig of an Ant-Lion trap. In this case there were many head sized rocks all balanced around the slope and poised to plummet into the depths.

“Listen to this!” Logan called out. He rolled one of the rocks over the edge. Nothing was heard for a few seconds. It then began to whistle as it fell. It bounced a few times and sound seemed to come up the pit for 10 seconds or so until it hit the bottom with a resounding boom.

“Wow! that is one deep pit!” Craig said. “Roll in another rock!”

It was fascinating to be on the edge of a 946 foot deep pit.

“How did you manage to rappel down that pit without getting killed by all of these rolling rocks?” Craig asked.

“You wouldn’t believe how it was originally. We have actually rolled most of the dangerous ones into the pit already. We tried to clear a path from the tie off point to the lip so we would be safe. Only one rock rolled in while I was descending and fortunately it missed me.” Logan replied. “The people on top had to be perfectly still while anyone was in the pit.

Their hour of having the boys watch their packs was quickly passing by so Logan and Craig climbed back up to the bottom of the rope. Logan went up first and Craig came out last. The boys were happily munching on more Animal Crackers by the time Craig came over the lip at the top. They pulled up the rope and packed their vertical gear back into the backpacks.

The boys waved and continued on their way. Craig and Logan continued their hike to Montoya's house. The ground on top of the mountain was a lot less steep and 30 minutes later they arrived. Logan walked up to the front door and called out, “Hola!”

The Montoyas came out, smiled when they saw who it was and replied, “Logan!!” Abrazos were exchanged. This was quickly followed by, “Mi casa es su casa!” They seemed genuinely glad to see Logan again. They asked about other South West Texas Grotto cavers that they knew. Logan introduced Craig to them as, “Mi amigo Gregorio”. They were treated like honored guests and were offered food, a place to stay, and a guide to more virgin pits than they could possibly explore.

Logan told the Montoyas that they were there looking for deep pits and would like to see any that they knew about. That afternoon their son guided them to



a nearby pit that Logan had heard about on his last visit. The pit was a short distance from the Montoya's home. When they got to the pit, Craig threw in a fist sized rock. Logan listened carefully as the rock accelerated down the drop and hit the bottom with a boom.

"It sounds like it is about 120 feet deep," Logan said.

They found a nearby tree that looked like a good rigging point. They uncoiled their 150 foot rope and tied a knot at the very end of the rope. After tying off to the tree, they lowered the rope into the pit. It seemed fitting that Logan should go down first as the Montoyas were his friends and they had come to show him the pit. Logan got out his vertical gear and started to put on his seat sling.

"Wait a minute, there is something going on with your seat sling," Craig warned Logan.

Logan took off his seat sling and looked at the place where the webbing was sewn together. About half of the sewn part was now dangling loose. He pulled strongly on the webbing and it still seemed securely fastened.

"It looks like it is still holding," Logan said.

"What did you sew it with?" Craig asked.

"My mother's upholstery thread that she had laying about the house." Logan replied.

"I wouldn't chance it." Craig said. "I always use braided nylon fishing line to sew up webbing that my life is depending on. Why don't you use my seat sling instead?"

"My seat sling would probably hold, but it is better not to take a risk I don't have to. I accept your offer." Logan said.

Logan put on the borrowed seat sling and attached his rappel rack to the seat sling and then to the rope. He shifted his weight onto the rope and soon disappeared out of sight into the darkness below. In a few minutes Craig could hear him yelling up from below.

"I'm coming back up."

Ten minutes later Logan came back into sight and climbed out of the pit. After unhooking his vertical gear he sat down to catch his breath.

"This pit is deeper than I thought. It must be nearer to 300 feet deep. It looked like I was only half way down when I ran into the knot at the bottom of the rope." Logan exclaimed disgustedly. They began to pull up and coil the rope.

The Montoyas' son had been watching all of this with fascination. Here were two people excitedly going down a pit that was almost in his backyard. He couldn't seem to quite understand what they were excited about, and how it profited them.

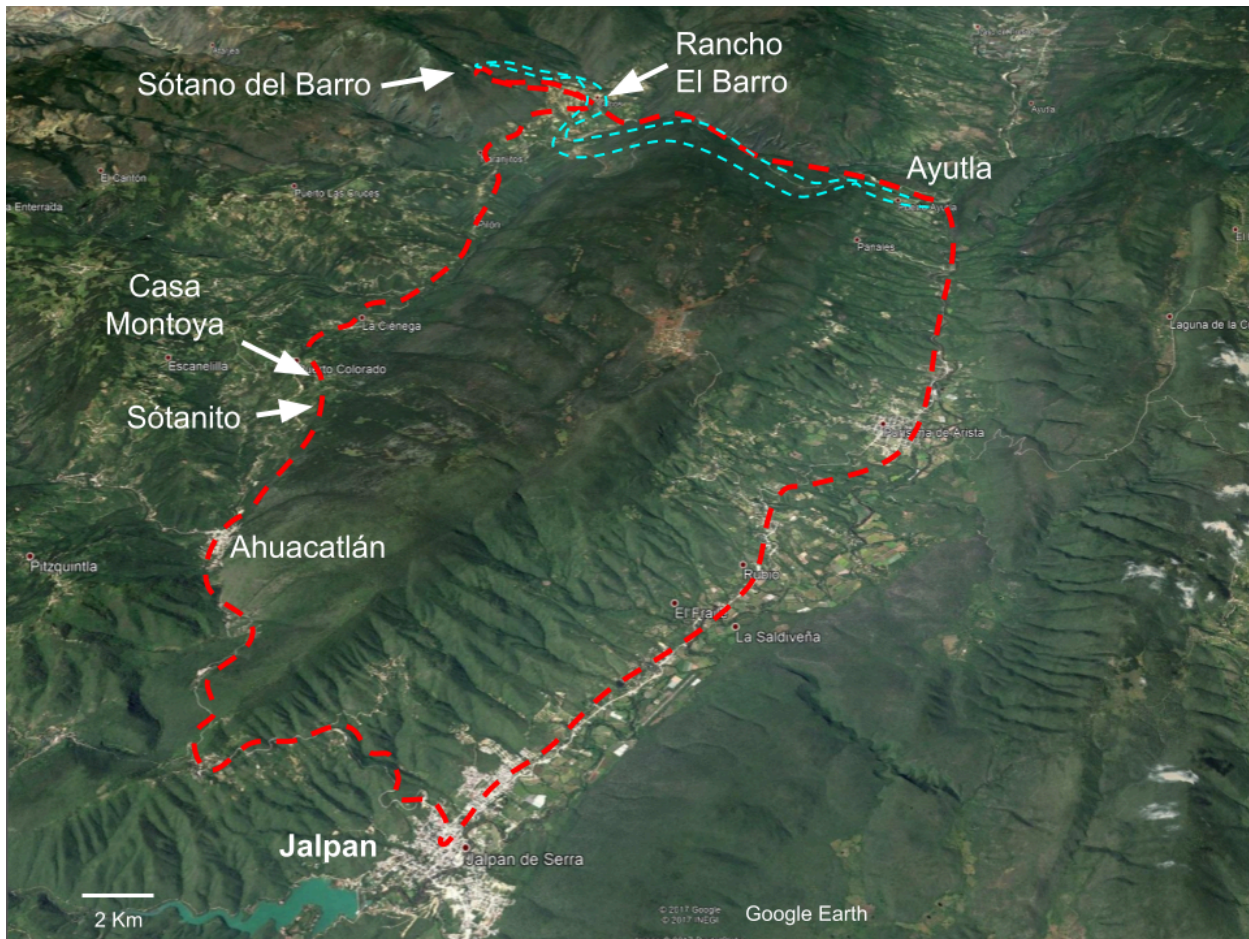
"What are you looking for?" He asked in Spanish.

"We are looking for the biggest and deepest pit that we can find." Craig said.

"Do you get paid or something for finding these pits?" he wondered.

"No, it is just our hobby. We are members of a caving club and enjoy exploring pits." Logan said.

"Do you know of any big, deep pits anywhere around here?" Craig asked, thinking of the big pit that Logan had mentioned, rumored to be in the area. The Montoyas' son thought for a minute and then pointed to a mountain in the far distance. The pit near the Montoyas' house was on top of one mountain and so they had a clear view of multiple mountains and the surrounding countryside.



“Do you see that white spot on the side of that mountain?” He asked. He again pointed to a specific spot. Logan was the first to see what he was indicating.

“I think that I see it. It looks like a cliff face to me.” He said, squinting his eyes.

The Montoyas’ son said, “That is the back wall of a huge pit. I have never been there, but that is what everyone says it is.”

At this point the rope was coiled up and it was beginning to get dark. They decided to head back to the Montoyas’ home for supper. When they reached the Montoya’s house they were invited to supper. Craig and Logan were given endless helpings of beans and tortillas. The beans were very tasty and well seasoned. The tortillas were fresh off the comal and delicious. They began to feel guilty about taking so much from the family and offered to cook one of their meals to share. Logan had some freeze dried beef stroganoff and pulled his lightweight cooking pot out of his backpack. They added some water and soon had something to share. The Montoyas had never tasted beef stroganoff and thought it was tasty and delicious. Between the two cultures they each had an experience to remember and a great meal as well. By 8PM everyone was full of delicious food and ready for bed. Logan and Craig returned to the small house they were sharing and soon fell sound asleep after their day of mountain climbing and caving.

Morning came early, especially on top of a mountain. With the breaking of the dawn the farm animals woke up and began to make noise. Dogs, chickens, roosters, pigs and burros all added their voices to the overall din.

It was so noisy that Craig couldn’t sleep any more.

“Are you awake?” He asked Logan.

“I’m trying to pretend that I am asleep, but it is impossible with all of this noise,” he answered.

“I guess that we had better get up and start the day,” Craig replied.

After a quick breakfast they approached the main house. Mr. Montoya came out and they began to ask him about the pit in the distance. Logan had brought along his binoculars.

Mr. Montoya pointed out the white spot on the side of the mountain in the far distance.

“That white spot is the back wall of a huge pit. I have never been there, but what I have been told is that the pit is so large that no one could throw a rock across the entrance and it is very deep (muy hondo),” He told them.

Logan got his binoculars focused on the white spot and soon said, “I can see the curve of the entrance from this distance.”

Mr. Montoya had a look and enjoyed seeing the view of the surrounding mountains through the binoculars. Craig took his turn and started to get excited when he could also make out the entrance to the pit.

“Why don’t we hike over and see the pit?” He said to Logan.

“I am up for it.” Logan concurred.

“Do you think we should take our backpacks with us?” Craig asked.

“It would be a lot easier with just daypacks. Why don’t we just hike over for a quick look?” He suggested.

“That is fine with me.” Craig said.

By 10:00 AM they each had their daypacks ready. They were filled with food and water, caving packs and a roll of toilet paper. Between them they had about 25 pesos just in case they came across a store or somewhere to buy some refrescos.

Logan found Mr. Montoya at work on his farm feeding the pigs.

“We are going to hike over and see the pit you pointed out to us. Would you mind watching over our backpacks until we return? We should probably be back late tonight.”

“Mi casa es su casa. Everything will be safe here until you come back.” Mr. Montoya replied.

“Muchas gracias,” Craig and Logan said simultaneously.

“The Montoyas are such wonderful people.” Craig said to Logan as they walked away.

