



**Caves of Matehuala
and Casa Blanca, México**

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Front cover photo: Bill (Z) Miller in an entrance of Sumidero de Matehuala,
San Luis Potosí, by Joe Sumbera, 1967

Caves of Matehuala and Casa Blanca, México

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Photographs by Joe Sumbera

Abstract

In 1967-1968, members of the Southwest Texas Grotto, San Marcos, explored caves in the Casa Blanca area, Nuevo León (Cueva de Casa Blanca and Cueva del Águila Dorada), and the Matehuala area, San Luis Potosí (Sumidero de Matehuala and Cueva de Matehuala). The latter cave was mapped, but was not published until now. The author's photographs from 1967 are included.

Resumen

En 1967-1968, miembros del Southwest Texas Grotto, San Marcos, exploraron cuevas en el área de Casa Blanca, Nuevo León (Cueva de Casa Blanca y Cueva del Águila Dorada), y el área de Matehuala, San Luis Potosí (Sumidero de Matehuala y Cueva de Matehuala). Esta última cueva fue topografiada, pero no publicada hasta ahora. Se incluyen las fotografías del autor de 1967.

Introduction

This article reveals some caving history from 1967-1968 by members of the Southwest Texas Grotto, Southwest Texas State University (now Texas State University), San Marcos. During a June 1-6, 1967, Mexico trip, we explored caves in the Casa Blanca area, Nuevo León, and the Matehuala area, San Luis Potosí.

Two trip reports about the discovery and exploration of the caves were published in *Mexican Caving of the Southwest Texas Grotto, 1966-1971* (Mike Walsh, ed., 1972). Because Bill Elliott recently digitized and restored my old slide photos of three caves, I include that information here.

We explored Sumidero de Matehuala, with multiple entrances about 2 km east of Matehuala. We also found Cueva de Matehuala, the focus of this article, about 20 km north of Matehuala; it is an important and interesting cave that we explored and

mapped in June, 1967 and September, 1968.

Many thanks to my SWT caving companions who helped me explore and survey Cueva de Matehuala, and shared the special camaraderie, excitement, and memories associated with these early Mexico cave trips: Miles Abernathy, Martha Burk, Sharon Cathey, Duane Faith, Ed Fomby, Jim (Jimmy) McIntire, and Bill (Z) Miller.

Matehuala Area, San Luis Potosí

The story of discovery and exploration of Cueva de Matehuala began on June 5, 1967. After exploring Sumidero de Matehuala (cover photo and figs. 2-6), Miles Abernathy, Duane Faith, Bill (Z) Miller, and I were led by a local caving group to a cave about 20 km north of town. Since there was no local name for the cave, we dubbed it "Cueva de

Matehuala” (area map, p. 4). The entrance was a small hole about 1 m in diameter, 3.7 m deep, and climbable, dropping into a passage 2.4 m wide and 3 m high. We explored perhaps 300 m of dry, dusty walking-size passage to an unclimbable 7.9-m deep pit (the top of the Corkscrew Series on the map). Since we did not have time on this trip for vertical exploration, we left the intriguing pit and promise of more cave for another adventure. Another phenomenon enticing us to return was the breeze blowing throughout the entire cave, especially in the restricted areas, and at times briskly out the entrance.

Another cave in the area is Cueva del Cochino, 7 km east of Matehuala, which was visited on September 22, 1974 by James Reddell, David McKenzie, and Suzanne Wiley. They collected a scutigermorph centipede and an argasid tick.

We have no surviving photos of Cueva de Matehuala. For a Mexican cave, Cueva de Matehuala is moderate in length and depth. The cave’s surveyed length is 563 m, the depth is 166 m, but with 12 levels (map, p. 8). The limestone cave was thought to be unusual because Nuevo León, to the north, was noted for gypsum caves. But, there are no gypsum outcrops in the Matehuala area. Bill Elliott and I examined an INEGI geologic map for that area, and it shows outcrops of “caliza-lutita” (limestone-shale), but no “yeso” (gypsum). The local surface rocks may be alluvium and shaly limestone, but no mapped gypsum.

