Holmes Alford Semken, Jr., was born in Knoxville, Tennessee on January 28, 1935. He was the son of Holmes Alford Semken, Sr. and Edith Elizabeth Klinck. His father was a chemist for Alcoa. The family lived in Maryville, Tennessee (about 15 miles from Knoxville) from 1935 until 1942 when the war effort took the family from Tennessee to Hot Springs, Arkansas in 1942. After the war, in 1946, the family returned to Maryville and subsequently (during his senior year in high school) moved to Rockdale, Texas a small town around 60 miles northeast of Austin. After graduation from high school in Rockdale, Holmes continued his education at the University of Texas from 1953 until 1960, receiving a BS in Geology in 1958, and an MS in Geology and Vertebrate Paleontology in 1960.

Like several of the spelunking crew, he spotted a recruiting table for the University of Texas Speleological Society shortly after arriving at UT and decided to give it a try. Finding it very interesting, he became an ardent spelunker and went on quite a few of the caving trips in the 1953-56 time period. He was, in fact, the president of UTSS from the fall of 1955 to the fall of 1957.

His enthusiasm for caving did cause his grades to suffer. As a result he was advised by The Dean of Student Life (Arno Nowotny) that he should knuckle down and not engage in so many extra-curricular activities. In response to this advice, Holmes quit the Longhorn band where he played the saxophone and then the UTSS. He didn’t give up caving altogether, though, as he did his Master’s Thesis on fossil vertebrates from Longhorn Cavern.

He married Alma Elaine Friedrichs from Goliad and Eagle Pass, Texas on August 31, 1957 in Austin, Texas.

After receiving his Masters in Geology at UT in 1960, the army reminded Holmes that he had a commitment to the Corps of Engineers at Ft. Belvoir, VA. He was assigned as a combat engineer and was supposed to zip around the world “doing army” at a moment’s notice, but no such zips occurred. After Ft. Belvoir, he worked at the Smithsonian Institute for a year in the winter as a lab technician and in the summer at a site outside of Littleton, Colorado where parts of 21 Columbian mammoths were uncovered, then dug for whale bones in Virginia and prepared fossils in the museum. This made him a committed vertebrate paleontologist and led him to enroll at the University of Michigan for more graduate work. He received his Geology PhD in 1965. With new PhD in hand, he joined the faculty of the University of Iowa in the fall of 1965, first as Assistant, then Associate, and finally Full Professor from 1965 until retirement in 1999 when he became Professor Emeritus. It is worth nothing that three of his graduate students in Iowa wrote theses on fossil vertebrates from caves in Iowa and Arkansas.

At the University of Iowa, his research primarily involved interpreting past climates (last ice-age to present) via fossil micro-vertebrates (rodents, etc). Many of his students’ excavations were in cave deposits, which reminded him of caving days at UT. He also teamed up with archeologists to do faunal analyses on vertebrate remains recovered from cultural sites ranging in age from Paleoindian bison-kill sites to Indian War Period forts.

Conferences, digs, field trips and scientific exchanges took Holmes and Elaine to the Lena River and Lake Baikal in Siberia, Caucasus Mountains in Soviet Georgia, the Burma Road, and the Turpan Depression in the Peoples Republic of China, mud volcanoes in Azerbaijan, the wine country of France, and the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. The highlight of their travels was a jeep trip through the Himalayas from Pakistan to China. They had just returned from Krakow, Poland, where Holmes had been invited to present a paper and chair a session on
biodiversity over the last 100,000 years at one of the world’s oldest universities (est. 1120AD).

Holmes and Elaine had two sons, Steven (1963) and David (1965). Steve is a publisher for Ice Cube Press and David is a retired Sergeant First Class from the US Army. Both now live in the Iowa City area.

Holmes liked to tell stories of his early days as a spelunker at UT. Here are just a few:

One story was about the first UTSS trip to Mayfield Cave (now a rather famous cave). Three or four of the group (including Holmes) took a lower passage while Larry Littlefield and a few others went in the same direction but in a higher passage. Both parties, one above the other, ended up looking into a big room, where the helictites were discovered. Larry’s passage opened at about the helictite level. The group that included Holmes heard them rigging a cable ladder to descend. They remained hidden and quiet until Larry came down. Seeing that his group was not the discoverer of the famous helictites, Larry was quite upset. Larry had a few choice words to say but later saw the humor in the situation.

Another favorite cave was Frio Bat Cave, probably because Holmes had always been fascinated with bats. He always claimed that being in the room with millions of bats was exciting despite the urine rain and ammonia-laced atmosphere. Also, he said that the guano piles near the cave entrance were comfortable places to sleep on a rainy night.

Holmes related that rabies was not considered seriously by UTSS at that time. Because of his prior experience in Frio and his association with the Zoology Department, he joined a group of zoology graduate students and UTSS cavers in 1955 to collect bats from the cave for the Texas State Health Department. The TSHD wanted to estimate the size of the bat colony and to determine the percentage of the Mexican free-tailed bats that were infected with rabies. They had a net bag attached to a one-foot square metal frame. Working the frame over hanging bats near the center of the colony, they raked those that did not drop into the bag to quantify bat density. They used a surveyor’s tape to estimate the size of the roost. The bats from this collection were sacrificed and tested for rabies at TSHD.

Shortly after the cave visit, Dr. George Menzies of the TSHD staff, contracted rabies and died. The TSHD thought that a bat from this collection was responsible even though no bite wounds were found on his body and aerosol transmission of rabies was not thought possible at the time. It was thought that Dr. Menzies became infected by rubbing a raw rash on the back of his neck with infected tissue or saliva on a surgical glove. Since none of the cavers had any bites or open wounds, no rabies shots were given. Holmes said later that he was happy that he did not know that aerosol transmission was in fact possible.

Details of Menzies death in 1956 were learned from Mona Hannah, then the TSHD librarian. Holmes never learned how many bats were collected or the percent that were rabid.
As President of the UTSS, Holmes also got involved in some situations for which he was not responsible. One evening when returning from a cave trip to Perry Water Cave the group arrived at one of the three big university coed dorms right behind the Journalism Building with a spelunker named Jeannie Lassen and another caver named Jerry Chastain. In those days the girls dorms (as well as university approved girls boarding houses) locked their doors at 11:00PM sharp on Friday and Saturday (10:00PM weekdays). Unfortunately, they arrived at 11:02 only to have the housemother slam the door in their face. Jerry rammed the door with his shoulder, it shuddered and the housemother (warden would be a better term) opened it, announced that they had arrived after closing and informed us that she would report the transgression to the Dean of Women for disciplinary action. Jeannie was scolded but admitted.

The Office of the Dean summoned Holmes who was then president of UTSS and their faculty advisor, Professor Austin Phelps (Professor of Zoology), to her office.

Holmes reported that she looked sour behind her big mahogany desk. They were sternly admonished that girls must return before closing (lockup). However, it became clear that the real purpose of the meeting was to establish the names of the chaperones on the trip. She announced that University regulations required three chaperones on late night university social functions involving coeds. Phelps said “three?” “Yes,” said the Dean, “social events require the presence of three married couples, academic functions require two and that retreats require one.” Professor Phelps immediately announced that anyone going into a cave was obviously retreating and that one chaperone should qualify for caving. The Dean replied that the University was interested only in appearances, that spelunkers were not to embarrass the institution and that all expulsion required was a decree from the Dean. After that every effort was made to comply. Not too long after that, a new Dean of Women was appointed and the rules were relaxed somewhat.

After retirement, Dr. Semken served on several boards and committees devoted to science. Holmes passed away on January 1, 2024.