

LAVA BEDS CAVING GUIDE



Jefferson State Lava Caves Celebrated



State of Jefferson

The State of Jefferson was established in 1941 with a core group of three California counties and four Oregon counties, all adjacent to the California/Oregon border. Yreka was the state capital, Mt. Shasta was the state high point, and John Childs was the Governor. The state flag showed the golden seal on a green field. The seal contained the "double cross", the two Xs that represented the tendency of existing state governments to ignore the needs of the rural areas, particularly regarding roads. The State of Jefferson included many caves. Though hopes were running high, the new state was largely forgotten after Pearl Harbor was attacked.

On behalf of the State of Jefferson and the Gaping Holes Gang, this guide has been written by Bighorn Bill. The Gang is a lively bunch of local cavers active in these parts about 1980, while Bighorn didn't show up until later. So he is an imposter to both the State and the Gang, and should not be fully trusted. The Gaping Holes Gang, not affiliated with anybody, published this guide. But the Gang had no control over the content, and does not accept any responsibility.

This cave guide for Lava Beds caves puts together a little history (early Lava Beds caver J.D. Howard) with some information about 24 caves with a total combined passage length of 6.75 miles. Each cave is briefly described along with a cave map, except in the case of two of the shorter ones (Symbol Bridge and Big Painted). Charlie Larson includes maps of these two in his book "Lava Beds Caves". All the other 22 caves in this guidebook have maps adapted from USGS Bulletin 1673. They are conveniently arranged as they are found moving counter-clockwise, either through the Monument (8 caves), or around the Cave Loop (16 caves). It is hard to see them all on one trip. You might have to come back.

Lava Beds Caving Guide

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This cave guide is dedicated to

J.D. Howard

Early Lava Beds caver



Howard and family pose for the camera on a natural bridge.

NPS

J.D. Howard – Father of Lava Beds

Born at Ft. Atkinson, Iowa on Jan. 9, 1875, and died in Klamath Falls, Oregon on Dec. 15, 1961. The following is from an online National Park Service pamphlet.

“J.D. Howard, A Monument Legacy. Sometimes the man credited with founding Lava Beds National Monument wished others had never followed his lead. It was Judson D. Howard – called Judd or J.D. by his friends – who mapped and named many of the Lava Beds lava tube caves. Howard’s relentless efforts also are credited with helping to have the area declared a national monument in 1925.

Howard’s legacy has mostly gone unrecognized except for a plaque placed on a rock outside the entrance to Mushpot Cave. Although park files contain some information on his explorations and discoveries he remains something of an enigma. The only mark he left behind are names he painted inside many of the caves he named. Howard contributed the earliest photographs of cave interiors, but shied away from other’s cameras.

People who knew J.D. picture him as a physically unimposing man. Cal Peyton, who lived across the street from Howard in Klamath Falls, remembers him as being about 5’5” tall and 130 pounds. ‘He walked with short steps and he could walk you into the ground. You’d think the frail critter would play out and you’d have to carry him home, but if anybody was carried home, it would be you.’

Carol Howe, writing about Howard in his book, *Frontier Stories of the Klamath Country*, described Howard as ‘a short dumpy-looking fellow whose clothes were neither neat nor stylish.’ No matter how he’s pictured, Howard was peculiarly suited to the Lava Beds. He moved to Klamath Falls in 1916 to work as a miller for Martin Brothers Milling Company. A native of Fort Atkinson, Iowa, he grew up in the Midwest, eventually studying chemistry at the school that later became the Colorado School of Mines, specializing in flour chemistry. He came west in the early 1900s, working in Los Angeles before moving to Oregon.

Much of Howard’s work was at the Martin Brothers mill in Merrill. From there he often walked to the Lava Beds region, where he was befriended by some of the rugged individuals who lived in the sparsely settled country. ‘He went all the time,’ recalls Jean Puckett, a neighbor. ‘People would come and get him because he didn’t have a car.’

Howard’s intimacy with the Lava Beds began Sept. 10, 1917, during a visit with the George Howells family. That first trip set the tone for future journeys as Howard named Fleener Chimneys and Winemas Chimneys and explored several caves. From then on his diaries indicate a continuum of visits. In those early years, Howard often had to crawl on his hands and knees through dense stands of mountain mahogany. Entrances to undiscovered caves frequently were possible only after clearing walls of rock.

But if his travels and discoveries at the Lava Beds were among his delights, among his greatest disappointments was seeing the area destroyed by careless or uncaring visitors. Howard once said, ‘I am sorry I made a road up to the place.

Further, I am sorry I left the entrance to the Catacombs open after I first entered it. I opened it and enlarged it, then began to take visitors there. I should have closed it again and left it unknown as the better stalactites are now gone except in the remote crawlers.'

Howard's perceived need to preserve the lava tubes and the area's other geological features was a major reason why he vigorously pushed for a federally protected status. Since the creation of Lava Beds National Monument, that protection has been provided. For that, the enigmatic Howard would surely be pleased."

The following was written by Bill Devereaux on behalf of the Cave Research Foundation, and published in the program guide to the Speleo-Ed Seminar held at Lava Beds in May of 2007.

"J.D. Howard: Father of the Lava Beds. Much of the Lava Beds area looks the same way it did from 1916 to 1957. This familiar scene includes scrub land, sage brush, juniper trees, broken lava fields, deep pumice and walking surfaces broken by either aa lava fields, or pahoehoe surface features. Dense mahogany thickets abound. It is hot in the summer and bitterly cold in the winter. The elevation varies from 4,000 to 6,000 feet.

In September of 1916, Judson Dean Howard walked into the lands we now know as Lava Beds National Monument. That trip changed his life, and ultimately, ours too. He never owned a car, or a horse or a mule. He traveled at the convenience of others. It is 40 miles from Klamath Falls to the lava beds. Quite often, he walked that distance just to visit the caves. When J.D. saw the remains of the Modoc War lands and the caves and bridges being broken up and stolen by outsiders, he began a campaign to protect the lands he had come to love.

He wrote articles. He wrote letters. He visited politicians. He talked to locals. He did everything he could to protect 'The Beds'. Eventually, in 1925, President Coolidge set aside 43,000 acres as a monument to the Modoc War and the caves therein. His dream fulfilled, Judson Dean Howard died in 1961 while talking to a Lava Beds National Monument ranger."

Lava Beds National Monument was established by presidential proclamation on Nov. 21, 1925.

Cave Loop Caves

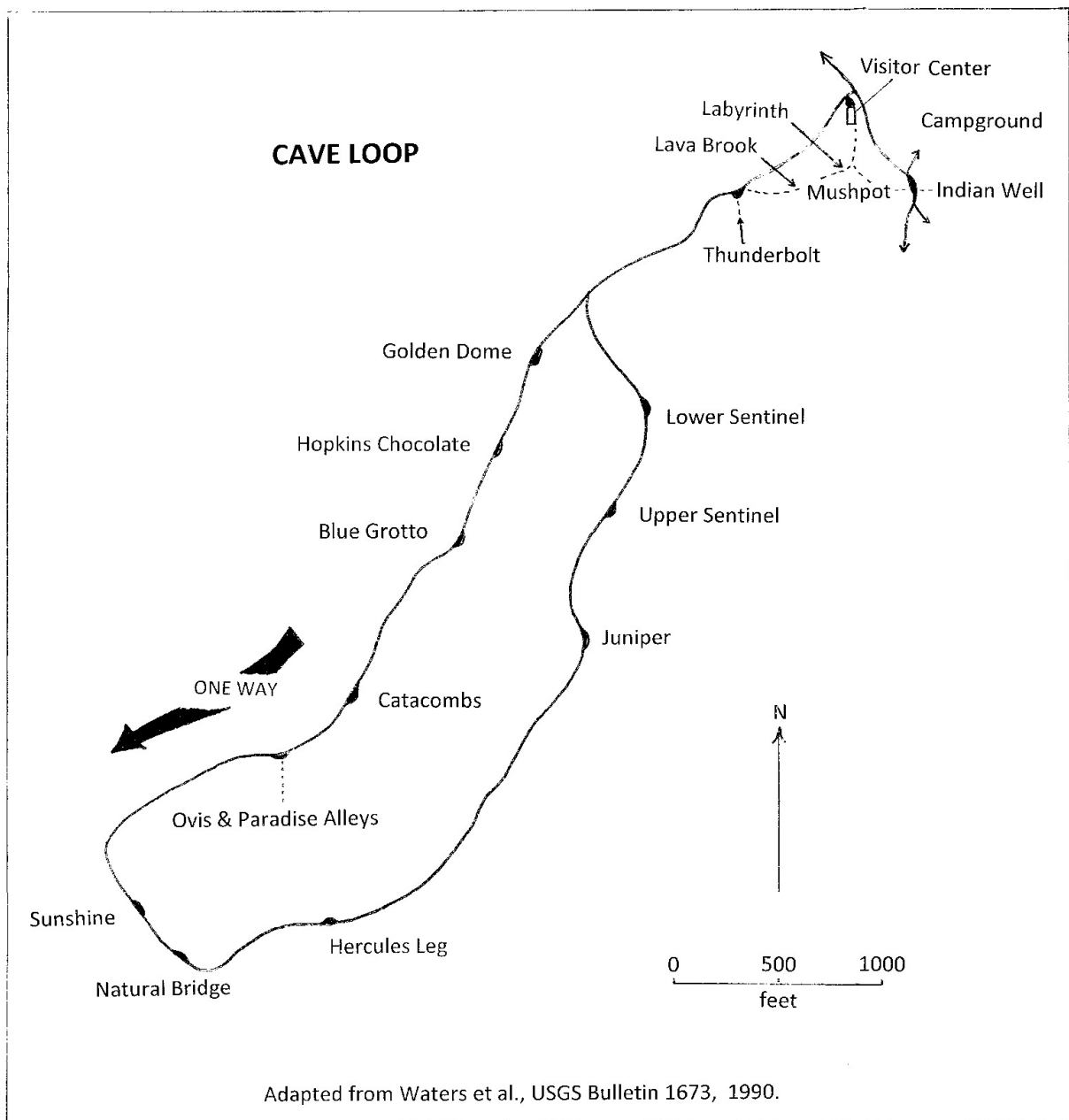
The Visitor Center at Lava Beds sports a small museum and gift shop, loans out big hand-held flashlights, sells plastic bumper caps, and has really nice bathrooms. Someone is there during regular hours to answer questions and collect entrance fees. The Center is a fairly new facility and has a nice expansive view. It is still settling into the harsh desert-like setting of Lava Beds. It also serves as a portal to the Cave Loop.

The Cave Loop is a paved road that loops up behind the Visitor Center. It is one-way, going counter-clockwise, and is closed with a gate at night. Easy access is provided for over a dozen fantastic lava tubes: Caving is facilitated by parking pull-outs for the various cave entrances, marked with signs, and with paved walkways leading to rock steps or stairways going down into the caves. Trash receptacles are placed to encourage folks to dispose of their garbage items properly. Some safety messages are placed at strategic spots, and caves currently closed are clearly marked as such.

The caves themselves are a tangle of distributaries off a big master tube that originated at Mammoth Crater and runs down through the middle of the loop. Some of the caves are segments of the master tube (Natural Bridge, Ovis, Sentinel, and Indian Well). The distributaries form networks including many walking passages, and are sometimes interconnected. Major routes can be identified by the old CCC trails built about 70-80 years ago, and still in regular use today. Many side passages, usually smaller and less traveled, invite further exploration and adventure. J.D. Howard's old painted signs can still be found here and there. Sometimes a ladder, gate, or stairway shows up. Other than that, these are wild caves and are in amazingly good shape when you consider all the visitation that goes on here. Lava Beds goes to a lot of trouble to engender a culture of respect and care for the caves.