At times wind blows out the entrance, especially when breezy on the surface. From an inconspicuous and small-diameter, climbable entrance pit on a hill north of Matehuala, the main passage (345 m), is mostly walking-size, dry, and dusty with occasional stoopways, trending east past several junctions and dead-end crawlways. The “Main Route” slopes gently downward to ledges and numerous pits, the most notable being the Corkscrew Series (total 45 m deep). It continues under natural bridges and domes to its probable terminus in the breakdown-floored Bat Room. The climbdowns and pitches total 162 of the 166-m depth of the cave, and the floor between pits generally slopes slightly downward. The cave may be a bit deeper than that because we lack slope data.

Over a year later, September 1–2, 1968, Martha Burk, Sharon Cathey, Duane Faith, Ed Fomby, Jim

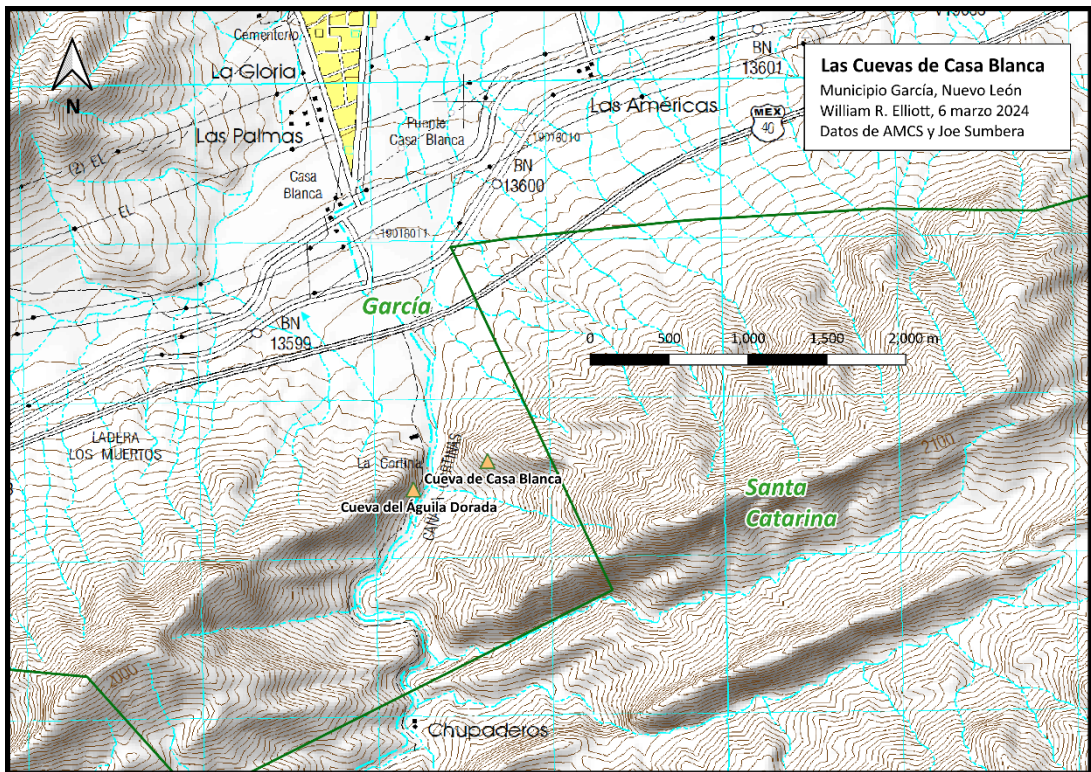
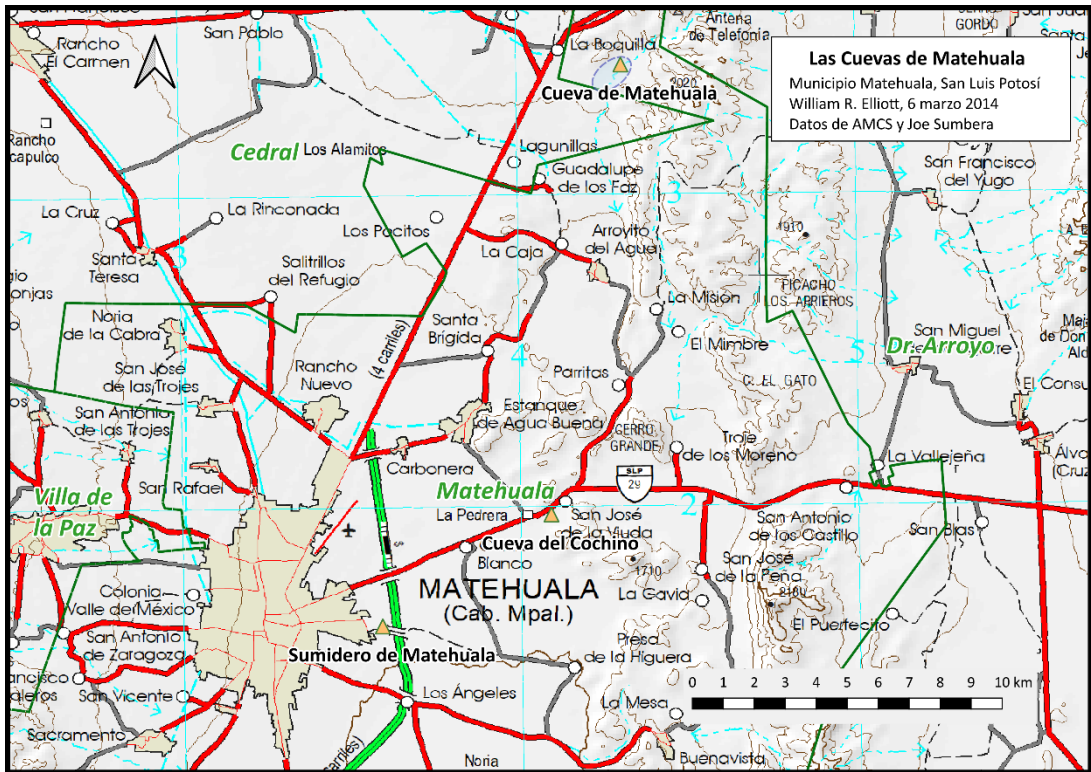
(Jimmy) McIntire, Bill (Z) Miller, and I returned to Cueva de Matehuala to resume exploration and start the survey. We reached the cave by driving about 20 km north of central Matehuala on Mexico Highway 57 to the first large hill to the east. Directly across from a police checkpoint, probably in the village of La Boquilla, there is a well-traveled dirt road, that wound around a fence then east up the hill. After traveling 1.6 km, we emerged on the other side of the hill, and were looking down on a village, probably Cruz de Elorza in the valley to the east. The small, inconspicuous cave entrance was just below this crest about 50–75 m on the right side of a very bad road.

