

Mammoth Party

Cave Research Foundation turns 50

by Aly Bowen & Bryan Signorelli

Turning fifty is a big deal. It means you've survived and have probably learned a few things along the way. With this in mind the three of us (Aly Bowen, Mandy Harris and Bryan Signorelli) were looking forward to celebrating the Cave Research Foundations 50th birthday in October 2007.

There was going to be some really neat cave trips to choose from and lots of "famous" cave people would be there. Having the opportunity to sit around the fire (or breakfast table) and talk with Roger Brucker, Patty Jo Watson, Richard Zopf or Carol Hill is a real treat.

Wednesday

Wednesday evening we left Benton about six. The afternoon's rain had moved eastward, meaning that we had to drive through all of it to get to Nashville. It poured buckets on us and traffic was at one point totally stopped on the interstate because several big trucks were off in the median or rolled over on the side of the road. It looked as if the wind had just shoved them off.

Fortunately for me, Bryan was driving during the worst of the rain. We stopped for gas in Bowling Green, KY and arrived at Hamilton

Authors Aly Bowen and Bryan Signorelli outside of CRF's Hamilton Valley Research Station.

Valley, still in the rain, at about 2:30 am on Thursday.

Thursday

After a rather disappointing breakfast, the twelve "Flint Ridge/Mammoth Connection Trip" people piled into cars to be dropped off at the Austin entrance. Mandy and I drove as far as the Floyd Collins house/ticket office and took photos of the group before they went in.

Mandy and I walked the half-mile down the road and trail to see the Austin entrance and wave good-bye to everyone.

After telling the group to think skinny thoughts, and saying goodbye, we watched the door to the Austin entrance lock behind them and we walked back to the car where we met a group getting ready to go into Crystal Cave.



by Bryan Andrich

I didn't recognize all of them, so I asked—and got to meet Art and Peg Palmer and Peter Bosted. We locked the road gate behind us on the way to the visitor's center and I had the good sense to wear the park's key inside my shirt so as not to encourage sticky questions.

But it didn't matter because Mandy wore her usual brown jacket with the eleventy-hundred cave patches on it to the tour and positioned herself in her usual spot right at the elbow of the tour guide.

He immediately asked her what was up with the cave stuff and she replied "I'm a member of CRF and we're here for the 50th anniversary." I told the guide that she wasn't really a CRF member, being nine years old and all, but that we were in fact in town for the CRF shindig and from there on out he called Mandy "CRF" and had her switch all the lights on and off.

He asked me a bunch of questions about the weekend's activities and had me talk briefly to the group, which was fortunately small.

Bryan and I are both becoming accustomed to this spiel, apparently Mammoth tours with Mandy will always end up being an easy plug for CRF's work.

The Snowball tour just takes tourists in the Carmichael entrance and to lunch on the new picnic tables, then past the bathrooms as far as El Ghor, then back out. Mandy was, as expected, less than totally impressed by the relative grandeur of the "Snowball Dining Room" and suggested that it really should be called the "Snowball Snacky Lunch in a Box Room" instead.

We ran back to Hamilton Valley to check in and see if there was anything interesting going on. There wasn't, so we continued Tourist Day with a free visit to Diamond Caverns.

This is a rather pretty cave with nice, well maintained walkways and railings. Our visit was, however, totally spoiled by an incredibly cheesy and badly informed guide who had a completely memorized and inflexible lecture and had no adequate answers to questions.

One interesting thing about the cave was that many, many, many years ago several of the large stalagmites had been sawn off flat and polished, making them look remarkably like ringed tree stumps.

We ran to Glasgow (about a twenty minute drive) for one of each type of pizza D'Giorno sells, and then went back to Hamilton Valley to do homework and wait for Bryan's group. Most of those there were going to town for supper but since we weren't sure when the group would need a ride (they'd be coming out



by Eli Winkler

Tommy Brucker takes a break on the "Flint Ridge/Mammoth Cave Connection" trip.

at the visitors' center where there were no cars) we stuck around the phone.

Mandy was just starting a sheet of fourth grade spelling words when a group of people came in and went into the map room. They sent an emissary out to ask if I was Ellen Brucker, but I disappointed them by saying that, though it was an honor in this company to be mistaken for a Brucker, I was not.

