

# Carl Ponebshek— A long life lived well – above and below ground

By Jay Jorden

Carl Martin Ponebshek, a longtime Central Texas caver and retired Army officer who also pursued passions for teaching and scouting, died last month at his San Antonio home.

Carl, who was 84, was remembered by his many caving friends, former students and colleagues in education and the military for the life he devoted to exploration, volunteerism, mentoring and serving others.

When Carl was buried at Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery on Aug. 19, students at St. Peter Prince School in the San Antonio suburb of Alamo Heights wore their scouting uniforms to classes in his honor.

“Carl, you touched so many young people's lives and they are all richer for having known you,” a memorial from the school read. “Past, present, and future Troop 31 salutes you!”

Dallas-Fort Worth Grotto chairman Bill Steele, who works for the Boy Scouts of America at the national Irving, Texas headquarters, first met Carl after moving to San Antonio -- and the Alamo Area Council -- in 1980 to begin his BSA career. Carl was then a scoutmaster. As the two worked together in Scouting, Carl learned about Bill's interest in caving and told him he had gone caving as a boy. Carl began inviting Bill to his high school class to show caving slides. Bill later guided Carl's Troop 31 from St. Peter's Catholic Church on two caving trips to Bustamante, taking the troop bus.

The troop returned to Mexico again on its own. Later, when severe flooding from a hurricane struck Northern Mexico, Carl and Troop 31 organized a charity relief effort for the region. They drove the same troop bus south of the border, loaded with clothing, shoes and blankets for Bustamante flood victims.

As an adult, Carl continued his work for scouting. He was awarded the Scoutmaster Award of Merit, the District Award of Merit and the Silver Beaver Award, which is the highest honor a local council can bestow. He took 24 treks to the Philmont Scout Ranch in New Mexico, a rare accomplishment. Carl was loved and appreciated by literally thousands of people in the Scouting community.

For Carl, those actions came naturally. No one was a stranger to him. His friendliness was genuine and his willingness – no, eagerness – to help others was a trait all his friends and acquaintances would notice immediately.

Carl was a devoted family man. He died just weeks before he would have celebrated his 60th wedding anniversary with his beloved wife Emily, and his own 85th birthday. He had married Emily Gogolski after returning from World War II in 1949. Other survivors include two daughters, Joann De Luna and Annalisa Peace, both of San Antonio; a son, Philip Ponebshek of Austin; and three grandchildren.

“He was my best friend,” Joann De Luna told the San Antonio Express-News. “He was my mentor.”

Carl's enthusiasm for caving and introducing young people to the activity was seemingly boundless. Annalisa



**Carl at the Bexar Grotto Spaghetti feed during the 2007 TCR.  
Photo by Butch Fralia**



**Carl helps run ICS registration, sporting a T-shirt featuring his many adventures.  
Photo by Jay Jorden**

Peace recalled that caving became a favorite pastime because it helped him avoid a tendency to sunburn easily. Carl was a Bexar Grotto member and officer for many years and active in the Texas Speleological Association. His Bexar Grotto camps at TSA functions are legendary for their hospitality.

Carl attended and volunteered at the registration desk for the 15th International Congress of Speleology (ICS) at Kerrville in late July. He was energetic and vibrant. Working the registration table tirelessly, he greeted everyone with sincere joy and enthusiasm, as he did with nearly everyone he met during his life.

In fact, many commented that it was wonderful to see Carl at the congress – and how he exhibited the enthusiasm and vigor of someone many years his junior. He enjoyed visiting with his many Texas caving friends as they hosted cavers from 52 countries for nine days.

Less than a month later, on Aug. 14, Carl passed away peacefully in his sleep.

Carl was born on Oct. 16, 1924, in a coal mining union camp in Ren-

ton, Pa., near Pittsburgh. He mined coal for a short time after returning from WWII, but his wife persuaded him to leave the mines. He returned to the military and became an officer's candidate.

