

Sandra Renstrom Deal

22 November 1941 – 10 October 1983, 41, NSS 7945

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Carl Kunath, Dale Pate and Dwight Deal, 31 January 2020*



Sandy Deal in Terlingua, Texas, 1982.
By Dwight Deal.

Sandra (Sandy) Renstrom Deal was a musically and mathematically gifted woman. She was an enthusiastic cave explorer and surveyor, a talented artist and performer, and provided many hours of entertainment around campfires and in caver camps. Sandy was a member of the Sandia, Paisano, UT Grottos, AMCS and CRF. She was secretary/treasurer of the SW Region of NSS in 1965 and 1966. She visited many caves in New Mexico, Texas, Tennessee, Kentucky, West Virginia, Alabama, Indiana, Arizona, California and Mexico. A strong rock climber and vertical caver, most of her exploration and survey contributions were in the Guadalupe (the most significant being Hell's Below, Madonna, Sentinel, and McKittrick Hill). Sandy and her husband, Dwight Deal, lived in Austin in the early 1970s, where Sandy was an enthusiastic member of the GLG (the all-woman God's Little Grotto). Her Texas caving was mostly in the Trans-Pecos and Carta Valley. She surveyed Bat Cave in Carlsbad Caverns with her 6-month-old daughter, Tara, strapped to her back. She also contributed to exploration in Jewel and Flint-Mammoth Caves. On an AMCS trip to Mexico in 1968, emerging first up from the 80 m entrance drop from Sótano del Tigre in the Sierra de El Abra, she found the tigre looking at her from only a few feet away. The jaguar fortunately decided to flee from this emerging apparition, as Sandy was very vulnerable, still on rope at the lip of the drop. She spent a week backpacking with Dwight and John and Meri Fish, locating and surveying caves in the vicinity of Sótano de las Golondrinas and Aquisión, Mexico.



Sandy Deal, Onyx Cave, Arizona, September 1964.
By Dwight Deal.

She was born Sandra G. Renstrom in Orange County, Texas on 22 November 1941, to Geraldine C. Gunn (nurse) and Richard R. Renstrom (sailor in the Merchant Marine). She was an infant in South Austin while her father obtained a chemical engineering degree at UT. They lived a block east of Congress Avenue just south of the bridge.

Her family moved to Los Alamos, New Mexico, where her father was employed by the national lab. She attended local schools and in the 5th grade began performing in the school theater (and later in the Los Alamos Little Theater). Sandy learned to ski and figure skate, played violin in the Los Alamos Civic Symphony with her father and sister, and was fascinated by the Native American cultures of the Southwest. She became an accomplished thespian and continued to perform (both theater and modern dance) throughout her life in civic and university productions. As a teenager, Sandy joined the CAP (Civil Air Patrol).

On 4 December 1961 the Albuquerque Journal ran an article “Associations, CAP, fly [Christmas] Seals to TB Hospital” in Fort Stanton. “Packages of Seals and Christmas cards were given to the pilots—Preston Simms, Santa Fe, and Sandra Renstrom, Los Alamos, by George Jenks...” By the time she married her husband Dwight in 1965, she held the rank of Major in the CAP.

When Sandy began attending the University of New Mexico (UNM) in 1962, she applied her classical music training to folk music and performed on many occasions for student groups and in other local venues. On 29 October 1963, the Albuquerque Tribune ran an article about a UNM “Studen’anny,” or student folk singing event, featuring a trio, “The Fenceriders.” Sandy was pictured playing a guitar and singing.

Harvey DuChene first heard her in 1963 and wrote: “I was in awe of her musical ability and incredible singing voice. It was deep, full and strong and reminded me a little of a famous gospel and folk singer named Odetta.” When she later lived in West Texas, Sandy had a country-western band, *The Desert Willow*, which performed around the area and accompanied her voice with guitar, banjo, and fiddle. During the times she spent in the Black Hills of South Dakota, Jan Conn coached Sandy on how to improve her classical guitar technique. When she died, she was experimenting with jazz violin.

She met Dwight Deal, caver and geologist, at UNM in Albuquerque. Sandy learned administrative skills managing NASA grant funds for the Physics Department at UNM. They were married on 25 May 1965 in Silver City, Grant County, New Mexico. They were both highly regarded cavers and climbers. She perfected her graphic art skills while in Albuquerque, drafting cave maps and preparing technical illustrations for geology graduate students. Later, in 1971 and 1972, she was employed by the North Dakota Geological Survey preparing complex geologic maps and illustrations for publications of the Survey while Dwight completed his PhD at the University of North Dakota.