They looked at the route they would hike. From the top of the mountain it looked like there were 5 major ridges to cross before they got to the mountain with the pit. It seemed simple enough to try to hike in a straight line to their destination. There would be a lot of elevation loss and gain, but with only daypacks and a reasonably light load it should be possible.

“I wish there was an established trail from here to there,” Craig said as they headed downhill from the Montoya’s mountain.

“There is not much brush so it should be fairly easy hiking,” Logan remarked.

An hour later they reached the bottom of the mountain and started up the first ridge. There was some fairly thick brush as they started back up, but they were able to weave their way through the bushes and vegetation without slowing down too much.

At the top of the third ridge they stopped for a quick break.

“This has been a day of highs and lows,” Craig moaned.

“Just a few more ridges and we will be there.” Logan answered.

They finally started up the fifth ridge which was a little higher than the previous ones.

“We are getting close now,” Logan said.

They crashed through the brush and came out into a clear space on top of the ridge. In the distance they could see the white cliff at the back of the pit. It barely looked any closer than when they had started that morning. Craig lowered his eyes from the objective and was shocked to find 5 more ridges between them and the pit. The taller ridge had hidden them from view.

“We need a new plan.” Logan said.

“This up and down is not working.” Craig answered.

From their higher viewpoint they could see a riverbed that was heading in roughly the same direction that they wanted to travel.

“There is almost always a trail paralleling a riverbed.” Logan suggested.

“The ridges all come down to the riverbed so if we were down there we could just skirt around the ends of them without all of this elevation gain and loss.” Craig added.

“It may be miles further, but it will be faster once we get to the riverbed and I hope, a trail.” Logan replied.

“Let’s keep going and just head down the back side of this ridge and then once we get to the bottom we can hike down to the riverbed.” Craig said in agreement.

Having a new plan re-energized the hikers and an hour later they emerged onto a trail headed in the direction they wished to travel.

“This is more like it,” Logan said as they now contoured around the ends of the ridges without so much change in elevation. Their hiking speed increased with no brush to crash through.

By 6:00 PM they finally reached the base of the mountain with the pit. They had been hiking at a steady 2 and a half to three mile an hour pace all day long and were totally exhausted. As luck would have it they came upon a man and a burro carrying a load of firewood. He seemed surprised to find two Gringos in such an out of the way place.

“We are trying to find the big pit that is on this mountain.” Craig told him in Spanish.

“Do you know of any trails that lead to the pit?”

“I would recommend that you go to Rancho El Barro and talk to the judge there. He can give you permission to visit the pit. Just keep going along this trail for about half an hour and take the first big trail heading up the mountain. Rancho El Barro is up that trail. You can’t miss it.” With that comment the man and his burro swiftly headed down the trail in the direction that they had just come from.

"It makes me nervous whenever someone says, "You can't miss it." Nine times out of ten it is not that easy." Craig said as they continued to hike along.

"Let's just watch for a big trail heading uphill." Logan answered.

About 45 minutes later they came to a major trail heading uphill. They got lucky as a woman and a child were approaching the intersection.

"Which way is Rancho El Barro? Logan asked.

The woman seemed reluctant to speak, but pointed to the trail going steeply uphill away from the river.

"Muchas gracias," Craig and Logan replied. Relieved that they were finally getting close to their destination and not wandering around lost, they started up the trail.

"My legs are telling me that they don't like uphill climbs," Craig moaned to Logan.

"Maybe it won't be too far to the judge's house." Logan said, trying to inject some hope into their seemingly endless hike.

About half an hour later some houses came into view. They asked for the way to the judge's house and were directed to the largest of the dwellings.

It was Craig's turn to try out his Spanish and to try to convince strangers that they were OK people just out looking for a pit. Craig knocked on the door and a middle aged woman answered. He asked to speak to the judge and she went back inside to get him. A few minutes later a distinguished man came to the door.

"Gregorio Rodriguez a su servicio," he said.

Craig launched into his prepared speech. "We are students at the University of Texas and members of the cave exploring club. We have heard that there is a deep pit near here and we would like permission for us to go and see it. I am Gregorio and this is Logan."

The judge smiled and said, "We are Tocayos", which seemed to mean people sharing the same name. He was very friendly and invited them into his home.

"Mi casa es su casa," he continued. He next invited them to join his family for supper. They were having tortillas and beans.

"They smell delicious and we are very hungry. We left the mountain near Ahuacatlan this morning and have been hiking all day," Logan added.

The judge seemed impressed by this and said, "Muy lejos"(very far). During the meal he told them that there was indeed a big pit higher up on the mountain. They were welcome to climb up to see it in the morning. He then asked if they had brought any other equipment with us.

"No, just our packs." Craig said.

"I invite you to stay with us tonight," The judge offered.

This was wonderful news as it was already getting a little cold and spending the night huddling around a campfire with no blanket was not a good thought.

"We gratefully accept your offer," Logan said.

After the meal the judge showed them to an adjacent, smaller house and provided them with two beds and two serapes. After several "Buenas Noches," Craig and Logan stretched out to go to sleep. They were exhausted after many hours of hiking. Just when they were about to fall asleep, the judge decided to crank up his loudspeaker system and play the radio over it.

"Why do you think he is blasting music over the loudspeakers?" Craig asked Logan.

Logan was quiet for a moment and then said,"I would guess that few people around here have electricity or access to a radio. Maybe he is providing entertainment for the surrounding houses."

"That makes sense to me," Craig answered.

He tried to sleep on his side and put his arm over his exposed ear. This was still not enough to block out the loud music of a Mariachi band and various Mexican folk ballads.

There was a lot of Mariachi music and talking in loud voices that made sleep difficult to find.

Sometime in the middle of the night the music finally cut off and they were able to get some sleep.

By 6:00 AM they heard the family going about their daily chores.

“We had better get up and head up the mountain.” Logan said.

“I am awake. I never could get really warm under this serape. I must have shivered for half the night.” Craig replied. “I am grateful for the serapes and can’t imagine how cold we would have been without it.” He added.

They opened their packs and pulled out some Gorp and a mangled Pop Tart for a quick breakfast.

“We should give them something for our night’s stay.” Craig suggested.

“We don’t have much money. What about something we have that they don’t.” Logan suggested.

“One of my three canteens is empty. We could give them that. They don’t have high quality water bottles and might find the canteen useful.” Craig continued.

“Fine, let’s try that.” Logan said.

After neatly folding their serapes and leaving them on the bed, they went outside and approached the main house. Everyone was awake and invited them in.

It was Logan’s turn to talk and he started out, “We want to express our gratitude for you taking us into your home and giving us food and a place to stay. We would like to give you a small token of our appreciation. Please accept this canteen.” Logan said.

The judge smiled and seemed to like the gift. He tried to minimize the help they had been given by saying, “De Nada.”

“Would you point out the way to the pit? We thought we should get an early start.” Craig added.

“Just climb straight uphill and eventually you will come to a grassy meadow. The pit is just behind that. He pointed straight up the slope of the mountain.”

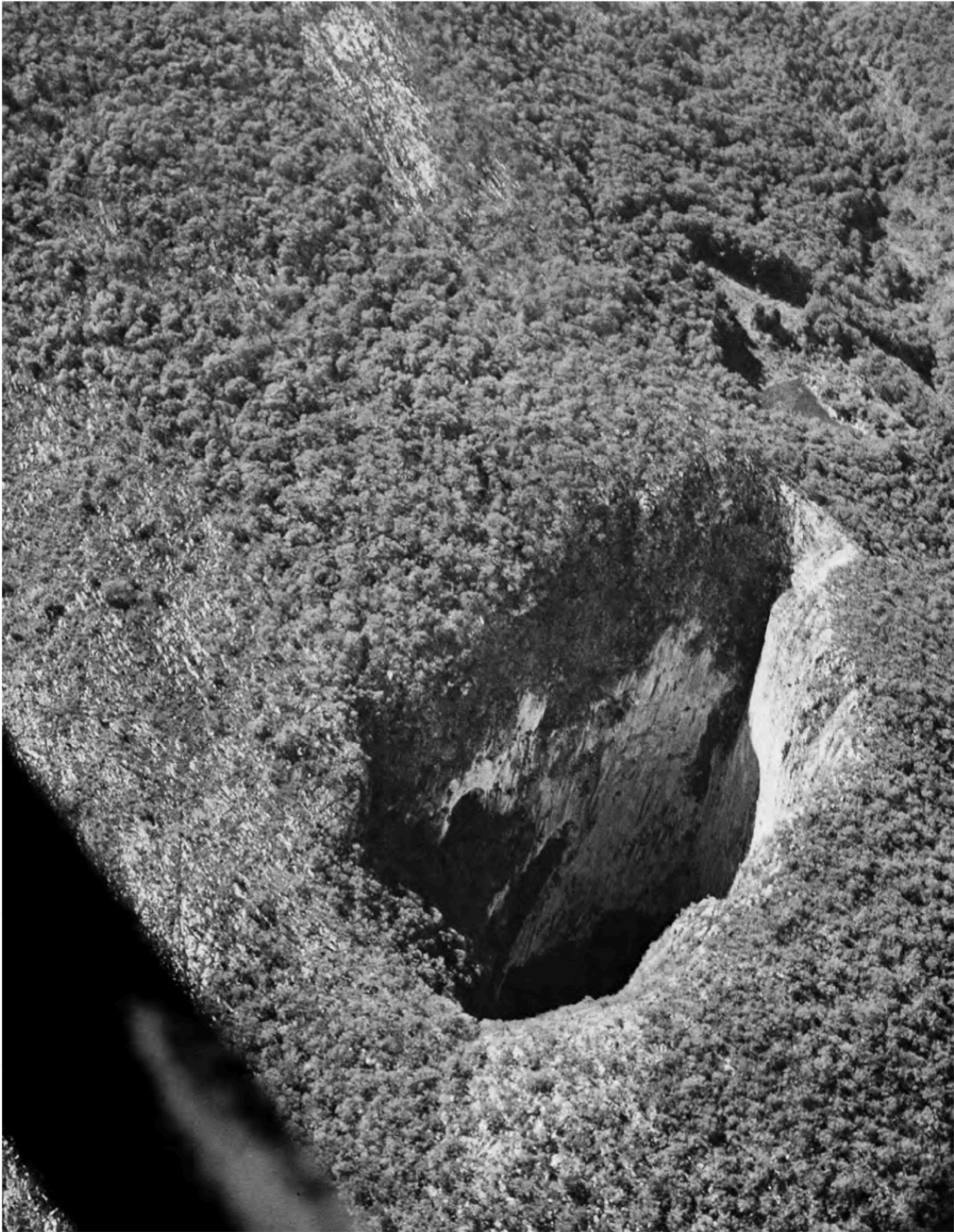
“Muchas Gracias,” they both said and started hiking uphill.

Thirty minutes later they discovered that there was no obvious trail and that there was a dense forest between them and the pit. It was slow going. After a few minutes of crashing through the brush they heard shouts from below. It sounded like, “Andan perdidos”, which translated to “you are lost and going the wrong way”. Before long the judge’s son, Ramon, came into view. He was hiking twice as fast as Craig and Logan and didn’t seem at all out of breath as he sprinted up the mountain.

“I will be your guide,” he said. With Ramon in the lead he veered off to the side and they soon came out on a trail heading up the mountain. Two and a half hours later they emerged onto the grassy meadow. They all sat down for a much needed rest break. After drinking some water Logan asked Ramon, “How much farther to the pit?”

“We are here. It is just on the other side of those trees.” He informed them.

