

A REMARKABLE VISION

Looking Back at the Australian Speleological Federation

Elery Hamilton-Smith

Beginnings

Inevitably, this paper has to tread the narrow line between the proper recounting of a story in which I have played some part, and self-indulgent nostalgia. But to simply tell the story might just be a dry-as-dust account of arguments over constitutional questions and the proper role of the organisation. Nostalgia deals with the real stuff of organisational life and so I trust I will be excused for any self-indulgence or bias in my version of the story.

I guess it all started with a trip to Yarrangobilly by Brian O'Brien and Fred Stewart of the Sydney Speleological Society in December 1953. Their trip report, in somewhat laconic style, says, 'We explored in the Western Deep Creek Cave for about half an hour, and intended to be in the Eastern Cave for a similar time, but here an untoward incident occurred which forced us to postpone the remainder of the trip.

This is not the place to detail that incident, but in short, as they were leaving the cave, Fred went back to camp, but Brian stayed behind to just have a look at another section of the cave, became lost, and ran out of light. On realising he was missing, Fred notified Bruce Head, then manager of the caves and the police were called. After a cursory look in the cave, they decided that Brian must have become lost in the bush on his way back to camp and thereafter focussed their efforts on a bush search. Fred then called other members of the Sydney University Speleological Society, who all rushed to Yarrangobilly to join in the search. An item on the ABC news alerted others, and over sixty cavers gathered to join in the long search. After 74 hours, Brian was found, in surprisingly good shape, by a group from Canberra and walked out of the cave with them.

Apart from Brian's survival, one of the most interesting long-term outcomes was that this incident brought to light the fact that there were in fact a number of informal groups going caving. In turn, this led to discussions about cooperation, particularly recognising the need for some sort of coordinated approach to safety and rescue. So, sometime in 1954, a letter, signed by both Brian as President of the Sydney University Speleological Society and Ben Nurse as president of the Sydney Speleological Society was sent off to caving groups in Cooma, Canberra, Hobart, Mt Isa, Orange and Adelaide.

The letter was received in Adelaide, and was duly discussed by the committee of the Cave Exploration Group of South Australia. The late Alan Hill, who was secretary of the Group had a new-found and passionate patriotism to South Australia rivalled only by his similarly passionate patriotism to his home town - Sydney. I recall very clearly his response: "We can't leave it to those bastards from Sydney; they think Sydney should run everything; tell them we'll convene a first conference!". So, in due course, an invitation was mailed off - and to our amazement it was accepted, virtually by return mail.

Planning got under way, with an initial proposal to hold the first conference in Koonalda Cave. Reason prevailed, and so it was decided that the conference would be held in or near Adelaide, with a field trip to the Nullarbor.

The Inaugural Conference

Looking back now, I am amazed that the first conference and field trips really happened more or less as planned. It was a truly mammoth undertaking, as it involved a conference with attendance from every state and several international wanderers; a Nullarbor expedition of 62 people and a Kelly Hill Expedition of some 20 people. All of this took place in a world where all cavers were poor and few owned a car; hitch-hiking to caving areas was common; those cars that were owned went on grossly overcrowded journeys and often broke down; after all, some of them were over 30 years old.

I well recall hitching all around Australia to 'sell' the conference and the Nullarbor Expedition. Because of the formidable logistics of a Nullarbor expedition in those days, we had to plan well ahead, and by the beginning of April 1956 we had 62 people committed to and signed up for the expedition; there were changes as the months went on, but on the 28th December when the trucks rolled out at 4.00 am., there were 62 on board! I also recall falling asleep as we drive out the gate of the conference centre and not waking until we reached Kyancutta that night.

