TRIBUTE TO A CAVING LEGEND
MARION OTIS SMITH, NSS 9164-PH-LB-FE

MICHAEL RAY TAYLOR AND DAVE HUGHES, PHOTOS AND CAPTIONS BY LIN GUY
Marion O. Smith was born in Fairburn, Georgia, Sept. 24, 1942, and died in his Rock Island, Tennessee, home Nov. 30, 2022, at the age of 80 after a long illness. He was preceded in death by his father Otis Smith and by his mother Bernice Stephens Chaffin.

Known also as MOS, Goat, and by other nicknames, Marion was a skilled cave explorer, a world-renowned historian, a legendary raconteur, and a good friend to cavers throughout TAG, the U.S., and the world. A longtime NSS member, Fellow, and recipient of the Lew Bicking Award, he also supported the Southeastern Cave Conservancy and other cave-related organizations. MOS worked tirelessly on projects for the Tennessee Cave Survey, Alabama Cave Survey, and Georgia Speleological Survey. He authored and co-authored books, technical papers, and monographs. Marion was perhaps the world’s foremost expert on the symbiotic relationship between saltpeter mining, caverns, and the Civil War. The New York Times published his obituary Dec. 16, 2022.

For Marion Smith, cave exploration and speleology constituted a second career. At times they seemed his only career—although he worked for years at the University of Tennessee as assistant editor and curator of the papers of President Andrew Johnson. He wandered through caves noting historic inscriptions on the limestone walls, and then did extensive genealogical research on each of those names. He was especially attracted to soldiers and saltpeter workers that had left personal inscriptions in the caves of the South.

At times Marion seemed to intentionally cultivate the image of an unemotional tough guy. But those who grew to know him, from the oldest to the youngest cavers, soon realized that he truly had a heart of gold. He enjoyed entertaining fellow cave explorers—particularly wide-eyed newbies—with heart-throttling tales of subterranean wonder. His enthusiasm for caving seemed nearly boundless.

In many ways, the Goat was a good ole boy. He hated wasting money and knew little of communication technology. He refused to use a cell phone and eschewed computers, writing trip reports, scientific papers, and even entire books in longhand, with an ordinary pencil, on lined tablet paper. If they needed typing for submission, that task was left to a friend. Fortunately, his cursive remained beautiful and lucid until the end. To be sure, a handwritten postcard or a letter from MOS was a keepsake to be treasured—one bestowed upon hundreds of cavers over the decades.

Of all the modalities of cave exploration, Marion was famous for his negotiation of vertical caves using single rope technique. No pit was too deep or too shallow to escape his attention. Twice in the past decade, he narrowly escaped death in cave mishaps, first after being trapped by rockfall and second after a loose rock in a pit struck a glancing blow to his helmet, causing serious head injury. After each resulting rescue and hospitalization, he soon returned underground.

He chocked up as many caves as possible during his lifetime, despite a climbing rig that might be charitably termed “unique,” cave clothes from Goodwill, and occasionally questionable vehicles. By the end of his life, Marion O. Smith had visited and recorded in his meticulous journals 8,290 different caves—3,616 of which were vertical caves requiring SRT. In the course of these pits he ascended more than 900,000 feet of rope.

It is hard to imagine anyone will ever have that much fun again.
A HALF CENTURY OF FRIENDSHIP - TERRY MCCLANATHAN

The Oxford Dictionary defines “icon” as “a person or thing that people admire and see as a symbol of a particular idea or way of life.” The Merriam Thesaurus says, “a person who is widely known and usually much talked about.” In the Cambridge English Dictionary the definition for “icon” is “a very famous person or thing that is used by society to represent a set of beliefs or a way of life.” Other sources describe the term as “a person or thing widely admired especially for having great influence or significance in a particular sphere.”

There is no question that Marion O. Smith fits these descriptions. Decades of observation lead me to conclude that Marion was known by more people than any other caver in the country. Nor was his familiarity limited to caving circles. Feature articles in Sports Illustrated and National Geographic magazines gave Marion an audience that even the most well-known cavers could not hope to duplicate. The 8,000-plus documented caves he visited over his nearly 60-year-long caving career will most likely go unchallenged for decades.

His name was synonymous with vertical caving. Whenever I meet someone who claims to be a vertical caver, one of the first questions I ask is “Do you know Marion Smith?” or, if not, “Have you ever heard of Marion Smith?” If the response to these questions is negative, then I’m thinking to myself that their knowledge of vertical caving is somewhat lacking. It’s like a musician unfamiliar with Mozart or an historian with no knowledge of Napoleon.

