

# OBITUARIES



**Bill Mixon**

NSS5728  
(1940-2019)

Caving and the NSS have been fortunate over the years to have energetic and talented members and leadership whose efforts have collectively raised organized caving to the level we benefit from today. Many of these were exceptional individuals, dedicated to advancing the goals of the NSS, who worked consistently over a lifetime, in and out of official capacities, for the benefit of caves and cavers. By any measure, Bill Mixon deserves recognition as one of these exceptional individuals. His most prominent contributions encompass service in the administration or governance of caving organizations and in the improvement and dissemination of caving literature, though the depth of his commitment and scope of his efforts go far beyond these areas.

Hundreds, maybe thousands, of cavers and NSS members know Bill Mixon by name, especially through his writings and reviews. Others have met him socially, or in the course of official activities at conventions and other gatherings; they've worked with him on numerous committees and projects; they've caved with him; or they've benefitted from his editorial or publishing expertise, his mentoring, or his generosity.

These legions of cavers have memories and stories about Bill which would fill volumes. Informal inquiries have elicited a wealth of anecdotes from acquaintances, old and new. These have been helpful for supplementing the details about his early life and caving experiences. He wrote and edited much, but not so much about himself.

"Eccentric" is a term occasionally

mentioned, though it's practically meaningless when applied to cavers, where eccentricity is almost commonplace. "Curmudgeon" is another, usually with a qualifier like "loveable." His capacity for incisive focus on detail and his singular intelligence were evident in even casual encounters and suffused his written work. And he could be a little curt and dismissive when confronted with what he considered vacuous or nonsense. Not gratuitously argumentative, he nevertheless usually had the last word in controversies around the campfire. He was, however, far from humorless, and could be a bit provocative, even gleefully irreverent. In a May 2000 "Spelean Spotlight" interview, he claimed with a hint of barely concealed satisfaction, to probably hold the record for voting in the minority on Board of Governors business items. One picture shows him, with his wry smile, in his tuxedo tee shirt.

His talent for editing emerged early. His 1958 senior yearbook from Morton High School, in Hammond, Indiana, where he was born and raised, credits him as its "Photo Editor." Along with citations for winning a science fair and receiving a Merit Scholarship, the caption on his awards page photo promises that "A scientist will be contributed to society in Bill Mixon." This prophetic yearbook speculation proved accurate indeed, as Bill continued his education at the University of Chicago, where he earned a B.S. in physics (1962) and an M.S. in mathematics (1965). The conjunction of his educational background and the dawning of a golden age of computer and Information technology, along with native aptitude, led him into the emerging field of computer programming and its application to experimental physics. He would spend his professional career pursuing this at physics labs at the University of Chicago and later at the University of Texas at Austin.

In 1960, while an undergraduate, he was invited to go on a caving trip. As for many cavers of Bill's and later generations, the university's Outing Club was the conduit through which he was first exposed to caves, before fear of liability curtailed these adventurous experiences. He claimed he was recruited because he had access to a vehicle, rarer among college students of that era than in today's affluent climate. He apparently took to it immediately and wholeheartedly. Within a few years he had been a founding member of the Windy City Grotto and attended his first NSS Convention, in 1964. That same year he became the editor of the Windy City Grotto *Speleonews*, with the August issue, a position he would retain for

seventeen years.

Bill's caving activities and acquaintances expanded through the '60s. He made frequent weekend trips to nearby karst areas in south-central Indiana, Kentucky, southern Illinois, then farther afield to southeastern Missouri and to TAG. In his Jeep Wagoneer and later Suburbans, he would arrive at camp near caving areas such as Dick Blenz's barn at Buckner's Cave, west of Bloomington, Indiana, invariably with a crew of younger caver "kids" from the Chicago area aboard. Bill was a mentor as well as an enabler, as it were, for these groups, most still too young to drive. They thanked him, among other ways, with the affectionate nickname "Uncle Willy." He was well-versed in technique and current with evolving equipment and methodology and shared this knowledge with any and all. He and his young friends participated in the James Cave Project on many occasions. Other times they would rendezvous with caving friends from the Bloomington area for trips to TAG, as these groups acquired vertical skills and looked for caving challenges in the legendary southeastern pits.