When the conversation moved close enough to us for me to realize that the old people were Alan Hill (the physicist), Carol Hill (in one of M's movies and author of *Cave Minerals of the World*), Patty Jo Watson (author of the Mammoth archaeology book) and Red Watson (author of any number of other caving books) I let Mandy bail on her spelling words in order to eavesdrop on their conversation, which she did shamelessly.

The Mexican supper eaters and the Crystal Cave crew came back in a rush but there was no sign of the connection trip group. They finally called in at eleven (two hours late) and as soon as Mandy heard that they'd gone in Flint Ridge and were really coming out Mammoth, and that they were safe, she fell asleep.



I put her to bed at the Hoffmaster House and, since Joyce Hoffmaster and Dan Gregor arrived shortly after, I left her there and went back to the main building to throw pizzas in the oven and listen to stories.

While Aly was taking care of things on the surface, our connection trip team was making great progress through the cave.

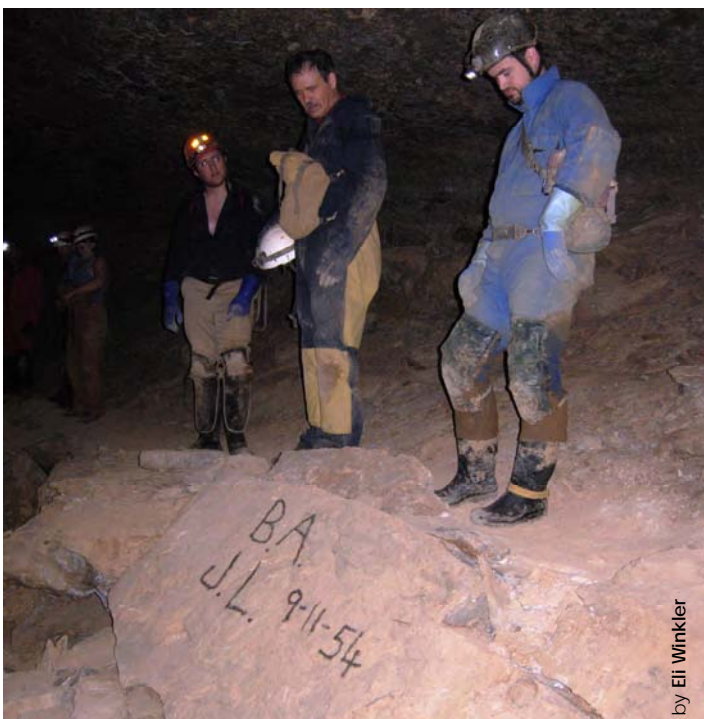
After entering the Austin Entrance we made good time through the borehole passages of Pohl Avenue, up the ladder and up Bucker Breakdown to Turner then Mather Avenues and soon found ourselves taking a break at Crowbar Junction. We were several hours into the trip now and hadn't had to crawl much at all.

After some food and drink we walked a short ways to the Duck Under (quack, quack) where the real caving began. From here on to Main Cave out we'd be crawling and stooping, straddling canyons, squeezing into tiny places and generally having a sporting time.

I'd like to offer more details but we really just boogied straight to the Tight Spot. Our group

Top: Shanna Borden, Eli Winkler, and Dan mug for the camera in front of the "Old Grandad" formation in Turner Avenue.

Left: Bryan Signorelli, Tommy Brucker and Dan admire a Bill Austin and Jack Lehrberger carbide signature in Pohl Avenue.



by Eli Winkler

was strong and capable and worked well together. For such a large group we moved rather efficiently.

After climbing down Best Way Down and then crawling through Candlelight River, we shuffled through Bretz River and Bretz River Tributary where we made the impossible looking climb up the slick canyon walls to the ceiling. It was here that we contorted and cursed and struggled to get into the entrance of the Tight Tube.

This passage was very interesting, being a shoulder width round tube with two sharp turns in it before you pop out the other side. It wasn't overly difficult but I was glad it wasn't any longer than necessary.

We soon arrived at a point where Tommy told us that, straight ahead was the way to the infamous Q87 survey station. Mind you it was 90+ stations away but in the grand scheme of things we were very close.



by Eli Winkler

Instead of heading out to the end of the Q, we turned left and headed down the A survey to the Tight Spot.

If you haven't already, you really should read the *Longest Cave*, since it tells the story of finding this spot and the attempts to push through it and connect to Mammoth Cave Ridge.

Upon arriving at the Tight Spot, Karen Wilmes (an extremely strong and slender caver from Maryland) was the first through. Tommy followed and grunted his way through ... he'd been through before but it had been a LONG time.

