

Rock Climbers Reach Bottom of the Cave of the Winding Stairs

Two expeditions have attempted in recent months to complete the exploration of the mysterious Cave of the Winding Stairs in the Providence mountains of California.

This almost vertical cave was discovered by Jack Mitchell nearly 20 years ago, and he almost lost his life in an attempt to reach the bottom of it on a rope lowered from a windlass at the entrance.

Since the publication in 1941 of Edwin Corle's book *Desert Country*, in which the story of Mitchell's adventure was told in detail, interest in the exploration of this cavern has been revived.

A year ago John Scott Campbell, instructor at California Tech, undertook to measure the depth of the cave with radar. The attempt was unsuccessful due to the zig-zag formation of the cavern, and to the moisture at lower levels which has caused a heavy accumulation of dust on the rock surfaces. The dust absorbed the sound waves, making accurate readings impossible.

Later a party headed by Walter S. Chamberlin of California Tech and William R. Halliday representing the National Speleological society descended into the cave. This was purely a scientific expedition, and the results have not been made public.

More recently Pete Neeley, speleologist, teamed up with five rock climbers of the Sierra club—Clem Todd, Lee Lewis, Carlton Shay, Wayne Mann and Ruby Wacker—to prowl the subterranean depths. Their adventure was reported in a recent issue of *Mugelnoos*, publication of the Sierra club's Rock Climbing section.

Belayed on ropes from the surface, the climbers found that the cavity consisted alternately of narrow chimneys which they barely were able to squeeze through, and spacious chambers with ceilings as high as 50 feet. The descent

required all the skill of the expert rock climber.

Stalactites line much of the route, and when the rough walls closed in to form narrow chimneys the climbing was painful in places. The three members who finally reached the bottom returned to the surface with their clothes in shreds.

Based on the lengths of rope used, they estimated the depth of the cavern at 500 feet. The descent required 2½ hours, and the climb back to the surface 9½ hours.

They used carbide lamps, and extra carbide was lowered in the same knapsack with lunch. The sack would hang up on ledges and then fall long distances—with the result that the food became well seasoned with carbide and ammonia inhalant before it reached its destination deep in the hole.

At the bottom were four rooms with fantastic formations of stalactites, stalagmites and crystalline columns.

The climb out was made more difficult by the elasticity of the nylon rope they used. As one of the explorers exclaimed, "it gives one a frustrated feeling, like trying to swim up a waterfall."

Once during the ascent Carlton Shay's light went out, and that further complicated his difficulties.

Twenty years ago when Jack Mitchell was pulled out unconscious after spending two days in the cavern, he closed the entrance and turned his attention to the development of more accessible caverns. He built trails and guest accommodations and has provided scenic guide trips for thousands of visitors annually.

Recently he announced his desire to retire from active management of the caves, and a movement has been initiated to have the property taken over as a California state park. He has stated his willingness to relinquish the caves for park purposes.