He was a regular attendee at organized caving events: national NSS Conventions, regional MVOR meetings, Indiana Cave Capers, Hodag Hunts and others. He was an active participant, caving on sponsored and unofficial trips, taking part in official proceedings, and socializing around the campfires into the night, often enthroned on his inflatable black vinyl armchair.

Into the early '70s he began to take on higher profile official positions in the NSS. He served as Internal Organizations Committee Chairman from 1970 to 1973, and chairman of the By-laws Committee, for the first time, in 1972. In 1973 and 1974 he was Administrative Vice President. A major commitment began in 1971 when he was elected to the Board of Governors, and he would serve in that capacity for twenty-five of the next twenty-six years. These duties, in addition to his continued editorship of the *Speleonews*, along with numerous reviews of caving publications, represented a sizeable investment of time, effort and travel, all while still employed full time. And he continued to lead and participate in caving trips and other excursions. Many coincided with the schedule of conventions, such as his shepherding a group of cavers/novice climbers up Seneca Rocks in West Virginia.

He remained a campground regular at regional and national gatherings, regularly seen crawling out of his tent in the morning, groping for his indispensable breakfast beverage, a Coca-Cola, before hurrying off to

some board or committee meeting. At some point he had assembled the components of a portable geodesic dome. It consisted of wood-framed plastic and aluminum triangles, which he hauled around to events in his Suburban and stapled together in the campground with some recruited caver assistance. For several years it was a prominent feature at caving events, anomalous and thought-provoking, as Bill surely intended.

In 1978 Bill attended the NSS Convention in New Braunfels, Texas. Afterwards, he and his Indiana and Illinois caver passengers caved in Mexico for a short time. He had been a member of the Association for Mexican Cave Studies since the mid-1960s, but this seems to have been his first trip to Mexico. Cavers across the U.S. were increasingly taking advantage of the spectacular caving opportunities and challenges south of the border, and Bill's interest in Mexican caving would continue and evolve into an increasing part of his future literary and editorial activities.

In 1981 Bill completed his 100<sup>th</sup> issue as editor of the *Speleoneers* and left Chicago to relocate to Austin, Texas. He lived in town for a few years, as he planned and built his house on property in a mostly rural (at the time) area southwest of Austin. In 1986 he moved to that house, which was custom-made for his literary work, with large open rooms equipped with a huge desk, and bookshelf-lined walls throughout. It became the site of one of the most important bibliographical collections of caving materials in the world, and in later years, the venue for celebrating many New Year's Eves.

His tenure on the Board of Governors continued through the 1980s and into the 1990s, interspersed with two more terms as Chairman of the NSS By-laws Committee. He was Fellows subchairman on the Awards Committee until 2003, and later subchair for the William J. Stephenson Outstanding Service Awards and Honorary Member Awards. In 1994 he was Program Chairman for the NSS convention, among other undertakings. As of 2000, he had also published over 350 book reviews in caving publications, and had gradually taken an increasingly more active role in production of AMCS publications. He is listed variously as "co-editor" and "staff" for several issues of the *Activities Newsletter* from as early as 1980. By 1992, he was being listed as "editor", and also served as layout editor and production manager for many issues of the *Bulletin*. Under Bill's leadership the *Activities Newsletter* rose to a consistent level of excellence, to rank among the most highly regarded caving publications.

Bill still found time to cave. Trip reports in the *AMCS Activities Newsletter* list him among personnel on trips to the *Purificacion*

area in Northern Mexico from the early 1980s through 1987. And as his active participation in mapping, exploration etc. diminished, he continued to contribute by driving with passengers and gear and lending support in various other ways through at least 2003. He also continued to be a regular attendee at conventions and regional meetings. At these events he would set up and staff a booth displaying assortments of old and new AMCS publications for sale. His traveling companions were now most often a succession of Saluki dogs, variously named 'Silly' or 'Sally.' A newer incarnation of the dome appeared in the form of the 'Longest Cave in \_\_\_\_\_,' (insert the name of the convention or meeting site). This is a large plywood block or rectangular solid structure, subdivided into smaller interior cubes, which one enters and follows in a labyrinthine pattern to the exit. It was frequently crawling with young and old, taking the challenge dreamed up by Bill.

