

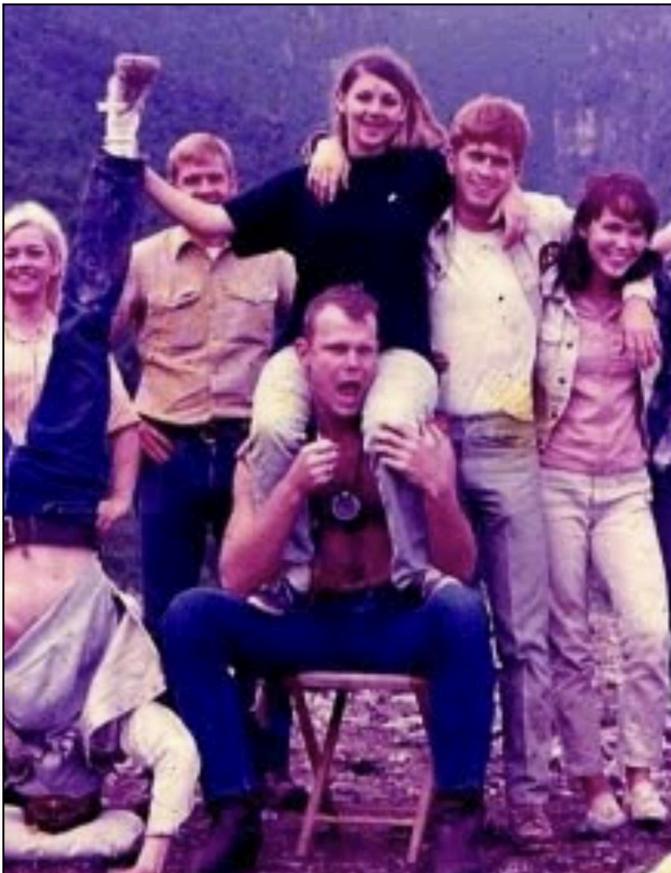
GILL EDIGER'S LEGACY

By Craig Bittinger

Gill was my friend and mentor. As a 13-year-old boy growing up in South Texas, Gill was my hero. He had qualities that I wished that I could have. It is with great sadness that I think of his passing. In tribute to Gill, I will try to write down a few life lessons that I learned from him.

Gill was at my first cave meeting at Texas A&I in Kingsville. I was 13 in 1967, and Gill and John Kreidler were in front of the cave meeting giving an introductory talk about caving. Gill seemed larger than life in his cowboy hat adorned with a ringtailed cat's tail. He had on his cowboy boots and Levi's. There was a charisma that drew in the people present. He had something special to say to each person, and his enthusiasm for caving was contagious. He had a special gift of making each person feel that he was interested in them and making them his friend. Each caving trip that I went on with him saw him teaching us all life lessons.

On a trip to Cave of the Lakes, he demonstrated how to use a carbide light. He made simple things seem interesting and fun. Rather than pouring water into the top of the light, he demonstrated how to spit in the water without spilling any. He gave joy to each thing that he did. He believed in not taking life too seriously and having fun as he went along.



Gill having fun at Bustamante

On a trip to Frio Bat Cave, he taught a young boy some basic biology and some good common sense. Looking up at the bats, something landed in my mouth. After I finished spitting several times, Gill told me, "When you look up, your mouth tends to open. If you want to see the bats on the ceiling, try to keep your mouth closed." This was good advice and remains true to this day.

Gill Ediger's Slide Collection, Digitized

by Chris Vreeland

For the last couple years, I have been working my way through Gill Ediger's slide collection, and getting it all digitized. This small sample doesn't begin to span the breadth of the pictures he took everywhere - traveling in Mexico, TSA & NSS conventions, parties, trucks - lots of trucks - and most of all, cavers caving. The photos range from the late 60's to the late 90's. The sampling here is mostly early 70's. I don't have much more info other than what he wrote on the slides, and the date stamps, so I'll let the titles speak for themselves. I'm on box 6 of 8, & the TSS is working on a plan to get them all on line in the near future, so keep an eye out. There's more gems like these to come. I feel like having these scanned and preserved will be a great boon to the history of Texas caving.



Feb. 69, Frio Bat Cave, S. Bittinger, George J. Hoene, S. Halshausen, C. Bittinger, Possible G. Garbuda, Possibly T. Ranta