Logan and Craig jumped up with renewed energy and headed in the direction that he had pointed. Ramon was right behind them and pointed out a faint path between the trees. In five minutes it was obvious that something was right in front of them. There were no more trees ahead and a large open area. They came through the last screening brush and got their first view of the pit.



“It is huge!” Craig yelled enthusiastically.

“That is the biggest pit I have ever seen.” Logan added. “Grab a rock and throw it in,” he said eagerly.

Craig looked around and found a fist sized rock. They were both silent as Craig tossed it over the edge. Nothing could be heard for a few seconds. It then began to whistle as it fell. It got louder and louder for an eternity. Finally a huge boom echoed up out of the pit.

Ramon was totally mystified as to why these two crazy gringos were jumping up and down, screaming and excitedly shaking hands. He was used to having this pit in his backyard and had nothing to compare it to. To him it was no big deal and just part of the mountain scenery.

“Let’s time a rock and see how deep it is.” Craig said.

“I don’t have a watch.” Logan replied.

“I don’t either. We will just have to count one one thousand, two one thousand and get as close as we can.” Craig suggested.

It was well known to cavers that a fist sized rock fell roughly one hundred feet per second after the first few seconds. Thus a ten second drop would be around 1,000 feet deep.

“I will throw and you count,” Craig suggested to Logan.

Logan nodded and Craig threw in another rock. Logan counted loudly out loud. When he reached one hundred and 11 a loud boom was heard. They both smiled and laughed out loud at the joy of discovering a pit that deep.

“If anything we are undercounting the depth. I bet it is even deeper than 1100 feet.” Logan speculated.

They sat down for a minute to make a plan for further exploration. Craig pulled out his lightweight 35 mm film camera and began to take a series of pictures. The sotano was so big that it wouldn’t fit into one frame. As in most big pits they saw a flock of parrots circling around inside the entrance.

“I think those must be Military Macaws,” Logan said. Craig didn’t know one parrot from another and just nodded his head.

“What do you call this pit?” They asked Ramon.

“We call it, “El Sotano” for short or sometimes, “El Sótano Del Rancho El Barro”.

“It is so huge that just plain “El Sotano” sounds good to me.” Craig said.

“Fine,” Logan added

Logan continued to stare at the pit. In a minute he said, “I think that I see a cave entrance on the far side of the pit. If we go around over there and check out the cave, maybe we can find a way down or something.”

“That sounds good to me,” Craig said.

They asked Ramon if he had ever been to the cave and he said that he hadn’t. He didn’t think that it went in very far, but wasn’t certain.

In a few minutes they set off around the top of the right wall of the pit. The brush was fairly thick and it took a while to fight their way along to the far side of the pit. They finally saw the cave ahead and eagerly made their way toward the entrance.

There was a strong odor of dung in the air.

“Let’s go in carefully”, Logan warned. “We don’t want to surprise some wild animals.”

They finally arrived at the entrance and the ground was covered with pig poop.

Craig who had grown up in South Texas knew what Javelina dung looked like and this was it in large quantities. He also knew the danger of surprising a herd of Javelinas, who were known to attack humans.

Picking up some rocks and banging them together as well as yelling loudly, failed to flush out any animals. They entered the cave only to find that it was a small shelter cave and didn’t have any way to continue on into the pit. The floor of the shelter cave had many pig tracks and was almost entirely covered in droppings.

They left the cave and hiked back up to the top of the wall of the pit.

“What do you want to do from here?” Craig asked as they hiked along.

“We have probably done all that we can without more rope and equipment.” Logan said.

“It is already around midday and we have a long way to go to get back to our packs at the Montoya’s house. Craig added.

They continued to retrace their steps and several hours later arrived back at Ramon’s house. On the hike down they continued to discuss their situation. Logan asked Ramon if there was an easier way to get back to Ahuacatlan, than to hike back up all the mountains and ridges that they had come down.

“Yes, all you have to do is follow the river downstream through the canyon and you come out on the road at the town of Ayutla. From there you can catch the bus back to Jalpan and then catch another bus up to Ahuacatlan.” Ramon informed them.

“How long do you think it will take to get to the road?” Craig asked.

“I have hiked it before in two or three hours.” Ramon told them.

Craig had learned to take time estimates like this with a grain of salt as they came from people who didn’t have watches and traveled at a very quick pace. Still, even double that estimate would be a great savings in time and energy. The idea of a bus carrying them back to the top of the mountains seemed wonderful.

“I like what he is suggesting.” Craig told Logan.

“I think it is a good idea. Let’s do it.” Logan replied.

“We owe Ramon something for guiding us around all day. We are about out of food and money. Do you have any ideas? Craig asked.

“What about that pocket knife you have? It would be something he could use and seems like a good payment for a day’s work.” Logan suggested.

With this Craig decided that he could always get another knife and made up his mind to part with his knife.

They arrived back at Ramon’s house. They thanked him profusely for guiding them to the pit. His father Gregorio was at the house and seemed interested in their plans.

Craig and Logan tried to explain to him that the pit on the mountain would be of great interest to many people. They planned to return in a few weeks to explore it.

Logan added, “In the future many people will come here to see the pit. It is very deep and unique. It could mean jobs for your village and a way of making a living in the future.”

The judge seemed to think deeply about this and seemed to be in favor of anything that could bring prosperity to his village.

“We want to thank you for your hospitality and would like to give Ramon a little something for all of his work guiding us around.” With that Craig pulled out his pocket knife and gave it to Ramon. It was a Buck knife with one big and one little blade. Ramon opened and closed the knife several times and seemed very pleased.

After completing their goodbyes and assuring the judge that they would be back within a few weeks Craig and Logan started downhill toward the stream and the entrance to the canyon they could see in the distance. The hike seemed fairly straightforward and they just cut cross country to their destination. This involved crashing through a lot of brush and bushes. An hour and a half later they arrived at the stream near where it went into the canyon.

“Look ahead, there is someone sitting on a rock,” Logan said to Craig.

“He looks kind of familiar,” Craig replied.

As they got closer they could see that it was their guide, Ramon, waiting for them.

“Hola!” Logan said as they got near to where Ramon was sitting.

“I thought that you might need a guide through the canyon,” so I came down to wait for you.” Ramon said in Spanish.

“How did you get here before us?” Craig asked.

“There is a trail that the local people use to get here quickly from our ranch,” he replied.

“We accept your kind offer of being our guide.” Logan said.

Ramon set off at a rapid pace that almost had Craig jogging to keep up with him. Ramon knew where to cross the river in order to walk the straightest path and kept them moving right along. The canyon was beautiful with walls reaching up to 1000 feet tall. The stream was not too deep and was easy to ford when necessary. Usually they could just jump across from one large rock to the next. After 2 and a half hours they sat down for a rest and a drink of water.

“This canyon is a beautiful place.” Logan said as they were resting.

“Why don’t people live and farm down here?” Craig asked.

“There is a local belief that bad spirits inhabit this canyon. It is OK to pass through it in the daytime, but it is very dangerous to try to spend the night in the canyon.”

Craig and Logan were trying to be culturally sensitive and nodded their heads in agreement. Maybe this was a local legend that still survived from pre-Hispanic days when only local indians lived in this area. Craig thought to himself that the bad spirits might be the reason that Ramon was pushing the pace of their hike. He was thinking about the return trip and wanted to be sure he had plenty of time to get through the canyon before dark.

In a few minutes they started hiking again and two hours later they saw an old aqueduct on the right wall of the canyon. Ramon guided them up to the aqueduct and they saw a trail running along beside it.

“Just follow this and it will take you right to the town of Ayutla. From there you can catch the bus.” Ramon said.

They thanked him again for all of his work for them. Ramon waved goodbye and headed back up the canyon they had just come down. He set a very fast pace and soon disappeared from sight.

Ramon was right and the town of Ayutla soon came into view. They heard a strange sound and realized that it was the sound of a truck passing by on the highway. It was nice to be back in a more developed part of the world.

Ayutla had a refresco stand and Craig was soon enjoying the delights of a Coke. Logan decided to have an agua mineral. They asked the store owner about the bus and he told them it was due in about half an hour. They happily sat down and rested their weary legs.

Suddenly someone yelled, “Here comes the bus,” so they quickly grabbed their daypacks and started running straight uphill toward the road, only to see a vehicle flash by and vanish in the distance. Fortunately, it was only a car, but the bus appeared 2 minutes later. Craig and Logan both stood by the road and waved their arms. The bus screeched to a halt and the door opened. They jumped on board and the driver floored the accelerator and roared up the road back to Jalpan.

“It sure is nice to have the bus carrying us along after all that hiking,” Craig remarked to Logan.

“I love modern conveniences,” Logan said as they roared along.

The bus pulled into Jalpan about a half an hour later. As they got off they asked the bus driver, “When does the next bus to Ahuacatlan arrive?”

“I am sorry to inform you that the bus to Ahuacatlan will leave in the morning at about 9AM,” he replied.

It was now dark outside. They sat down in the town square to discuss their situation.

“It would be nice to check into a hotel for the night,” Craig moaned to Logan.

“Yes, that would be nice. The only problem with that is that we have a total of 5 pesos left between the two of us.” Logan replied.

“Public transportation is out, so that leaves private transportation.” Craig continued to think out loud.

“Maybe we could hitch a ride or something,” Logan mused.

“It is either that or we spend the night here in the square, waiting for the bus in the morning,” Craig continued.

The square was fairly quiet and no cars were passing by. There was nothing to do except wait and hope that someone would come by. About 15 minutes later a pickup truck with a flatbed and a wooden enclosure on the back pulled up. The driver got out and Craig plucked up his courage and approached the man.

“Buenas Noches,” he started off. The man looked at him and nodded. “My friend and I are trying to get to Ahuacatlan and the last bus has already left. Would you happen to be going in that direction and could we catch a ride with you?” Craig asked.

“Si” the driver responded. “You just need to wait for half an hour and I will give you a ride. Ahuacatlan is on my way home.”

“Muchas Gracias,” Craig replied. We will wait for you here, next to your truck.”

With that the driver walked away across the street and went into a place of business.

Craig went back to where Logan was sitting and told him the good news.

They both walked over to the truck and sat down on the curb to wait. Thirty minutes later the man had not reappeared.

“Which store did he go into?” Logan asked.

“That one with the red light on over the door,” Craig said.

Logan walked across the street and surreptitiously glanced inside the place of business. He shook his head and walked back to rejoin Craig in their sojourn next to the truck.

“What did you find out?” Craig asked.

“That is a Mexican cantina. There are a lot of men in there drinking Tequila, laughing and talking loudly.” Logan informed Craig.

They were so tired that they both began to doze off. After waiting for three hours they heard loud voices at the door to the Cantina. Logan had woken up and nudged Craig. The driver stumbled up. “Ah! There you are. Let’s go to Ahuacatlan,” he said.

He motioned for them to climb into the back of the truck which was surrounded by a wooden enclosure much like a wooden fence. They climbed aboard and moved to the front where they would be protected from the wind by the back of the cab. Craig grabbed onto the wooden slats on one side and Logan grabbed onto the slats on the other.

The driver started the engine and roared out of town. He seemed to accelerate up the curvy and mountainous road as fast as the truck would go. He had the road basically to himself and was using all of it. Craig and Logan were in the back hanging on tight in order to keep from being rolled back and forth across the flatbed. They finally reached the top of the grade.