Next up was Jim Borden (project leader for Roppel Cave and fresh off the plane from Washington state) who also had been through it before but found that, no matter how he tried, he just couldn't make the required moves.

Upon realizing that Jim couldn't make it through our group made the decision to stay together and exit the cave via Janets River.

This interesting passage leaves from the room above the Tight Spot. The original explorers had either missed this route or didn't like what they saw since it is a belly crawl through goopy, wet mud.

Yay synthetic underwear!

The route out via Janets River was very interesting with a lot of canyon straddling required. We connected to Mammoth Cave in the area of Alberts Domes and made our way to Henrys Dome, Rider Hyders flight and then Ganter Avenue.

Ganter Avenue is a LONG stooping and walking passage about size feet wide that is full of history due both to Indian visits as well

Jim Borden resting on the Flint Ridge/Mammoth Cave connection trip.



by Aly Bowen

as the tours that the historic owners of Mammoth used to run down that way.

All along the passage is evidence of human visitation, burned cane and other torch fragments, a hard boiled egg, shoe heels, shoes, hats, stacked rocks, rock walls and TONS of signatures.

We arrived in Main Cave and used one of the in-cave phones to make a collect call to Hamilton Valley to let everyone know we were safe though overdue.

Afterwards we made our way down the tourist trails to the Historic Entrance. Our group was fairly quiet, everyone in their own head pondering what we had just done.

We weren't the first and we knew where we were going. But you could imagine what it was like to be way the hell out under Houchins Valley, so far from daylight and wondering if anyone would find you if you got hurt. Wondering if you'd ever manage to

The CRF 50th Anniversary "Flint Ridge to Mammoth Cave" team poses outside of the old Collins Family Home before hiking to the Austin Entrance. From L-R, Jackie Wheat, Rick Olson, Bryan Signorelli, Jason, Karen Wilmes, Jim Borden, Shanna Borden, Lynn Brucker, Tommy Brucker, Dan, Eli Winkler, John DeLong.

connect Flint Ridge and Mammoth Cave Ridge.

We snapped one last group photo at our exit location and then walked to the bus loading area in front of the Visitors Center where we weren't allowed to sit on the benches for fear of dirtying them. Don't ask... politics rears its head in unexpected places.

Friday

On Friday morning, I left Bryan and Mandy asleep in our upstairs room and went to breakfast. Shanna, my Roppel trip leader, had torn up her knees on the Thursday connection trip, so I knew I'd have a different leader. When I checked the board I found that

it would be Dick Market, which scared me since I'd heard that Dick is a really fast caver.

I pulled up in the parking lot and sat on my bin behind the car waiting for my group to get ready to go. Tommy Brucker, in typical high energy pre-trip form, strode by the car and said "Where are you going?" "Right now, nowhere, I'm sitting here on my box." "Yes, okay, but after that where are you going?" "To Roppel with Dick." "Want to come with me?" "Um, maybe."

He had a hole to fill in the Austin/Lehrberger Unknown Cave trip and I knew better than to pass it up. After cautioning him that I hadn't brought vertical gear ("No problem, you won't need it") and that I hadn't slept much for two nights ("That's fine, this is an easy trip") and checking with Dick to be sure my jumping ship wouldn't affect his crew negatively, I hopped in with Steve Ormeroid and we headed for the Unknown entrance.



by Jackie Wheat

Once in the van, I finally had time to mentally review what I knew about Unknown Cave. I'd reread *The Longest Cave* only a few days before, but I'd done so much reading it was hard to keep the different parts of the system straight.

Suddenly I remembered that the description of the first part of Unknown was rather hairy, with lots of canyons and climbing. If this is what I'm headed for today, tired and without a harness, I thought, I should worry.

We'd packed up and headed away from the cars toward the cave when I had my second clue that it would be a long day. This was not the regular ragtag bunch of beginners and potato chip eaters I am accustomed to caving with. This was a group of fit, capable, experienced cavers and I wasn't at all sure it was a group where I belonged.

I also noticed that everybody else had bigger and heavier packs than I did, hinting at the fact that they had more gear.

While I was worrying about that, I tripped and fell.

In broad daylight, on something resembling a trail, I tripped on a stick and fell on my butt. All I could do was laugh—and realize that I was the noob (and the baby too!), I was already tired, I had no vertical gear and very little vertical training, and I was with very experienced cavers and was going into a very difficult section of cave.