The Conference was held at the Parnanga National Fitness Council camp and although it was a bit hard to keep track of attendance, with both full-time attendees and day visitors, the total was probably some 130 people. The formal business of the conference was simply a very protracted discussion of what the Federation should be and what it should do. The possibility of a national society was considered and rejected in favour of a federal structure. A draft constitution was shaped by the meeting, the first office-bearers were elected (President, Secretary, Treasurer and Librarian), and a second conference was set down to be held in Hobart. Issues of safety standards, search and rescue organisation, and setting standards for maps and reports were all canvassed, although at that time, the only action on these matters was to establish a safety code committee.

But in spite of the usual wrangling about constitutional niceties, the first conference was certainly distinguished by a sense of fun, unity and fellowship.

The Nullarbor expedition provided a particularly memorable event. Three groups of 19 people each were established, each group being basically self-contained and travelling on a Ford F500 Truck with petrol, water, food, caving gear and people. Each of the 19 people had pre-arranged responsibilities for various aspects of the program. Then five others, responsible for various aspects of overall expedition management, travelled in a VW Kombi. It probably seems bizarre, but we had established that the only two bits of the Nullarbor that were surveyed to anything resembling a reasonable level of accuracy were the railway line and the coast. All else, including the state border, could not be accurately located. So the VW team included a professional surveyor who did two star fixes per night throughout the expedition and thus set up the ground control for the first topographic maps of the Nullarbor.

A range of other bits of pioneering research were done, all caves visited were mapped, and numbering of the Nullarbor caves commenced. In retrospect, the most remarkable achievement was the discovery by Alexander Gailus of the Koonalda Cave workshop, and by Adrian Hunt of the Aboriginal art within the same cave. These two discoveries both constituted a massive revolution in Australian archaeology and the foundation of the scientific study of Australian rock art, now recognised as the oldest dated rock art in the world. Joe Jennings also wrote the first of his many papers on the geomorphology of the Nullarbor.

But there were lots of other accomplishments. Joe had recognised that the expedition members were drawn from four different time zones - and so, of course, we had to have four New Year's Eve parties! Despite the impact of that night, Joe organised a survey training program the following day, as we had discovered that we had too few people with good experience in cave mapping. It is some tribute to the capacity of cavers to bluff that Paul Rose actually got a surveying job with the Snowy Mountains authority on the strength of that training.

We had told people at the conference that on the Nullarbor one only had to walk far enough in a straight line to discover a new cave - Tom Draper immediately put it to the test and discovered Tom's Cave in under 30 minutes. Then there were Jim and Ozzie from Orange. Jim went for a walk one morning and when Ozzie awoke, he set out to find Jim; in due course Jim returned, and then went to find Ozzie; Ozzie returned and went to find Jim, and so on for the day.

On return to Adelaide and the arranged expedition depot, Ben Nurse phoned up each of the major distributors of washing machines and arranged for them to deliver a machine for demonstration purposes. Not surprisingly, they all failed the test and no purchases resulted - but a lot of caving gear got washed. The expedition had also proved a wonderful opportunity for beard-growing. Joe Jennings was so successful that he was able to get away with returning to the National University and attending, unrecognised, a reception for new staff members.

But the Federation was under way, with considerable enthusiasm.

Growing Up

At Easter 1957, the newly elected executive met at Yarrangobilly to commence planning for effectively carrying out their assigned role. Here we saw both one of the early results of the Federation and the beginning of some of the divisions which have haunted the Federation over many years. Many of those who had attended the conference had been impressed by the cave numbering system which had been developed by Alan Hill and had determined that it would be executed more widely. So by Easter, the Sydney Speleological Society had been formally authorised by the Kosciusko State Park Trust to commence numbering of caves at Yarrangobilly. However, The Sydney University Speleologists were adamantly opposed to cave numbering - and a dramatic confrontation developed during the course of the weekend.

By this time, the foundation membership was defined as including :

- Canberra Speleological Society
- Cave Exploration Group (South Australia)
- Cooranbong Speleological Association
- Cooma Cave Club
- Hunter Valley Caving Club
- Jenolan Speleological Society
- Mt. Isa Speleological Society
- Newcastle Technical and University College Speleological Society
- Orange Speleological Society
- Sydney Speleological Society
- Sydney University Speleological Society
- Tasmanian Caverneering Club
- Victorian Cave Exploration Society
- West Australian Caving Group

A number of these groups had been formally constituted out of pre-existing informal groups, at least partly as a result of the establishment of the Federation.