Living in Maryland, my caving focused on Virginia and especially West Virginia, though at last count I also logged 215 TAG caving trips. Marion, of course, was first and foremost a TAG caver, but there are very few vertical or historical caves in the Virginias that eluded him. He had an unflagging interest in saltpeter caves used during the Civil War.

When I met Marion in 1973, I was a “Yankee” caver from Maryland who was drawn to deep pits, but that was apparently all it took for Marion to take a liking to me. Having a (some might say fanatical) interest in vertical caving, I knew of Marion before we met. We became immediate friends. For the first twenty years, our caving together was primarily the result of chance meetings. Most of our

During a “ridge-run” (not a ridgewalk) on March 26, 1972, Marion and six others descended several caves and pits skipping those that took water. Near the end of the day we came upon a spring pouring out of an entrance 15 feet up a bluff. We thought a scaling pole would be needed, so it was left for later. This cave was eventually mapped to 4.66 miles. In 1974, I took Marion and three others on a tour of the nicer parts. The several-hundred-foot-long water crawl near the entrance was not a nicer part. Marion pauses in this photo, his carbide lamp on the sharp limestone beside the stream.
correspondence was through letters, his preferred means of communication. I would relate goings on in West Virginia, and he would update me on finds in TAG. During those early years, I think the only trip we planned together was when I asked him to take me to the 180-foot Rob’s Pit and Red Heaven in Alabama’s Engle Double Pit Cave, which he graciously and expertly did. It was a great trip.

Around 1990 our caving relationship changed. Having been to most of the TAG classics, the more accessible surface pits, and the easier pit caves, I wanted to experience TAG’s more difficult wet multi-drops, particularly those featuring hundred-foot-plus pits. One of my first selections was Solution Rift. It didn’t turn out well. My “northern” team bailed on me at various obstacles within the cave.

Marion became aware of this and fired a letter to me. “If you want to do these kinds of caves, why don’t you just leave the faint of heart behind, come on down to TAG alone, and just go caving with us.” The “us” included Jim Smith, Alan Cressler, Andy Porter, John (Rocco) Stembel, Doug Strait, Jack Thomison and a few others who comprised the contemporary hard-charging contingent of cavers making incredible new discoveries in some of TAG’s most demanding caves. That is exactly what I did.

Over the years since, Marion and I shared hundreds of experiences. Most were wonderful, a couple not so much, but anytime I got in my car for the 600-mile trek back to Maryland it was with a sense of both nostalgia and regret that the trip was over, and that it would be a while before I had the privilege of caving with Marion again. Since he and Sharon lived on Bone Cave Road in Van Buren County, their hospitality towards me, and countless other visitors, has been indefatigable and genuine. For this Yankee they became the epitome of Southern warmth and etiquette.

In “The End of the World,” Julie London sang, “Why does the sun keep on shining? Why does the sea rush to shore? Don’t they know it’s the end of the world?” The day I learned of Marion’s death, as I went about my farm chores, for some reason these lines popped into my head. I could not shake them. It may not be the end of the world, but Marion’s passing is in many ways the end of an era in American caving.

“More packin’, less yackin” -mos
**SINGLE-MINDED PURSUIT - JIM WILBANKS**

Marion was an icon. As a symbol to follow and a teacher of how to live, he affected me greatly. As he aged, he defined the term curmudgeon, but he always remained the taciturn fellow we all loved. I first caved with him in 1967. He was a quiet sidekick to Richard Schreiber. They were always aside talking. We teenagers saw Richard and Marion as father figures, since they were in their twenties. For the next 55 years he was part of my life. He showed up at all the important junctures, even attending my daughter’s high school graduation. When I organized a caver raft trip down the Grand Canyon, he came along.

Part of what makes an icon successful is single-minded pursuit, the ability to focus on one thing and do it well. Marion held degrees in history. Unlike most holding them, he did historical research his entire life. When he retired, he told me that he had read every scrap of paper that sat on Andrew Johnson's desk. He considered that chapter in his life complete.

Having always loved caving, he started doing it full time. Caves and history consumed him. If we were digging a lead and it looked like we might break through, he would just come walking up to share in our discovery. Mention virgin cave and he was there. He used to humbly shrug his shoulders when he talked about his retired life, as if he had to justify his pursuits.

Marion started climbing rope on three knots. Many of us bought horse girths, since the chest harness had to hold our whole weight. The problem was Marion liked his and wouldn’t give it up. Twenty years later he was still hanging on those thin rings and fabric. He would recount being jerked off a ledge in El Capitan Pit with it. Someone took it and added a length of webbing to save him when it gave way. Eventually I hand-sew a sling with six-inch webbing that he used for a long time. When I gave it to him, he looked kind of embarrassed as he tried it on, but we never saw the horse girth again.