Shit.

We stopped at the entrance for what's apparently a fairly typical Tommy speech, then went in. After a brief hands and knees crawl, we came to a drop where we needed to stop so that we could tie the top of the old aluminum ladder to a rock projection. As I waited for

This is the namesake of Crowbar Junction ... those items have been in the cave since the early days of Flint Ridge caving.

others to go down the ladder I heard Tommy say "It's totally vertical so when you're halfway down it will lean out away from the wall. Don't let go."

I'm not sure I can adequately explain this ladder without a picture apart from saying that it's terrifying. For one thing, it doesn't even start until two or three feet from the lip, which means that we had to lie on our bellies and scoot backwards, holding onto the rope and lowering our legs down toward the ladder.

About halfway down, sure enough, the ladder pitches wildly out away from the wall. Hanging on, I became aware that this was not one ladder section, and it wasn't even two sections connected typically—it's two sections of extremely ancient aluminum ladder totally overextended and lashed together in the middle with a rope.

I climbed to the bottom of the ladder and found that it didn't actually touch the floor of

the passage, but rather was propped up with small rocks at the bottom. And there wasn't really a passage floor there anyway—it was a small, very steep hill of smooth rock that I had to slide down, hoping that something would catch my feet and direct me to a little saddle of rock between two holes, one far down, the other apparently bottomless.

This is why it was wise for me not to look over my shoulder at the point when my arthritic, pieced-together ladder was careening out away from the wall.

We crossed under a rock and kept going. Soon we came to a spot where Tommy described the direction it's usually assumed Austin and Lehrberger made the connection with the rest of Flint Ridge, and then he told us why he thought it was wrong, moved a rock, and showed us what HE thinks they found.

The final group photo from the Flint Ridge/Mammoth Cave connection trip, taken in front of the Historic Entrance gate.



by Jackie

We walked through some very tight tall canyons and crawled through some fairly pleasant small spaces and one extremely tight odd-shaped crawling passage made more peculiar by the fact that it really had no floor.

Popping out of this stupid tube, I found that the person immediately ahead of me had gone on. We were in a mazy canyon space and I saw some lights up around the corner. I gingerly climbed down onto a shelf midway down a canyon wall only to find that it did not in fact go anywhere—I'd missed the passage I was supposed to be in.

Shit, I thought, as I realized that the treacherous and unnecessary climb down would be even worse going back up since there were no decent handholds and since I'd now seen the place I'd fall to if I slipped.

Soon it came drifting back to us that there was a problem with rigging the vertical stuff ahead. I saw people in the canyon in front of me, apparently suspended in midair, and I saw Tommy far below and to my left. It seems that he had not actually been into this part of the cave in a number of years and remembered the vertical part of it to be no big deal when, in fact, we needed considerably more rope and/or ladder to make the climbs safe.

He wanted to do things one way, Bill wanted to do them another. Tommy, CRF people manager poster boy for the day, told Bill that he really needed him at the bottom and Bill was glad to comply, not realizing that he was just being moved out of the way to a spot where he couldn't argue.

Since it would apparently take awhile to get the cable ladder in exactly the right spot, and the belay lines situated in the other areas, I decided to stay on my comfortable little private canyon shelf and contemplate my impending doom.

I had a snack and a drink and wondered about the climb out and worried about the

weird rigging problems I was hearing snippets of. Snack finished, I turned out my light and made use of my pee bottle. I set it down in the dark without a lid and started dressing again when my foot slipped and I heard liquid draining over the edge twenty feet or so to the floor of the canyon below. I turned on my light to find that my recently filled bottle was nearly empty again.

I didn't say a word. I repacked my bag and found that I could go straight over, back toward the way I'd come, and that if I exhaled and thought of thin things I could shove my body up through a crack in the floor, neatly saving myself from a short but scary exposed climb.

We twisted through some weird shelves of canyons that folded back on themselves. I announced publicly that it was NOT MY FAULT that I had no vertical gear.

Dave West had brought a "caver's belt", a piece of stout 2" webbing with an easy buckle and a metal ring. Since the belt was easy to get on and off he offered to share—I'd go down first, take it off, and send it back up. I eased off the ledge in the narrow canyon and climbed down several feet to the beginning of the cable ladder.

