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Exploring the Caves of Carlisle

Jackie Turnquist

Thirty folks turned out for the Carlisle Historical Society's "Driving Tour of the Caves of Carlisle" on June 1. The tour was led by Mr. Bob Addis, president of the Northeastern Cave Conservancy (NCC), an organization which works to protect and study caves and karst areas. Mr. Addis describes himself as a "caver" since the early 1960s when he was still a high school student from Cobleskill. Carlisle is well known in the caving community for its many caves, and Carlisle holds the distinction of having the longest cave in the northeast.

Most cave entrances lie on private property and permission must be obtained before approaching those caves. However, part of the NCC's mission is to acquire land around caves in order to manage and protect the cave and the watersheds they affect, and these sites provide nice public hiking areas. Cautioning the audience that one should never enter a cave without the proper equipment and knowledge, Mr. Addis also described the two cave preserve locations in Carlisle that are owned and managed by the NCC and the NSS (National Speleological Society), which anyone is welcome to visit and explore around the surface. These were the sites he would introduce us to over the course of the next three hours.



Bob Addis discusses aspects of the McPhails Cave system, using the National Speleological Society display located in the parking lot of the McPhails Preserve.



Peering down into Ack's Shack at the McPhails Cave Preserve.



Impressive entrance of Sellecks Cave. All photos for this article were taken by CHS member Donna Walker.

Our first stop was at McPhails Cave Preserve on Lykers Road, which is owned by the NSS. This site has a display at the head of the path detailing the cave and its several openings as well as showing pictures taken from inside the cave system. The woodland path skirts a large field and the group saw a variety of wildflowers including white violets.

The McPhails Cave system is over seven miles long, which makes it the longest cave northeast of Pennsylvania and West Virginia. To enter the cave one must be lowered by a rope. Once inside, some parts of the cave system can be walked or crawled through, but much of the system requires scuba diving equipment. The preserve includes McPhail Hole, Ack's Shack, Hanor's Cave, Featherstonhaugh's Flop (surprisingly pronounced "Fenshaw") and Cave Disappointment pit entrances.

Our second stop was at Doc Shauls Spring on Barnerville Road. All the water from the Carlisle caves drain to this location. Professors and students from Cornell University visit the site every spring and track the drainage of the different Carlisle caves by putting dyes into the caves then returning a week later to find them in Doc Shauls Spring. The water at Doc Shauls has never frozen, and the water depth has been measured to at least 110 feet.

We had a brief stop on Wetsel Road to point out half-mile long Browns Depression, a large underground drainage area. A passage was found in the early 1990s, and the cave was named Barrack Zourie in honor of nearby Barrack Zourie Mountain. This site is privately owned and visitors are not allowed.

The final stop on our tour was the NCC's Sellecks Karst Preserve on Kniskern Road. There is a parking area and visitors are cautioned to stay off the field when walking to the woodland path. Both Levys and Sellecks Caves are located in the woods of this preserve. The opening to Sellecks Cave is quite remarkable; a vertical opening in the rocks in a sinkhole. Again, the 45 minute roundtrip walk included the opportunity to observe the peaceful natural setting.

Although the group never entered any caves, Mr. Addis was adept at describing the sights and conditions one would find upon entering any of the caves we visited. Walking the Sellecks Karst Preserve and McPhails Cave site is not only fascinating due to the cave entrances they harbor, but are a wonderful way to spend an afternoon, no matter what the season. In the spring, there are waterfalls flowing into many of the sinkholes, and these freeze in the winter. The group learned quite a bit about the caves of Carlisle as well as cave safety.

More information about the caves of Carlisle can be found in the book "History of the Town of Carlisle," which contains an extensive and informative 18-page article written by Chuck Porter of the NCC. This article details the history of the caves in Carlisle and includes many spectacular pictures of both inside and outside several of the caves. This book is for sale from the Carlisle Town Clerk, who can be reached at 234-3737 or from Ray Briggs, 234-3969. For more information about the NCC, check out their website: www.necaveconservancy.org. All the pictures for this article were taken by CHS member Donna Walker.

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