Other highlights from Carl's life:

## Caving:

- The son of a miners' union organizer, Carl found a natural environment in cave exploration deep in Pennsylvania's caves
- After moving to Texas, first to explore several San Antonio/Balcones area caves
- Expedition cook for a National Geographic Society excursion to Mexico
- Active Bexar Grotto member
- Former director of Texas Cave Management Association, officer of other caving organizations

## Teaching:

- After Army stint, found a second career in teaching and counseling
- Taught history, other subjects at St. Gerard High School in San Antonio in the 1960s and 1970s, also serving as vice principal
- Known by students as "the major"
- Graduate of St. Mary's University
- Received master's degree in clinical counseling from Our Lady of the Lake
- Marriage and family counselor for Catholic Family Services
- Taught elementary school classes at St. Peter Prince of the Apostles School
- Intellectually curious, he learned several languages

## Scouting:

- Lifelong activist with the Boy Scouts of America
- Eagle Scout
- Troop leader for 44 years
- Began a Scouting program for handicapped boys, taking scouts to a camp specially outfitted for their needs
- Led treks and spent summers operating camps at the Philmont Scout Ranch in New Mexico
- San Antonio area scoutmaster

## Military

- Army career spanned more than two decades, from 1942 to 1968
- Enlisted at age 18
- Stationed as enlisted man in France during WWII, became artillery observer
- Earned a Purple Heart
- Enrolled in officer training school
- As an Army officer, stationed in Korea, at the Pentagon and in military biological warfare laboratories at Fort Detrich and Walter Reed
- Became hospital administrator at Brooke Army Medical Center
- Retired as a major in 1968

## Quotes about Carl:

"a huge heart and a wonderful smile"

"had the most wonderful attitude toward life and people of anyone I've ever met"

"kind, generous, public-spirited"

"One of the very best teachers I ever had"

And a sampling of comments from the many pages of memorials and e-mails flowing in about him:

**Bob Cowell:** "Carl was known for his kindness, generosity and his sincere friendship. I'm so proud to have known him and to have called him my friend."

**Dr. George Veni:** "For me, it all boils down to one thing: Carl was a good man. ... With Carl, there were no exceptions. He was exceptional. He was a good man. I am honored that he considered me his friend."

**Glenda Waters:** "My husband, Randy Waters, introduced me to Carl and Emily about 18 years ago. Randy had a tremendous amount of love and respect for Carl, and Carl returned that love and respect to Randy. Carl had wonderful things to say at Randy's memorial ..."

**Joe and Evelyn Mitchell:** "We had the great pleasure of being friends with Carl for the last ten years. He was among the kindest and most generous people we have known. We always enjoyed his stories and quick wit and spent a number of evenings around the campfire with him. During events we attended with him, he would always be in front trying to help out and having a great time doing it. This was what everyone knew Carl for, always wanting to help everyone and make the world a better place."

**Andee Kinzy,** Bexar Grotto: "Like others have mentioned, his stories were something else!!! And you know what? Every time the story ended, Carl's face would light up and he'd say, 'Oh, I've had a great life. ... A wonderful life.'"

**James and Mimi Jasek:** "For those who knew and loved him, he truly filled our minds, bodies and spirits with the best that life and wisdom had to offer from someone who had lived for so long and so well."

**Julia Germany:** "I first met Carl at a Bexar Grotto cleanup at Bracken Cave more than 10 years ago. I was so happy to see him at ICS. ... Always smiling is the way I will remember him best. We are truly diminished ..."

Gifts in lieu of flowers in Carl's memory may be sent to the Greater Edwards Aquifer Alliance.

On Labor Day weekend, at the Deep and Punkin Nature Preserve where Carl was also a volunteer, the Texas Cave Management Association was scheduled to dedicate a new composting toilet. It's in honor of Carl, whose generous monetary donation won him the naming rights.

Per Carl's request, the new addition to the preserve will be known as "Carl's Comfortable Crapper and Loo with a View."

Undoubtedly, Carl's view is even better now than we can imagine. Like the slogan on the new T-shirt he was recently seen sporting at ICS, "The Further Adventures of Caving Carl," he is truly off on his next sojourn.

He will be greatly missed.

# San Antonians' memories of Carl Ponebshek

by Kurt L. Menking and Rick Corbell

## From Kurt:

Carl Ponebshek was a friend to many cavers, scouts and anyone else who would sit and visit with him. He was a master storyteller. Carl could tell stories all day – and then well into the night. If he couldn't find anyone to talk to – or just wanted a break from storytelling – he would break out into a German folk song. I have many fond memories of Carl smoking his pipe and singing his German songs. During the 70s and 80s, Carl and his VW van were bouncing down many a ranch road, filled with cavers searching for the next great cave.

