

SPEECHES

APPROXIMATE TRANSCRIPT OF THE OPENING ADDRESS TO TROPICON

Paul Wilson.

When Les Pearson telephoned me asking me to be the opening speaker at the 1988 Caving Conference I was both flattered and honoured. The invitation was quite unexpected. It has given me the opportunity to return to the north, albeit briefly, and to renew very dear friendships.

In opening the conference let me, as a certified Queenslander, extend a warm Australian welcome to our overseas guests and an enthusiastic welcome to Queensland to our interstate visitors. To those, like myself, from elsewhere in the State, "glad you could make it - isn't it a relief to get away from Expo City", and to the locals, "it's great to be back in your lovely part of the world".

As I wasn't sure what the theme of my talk should be Les suggested that the early days of the Chillagoe Caving Club would be an appropriate topic, and so it is. If my account is a personal view I hope I shall be forgiven, as there are many stories other than mine. In a sense the club was in existence before I ever arrived in Chillagoe as there has been regular local caving activity since 1890. For me, arriving in Chillagoe in December 1972 to begin work as a labourer for the Forestry Department was the end of an overland trek from England. I never thought that I would stay for nearly four years.

Pat Kinnear used to talk about "the cavers from Cairns" and I met many of them when Alan Cummins, Tom Robinson and Les Pearson, arrived in town with a mob of Venturer Scouts. I was only the catalyst, as I had been on caving club committees in the U.K. and knew what needed to be done. We quickly started talking about the possibilities, with the younger local cavers supplying enthusiasm, and the Kinnears adding wisdom and respectability.

The original philosophy, which appears to have endured, was to keep the bureaucracy to a minimum, make the paperwork as efficient as possible, keep the annual subscription low and get on with the caving. We organized a public meeting in the Chillagoe Hall, formed the club, chose a nice simple name, elected Vince Kinnear as President, myself as Secretary/Treasurer and went caving.

The years 1973 and 1974 were the most formative. We bought some ladders and nylon rope and taught most of the members the basics of tackling pitches and proper belaying. We taught ourselves surveying and mapping and embarked on a programme of identifying and tagging all the known caves. This project, which was to take a further two years, was a legacy of the 1968 visit to Chillagoe of the Sydney Speleological Society. The SSS

had left behind a map, with all the "known" caves on it, and a large bunch of orphan aluminium cave tags.

The tagging project developed into the current register of caves at Chillagoe and the Mitchell-Palmer, which has been so magnificently prepared by the club under the umbrella of the Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service.

In those early days we enjoyed very many amusing incidents of which one of the most funny was the day we learnt the art of digging. Having mapped much of the Queenslander we knew that there was more to be found in the area, and we were starting to map Cathedral Cave. Having done much digging in Yorkshire and South Wales, silted up phreatic tubes were just my thing and I started to dig into a likely one. Ralph Page thought this was highly amusing, and sat and passed appropriate cynical comment - until I got a strong draught - in fact a wind. Then Ralph and a few others joined in - until Ralph became stuck in the hole.

Came a distant muffled voice, "What do I do now?"

"Take off your helmet", was the reply. This was accompanied by gestures to the others and to Ralph's ankles. "Now dig the helmet into the soil in front of your face". "Grip the helmet tightly", and with that, we pulled Ralph's ankles bringing him and half the tunnel with him. When we saw Ralph's face and the state of his helmet everyone collapsed in a heap. Within half an hour we were standing in the Queenslander.

One of the most interesting systems at Chillagoe is Christmas Pot, and an exchange through trip on SRT is thoroughly recommended. The cave is unusual for Chillagoe because all entrances are vertical and it had an undived sump at the end.

One September day Vince stopped the Forestry Landrover next to what is now called Suicide (after Suicide Bend in the Mungana road - now removed). Graeme Hawkins and I groveled around in a four layer wedding cake type of a thing at the west side of the bluff until Vince headed off for the top of the bluff, and we followed. Vince sat down on the peak of the bluff while we wandered around until we found a large black rift with a cold wind coming out of it. "Jeepers, Vince, come and look at this!", but the smile on Vince's face indicated he knew the cave was there all the time.

The Christmas visit of The Cavers generated much interest and so we set off with our new ladders, ropes and the borrowed Forestry ladders. By the rift there was

considerable debate as to the depth of the hole, and eventually we clipped on 3 25 foot sections and I elected to go down first. The rift opened into a roomy vertical cavern that just swallowed my light, and the ladder had an ominous swing to it. At about 40 feet down it was clear that the ladder was nowhere near the bottom. Back to the top and on went our last section. This time Ricky Hipworth had a turn and made it to the ledge at about 100 feet down. The bottom of the rift turned out to be another ladder length down but we climbed it on a hand line. That was probably the best day's caving any of us had in the early days, but it was another year before Suicide had yielded most of its secrets.

If there was a point at which The Chillagoe Caving Club became respectable it was at the 1974 ASF conference at The University of Queensland. There were two Chillagoe delegates, Tom Robinson and myself, and we managed to persuade many other delegates to pay us a visit. The club benefited enormously from the contacts we made, and has gone from strength to strength.

I should like to finish with a change of mood, by paying my respects to two people who ought to be here, and are sadly missed. Pat Kinnear was a fount of wisdom in Chillagoe and was popular with all the visiting cavers. A visitor in January 1975 on his first trip to Chillagoe was Joe Jennings, and the visit altered his perception of tropical karst, but not so much as it altered mine. Joe quickly became known in the top pub as 'The Professor', and he was accompanied by one of his students, Joyce Lundberg. We spent a week exploring and in animated discussion about the formation of the caves, a discussion which continued through correspondence and papers.

Caving in the far north is different, exciting, and great fun. I am sure that this conference and the subsequent field trips will live up to the expectations of all the visitors. Welcome to everybody, and good caving.

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