

**6 June 2015 Binkley Cave Trip Report**  
**Coontown Survey & Push**  
**by Marion Akers and Dave Everton**  
**comments by Gary Roberson**

**Marion Akers report**

A group of eight gathered at Fredericks Café on Saturday morning: Dave Everton, Rand Heazlitt, Tim Pride, Shane Myles, Chris Parks, Braden Catt, Angel Chaidez, and I. We were all looking forward to the trip down the Coontown Passage, being an unknown area to most of the group. It had been explored more than 35 years ago, and we were told there were still leads. That fact alone should have raised the red flag...but we didn't worry too much. This trip was for seasoned cavers, so we knew we were in for some crawling and wet conditions. We had several goals: survey side leads off the Coontown Passage (spread out over various parts of the passage), and get to the terminus breakdown pile to check the potential of expanding the passage to keep going. At 11:00 AM, we were headed over to the entrance, located close to the Fairgrounds in Corydon.

Entering the cave around noon, in various wetsuit and caving clothing combinations, we were all having fun. The crawling began pretty quickly, and then the water, which was pleasant at first, being hot from the thick clothing. Dave looked at the entrance to the first couple of side leads that were partway into the Lake (stations in the 40s), then stopped at the third of three with his team Chris and Tim, and began to survey one of them. We stopped briefly with them, but got chilly and began to move on. We had already entered the Lake, and the long, low bathtub continued for a while. Then wet crawling resumed, with some stoop walking, and we meandered upstream for some time. I was having a terrible time with my kneepads, and had to mess with them a couple of times, much to my irritation. The passage had the drainage in the sometimes fragile middle shelves of black and gray, with the edges silted in mud. We passed the first of several wide, shallow waterfall areas, very beautiful and ethereal. We reached a standing area, with a high dome off of the passage. We had reached station 68-70, 70 being where Karla's dome was off to the left. We were drained from the long crawl, it taking more than three hours to get to this point. Both Shane and I pulled out our tea and stoves, and began heating water for tea; we needed it. We rearranged clothing, kneepads, donned extra shirts, etc, and then discussed the various leads mentioned in the notes. There was another lead mentioned in the notes in this area, but we didn't see it at the time, being underneath the canyon leading to Karla's dome, a low crawlway. We decided to continue onward. Rand and Shane were heading upstream to the terminus, drill and batteries included. Braden, Angel, and I would choose a side lead to survey. At 4:30 PM, we chose a lead right to the left of station 77, up over a shelf, which spread in two directions, and was going. The meandering passage was fairly low, covered in creamy mud from the floor to the ceiling, and had pools every so often. We surveyed for a bit, and the mud began to permeate our survey tools. Braden was point man, and picked up reading the instruments quickly. Angel followed with the Disto, and we slowly continued. The mud soon covered my book and I worked as hard to sketch as I did managing the mud. Meanwhile, Braden began to get excited when he found echoing blackness and a dome room, or so he thought a new dome room. Angel and I caught up with him, and we realized this was the main passage, where we had stopped to eat and have tea. We surveyed to a point in the room on a rock, close to Karla's dome, and I counted about 280-290 feet surveyed. We went back through the low crawl, and Braden checked out a side lead off of our lead. It went 40-50 feet before increasingly getting lower and tighter. Since it was on the inside of the loop, we knew it just tied back in. I decided that I had enough of survey and needed another break, and Angel agreed. We also were thinking of the two-man team at the terminus, another 30-40 stations down the passage. We rested, while I cleaned my gear in the clean water, restuffed my pack, and although tired already (expect for Braden), we continued upstream in the passage. Oh yeah, it

was mostly crawling and stoop walking, although at points it was quite beautiful, with the black manganese and chert shelving. We did encounter a section of walking passage, and it was nice, albeit short. We reached the terminus and turned back to get to the Railroad passage. Rand and Shane were coming out now, down the steep slope that leads from the Railroad Passage back to the main stream passage. They never did drill, but had reached the end, and didn't feel it feasible to begin a full dig. They were happy to see us, and handed off the drill and some batteries to relieve themselves of the weight. We grouped together again and began the trek out at around 8:30 PM, resting frequently as the realization set in of what we had yet to do. Let's just say it was close to torture, with pain erupting from various parts of my body, knees, neck, elbows, and knees again, as the crawling began. And I began to have heartburn, which really sucked, as I was constantly in a horizontal position. I seemed to be comparing this with Miller Cave and the long trek in there, and thought just because it was shorter, it would be easier. I was so wrong! It was pure suffering getting out of this cave (put a couple of expletives in the previous sentence and this about explains it). It just continued, although we weren't cold, and we finally made it through the Lake without incident. Slow and steady we went, expect for Braden and Shane, who powered out with the drill box in hand and batteries in their packs. Rand, Angel, and I turtled our way out, resting at points to ease our various pains and catch our breath. We did get out at 12:30 or so, and I was pretty happy to be upright. We accomplished a part of our goals, having surveyed enough footage to exceed 42 miles. Nice....but we decided it may not be worth digging further, although we did leave some leads unchecked. All in all, we had a great group, and much fun was had (really!). Everyone pushed hard and helped each other to find out what was down in Coontown.