Sunday evening, September 1, the whole group went into the cave. Some took pictures and explored (unfortunately those photos were eventually lost). Duane, Jimmy, and I started off mapping from the entrance. The entrance was climbable down 3.7 m into the entrance room. A walking-size passage, 2.4 m wide by 3 m high, led 30 m to the First Junction, which connected to the North Section. Straight ahead, the passage kept about the same dimensions as before, except for several duck-unders, leading 45 m to a right-hand passage ending in fill after 9 m. Beyond this side passage, the main passage continued 10 m to the Second Junction.

The left-hand passage at the Second Junction extended 11 m to a large Crevice Room and a westward trending passage, the North Section (183 m). This section is a series of passages ending in small rooms; it loops north and west to the Third Junction, and back to the First Junction near the entrance.

At the Second Junction a tight pit dropped 12 m. At the bottom the passage continued 35 m with a large breakdown slab on the left and a dome on the right. We then passed a left-hand, dead-in crawlway, and after 25 m we came to a climbable 7.6-m pit. At the bottom of the climbdown a fissure passage, 1.2 m wide by 8 m high, requiring some chimneying to negotiate, led to a 4-m ledge down to a 40-m drop. We rigged the pit and Ed descended about 25 m before we decided to save exploration and surveying of this passage for the next day.

