



This photo of Bill by Steven Pumphrey appeared in *Third Coast*, September 1982, accompanying an article titled “Thrillseekers” by Nick Vanderbilt.

William Hart Russell

(1937 – 2019)

NSS 4357RL – HM-CM-FE

On 21 March 2019, cavers lost William Hart Russell, a force in caving for 60+ years. He played significant roles in opening up caving in Mexico, in conserving and documenting caves in Texas and beyond, and in furthering the cause of caving in all its dimensions: exploration, cave science, conservation, documentation, archiving data, training a next generation, and especially digging and mapping.

This uncommon career is here documented by several of those best placed to do so, in statements as varied as was his life. This editor’s contributions are in italics or square brackets. Enjoy, and remember.

Katie Arens

Philip Russell, William’s brother, starts the story:

A caver extraordinaire was born on June 30, 1937, the son of petroleum geologist William Low Russell and librarian Leonore Schuppert Russell. At the time of the caver’s birth, his father was working for a Houston oil company.

Shortly before World War II, the family—father, mother, and Bill—moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma, where his father had accepted a job with Stanolind Oil Company. The war years passed uneventfully, although they were punctuated by his father’s absence when he was sent to Great Bear Lake in Canada as part of the Manhattan Project.

The year 1946 saw a flood of veterans swarming into college, anxious to get on

with their lives. To meet that challenge, Texas A&M College (as it was then called) offered Bill’s father a teaching position in the Geology Department. He accepted the offer, and the family—father, mother, Bill, and newly arrived little brother Philip, moved to Bryan, which would be Bill’s home until he graduated from high school.

Home life was tranquil, both emotionally and acoustically. The acoustics resulted from Bill’s parents not buying a TV until both brothers went off to UT. There was, however, no lack of stimulus since, with no TV, family members could actually read. In between meals, there was a living room lined with books, not to mention a set of *Compton’s Encyclopedia*.

Bill’s parents, rather than being helicopter parents, were helipad parents, who launched the brothers out the door for parts unknown. One time, as the brothers were walking along a rural pipeline construction right-of-way, they encountered some workers who had just bulldozed an armadillo nest. Only two armadillo pups had survived. The brothers resolved the workers’ dilemma of what to do with the pups. They gladly accepted the orphans, which were fostered on a screened-in porch.

Perhaps the most notable accomplishment of Bill’s high school years was his becoming a ham radio operator—WN5HRI. Aside from amateur radio, Bill’s early years were mainly time spent until he could make it to the University of Texas-Austin and what really mattered—Caves with a capital C. [At that time, he joined the UT Student Grotto and the NSS, later adding the Balcones Grotto to that list.]

Bill’s 1955 arrival in Austin saw some intense years of caving, [often originating in the “caver ghetto” on Kirkwood Avenue in Austin]. The zeitgeist of 1950s caving is best described by Bill’s own words from the 50th Anniversary issue of the *Texas Caver*¹:

My formative years as a caver were during the 50s just after the dawn of Texas caving. The world was not as serious, time was not as controlled, and the possibilities for the future seemed infinite. Work in Austin was plentiful, rents were low, and spending a year or two exploring Mexico or mapping a cave was an exciting option. A group of talented cavers had assembled around the University; they had their own table in the [student union] dining room (Chuckwagon) where they met to plan trips and socialize.

Caving was new and we experimented with everything. Flashlights were too awkward, Coleman lanterns were large, hot, and delicate, but carbide lights were just right and could be mounted on a hardhat.

1 Vol 51.4, Fourth Quarter, 2005, published April, 2011; special issue edited by Carl Kunath and Jerry Atkinson.

At first most trips were north to the Gorman Falls area and surrounding counties; soon adventurous cavers realized there was great potential in West Texas. Edwards County with caves like the Devil’s Sinkhole, Dunbar, and Felton became a common objective. [. . .] It was great fun and we were hugely creative with our equipment, primitive though it now might seem. [...]

At the Carlsbad NSS convention in 1960, Texans discovered SRT [single rope technique], and the world changed. A vicious fight rocked the UT Grotto as the more conservative denounced the unsafe new methods. But the word was out: a small group could push the deepest caves then known; elaborate expeditions were no longer necessary.

Then we discovered Mexico. Cars, trucks, third class Mexican busses, and even trains rolled south with cavers and rope and the wonders increased: Palmito, Huitzmolotitla, Ventana Jabali, and Golondrinas. Texans became world-class cavers... (pp. 11-12)

What Bill described as an “all-caving all-the-time” lifestyle took its toll scholastically. Bill flunked out of the University of Texas [to scholastic probation] and, his educational deferment lost, got drafted. Not surprisingly, Bill didn’t let a little thing like the U.S. Army interrupt his caving. While stationed at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, he checked out a book on caving from the base library, contacted all those whose names appeared as having checked out the book, and voilà, an instant caving group. In addition, he continued work on the *Texas Cave Index*, sending results back to Austin.

Upon returning to Austin after his army enlistment, Bill plunged into a monumental half-century of caving in both Texas and Mexico...He was welcomed back into UT, changed his major to geography (presumably, a major impinging least on his caving) and graduated in January 1969.²

Gary O’Dell fleshes out the army episode and how William got back to Kentucky:

About 1958, he was drafted into the U.S. Army and was sent to Germany, a relatively easy posting since this was the period between the Korean War and Vietnam. Bill was stationed first at Baden Baden, where he

2 Philip Russell notes that graduation was accomplished with a little help from Philip’s savvy on bureaucratic paperwork, and through the grace of the powers that be in granting a waiver for the language courses that seemed to be an “insurmountable option.” The editor, a teacher of foreign language, notes that William was probably tone deaf . . . he could not sing a melody to save his life.

was assigned to the French army, and then transferred to Münchweiler, where he ran the post switchboard. While at Baden Baden, Bill made friends with another serviceman, Thomas R. Costello, and as their enlistments would be over at about the same time, they began to make plans as to what they would do when they returned to the states, something memorable to celebrate a return to civilian life. Given his enthusiasm for cave exploration, Bill had no trouble convincing Tom that some caving would be just the right thing to do.