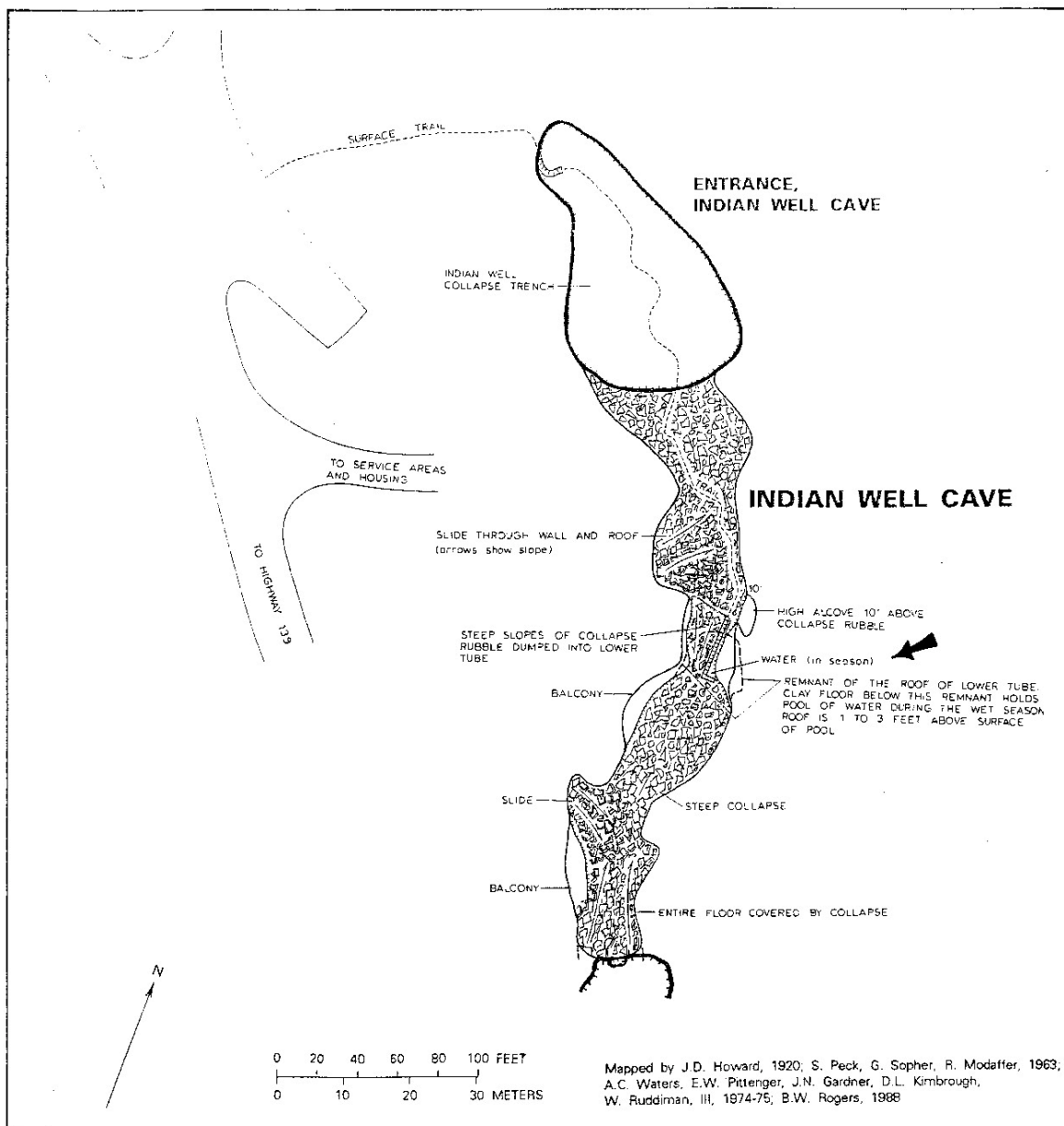
All in all, the Cave Loop is a valuable and very unique recreational resource. I don't think there is anything else quite like it anywhere in the world. The key element that makes it all happen is the incredible concentration of big lava tube passages all packed into one small area. Back in the 1960s I came here as a younger version of myself, and we borrowed a caving light from the rangers. In those days, it was a Coleman lantern with mantles and fueled by white gas. It hissed loudly and became quite hot. The caves seemed cold, vast, maybe endless, mysterious, and extremely exciting. We explored some of the passages and worried about getting lost. My Dad cut his head on the ceiling, but we kept going. Eventually we came out of a different cave. We had actually gone in one cave and came out another! When we were done and it was time to return the lantern, we couldn't wait to tell the ranger about our discovery. What a great experience, and it remains repeatable here for kids and parents to this very day (though maybe we could think of a way to avoid the head laceration).

That I think is the magic of the Loop. That is why I am a little leery of changes that might re-organize, consolidate, or re-name the caves. The experience of exploration, the spirit of discovery, and the chance to connect caves needs to be preserved here as it is.



Indian Well Cave

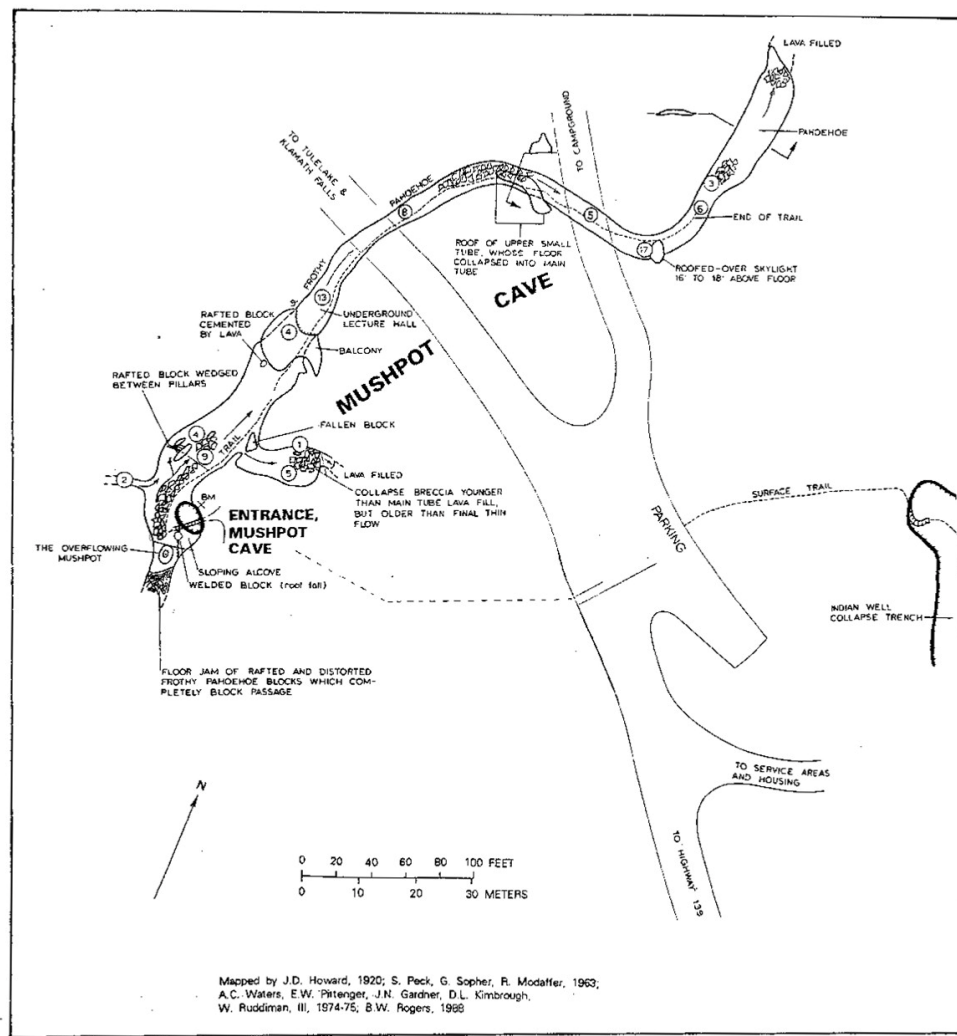
Just across the main road from Mushpot Cave, the parking lot and signed trailhead for Indian Well Cave is easily found. The trail goes into a large, impressive entrance, and drops over a breakdown slope to the steps leading further down to the bottom of the cave. A pool of ice water has been found there, but is now dried up for the most part, in more recent years with frequent droughts. Apparently, Indian Well was an important water source back in the old days. An early name for the Monument Headquarters was Indian Well. These days a much deeper man-made well provides water for the Monument. The length of Indian Well Cave is 300 feet, as given by Lava Beds. J.D. Howard used the name for the cave as early as 1917, and he probably drank from it himself. Winter ice regularly forms in the Indian Well entrance.



Mushpot Cave

Of all the 1,500+ caves of Siskiyou County, Mushpot is the only one tricked up with a built-in electrical lighting system. It also has a theater where a small crowd of people can sit and watch movies or ranger slide shows. Aside from all that, Mushpot is a beautifully sculptured lava tube. The lighting is subdued and artistic in placement, making a Mushpot tour an adventure in natural art appreciation. Everyone should make some time to check this out. This is somewhat different from the other caves, but still bring your hardhat because the ceiling gets a little low part way down the passage. There is no need to go crawling beyond the end of the trail. The floor is covered with sharp rocks, and the cave quickly terminates.

J.D. Howard's original name for this one was Devils Mushpot Cave. The mushpot itself can be seen where lava upwelled through the floor near the base of the entrance stairway. Mushpot is the most developed cave in all of Siskiyou County, and if you only see one cave at Lava Beds, this should be the one. Lava Beds gives it a total length of 770 feet. Mushpot Cave is an easy short walk from the Visitors Center or from the Indian Well parking area. Just follow the signs.



Labyrinth Cave

A stairway went down into a relatively small skylight entrance, with lava tubes taking off in four different directions. Cold air was moving through. This was my first Lava Beds cave, many years ago as a small child. The underground world struck me as powerful and overwhelming, and even now my mind can go back to that spot and I can feel the chills. Some of that awe of caves is with me still. Labyrinth Cave was frightening and alluring at the same time.

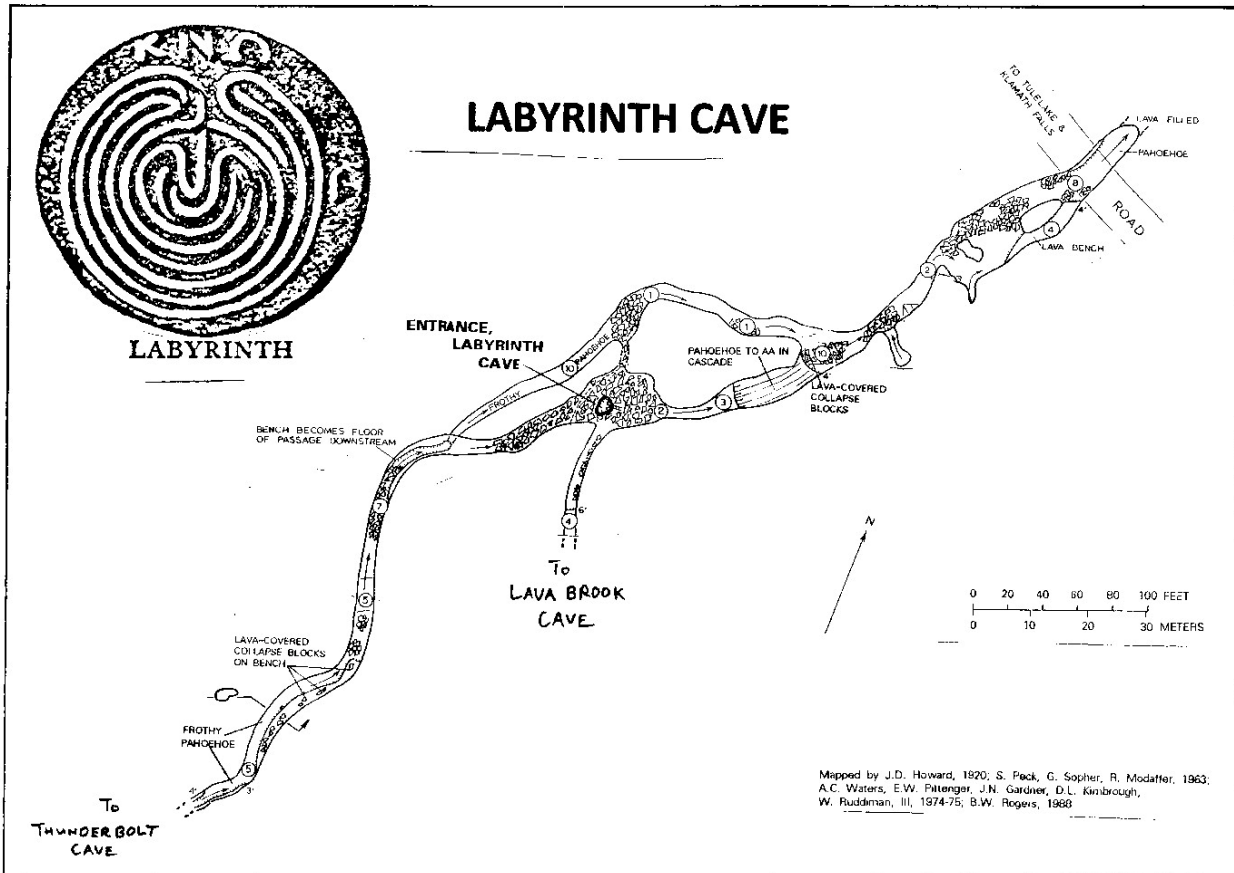
The Labyrinth is the biggest puzzle at Lava Beds. J.D. Howard named it well, after the mythical maze where Theseus was lost. He was later saved by Ariadne who led him out of the Labyrinth with a thread.

Lava Beds gives Labyrinth a length of 1,239 feet. But there's more. For one thing, the Labyrinth Cave shown on this map clearly connects with nearby Lava Brook and Thunderbolt Caves making one big cave with a length of about 4,000 feet. This all appears to be disconnected from more of Labyrinth Cave by some upflow segments of collapse trench. There we find quite a few Labyrinthine passages, unmarked by Lava Beds, but composed of mostly regular walking tubes with old CCC trails just the same. This is the enigmatic part, a mess you might say. There are multiple entrances and caves that connect, or connect through sub-human passages, or don't connect. Some desperate breakdown crawls are still even now being investigated. A J.D. Howard "Labyrinth" sign can be found as far upflow as the Blue Grotto.