On our return to the Second Junction, Ed decided to exit the cave while Duane, Jimmy, and I continued mapping into the Crevice Room, 5 m



wide by 10 m high by 30 m long. Squeezing through a tight pit 3 m deep in the west side of the room, we entered a walking-size passage that led over a 2.9-m crevice and 66 m to the Third Junction. To the right, a high fissure passage 0.6 m wide by 8–12 m high, led through a 26-m-long crawlway, ending in a small, low room with breakdown, then 36 m to a Joint Room, 3 m wide by 4 m high by 10 m long, which ended in fill. The fissure was so narrow in places that we had to survey up near the ceiling where the passage would sometimes bell out to 1–1.2 m wide. Returning to the Third Junction, we surveyed down the left-hand passage, which was 2 m wide by 4.5 m high, and after 25 m led back to the First Junction in the main passage. After mapping 360 m of dry, dusty, maze passage in six hours, three tired cavers emerged out into the cool plateau night about 8:00 pm.

Monday morning, Duane, Jimmy, David, Ed, and I re-entered the cave and proceeded directly to the pit we had rigged the previous day. Ed went down first while the other four started surveying. Going ahead for 12 m led to a 15.2-m blind pit. Three meters before the blind pit was a right turn (south) to a 7.9-m drop, the start of the Corkscrew Series on Levels 4 to 7. The pit is really four drops separated only by small breakdown slopes which corkscrew counter-clockwise under each other. The first drop is 7.9 m, the second drop 7.9 m, the third drop 12.2 m, and the fourth drop 12.8 m. At this point we were on Level 7 and headed east again. There is a final 4.6-m chimney to the bottom of the pit. The whole pit series is about 45 vertical meters, about 6 m in diameter, and is very dusty with much loose breakdown.

At the bottom of the Corkscrew Series a walking-size passage, 1.5 m wide by 3.5 m high, led 12 m to a 9.5-m pit and a 4-m climbable drop. At the bottom of this climbdown, a large passage, 3 m wide x 4–6 m high, led 41 m to another drop. The pit wasn't entered on this trip because we ran out of rope. Leaving our mapping gear at the pit, we headed out to get something to eat and more rope.

After eating a caver lunch of sardines and peaches, Sharon, Duane, Jimmy, and I went back in the cave about 1 pm. The rest of group investigated the hill for other caves, hoping to find another entrance. We made it to the last pit at Level 10 in less than an hour. Unable to find a natural tie-off, I

drove a piton for an anchor and Jimmy, using the rope as a hand line, descended the drop and reported another drop about 6 m deep. We rigged the pit quickly and the crew went down.

A walking-size passage, 1.5 m wide by 6 m high, led under a natural bridge (puente natural or puente de Dios) for 10 m to a 7.9-m pit to Level 11. At the bottom a steeply-sloping, walking passage led 33 m down several ledges to another deep pit. This drop was 15.2 m, and then it immediately dropped another 4.3 m (labeled 19.5 m on the map) into the largest room in the cave on Level 12, named the Bat Room for all the dried guano on the floor. The Bat Room is 9 m in diameter and 4 m high. The floor was covered with cemented breakdown, dust, and dry guano making the atmosphere in the room very unpleasant and unhealthy. We quickly checked for leads, and finding none, finished surveying and headed out. Two and a half hours later, after the usual rope retrieval, the four of us struggled out the now seemingly difficult entrance.

Checking our notes, we found that in two days and about 16 cave hours we had mapped 563 m of horizontal passage to a cave depth of 166 m (see map). The trend of the cave system and the hill under which it lies is west to east. For all practical purposes the cave is completely mapped and explored. The only lead left unchecked was what appears to be a passage leading from across the top of the 15.2-m (19.5-m) pit in Level 11. However, back then cavers in Matehuala indicated that the cave extends another 300 m deep! Perhaps Cueva de Matehuala has more secrets to discover and deserves another visit.

After our trip, I drafted a pencil plan of Cueva de Matehuala on orange grid paper. The incomplete pencil and ink drafts eventually were donated to AMCS, and languished in the AMCS flat files until 2020, where Bill Elliott found them. Bill and I collaborated to redraft the map in Walls and Adobe Illustrator, and I rewrote the cave description and reconstructed cross-sections. The project has been a challenge because no survey notes or photos still exist. Bill recreated the geometry of the cave in Walls by making a desktop survey of the draft, then he plotted a reconstructed profile. I am relying on a 57-year-old memory to flesh out the details of the map, and correct discrepancies in the cave description.

Regardless of the imperfections I hope that readers will find this interesting and useful. I suggest that modern cavers should photograph Cueva de Matehuala and study its biology and geology!