Sandy was also an excellent writer and editor, assisting Dotty Willis in the production of the *Southwestern Caver* in Albuquerque in the 1960s. Her good friend John Cooper was editing the *Baltimore Grotto News* (BGN), arguably the most literate of the caver publications at the time. Sandy created the notorious 1965 *Southwestern Caver* April Fool spoof issue, which masqueraded as the BGN.

Sandy and Dwight moved to Alpine, Texas, in 1967, where Dwight initially taught at Sul Ross State University. He was one of the founders of the Chihuahuan Desert Research Institute (CDRI) and their first General Manager. Their children, Craig and Tara Deal, were both born in Alpine. Sandy raised the children the Hopi way, with minimal corporal punishment and a lot of love and acceptance.



Sandy (37), Tara (5) and Craig (7) in the Lower Canyons of Texas, July 1979.
By Dwight Deal.

Sandy was the Office Manager for CDRI in Alpine from 1974 to 1982. She was the glue that held the largely volunteer organization together during its formative years. Her business skills were applied assisting Dwight in building his consulting geology business, *Geofactors*.

Sandy was a committed volunteer ski patrolman working at Sandia Peak (Albuquerque) and Sierra Blanca (now Ski Apache, Ruidoso, New Mexico). She remained qualified at the latter for years by skiing and working the required one-half of the weekend days that the ski area was open each season, usually 21-24 days, all the while living in Alpine (a 7-hour drive from Ruidoso). That's also why both her kids are such good skiers. She had them on skis from the time they could walk.

There are numerous trip reports including Sandy, Dwight, their kids and dogs in *The Texas Caver*. Ron Fieseler remembers that, "I just hung out with the Deals, went caving with them, and river running with Dwight. I also worked with Dwight in the Natural Areas Survey days [1970s]. We co-authored a couple of cave chapters in the Survey reports. Sandy was managing the CDRI office and taking care of the kids. I visited their home a few times as I passed through Alpine. I even buzzed their home one time in a Cessna 172, which delighted Dwight and Sandy, who flew their own 1952 Cessna 170."



A windblown Sandy Deal at the entrance of Big Mutha' Caverns, Texas. By Carl Kunath.

Sandy died at home on 10 October 1983. Just a few days before her death, Sandy and Dwight spoke with Tom Byrd of their plans for the family to spend a year or more in Oman while Dwight searched for water for the Sultan. They said that it was the one Arab country where a western woman could drive and wear shorts in public, and that their children could go to an English-language school. They described the beautiful landscapes and the potential for caves in Oman.

Sandy died tragically under confusing circumstances. Dwight found Sandy dead in the bathtub when he came home from work and errands. It appeared that she had drowned, but an autopsy revealed that she had a blunt force trauma to her head from multiple blows. Dwight was accused of her murder and arrested. A year and a half later he was acquitted and exonerated in a trial in Ft. Stockton, Texas. A doctor testified about a mentally disturbed neighbor who had threatened the Deals and other neighbors in September 1983. The doctor had called the sheriff's deputies, who disarmed the man. Sandy's closest friends in Alpine testified on behalf of Dwight. Both Sandy's sister and her mother said that they wouldn't be in court testifying in Dwight's favor if they thought he could have been responsible for Sandy's slaying. After the acquittal, Texas authorities marked the case "unsolved" and did not pursue charges against any other possible suspect.

Sandy's death was a huge trauma to Dwight, Craig and Tara, but they managed to live their lives successfully with critical support from Sandy's parents, sister, and the caving community. Carol and Dave Belski took the children into their home in Carlsbad, New Mexico, while the legal problems played out. Dwight found work at the WIPP site (Waste Isolation Pilot Plant), a repository for a peculiar kind of radioactive waste. He became the Geotechnical Manager for the project and pioneered a 10-year study of groundwater infiltration into the

underground excavations. For many years Dwight has led karst tours to SE Asia, China, the Balkans, and other international destinations with his second wife, Mary. They spend winters in Terlingua, where older locals remember Sandy.

Sandy enjoyed cavers as much as the caves themselves and shared a mutual embrace with the caving community. She described them to a friend as “a complex, diverse, complicated, sometimes wacky, group of individuals from all walks of life having an absolutely wonderful time doing unusual things in fascinating places”.

Everyone who knew Sandy misses her.



Sandy Deal at the August 1968
TSA meeting. By Carl Kunath.