Carl's German language skills came in handy regularly when driving up to the many Hill County ranchhouses. We would often use county road maps and quad sheets to locate roads in promising cave areas, then just drive through any unlocked gates until we encountered a house. At that point, we'd knock on the door and introduce ourselves. Carl was a master at this, and he passed on the skill to others.

Carl introduced many scouts to caving – and used scouts for many cave-related work projects. Carl and his scouts hauled many dump truckloads of trash, rocks and debris out of Robber Baron Cave. Carl made it a point to drive by the cave any time he was in the area, and spent many hours educating the neighbors who stopped by while he was there. Carl took scouts caving many times to Bustamante, Garner State Park – any scouting trip where caves were nearby. We'll never know how many cavers had their sparks first ignited by Carl.

Carl also had many stories of his time in the military. It seems he visited nearly every country in Europe, and many in the Far East as well. During WWII, he did what he called a walking tour of France and several other countries. In his time there, he learned to speak several foreign languages in addition to the English and German he knew before joining the conflict.

I can't remember seeing him happier than he was during ICS. He loved working in the registration area and visiting with cavers from all over the world -- his favorite pastime was the opportunity to converse in French, German or Italian. His favorite ICS story involved a caver from France who asked Carl how he came to speak French. Carl explained he walked from Normandy to Paris during WWII. The guy dropped to one knee and thanked Carl for saving his country ... adding that if it wasn't for Carl and his friends, he would be speaking German right now. I watched Carl get misty-eyed as he told that story to several friends and at our grotto meeting after ICS.

Carl was a very close friend to a handful of cavers – most notably Bob Cowell, who would make sure Carl was able to attend caving functions. For the last 10 years, Carl drove less frequently – but he still loved to attend caving events. Bob made sure Carl attended most Bexar Grotto meetings, Texas Cavers' Reunions (TCRs), Bracken Bat flights and many other caver trips and gatherings.

Carl, Bob, and I also spent hundreds of hours over the years catching fish for the Bexar Grotto fish fry during

many of the past TCRs. Carl really loved to fish. For about 12 years, we would spend several to many days catching fish and getting ready for the annual fish fry. Often, we would start our trips to the lakes months in advance of the TCR weekend, spending 10-12 days and nearly that many nights until we had enough. As we got better and improved our techniques, this became more of a harvesting exercise, and we could get all we needed in a few two-day trips.

Carl would often start preparing for one of our trips weeks in advance -- building new jug lines, searching through the city's recycle trucks to get just the right type of jugs for our lines, spending many hours getting everything ready. He always arrived with more food than we could eat and more supplies than would fit in the boat. Whenever things got a little slow or we would just take a break, he would always say how fishing was so much more relaxing than catching.

Many of us look forward to the TCR, but Carl planned and prepared for that weekend nearly year-round. He bought and organized gear, food and supplies all year long. He stashed his bargains in his garage, storage room, house and van. Then, he might not remember where everything was when it came time to load up! We had to keep buying ever-larger vehicles, then trailers to haul all the stuff.

Carl was always a happy man. He didn't let little problems ruin his day. He was proud of his children and grandchildren. He would talk of their accomplishments whenever we were together. He was internally proud of his own accomplishments, too – but while he told many stories of his adventures, he never boasted or bragged. His stories and memories will live with me forever, but we are all diminished.

## From Rick:

At Carl's Rosary, one of his former students (Carl taught fifth and sixth grade at the church school his kids went to) told of when Carl caught him destroying something. Without raising his voice or sending him to the office, Carl just said, "David, David, David – you won't ever do that again, will you?" That was just like Carl: to point out the right path, not drag you down it!

Carl had an uncanny ability to accumulate stuff. The collection of camping gear in his Vanagon was amazing – but not very organized, sorted in "layers." Along with Carl on one of the Sonora restoration weekends, he said, "I know I've got some more packages of cocoa somewhere in here." When he found it, you couldn't be sure what decade it was from. He was a very entertaining traveling companion.

As Carl fought off several life-threatening episodes in later years, it became important to me to tell him how much I loved him – in that "We are part of a caving family, caring for each other, and I'm glad to be able to share some of your life with you" way. In recent months, his big hugs have been emotional – and I'll cherish the intensity of these.

Carl mentioned a party was planned at this TCR for his 85th birthday, so it was a shock to hear of his passing. We had not talked about dying, but it seems he had finally gotten relief from aches and pains that had bothered him the last few years. What a role model he was to show how to never give up what you love, even if it means fighting pain and debilities of age.