Casa Blanca Area, Municipio de García, Nuevo León

Prior to Matehuala we visited the Casa Blanca area on June 1-3, 1967. We were following up on a 1966 trip by John Fish and James Reddell.

On June 2, 1967, Miles Abernathy, Duane Faith, Bill (Z) Miller and I visited the canyon south of the village of Casa Blanca between Monterrey and Saltillo, Nuevo León, to find and explore two caves and rumored gypsum sinks east of there reported by John Fish and James Reddell (1966). Excerpts from their report:

“3 August [1966]. About 26 miles west of Monterrey on the Saltillo road, we stopped to locate one of F. Bonet's caves called Cueva de Casa Blanca. A crude sketch map is to be found on a wall of Restaurante Casa Blanca, and the map showed a large, horizontal cave. However, we found a different cave, Cueva del Águila Oro (Gold Eagle), in a canyon just south of the villa. This cave is reached by climbing a few hundred feet up a talus slope to a small opening leading to a 3 to 5 foot wide fissure choked with dust. A series of short climbable drops go down to about 100 feet [30 m] where further climbing without equipment was difficult because the fissure became narrower. A few minutes more searching did not reveal the entrance of C. de Casa Blanca, so we drove on to Matehuala. We turned east on the paved road to Doctor Arroyo to check out some rumored gypsum sinks. After a brief survey of the gypsum plains, we settled down beside a large gypsum sink for the night.”

“4 August. This morning we explored Sumidero de Matehuala, located about one mile east of Matehuala. One entrance sink 50 yards from the road is about 100 feet long, 40 feet wide, and 25 feet deep and has a 40 foot deep shaft, 10 by 15 feet, at one end leading to a series of rooms connected by small passages. Another sink 200 yards away

connects with the same cave. A small stream is encountered which soon siphons...”

Our SWT team visited the Casa Blanca restaurant, saw the cave map showing several rooms with cave location, and were told that it was up the canyon (fig. 7) about 1.5 km. We drove south-southeast up the canyon and camped across from Cueva del Águila Dorada. Details about this area are found in pp. 118-119 of Walsh (1972).

On June 2, 1967, we hiked up the road (figs. 8-10) to find Cueva de Casa Blanca. “The entrance to Casa Blanca is up the hill from an abandoned white guard house (fig. 11) and is partially obscured by small trees (figs. 12-14). The entrance was 10 ft. in height and 8 ft. in width [3 x 2.4 m] [fig. 15] and immediately dropped 15 ft. [4.6 m] [fig. 16]. We came back the next morning and explored it. Beyond the entrance drop there was another drop of 90 ft. [27 m] into a room 100 ft. long and 50 ft. wide [30 x 15 m] which had no leads.” I took photos of the entrance drop but unfortunately not inside the cave, and we didn't map the cave. Figure 17 shows the view from the entrance of Cueva de Casa Blanca up canyon towards Villa Casa Blanca.

In addition to finding and exploring Cueva de Casa Blanca, on June 3 we hiked up the talus slope to Cueva del Águila Dorado (figs. 18-21) “... that afternoon I went (rappelled) into Cueva del Águila Dorada and went down 100 ft. (30 m) where I ran out of rope. This crevice cave is quite dusty and narrow...”

Elliott and Sumbera have renamed “Cueva del Águila Oro” in proper Spanish as “Cueva del Águila Dorada.” Our SWT team found the cave in a canyon just south of the villa. Google Earth shows an opening or overhang on the west side of the canyon about 200 m above the canyon floor (area). This cave is reached by climbing up a talus slope to a small opening leading to a dusty fissure 1-1.5 m wide. A series of short climbable drops go down to about 30 m, where further climbing without equipment was difficult because the fissure became narrower (figs. 18-21).

The location of Cueva de Casa Blanca was retrieved from the cave invertebrate collections database at the University of Texas, courtesy of James Reddell and Bill Elliott. Peter Sprouse and Susie Lasko visited the cave on 25 November 1987, recording it as “Grutas de Casa Blanca.” They

collected a schizomid, a carabid beetle, and a ctenid spider. The coordinates were plotted by Elliott in QGIS at about 2200 m S of Casa Blanca, and applied in the Casa Blanca area map on p. 4.