Gill at Frio Bat Cave

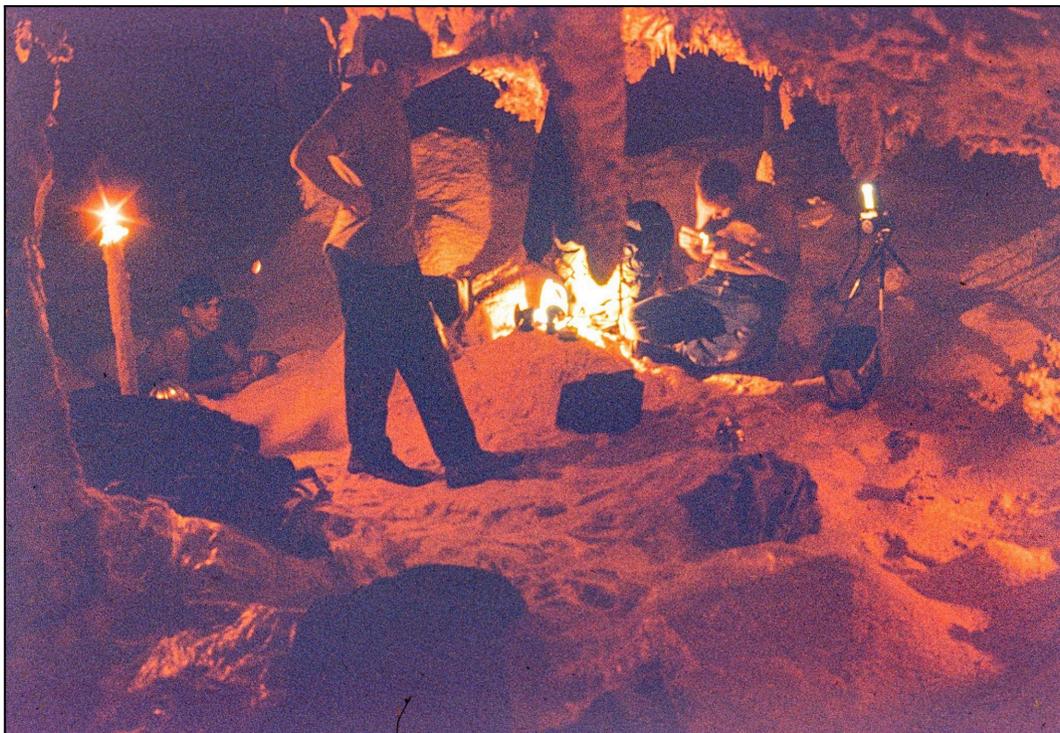
Training for a trip to the Devil's Sinkhole, we were practicing climbing on a rope going over a pulley attached to the bottom side of the A&I stadium. A person would climb up and then be rappelled back down as the rope fed through the brake bars and carabiners. The rope got rigged through with the short end feeding into the rappel gear. An accident happened and Pancho got injured. Gill responded by making a rule that a knot would always be tied in both ends of any rope being used before it was rigged. He also appointed Pancho to be safety chairman of the caving club, figuring that he would now be the most serious about enforcing the safety rules.

Gill believed in using the most up-to-date technology. Prior to a trip to Golondrinas, he saw an article in the *NSS News* about using a whale's tail to descend deep pits. It allowed a person to add or subtract friction while they rappelled. This was a big improvement over using carabiners and brake bars. He contacted the author and got the plans for how to make them. He got the material and cut out the blanks for all of the cavers to use. After multiple practice sessions, the group was ready to go. The whale's tail had one slight problem with the rope popping out when going over the lip of a pit. When the rappel rack came along, he championed the safer device.



Whale's Tail

Gill felt that a good caver would keep his or her gear in good shape and ready to use at a moment's notice. He would arrive at the beginning of the hike up to Bustamante cave and, within a few minutes, he would start up the trail. Those who were unorganized would be left behind to find their own way up the mountain. After experiencing this tough love approach, younger cavers soon learned to keep their caving packs ready to pick up and head up the trail. This was a good life lesson, as staying organized and planning ahead paid off in many life situations.



Gill in the Birthday Passage in Gruta Del Palmito

Gill was serious about the rules of caving. "Take nothing but pictures and leave nothing but footprints" was emphasized to all of the new cavers. On one field trip from a central Texas caving convention, one of the new cavers decided to pick up a cave formation that was already broken off and carry it back to the truck. When Gill saw this, his cowboy boot quickly enforced the rule, and the offending neophyte was sent back to the cave to return the formation to the exact place that it was found. This action taught the rest of the younger cavers that the conservation rules were real and seriously enforced.

Gill believed in having fun in everything that he did. At Carta Valley, he showed us all that going swimming in the stock tank when the temperature was in the 30s was possible and that we could push our perceived limits farther than we ever thought that we could. We would bare our true selves. It was a way to bond with a group of friends who would stay true for a lifetime.

Gill was the high priest of Oztotl. At one particularly memorable party, he used a jug of water from Oztotl's cave to ceremonially baptize the cavers into the ranks of Oztotl followers. The party was upstairs in an old building in Buda leased by Frank Binney. Hors d'oeuvres of mushrooms were served, and much dancing and partying went on. It was hot in the upstairs room and some cavers shed their tops in order to cool off. Several people later related that the party had changed their view of the world and the subsequent course of their lives. Gill was a charismatic leader who touched the lives of all whom he came into contact.



Gill blesses Lisa Wilk with Oztotl water.

- *Photo courtesy of Carl Kunath and Frank Binney*

I can easily picture Gill, on the other side, happily sitting around a campfire and planning a caving trip and a party with all of those who had preceded him. Thank you for the memories and the joy of knowing a truly special person.