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National Speleological Society

CAVES have always held an almost mystical fascination for the average human being to whom the word *cave* immediately brings to mind a mysterious, subterranean chamber whose exploration is fraught with danger in dark, narrow passageways, rock breakdown, underground streams, and attacks from all sorts of animals ranging from bears to bats. Partly as a result of this feeling and, paradoxically, partly as a means of dispelling some of the aforementioned misconceptions, the National Speleological Society was formed in 1941. It is a nonprofit organization interested in the study and exploration of caves and allied phenomena. Originally the N.S.S. consisted of a group of amateurs as far as the field of cave science was concerned but whose energies were devoted to unlocking the secrets of the underground world. When this group, filled with an enthusiasm that is still prevalent in the society today, attempted to obtain information concerning the location, topography, and flora and fauna of caves, they found that little information was available for caves of the United States. In contrast to the many contributions made to science by European speleologists, not much had been undertaken in this field in the United States apart from studies made in some of the commercial caves.

As a result of projects undertaken by the N.S.S. in the fields of cave mapping, mineralogy, archeology, and biology, scientists who specialized in these subjects were attracted to the society, so that at the present time approximately half of the almost 2000 individual and institutional members are men of science whose fields of study and research are related to speleology. The remainder of the membership is made up of persons who devote their leisure time to locating new caves, developing new techniques of exploration, and gathering data from both new and well-known caves. These data are registered on a comprehensive four-page cave field report that is forwarded to national headquarters in Washington and a duplicate is

retained for local files. In this manner, the society serves as a central agency for the collection, preservation, and publication of scientific, historical, and legendary information pertaining to speleology.

The affairs of the N.S.S. are controlled by a board of governors that appoints the national officers. These officers supervise the administrative and scientific functions of the society. Some of the more prominent activities now completed or under way include: (i) state surveys of caves with maps and descriptions of caves in Texas, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and West Virginia already published; (ii) a program of cave safety featuring lectures and articles on first aid, proper use of ropes, organization of expeditions, and underground communication; (iii) a cave conservation committee working vigorously for the preservation of the wildlife and geologic formations found in caves; (iv) continuation of a bat-banding program initiated to study the life-history and migration of bats.

The N.S.S. is divided on a regional basis into some 40 Grottoes whose members assume responsibility for all speleological activities in their area. This gives the individual member an opportunity to participate in expeditions studying larger caves that could never be explored by one or two persons. The experience gained from local studies is useful in large-scale expeditions, such as the recent week-long survey of Crystal Cave in Kentucky. All members receive the *N.S.S. News*, a monthly publication; *The American Caver*, an annual devoted to papers of a scientific nature; and *Occasional Papers*, a series of technical articles dealing with speleology.

The National Speleological Society has been fortunate in having men eminent in the fields of geology and natural history to act as its presidents. Currently the president is William E. Davies of the U.S. Geological Survey and author of *Caves of Maryland* and *Caves of West Virginia*.

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