

THE DIRT

A History of the Williams Canyon Project

BY RICHARD RHINEHART

October 14, 1989 was an unseasonably warm autumn day for Colorado Springs. Despite the summer-like temperatures and blue skies, a group of interested cavers gathered in a University of Colorado classroom at a special luncheon of the initial Rocky Mountain Speleo Seminar. Over sandwiches and non-alcoholic beverages, the group established Colorado's first and only National Speleological Society-recognized project.

Although cavers had worked in the privately owned caves of Williams Canyon since September 1978, relations with the professional management of the Cave of the Winds relied strictly on personal contacts and friendships rather than a formal long-term working agreement. In March 1987, these friendships were put to a severe test when renegade cavers affiliated with Denver's Colorado Grotto abused open access to the canyon and illegally entered the Cave of the Winds for an after-hours trip into the treasured Silent Splendor.

Following the incident and a Colorado Cave Survey investigation resulting in the expulsion of two cavers from the Colorado Grotto, relations between the commercial cave management and cavers were tense. Though the management understood the trespassers were not a part of the core group who frequented the caves of Williams Canyon, they were reluctant to provide free and open access to anyone affiliated with the grottos in the future. Although cavers had built and maintained a gate on undeveloped Huccacove Cave since 1978, opening Cave of the Winds to caver access seemed an unnecessary risk that could affect the livelihood of hundreds of annual and seasonal employees.

Recognizing the uneasiness of the Cave of the Winds management, cavers from several area grottos worked together to reestablish trust and accountability. One proposal was to establish a formal National Speleological Society Project. First suggested in 1985 following the discovery of Silent Splendor, a formal project could assist the cave's management by qualifying and identifying trip leaders. A project could also coordinate activities in the caves of the canyon, from managing ongoing surveys to new digs to scientific studies to conservation efforts.

By October 1989, the project proposal had been agreed upon by cavers and by the commercial cave's management. At the Speleo Seminar, an open luncheon was arranged to discuss the initial management of the project, including designation of the first board of directors. Pending official elections to be held in 1990, the initial board consisted of 11 cavers from the Colorado, Front Range, Sangre de Cristo and Southern Colorado Mountain Grottos. Paperwork was sent to the National Speleological Society to officially charter the group.

The Huccacove Crisis

Three months later, the discovery of the Mammoth Extension of Huccacove Cave brought forth the project's first crisis. Under the direction of the initial project board, trips into Huccacove during this period were limited to trip leaders who had been involved

with the dig project that discovered the new extension. Other trip leaders, including cavers who had assisted in many other Huccacove projects over the previous 12 years, including its gating, felt the popular novice cave should be open for all current trip leaders.

At an emergency meeting of the project board in February 1990, the board listened to emotional complaints of elitism and unnecessary restrictions on cavers wanting to visit Huccacove's new extension. Some cavers even boldly suggested it was the duty of individuals who discover new caves and passageways to immediately open their discoveries to the public. In response to criticism voiced at the meeting, the board decided to immediately dissolve, with new directors to be elected that spring by the member grottos. This action greatly worried the Cave of the Winds management, who felt comfortable with the initial board, as its members were all individuals they trusted and knew for many years. New unknown board members might require a reevaluation of caver access to the caves of the canyon.

Matters grew worse at the March Colorado Grotto meeting. Though the board had already dissolved itself, several board members publicly resigned from their positions and angrily demanded grotto censorship of the project. Some even suggested to the members of the Colorado Grotto that they refuse to ever work again in the caves of Williams Canyon. Fortunately, grotto members ignored such revolutionary calls and agreed instead to try to rebuild relations with the cave management.

Two days later, in an open meeting with Grant Carey, the Cave of the Winds general manager, cavers were told that the management wanted to continue to work with the Williams Canyon Project in the future. Carey appointed Richard Rhinehart as his personal liaison with the caving community and requested all canyon activities be cleared through him. Rhinehart was interested in establishing the project as the managing authority for caver activities and encouraged cavers to work together. Cavers at the meeting recommended the project directors consist of both elected and appointed representatives to consider both caver and owner interests.

At the Front Range Grotto meeting in mid March, the club devised an equal representation plan that it forwarded to another member grotto, the Southern Colorado Mountain Grotto. At its April meeting, the Mountain Grotto agreed with the new plan and elected the first representative to the new board, Walt Rubeck. A month later, the Colorado Grotto elected Tish Korbly to the board. Steve Holiday was the Front Range Grotto director, elected at the club's May meeting. Appointed representatives for the Cave of the Winds included Rhinehart, Fred Luiszer and Mark Maslyn.

