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Diving in Jacob's Well By Dan Misiaszek

The San Marcos Area Recovery Team (SMART) is a non-profit organization made up of primarily police officers, firefighters and paramedics. We have been diving in Jacob's Well since 1995 and originally asked permission from the property owners to dive in the cave in the event the team needed to do a recovery operation. Our cave divers are certified through the National Speleological Society Cave Diving Sections NSS-CDS, The National Association of Cave Divers NACD, and the International Association of Nitrox and Technical Divers IANTD. The team has a strict [cave diving policy](#). We wanted to know the layout of the cave, restrictions, hazards, etc, before we had to enter for a possible recovery operation. We were granted this permission and gave one of the property owners a video tape recording of the dive. This was the first time any of the landowners had seen the inside of the cave and they were very pleased. This began a long positive relationship with the landowners that continue to this day.

One of the land owners formed the Wimberley Valley

Watershed Association and brought in biologists, hydrologists, chemist, landscapers, US Fish and Wildlife, Parks and Wildlife, environmental protection agencies, along with numerous other individuals to study and protect the cave. We were routinely gathering water samples for analysis at Southwest Texas State University at the Edwards Underground Aquifer research center. The WVWA asked SMART to continue getting water samples, map the cave, produce some more informational videos, and answer an important question - Is Jacob's Well part of the Trinity Aquifer or part of Edwards? To prove or disprove this, the biologist wanted pictures of some of the species in the well and wanted to see if there were blind salamanders or San Marco s salamanders present. If there were, the cave would undoubtedly be tied to the Edwards Aquifer, the only know place where these species exist.

During the "big" South Texas flood of 1998, much of the gravel was blown out of the cave or pushed aside making the previously impassable restrictions passable even without side mounted scuba gear.

The team extracted tons of gravel with an airlift; most of the gravel extracted was blown out into the second





Jacobs Well Preserve

Jacob's Well is a perpetual artesian spring, pumping thousands of gallons of fresh water per minute to form Cypress Creek. Considered a sacred place by native Americans and the heart of Wimberley by early settlers, today Jacob's Well supports a habitat rich in wildlife and plant life, including several endangered species.

Growing pressures on the aquifer from Wimberley's expanding population coupled with increasing sources of pollution are endangering both the flow and water quality of Jacob's Well and Cypress Creek. Therefore, Wimberly Valley Watershed Association (WVWA) is creating the Jacob's Well Preserve to protect the land around the well and to educate our community about management practices that will sustain this invaluable natural resource. [Click here to go the Wimberly Valley Watershed Association - Jacob's Well website.](#)

chamber by floodwaters, and the team it sucked out with the airlift before it could slide down into the third chamber. Originally we thought the gravel was dropped in from the top during the flood, but later learned the gravel was blown out of lower chambers during the flood. We had no reason to penetrate any further until the WVWA association asked for our help in their study and the search for endangered species. We knew for a long time that the fourth chamber was penetrable

but did not see the need until this study.

For the sake of this report, we are calling the first chamber the main shaft that drops straight down for 25 feet, tapers off to 30 feet then stair steps down to 55 feet. The 55-foot level is the beginning of the second chamber and goes underneath the false chimney. The second chamber is similar a long funnel that brings us to the first restriction at 80 feet, the entrance into the third chamber. This restriction is minor and you can pass through without even touching the sidewalls, but you will still scrape the bottom gravel slightly. An occasional scuba tank bang on the ceiling is heard. The third chamber is a small room with a gravel floor. The floor is unstable moving gravel that should be avoided all cost and the room is about the size of an average small apartment bathroom, with a tall ceiling. At the end of the third chamber and still in line with the second chamber is a long tunnel with larger rocks. This is a tight restriction where we had to deflate your wings (buoyancy control device) to get through, but still passable without gear removal. About 15 feet down this tunnel is the tightest restriction. The ceiling has a "knife edge" type formation from left to right and fine gravel below it. This is the tightest restriction in the cave and the cause for most concern. Immediately after



Dan Misiaszek navigates through a tight squeeze between the 2nd and 3rd chambers.

Photographs of Jacob's Well - By SMART Divers

[Jwell2](#) - Looking straight down into the first chamber

[Jwell3](#) - David Baker and Layne Hendrick stand on the retaining wall next to the cave on cypress creek

[Jwell4](#) - SMART cave diver Jim Price contemplates the next cave dive

[Jwell6](#) - Kathy Misiaszek entering the second chamber.