### **Everton Report**

This date and destination had been established a few weeks earlier by Rand Hezlitt. The Coontown had for years been on the back of the minds of the newer ISS cavers as a somewhat mysterious place, but nobody seemed very fired up to go visit. It was one location which Tim McLain had wanted to eventually visit, but just didn't get to. The reports in Gary Roberson's book made it sound like somewhat of a grueling trip to make. However, after years of putting it off, it was finally decided to take a trip there.

Rand put out the invite and ten persons expressed willingness to participate. By the time trip day arrived, Joe Kinder had to back out due to illness, and Brad Barcom did as well, due to a shoulder reinjury or related problem, which in hindsight was a very wise decision. Eight team members showed up at Frederick's Café between 9:45 and 10:15 for breakfast. They were Rand, Shane Myles, Tim Pride, Angel Chaidez, Marion Akers, Braden Catt, Chris Parks, and me. Gary Roberson joined us for breakfast and afterward hung out with the gang at the vehicles as they prepared, then took a pre-trip photo, and waited until the last person (me) had entered the cave around 12:15 before heading off to work at Indiana Caverns.

Prior to the trip, some of us reviewed information in Gary's book in order to have an idea where some of the side passages were located. On trip day, the plan was to have two survey crews of three persons, and two persons to work the frontier. I had picked out an area to lead a survey crew, which was less than halfway toward the back. This area was supposed to have three side passages on the left within 870 feet of each other, located before reaching the Waterfall. As we were going upstream, I decided to look at the entrance to each passage in hopes of determining which appeared to be the best one to work on. We passed the first, which didn't look terrible, but continued on. Number two wasn't as appealing, but number three didn't look too bad. I figured we could make our way backward, if one by one they didn't pan out very well. I had earlier recruited Tim and Angel to be on my team, but when Chris seemed to be taking a bit longer to travel than some of the others, I felt he should join our crew. Angel willingly agreed to go further into the cave, so we made the assignment swap.

The entire group had quite a few laughs up to that point as we had travelled upstream. We good-naturedly poured a generous dose of teasing on Marion; some phrases which seemed to prompt a lot of laughter included “pot of tea,” “pot of coffee,” and “joint-controlled passage.” That’s about I’ll say about that! Nevertheless, the teams parted ways when three of us stayed and the other five continued upstream. We started the survey around 2:40, taking a line plot distance and azimuth in each direction of the main passage in hopes of establishing the exact location of our side passage, and then started into it with the survey. Several stations inside, I could still hear the other group’s talking, although I couldn’t really discern sloshing, which mystified me a little bit. Early on into our survey, I had one of those brief moments where panic tried to come on me due to difficulty breathing, but I just calmed myself down. I didn’t say anything about it to the others, since I thought it was perhaps just me, and nobody else had said anything.

The passage started out about two feet tall and continued that way, with shallow ponded water. The height gradually got a little bit bigger, and it wasn’t the worse of passages, although there was plenty of mud and slime. We were all cold, but suffered through it, and shot lengths were decent as we plugged away. Gary had informed us before the trip that we needed about 800 feet of survey to reach the 42-mile mark for the cave system. Although I didn’t want to subject us to torture in order to get that, I did want to give it my best effort for our team pulling our weight toward reaching that goal. Gary had celebrated his 68<sup>th</sup> birthday the day before, and I thought that would be a great present for him. Therefore, I was keeping track of survey totals page by page, which is more than I usually do, while trying to gauge our comfort (or discomfort) levels. It was around 6:15 or so when we decided to call it a day for surveying, having set 20 stations. Chris volunteered to do the post-trip recon after we set what we hope will be a permanent station, which was a cyalume stick stuffed horizontally into a mud pocket at ceiling level, and has a piece of flagging tape tied to it. I added up the survey amount while I waited for Chris and it came to nearly 650 feet. I was very, very pleased that the cave allowed us that amount of footage in a side passage, since one never knows how that will go. Chris returned from NTI (Next Trip Investment), and reported going perhaps another 100 feet, reaching a location that might require a larger person to dig some clay to continue. Here are his comments: *After 3-4 meanders and close to 100 feet, the stream went abruptly under the left wall. Lying on the passage floor, through the approximately 1 inch of airspace, I could see and hear the passage opened up on the other side of the wall. The passage ahead of me was filled with mud to the ceiling but there was space in the upper left corner where someone small (or someone with a shovel and motivation) could squeeze their way over the mud choke and rejoin the passage after about 15-20 feet. After passing the mud choke, I suspect the passage continues with similar dimensions -- about 2 feet high and 3-5 feet wide.*

Throughout the length of the survey, the gradient had essentially stayed pretty constant for a while, but later started gaining elevation in small increments of six inches to a foot. Although the passage is by no means miserable for Binkley Cave, I have no plans or expectation of returning to resume the survey.