(I got kudos for this move—apparently I didn't let on that I was petrified!) I climbed down to the end of the ladder—which was not, in fact, the end of the drop. I got off the ladder and climbed another ten feet down to the floor of the passage below.

Hurray! We looked across a depression to an elliptical tube in the far wall, the beginning of Upper Crouchway. Lower Crouchway was a few minutes down, and Indian Avenue about five minutes in the direction opposite where we'd head.

Considerably late already, we headed off at a good clip. At some point we hit the F survey where we walked along single file next

to several-thousand-year-old bare footprints. We saw smoked initials from Lehrberger and Austin.

I asked where we were and then answered my own question when I saw the formation they'd named "The Shillelagh" – we were on Turner Avenue and Old Granddad wasn't far ahead. Everyone oohed and ahed over the big column crusted with formations, but after Chinn, I wasn't all that impressed.

What was exciting, though, was realizing that I recognized the passage not from having been there before but from having read about it.

What did impress me, though, was not far ahead – cotton. Big wads of what looks like the stuff in the top of pill bottles, waving in the breeze. Here there are also what look like snowballs pressed to the ceiling, whiter and prettier than those in the Snowball Dining Room. And there are what look like snow drifts on the ceiling too – feet wide, big drifts of gypsum coat the ceiling.

We climbed the Brucker Breakdown and went past the ladder to Pohl Avenue, where someone remarked happily that a rung has been replaced, and turned to go to the place marked "DO NOT ENTER" in carbide on a stone sign—the passage that leads to Bennington Grotto, a spot full of very fragile pretties. Tommy told us that he'd been there once and wouldn't go again, and said that if we ever have the opportunity to go there he hopes we'll turn it down.

We continued on (through a bypass since blasted) to the spot where there are more signatures—the spot where Austin and Lehrberger turned around on the day they discovered so many miles of cave.

On the way out I realized something very important at the bottom of the Brucker Breakdown—it's okay to not know where you're going. Tommy had stopped at the top to

change carbide and so we went on without him. Ten experienced cavers (and me) managed to confuse ourselves at the bottom of the breakdown—we weren't sure which way to go so we all laid on the cool mud and waited for a hint. If these people get turned around, I thought, it must be okay to get turned around.

By this point we were very, very late, and three of our group were sent ahead to get up the ladders and out of the cave and to the cars, in order to call in and let people at Hamilton Valley know that things were fine. The rest of us took our time but still got to the hairy section before they were finished with it. While waiting I had another snack, then walked to the bottom of the rope in order to get a big rock dropped on my head.

// ... if we ever have the opportunity to go there he hopes we'll turn it down ... //

Dave and I again shared a belt. The climb up the ladder wasn't as bad as the climb down the ladder, partly because I ended up using only about half the ladder and free climbing the rest on belay. Part of it was again rather hairy and at one point I told the guys that I was really tired and that I'd probably be okay but that a couple of "way to go, Aly's" would be appreciated. Tommy waited for me at the sticky section but I did fine and felt good when he advised the next person to catch the same holds I had.

Dave West and I were told to head on out, so we did. We were both tired—he'd been up very late the night before too—so we just took it easy and stopped often to catch our breath and visit. Once outside the cave we heard whistling and yelling in the woods—it turns out that the group who'd gone out of the cave first couldn't find the cars and had assembled at the top of the hill to wait for the rest of us. Pulling the ropes out of the cave took awhile, so we waited, and when we were all together we headed through the woods to the car, with only about three false starts and merry crashes through underbrush.

Once on the trail again we met Dick Market's group coming in to rescue us. It turns out that, though we were over four hours late, no one at Hamilton Valley was particularly concerned about us since Tommy often gets lost near the Unknown entrance and they thought we were probably out of the cave safely but just wandering around in the woods.

Just after we got to the cars a ranger pulled up, rolled down his window, and said "now that's a beautiful sight. I'm glad you're all out safely" and drove off. Later we were told that the park's superintendent had been at Hamilton Valley all evening for the 'social'. Oops.

When we got back, finally, yummy snacks were being served. It was a very, very good trip. I still think that the high points of the day were seeing cave cotton, visiting with Dave West, and not dying.

Saturday Day

Cavebooks had boxes of books outside on Saturday – things that weren't moving, that they'd printed too many of, were being given out free to people attending the celebration. I don't know that any of them were things I'd have bought for full price (particularly the *Guide to Speleological Literature*) but I was told to take them because I might need them sooner or later.