[Turtle1](#) - A victim of the cave is found 70 feet down

[Up view JW](#) - Looking up into the cavern zone of the first chamber as Kathy descends down

[Down view](#) - Looking down into the first chamber, SMART Divers prepare a suction tube to remove debris and gravel

[Drysuits](#) - Divers Dan & Kathy Misiaszek ready their dry suits for a cave dive into Jacob's Well.

[Bob&Ian](#) - Divers Bob Klett and Ian Rosen read their equipment to help take measurements in the first chamber.

already placed a permanent line down to the bottom of the 3rd chamber on previous dives and this time took the reel into the 4th. After passing through the restrictions

this "knife edge" formation, the cave opens up both in height and width. This leads into the beautiful 4th chamber and all gravel stops. The limestone karsts formations are fantastic however a fine silt and clay now cover the bottom.

For those certified cave divers reading this report, I compare the 4th chamber at Jacob's well to the first few hundred feet of Madison Blue springs in Florida. On October 10th Kathy Misiaszek, Jim Price, and I entered the cave with the plan to penetrate into the 4th chamber. We have all dove the cave before, planned extensively, and had a well-trained topside team. We had

without incident, I began to videotape (Hi-8mm) the 4th chamber. This is a large wide room with about a 12-foot ceiling height (after leaving the tunnel) with a large key shaped hole in the floor. The last restriction was at 102 feet and this large room was now a beautiful site. We inflated our wings and hovered over the black hole in the floor. As I videotaped, I first noticed one femur bone, then a second, and as I descended into the keyhole shaped tunnel, I could see a heavily corroded scuba tank and wetsuit. It was obvious we had stumbled upon some human remains. The beginning of the bones were in 113 feet of water and were spread out over 15 feet of the bottom at a slanted angle going down into the keyhole tunnel at a depth of 130 feet. At the bottom of the tunnel lay the corroded scuba tank with attached regular and visible hoses. The tank was still attached to a shorty "beaver tail" style wet suit with weight belt. We were pleased to see that the cave continues on well past the 4th chamber.

We left our reel tied up to a limestone formation near the first femur bone found. We thought it was a possibility that we might find remains and had already planned for such an event. We had decided that if we did find remains, they would be left untouched and only video taped in following with the general rules of evidence. This was done and we turned the dive after using less than 1/3 of our air, ascended to the 1st chamber and began our decompression. We had two support divers in the cavern zone that collected our stage bottles from us and turned on the surface supplied nitrox lines for our decompression.

As REQUIRED by law upon the discovery of human remains, we notified the Hays County Sheriff's

Department of the find and gave them a copy of the video. Our research on the cave indicated that two drivers, Mark Brashier and Kenneth Maupin were reported missing in Jacob's Well on September 9th, 1979. They are two of 8 divers known to have died in the underwater cave. Don Dibble, a recovery diver, was almost killed in a gravel slide attempting to recover the two bodies the following day in 1979. A gravel slide in the third chamber tapped Don 90 feet underwater until safety divers could reach and free him. Don ran out of air and safety divers brought Don's lifeless body to the surface. Don survived but suffered barotraumas when his stomach ruptured in the unconscious ascent to the surface as he was brought out. He spent 10 days recovering in the hospital after abdominal surgery. In 1981 during a rain fed rapid flow discharge of the cave, the wetsuit of Mark Brashiers floated to the surface and onto the bank of Cypress Creek. Upon this discovery, divers re-entered the cave and recovered some bones and a skull that had washed out of the forth chamber tunnel. The remains were later positively identified through dental records as those of Mark Brashiers.

Ken Maupin was never found or recovered despite the best effort of local recovery divers and a professional dive team from Houston that spent a week removing gravel in an attempt to locate the bodies. We felt that during the flood of 98, the bones and gear of Maupin must have been ejected out of the well and we were somewhat surprised to find some human remains in the cave.

The local media in San Marcos and Wimberley picked up on the story and it soon became a media frenzy. One reporter with the Houston Chronicle took it upon himself to locate and notify the Maupin family of the find even

though at the time we had not recovered any bones yet nor had a positive identification on the remains. I had received a total of 64 phone calls in the next two days as indicated on my caller ID readout. The Maupin family, who knew Don Dibble very well, called him the next day after hearing some wild rumors. The Maupin's had sent get-well cards and flowers to Don while he was recovering in the hospital in 1979. Don told the Maupin family this accurate story of the accidental find and their anxieties were calmed. They also said that they wished to receive the remains of their son and find closure. The Hays County Sheriff's Department agreed and asked our team to recover the skeletal remains and dive gear.