**TRAPPED WITH AN OLD MAN - BILL STEELE**

I met Marion the day that Incredible Pit in Ellison’s Cave was first done. As we approached the top of the un-descended 440-foot awesome pit, Marion was ahead of me, dragging the duffel of rope through the low, wet, gravelly crawlway. I pushed it from behind. He stopped, dropped his forehead to the gravel and said, "I've always been old." He was 26 years old at the time and I was 20. He did seem old.

An old photo of Marion showed him squatting by a campfire with an unopened can visible in the coals. I saw him cook this way many times. He called it "heat n' eat." He'd take a can of chili or stew, dent it, and nestle it in the coals. When the dent popped out it was dinner time. He was cautious with the first puncture when opening the can. It would spew.

On my first trip to the Huautla de Jimenez, Oaxaca, Mexico, caves in 1977, I became trapped 2,000 feet deep in Sotano de San Agustin with Marion Smith and a few others. A caver inadvertently lifted the rope in a 318-foot pit as he climbed it. We were trapped. Our friends on the surface had no way of knowing it.

During the days we were trapped, we continued to explore and map the cave, hoping someone would come to join us and dislodge the rope. By the fourth day no one had come, and a diabetic caver with us had run out of insulin. Marion and I went to the shaft to climb it with aids we had improvised. He was the one willing to dare it with me.

**A STACK OF MEMORIES - KRIS H. GREEN**

After a lengthy caving trip in Papoose Cave, Marion and I went for breakfast at the only restaurant in Riggins, Idaho. He perused the menu, then ordered his usual stack of three pancakes. A minute after the waitress took the order to the kitchen, the cook came out and asked, "Who ordered a stack of three?"

Marion acknowledged that he had.

"I just had to see who was going to eat three of my cakes," the cook replied.

When the order came to the table, Marion’s eyes bulged as he gazed upon a stack of dinner-plate-sized cakes over four inches thick! An hour and a half-bottle of syrup later, Marion had managed, amazingly, to choke them down. The cook was duly impressed.

Marion was infamous for being notoriously frugal. During the 35-plus years we caved together, whenev-
er we shared a restaurant table my tally was always less, even though my meal was usually larger. This annoyed MOS immensely. I could consistently “out-cheap” him. He often proclaimed, “You (blankety) out-cheaped me again!”

I thought he never figured out why. He always ordered a drink, while I simply drank water. Maybe he just pretended to not know why, as a big (blankety) joke on me.

COATIMUNDI PACIFIED - JIM FOX

On July 3, 2022, I found out that Marion had been in the hospital for a week. I called him, and on the phone, he mentioned something about caving in Costa Rica. I said that was funny, because Amy had held a baby coatimundi on Wednesday.

“Oh really?” he said. “Well, I’ve actually done Coatimundi Pit Number One and Coatimundi Pit Number Two in Mexico, and I am the only one to do Coati Tuesday Pit, at 400 hundred feet.”

Marion always had a great story for everything. While his amazing lifetime cave and pit tallies were shared with many after his death, here are some additional statistics: Caving trips to Mexico: 49. Years spent underground over 52 years of caving: two. In 2021, he climbed 3,700 feet before his “sabbatical.” Number of 100 (and greater) footers: 617 the last time I asked. In the end, it was likely closer to 700. Marion once did 65 pits in Mexico in 12 days. Most were virgin.

A final story: A waitress Marion always fussed with in Kimball left him a pacifier on the table. He thought that was brilliant.

LOST KEYS AND HAMMERS - RYAN MAURER

My first trip with Marion was in 2016 to Blue Spring Cave. We went to the P Survey with a big group.

When I started taking photos, he left us with a simple, “Young man, you know your way out? Good.”

At the entrance passage we got lost somewhere before the bridge. While walking in the totally wrong direction we heard this loud cackle that made us jump. It was MOS, who had realized that he left his keys in one of our locked vehicles. He had slept in the entrance passage for five hours because it was January and cold outside, and he saved us from getting lost.

I spent Thanksgiving 2016 digging open a nerd hole with him that he named after me. I posted the full story on Facebook. We live-streamed the event across two days, lost his sledgehammer, and ate Thanksgiving dinner at 11 p.m. in a Huddle House in Sparta.

MANY HORROR HOLES - JOHN STEMBEL

I met the Old Goat MOS on a survey trip to Tennessee’s Sherwood Spring Cave in 1988. He quickly became a weekly cave companion, with many horror holes in TAG and Mexico. As I slowed down over the years, MOS was a stalwart to the end, a true character with an incredible memory and a gift for mentoring young cavers. No caver will forget MOS. Rest in TAG. You earned it.