His career reads like a litany of important positions in the various facets of NSS activities, and he was recognized with an appropriate list of accolades. A Fellow of the Society since 1971, he was honored with the William J. Stephenson Outstanding Service Award in 1987, followed in 1999 by the Spelean Arts and Letters Award. More recently, in 2014 he was recognized with a Certificate of Merit for putting more than 3000 maps of Mexican caves on the AMCS website. And in 2016 and 2017 he received NSS President's Certificates of Appreciation for significant assistance to the IT Committee in creating an archive of NSS publications, and for many years of service to the *Journal of Cave and Karst Studies* and to the NSS. In another lasting tribute, he is memorialized in the name of *cabralcandona mixoni*, a small aquatic invertebrate, in gratitude for "contributions" to the Texas Speleological Survey, the Texas Cave Management Association and the AMCS.

Besides his work on the Awards Committee, he continued to help with layout and editing, particularly of monographs published as *AMCS Bulletins*, and submitted over 100 more published book reviews in the *NSS News* alone from 2000 to 2019. He was engaged in the production of another *Bulletin* monograph in 2018, until failing health compelled him to relinquish it.

All these lists of services to the caving establishment and positions held by Bill aren't news to those who knew him and witnessed his accomplishments. But above and beyond the offices he held and the book reviews and award ceremonies he participated in was an unsung legacy of personal generosity. Authors tell of the painstaking assistance Bill provided with layout and editing. Fellow BOG members mention his

tutelage and willing consultation even long after he had finished serving in that capacity. Current and past NSS officers acknowledge with gratitude advice and guidance from his judgement and experience. Others even acknowledge his meticulous, but always fair and reasonable, criticisms and take away valuable lessons. The simple act of driving with scores of young cavers and leading them on trips exposed young people to caves in ways that changed their lives and made cavers of them. We should be grateful that the Outing Club didn't take him birdwatching or sailing instead of caving!

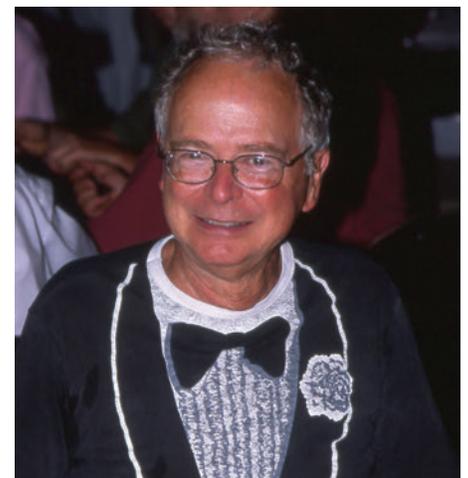
In the realm of more tangible generosity, he made at least one loan to the NSS to enable publication of an *NSS Bulletin*. A gift from his library to the Walter Geology Library at UT Austin comprised more than 1000 books and over 1000 periodical articles—all material new to UT Libraries! He made it possible for Texas cavers to acquire his home at significantly reduced cost. It has become the Texas Speleological Center. A bequest to the NSS has yet to be disclosed, pending the probate process.

A less tangible, but perhaps more profound and lasting legacy from Bill, is the impetus he gave to raising the quality and expectations for scholarship and literature throughout the caving establishment. Anyone seriously writing for a cave-related publication today directly or indirectly feels the presence of Bill's exacting standards. Anyone writing about Bill himself is haunted by constant speculation about what his reaction would have been. As the consummate editor, his expectations for both style and content were a challenge to meet. And it is that challenge that Bill has left to cavers as one of his most enduring influences.

**Gary Napper, NSS14115**

**Susan Souby, NSS54261**

*With contributions from many friends and fellow cavers*



**Bill at the 2005 Convention in Huntsville, AL. Photographer unknown.**