

Ronald William Ralph

June 1, 1942 - April 16, 2025



Ronald William "Ron" Ralph, a cave archeologist and rock art specialist whose many contributions to the Texas caving community included advancing our knowledge of native American prehistory, died on April 16, 2025 at an Austin hospital following a long illness. He was 82.

Ron, former president of the Texas Archeological Society, was scheduled to receive a prestigious award on April 24 for a career spanning nearly 60 years. The Texas Historical Commission nominated him for the Curtis D. Tunnell Lifetime Achievement Award in Archeology. His widow, Diane, accepted the award. Ron, who was born in Santa Barbara, Calif., began studying caves and archeology in the Golden State in 1963. He moved to Texas in 1965 and graduated from The University of Texas at Austin.

For 13 years, Ron served as an archeological consultant on projects throughout the southwestern United States and Mexico before joining the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department in 1976, where he worked for 21 years. Ron taught nearly 30 archeological and speleological training courses and workshops, presented more than 30 papers at

conferences, and published more than 150 research reports.

After retiring in 1997, he returned to private consulting in Cultural Resource Management. Working as an independent contractor, he conducted more than 250 pedestrian surveys in Texas, Louisiana and New Mexico.

Among Ron's projects were Hueco Tanks State Park and Historic Site in far West Texas; the Bullhead Bayou Camp Cemetery in Sugar Land, Texas, where dozens of black convicts died during forced labor in sugarcane fields; McKinney Falls State Park near Austin; and many other sites.

With Ron as principal investigator, the Bullhead site grew to be the largest, previously unknown convict cemetery in the state. He received the Historical Commission's Award of Merit for leadership of the project and for his contributions to the final report.

At Hueco Tanks, Ron plotted rock art localities and archeological features, coordinated the documentation of pictographs, and directed excavations of middens and pithouses.

Besides authoring and co-authoring scientific papers, Ron mentored dozens of archeologists over the years who went on to have significant careers with state and federal agencies, universities, and in private consulting practices.

Other areas of interest for Ron were Fort Jefferson, the Western Hemisphere's largest masonry structure located at Dry Tortugas National Park near Key West; and Canyon de Chelly National Monument in Arizona.

Ron served on boards of both the Texas Cave Management Association and Texas Speleological Survey, where he was former president. Ron led the TCMA Budget Committee for many years along with managing Los Oasis, Ezell's, and other cave preserves. He also presented programs to the Texas Legislature and the public on TCMA and the benefits of protecting and preserving caves and cave fauna.

Additionally, Ron was active in projects and conventions of the Texas Speleological Association. A Fellow of the National Speleological Society (7616FE), he co-chaired the 1994 NSS Convention in Brackettville, Texas.

Along with Ron's widow Diane of Manchaca, Texas, Ron is survived by two sons, Logan, of El Paso, Texas, and David of Tucson, Ariz.; a daughter, Fontaine Schibi, of Austin; three step-children; 12 grandchildren, including grandsons Nolan and Rowan and granddaughter Stella; one great-grandchild; and a sister in California.

At a Celebration of Life on May 18 at the County Line BBQ in Austin, a number of relatives and friends shared heartfelt eulogies and shared Ron's legacy. Please see some video links below.

Also, more memorials for cavers who have passed on are in [The Hall of Texas and Mexico Cavers](#), part of the Texas Speleological Association website.

We offer condolences to Ron's family and loved ones, and we are all diminished by his passing.

Caving

Ron was an early explorer in the caves of Huautla, Oaxaca, Mexico. He was 24 years old when he made his only trip to Sotano de San Agustin in February 1967. Sotano de San Agustin is one of 30 known entrances to what is now Sistema Huautla, the deepest cave in the Western Hemisphere, and the 28th longest known cave in the world.

Bill Steele wrote, "The trip was an absolute epic. Sotano de San Agustin had been found the prior year. There were only three cavers on this trip: Ron, John Fish, and Terry Plemons.

"This was some really gutsy cave exploration. The deepest point these three cavers reached was the bottom of the awesome waterfall shaft later named The 318, because from where it's best rigged it's 318 feet deep.

"Ten years after Ron, John, and Terry's pioneer exploration of it, I along with a few others were trapped deeper down for four days when the rope in The 318 was accidentally pulled up the shaft by a caver as he climbed it."

In 1972, Ron returned to Mexico for caving in Valle de los Fantasma. He explored Cueva de la Puente, Sótano de San Francisco, and caves of the El Abra with Pamela Lynn and Mike McEachern.