We all got to go on the Violet City lantern tour for free, except that instead of being led by a random ranger, it was led by CRF people. Scott House did most of the talking for the first group, I think, and Will White and Rick Toomey did most of ours.

At various intervals we'd pick up people who talked about other things: Charles Fox gave a recap of the board meeting, for example, Sue Hagan and Mick Sutton talked about the gazetteer and atlas they're working on, Tommy Brucker and Bob Osburn talked about surveying, Patty Jo Watson and George

Caruthers talked about archeology in Mammoth.

Also neat was when someone had a question the leader could defer to one of the many experts present on the trip – for instance, someone asked a mineralogy question and Carol Hill (author of *Cave Minerals of the World*) answered it.

At the beginning of the trip Mandy was at her accustomed spot at the very front of the group, but toward the end a lot of things were above her head and she was chilly (it was a five hour tour) and somehow by the end she and I were walking up the stairs from Bishop's Pit with Dave Weller and Roger Brucker.

Mandy told them both the story of I Hate This Cave, which they thought was a hoot. (Roger once named something "Dont's Pit", he says.) We rode back to the Visitor's Center in vans – Mandy and I sat with the owner of Marengo Caverns where the NSS convention was this year.

Saturday Night

Our last evening would be the actual celebration. After spending five hours in the cave on a "walking meeting" we had a little time to freshen up and change clothes before the banquet and slide show.

The banquet was held in a large tent on the lawn outside of the research facility and dinner was fully catered with wine on every table.

Several people were recognized for their dedication and hard work and a handful of the old-time CRF members took a few moments to share memories and offer advice to the younger generation.

At times, emotions ran high and there were a lot of moist eyes in the tent. You could tell these icons had dedicated a large part of their

life towards the cave. I can't explain it, you just had to be there, but it was an honor to be among the 100+ people in the tent that night.

After dinner was over we moved into the common room and were wowed by two 3d slide shows presented by Peter and Anne Bosted. The first featuring Mammoth Cave and the second featuring Lech!

Neither Aly nor I had ever seen a 3d slide show and we were blown away. Peter and Anne are truly masters of that genre.

Sometime during the evening I, Aly, was standing in line in the bathroom and noticed myself next to Joan Brucker, Tommy's mom. Behind her was Betty Davidson. They started talking to me about raising their kids around cavers. Then Patty Jo Watson came out of a stall and chimed in.

It was surreal – a weird conversation about parenting in a bathroom with these three icons. Joan – the original soccer mom of caving – said that, from what she hears, I'm doing a good job. I'm not at all sure she's adequately informed, but even so it made me feel good to hear such a nice compliment.

Sunday

Sunday was going home day. I left Mandy and Bryan sleeping to run up to the main building to find Roger McClure. He had our Speleobooks order from the week before (long story) and Mandy needed it since she was out of clean bat shirts.

Dan Gregor had asked me the night before "does Mandy understand what she's a part of this weekend?" and my answer was that she understands that she's eating supper with giants – she knows how important and cool these individuals are and she's appropriately awed by meeting and talking to them – but she really doesn't understand the importance of the organization itself. Not yet, anyway.

Mandy trailed around asking people to sign books for her. At one point I had to go make her stop brushing her teeth because Red Watson was outside with a stack of new books, looking for her.

He'd picked out five things to give her, breaking into Patty Jo's conversation with somebody else: "This is Mandy. Sign her book." "I KNOW who it is, Red." "Good. Tell her she can do anything she wants to do." Mandy, of course, was grinning her silly head off the whole time. We got to talk to Jim Borden for awhile, too. I sat on the floor for quite awhile talking to Roger Brucker about managing people and projects and eating cake and only later did Bryan tell me that my Kermit the Frog underwear were sticking out the entire time.

We took a walk on one of the mowed trails around the Hamilton Valley property and then ate lunch and packed up. We were staying right next to the restored Spelee Hut, which has been moved to Hamilton Valley and rebuilt. They even checked the numbers on a can of the paint the original builders stole, so as to repaint it the same color. Inside are a Worthy Washington woodstove, the old Salts Cave gate with the famous hole in it, and not one but two real Gurnee cans. They even found the old "Expedition Headquarters" sign.

When we stopped by the main building one last time to say goodbye, Mandy drew a bat picture and thank you note on the whiteboard and we took a picture of all of us in front of the bunkhouses and were on our merry way.