

Harry Walker

Photos by Jim McLane.

Obituaries by Jim McLane and David Locklear.



I Remember Harry Walker
Jim McLane, NSS 14628,
Houston Texas

On December 16th, caver Harry M. Walker (NSS 9381) died in his sleep at home in Dickinson Texas. Harry had telephoned me about 6 months ago to express regrets that he couldn't manage to attend the Greater Houston Grotto meetings any more. He sounded very sharp on the phone. There was no evidence of the Alzheimer's disease the doctors said he had. The news of Harry's passing caused me to re-

fect on my long association with that remarkable man.

I first encountered Harry in the 1960s. I think the occasion was probably a gathering of cavers in Houston at the Villa Monterrey apartment of Tommy Knox, near the Gulf Freeway at the Monroe exit. That speleologically significant place was later torn down and the slab reused to build a hotel. Tommy worked nearby in the Clear Lake area for Lockheed. I remember that Tommy's coffee table held half of a really big cave pearl that he'd collected in Gruta del Palmito, Bustamante and sectioned on a rock saw to display the internal banding. Other local cavers who met at Tommy's place included Dewayne Dickey, Mike Connolly, Charles Fromen, and maybe Billy Campbell and Bill Sherborne.

There was a little caving club out in Clear Lake, the "Spelean Group" led by Ken Griffin. It was made up exclusively of employees of TRW, a NASA contractor. Once I encountered them camping in the Rio Sabinas canyon near Bustamante, roasting chestnuts on an open fire! There seemed to be very few active cavers in Houston during the 60's. Beginning in 1964 Charles Fromen, Mike Connolly and I regularly went on trips. In 1968 I was contacted by Don Broussard and David Honea, undergraduate physics students at the University of Houston. They wanted to visit a big Mexican pit so I took them down to Huitzmolilitla near Xilitla.

No large scale organized caving existed in Houston until Rice University PhD candidate Barry Beck persuaded the Rice Geology Department to sponsor a club. Barry also served as the "advisor" to a Boy Scout Explorer post. He took me along on trips with the Scouts so he could tell the parents there would be another "adult" present. Basically the Boy Scouts would subsidize Barry's caving. He would sell his blood to have spending money right before a trip so he often looked pale and anemic. Barry would borrow a big Chevy Carry-All truck from Rice, fill it with Explorer Scouts and we would go caving in Comal County. Sometimes if we made a trip without the boys, Barry's wife Patty would pack him a mayonnaise jar of alcoholic Mai Tai mixed drinks to help him recover after coming out of the caves. This was especially welcome in the cold winter! Gradually the Rice

Grotto began to attract some very enthusiastic cavers, including Paul Boyer, Louise Power, Jon Everage, Roger Moore and Harry Walker.

Since he was born in 1921, Harry was a lot older than everyone else, but he was enthusiastic, very physically fit, and his scientific credentials added an aura of respectability to our caving trips. Back then cavers had long hair and wore hippie attire so Harry really improved our appearance, which helped with public acceptance. I think he might have taken part in a Rice Grotto trip to Indian Creek Cave near Uvalde and he might also have gone on some of our trips to West Texas caves near Junction. I have some good photos of Harry and a visiting British caver out at the Valdina Farms sinkhole

Besides caving, he loved mountain climbing and white water canoeing and often persuaded cavers to accompany him on such trips. Charles Fromen made many expeditions with him. Harry didn't go in for too much high tech stuff and I seem to remember I was astonished to see photos of his pack on the summit of the Grand Tetons with the handle of a very heavy cast iron frying pan sticking out! One time Harry went on an expedition with friends into the Sierra Del Carmine in Mexico. This is a remote cluster of largely unexplored mountains south of Big Bend National Park. It's very rough country. They hired burros to carry water and one of the poor creatures fell off the mountain to its death.

Harry topped virtually all the major peaks in the lower 48 and even when he was in his 60's he climbed the Matterhorn in the Swiss Alps. Once he went to Alaska, hired a bush pilot to fly him into a remote area and scaled a mountain that nobody had ever been on just so he could apply to the US Geological Survey to name the place "Mount Dorothy" after his wife. He traveled to lots of interesting places, including a boat trip to Tierra del Fuego on the southern tip of South America.

Harry was a PhD scientist. In the 1980's there was a downturn in the oil and gas business and he "retired" from Monsanto in Texas City. He wrote a computer program that would run on a PC to predict the spread of a plume of gas if there were an accidental release in a refinery or petrochemical plant upset. This was a computationally intensive task and I remember he complained that his 386 computer (the fastest that one could buy back then) took a half a day of number crunching to generate the answers. Consulting on plume spread made Harry lots of money in his "retirement." He often consulted with the company where my wife worked "Applied Meteorology" and was good friends with the owner, the brilliant one-eyed weatherman "Book" Hathorn.

For many years Harry would enter climbing contests at the caver reunions and other get-togethers. He was always the oldest person climbing and consistently made respectable time. One year he showed up with a strange invention. He had mounted a jumbar on the top of an aluminum pole that extended upward from a harness up his back, perhaps three feet above his head. He thought this strange device would hold his body in a more natural upright position under the rope.

One memorable trip we made together (but in separate vehicles) occurred over the Thanksgiving holiday in 1971. The Rice grotto decided to go to Mexico. As the cavers made their way through Mexican customs, the group divided. The half that included Harry headed south to Horsetail Falls near Monterrey. The others drove over to the warm water cave, Gruta de Carrizal near the little town of Candela, 20 or so miles from Bustamante.

