

MAMMOTH RESTORATION CAMP

This year marked our (Harry & Larry Sowers) 4th year at the summer restoration camp at Mammoth Cave. It was the 23rd year for the summer camp. There were about 32 of us who came from all over the U.S. to camp. Probably 80% or more are returnees with a few new faces. The oldest at camp, Larry Matiz, has attended 20 camps!

Our director this year was Bill Copeland who has attended camp in the past but this was his first year as director. He ran into a snag at the very beginning when, because of work schedule problems, he lost his 2 cooks. This was solved when 2 ladies who normally work with us agreed to be cooks. They did a great job.

We arrived Sunday night for supper together and then started work on Monday morning and I do mean work. These are not easy camps and this one was especially difficult.



DAY 1

Our day starts with breakfast at 7 and arrival at the cave about 8:30. We work till about 3. We met at the Historical entrance and started work. In the morning some of us carried wood up from the Echo River to the “chop shop”. It is sawed up there and put into smaller bags to be hauled to the surface. Some people with wetsuits went into the river to retrieve old wood left from former piers and walkways and others carried it up to the chop shop, about a half mile trip uphill. (Harry worked in the chop shop.)

For decades in the past, one of the tours was the “Echo River boat tour”. It ended in 1991 because it was just too much trouble to keep up. Mammoth floods occasionally and when this happened it was necessary to go down to the river and actually dig out the boats and pier that were covered with sand. The park service finally had enough of this and closed the tour. There are many old photographs showing the boat ride. The wood has rotted and every year at camp we go down and pick up the pieces that have come loose.

The rest of our work crew stayed in the Historical entrance area and hauled out old electrical cable. These are pieces about 15 to 30 ft. long that we drag to the entrance and load onto a pickup. It is taken near the visitor center and sold as income for the park. All the old cable (50 yrs. old) is being removed and replaced with fiber optic cable. This involves literally miles of cable that is dug up by hand, cut into manageable sections, and hauled to the surface. New line is placed in the slots we have dug out and we then cover it up to blend into the cave. This is all done by hand and has been done for years in the past and will be done by work crews for years to come. (This was my work.)

The last workers were on “lent patrol.” Because thousands of visitors lose hair, skin, etc., it is necessary to take a brush and dustpan and sweep the walkways that have collected dust on there edges. You may not think this would amount to much but in half a day 2 large garbage bags were collected. At about 3 we ended our work day.

We headed back to the Maple Springs camp ground for showers and supper at 6. Afterwards we tell stories and finally go to bed about 10. You may think this is early but after hauling wire and wood for “miles” you are really tired. By the end of the week you hate getting up! This year one of our workers played the guitar and sang songs to serenade us.

DAY 2

Much of the same work as day 1. That night after supper we saw a new cave movie called “Cavewomen to the Rescue”. This was a low budget (really low) spoof done by some TAG women cavers. It was a hoot! How stupid was it? One woman “diva” wore white shirt and pants plus sequins and after crawling, sliding, climbing, rappeling, etc., never did get dirty! We loved it! You had to be a caver to appreciate the humor.

Day 3

We went to Echo River to break up an old concrete pier. Instead of the Historical entrance, we used the elevator to the “Snowball LunchRoom.” This involves a walk of 2 miles to the river. No one had researched this and the best guess was that it was about 12-15 ft. by 6ft. And about 6 inches thick. We took drills, sledges, chisels and punches for the task. A camp about 10 yrs. before had tried to break up the concrete and gave up. The concrete pier turned out to be 7-12 inches thick and was 80 % buried under 1 to 4 ft. of sand. To break it up we broke off a corner after drilling and pounding and then scooping underneath to create a hollow cavity to break the pad up. It simply wouldn't break if sitting on sand. We worked at this for 3 hrs. Harry and I were the main sledge hammerers. We broke off about 2 ft. by 20 ft. No easy task. Other workers would gather up the concrete into bags for the trip back to the elevator. They could only hold about 25 lbs. because of the 2 mile portage. These first bags were then carried up a steep slope to the first drop off area. We finished about 2:30 and went back to camp. We were dead tired!



Day 4

Back down to the river and attack the pier once more. We managed to break off another 2 ft by 20 and Harry finally took a sounding rod and found the pier was at least 18 by 20 ft. We had barely started and had broke off probably 6000 lbs. of rock! We carried the bags to the first staging area and stopped at noon. In the afternoon we carried the bags to the 2nd staging area. We estimated we had 400 bags.

Some thought we should move all the bags but we were exhausted and about half our group simply started walking back to the Snowball Room and elevator, a trip of about 1½ miles.

Day 5

We moved the final bags back to the 2nd staging area and called it a week. We stopped at noon and went back to camp to rest in the afternoon. Friday night is always banquet night and we have a great meal and awards banquet. Some of the Mammoth Park Administrators also came over and thanked us for all the work the volunteers do.

Day 6

On this Saturday 2 trips were offered. One was a 6 hr. trip in Mammoth and the other was a trip to Crystal Cave in the Park. Most chose to visit Crystal which is normally closed. Crystal Cave was owned by the Collins family during the great “cave war” era and was a rival of Mammoth. After Floyd Collins was trapped and died in Sand Cave, his body was buried in Crystal and for decades tourists could view the casket of America's most famous caver! At the 1993 Restoration Camp this same trip was offered and a 62 yr. old college professor was injured and a 32 hr. rescue ensued. This was embarrassing for the Camp and Mammoth Cave. As a result, the field camps were stopped for a period of four years but eventually resumed.

It was a very hard week physically but what's new about that. We had great fellowship and if you'd like to see America's greatest cave – Mammoth, and want to give something back to caving, consider volunteering for a week or a weekend underground.

Report by Larry Sowers