Ron served as a principal organizing committee member for the 1978 NSS Convention in New Braunfels. Ernst Kastning and Ron presented talks at the dedication of Enchanted Rock State Natural Area, with then-First Lady "Lady Bird" Johnson in attendance. With the help of James Reddell and Ronnie Fieseler, Ron and Ernst researched and wrote the Texas Natural Areas Survey report on Enchanted Rock that ultimately led to the Nature Conservancy's funding to establish the state park there.

Ron attended the first MexSpeleo in 1989.

Publications

Extracted by William R. Elliott from TexBib, Bibliography of Texas Speleology, April 19, 2025

1. Fieseler, [Ronald G.] (=Ronnie), and Ron Ralph. 1976. Helm's West Well. The Texas Caver, 21(10):182-183.
2. Ralph, Ronald W. 1977. Guadalupe River State Park: A preliminary report on an underground wilderness. Unpublished report submitted to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, 15 pp.
3. McEachern, Michael, and Ronald W. Ralph. 1980. Archeological investigations at the Thomas F. McKinney homestead, Travis County, Texas: An experiment in historic archeology. Part I. Bulletin of the Texas Archeological Society, 51:5-208.
4. [McEachern, Michael; Ralph, Ronald W. Archeological Investigations at the thomas F. McKinney Homestead, Travis County, Texas: An Experiment in Historical Archeology, Parts I and II \(1980\)](#)
5. Betancourt, Julio, and Ronald W. Ralph. 1981. Preliminary reconnaissance of the archeological resources in the lower Hueco Mountains, El Paso and Hudspeth Counties, Texas. Pp. 83-113 In: Five archeological investigations in the Trans-Pecos region of Texas. Austin: Texas Antiquities Committee. (Texas Antiquities Committee Permit Series, 6).
6. Fieseler, [Ronald G.] (=Ronnie), and Ron Ralph. 1983. Helm's West Well, El Paso County, Texas. Speleo Digest, 1976:140.
7. [Ralph, Ronald W.; Sutherland, Kay. Pictograph Conservation at Hueco Tanks State Historical Park: An Initial Experiment \(1979\)](#)
8. [Betancourt, Julio; Ralph, Ronald W. Preliminary Reconnaissance of Archeological Resources in the Southern Quitman Mountains, Hudspeth County, Texas \(1981\)](#)
9. [Betancourt, Julio; Ralph, Ronald W. Preliminary Reconnaissance of the Archeological Resources in the Lower Hueco Mountains, El Paso and Hudspeth Counties, Texas \(1981\)](#)
10. Walsh, [J.] Mike, and Ron Ralph. 1986. Cave management of Texas state parks. Program, 1986 National Speleological Society Convention, Tularosa, New Mexico, pp. 23.
11. Ralph, Ronald W. 1989. A Texas cave management plan for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department: A review for the 1989 proposal. (Abstract). Southwestern Cavers, 27(6):99.
12. Ralph, Ronald W. 1990. The Texas Cave Management Plan for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department: A review of the 1989 proposal. Program of the National Speleological Society Convention, Yreka, California, 25 pp.
13. Ralph, Ronald W. 1990. Seminole Canyon State Historic Park: An inventory of rock art conservation. In: Proceedings of the International Rock Art Conference and the 16th Annual Meeting of the American Rock Art Research Association, Solveig A. Turpin (ed.), published as American Indian Rock Art, 16:93-97.
14. Ralph, Ron[ald W.], and Robert Burnett. 1992. An update on cave management goals within the Texas state park system. (Abstract). NSS Bulletin 54(2):87.

15. Jorden, Jay [R.], and Ron [W.] Ralph, (eds.). 1994. National Speleological Society Program, Fifty-first annual convention, June 18-25, 1994, Brackettville, Texas. 59 pp.
16. Elliott, William R., and Ron Ralph. 1994. Waltz across Texas: archeology/biology tour road log. In: The caves and karst of Texas, National Speleological Society 1994 convention guidebook, William R. Elliott and George Veni, (eds.), Brackettville, Texas, pp. 112-119.
17. [Ralph, Ronald W. Assess Proposed Firebreak on U. S. Army Corp of Engineers Land Outside Lake Whitney State Park, Hill County \(1997\)](#)
18. Burnett, Rune [Robert (=Bob)], Julie Jenkins, Ron Ralph, and Bill [William H.] Russell. 2000. Cave management in the new millenium: The Texas Cave Management Association. Texas Caver, 45(2):28-29.
19. Ralph, Ron[ald W.]. 2002. TCMA sponsors successful gated cave field trip. TCMA Passages, 3(1):5 (Spring 2002).
20. Ralph, Ron[ald W.]. 2002. Cave gate field trip: Austin and Round Rock, Texas. Texas Cave Management Association, 7 March 2002, 17 pp.
21. Ralph, Ron[ald W.], Mike Walsh, Robert Burnett, and Ann Scott. 2009. Bats, bridges and cave preserves field trip itinerary: Austin, Texas, July 22, 2009. 15th International Congress of Speleology, Kerrville, Texas, 21 pp.
22. Ralph, Ron[ald W.]. 2015. Ezell's Cave Preserve update: Gating project. TCMA Passages, 15(3):4.
23. [Ralph, Ron. May 2019. Newsletter of the Fort Bend Archeological Society. The Archeology of Palo Duro Canyon State Park. 4 pp.](#)