The Cartography Group

Paul Burger, one of the original Project directors, created the Williams Canyon Project Cartography Group in October 1994. This group was established with the purpose of resurveying the Cave of the Winds to current society standards.

The Cartography Group also was interested in resurveying the other canyon caves, coordinating a theodolite Williams Canyon survey to serve as a baseline for all surveying efforts and beginning inventory of the geological, speleological, biological, and hydrological features of the canyon caves. Over the next six years, most every known cave in the canyon was surveyed through the efforts of this group.

Participants in Cartography Group activities were required to follow strict rules and guidelines above and beyond the current established project guidelines. Recognizing the value of the Group's rules, Tom Dotter of the Colorado Grotto expanded this philosophy and guidelines for the full project. The revised guidelines were adapted by the project in January 1996 with the approval of the Cave of the Winds management.

Redirection and Expansion

By the autumn of 1996, board members and participants of the Williams Canyon Project began expressing concern about the project's future. Though there had been some success stories such as the 1993 discovery, exploration and study of Breezeway Cave, the project failed to consistently enforce established policies and guidelines. Worse yet, political battles had crept into board meetings for the first time since early 1990 and many cavers were growing tired of the fighting.

The three appointed Cave of the Winds directors, Rhinehart, Luiszer and Maslyn, met in December 1996 to discuss the project's future and possible recommendations for the full board. Over an afternoon, the directors considered and argued numerous topics, ranging from qualifications for trip leaders to trip safety to upcoming projects to a formal agreement with the Cave of the Winds. At the end of the day, they had an outline for the project's future they would present at a special project board session in January 1997.

Key to the new direction was the establishment of a formal annual procedure for qualifying trip leaders. Though more bureaucratic, the new system assured that trip leaders were cavers who actively participated in canyon projects. Trip leaders were required to take part in and lead a minimum number of trips each season.

The project board also reaffirmed its interest in a variety of activities in the canyon, including digging, exploration, survey, scientific studies and conservation. While digging and exploration had long played a leading role in the project's past, it was decided the future would bring a diversification of caver activities.

The new year would also see the addition of the first new grotto to the project with the welcoming of the Northern Colorado Grotto. Two long time board members, Luiszer and Maslyn, retired from active leadership in 1997, though both remained as members of the scientific advisory board. The Cave of the Winds brought in Burger and Carolyn Cronk as its new appointed representatives.

By the end of the decade, the Williams Canyon Project had attracted many new participants from several of the grottos of Colorado. Many of the participants eagerly sought out new projects, including digs, surveys and conservation. Al Collier of the Colorado Grotto, for instance, directed restoration efforts in the caves, repairing damage both in undeveloped caves and along the tour routes in the Cave of the Winds. Other cavers participated in efforts to replace aging gates and structures installed in the mid to late 1980s with more environmentally friendly materials.

Since its beginnings in 1978 as the Huccacove Cave gating project of the Southern Colorado Mountain Grotto, the Williams Canyon Project has greatly expanded the scientific and historic knowledge of the caves of Williams Canyon and Cavern Gulch. The discoveries of Silent Splendor and Breezeway Cave remain the project's key accomplishments, though digging in the Cave of the Winds also served as training for the landmark 1986 discovery of southern New Mexico's Lechuguilla Cave.

Without a doubt, the future of the project will bring about many more remarkable discoveries.

ORIGINAL 1989 PROJECT DIRECTORS: Paul Burger (Golden), Donald Davis (Denver), Gene Dover (Pueblo), Larry Fish (Denver), Ken Kreager (Louisville), Pat Jablonsky (Denver), Fred Luiszer (Boulder), Mark Maslyn (Denver), Richard Rhinehart (Boulder), Walt Rubeck (Colorado Springs), Bill Yett (Denver).

PROJECT DIRECTORS FOLLOWING 1990 REORGANIZATION: Steve Holiday (Aurora), Tish Korbly (Denver), Fred Luiszer (Boulder), Mark Maslyn (Denver), Richard Rhinehart (Boulder), Walt Rubeck (Colorado Springs).

PROJECT DIRECTORS, 1999-2000: Paul Burger (Golden), Carolyn Cronk (Monument), Tom Dotter (Golden), Randy Reck (Lakewood), Richard Rhinehart (Colorado Springs), Bob Stucklen (Loveland), Todd Warren (Colorado Springs).