“Maybe he will slow down a little for the downhill portion of the trip to Ahuacatlan.” Craig called out to Logan over the roaring wind and the sound of the engine.

The driver continued to accelerate down the winding mountain road. The tires were screeching around the corners and the truck seemed to slide a little as they continued downhill. Logan said something that was blown away by the wind. It sounded to Craig like some kind of prayer or something as the truck was on the wrong side of the road for at least half of the descent.

Lights appeared ahead and the truck slowed rapidly and came to a halt.

“Ahuacatlan!” the driver called out from his open window.

Logan and Craig jumped out and called out, “Muchas Gracias!”

The driver waved and roared off into the night.

“I have never been so glad to be back on my own two feet.” Craig said.

“Thank God that we survived!” Logan added.

They hiked through town and found the start of the trail up to the Montoya’s house. They were leaving the last electric light behind and so stopped for a minute to light their carbide lights. At this point it was about 9 PM.

“How long do you think it will take us to get to the Montoya’s house?” Craig asked.

“I estimate it is about a 3 hour hike so we should arrive about midnight.” Logan answered.

“Do you think that is too late to bother them?” Craig continued.

“I don’t think that they will mind. They are probably worrying about what happened to us.” Logan replied.

The trail was wide and easy to follow in the dark. As they climbed higher the trail got smaller and less used. Two and a half hours later their carbide lights were growing dim.

“I think that I have lost the trail.” Logan said.

“Let’s scout around and see if we can find it. I will go to the left and you go to the right. Yell when you cross it .” Craig suggested.

“Let’s try it. We will meet back here in 15 minutes” Logan said.

Fifteen minutes later they met back at the spot where they had realized they were lost.

“Do you have any idea what we should try now?” Craig asked.

“I admit that I am totally lost and have no idea where the trail is.” Logan answered.

“The trail will be easy to find in the morning when it is light. Why don’t we build a fire and spend the rest of the night here.” Craig suggested.

“I am cold, lost and tired.” Let’s get a fire going.” Logan suggested.

“I saw some sticks that we could burn over this way.” Craig said.

Logan began to gather some firewood as well. Soon they had a large pile of sticks. They made a teepee of sticks and held the carbide light flame to it until it began to burn. The night had turned bitterly cold and they each just had only a thin long sleeved shirt. They didn’t have enough big sticks to make a long lasting fire, so had to keep adding more sticks every half an hour or so. Craig would build up the fire and then doze off. He would then wake up shivering with cold and discover the fire was about out. He would add more sticks to the fire and doze off again. Every couple of hours they would run out of sticks and have to search for more. Finally, five hours later the sky started to turn pink and they were treated to a glorious sunrise.

Logan soon woke up and they discovered the main trail 20 yards away.

“I can’t believe that we were this close to the trail and couldn’t find it last night.” Craig moaned as they resumed their hike.

They arrived at the Montoya’s house about thirty minutes later. As usual they were awake with the dawn and seemed surprised to see us. Logan and Craig were greeted warmly and the Montoyas had many questions about where they had been and what they had found.

“We made it to the huge pit that you pointed out to us. It was much further away than we had thought and so it took longer to get there and to get back.” Logan said.

Mr. Montoya said, “ We were worried about you and hoped that you hadn’t gotten into trouble.”

Craig answered, “ We were fine and the pit you showed us is truly a wonderful discovery. Thank you so much for directing us to it.”

Mr. Montoya said, “Someday I will have to hike over there and see it for myself.”

They were happy to be reunited with their packs and soon had a delicious breakfast. Two hours later they said goodbye to the Montoyas. Twenty people were standing around waving goodbye and telling them to come back soon. It was a heartwarming send off and seemed to make up for the horrible night spent shivering around the fire.

On the way down the mountain to Ahuacatlan they discussed their plans.

“I think that we should head straight back for Austin and tell everyone what we found.” Logan said.

“That sounds fine to me. It will be fun to see their faces when we tell them about a new, deep, huge pit.” Craig replied.

When they arrived in Ahuacatlan they asked about the next bus to Jalpan. It was due in about 30 minutes. They had time to sit in the square and have a cold refresco before the bus came. Craig decided to try a new flavor of refresco called Sangria. It was delicious and like having a glass of grape juice for breakfast. The bus arrived on time and they loaded their packs on top and set off for Jalpan. The bus gods were with them and they only had a short wait before catching a bus on to Ciudad Valles. By lunchtime they arrived in Ciudad Valles.

“We should have a celebratory lunch and splurge a little.” Logan suggested.

“I am really hungry and ready to eat.” Craig replied.

“I know of a great restaurant one block over from the Condesa.” Logan continued.

He led the way and shortly they were seated in a more upscale restaurant than Craig was used to. There were white table cloths and a cut flower on the table.

Logan looked at the menu. “I suggest we have the Filet Mignon, wrapped in bacon, with mushrooms. It comes with fried potatoes as well.”

This was something new for Craig but he decided to try it as well in support of the idea of a celebration. The restaurant did have ice cold Cokes and he had two to accompany the meal.

The waiter did look at them kind of strangely and seemed to try to hold his breath when he came near to them.

“The waiter doesn’t seem to like us very much.” Craig said.

“It might have something to do with us not having bathed for a week and spending the night around a smoky campfire.” Logan replied.

“Our money is still good, so he can just put up with us, if he wants a good tip.” Craig answered.

Their conversation kept turning to the deep pit they had discovered and how amazed their friends would be to hear of their discovery.

Craig noticed a large clock on the wall with a visible second hand ticking off the seconds. They were sitting and waiting for their order to be served. It certainly took a lot longer to get their food than at McDonalds.

“Why don’t we try counting off the seconds like we did at the pit? We can judge how accurate we were by the clock.” Craig suggested.

“Let’s wait until the second hand gets to the top and then we will start timing.” Logan said.

They watched the clock and when the second hand got to the 12 Logan began to count, One thousand one, One thousand two and so on. When he got to One thousand and eleven the second hand clicked over to 13 seconds after the hour. Craig and Logan suddenly had big smiles on their faces. This meant that the pit was actually around 1300 feet deep rather than 1100 feet deep.

“Are you sure you weren’t counting slower than you did at the pit? Craig asked Logan.

“Let’s try it again. This time I won’t even look at the clock.” He said.

Logan turned his head away from the clock and Craig said, “Now”. When he got to one thousand and 11 the second hand was again on thirteen.

They felt like cheering, but due to their surroundings they began to laugh and smile and shook hands in congratulations.

The waiter returned at that moment with their order. He gave them a strange look as if his customers were crazy, as well as smelling bad.

The food was delicious as they had been on short rations for some time. The filet mignon was about 2 inches thick and very juicy and delicious. It cut easily with a sharp steak knife and was tender and well cooked. The mushrooms and potatoes added some tasty treats to the entire meal.

“This is certainly better than cold sardines with a side order of net.” Logan joked.

Craig couldn't contain his laughter and laughed out loud. The waiter gave him another dirty look from across the room. This made Craig laugh even louder.

They ate until they couldn't hold any more. The bill was expensive, but as they were in a good mood they even left the waiter a generous tip. His eyes widened when he saw the tip and he was actually polite to them as they left the restaurant.

“Come back soon,” the waiter said with a smile.

“Do you think we should check into a hotel and take a bath and clean up?” Craig asked Logan.

“I am so tired that I can sleep on the bus. We are in for a long ride and it is better to spend it asleep. I am getting a bit low on money, so we had better just head back to Austin.” Logan suggested.

This made good sense to Craig and they hiked down to the first class bus terminal. The bus gods were still with them and within an hour they climbed onto a first class bus. Their packs were safely stowed under the bus. As Craig walked up the stairs into the bus the first thing that he noticed was that it was air conditioned inside. They walked down the aisle and found two seats together near the back of the bus. The seats had a white cloth covering the head rest area and seemed very comfortable.

Logan glanced toward the back of the bus and then said.”Look at that! There is actually a bathroom on this bus.”

“This was good news to Craig as his meal of Filet Mignon was not sitting too well on his stomach.

Several other bus riders got on and for some reason no one wanted to sit in the seats near them. The bus left Ciudad Valles headed north. When they got to the city limits the bus driver seemed to push the accelerator all the way to the floor and the bus began to pass all of the other traffic on the northbound side of the road.

“I hope that the bus driver knows what he is doing.” Craig mused to Logan.

“He is still alive, so I imagine that he does.” Logan replied.

“At this rate we will be at the border in no time.” Craig said.

Logan didn't reply. Craig looked over and saw that he had fallen asleep.

This seemed like a good idea and he quickly followed suit. The night spent around the campfire hadn't provided much rest.

The bus made several stops during the night. Craig would wake up briefly and look around to see if they were at the border yet. He quickly fell back asleep once he figured out where they were.

After midnight Logan was shaking him and Craig woke up from a dream of eating a 19 cent taco at Taco Bell.

“Wake up! We are here.” Logan said.

Craig finally got his mind in gear and exited the bus. The driver's assistant was unloading their packs. It was a good thing that they had exited when they did as there were several suspicious looking characters standing around. They quickly put on their packs and asked which way to the

border. After a hike of about half a mile they saw the bridge ahead. It was now about 1 AM and the only other people crossing the bridge were drunk after a night of partying in Reynosa.

The border guards' eyes lit up when they saw two young men with backpacks approaching. They were constantly on the lookout for hippies smuggling marijuana across the border.

They approached the officer on duty. "Are you American citizens?" He asked them.

They both assured the officer that they were.

"Did you go into the interior of Mexico?"

"Yes," they answered.

"What was the purpose of your visit to Mexico?"

Logan launched into a spiel about how they were cave explorers from the University of Texas at Austin cave exploring club. The officer did not seem impressed and told them to go down a hallway for further questioning.

They arrived and a different officer waved them over. They once again explained about being cave explorers. They were instructed to take off their packs for a search. Two officers approached and took everything out of their packs. They were fascinated by the carbide lights and carefully sniffed the white powder of used carbide in the bottom of the lamps. They looked at the rope and the jumars and tried to figure out what they were used for. Their dirtier clothes had spent some time in the bottom of their packs and now had started to mildew. The officers weren't quite as diligent in going through these.

Finally, they were given permission to continue on their way. The border patrol looked a little disappointed that they weren't able to find anything illegal.

The Greyhound bus station was a little further down the street. The next bus to Austin was leaving in the morning which now wasn't too far away. After buying tickets they dozed in some chairs until their bus was called. By noon they were at the bus station in downtown Austin. Craig and Logan parted ways and promised to call each other in the next few days in order to arrange their return trip to the huge pit. The bus station was in downtown Austin around 5th street. Craig lived near 29th street so he decided to just hike back home. He was used to hiking many miles per day and this didn't seem too far to him.

He arrived back at the Hemphill Park apartment and was lucky to find Steve at home on a Saturday morning. Steve answered the door and was quite surprised to see him.

"What are you doing here? I thought you would be in Mexico for many more weeks." Steve said.

"Logan and I found a huge pit that is really deep. We came back for rope and supplies." Craig said.

"Before you tell me anything else, why don't you go and take a shower. You really need one if you know what I mean." Steve said.

Craig had dropped his pack in the living room and quickly headed to the shower. He picked up some clean clothes from his dresser and carried them with him to the bathroom. The hot water felt so good. He climbed out after fifteen minutes of using a lot of soap and shampoo. He noticed a terrible smell filling the bathroom. He bent down and sniffed his dirty clothes. They smelled like rotting, smoky garbage.

