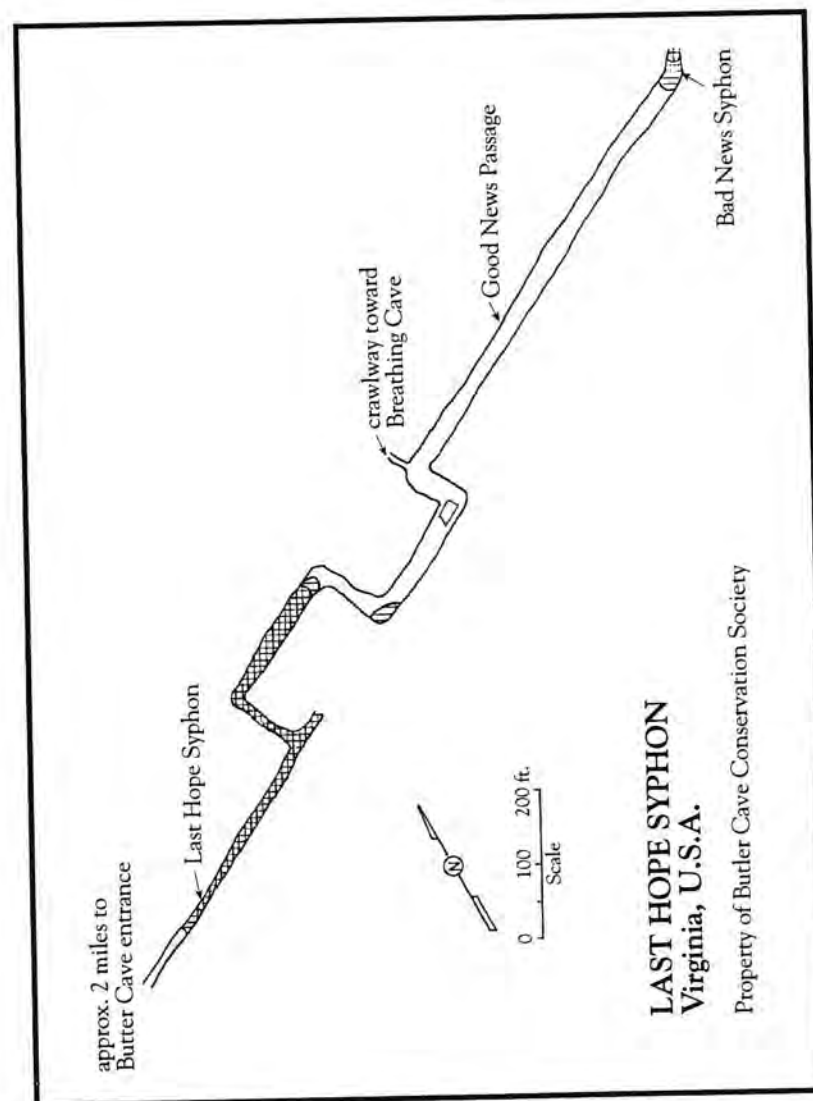


me. We deposited our tanks on the sand bank, then walked down the passage. Beyond a sharp bend to the left we splashed back into knee-deep water to wade through an area whose high ceiling was covered with stalactites. After 100 feet the stream ended in a deep pool where the cave ceiling once more dipped beneath the water. We wiggled into a cobble-floored crawlway on the right in an effort to find a route around the new sump, but the low slot was blocked by boulders after 100 feet.

Two years later Paul Smith and I dived the second sump in Hughes Spring. After a short swim we surfaced in a small lake room at the base of a high wall of boulders that had collapsed from the ceiling. We climbed 20 feet up a crevice through the unstable boulders, but only succeeded in causing some rocks to splash into the lake. Disappointed, we retreated after surveying our discovery so that we could give Bill Torode a map.

Is there a way past the boulders in Hughes Spring? Bill says that the water rising in Hughes and nearby Skidmore Spring comes from the Newsome Sinks area many miles to the north. Between them lies a high limestone area which could contain Alabama's longest cave.

The biggest opportunity for discovery by sump divers in America may lie under a picturesque section of Virginia's Appalachians known as Burnsville Cove. Under the colorful wild flowers and split rail fences are both the longest and third longest caves in the state, sprawling Butler and Breathing Caves. Tests have shown that all the water from both caves, as well as from some less significant caves in Burnsville Cove, resurges at Refrigerator Spring several miles away. With potential for a huge cave rivaling the 300-mile length of Kentucky's Mammoth Cave, the world's longest, it is not surprising that NSS divers have long directed their attention there. In 1956, Bevin Hewett plunged a mere 30 feet into Refrigerator Cave and surfaced in an awesome virgin air cave with a ceiling 60 feet high. Later, dry cavers excavated an



entrance in air and surveyed a half mile of cave passage before it sumped again in an intriguing area known as French Lake. Bevin's dive was the biggest American sump diving discovery until the late 1960's.

By the time Court, Lewis, and I arrived at Burnsville Cove in 1975, both Hank Hoover and Rick Rigg had pushed French Lake and a tantalizing sump in the remote recesses of Butler Cave without finding any new airspace. At the latter site, which carried the ominous name of Last Hope Syphon, Rick had pushed 300 feet into the icy 50° F water with no luck. This should have told us something, since Rick is a very fine caver as well as a cave diver and had discovered the world's longest soda straw stalactites during a dive at Pennsylvania's Tytoona Cave in 1965.