Those rumors of Rockcastle caves had stuck in Bill's mind, and this became their destination. In the spring of 1960, during their last days in Germany, Bill purchased several of the USGS topographic maps for the area to assist in their investigation of the region. Since their expedition would, necessarily, be done on the cheap, they boxed up a lot of food into "CARE" packages which they mailed to post offices in the area, "in all the little towns." Discharged from the army, Bill and Tom were flown by the Army to New York, from where they took a series of buses that eventually deposited them in Mount Vernon in Rockcastle County. They stopped at the local post office, collected the food packages sent there, and started asking local residents about caves in the area. Fortunately, they were directed to the two persons who probably knew more about the caves in Rockcastle County than anyone else, John Lair and Richard Mullins, and the great adventure began!

Gerald Atkinson summarizes William's subsequent career, picking up where Philip left off:

After serving in the Army in Germany, [William] returned to the University of Texas at Austin to complete his degree in Geography in 1969, studying under J. Hoover Mackin and other prominent geologists at the university. He went on to successfully apply their teachings and methods to the science of speleology. William subsequently became a central figure in caving, cave exploration, and cave science in Texas and Mexico—a role he maintained for over 60 years, while helping preserve cave and karst resources, and water quality in the Austin, Texas region.

William was a renaissance man amongst cavers during the Golden Age of Texas caving – knowledgeable in a variety of topics including geology, geomorphology, speleogenesis, biology, and meteorology. He was a prolific writer (but terrible speller) who authored over 200 articles and publications on cave science, philosophy, and cave descriptions beginning in 1959. He was a dedicated cave surveyor and drafted several hundred cave maps over the decades. William was a

renowned authority on the caves and speleology of Texas and Mexico, and through his writings and instruction, provided a singular source of inspiration and energy to Texas and Mexican caving which served to instruct and guide generations of cavers.

In 1955, at the ripe age of 17 years, William joined the relatively new University of Texas Speleological Society (UTSS), an affiliation he was to maintain for the rest of his life. In early 1960, William, along with James Reddell, Ruben M. "Bud" Frank, and A. Richard Smith, formed the Texas Speleological Survey (TSS), and he subsequently edited or co-edited several TSS publications. He was a Director of the organization from its inception until his death.

After participating in the first exploration of the Tequila, Veracruz area karst of southern Mexico in late 1962, William, along with T.R. Evans, James Reddell, and Terry Raines, founded the Speleological Survey of Mexico which would later become the Association for Mexican Cave Studies (AMCS). William conceived, initiated, and acted as editor and publisher of the early *AMCS Activities Newsletter*, and co-edited the *Caves of the Inter-American Highway* in 1967—the first comprehensive compilation of the caves of northern Mexico.

In the early 1970s, William realized his greatest passion in caving: digging in small caves. Over the next three decades, he unearthed countless caves in and around the greater Austin region, many of which became significant sites for the study of the Edwards Aquifer. William described himself as a "claustrophiliac." I personally thought of him as part of the "mole patrol," happily scuttling about in tight little tunnels, occasionally popping his head up from underground. In 2004, William described to me his philosophy of cave digging as:

In underground exploration, speed varies from large walking cave passage where one might, in the best case, explore at 2500 feet per hour; to tunneling through rock at a foot an hour or less. While running down a borehole is more exciting than digging, it is not anywhere near 2500 times as exciting. I think the peak excitement per foot for any type of caving is in digging through passages just somewhat too small to traverse, but where you can see ahead to obstructions. And the peak excitement per foot for the average cave visit is in a nice-sized crawlway. Thus there are several Travis County caves (like Airman's Cave) that are among the most exciting caves per foot in the world to explore. Eat your heart out, Huautla. (cited in Carl Kunath, *50 Years of Texas Caving* [2006], 351)

Most folks who knew William in his later life don't realize he was on the forefront of early vertical caving in both Texas and

Mexico. In Helms West Well near El Paso, Bill Cuddington illustrated the benefits of SRT to the UTSS cavers in 1960 when he rigged and bottomed the cave (-96m) while William and others were still rigging up their cable ladders. The fire had been lit, and William and the other UTSS cavers went on to become ardent followers of the new technique. William was the first to bottom one of Texas's deepest caves, Plateau Cave (-104m, Culberson Co.), and he participated in the early exploration and survey of H.T. Miers Cave, Langtry Lead Cave, 400 Foot Cave, Emerald Sink, and Langtry Quarry Cave—some of the deepest Texas caves to this day.

For his many contributions to caving, the National Speleological Society has honored William by awarding him the Certificate of Merit and also naming him a Fellow of the Society in 1968 and made him an Honorary Member in 1998 [one of the two highest awards given by the NSS].

Sadly, in February 2010, William suffered a massive stroke that left him physically impaired [on the left side]. He continued caving at a somewhat slower pace for some time and regularly attended grotto meetings, caving events, and participated on the Board of the Texas Speleological Survey. It was largely due to William's generous donation of both his land near Georgetown, Texas, in 2016, and substantial monetary gifts that allowed the Texas Speleological Survey and Texas Cave Management Association to collectively establish the new Texas Speleological Center in south Austin.

William provided a singular source of inspiration and energy to Texas and Mexican caving which has served to instruct and guide generations of cavers. Sometimes controversial in his views but always respected and sought for his opinions, William was an exceptional individual who made immeasurable contributions to both speleology and the general caving fraternity.

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