"I must have been wearing them so long that I got used to the stench," he thought to himself.

He walked back into the living room to find Steve going through his pack and throwing items into a trash bag. "I thought we could contain the smell of your clothes by tying them up in this kitchen trash bag until you can wash them." Steve said.

Craig felt strange at being told that he stunk, but Steve's suggestion did make good sense. "I have some more clothes to add to the bag." Craig said, holding out the dirty clothes that he had just

carried in from the shower. Soon they had contained the smell and Craig settled down to resume his story.

“How deep was this pit?” Steve asked.

“Our best guess is that rocks fell free for 13 seconds before hitting the bottom.”

“Didn’t you have a watch?” Steve asked.

“My trusty Timex stopped working after I forgot to take it off when I went swimming in a pool of vampire bat guano back in December. I decided to throw it away.” Craig answered.

“How big is the pit compared to Golondrinas?” Steve asked.

“The entrance is huge. It is kind of like an enclosed valley. It must be around a thousand feet long and 500 feet wide.” Craig continued.

“I did get some pictures.” Craig said.

“It will take a week or more to get them back if you mail them off. I think that there is a place down on Congress Avenue that can develop them for you in 24 hours. It would be expensive, but worth it.” Steve continued. He seemed really excited by the finding of the new Sotano. “We need to call all of the cavers and quickly organize an expedition to explore it. I can see that we will need lots of rope and we don’t want to get scooped by some other group of cavers that hears about this.”

“I think that the UT Grotto has a rope locker with several long lengths of rope that we can borrow.” Craig added.

Steve went to the telephone and started calling all of the cavers. Throughout the Austin caving community, the word spread like wildfire. The word spread outside of Austin to neighboring caving clubs as well.

The original Mexican cavers from Austin started finding deep pits such as Golondrinas in the 1960’s. Most of the current generation of cavers had grown up hearing these stories and wishing they had been caving during those days. Suddenly, here was an opportunity to get in on something big and exciting. It was one of those once in a lifetime events and no one wanted to be left out. As the word spread, people started asking for time off from work or if that wasn’t possible they quit their jobs. Students asked for permission from their professors to have a week off. If that wasn’t allowed, they suddenly came down with the flu. The poorer cavers borrowed money from friends, sold their stereo equipment or somehow scraped together some funds in order to go on the trip.

On Sunday morning, Craig went down to the apartment building laundry area and washed the clothes in the kitchen trash bag. He nearly threw up when he opened the bag. The clothes still stunk after the first wash, so he got some stronger, perfumed detergent for the second wash. By lunchtime he was finished with the laundry and remembered his dream of eating at Taco Bell. He stopped for an ice cold Doctor Pepper at the machine across the street from his apartment and was soon enjoying two tacos and washing them down with Doctor Pepper.

That night he called Logan and they discussed the return trip to El Sotano. He had contacted a number of his friends from Austin and San Marcos who were all eager to go.

“When do you think we should head back to Mexico?” Craig asked Logan.

“It should be sooner rather than later. I worry that we will get scooped by other cavers if we delay at all.” Logan said.

“I would hate to arrive back at El Sotano to find that someone else was the first to descend the pit.” Craig added.

“I could be ready as soon as Wednesday.” Logan suggested.

Craig was still a little tired from all of their traveling and hiking but figured he would be up to the challenge in a few more days. “OK, let’s try to arrange things for leaving on Wednesday morning. We could be there by late that evening if we get out of town early in the morning.”

Each caver that decided to go had a speciality or something to offer. Several of the cavers from the previous generation of cavers decided to come as well. They had experience organizing many big expeditions and had money they had invested in things like long ropes. They also had newer transportation and were willing to have multiple riders join them on the trip.

On Monday morning Craig got on his ten speed and drove down to Congress Avenue to drop off his film at the developers. It turned out that 24 hour film development was available. The cost was an outrageous 8 dollars, but he could have slides the next day. He decided to take the plunge and



put in the order.

Photo by Steve Bittinger

Talking to Bill, he found out that there was a big caving convention in Austin over the weekend they were planning to be in Mexico. Bill was involved in organizing the event and couldn't take time off from his job at the IRS to go on the El Sotano trip. Craig gave Bill the claim ticket for the film and hoped that the caving convention audience could see actual pictures of where they would all be while the first descent of the pit was actually happening in Mexico.

Steve was involved in some intensive courses at UT, but didn't want to miss out on the trip. "I think that I will ride down in Tom's truck. We will leave on Wednesday afternoon after classes and travel all night. We should catch up with you on Thursday morning in Ayutla." Steve said. "I figure that I can just miss one class per subject if I go to school on Wednesday and return by class time Monday morning. I will be exhausted, but it will be worth it."

"Who will go with you in Tom's truck? Craig asked.

"Donna, Roy, David and of course Tom and myself. That is only 5 people so we should have room to take turns sleeping while we travel." Steve continued.

"I will see you down there," Craig replied.

"It should be fun." Steve answered.

Early Wednesday morning two trucks got ready to leave Austin. Pete was driving his 1967 ¾ ton four wheel drive Dodge Power Wagon that had a long wide bed. Terry was driving his 4 wheel drive truck as well. All together the two trucks carried 9 people: Logan, Terry, John, Jan, Craig, Frank, Blake, Craig S., and Pete. They had managed to procure a total of 4,000 feet of rope. They brought along water and provisions for a week. By the time all of the backpacks and rope were loaded into the trucks there was hardly room left for the people.

Craig was happy to ride in the back and found a soft rope bag to use for a large pillow. He soon fell asleep and was happy to have the trip go by quickly as he slept through his return to Mexico.

The trucks traveled together and continued south throughout the day. Late that evening they finally arrived in Ayutla. Craig found himself to be more rested than he had been when they left Austin. A day of no exercise and sleeping had done the trick. Getting out of the truck he walked up to Logan who had been riding in the other vehicle.

“It seems like we just left here.” Craig said.

“It certainly was easier to get here this time. No buses and no long hike.” Logan reminisced.

The cavers had found a place to park and camp for the night on the edge of the town of Ayutla. They had more rope and water than they could easily carry. Terry and several others walked into town to see if they could hire some burros or mules to carry their gear up to the pit.

They arrived at the local refresco stand and approached the shop owner. “Do you know of anyone who has burros to hire?” Terry asked.

“Yes, ask at the house across the street and two doors down. They have burros for hire,” the man said.

They tried that house and the woman who came to the door said that they didn’t have any for tomorrow but they should try further down the street.

Finally they found a man who was willing to carry 6 duffel bags of supplies on three burros from Ayutla to Rancho El Barro.

“How much will it cost?” Terry asked.

“The usual cost is 12 pesos per burro per day and an additional 10 pesos for the driver/guide.” the man said.

“That seems fair. We are camped at the upper edge of town. Please come early in the morning so that we can get started.” Terry replied.

The man smiled and the arrangements were concluded.

It was time for bed and they all set up their tents and turned in for the night.

The next morning the cavers all got up, had breakfast and got ready to go. By 8:00 AM they were all packed and looking around for the burros. The sun had been up for an hour and the burros and their guide were a “no show”.

They finally decided to walk back to the man’s house and to see what happened. They arrived at his house and knocked on the door. No one answered or came to the door.

“What do we do now?” Craig asked.

“I guess we will start over and find another person with burros for hire.” Terry replied.

They walked back up to the original house they had visited and this time they found a man taking care of his burros. It turned out that the job he thought he had, had fallen through and he was available to carry their gear. He wanted 15 pesos per burro per day and 15 pesos for himself. As they were short on time, they decided to take him up on his offer.

“When I changed money at the border I got 12 pesos per dollar. That means that we are paying about a dollar and a quarter for each burro. That doesn’t seem too bad to me.” Craig said to Terry.

“Yes, the price isn’t too high, but we are starting an inflationary cycle. Just wait and see what hiring three burros will be in a few years. We are starting the destruction of the local wage scales.” Terry replied.

“I never had thought about it that way,” Craig answered.

By the time that they arrived back at the truck with the burros it was 9:30 in the morning.

Craig thought that he should introduce himself to their burro driver/guide. “My name is Gregorio.” The man said, “I am Jose Flores.”

Jose got busy loading the duffel bags full of rope and water onto the burros. It was quite an art to hoist up the heavy bags and tie them on. The burros knew what was coming and didn’t seem too

thrilled about the heavy load. The longest rope split into two bags with the rope running from one to the other. This put about 600 feet of rope in each bag. Pete and John helped Jose load this especially awkward load onto the burro.

“What are you doing with all of this rope?” Jose asked.

“We are going to enter the big pit by Rancho El Barro.” They told him.

He seemed amazed that someone would want to enter that pit and couldn't seem to understand their motivation. They tried to explain to him that they were part of a cave exploring club and this is what they did for fun. Jose just shook his head and Craig speculated that he was thinking to himself “crazy rich gringos”.

At 9:40 they heard a truck coming up the street. It turned out to be Tom's truck. Tom parked and Steve, Donna, David and Roy all got out. They stretched and looked half asleep.

“You got here just in time,” Craig said to Steve.

“We will grab our packs and join you,” he replied.

Soon the 14 cavers were ready to go.

Craig asked Jose “Are we going to go through the canyon?” This was the way that he and Logan had returned from El Sotano on their previous trip.

“No, that way is too rough for the burros. We just climb up this mountain and down the other side. That brings you to El Limon and from there we cross the river and head up to Rancho El Barro.” Jose replied.

Logan was standing nearby listening to this interchange. “I guess that an established trail would be faster. Jose must know the best way to go,” he said.

“I just hate to have to climb over a mountain to get there,” Craig moaned.

They checked the trucks to be sure they were locked and started out on their hike. The 14 cavers made quite a line going down the trail. It looked like something out of an Everest expedition.

The trail started up a small arroyo and then came out on an old river terrace. The trail wasn't too steep at first but after about an hour they got to a steeper section as the trail started up the mountain. Craig was hiking near the burros and asked Jose, “What is the name of this mountain?”

“We call this Cerro de la Tinaja,” he answered.

At this point the faster hikers had moved ahead on the well used trail. The burros were among the slower moving hikers. They frequently let out 20 second long farts that polluted the air for a good distance around them. When they got to the uphill section they also began to poop on the trail. This spurred on the slower hikers as the best place to be was definitely not right behind the burros.

The climb got steeper and after some time they reached the top and could see down the other side. Everyone stopped to admire the view. They got the first view of El Sotano high on the side of the next mountain they needed to climb.

“That certainly is an impressive pit, even from this distance.” Frank said.

“Just wait until you actually get there and can really see how big it is,” Logan replied.

The group sat down for a well deserved rest break. Terry was playing with his altimeter. “We are 3,160 feet above Ayutla,” he announced.

“No wonder I feel ready for a break,” Roy said.

Steve and Donna were sitting together and Craig walked over and sat down near them.

“How was your drive down here?” Craig asked.

“We drove all night,” Steve said. “I am feeling it now, trying to hike on almost no sleep.”

“That must be pretty rough. I got lots of sleep and hiking up this mountain is still pretty hard.” Craig replied.

“We had some excitement during the drive. I was driving late at night and came to a bridge. A bus was coming from the other direction. I was about to drive over the bridge when I suddenly realized that the bus and Tom’s truck wouldn’t both fit on that narrow bridge. My only option was to jam on the brakes and try to stop before I sideswiped the bus. We screeched to a halt and swerved toward the ditch. I stopped just before we went over the side into a ravine. We came so close to the bus it was unbelievable that we didn’t scratch each other. The bus stopped and the driver and I both looked at our vehicles with a flashlight and somehow we didn’t touch.” Steve said.

