

Russell Dobson
June 16, 1956 - April 16, 2026

Compiled by Jay Jorden

Russell Dobson, a Texas caver who moved to New Mexico decades ago to build a successful whitewater rafting business, has died. He was 69 years old.

Russell, who was originally from Kerrville, Texas, attended Mary Carroll High School, part of the Corpus Christi Independent School District. He then studied at South West Texas State University (now Texas State University) in San Marcos from 1981 to 1985, earning a Bachelor of Business Administration in business administration and management. At SWTSU, he joined the caving club and explored Texas and Mexico caves.

Around 1987, Russell moved to New Mexico and began working to build a business that became Santa Fe Rafting Co. Inc. Since that time, his crews of outfitters have safely guided thousands of rafters down the Rio Grande and Chama rivers. Trips ranged from running the Taos Box, New Mexico's premier whitewater route, with the company's expert guides - to half-day floats through the lower Rio Grande Gorge.



Among Russell's caving adventures was a trip to Stevens Gap Pit on June 21, 1983, when he was a member of the Southwest Texas State University (now Texas State) Grotto. He reported details of his trip to the cave with Mike Walsh, Bill Rupley, and Jon Cradit - and the misadventure that followed.

"After a visit to the NSS (National Speleological Society) Headquarters in Huntsville, Alabama, we took a trip to Stevens Gap Pit Cave which is approximately 30 miles from Huntsville. A 30-minute hike up the side of Stevens Gap led us to the cave. We rigged our ropes and did a 120-foot rappel into the cave.

"Dropping into the cool pit was a relief from the humid and hot weather. Standing at the bottom of the pit, one could see the two entrances: one a (horizontal) entrance and the other ... vertical. A spring forming into a waterfall made the setting look very tropical. Overall, the pit provided an excellent drop for vertical training and playing. After de-rigging and hiking back to the vehicle, we discovered Wild Bill Rupley didn't have the keys to our vehicle. After a search

through our gear with no luck, Jon and Bill decided to back track to the cave looking for the mysterious missing keys. The keys were found at the bottom of the pit sitting perfectly on top of a fairly large rock. We were all relieved at finding the keys and we were soon on our way again to the N.S.S. Convention in West Virginia.”

Russell also attended the 1984 Texas Speleological Association convention. Additionally, he loved music, with close ties to a number of musicians and events, like the Big Barn Dance and Kerrville Folk Festival. And Russell loved to cook. He competed at Chilympiads in San Marcos, Texas and other culinary events, commenting, “ ... That wooden spoon I've had for over 32 years is still at work, and I still have a couple of those friends from when I was 28 years old.”

Russell is survived by his widow, Nicole, and a daughter. A celebration of life was held in Santa Fe, N.M., this summer, and a memorial event is also planned for Texas later this year.

Tributes

“All of us at NMRA are sending our heartfelt condolences to the entire Santa Fe Rafting Co. family over the loss of the incomparable Russell Dobson. He was truly one of a kind! ❤️” - *New Mexico River Adventures*

“Our friend and previous owner of Santa Fe Rafting, Russell Dobson, lived big. He had a huge heart for adventure and was one of a kind. He is the reason so many people found their way to the river either for the first time, for a lifetime, or as a starting point of careers. “He was a businessman, an explorer, a lover of music, rafting, his daughter, and his friends. We know so many of you have stories of river days, late nights, lessons learned and laughs shared. He touched more lives than he probably ever realized.

“Russell is no longer in pain, and for that we are grateful. We believe he’s now on the greatest adventure of all, heading into the great unknown with all the other adventurous souls who went before him. Wherever that may be, he’s still with us too.

“We’ll miss him. SFR will always be a place for anyone who wants to come together, share stories, and honor Russell’s life as well as our other loved ones who are on the other side. Sending love to Russell, his daughter, his family and everyone who got to know him in this life.” - *Santa Fe Rafting team*



“Remembering Russell Dobson: Caver, rafter.” - *Martha Connell*

Photos



Russell Dobson cooks at Chilympiad 1984 in San Marcos, Texas With Peter Monahan and Kelly Kay Burgess. Andy Grubbs photo.



Russell rappelling Stevens Gap Pit, 1984



Russell Dobson with Blake Harrison, 2011



Russell Dobson on the river



Bob in Saint Thomas, 2017



Russell Dobson with cousin Lee Dobson, 2019



Russell with Lee Dobson at Tiny's Restaurant and Lounge, 2018



Russell Dobson on the river



Russell with family and friends



Russell on the river



With Santa Fe Rafting crew



Russell Dobson at the Lobster Pot, 2023