Technical Note

The 1967 photos in this article were taken by Joe Sumbera with a simple camera using “super slide” film with an image area of 38 x 38 mm, and mounted in a 46 x 46 mm frame. These were scanned by Bill Elliott with a Plustek 8200i film scanner.

Literature Cited

Fish, John and James Reddell. 1966. Trip report, 2-19 August 1966, AMCS Newsletter. 2(1-6).
Mike Walsh, ed. 1972. *Mexican Caving of the Southwest Texas Grotto*, 1966–1971. 146 pp. Houston, Texas, available at <http://www.mexicancaves.org/>

List of Maps

Las Cuevas de Matehuala, SLP, p. 4
Las Cuevas de Casa Blanca, NL, p. 4
Cueva de Matehuala, p. 8

Photo Section

June 1967 photographs by Joe Sumbera. Figure 1 is the cover photo of Bill (Z) Miller in an entrance of Sumidero de Matchuala, San Luis Potosí.



Fig. 2. Miles Abernathy looking into one of several Sumidero de Matchuala sinkholes, San Luis Potosí.

Figure 3. Bill Miller looking into one of several Sumidero de Matchuala sinkholes.





Figure 4. Miles Abernathy rappelling into Sumidero de Matehuala; owner with hat looking into pit.



Figure 5. Joe Sumbera rappelling into Sumidero de Matehuala entrance



Figure 6. Entrance to Sumidero de Matehuala, San Luis Potosí.



Figure 7. View of canyon entrance looking north towards Villa Casa Blanca, Nuevo León.

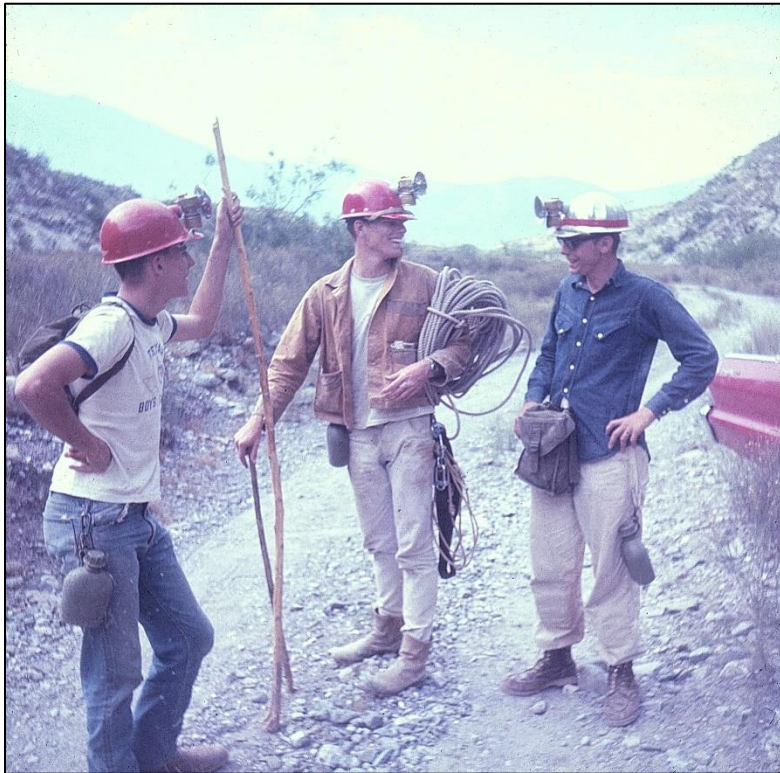


Figure 8. SWT covers left to right: Bill Miller, Duane Faith, and Miles Abernathy, Casa Blanca area.



Figure 9. Miles, Duane, and Bill hiking on road to find Cueva de Casa Blanca.



Figure 10. Miles, Duane, and Bill on a trail to Cueva de Casa Blanca.

Figure 11. Bill, Miles, and Duane in a dry arroyo with white guard house and pillar in view.