The second conference was also a remarkably memorable one. It also focussed its proceedings very much upon constitutional wrangling - but again with great good humour and some remarkable expedition caving. Professor Carey spoke on his war-time experience at Mt. Etna, training commandos to fight in the caves of the Pacific region. The great Des Lyons also made his particular mark on the occasion. Noel Fraser as minute secretary was being particularly punctilious about ensuring that all resolutions were clearly worded and properly recorded, and at one stage, David Taylor was having difficulty getting his wording right; Des (a lawyer) assisted him in phrasing his intentions but David's gratitude was shattered by the next step, when Des said, 'Mr. Chairman, now that my honourable friend's intention is properly clarified, I intend to argue against it'. He did, and ensured its defeat.

Des also commemorated the occasion with a wonderful series of poems in the next issue of the TCC Bulletin all of which have stayed in the minds of many of those present (or even absent);. But more seriously, he had, as a one-man safety committee, drafted the Federation's first safety code and that made a great impact on caving practice. Until that time, we had such monstrosities as the people who refused to purchase safety helmets, and instead bought cheap aluminium kitchen basins from Woolworths and lined them with thin sponge rubber.

By now cave numbering was widely accepted and used virtually right across the country. Various other initiatives were under way ; the newsletter was formally established; and committees established on survey standards, Yarrangobilly, bat research, speleological terminology, code of ethics, and NSW coordination.

The third conference was held in Canberra; the constitution only occupied a small part of the agenda, but wrangles over the number of societies in New South Wales wasted a lot of time in this and the next few meetings. However, there was considerable progress : a revised safety code, a standard glossary of speleological terms, and a code of ethics and courtesy were all adopted and some first moves were made towards advocating the conservation of caves. Given some of the problem in finding officers to take on the work of the Federation both prior to and following this meeting, it is indeed interesting that there was a high profile campaign for election of office-bearers and this in fact proved to boost the administration of the federation considerably.

Over the next few years :

- conservation emerged much more strongly and a first conservation code appeared
- the founders of Helictite endeavoured to get Helictite accepted as an ASF responsibility, but this was rejected
- the Federation became deeply involved in negotiations with the NSW Tourist Bureau over caving at Jenolan
- the idea of a centralised cave map archive was rejected
- the infamous Bill Penman cave-sitting record led one to of the many divisive arguments within the Federation
- another source of division was the concern of some members that far too much attention was being devoted to the 'political' problems of caving in New South Wales
- the potential use of track marking as a conservation strategy was first suggested
- the ASF Handbook idea - the first move towards a national karst index - was developed and the first edition published in 1968
- The Australian Bat Research Newsletter was established with the support of the CSIRO Wildlife Research Division and continued for many years before being replaced by the formation of a formal bat society with its own newsletter.
- The Edie Smith award was established to celebrate the work of one of the pioneer cavers
- Although the presentation of papers at conferences steadily increased over the years, it was not until 1968 that publication of proceedings commenced.

Into the Seventies

At the 1971 conference, a document which I had prepared on the future structure and organisation of the Federation (known as (Elery's Green Thing') was discussed at very considerable length. This document was a response to long standing problems about the administration of the Federation, which had until then been divided between the annual meeting which made more-or-less ad hoc decisions and too few officers who were then responsible for implementing them. The new arrangements delegated greater responsibility to a series of commissions, established clearly defined terms of reference, enabled the establishment of state liaison councils clearly defined. This in turn led to an administrative handbook which provided a sort of owner's manual for the Federation.

