

Jack C. Burch, NSS #2175



Obituary submitted by Carl Kunath

Jack C. Burch died June 16, 2009, from complications of Alzheimer's. Jack was 86. Those are small sentences to announce the passing of a large figure in the caving world.

Jack was born November 11, 1922 and lived much of his life on the family farm near Ardmore, Oklahoma. During his time in Oklahoma, Jack became interested in caves and is considered the father of Oklahoma caving. He founded the Arbuckle Mountains Grotto and is credited with mapping several miles of Wild Woman Cave.

Most Texas cavers knew Jack from his association with Caverns of Sonora. When the Crisman brothers published a story in the April 1956 *NSS News* about Secret Cave, Jack was instantly captivated and was immediately plying Bart Crisman for further information. Jack visited the cave in June 1957 and wrote to the Crismans: "Thanks to you I have visited perhaps the most beautiful cave in the world . . . Any ten feet of that passage would be a wonder."

Jack saw that the cave was already suffering from careless visitation and determined to save the cave by making it commercial. "Conservation by Commercialization" as Jack put it. With Jim Papadakis (NSS 3630) as a business associate, they made a deal with landowner Stanley Mayfield and work began in 1960 to make the cave a commercial attraction. It is here that something unprecedented occurred. Jack's idea of commercializing a cave was to make the beauty accessible with the least possible change to the cave and without the use of gimmicks such as colored lights and organ music. His work in this cave set a standard for cave development that has been a goal for others ever since.

Jack spent several years working at Sonora before accepting an offer to lead the development of a new discovery, Natural Bridge Caverns, near New Braunfels. With Orion Knox as one of his main associates, Jack again applied the magic touch to this cave and it is also widely recognized as a classic example of tasteful commercialization.

Jack was involved with commercializing other caves including Rio Camuy in Puerto Rico, Harrison's Cave in Barbados, and Kartchner Caverns in Arizona.

Jack served as TSA Chairman for 1967 and was as active in TSA as his busy work schedule would allow.

Jack joined the NSS as #2175 (just moments before Bill Cuddington, #2177) and was honored as a Fellow of the NSS in 1969.

Jack married in 1961, somewhat late in life, and lived happily with Margaret (Maggie) until her untimely death in 1993. Their only child, Lee, age 20, was killed in an automobile accident in 1993. Jack is survived by his younger brother Kenneth "Pete" Burch and a favorite nephew, Gary. Services were June 20 at the family site in Sonora, Texas.

Jack was a personal friend for nearly 50 years and a giant in the caving world.

We are diminished.

Obituary submitted by Jerry Atkinson

The caving world has lost one of its grand old gentlemen. Jack C. Burch (NSS #2175) passed away on June 16, 2009 from complications due to Alzheimer's Disease.

Jack started his caving career in Oklahoma as a young man in the 1950s. He is regarded by many as the Father of Oklahoma Caving and founded the Arbuckle Mountain Grotto, the first NSS grotto in Oklahoma, in the 1950s. Jack received the April 1956 *NSS News* and saw an article written by Bart Crisman describing a "Secret Cave" in west Texas with extraordinary speleothems.

He was immediately interested and soon paid a visit to Crisman to find out more about the cave. The cave was Mayfield Cave (Caverns of Sonora) and Jack made his first visit there on June 15, 1957. After a few more visits to the cave, Jack decided that "conservation by commercialization" was the only way to save the cave from future degradation. He and James Papadakis (NSS #3630) formed a partnership and negotiated a lease from the landowner, Stanley Mayfield.

After conducting a transit survey of the main portion of the cave in 1959, construction of the commercial trail began in 1960. Visitors to the cave still marvel at the masterful engineering and meticulous attention to detail which was taken to construct the trail with as little damage as possible to the fragile speleothems. The cave was open for tours on July 16, 1960, less than 6 months since trail building began.

Jack's career as a professional commercial cave consultant and trail builder was not over. He built several more extensions to the trail in Caverns of Sonora, and was hired to commercialize Natural Bridge Caverns in 1963. Trail building began in NBC on March 7, 1963 and was completed to the Hall of the Mountain Kings by June of the following year, just in time for the first public viewing of the cave by attendees of the 1964 NSS Convention in New Braunfels, Texas.

Jack assisted in the commercialization plans for the Rio Camuy Cave in Puerto Rico in the mid-1960s. In 1967,

Jack served as the chairman of the Texas Speleological Association. He was made a Fellow of the NSS in 1969. He was subsequently honored as a pioneer of Oklahoma caving in 1986 by the newly formed Southern Plains Region of the NSS.

He will be missed.

From the *San Angelo Standard Times*, obituary by Dan Cipriani.

In 1955, a group of spelunkers got permission to explore an almost forgotten cave near Sonora. The reason it was largely forgotten is that there was a deep abyss with no way to cross it.

Using mountain-climbing techniques, the explorers carefully crossed the pit and found a way into a 45-foot crawlway on the other side. At the end of the long crawl, they found beauty beyond the wildest dreams of spelunkers — there were stalactites, stalagmites and, most unusual, helictites covering everything. Helictites that grow horizontally are a rare find. This cave had so many they were “common.”

Jack Burch and a friend, James Papadakis, heard about the discovery and couldn't wait to explore it. After risking their lives inching across what is now known as the “Devil's Pit,” they, too, were able to witness the beauty of the cave.