“Tom’s truck really needs new shocks. We banged up and down all the way down here. It was a really rough ride.” Donna added.

“I’m glad that you both survived and didn’t get into a wreck.” Craig said.

Jose started the burros down the trail. They seemed much happier going downhill and picked up speed. The faster hikers were already far down the trail and could be seen below. There was a small village at the base of the mountain.

“That is El Limon you can see down there.” Jose informed them.

From El Limon they continued to descend for another hour until they reached the stream. Jose fulfilled his obligation as a tour guide and informed them that the name of the stream was Rio de la Atrejea. Terry pulled out his altimeter and said, “We are now only 612 feet above Ayutla.”

“The route through the canyon is a lot flatter,” Logan added. “But I don’t think the burros could make it through there.”

“I am happy we don’t have to carry all of the

Sótano del Barro, high on the next mountain



rope on our backs. The burros carrying all of that weight are making our lives a lot easier.” David commented.

They crossed the Rio de la Atrejea and headed up the other side to Rancho El Barro. The trail climbed for another 1000 vertical feet until they finally arrived at Rancho El Barro about 6:30 PM. Terry pulled out his altimeter and announced they were now 1557 feet above Ayutla. Craig and Logan quickly walked over to Gregorio Rodriguez’s house. Ramon had heard the racket of the burros arriving and came out to see what was going on.

“You are back already!” he said.

“Our friends were all excited to hear about your wonderful sotano and wanted to come right away.” Logan said.

“We wanted to ask permission for our group to visit the Sotano and rappel down inside to see where it goes at the bottom.” Craig said.

Gregorio Ramirez, the judge, had come out and was listening to this conversation.

“You have my permission to visit the Sotano. How many of you are there?” he asked.

“There are fourteen of us,” Logan replied.

“It is too late today to go on to the Sotano. Why don’t you use the schoolhouse to sleep in tonight and go on up tomorrow.”

“We gladly accept your offer.” Craig said.

“Our burro driver needs to return to Ayutla tonight. Do you know of anyone we could hire to carry our rope up to the Sotano tomorrow? Terry asked.

“I have three burros that you could use to carry your belongings up to the Sotano,” Ramon said. “I will come by the school house early in the morning with the burros.”

“Thank you for your kindness and your hospitality,” Craig said.

The group walked over to the school house.



Jose got to work and unloaded the three burros. The duffel bags were taken into the school house for the night. Terry paid Jose for his burros and the day's work guiding them. He was grateful for the money and quickly herded his burros back down the trail toward their home.

The cavers settled into the school house for the night. It was basically one big room with a cement floor. They all spread out, rolled out their ground cloths, set up camp and began to prepare supper. Soon the aroma of many meals cooking at once filled the air. Beef stroganoff and chicken with noodles seemed to be the dominant smells. Local people dropped by to see what was going on. They all seemed very friendly and welcoming.

The next morning Ramon showed up with his three burros. It seemed like the rest of the population of El Barro was on hand to watch Ramon load the duffel bags onto his burros and to see what the strangers from the USA were doing. Craig and Logan headed out early and remembered

how to get to the grassy meadow by the pit. Craig had brought along some flagging tape left over from jungle chopping in the El Abra and flagged the way up the network of muddy and connecting paths to El Sotano. Several local people accompanied them and pointed out the best way to go.

“What is the name of this mountain?” Craig asked one older man.

“We call the Cerro de la Mesa and some people call it Cerro del Charcos,” he answered.

The cavers were spread out along the trail and the slower ones followed the flagging tape markers. About a 1000 vertical feet above Rancho El Barro the trail turned toward the south. The local people kept saying the word “Cerquita,” and indicating that the hikers were getting close. They crossed a stream bed and finally arrived at the grassy meadow.

The local people informed us that it was called, “La Joya de Nogales.” The hike from El Barro to the grassy meadow took about two hours and 45 minutes.

John, who knew geology, said, “I think that this grassy meadow was formed when a depression had been filled in with dirt.”

The meadow was flat and level and perfect for camping. The cavers trickled into the meadow in groups of two or three. They would drop their packs and sit down to catch their breath and have a drink of water. When most of the cavers had arrived Pete asked, “How far is it to the pit from here?”

One of the locals said, “It is only 7 minutes away down that trail.” He then pointed to a trail leaving the meadow. The group all found new energy, abandoned their packs and climbed the low ridge above the meadow.

Tom was first and called out, “Wow look at that!”

Each person let out some sort of exclamation as they were able to see the pit opening in front of them. The excitement was contagious as cavers ran from one spot to another trying to get the best view.

“It is so big!” Pete said.

“It is really huge!” Donna added.

Sótano del Barro



It was kind of like looking at the Grand Canyon for the first time. It takes a few minutes to have the size and scale of the thing sink in and to be truly appreciated. The next group impulse was to throw in a fist sized rock and to time how long it took to hit the bottom. Terry had brought along a stopwatch and looked around for a suitable rock to throw in.

Craig was standing near Logan and said, "We are finally going to figure out exactly how accurate our counting really was."

Logan said, "Yes, Will it be 11, 12 or 13 seconds?"

Terry yelled for silence and then nodded for John to throw in the rock. Pete helped to stabilize him so he wouldn't fall into the pit. Steve snapped a picture of the event.



Terry clicked the stopwatch and silence reigned. Nothing was heard for the first few seconds. Then a whistling filled the air. This continued to get louder and louder. After what seemed like an eternity a loud boom echoed up from the Sotano. Terry clicked the stop watch. He held it up and then announced, "Thirteen seconds!"

Loud cheering broke out from the cavers. This meant that they may have been about to break the record for the world's deepest pit. Excitement reigned and calls began to break out, "Again!" People scrambled to find another fist sized rock. The second rock was timed and again came in at just over 13 seconds.

Terry pulled out his altimeter and took a reading. He said that the reading was 6624 feet at the upper edge of the pit.

More and more local people kept arriving. It was like the cavers were the circus that had come to town. The word had spread that they were going to descend into the pit and everyone around Rancho El Barro wanted to see that.

Terry looked around for an even bigger rock to roll into the pit. He climbed around the edge of the pit and saw a boulder the size of a Volkswagon bug that was perched on the edge of the pit. Several local men joined him and they tried to budge it by pushing. It shifted a little but remained in place. One of the local men then found a 10 foot long sturdy pole. They used this as a lever and with a giant heave the boulder went over the edge.

There was an initial whooshing sound that got louder and louder for the 13 second fall. It landed with a tremendous and thundering boom. The noise continued for at least 30 seconds as the boulder had broken into pieces when it hit and these were flung back up into the air by the force of the impact and then came down again a few seconds later. When the noise first started, a startled flock of Military Macaws began to squawk and fly around adding to the overall din. Finally the pit became silent again and then people began to cheer and exclaim about how amazing that noise was.

Things began to calm down and Craig thought about his pack back in the grassy meadow and how it was probably sitting there with no one watching over it. He was also interested in whether Ramon and the three burros had arrived yet.

Arriving back at the grassy meadow, things looked safe and his pack was still there. Ramon hadn't arrived yet so the cavers had a chance to rest and have lunch.

Ramon and the burros finally arrived about noon. Ramon unloaded the burros and Frank helped him to lower the ropes to the ground.

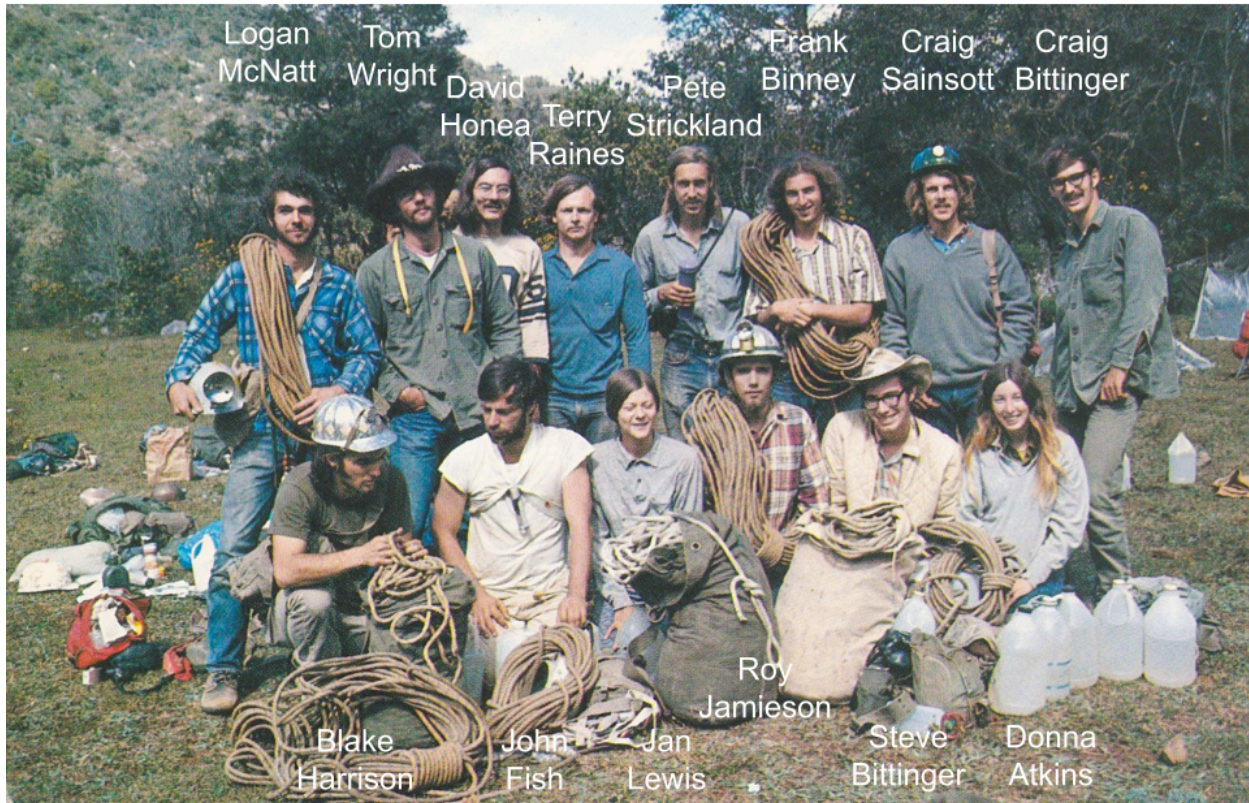


The cavers unpacked the 6 duffel bags and took out all of the rope, water and associated gear.

“Let’s get a group picture,” Terry called out.

It was a good moment as everyone was there. The cavers put coils of rope over their shoulders and piled their gear in front of them for the picture to commemorate the event.

The team from Austin for the first descent of Sótano del Barro



Pete had brought along his "Rhine River Rope". It was over 1200 feet long and was a 12 millimeter, braided rope. He had purchased this rope while in the Army in Europe and had previously used it in Golondrinas and to rappel down several tall cliffs in Europe. He and Logan picked up the two connected duffel bags and carried it to the edge of El Sotano. Pete had already picked out a good rigging spot. Turning to Logan he said, "Most of the sides of this pit are unriggable due to the brush covered slopes. I think that I have found a section of the lip of the pit that would provide a free drop all the way to the bottom." They turned left along the north wall when they reached the pit and walked around the top of the pit to the spot that Pete had seen earlier.