A GIANT - MARK LASSITER

Marion Smith was the quintessential TAG caver, friend, mentor, and inspiration to us all for 60 years. He was the most dedicated caver I ever met, and he leaves behind a tall legacy in TAG and beyond. His name will be forever synonymous with Ellisons and Rumbling Falls, two of the country’s greatest caves. Beneath the curmudgeon shell was a man of truth, compassion, and relentless exploration curiosity. We have lost a giant. Rest in peace brother.


Photo atop this page: Marion and Gerald Moni discuss the fine art of cave exploration at Crucifixion Pit in Tennessee, on July 6, 1996. Andy Porter and Alan Cressler appear to be busy attending to their gear. In caving there’s seldom a dull moment among good friends.
FRIEND AND MENTOR - ZEKE MCKEE

I met Marion at my first Tennessee Cave Survey meeting in 2015. I knew of his reputation as a lifetime caver with thousands of trips and numerous large discoveries. He didn’t know me from Adam, so I was surprised when he stopped for a chat. We talked briefly, and he scribbled something on a notepad from his pocket, then went off to circulate among the cavers filing into the auditorium on the Tennessee Tech campus. Within a year we were surveying and exploring local holes in White and Van Buren counties.

I typically had a four-day work week, which Marion found useful. He and I could map and explore various nerd holes every Friday, and he would still have the weekend available for a slew of projects with other cavers across TAG. This routine included a Thursday night phone call, sometime after the local news ended at 7 p.m., to plan, scheme, and spread the latest cave gossip. Through these nearly bi-weekly interactions, Marion quickly became one of my closest friends and mentors.

I grew to know him as an explorer through and through, both physically and intellectually. While his most known passion was exploring caves, he also had a deep interest in the fellow individuals who shared enthusiasm for the underground (whether still living or dead for 200 years). When Marion entered a gathering of cavers, he tried to make time for everyone in the room. Even for complete strangers, if only to have them record their name on his notepad as he explained, talking as much with his hands as his voice, that he “liked to keep records of who was at these things.” He’d note your birthday if he had time, and you might get yearly birthday well wishes from him from then on sometimes accompanied by a description of his breakfast and location the day you were born). His unique sense of humor and love for wordplay could have an entire room laughing in seconds.

Marion was probing, constantly exploring individual skills and talents of fellow explorers, trying to put them to use. Just as he could see the potential of any nerd hole, he could see the potential of the most unsuspecting caver. He mentored and befriended a broad spectrum of people with the understanding that our shared interests far outweighed our differences. He was indefatigable to the end, always pushing toward some goal.

Taking a break on a muggy hillside in late June 2021, Marion rambled on about a variety of subjects. He finished and looked at me to pose the next topic so he could rest a bit longer. I had been going through one of those cycles questioning the meaning of life. I looked down at Marion with his worn old walking stick, covered in duct tape, and thought, “Why not ask this wise old wizard, the corporeal manifestation of the Spirit of TAG itself?”

“Is it worth it?” I asked. “All the time and effort spent on caves?” He whipped his head around and responded without hesitation: “Of course it’s worth it! Look at where we are! Look at what we are doing!”

“MARIONISMS” BY JIM FOX

Marion O. Smith was an absolute original. The list below is by no means exhaustive. When working underground or on the way to a project cave, Marion always interjected wit, bantered with the cave itself and offered endless fascinating and funny stories of virgin cave exploration and history.

“There’s a hundred ways to coil a rope, and that ain’t one of ’em.

Driving North? South? East? West? Or in circles?

However, comma, ...

What time do you turn into a pumpkin?

I’m not a young whippersnapper anymore. I’m a snapped whip.

Make it bigger (always in reference to the cave entrance).

The Horror.

Zipathon (Our trips when I had to be back to pick up kids).
Put this car in R for race.

I am un-tucked. I have some tucking to do.

That’s a cesspool, very cessy.

What’s going on in Tim Buck 4?

The pit entrance is ugly, even uglier than me.

Which is what and what is which?

I want you to quit finding pits over 20 feet deep.

It’s not deep, but it’s not un-deep.

Too bad I don’t have any cow’s-tails, or goat’s-tails, or puppy-dog tails.

I am moving at the speed of a galloping Moni!

Rain go away. Find Gerald and stay there!

We yo-yoed 450 yo’s.

I’ve got too many books. I am booked up.

Speaking to the pit: Why do you have to be so sharp? I’m trying to find where you are less sharp.”

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