Nevertheless, we showed up at Burnsville expecting something similar to our previous experience at Alabama's Hughes Spring, where a short walk from a parked car put us in the water. We had along the heavy, bulky cave diving equipment that we used in Florida that had served us well. The discoverer of Butler Cave, Ike Nicholson, had told me on the phone that Butler consisted of an easy two-mile walk to the water at Last Hope Syphon. I should have known better, having done a little dry caving in Georgia and Tennessee during my college days.

Our first dive was in Refrigerator Spring's French Lake. Because of the half-mile underground trek to the lake, we decided that only two of us would dive. I volunteered to carry equipment and help the other two get ready. At the lake I grew restless waiting for the dive to start, so grabbed a snorkel and started swimming around on the surface. I was able to swim under the right wall by holding my snorkel in a narrow crack that extended above the water surface. After nearly 100 feet I entered a large room with a ceiling that shot up into air for 20 feet. A minute later Court and Lewis, wearing double tanks, joined me, their 55-watt quartz lamps transforming the



Sheck Exley prepares to free dive a sump in Tennessee in 1973. (Photo by Glenn Thompson)

dark water into a blazing sapphire that clearly illuminated the recesses of the large room. Despite their lights, we never found Hank and Rick's passage leading from the lake. Maybe sump diving was not as easy as we thought.

Early the next morning, we assembled on a grassy knoll in the bright yellow sunlight. It was decided that I would make a solo dive in Butler Cave because of the difficulty of getting equipment to Last Hope Syphon. Nevin W. Davis, the red-bearded president of the Butler Cave Conservation Society, took one look at us and shook his head, skeptical of our chances. Instead of vibram-soled climbing boots we were wearing our slick-soled neoprene diver's booties, and the rest of our dry caving equipment was equally inappropriate.

With us were Tom Tompkins and a Marine from Virginia Beach whose experience, like ours, consisted mainly of diving in Florida's springs. The Marine did not like Nevin's attitude. "Look," he said, "I run two miles in the soft beach sand every day. Don't tell me I can't handle a two mile walk through a cave. Now, where is the entrance?"

Nevin sighed and stepped to the side. Behind him appeared an 18-inch-high opening in an outcrop of rock. In a

few minutes our efficient BCCS porters had passed my equipment and the five of us through the tiny opening. Just inside was a sheer 30-foot drop that required climbing down a cable ladder. So much for Ike Nicholson's easy two-mile walk. The Marine muttered something like, "Neat, just like an obstacle course," and started down.

"Wait," Nevin called. He carefully tied a loop of rope around our gung-ho friend, then belayed him as he climbed down. Halfway down the Marine slipped off the ladder and had to be carefully lowered to the bottom. I looked at the Marine's eyes, as big as saucers. The bravado was gone. "I've had enough," he croaked. As Nevin hauled him back up I realized that I didn't feel much better. Beyond me was a muddy squeeze called the Glop Schlott, then a slippery climb over slippery mud-covered boulders that bordered treacherous, sheer-walled pits more than 100 feet deep.

Climbing on all fours (and sometimes fives when I could bring my fanny into play), I managed to get past the pits without sliding into oblivion. Three hours later we arrived at Last Hope Syphon having suffered through all the crawlways, chim-

Nevin Davis helps Sheck Exley suit up at Last Hope Syphon. (Photo by Lee Gilman)



ney, and other nasties that any experienced dry caver would have expected on a two-mile cave trip involving a 590-foot change in elevation. Because of the frigid water—the coldest I have ever experienced in a cave except for a dive with Jochen Hasenmayer in Germany's Blautopf—I wore a fully sealed dry suit instead of the usual wet suit. With a thick woolen sweater on underneath, I was quite comfortable during the dive. After assembling my double tanks I followed a three-foot-high by five-foot-wide tunnel for 500 feet. While the maximum depth of the dive was only eight feet, there was no hint of any air above me.

I returned to tell the others what I had found, then asked Jack Igoe to open my drysuit zipper. But it had become jammed with clay and no amount of yanking by Jack and Fred Wefer would open it. Since I was not about to slice open a new \$200 suit, I was a prisoner in my drysuit until we arrived back in our motel room 20 miles away, and became dangerously overheated. Only repeated immersions in the cave stream averted heat prostration.

Our success in exploring 200 feet past Rick's furthest penetration encouraged Nevin, so he invited us back for another dive. That fall I returned with boots and other caving equipment, and pushed another 100 feet into air. Although the 600 feet of Last Hope Syphon was far shorter than our Florida cave dives and even sump dives in Europe, it was nevertheless the longest single sump ever successfully pushed in America at the time. Unfortunately, our search for the greater glory of a major cave discovery was foiled. When I returned to the start of the sump I told Nevin, "The good news is that we've found 950 feet of air-filled passage. The bad news is that there's another sump." Several years later David Whall and Karen Wark dived the Bad News Syphon and came back with the even worse news that it is clogged with mud. So the key to the vast Burnsville Cove Cave System remains undiscovered.

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In Xanadu did Kubla Khan

A stately pleasure-dome decree:

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran

Through caverns measureless to man

Down to a sunless sea.

— Samuel Taylor Coleridge