
Musing on Membership ...

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By Jack Igoe

... from a place far, far away, in both time and space. I write from California and haven't been caving in the Cove since 1981. The extent of my caving these days is lurking on the email list, occasionally kibitzing, and caving vicariously via Phil Lucas and others.

However, I've recently reconnected with some BCCS friends of more than 40 years and begun connecting with some new ones I've met only electronically. It got me looking back on becoming and being a member and wondering what was it about membership in the Society that allowed it to endure so long and continue to thrive.

Early years

I think I was BCCS member #12, having joined in 1969. That was before many of our newer members were even born. Yes, I was proud to be a member and still am, but unfortunately I know a decreasing percentage of our members.

We had member numbers in those days, keeping close watch as the numbers climbed. We were very slow to expand the membership. We still are, although the number of members in good standing has now surpassed 50. This is a significant milestone; an organization that doesn't grow and evolve will eventually perish.

Back in the early days, there were a number of people who viewed us as a bit snotty about our "private cave." I suspect there still are some with that view, although the durability of the Society and the broader understanding of our objectives and methods perhaps ameliorates that problem.

Some good reading

Volume 4 of our newsletter, subtitled *Ten Years of Footprints 1968-1978*, contains three long articles about membership in the BCCS. Two are by the venerable Fred L. Wefer and one is by Toni Williams, now Trees, about her thoughts on becoming a member. All are insightful -- recommended reading if you haven't already.

Fred's first article is steeped in his academic style and he carefully documents and interprets all the provisions of the BCCS membership policy.

For those who didn't know Fred, he was a PhD in radio astronomy and analytical about everything.

But it is his second article that is most salient to this musing, his disquisition (a word borrowed from Fred, of course) on "inclusive" organizations (e.g. the NSS) and "exclusive" organizations (e.g. the BCCS). Fred also elucidates his view of the unwritten requirements to become a member.

Not much has changed over the years, in concept, although the length of time it takes to "earn" an offer of membership has not been implemented with any consistency. Recently I learned that one of our now-life members toiled with us for 17 years before being offered membership. While I still support our position as what Fred described as an "exclusive" organization, this seems to me a bit extreme.

Membership policy

It is perhaps useful to repeat Fred's explanation about our membership policy:

So why did the founders of the BCCS choose to make it an exclusive society? I remember the following as being important considerations:

- (1) It would be possible for every member to know every other member on a more or less personal basis.
- (2) Each member could have a larger influence on the policy decisions of the society.
- (3) The founders could expect to exert some control over the activities of the society for a considerable time after its establishment.
- (4) Each member could expect every other member to be highly motivated and dedicated to society goals.
- (5) The turnover in membership would be slow, producing a leisurely paced evolution of ideas and practices.
- (6) Experience gained by the members in solving problems peculiar to the situation in Burnsville Cove would be retained as a society asset.

That these six statements are descriptive of the BCCS today is no accident.

Forty years after their conception, they're still valid, although (1) has gotten a little soft as the membership has grown and dispersed.

Regarding life membership

Fred closed his article with some comments about life memberships:

Some slight comment is required on one final topic. The BCCS is by nature an eleemosynary society and constantly in need of additional funds. Yearly dues are \$30; a life membership costs \$1000. But the ability or lack thereof of a prospective member to acquire a life membership has not, to my knowledge, ever influenced the Board of Directors in deciding whether or not to offer that person a membership.

Indeed, ten years ago when the society was being formed, few if any of the members were able to seriously contemplate such a financial commitment. Life members have no concomitant additional power or influence in the society, and \$30 a year does not seem all that much money to invest to preserve something which continues to give both the friends and members of the BCCS so much pleasure.

The underlined emphasis above is mine because it touches on a point Toni makes in her article, as well. We have single class of membership, regardless of whether paying annually, chipping a way towards life membership as a sustaining member, or somehow finding the financial wherewithal to go full boat. Members are members. There are no uber-members nor lesser members.

The concept of life membership was implemented at a special membership meeting held in April, 1975, to ratify the board's decision to purchase the Butler Homestead. Life memberships were a way to expedite funds coming into the Society so we could pay the mortgage. It worked; fortunately enough people were able to find the means that we are no longer "constantly in need of additional funds."

"Earning" membership

Back in the late 70's and early 80's, I suppose I was in the camp that thought people had to earn a membership offer by doing lots of what Greggo recently called "death march" caving. I even sent out what was subsequently referred to by more than one person as "Igoe's hype letter." It certainly generated a lot of activity in Marlboro Country!

In recent years, though, people have been offered membership for reasons other than being an active, hard-core push caver. I think this is a good thing. It helps avoid tunnel vision and is consistent with the concepts were quoted in the front of each newsletter for decades:

The BCCS was formed in 1968 to promote the conservation, preservation, and study of caves.

The Society conducts conservation, educational, and scientific projects -- and may support other such programs in the furtherance of its objectives.

Although most of the recent activity has been spent in the area of Burnsville Cove, Bath County, Va., the Society is committed to the preservation and study of caves, both within and outside the State, to whatever extent its resources permit.

To me, the fundamental requirement for membership is a sustained commitment to the concepts embodied in that first sentence above: the "conservation, preservation, and study of caves." It has nothing to do with how many trips you've made to Marlboro County.

But enough, you say, and I agree. To quote Rick Rigg from many years ago, “Let there be dark.”

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