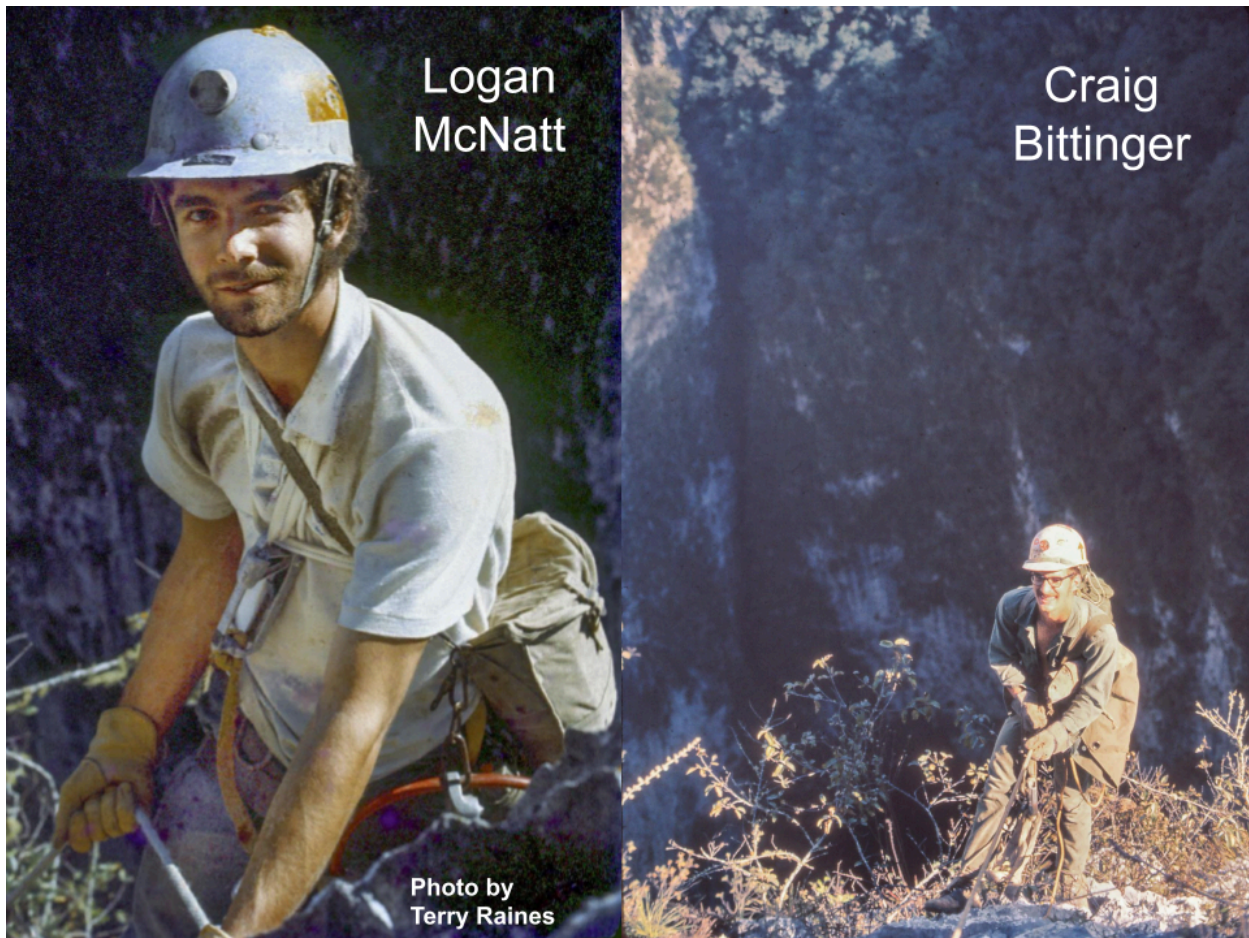
Craig, Steve, Donna and Roy carried the two 600 foot duffel bags of 7/16th inch Bluewater rope and an additional duffel bag that had a 300 foot length of Bluewater rope and numerous rope pads. They continued past the rigging point that Pete and Logan had selected for another 100 feet or so. They set down the duffel bags and scouted around for the best rigging spot. Soon the rest of the cavers had joined the rigging groups. They rigged some shorter handlines and used machetes to chop away vegetation and rolled any loose rocks into the pit. The next step was to secure rope pads so that the rope wouldn't abrade while the cavers were on rope.

The Bluewater rope sections were tied together with a Double Carrick Bend for maximum strength. One end of the 600 foot section was tied on to a large boulder, the second 600 foot section was tied on to the end of that rope and the 300 foot section tied on last. Lowering the rope began with the 300 foot section going in first so it would be at the bottom of the drop. A knot was tied in the end of the rope, just in case it didn't reach the bottom. This meant that the cavers using the Bluewater rope would have to negotiate two knots where the cavers rappelling down the "Rhine River Rope" wouldn't have any knots to contend with.

The "Rhine River Rope" was on the west side and the Bluewater was on the east side. It was decided that Craig and Logan would rappel in simultaneously as they were the discoverers of El Sotano. By 3:00 PM they were both ready to rappel.

Craig called out to Logan, "Are you ready?"

Logan answered, "Let's go!" and they started down the two ropes.



The first 60 feet or so they were against the wall and on either side of a bulge. After that they came into view of each other and the ropes fell free about 65 feet apart.

Craig's rope was near the wall of the pit. He spun around to look at what he was passing. Something moved on a ledge. Looking closer he saw a snake that seemed quite surprised to see him. The rope was in striking distance of the ledge and Craig stopped for a few seconds above the reach of the snake.

"I've got a snake over here," he called out to Logan.

"You had better speed rappel by him," Logan suggested.

Craig got ready to quickly drop by the snake. Just at that moment the snake decided to wriggle further along the ledge and disappeared into a crack.

Craig called out, "The snake didn't like me and crawled away!"

As he rappelled down he looked down at the view below. There appeared to be some bushes growing on the bottom. Disturbingly, he saw what appeared to be a path circling the edge of the bottom of the pit. His mind went wild. Remembering some Jules Verne novels about prehistoric creatures being preserved in the center of the earth, he wondered if some species of dinosaur or something carnivorous might have survived on the bottom of the pit for thousands of years.

Arriving at the first knot, this distracted him from his musings. Logan was slightly above him at this point. Years of practice of negotiating knots came into play and he was soon over the knot and headed on down.

Logan was carrying a walkie talkie and giving a progress report to those on top. They didn't want to rappel too fast and risk burning the rope, so they were both taking their time as they descended.

Craig reached the second knot and the floor of the pit looked much closer. The bushes he had seen from above now looked more like small trees. After leaving the knot behind he looked over to see how Logan was doing. He was roughly even with Craig but his rope had come against a mossy, 85 degree slope. It looked like Logan would land at the very top of one of the two steep slopes on the bottom of the pit.

Trying to land at the same moment, Craig increased his rate of rappel slightly as he had further to go before hitting the bottom. It seemed like he would land further down the slope in the top of a tree about 15 feet tall. He had a minute to carefully look at the bottom of the pit for any lurking predators or other dangers. Nothing moved and it was actually a tranquil scene. Logan was rapidly approaching the ground and so Craig headed on down.

Craig and Logan both touched the ground at the same moment. Later they found out that Logan's rappel was 1,181 feet and Craig's was 1,239 feet.

Craig walked over to Logan who was on the walkie talkie.

Logan was saying, "We are both off rope and ready for the next two cavers to come down."

They picked up their gear and moved away from the bottom of the ropes where they might be in danger of getting hit by falling rocks.

The walkie talkie came on and informed them that Frank and Roy were coming down next. It took about an hour for each successive wave of cavers to arrive. Tom came down and then Steve and Donna followed him. Some cavers thought that the "Rhine River Rope" looked a little thin and chose to go over the two knots in the Bluewater water rope to avoid it. Others decided the European rope was strong enough and chose to avoid the knots. This led to a staggering of when cavers would arrive on the bottom. The speed that each person rappelled also was variable so that the cavers weren't all arriving at the bottom at the same time in groups of twos.

While all of this was going on above them, Craig and Logan set out to explore the bottom of the pit.



Looking around at their surroundings, the bottom sloped steeply down to a linear trench about half way across the pit and then sloped back up to the same height as where they had landed on the western end of the pit on a talus slope.

“Let’s go explore that opening,” Logan said as he put his caving gear into his pack and got ready to hike down the slope.

“A large opening was visible across the 350 foot width of the pit on the south wall.

“I hope that it goes,” Craig said.

They hiked down to the bottom of the slope and then back up the other side to the cave entrance.

“Let’s see how far we can get without bothering with lighting our carbides,” Logan suggested.

There was plenty of light coming in the entrance and the floor was reasonably smooth and flat.

“It doesn’t go,” Logan yelled back to Craig who was examining the cave walls nearer to the entrance.

They looked around for any leads but unfortunately the cave only went back about 150 feet and stopped. The dirt on the floor seemed thick and there was no obvious place to dig or to continue. They walked back to the cave entrance.

“Look at that,” Logan said, pointing up to where Frank and Roy could be seen descending far above them.

“They really seem small from here.” Craig added.

“This cave seems like a good place to camp tonight.” Craig continued. “It will be away from the main pit if someone decides to throw in some rocks. It is also fairly level and free from rocks.”

“We can leave our sleeping bags here along with the rest of the gear we don’t need to haul around with us,” Logan added.

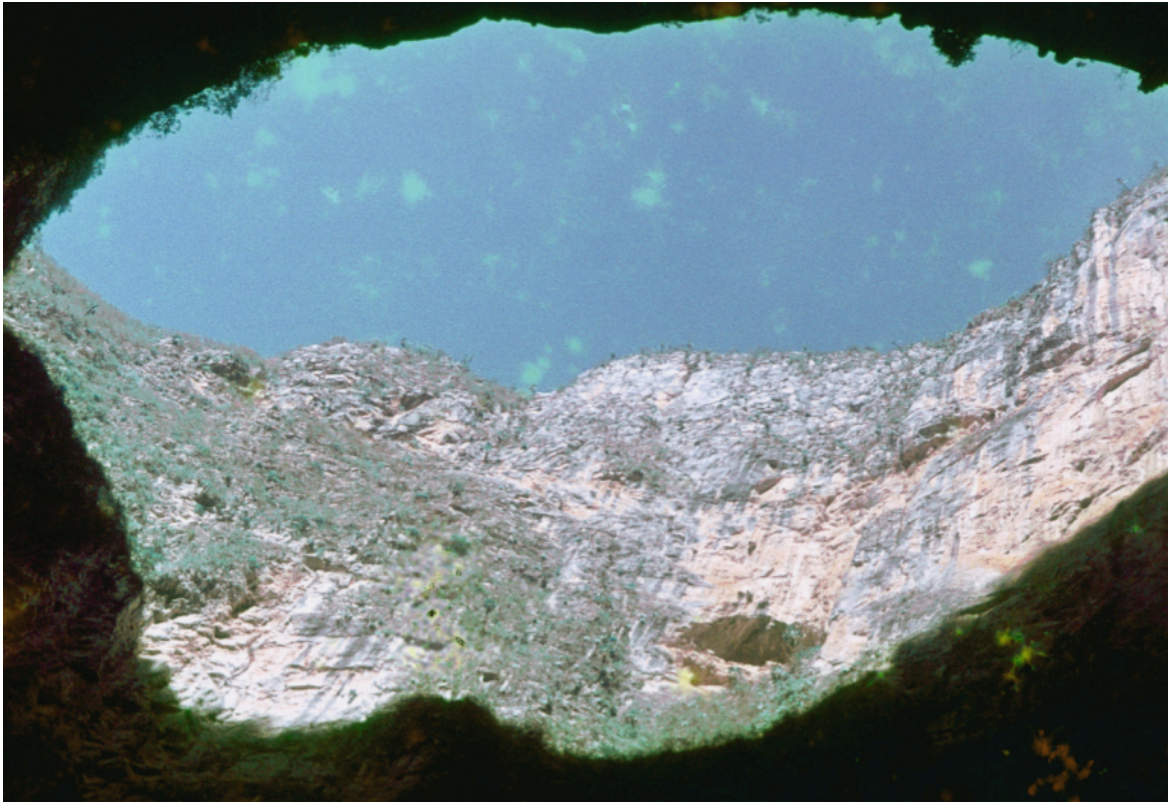
Logan pulled out his survey gear. “We have some time to get some work done before dark,” he said to Craig.