As in many spheres of Australian life, the 1970s saw a great boom of activity and productivity within the Federation. Much of this was on a continuing business-as-usual basis, but with a gradual improvement in the quality of what was being done, but there were some important new initiatives. Greg Middleton commenced the compilation and publication of Australian Speleo Abstracts. A grant from the Australian Heritage Commission enabled the production of an important policy document on conservation of the karst estate of Australia.

One action with extremely important and far-reaching outcomes was the convening of a first conference on Cave Tourism at Jenolan in 1973. This was well attended, attracting cave tourism managers from all states of Australia. It led to a continuing series of such conferences, the involvement of the Federation in a number of important management planning projects, including that at Naracoorte which laid the foundation for the recent World Heritage recognition, and ultimately to the establishment in 1987 of the Australasian Cave and Karst Management Association (ACKMA).

Even during this period of activity, the Federation continued to face the perpetual problems - lack of money, hence reliance upon volunteer workers for all of the Federation's activities, and the inevitable unpredictability of those volunteers, who in spite of the best intentions, often found themselves frustrated, usually by their work responsibilities getting in the way of caving. Particular angst was expressed about the Karst Index, which proved to be a mammoth project, but which finally appeared in hard copy in 1985. But looking back over the years of the Federation's existence, this and its many other accomplishments are indeed significant.

And More Recently

Many members will be aware of the more recent history and so I will only briefly deal with some of the key issues of the 1980s and 1990s. Organisationally, the Federation became incorporated in 1985, and given the breadth of the Federation's activities, this provided a long-overdue improvement in infrastructure arrangements. However, divisive arguments and dissatisfactions have continued to emerge; these sometimes represent genuine differences in ideology, but it really seems to me that they more often represent lack of organisational experience by Council members or lack of resources to enable the Federation to achieve what members expect.

But in spite of recurrent problems -

- The Newsletter finally assumed the Australian Caver format and has become a worthy publication .
- A Federation insurance scheme has become a reality
- Continuing its long commitment to conservation, the Federation has been particularly productive and taken a more effective approach to conservation issues

The Federation and some of its officers and members have played a key role in the development of the NORLD program and the Outdoor Recreation Council of Australia. While the Council operates within a wider national framework for training development which is extremely problematic, a great deal has been accomplished. It is interesting to note here that the NORLD conference demonstrated that no other outdoor activity has a body equivalent to the Federation, although canoeists have for some years had a national canoe education board and several are now looking at establishing some sort of national body.

Conclusion

Looking back, one can only marvel at the vision of those Sydney cavers who first proposed the establishment of the Federation back in 1954. It has accomplished a great deal in spite of formidable difficulties.

It currently seems to face a new set of problems. Increasingly, clubs or societies with their emphasis upon collective responsibility are being pushed aside by commercial operations and other managerial arrangements. At the same time, a great gaggle of social and economic pressures are impinging upon younger people. So, club and society members are both fewer and older. Yet the capacity of the Federation for advocacy and action in relation to all sorts of issues - safety, documentation, conservation and advocacy to name only four - is probably more necessary than ever.

A second problem of much longer standing is the decline in genuine exploration. Except in a few areas (eg Old Homestead, Thampanna, some other Nullarbor sites, the Kimberlys, Cape Range and the Gregory River) cavers keep returning to the same old caves, and adding little or nothing to our knowledge of those caves. Even the fact that this conference (and many of the more recent ASF conferences) do not include genuine exploratory expeditions as part of the program highlights this problem. As one local example, the documentation of many Flinders Ranges caves is remarkably inadequate and very little has been done beyond basic documentation. Further, my knowledge of the region leads me to believe that there are probably two or three hundred further caves to be identified and documented. A number of these which Alan Hill and I identified on a bushwalking trip many years ago certainly remain uninvestigated and a brief and all too rapid recent walk by Ernst Holland certainly identified a further number.

I believe it is vital that the current administrative malaise and decline in member confidence be addressed and resolved. And I hope that we will eventually see a wider revival of genuine exploration rather than the current pattern of repetitive tourist-type visits.