On October 12th the SMART Cave diving team again entered into the cave in an effort to recover the skeletal remains and scuba gear. The press had invaded the small Wimberley community and Sheriff's Department deputies placed yellow police line tape around an access area to allow the dive team room to operate. We appointed Don Dibble as our designated spokesperson since he knew the cave history and had personal knowledge of the Maupin family, our dive team, and the challenges ahead. The divers returned safely to the surface with some of the remains after a 108-minute dive. The media was ever present and looking for remains, which we had in a mesh, bag and put in a red plastic bag while still underwater and out of view. The media saw nothing but a well protected red bag being lifted out of the water and delivered to the Hays County Sheriff's Department. Due to some heavy silt conditions during the dive, we were unable to collect all the remains and dive gear until the following day on a second dive. The safety of the team is always our first priority and silt out conditions prevented the team from recovering all the

remains on a single dive. Don remained as our spokes person and handled the media.

Many thanks to the support divers and topside team which included: Kye Kennedy, Don White, Don Dibble, Teresa Dibble, Wade Parham, John Moseley, Tammy Moseley, and to the DIVE SHOP for all their support. A special thanks to Wade for his excellent photography and video coverage of the topside events. Our thoughts and prayers go out to the Maupin and Brashier families who suffered this tragedy in 1979 and had the wound opened again with the discovery of the remains on October 10, 2000. On October 30, the skeletal remains were positively identified as Kent Maupin and the remains were delivered to the Maupin family. The family held a private memorial service in Pasadena, Texas and put closure to the 21-year ordeal. Please read our [cave diving policy](#) to prevent any further needless deaths in this and other underwater caves.



We planned extensively for the recovery and had a good back up system in place. Even with all the safety measures, there were divers that thought we should not be in the cave doing this recovery. Those local shop divers who criticized us had made failed attempts previously to find and recover this missing diver. It is important to add that our divers who entered the cave were all cave diving certified through three recognized agencies, IANTD, NACD, NSS-CDS. When we found him his mask was still on the skull. Most of the smaller bones had long dissolved in the high mineral content water. The most important piece of evidence was a diving sticker found in the silt near the majority of the remains. During this recovery we received a fax from a man who lived in

Pasadena who claimed to have known the victim Kent Maupin. He was condemning the operation and did not want the remains recovered. He felt the remains should be left in place. He said both he and Kent Maupin were members of Neptune's Locker Diving Association in Pasadena, TX. During the evidence recovery I found a sticker that was still intact in the mud. When it pulled it up out of the silt it said "Neptune's Locker Diving Association, Pasadena, Texas". This helped in positively identifying the found remains as Kent Maupin. Had he not sent us that derogatory fax, we would not have known about Neptune's Locker. He inadvertently sent us a key piece of evidence and I am glad we kept the fax. We felt like throwing the letter in the trash, but you never know where clues and evidence will come from.

Today I look back on that recovery and still feel the entire operation was an acceptable risk. Those that condemned the operation lacked the overhead environment training to make a knowledgeable statement. During our cave training we dove in Florida caves that had a much greater potential of silt outs and disorientation than Jacob's Well. All three cave divers (myself included) who made this 2-hour dive planned extensively and had multiple stage tanks and back up plans in case of an emergency. We had support divers in place and even surface supplied air for the final stages in deco.

We had enough air, nitrox, and oxygen in place for three times the bottom time and decompression. In all, our bottom time was exactly 2 hours including our deco time. We still today dive in Jacob's well however we have not penetrated in distance and in depth to the extent we did during this Nov 2000 recovery. All 8 of the divers who are known to have died in Jacob's well lacked proper cave

training and equipment for overhead environments. None of them were cave certified and most lacked little more than a basic open water certificate. Some of the locals in the area claim that up to 15 divers have died in the cave and more are still missing.

We will solve that mystery as we continue our well-documented study, excavation, and penetration into the cave. Currently we are documenting and excavating the upper chambers of the cave to remove years of gravel and debris that has been dumped in during floods.

We currently are working with an archeology team out of Austin (Thru Texas A&M) on excavating the cave from all the rocks and debris that has been thrown into the cave over the decade. This is a cave restoration project and will go on for several years.

Dan Misiaszek

The Jacob's Well Project is an on-going study, archeological excavation, and preservation project of an underwater cave located on the Trinity Aquifer in Wimberley, Texas. The team is currently working on a detailed virtual computer map, an underwater video, documenting cave species, and excavating gravel and debris that has washed in over the many years of flooding. Click [HERE](#) help with this project. We welcome community based organizations and volunteers to assist with topside support during gravel excavations. Your boy and Girl Scout troops, school classes, fraternity and sorority groups are welcome and encouraged to participate in this project. Call or [email SMART](#) for further information and to schedule dates to participate.

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