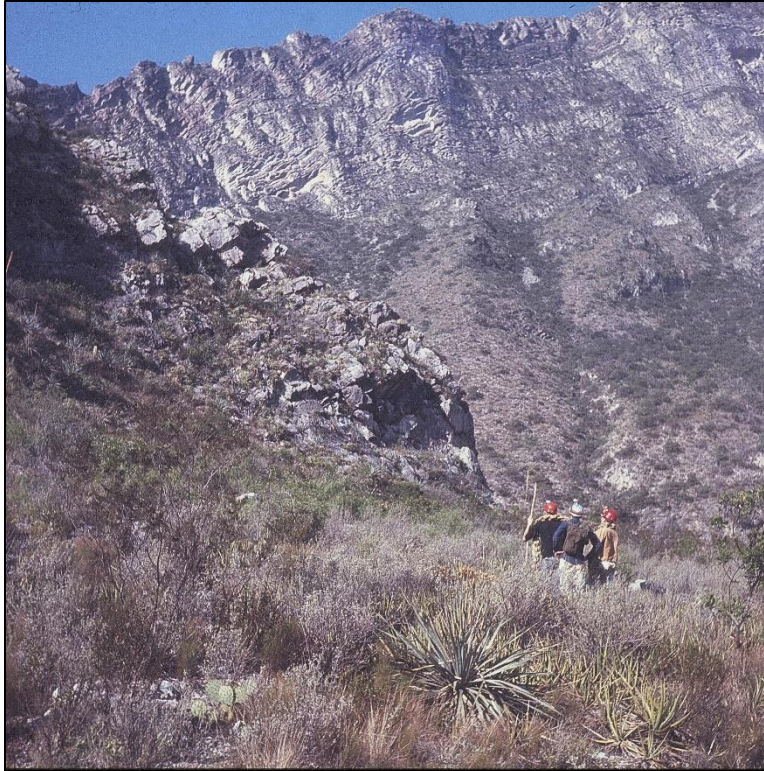


Figure 12. Bill, Miles, and Duane looking for route to Cueva de Casa Blanca.

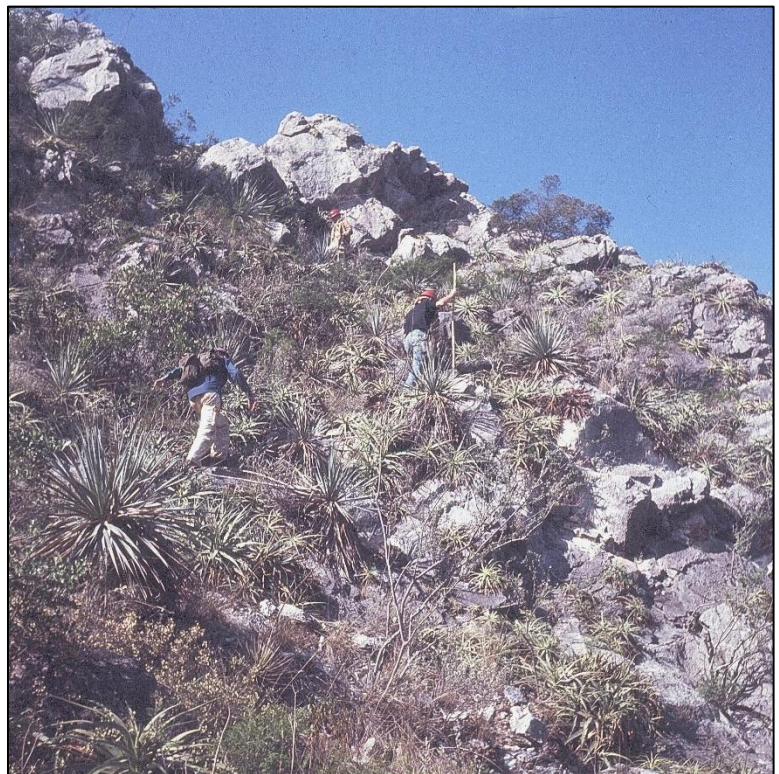


Figure 13. Duane, Bill, and Miles approaching entrance to Cueva de Casa Blanca.



Figure 14. Finally, the cave! With Duane looking into the entrance.



Figure 15. Duane looking down 15-foot (5 m) entrance drop.



Figure 16. Bill rappelling into Cueva de Casa Blanca with Duane in support.