Days earlier, a couple of cavers and I had towed motorcycles into Mexico on a trailer behind a car. We headed for a place called Potrero Redondo in the mountains south of Monterrey. From where the pavement ended near Horsetail Falls, the



Harry Walker at the entrance of Valdina Farms Sinkhole, Medina County Texas in January 1975. Notice the Goldline nylon rope and carbide lamp.

route to Potrero Redondo was a rough, single lane dirt road with steep grades and one very deep river crossing - always worrisome on a motorcycle. The approach to the village offered a view of a beautiful waterfall cascading over a cliff and down into a deep canyon. Behind the waterfall was a water-filled

maze cave. The other Houston cavers arrived at Villa de Santiago (near Horsetail Falls) and Harry somehow hired an old open-top jeep. A large group squeezed into Harry's jeep. We met the Jeep near Potrero Redondo and split up to visit the local caves. The weather was great and we spent a couple more days in the area.

We arrived back at US customs in Laredo Sunday night and were shocked to hear that fellow Houston cavers had crossed the border earlier that day with the bodies of two of our friends who had drowned in Gruta de Carrizal.

Over Easter 1973 Charles Fromen, Mike Connolly and I became the first cavers to enter Cueva Brinco in the remote headwaters of the Rio Purificacion above Ciudad Victoria. We'd visited several caves on that trip, guided to entrances by local villagers. We were also told of a major cave entrance in a nearby canyon where a waterfall sometimes spewed out. Charles made plans to return and visit that place. Harry was with him in 1976 when cavers first climbed up into the mouth of Infiernillo, the huge entrance to the extensive network now called Sistema Purificacion, one of the greatest caves on earth. On a later visit to the area, Harry and Charles went with Austin cavers on an arduous through trip, entering Brinco and a day later (and nearly three thousand feet lower in elevation) exiting Infiernillo. This is very heavy-duty caving. A person has to squeeze through a tight spot named the "Crack of Doom" in the middle of the cave. Photos show Harry with most of his clothes removed, his face in an awful grimace, struggling to make it through that narrow place.

Harry remained an active caver, even into his later years. For example, he put on a wet suit and went on a trip through Honey Creek Cave at the age of 80.

I know very few details of Harry's life before he came to Texas. I heard that during WW2 he trained to fly B-24 bombers, but dodged being sent to the Pacific when he was injured diving into the ocean just before his crew and plane departed. He was one of the very first to get to explore the famous Kartchner Caverns in Southeastern Arizona. I think once he had been involved

in mining operations out west. He leaves behind his wife Dorothy in Dickinson Texas and a sister in Tucson Arizona. Harry raised a fine family, but none of his children or grandchildren became world class adventurers like him.

Harry was a significant part of my life for the last 40 years. I look forward to digitizing the thousands of photos I have from those decades. Many will bring back warm memories of an intelligent, lively gentleman who had a genuine, passionate interest in caves, not just an armchair caver, but a man who embraced the subject with remarkable enthusiasm, curiosity and energy.

From David Locklear:

I met Harry in 1989 at a Houston Grotto Meeting. He appeared to be in his late sixties, but he showed slide shows of recent caving trips to the Sierra Madres. I was very impressed with his slideshows and his enthusiasm. He was always inviting me to go on his trips, and I always had to turn him down, because I couldn't get off school or work, or it conflicted with going to the NSS Convention.

Harry and I did go to TCR a few times together, the last being the big flood at Chalk Bluff. And I tried my best to get him to go with me to the TCR, just a few months ago.

In 1998, Harry invited me on what would be his last attempt to complete all the 14'ers in Colorado. But he planned the trip during the Tennessee NSS Convention, which I was greatly looking forward to. I had to make a tough call, as I knew Harry was 70 something, and I would never again get the privilege of climbing with him. We tried Mt. Anterra, Greys Peak and Torrey's Peak. Harry would have made it to the top had he been with an experienced person, but I had never been mountain climbing and I was way too out of shape.

We later went rafting thru Brown's Canyon on the Arkansas River near Salado, Colorado.

Harry was flipped out at Snider's Suckhole and we thought he may have drowned. It was a very tense moment waiting for someone to find him and pull him out of the eddy like water.

Harry apparently started caving in the 1940's, back east somewhere. He had a low NSS number. I saw him climb rope at a vertical practice about 10 years ago, and he did fine. I think he has been into Purificacion. I know he climbed Pico Candela, and that inspired me to give it a try.

Harry's claim to fame is that he taught his nephew how to cave. His nephew moved to Arizona, and went caving with some other guy and found a little hole that they kept secret for many years called "Kartchner Caverns." I recall Harry talking excited about it back around 1991 or so. He also showed me the recent book, before I had seen it at the NSS Convention.

Harry became an important role model in my life and I looked to him for wisdom. He more than anybody else, was the caver that advised me to marry my current wife. Had he told me to run for the hills instead, I probably would have. And since I have an incredibly wonderful daughter, I can only tell Harry "thank you."

Harry based this judgement on at least 2 road-trips from Houston with my then-girlfriend. One to Carta Valley to go in a cave, and the other to at least one TCR (2000?) at Flat Creek Ranch.

Hurricane Ike was a stressful event for the Walkers. I think it really took a toll on Harry.. I have been out of work for a few months, and Harry paid me to work in his yard to clean up the debris left over by Hurricane Ike. It was a real mess and he really

(Continued on page 22)