Their job was to survey as much of the bottom as they could. The notes would eventually be drafted and combine a top and a bottom survey for a complete map of the sotano. They hiked back

across the pit to the bottom of the “Rhine River Rope” for their first survey station. This point should be relatively easy to align the top and bottom loops.

“Let’s do a loop of the bottom of the pit,” Craig suggested.

Logan was sketching while Craig ran the Suuntos and tape. When they reached the bottom of the rope, Frank and Roy had just arrived and soon pitched in with the surveying. Tom arrived shortly there after. It turned out that the bottom measured 700 feet long and 300 feet wide. It was just beginning to get dark as Steven and Donna arrived on the bottom. There was still plenty of light to see and they all walked around the bottom and enjoyed the spectacular views looking up.



While the cavers on the bottom were beginning the survey around the bottom of the pit, the cavers on top were busy surveying the top of the pit. Terry, John, David, Jan, Blake and Craig S surveyed about 2/3rds of the north half of the entrance before dark.

After it got dark, the cavers on the bottom retired to the 150 foot deep cave to set up camp for the night.

“How long do you think it will take for all of us to climb out?” Craig asked.

“Well it will probably take between an hour and an hour and a half for each person to climb out. If there are 14 cavers spread over two ropes, that will take at least 7 hours of time on the rope, not to count the time the people on top take to rappel in.” Steve replied.

Donna said to Steve, “I’m not feeling sleepy at the moment. Why don’t we go ahead and climb out now.”

Steve thought for a minute and then replied, “I guess it would be just like climbing a pit in a cave. We could go out by carbide light. That would save at least two hours tomorrow and put us on the way back to the States a little faster.” He added, “I can’t afford to miss another advanced Calculus class and I really need to be there Monday afternoon.”

Steve and Donna said goodbye to Roy, Tom, Logan, Craig and Frank and walked back down the slope and then up the other side to the bottom of the ropes. The other cavers sat in the mouth of the cave and watched them make their way in the darkness.

Donna clipped on to the "Rhine River Rope" and Steve clipped on to the Bluewater. There was quite a bit of slack to get out of the ropes before they finally left the ground. Seen from across the pit it was spectacular to watch them climb for a while, then sit down to rest. The acoustics were good and the cavers below could hear some of their conversations.

About 45 minutes later they could hear Steve say to Donna, "Look at that! We are up high enough to see over the lower lip of the pit."

Donna replied, "I can see a light on the side of the mountain across the valley."

"We passed through the village of El Limon on the way up here. I bet that might be it." Steve answered.

"Whatever it is, It is a great view from here," Donna said.

The cavers on the bottom were starting to feel sleepy and went inside the cave for the night.

Craig crawled inside of his sleeping bag and fell asleep hoping that he was right about there being no predators lurking on the bottom. Especially ones that only came out after dark.

They all woke up early the next morning and after a quick breakfast, Roy, Tom and Frank went over and began the climb out. Craig and Logan continued their survey from where they had left off the night before on the north edge of the Sotano. This took several hours. Just as they completed the survey of the north edge they heard a "Hello the bottom," and looked up.

Blake was rappelling in and about to touch down.

"Nice pit you have here," he said as he landed.

Next came Peter, Terry, David, Craig S. and John. Terry and David set up and began to take pictures of the pit while John and Craig S rappelled in. Once John got off rope they began to survey east along the south wall. A few hours later they closed the loop with Logan and Craig's earlier survey, completing the survey of the bottom.

While the newly arrived cavers began closing the survey loop, Craig and Logan decided to climb out now that John had gotten off the rope and there were free ropes available for climbing. While they were climbing the cavers on top lowered a calibrated wire to measure the depth of the pit. The easternmost rigging point was measured at 1239 feet. They found another point just before the top lip recedes that was at the top of a sheer drop. This was measured at 1345 feet. This measurement made the pit the deepest known pit in the world.

Craig and Logan arrived on top just in time to witness Steve, Donna, Tom, Roy and Frank preparing to leave for Austin. They had to get back early in order to attend class on Monday.

"It sure would be nice to not have to hike back over that mountain. Going all the way up and then back down seems like a lot of work," Roy said.

"Terry told me about a trail through the stream canyon," Steve said. "It might be a flatter way to get back to Ayutla."

"Why don't we try it." Donna added.

Looking through the canyon toward Ayutla



They loaded up on water. Steve picked up a gallon of water that had been brought from Austin. It was in a bottle that had originally held some kind of chemical related to printing.

Craig later found out that when Steve started drinking that water, he became very nauseated and felt terrible. It was very difficult to hike when feeling dizzy and like he had been poisoned from the chemical residue that had leached into the water. The trip through the canyon was not really a short cut and took many hours. They finally arrived at the aqueduct and followed it into town. They finally made it back to Tom's truck and started back to Austin. They stopped for a few hours of sleep in the middle of the night. Steve vomited profusely and then felt much better as he purged the chemical residue from his body. Feeling exhausted, they did make it back to Monday classes in Austin as they had hoped.

Meanwhile, back on the bottom of the pit the remaining cavers continued the survey of the bottom from where Craig and Logan had left off. Within a few hours they finished the loop and the mapping of the bottom. After the mapping was completed they began to climb out of El Sotano. When the last caver had exited they began to de-rig the pit. Pete set up a haul rig so that a team of cavers could simultaneously pull the rope in a rowing motion much like those in an Olympic sculling race. A jumar was situated to hold the rope between pulls. The pit was quickly de-rigged and they all returned to camp by dark.

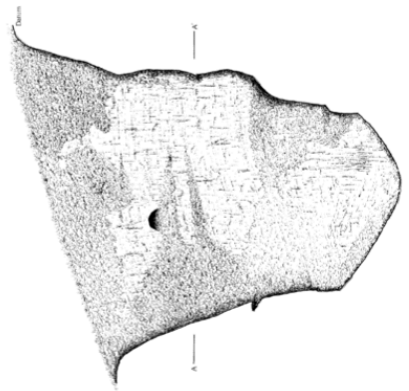
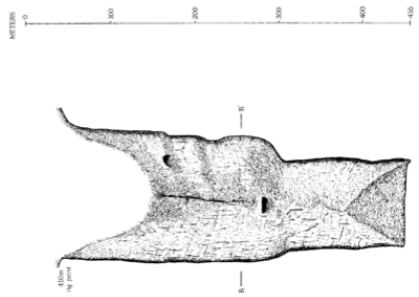
The next morning it was time to finish the survey of the entrance. There were 9 cavers left who all joined together to finish the job. The last third of the north side was finished by standard survey methods. The problem was how to survey the heavily overgrown southern portion of the pit. Terry, who was an experienced surveyor, came up with the idea of having triangulation stations from fixed points around the accessible portions of the top rim. Cavers were then directed to circle the pit and then chop their way down to the lip at closely spaced intervals where they would be visible from the other side of the pit. This quickly finished the survey.

EL SOTANO

Rancho el Barro, Municipio de Jalpan
Queretaro, México

Excavated and Drawn January 1922
by
D. Adams, R. Johnson
F. Barry, J. Lewis
C. Ballinger, L. McMan
J. Fisher, C. Sawyer
B. Newman, P. Strickland
D. Hayes, T. Wright

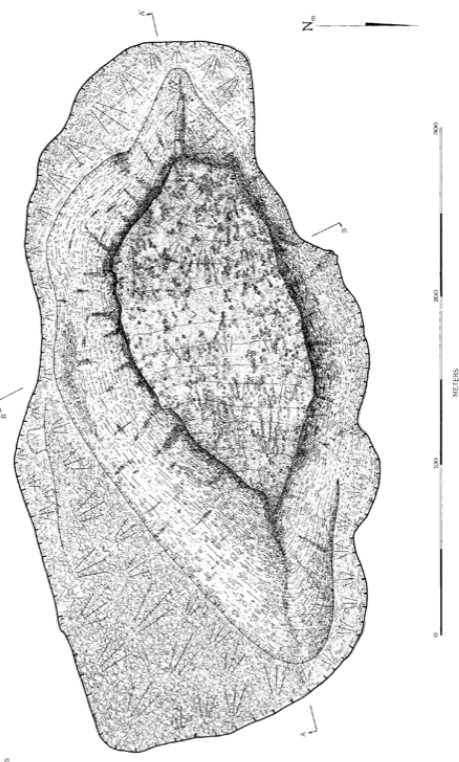
ASSOCIATION FOR MEXICAN CAVE STUDIES



Plan, Rancho el Barro, by Oscar F. Cook
November 26th, January 1921
Compiled from various notes, and used
on this plan.

Drawing, Collection No. 181, Stone

Plan



(The map was finished years later by Orion Knox.)

Everyone returned to the grassy meadow around noon. Ramon soon arrived as previously arranged and they transported the rope and other gear back to Rancho El Barro where they spent the night in the school house. Ramon agreed to carry their gear on to Ayutla the next morning.

About 7 AM the next morning Craig and Logan arrived at Ramon's house.

Logan knocked on the door and soon Ramon and his father came out.

"We would like to thank you for allowing us to use the school house and letting us go into El Sotano." Logan said.

"It was our pleasure to have you here." Gregorio Rodriguez responded.

"Your hospitality is appreciated. I would guess that in the days to come that many people will come here to see El Sotano. So you should be gaining a source of income for your village." Craig added.

"There are many other sotanos in this area that you haven't seen." Ramon added.

"We may come back to see those in the coming months." Craig replied. The thought of unexplored pits was always tantalizing.

"If you ever come to Austin, Texas please give me a call," Logan said. He gave Ramon a piece of paper with his phone number on it. (Years later Ramon did come to Austin and visited Logan)

They walked back to the school house with Ramon and his burros. They left Rancho El Barro by 9AM. Unfortunately, the climb up one side of the mountain and down the other hadn't gotten any flatter or any easier. By 4:40 PM they arrived back at the trucks. They paid Ramon for his burros and his help and soon departed for Austin.

As Ramon walked away, Craig said to Logan, "Ramon has been a good friend to us."

Logan replied, "I hate to see him go."

Craig replied, "Well we did find a really great pit. Thirteen hundred and forty five feet deep."

"Who knows, maybe someday it will be in the Guinness Book of World Records as the world's deepest pit," Logan added.