While Chris was off reconning, Tim wanted a cigarette and headed toward his pack a short ways downstream, but when I mentioned minimal air flow in the passage heading in the same direction we had to travel, he agreed to wait until getting back to the main passage, and in hindsight I’m very grateful he did. On the way out, I was finding myself laboring to travel, having to stop often to try and catch my breath. Chris at one point finally made a comment about air quality, and by this time I’d already decided that it wasn’t just me. I have encountered various times in different caves and passages over the years when air quality wasn’t normal, and while I never felt we were in danger in this passage, nor have the effects ever been detrimental, it isn’t very much fun to deal with. When we finally got back to the main

passage, I was very happy to get back out to better air, although even before we had even entered the side passage, some of the group had extreme difficulty getting their lighters to work, even in the main passage which had great airflow heading downstream. I don't recall having an issue breathing all the way out.

By 7:00ish after a short break, we were heading downstream toward the entrance. Chris was moving the slowest of us three, and expressed minor concern about missing the climb up out of stream level near the entrance, so we periodically waited on him to catch up. Before going on this trip, I was figuring the hands and knees crawling of this passage was going to be much easier than some of the crawling sections of the old Miller, Black Shale Shelf, and Rand's Return River Ride sections toward Wilson Way elsewhere in the cave, but this Coontown section is in a class of its own. My shoulders were really talking to me on the way out. At one point, I slipped and lost my balance, falling on my upper right thigh below my hip. It hit a ledge; there had been a floor drop. Ouch!! I thought I'd get a pretty good bruise, and two days later there was no sign of one, but it sure showed up later in the week. By now, the tenderness is nearly gone. I arrived at the barrels to see it wasn't quite dark, but exiting was something of a pain in the rear! Unfortunately, I believe some poor salamanders were in the wrong place at the wrong time. I tried to toss them aside and past me, but there seemed to be many present. It was about 9:15 by the time all three of us had exited, for about a nine-hour trip. I was very pleased at the results of our trip, and very glad I'd chosen the closer destination, although I was nowhere near out of energy by any means. I walked over to the Fairground Spring, surprised not to see any flow, and washed up in the pool right outside the dam. I later heard from Gary that he and Rob discovered the water is no longer exiting there, which is the first time ever Gary has noticed or experienced this in his long history of the cave.

Excited that it would be a Beef O'Brady's night, the three of us rode over there in my Honda, where Gary met us and we enjoyed the wonderful post-trip meal. I had earlier made plans to hang out at the cave entrance until pretty late, and had even brought a lawn chair and six beers (not all for me) in the event it might be a while. For only the second time ever, I'd gotten the OMG burger at the restaurant, and I found myself stuffed, and therefore only drank one beer back at the Fairgrounds area. Gary, Tim, Chris, and I hung out and talked for quite a while about a variety of things, and eventually, lights were seen in the woods on the hillside. We went up to meet them and discovered it was Shane and Braden. They gave us the report on their activities, which had resulted in nearly 300 feet of survey, but included a dismal report on the frontier. They had drug the drill back there for nothing because it was unworkable. I was by now getting pretty tired, so after waiting a bit longer, Chris and I headed home. By the time the duo had exited, it was perhaps around 1:00, because we got back to my house about 2:45. I drove to Mitchell and he took over until reaching my house. I was very satisfied with the results of the trip, although of course somewhat disappointed with the report about the frontier. Regardless though, it is probably best that it wasn't a good report. Return trips would likely be very, very difficult; possibly as difficult (in a different way) than trips to upstream McLain River.

It had been yet another wonderful day underneath the sinkhole plain south of Corydon, and hitting the milestone of 42 miles surveyed for the cave is certainly a special treat. It was all in another day's work.

#### **Gary's post-trip comments**

**Sent:** Sunday, June 07, 2015 12:24 PM

**Subject:** Re: [indiana-speleo-survey] June 6th Coontown Trip

Hi ISS people, I just felt like I need to express a few thoughts after yesterday's Coontown trip.

As I stood at the barrel entrance last night after midnight and listened to the moans, sighs and grunts of each caver in turn trying to make the final climb out of the barrels, it almost brought tears to my eyes. I stood there in almost awe of what cavers will subject themselves to both physically and mentally to pursue the unknown. I wanted to be able to help take the pain and fatigue away.

From another perspective, I was kind of glad to hear that the Coontown trip wasn't a piece of cake and that us old timers weren't just wimps. On the other hand, I felt a strong kinship with everyone as they staggered up and out. It certainly reminded me of feelings that I had about 35 years ago after a long hard survey trip. Those thoughts were quite negative at the time; but they led to a major change of lifestyle and a much more productive future for me. A kind of short term pain that resulted in long term gain.

I hope that later today after some sleep and a little rest that all eight of you feel like it was worth the effort. While it appears that an upstream route towards New Middletown will never be found from this route, almost another 1,000 feet of survey and passing the 42 mile mark is a worthwhile accomplishment and you probably doubled the number of cavers ever to see the back of the Coontown.

Wishing you a restful Sunday night.