Videos from Ron's Celebration of Life - May 18, 2025

- [Fontaine Schibi](#) [04:22]
- [Diane Ralph](#) [02:22]
- [David Riskin](#) [03:25]
- [Tom Byrd](#) [07:10]
- [Rune Burnett and Susan Souby](#) [06:17]
- [Pam Lynn](#) [03:43]

Photos



Ron manning the TSS book sale table at 2014 Texas Cavers Reunion. Frank Binney photo.



Ron at Chiqihuitillos rock art site near Bustamante, Nuevo Leon, Mexico.



Ron at Chiqihuitillos rock art site near Bustamante, Nuevo Leon, Mexico.



Ron during a work trip at the Texas Speleology Center in 2018



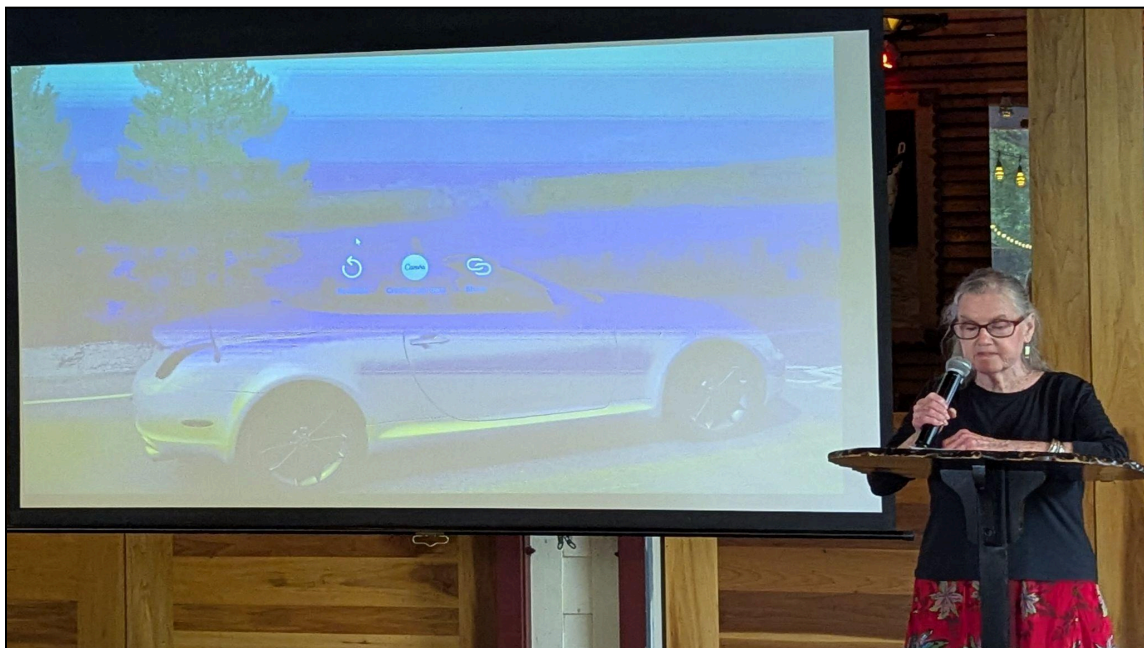
Ron leading a Texas Speleological Survey meeting in 2015



Ron at a Texas Cavers' Reunion



Ron's Facebook profile photo



Diane Ralph at Celebration of Life



Celebration of Life at County Line BBQ



Celebration of Life with [from right] Ron Miller, Martha, Meacham, Terry Raines, Jay Jorden



Walt Olenick and Allan Cobb at Celebration of Life