Somewhere in this situation, and combined with other loop caves in various ways, lies the longest lava tube in California. A great cartographic project would be to make a discreet map of this cave, showing what's connected, what's not, and what to name the cave and the entrances. This has actually been done 2 or 3 times, but it is difficult to gain universal agreement on all the details. For example, Lava Beds divides it into Labyrinth Cave (1,239 ft) as shown roughly on the map, and South Labyrinth Cave (3722 ft). Also, there are some fairly recent findings that need to be considered.

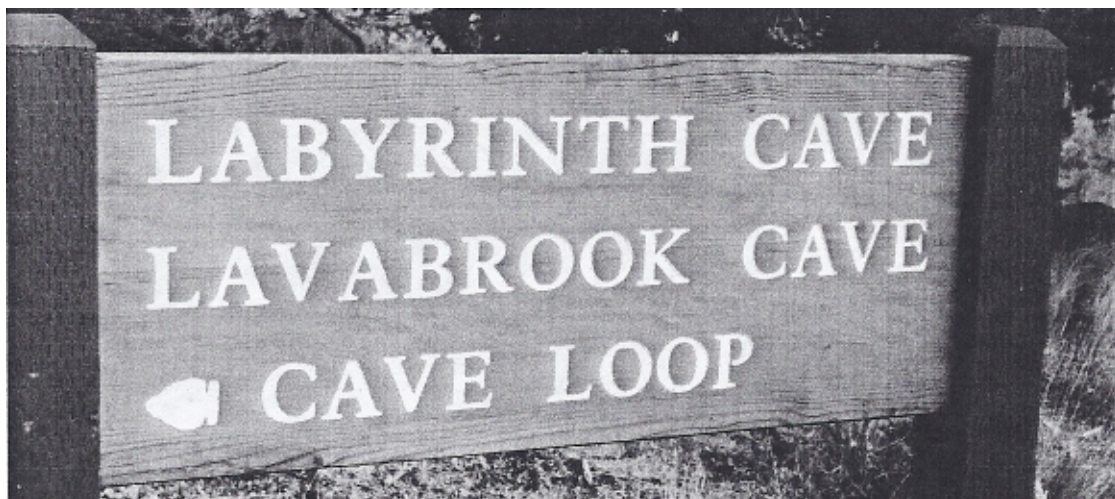
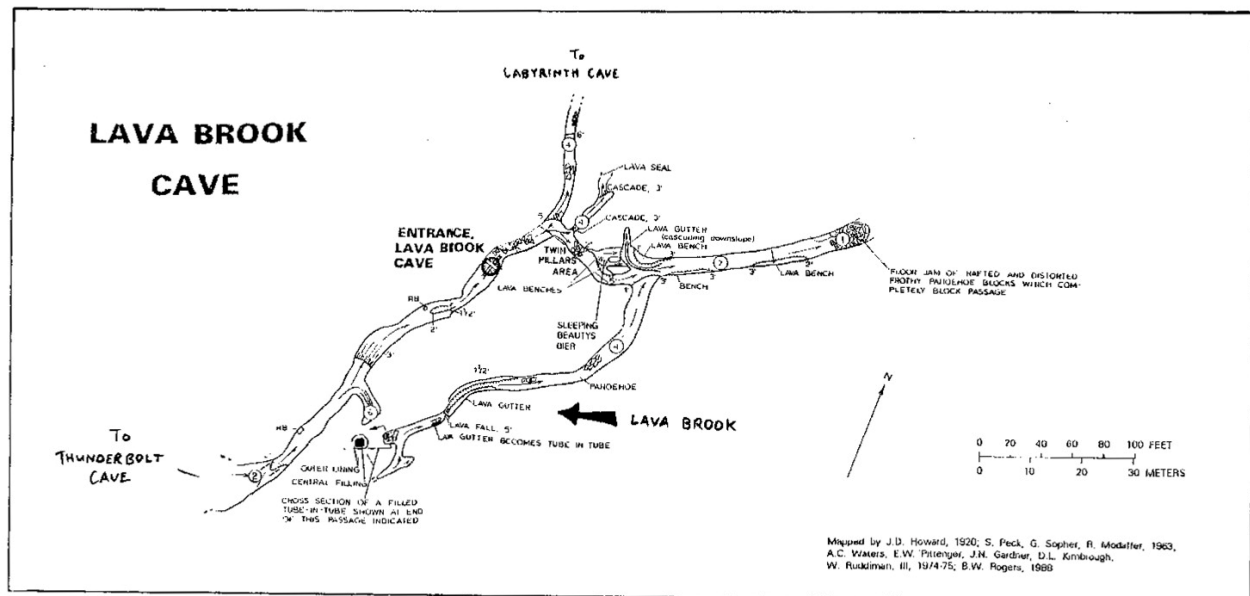
Meanwhile, there are some advantages to the status quo. A labyrinth should be enigmatic, and kids can still go in one cave and pop out another. Just remember that there is a big maze of passages in the middle of the loop without signs, and not shown by maps in this guide. Have a cool blast checking it out. As far as the longest lava cave in California goes, we'll just have to wait for Ariadne to someday lead us out of the confusion with a definitive cartographic thread.





Lava Brook Cave

A dual ladder drops off a small catwalk across the small skylight serving as the main entrance to Lava Brook Cave. The drop in temperature is dramatic on a warm sunny day. A modest tangle of mostly walking passages is available for exploration. Interesting sights include The Sleeping Beauty and the namesake Lava Brook. The brook is a scenic gutter running out from underneath some welded boulders and down the middle of a regular lava tube floor. J.D. Howard named the cave back in the old days during his explorations at Lava Beds. Some of the passages loop around or connect with other caves. Thunderbolt, Labyrinth, and Lava Brook actually combine into one cave with a total length of about 4,000 feet. Lava Beds assigns 859 feet to the portion generally considered within the domain of the signed Lava Brook entrance.

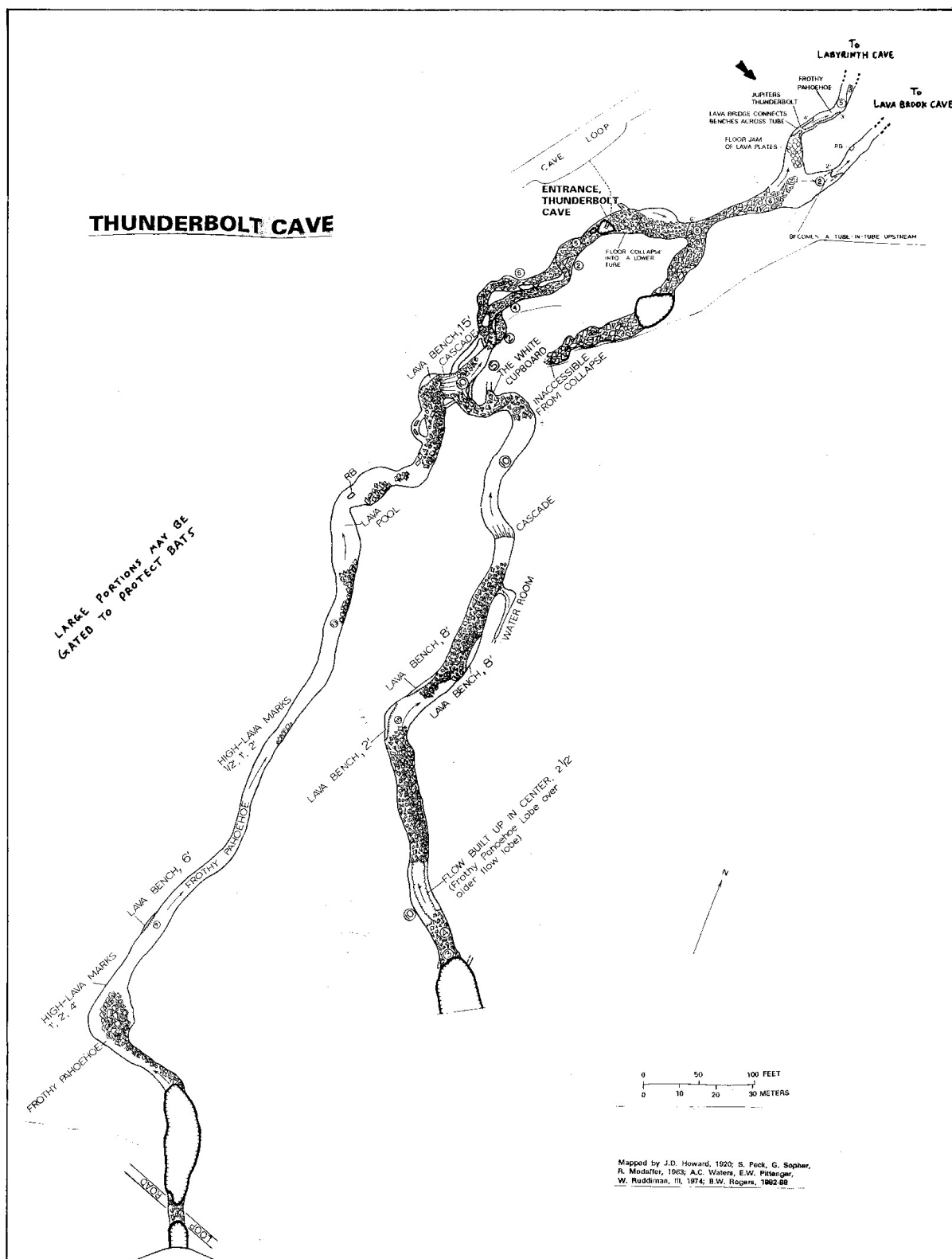


Thunderbolt Cave

Some portions of this cave may be closed for bats. Some big bat-friendly gates have been built at strategic spots. What I remember of the cave is long trails built through a complex of larger walking tube passages. Some of the passages connect with other caves, and it is clear that Thunderbolt, Lava Brook, and Labyrinth are really one cave with a total length in the range of 4,000 feet. J.D. Howard named the cave after something in there that reminded him of a Jupiter's thunderbolt. It was a bridge that partially blocks a passage. Jupiter was the ultimate Roman god, equivalent to the Greek's Zeus. Apparently, he would hurl thunderbolts when he was angry, just like people sometimes throw things when they are mad. In this case, he might have been trying to block a cave passage and make things tougher for mortal cave explorers. But then his wife Juno or somebody else who likes cavers intervened, so it is still possible to get over or under the thunderbolt and continue caving. Lava Beds gives this cave a length of 2,561 feet.

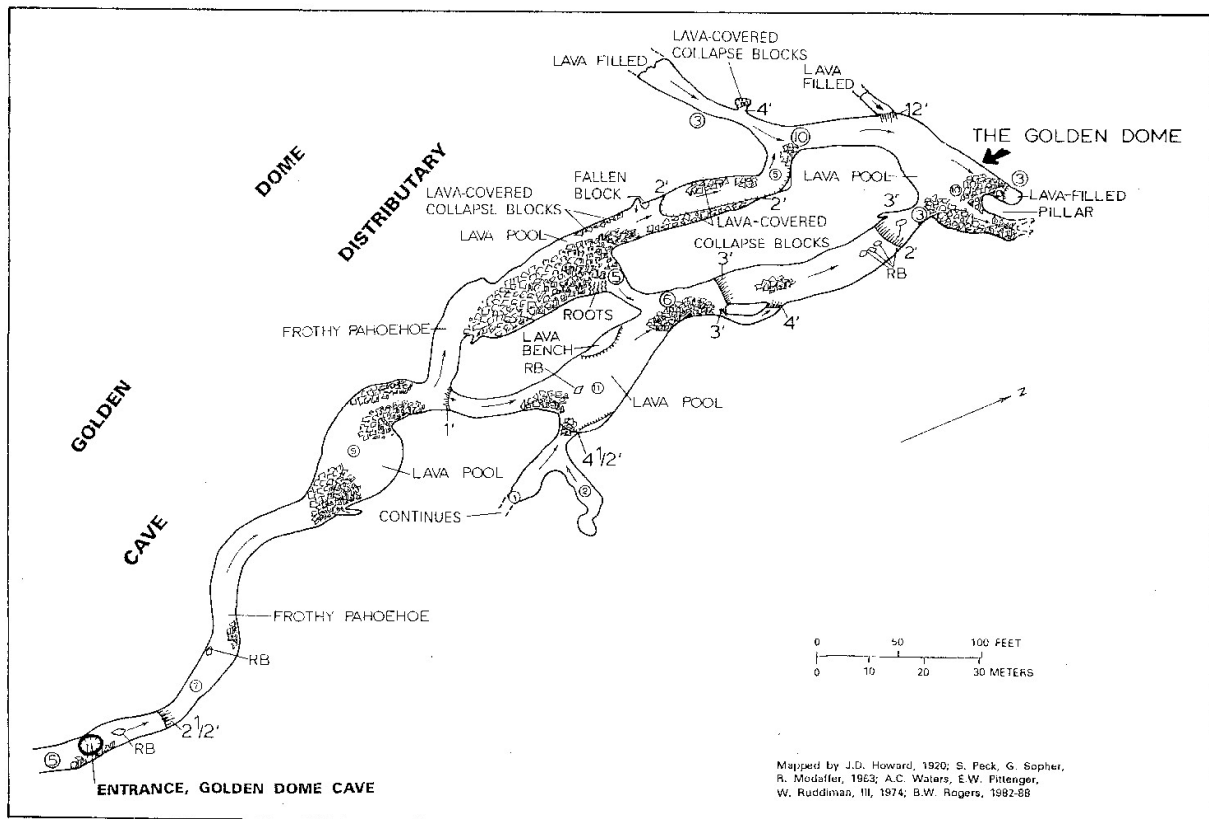


(Thunderbolt Cave map on next page)



Golden Dome Cave

Argonauts arise. Here is the Taj Mahal of loop caves, attracting many visitors by its name alone. People love anything that has to do with gold. Lava tubes often get more damp down near their terminations. There are domed rooms down near the end of this cave that often glitter with beaded water hanging from the ceiling. There may also be a microbiological component to the gold-flecked appearance of these domes, beautiful to behold. Besides all that, Golden Dome is also another fine example of a long walking tube with some big pillars or divided passages. Lava Beds credits this cave with 2,229 feet of length, and it is one of the more popular caves.