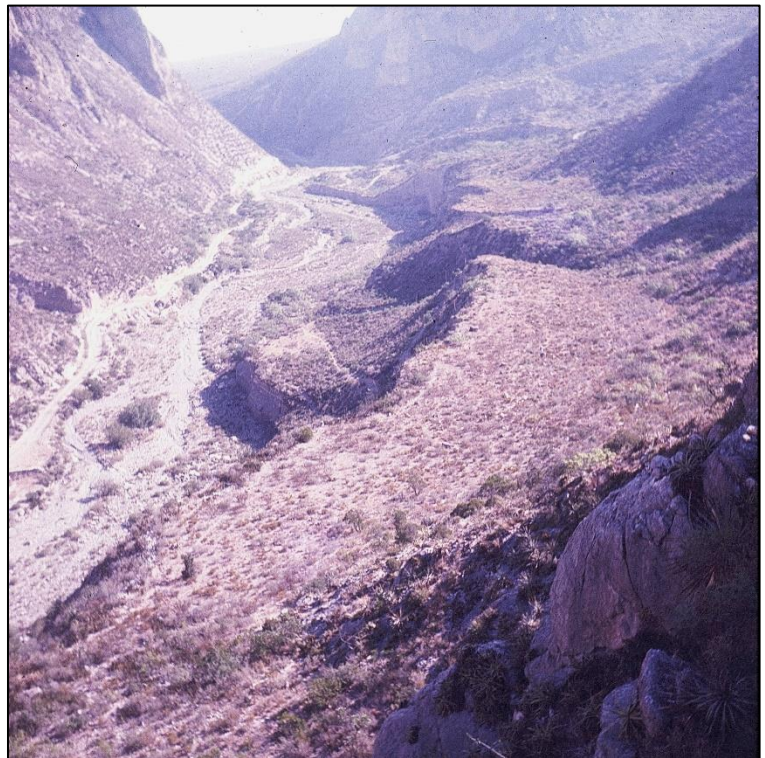


Figure 17. View of canyon entrance from Cueva de Casa Blanca entrance



Figure 18. Bill and Miles hiking up talus slope to Cueva del Águila Dorado .

Figure 19. Duane and Miles making traverse to Cueva del Águila Dorado.





Figure 20. Duane in front of Cueva del Águila Dorado entrance.

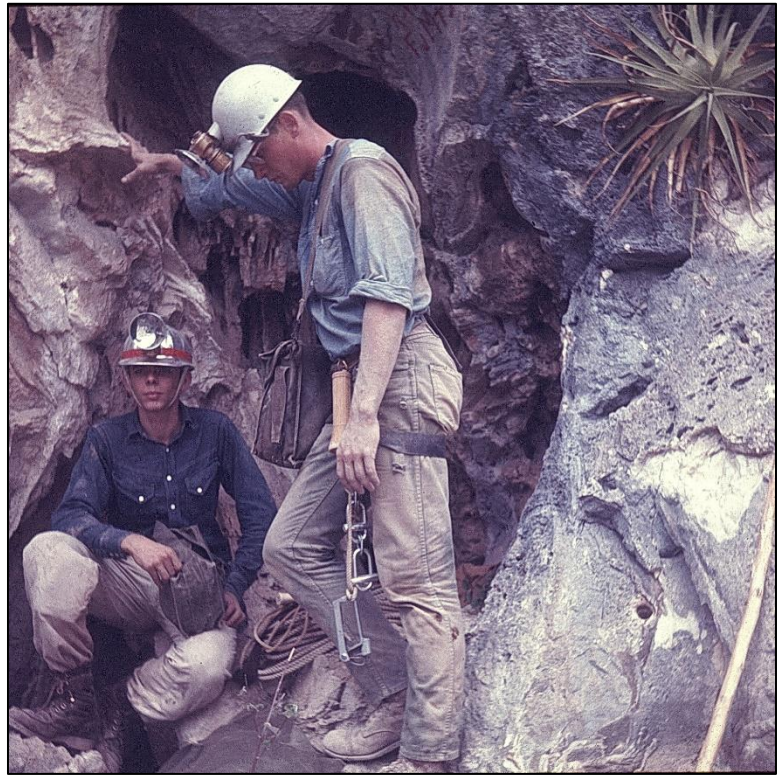


Figure 21. Miles with Joe at entrance after Joe exited Cueva del Águila Dorado.