They quickly recognized the commercial possibilities and, five years and thousands hours of toil later, The Caverns of Sonora opened to tourists, and over nearly five decades many have enjoyed what one past president of the Spelunker Society called “one of the most beautiful caves in the world.”

Burch played an active role in the caverns for many of those years. He died last month, and many in Sonora and elsewhere mourn his passing.

Jack Charles Burch was the ninth of 11 children. He was born at the foot of the eroded Arbuckle Mountains of Oklahoma, at the small town of Springer. Burch was used to hard work on the family farm where he chopped cotton and pulled many a boll.

During World War II, in 1944, he quit school and enlisted in the Army. He became a waist gunner on a B-17 that was stationed in England.

After the war and his father's death, Burch took over the family farm, 125 acres that had become depleted from

many years of cotton farming. He had become interested in soil conservation while in the military and continued studying the subject. He brought the farm back to life using various conservation methods, and a newspaper article called him a “Johnny Appleseed” when it came to planting legumes.

Burch had other interests. He loved to fish with his brothers and was a Scoutmaster.

He also became a spelunker, exploring caves in the Arbuckle Mountains. He became acquainted with Papadakis, a Shell Oil geologist. They began a long friendship and traveled to wild caves all over Oklahoma and Texas. That's what led them to Sonora and, after acquiring a lease from the owner, Stanley Mayfield, Burch began his labor of love.

He began developing the cave practically using his bare hands. He learned to be a plumber, a mason, an electrician, a blaster and whatever else was required. He drilled holes horizontally and at an angle for supports to make a walkway skirting the “Devil's Pit.” That was a stupendous undertaking.

Burch then carried two five-gallon buckets of cement, caliche and other materials into the cave, over and over, for years. He must have walked hundreds of miles carrying those buckets, wore out many pairs of shoes and breathed a ton of dust. It probably affected his lungs later on.

The years of sweat and back-breaking work installing lights and building walkways paid off when the cave opened to tourists in 1960.

Burch's reputation for a cave developer grew. He was hired by the owner of Natural Bridge Caverns near Georgetown to develop that cave. He built a walkway skirting a pit there, similar to the one at Sonora, that the owner named “Burch's Bridge.”

He was called on as a consultant for a cave on the island of Barbados and also for Kartchner Cave in Arizona. He was a one-of-a-kind spelunker, respected and admired by all who knew him.

It was through his interest in caves that Burch met Margaret Ann Smith, a spelunker also, and they married in 1961. They had one son, Lee Charles Burch. Margaret developed cancer in 1983. Lee came home from school to visit his sick mother and was killed in a pickup crash with three friends. Margaret died 10 years later.

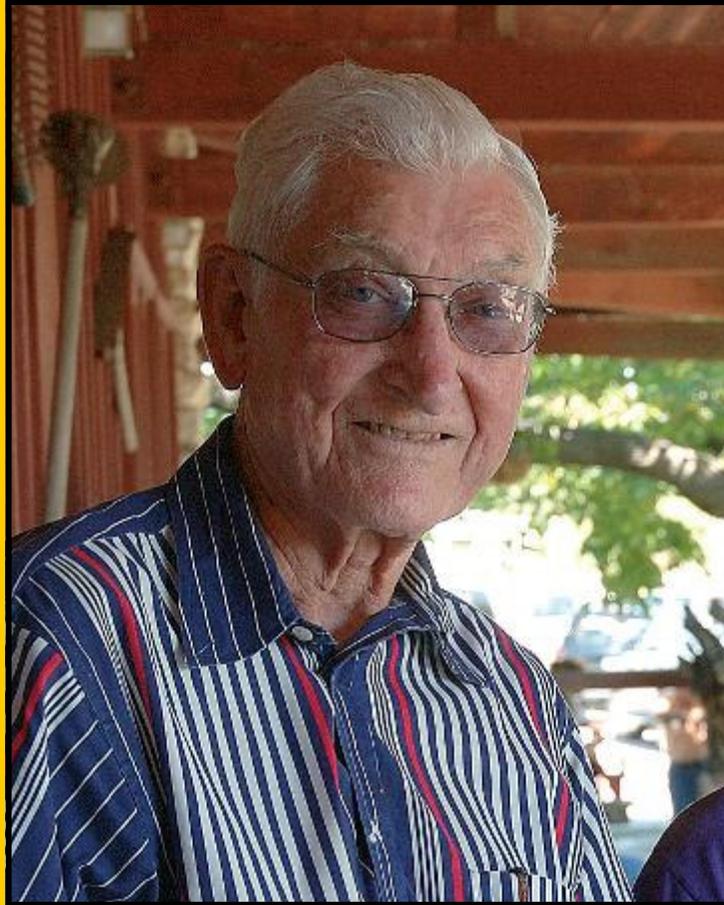
Jack Burch, suffering from vascular dementia, was admitted to a VA hospital in Ardmore in 2007 and died there after contracting pneumonia. On June 20, he was buried in Sonora next to his wife and son.

Dan Cipriani, of Temple, was Jack Burch's brother-in-law.



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**Jack C. Burch, NSS #2175
November 11, 1922 - June 16, 2009**



**Texas Speleological Association
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Attn: Editor