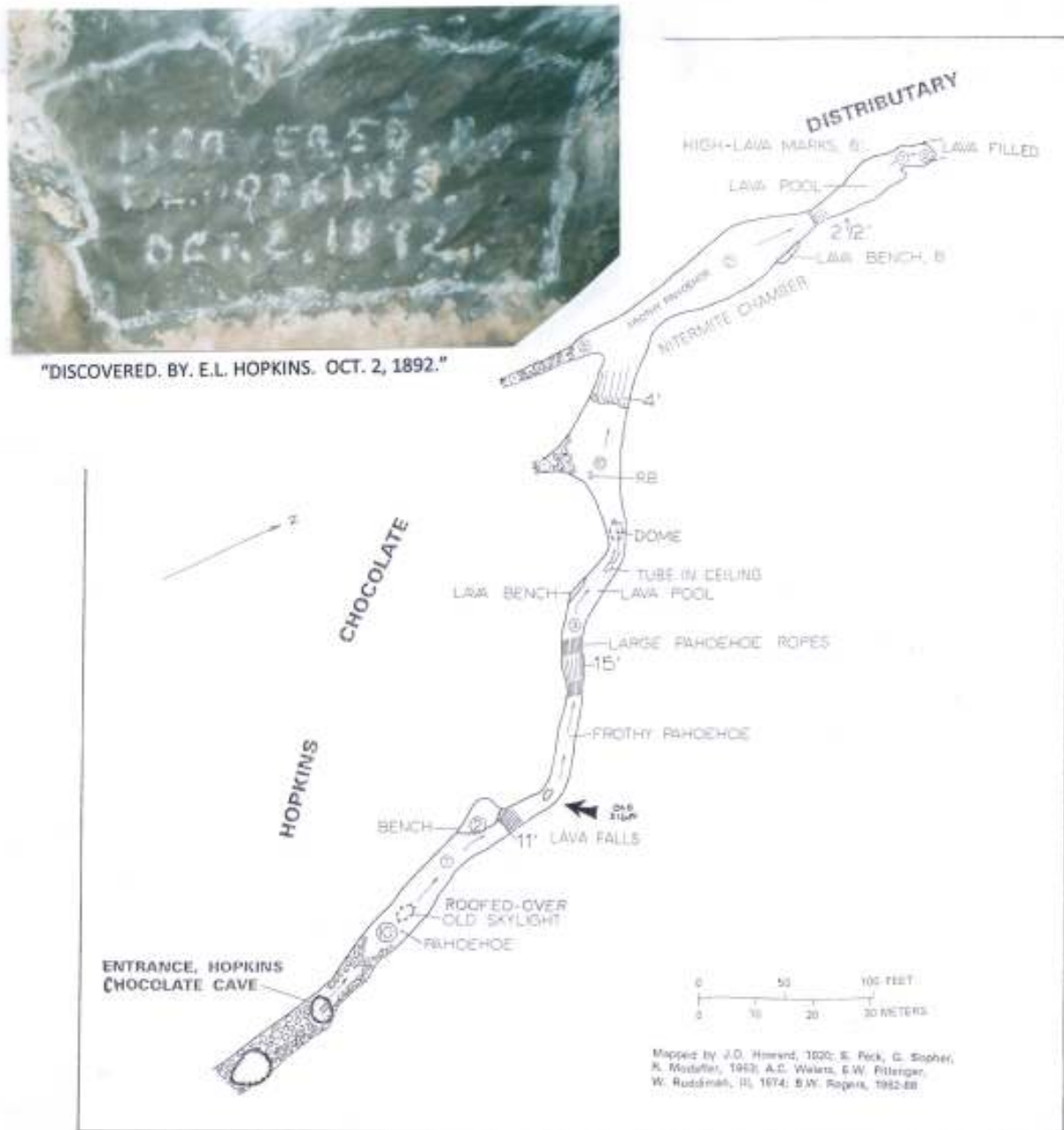


"A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers. The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one which flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold;"

Genesis 2:10-11

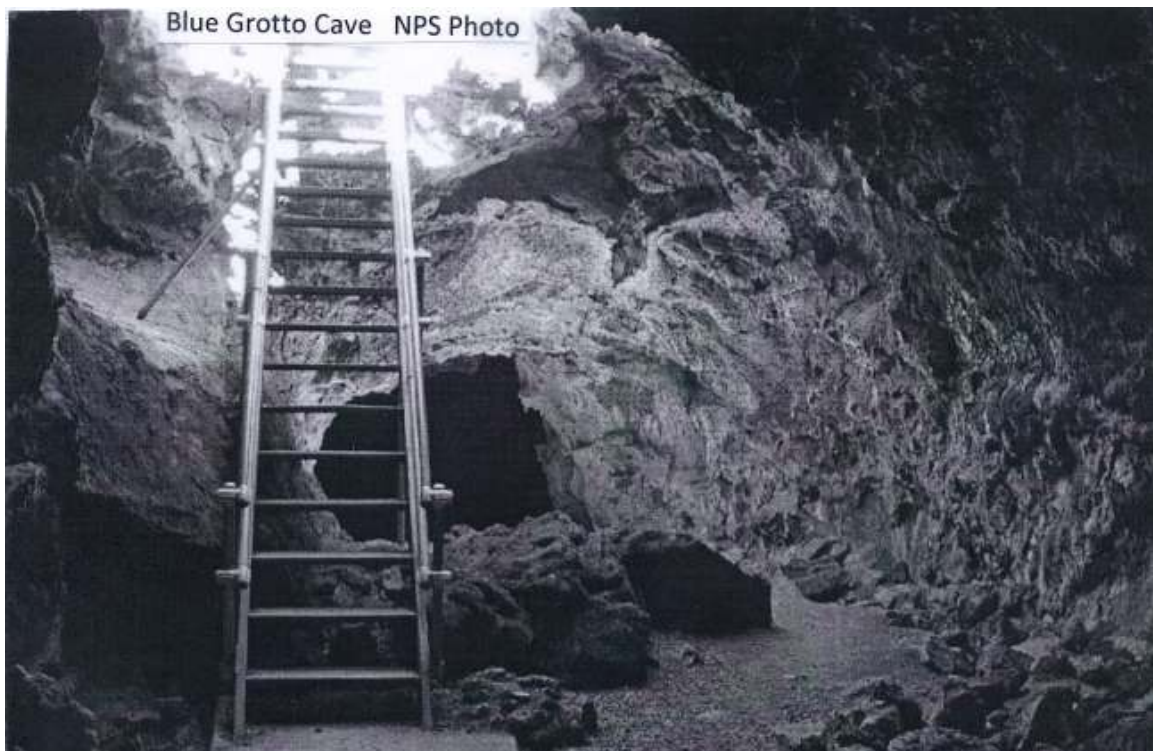
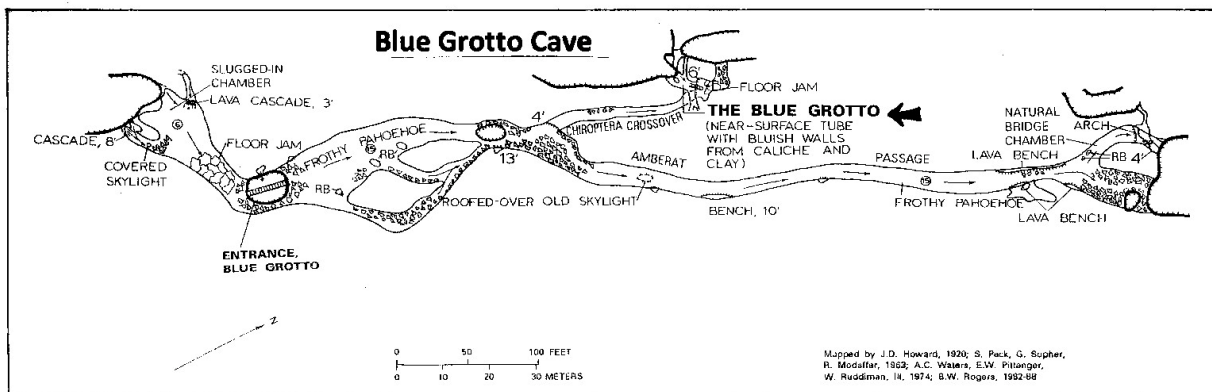
Hopkins Chocolate Cave

This one is especially popular with children who are intrigued with the idea of a chocolate cave. In addition to the signature chocolate-brown remelt, this cave has an interesting pillar with an historical inscription nearby. This white-on-chocolate sign looks like J.D. Howard's work, and it attributes the discovery of the cave to E.L. Hopkins in the 1890s. Beyond all that, the cave continues as another fine, long walking tube and good representative of the loop caves. Lava Beds gives it a length of 1405 feet.



Blue Grotto Cave

There are a number of Blue Grottos in the world. Perhaps the most famous is the Blue Grotto (Grotta Azzurra) on the Italian Island of Capri. Some say it was once inhabited by the Sirens of the Odyssey. Lava Beds has a Blue Grotto named by, you guessed it, J.D. Howard. A stairway leads down into some nice walking passages that wander around and connect with other stray entrances. When J.D. Howard painted his historic sign in the Blue Grotto of Blue Grotto Cave, he used blue paint. The USGS attributes blue color in the Grotto to bluish caliche and clay. My thought is that the sky is often blue out here in the Basin and Range deserts, where sometimes you can't remember your name, and maybe J.D. came out here a few too many times. Anyway, Lava Beds gives this cave a length of 1,541 feet.





Liz Wolff at the crossover in Catacombs

Catacombs Cave

"Catacombs Cave I named for its many branches and alcoves. It made me think of what the burial chambers under Rome might look like." J.D. Howard

J.D. Howard dug open, explored, named, and mapped this great cave, and I think it was his favorite. He later regretted that he didn't just cover it up again when he saw the wear and tear that occurred as the cave became more popular. However, many people have really enjoyed this cave, and can also say it is their favorite. Catacombs is the most likely Lava Beds cave for people to get lost in. This generally turns out fine, but once in a while somebody has a rough time of it. The cave is a complicated maze with over a mile of confusing passages, and only one entrance. If you can remember that the entrance is at the most uphill point, that might help you find your way out.

The regular catacombs tour goes down braided walking passages to the ladder near the midpoint of the cave. An interesting room is found at the top of the ladder, and you can look down through holes into lower levels. Catacombs has vertical as well as horizontal complexity. Most folks will then return to the entrance with their lives enriched by their walk through these beautifully sculptured and decorated passageways.

The back half of the cave is seemingly designed for die-hard cave crawlers. A large loop route is available as a caving challenge, with belly crawls that seem to go on and on forever. This is best done with full horizontal cave gear including knee pads and elbow pads, and someone familiar with the route. It may take several hours to get all the way around, going through the crossover at Cleopatras Tomb. Lava Beds has given Catacombs a length of 6803 feet. Teams led by Liz Wolff recently resurveyed the cave to a length of 8436 feet.

SEARCH ZONE MAP OF CATACOMBS CAVE

-
- Zone 4** (Beyond Crossover Passage Area)
- Zone 3** (Beneath Cave Loop Road Area)
- Zone 2** (Boxing Glove Area)
- Zone 1** (Entrance Area)
- Control Stations for search of Catacombs Cave by 6-member party**
- Control Point **1** is Entrance Control station.
 - Control Point **2** isolates Zone 1 (Entry Area) from remainder of cave. Enables search of Zone 1.
 - Control Points **3a** and **3b** isolate Zones 1 and 2 from remainder of cave. Enables search of Zone 2.
 - Control Point **4** isolates Zones 1, 2, and 3 from remainder of cave. Enables search of Zone 3.
 - Control Point **5** isolates Zone 4.
- LAUNDER UP TO BOXING GLOVE CHAMBER**
- Search protocols and cave zonation by William S. Frantz and John C. Tinsley, III Cave Research Foundation, Jan. 2005**
- Digital cartography by John Tinsley**

1. Control Point **1** is Entrance Control station.
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Enables search of Zone 1.
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Enables search of Zone 2.
4. Control Point **4** isolates Zones 1, 2, and 3 from remainder of cave.
Enables search of Zone 3.
5. Control Point **5** isolates Zone 4.
Enables search of Zone 4 and assembles searchers if evacuation is needed.

LADDER UP TO
BOXING GLOVE CHAMBER



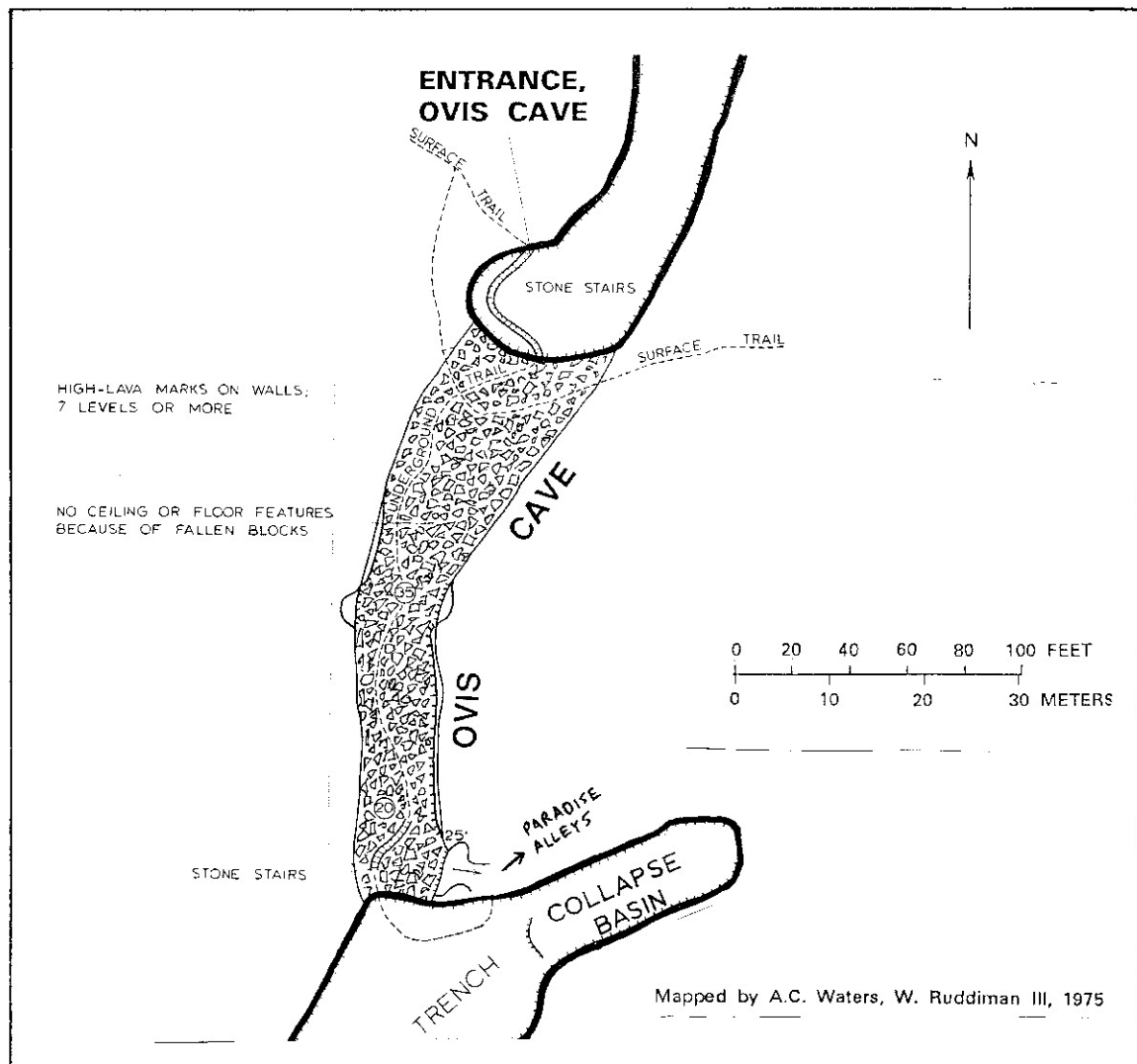
Source: Integrated Chomoran,
and Ise Survey 9/2 & 9/3, 1999
and 4/28/00 by Joe and Terry Maden

Search protocols and cave zonation by
William S. Frantz and John C. Tinsley, III
Cave Research Foundation, Jan. 2005

Digital cartography by John Tinsley
Adobe Illustrator v.9.0, January 2005

Ovis Cave

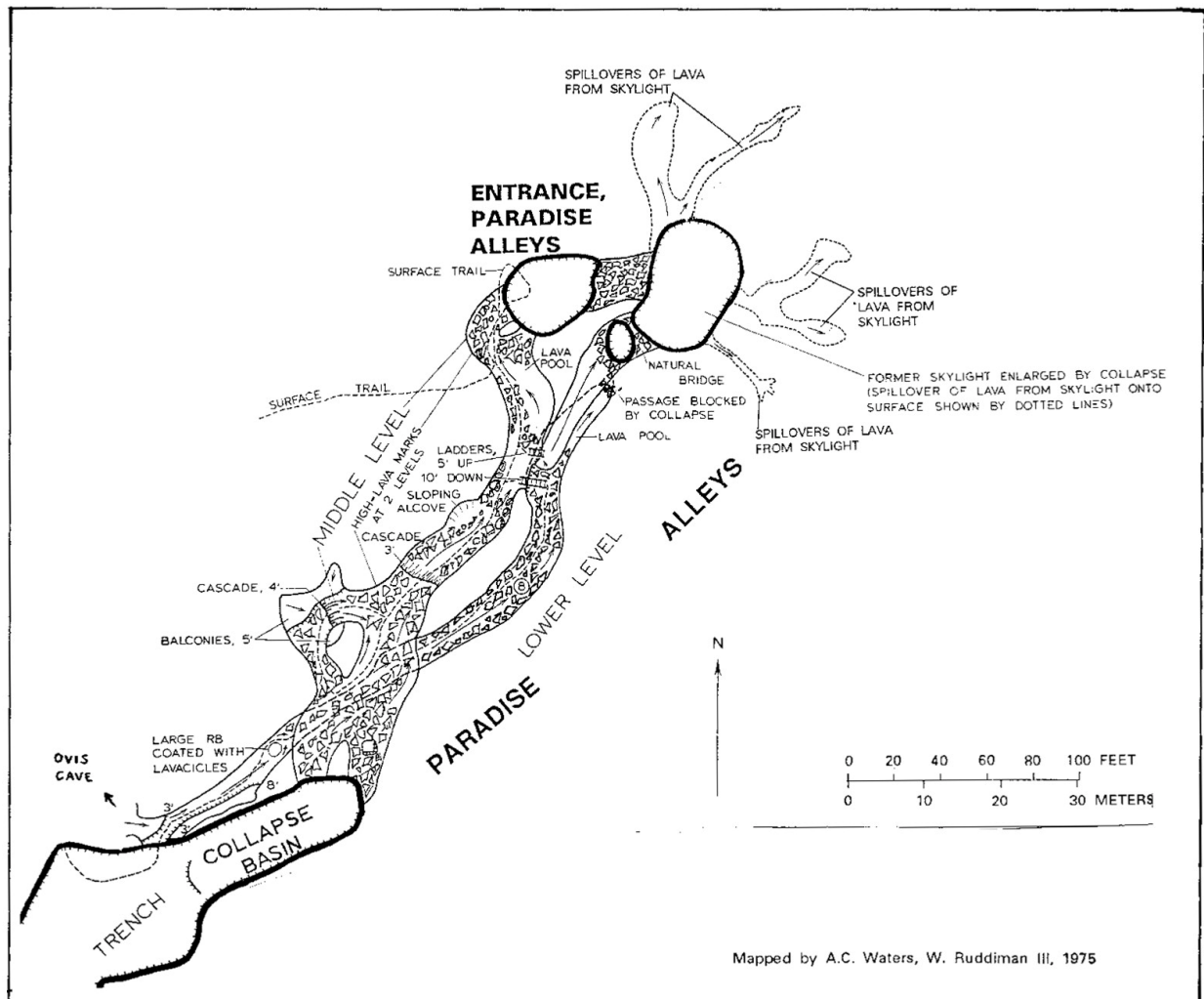
Ovis is the Latin word for sheep. J.D. Howard applied this name due to some bighorn sheep boney remains found in this ovine cave. The name was suggested by a visiting biologist named Vernon Bailey. Ovis Cave thus joins a short list of Siskiyou County caves that contain(ed) bighorn bones. That list also includes Pluto's and Skull Caves. Bighorn sheep are currently extinct in the county. Efforts to reintroduce them have failed, in part due to diseases related to domestic sheep. Ovis Cave is a segment of typical larger scale lava tube borehole, with breakdown everywhere. A trail goes through end to end. Lava Beds gives it a length of 216 feet. The cave is often closed for the sake of the bats.



"What man of you, if he has one sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out?" Matthew 12:11

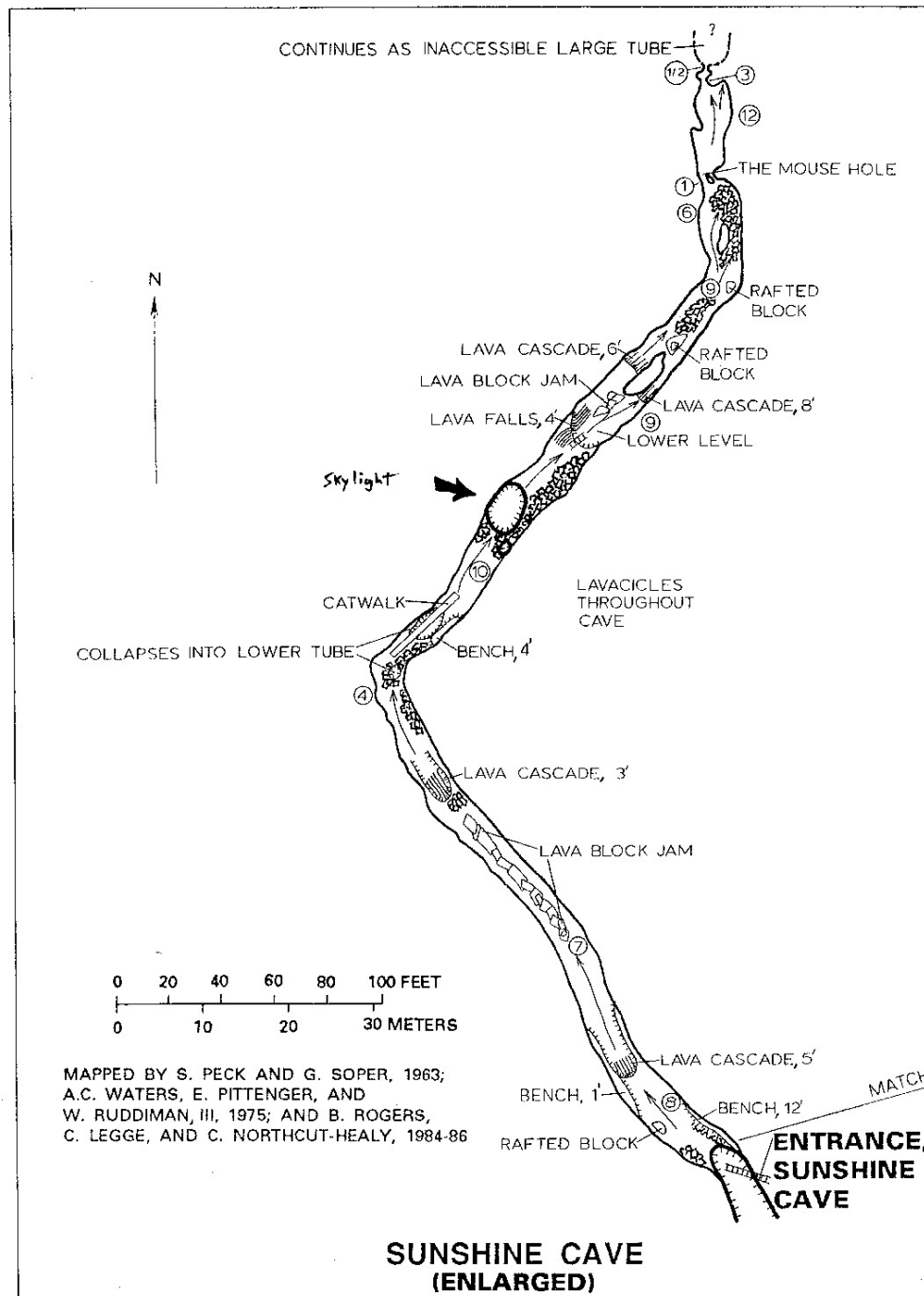
Paradise Alleys Cave

Lava Beds gives a length of 1,033 feet for this cave, making Paradise Alleys another one of the elite caves of Siskiyou County that pass the 1,000 foot mark. This cave connects with Ovis Cave to make it even longer. Like Ovis Cave, Paradise Alleys is often closed for bats. When open, this cave features some smoother surfaces, interesting routes, and stairways. Ovis and Paradise Alleys provide a good place to compare a big, broken up master tube passage (Ovis) with a much more elegant overflow distribution passage (Paradise Alleys). J.D. Howard named the cave and must have been enchanted with the heavenly qualities found in these alley ways.



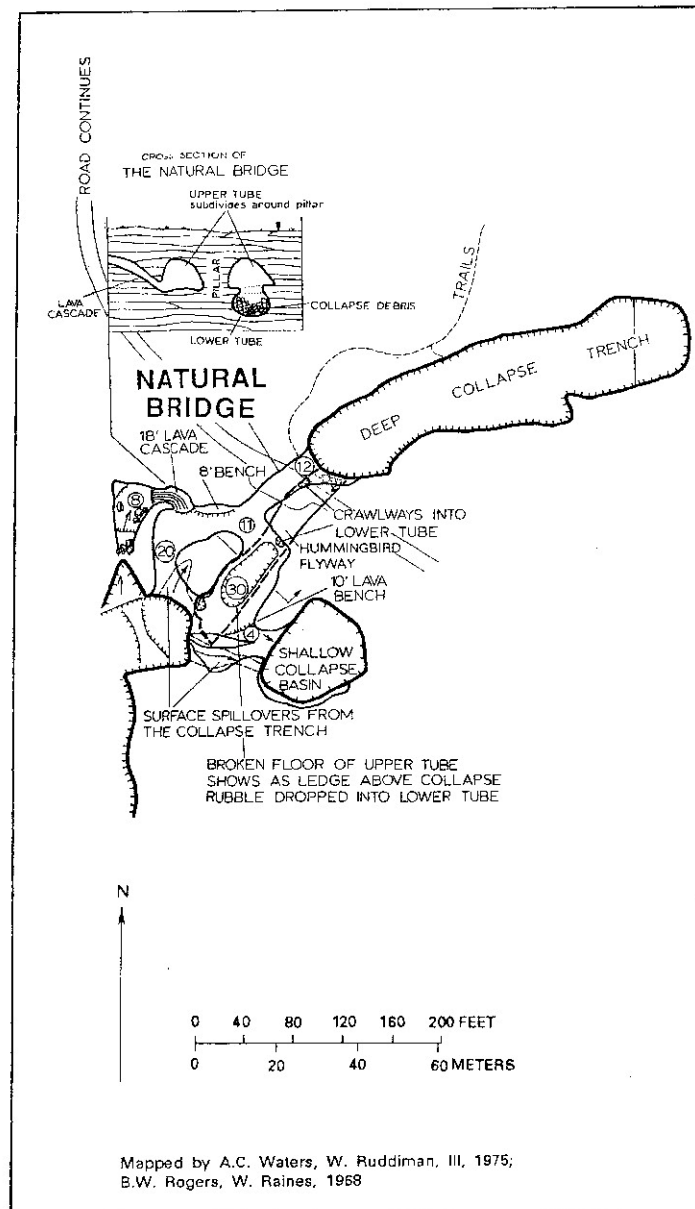
Sunshine Cave

By loop standards, Sunshine is one of the shorter caves. Lava Beds grants it a length of 466 feet. Whatever it may lack in footage, it makes up for in charm. A developed trail goes most of the way to the tiny lead at the far end, with more passage visible beyond. The cave was named for the sunlight that comes in through the entrances, including a scenic skylight well down the tube. "I named Sunshine Cave because it is lit up most of the day by sunshine." J.D. Howard



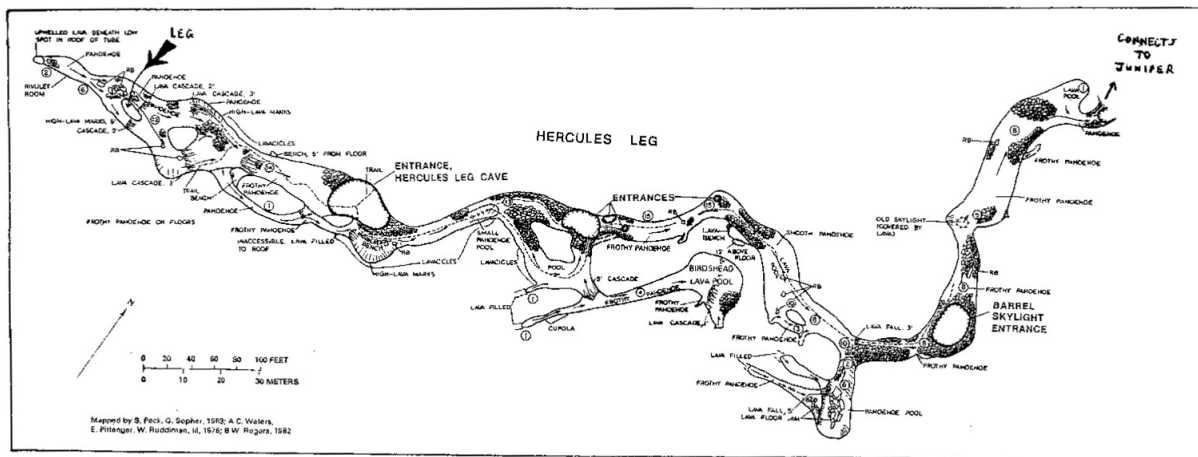
Natural Bridge

Natural bridge is actually a cave. To qualify as a cave, it must be longer than it is wide. Lava Beds gives Natural Bridge a length of 659 feet, so it easily qualifies as a cave. I don't think it is visited as much as some of the others. The name might throw some people off. For another thing, this cave may be closed for the sake of the bats. Thirdly, the cave is wilder and less developed, lacking the usual CCC trail. A person has to move across broken rock to get around, without the physical ease and psychological effect of the established route. The cave features a gigantic pillar with big passages going around it, and it also has some interesting complexity. It may not be a bridge, but it is all natural. J.D. Howard originally named it "Compound Bridge", a perfect example of how this guy could consider a humongous cave to be a bridge, just because daylight illuminates much of it through the large wide open entrances.



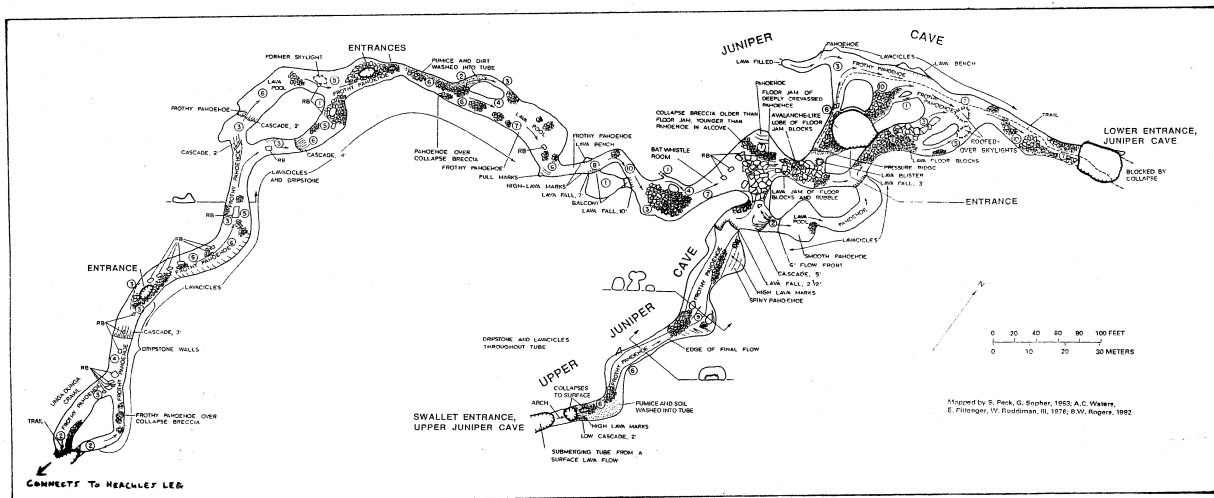
Hercules Leg Cave

The main entrance reaches an intermediate position in the cave, with old CCC routes going both up and down the flow. Upflow, some very impressive pillars are found. The last pillar is the actual singular leg of Hercules. There is a low lead at the end. Downflow the cave continues past interesting side passages and more entrances, and eventually comes to the connection with Juniper Cave. Most of the main routes in Hercules Leg Cave are pleasant walking passages. The Hercules Leg / Juniper through trip does involve some stooping, bending, and even crawling to make it all the way. Lava Beds attributes Hercules Leg with a length of 1,948 feet, or 4,310 feet when combined with Juniper. The USGS reports 4,810 feet for the two caves combined.



Juniper Cave

This cave was named and explored by J.D. Howard. He named it for the Western Juniper trees, *Juniperus occidentalis occidentalis*, which are common at Lava Beds. In fact, they are currently considered to be invasive water hogs and are now under active suppression. Over on the far east side of the loop, Juniper Cave is less visited than some, and retains some rougher and wilder characteristics. The main entrance is down at the mazier lower end of the cave. There are over half a dozen entrances, including one near the connection point with Hercules Leg Cave. The connection route was cleared by the CCC many years ago, and this resulted in a combined Juniper / Hercules Leg Cave 4,310 feet in length, definitely one of Lava Bed's longer caves. Bill Devereaux noticed an early morning beam of sunlight related to a petroglyph near the time of the equinox. However, some doubt has been raised about the authenticity of the petroglyph. Lava Beds gives a length of 2,362 feet for Juniper Cave.



Here is one of my favorite Lava Beds caves – definitely top five. This cave has something for everyone. The trail route runs between the upper and lower entrances. Both entrances have their own parking pull-out. The through trip is very pleasant, with a new, interesting surprise around every corner. Sentinel cave has some size, representing the main line lava artery through the cave loop area. Most of the other loop caves, spacious and wonderful as they might be, are only upper level overflow distributaries. Sentinel, however, proudly presents a segment of the master tube. This cave features internal pits, multiple levels, perched side passages, and a beautifully complex skylight area. Some parts of the cave may have seasonal bat closures. Please respect these restrictions. J.D. Howard named the cave and his painted signs, some faded with time, can still be seen near the entrances. Apparently, a prominent rock near the bottom of a stairway is the sentinel of Sentinel Cave. Lava Beds gives this one a length of 3,280 feet. Golden Gate Grotto says 4,030 feet, based on their survey work in 1987.



The Twelve Labors of the Loop

Just as Hercules had twelve labors, here is a quest for cavers to accomplish in the caves of the Cave Loop at Lava Beds. For help in finding the various locations inside the caves, look for the large black arrows which have been added to the cave maps. If you can complete all of these tasks, then you can be the Hercules of Lava Beds. The specific challenges are as follows:

1. Check the water level, if any, in the bottom of Indian Well Cave.
2. Experience the artistic electric lighting in Mushpot Cave.
3. Pretend to drink from the Lava Brook of Lava Brook Cave.
4. Pass by Jupiter's Thunderbolt in Thunderbolt Cave.
5. Gaze upon the Golden Dome of Golden Dome Cave.
6. Read the old inscription near the little pillar in Hopkins Chocolate Cave.
7. Find the Blue Grotto of Blue Grotto Cave.
8. Peer into the hole at the top of the stairs deep inside Catacombs Cave.
9. Stand under the bright skylight in Sunshine Cave.
10. Circumnavigate Hercules Leg in Hercules Leg Cave.
11. Complete the entrance-to-entrance through trip of Sentinel Cave.
12. Pick up a modern trash item from inside a cave and remove it.

If you are able to successfully complete all twelve of these tasks, you will be in position to receive recognition for your accomplishment. You will need to seek out Zeus Rogers, oops, I meant to say, Bruce Rogers. Tell him what you did and show him your trash item. He will then place his hand on your head and say "Ah, well done, you are the Hercules of Lava Beds". You might have to remind him about what he is supposed to say. If you can't find Zeus, I mean Bruce, you might have to find a Monument Ranger or other official to stand in and perform the solemn pronouncement. It is not easy to be Hercules, it might take multiple trips. Good luck!

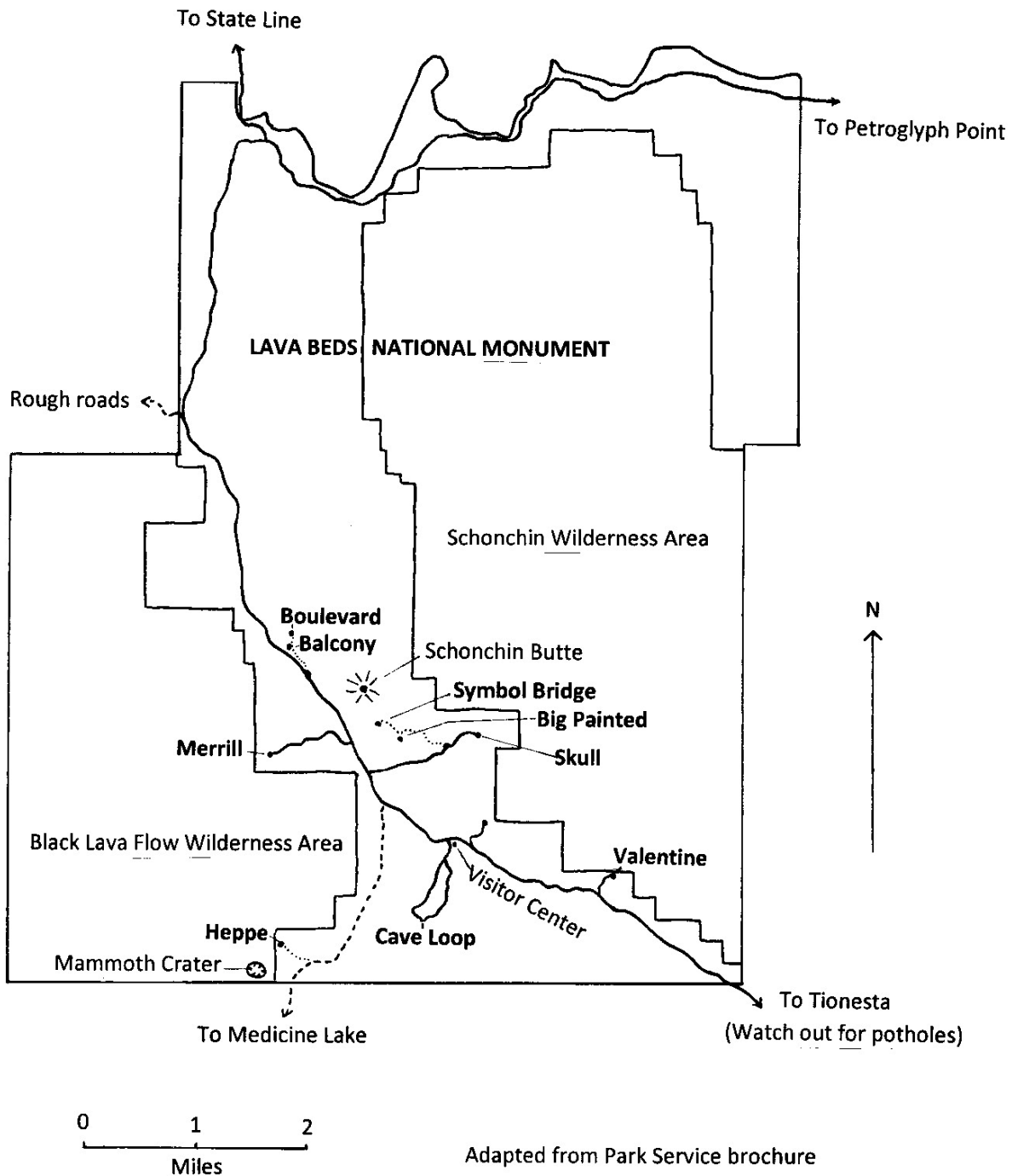
*"... when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you."
Isaiah 43:2*



Examples of Lavacicles NPS Photo

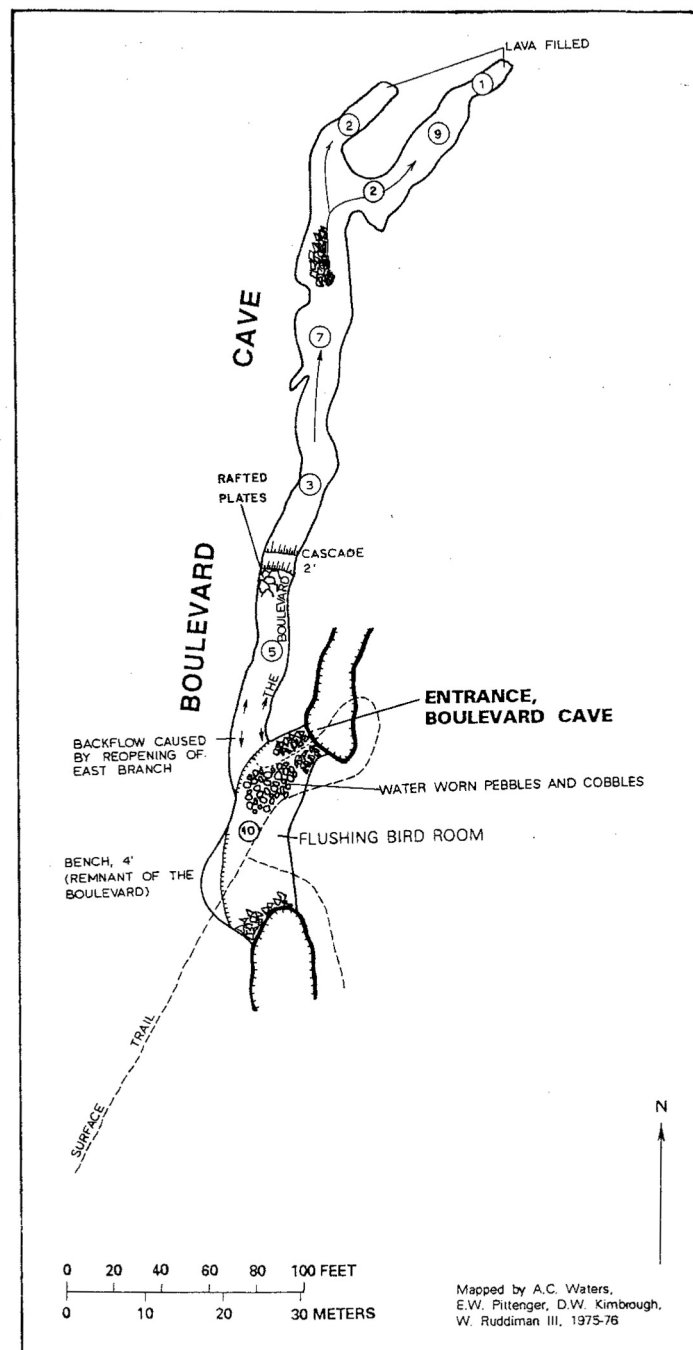
Caves Beyond the Loop

Eight caves are described as they occur counter-clockwise through the Monument. Reaching the trailheads generally involves a short, scenic drive on Monument roads. The entrances are either very near the trailhead (Merrill, Skull, and Valentine) or just a short walk down a marked path (Boulevard/Balcony, Symbol Bridge/Big Painted, and Heppe). All of these caves are interesting, and some have features not seen so much on the loop, such as pictographs or perennial ice. All are worth visiting, as your time allows.



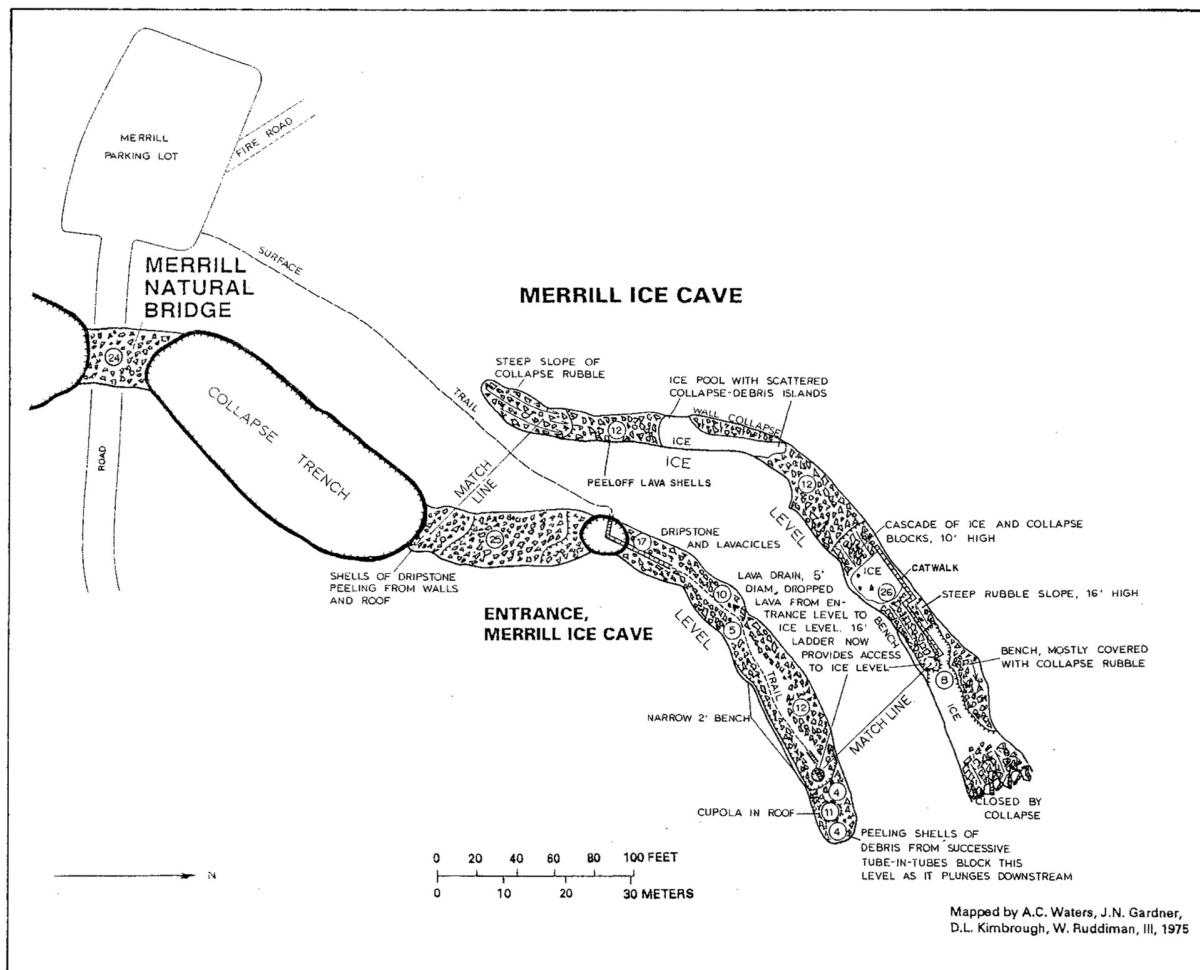
Boulevard Cave

This cave is at the end of the short trail, and contains a more discreet and organized lava tube avenue. J.D. Howard named the cave for this slightly elevated and intact passage with an extremely smooth and level floor. Touring this cave requires a bit of crawling, so kneepads are a good idea. There are some interesting rooms in the back, and the caving is more intimate and contained compared to some of the other caves. The Boulevard is the special attraction at this cave. The length of the cave has been given at 759 feet.



Merrill Ice Cave

This cave is found at the end of another spur road, this one to the west. Merrill Ice Cave was closed for awhile when there was a very rapid melting event involving a perennial ice floor down in the second level. Apparently things have been restabilized and reconfigured enough so that the cave may be open for visitation again. Like Skull Cave, Merrill is very cold down at the bottom of the stairs, a very pleasant and refreshing place to be on a hot day in the desert. A steep, handy ladder-like stairway goes down through a small hole to the lower level, where some ice may still be seen here or there. Some horizons (bath tub rings) can be traced high along the walls and invite speculations. The name "Merrill" was applied to this cave in 1938, after Charles Henry Merrill who donated property to the Monument. The cave was known from earlier times to trappers, and folks on holiday outings to enjoy the "air conditioned" cave and to use some of the ice for making ice cream. The big hole in the ice floor started opening up in November, 1997. It quickly grew until the entire flat ice mass was completely undermined and evaporated away, except for a few small remnants. This situation remains under observation by Monument staff and earth scientists, and is all very interesting. The total passage length for Merrill Ice Cave is 650 feet.





Merrill Cave – Note Ice Skates NPS Photo

Symbol Bridge

“There is a natural bridge at the Southeast base of Schonchin’s Butte, having red, white, and black writings on both walls, also a picture of an Indian Head and a Spanish Priest with a ruffled collar, on the south wall. I named this bridge, Symbol Bridge, 1917.” J.D. Howard

A little further out, at the end of the trail, is Symbol Bridge, also well worth the effort needed to visit. The symbolic art in this cave is generally less faded and easier to see. Just like at Big Painted Cave, a trail goes down the sink and into the cave. Again, it is best to stay on the trail. It is intentionally routed to showcase the various panels from advantageous viewing positions. Even more prehistoric art can be readily inspected by taking the drive out to Petroglyph Point where there is a huge number of glyphs on display along the base of a cliff. The Symbol Bridge and Big Painted sites are especially unique because they are cave related. The cave passage length at Symbol Bridge is 148 feet. It easily qualifies as a cave despite J.D. Howard’s “bridge” designation. Remember, this is the same guy that decided that the big old cave at Natural Bridge on the loop was a bridge.



These caves are getting pretty close to Schonchin Butte

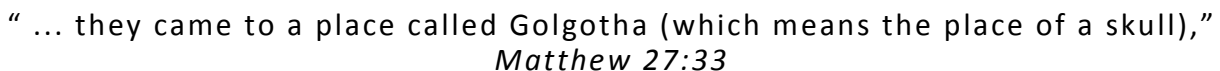
Big Painted Cave

Along the spur road to Skull Cave, the trailhead for Big Painted Cave and Symbol Bridge is readily indicated. An easy trail about one mile long goes to the two caves that feature prehistoric rock art, most prominently near the entrances to the caves. Big Painted is the first cave. A side trail goes down into the sinkhole and into the large entrance passage along slopes of breakdown. Most of the art is in the form of black pictographs. Much of the pigment has faded quite a bit, and is not always easy to see. Give your eyes a chance to adjust, and take some time with the various panels. Some of the patterns, shapes, and details will start to become more apparent. Big Painted Cave has only one entrance, so you will exit the same way you came in. It is best to stay on the trail. The faint remnants of this art are very old and valuable, and deserve extra respect and care. It is a great privilege that this archeology site is made available for our inspection, and it is well worth the short hike required. The total length of Big Painted Cave is 266 feet.



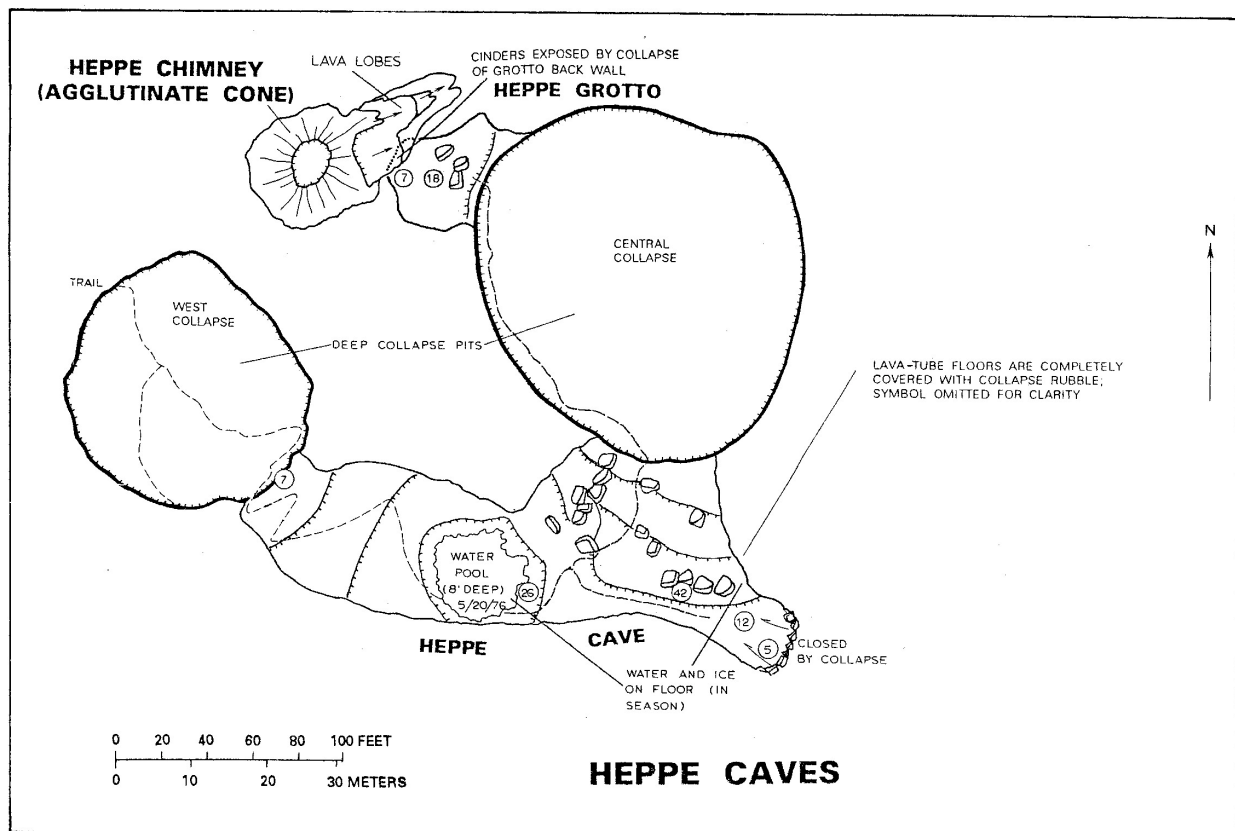
The “sunglasses” pictograph is the easiest to find in Big Painted.

This is the big one. The entrance passage is impressively large. Available light photos can be taken in this passage, with little tiny people along the trail for scale. The cave gets vertical in the back. Bighorn sheep skulls and bones were once found at the bottom of these drops, along with other remains, including human. Today, stairways go down to the lower level where an ice floor can be viewed through a gate. In the 1960s, visitors were allowed out on the ice. I can remember a vast number of perfect circles melted into the icy floor, all from the hot undersides of burning Coleman lanterns. People would set them down on the ice. Skull Cave is accessed by a paved side road that ends next to the entrance. Schonchin Butte is nearby. J.D. Howard visited on March 12, 1920, and seems to have been pleased with the cave. It has size, depth, and multiple levels. Skull Cave is credited with a length of 1,000 feet. E.L. Hopkins first spotted the cave from the top of Crescent Butte. He explored it and named it as early as the 1890s.



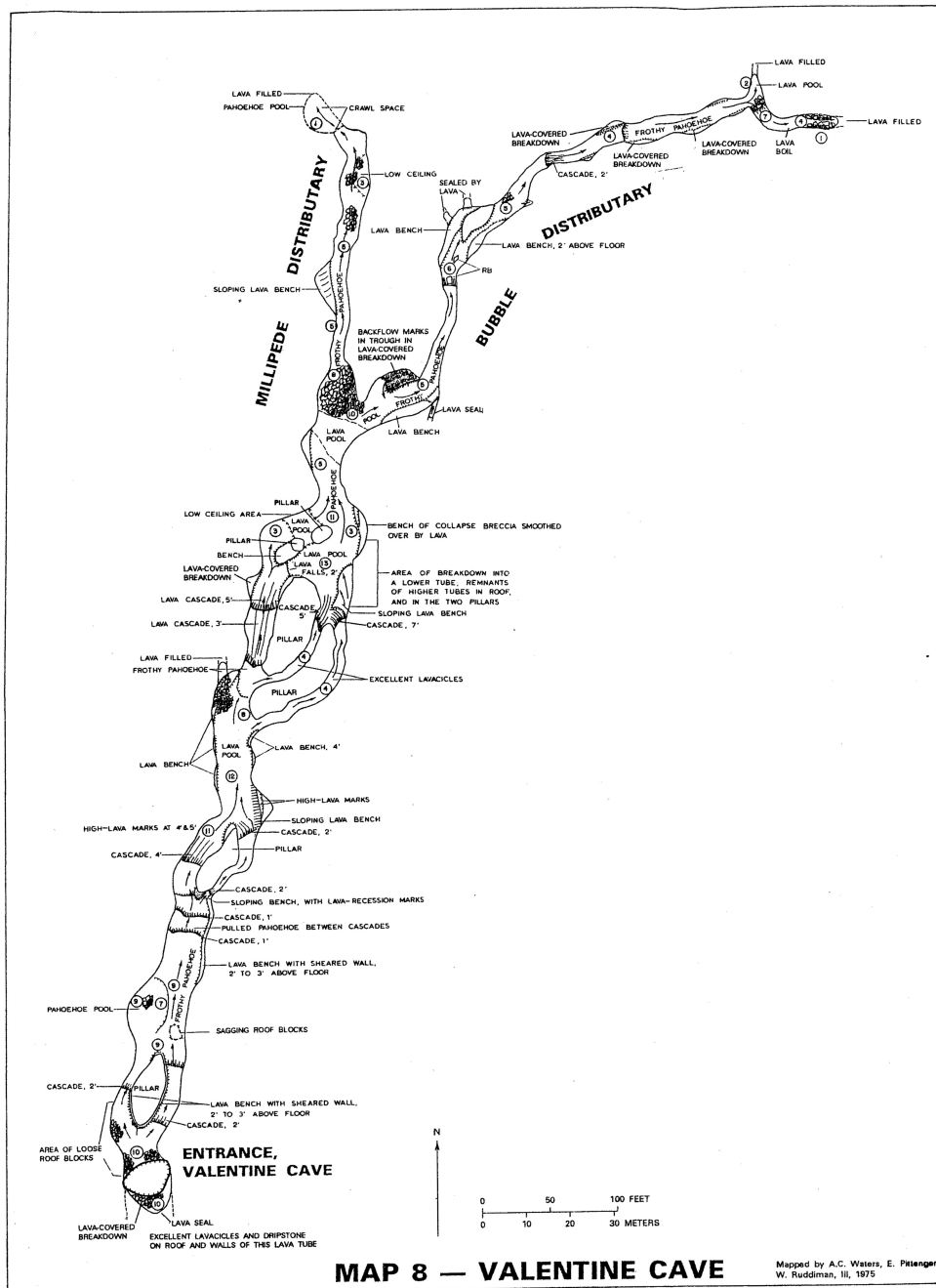
Heppe Cave

The trailhead is found a few miles up the dirt road that goes south to Medicine Lake. The trail goes about one half mile to reach a site with very little dark zone caving. What it lacks in darkness, it makes up for in Geology. First of all, the scale of the collapse pits and cave segments is quite impressive. An excellent example of a hornito can be appreciated in position directly over an underground space. The hornito is called Heppe Chimney, and the space underneath is an alcove called Heppe Chimney Cave, or Heppe Grotto. Apparently, the pit inside the hornito is blocked with rocks before it connects to the cave underneath. A nice underground trail makes it easy to tour Heppe Cave. There is an ice or water pooling area inside the cave. In 2008, this pool had completely drained and dried. J.D. Howard applied the Heppe name, after Earnest and Bertha Heppe, who were homesteading in this area. Their wagon road became the trail to the cave, and their access to water (the pool in the cave) became the trail that today enters Heppe Cave. The length of Heppe Cave proper is 170 feet.



Valentine Cave

This is a very lovely and popular cave located off the paved road that goes east from the Visitor Center. A short spur road ends at the entrance to the cave. Ross R. Musselman is credited with the discovery of Valentine Cave on February 14, 1933 (Valentine's Day). It starts off with some grand and scenic pillars, then branches and regroupes in a chamber-like pooling area. The cave continues further along in mostly walking passage. There are some optional crawlways and a hidden side passage that add to the intrigue. Children love this cave. The length is 1635 feet.



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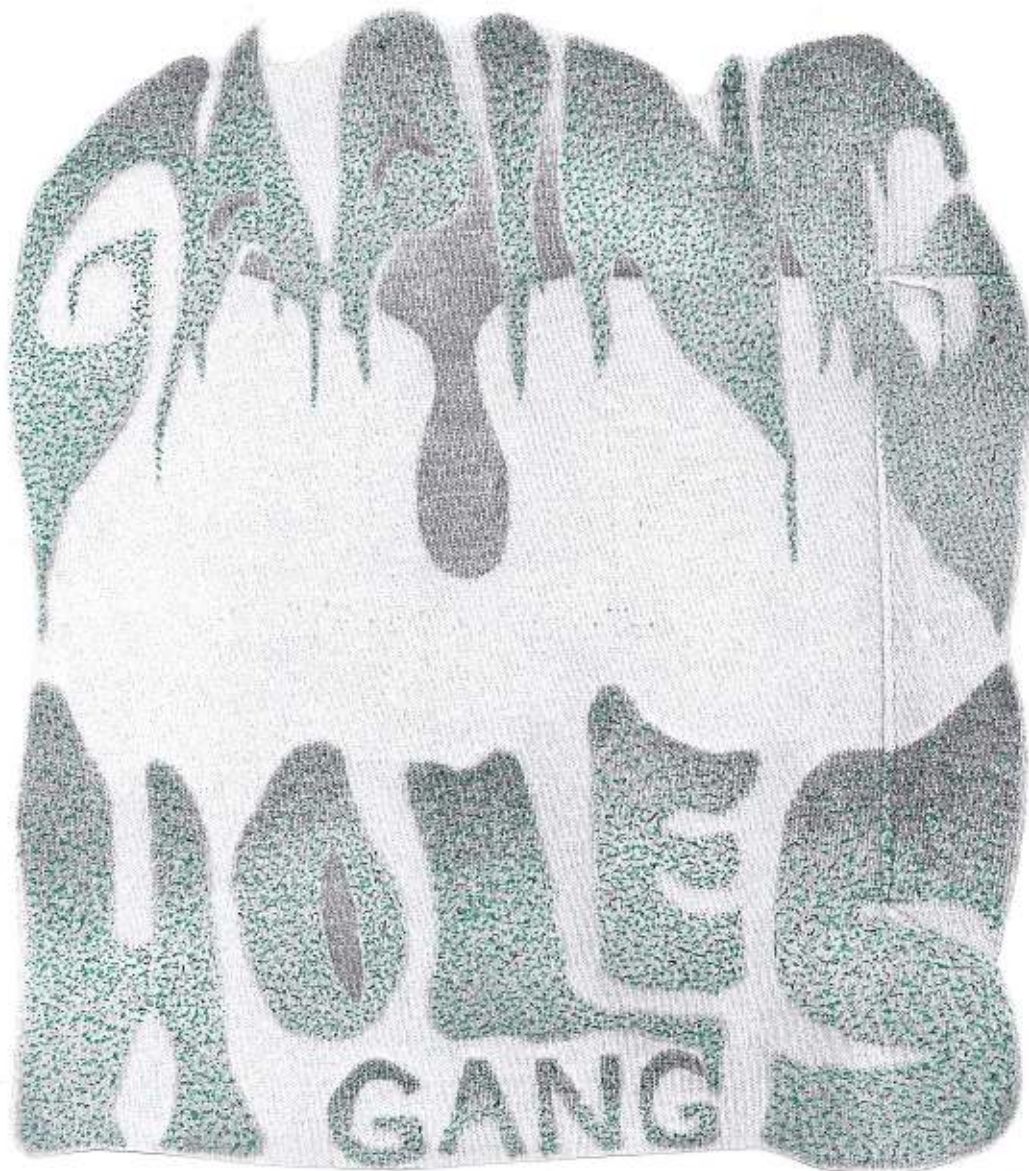
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We're busted,

we're lazy



We're caving

like crazy