

## THE NSS CONVENTION: A MICROCOSM OF THE CAVING WORLD

Janet Thorne (writing in *The Netherworld*, newsletter of Pittsburgh Grotto)

At the grotto meeting in February I realized that few of the people present had ever attended an NSS Convention—the official annual meeting of the Society. If you haven't, you're missing something special! Conventions are different from any other caving event in the United States. The Old Timers Reunion, Speleofest, and most other gatherings of cavers held each year have a speaker or a slide show. Sometimes they have a contact or a special training class. But these are small-scale and definitely secondary events.

Conventions offer caving trips too. In fact, the organizers of the 1990 Convention planned to have six different trips, led by qualified leaders, offered each day. The difference is that, because conventions are held in a different part of the country every year, the caves available are those most of us have never had a chance to visit before.

Conventions provide lots of opportunities for fellowship, too, from the opening night Howdy Party to the grand final Banquet, and many other planned and informal gatherings on the nights in between. The difference from most local gatherings is that these events provide an opportunity to meet and develop friendships with cavers from all over the country, and NSS members from other countries as well.

There are many contests held at conventions. In addition to the vertical contests and a speleolympics, which also can be found at some regional gatherings, the convention is the time for the Cartographic Arts Salon (where mappers learn how to improve their own techniques, the Graphic Arts Salon (the best grotto newsletter

covers used during the past year), the Cave Ballad Contest (for those who like to write cave songs, and—of course—the Photo Salon (the “best of the best” of cave photography).

Then there are special workshops. Training classes in everything from basic caving techniques to vertical work to cave photography offer new and worthwhile information for experienced cavers as well as novices. If you want to try out different types of vertical equipment or even have a harness sewn for you, this is the place to do it.

Perhaps the greatest and most lasting contributions made by conventions, however, are the many formal sessions which are conducted. Papers are presented in numerous different fields—geology, biology, archaeology and paleontology, conservation, exploration—the list goes on and on. This is the place to learn about the latest discoveries, state-of-the-art techniques, and the latest thinking in scientific fields. The sessions are the place to be for any caver who has wondered about the how and the why of caves. This is the time when cavers who have been isolated in their local areas can discover the real breadth of the multi-faceted caving experience.

Perhaps you have the idea that there's more going on at a convention than any one person can do. It's true! Something interesting seems to be happening all the time! Convention planners usually set pre—and post—convention caving trips for those who have the time. If you've never been to a convention, give it a try. I think you'll discover why many of us regularly plan our yearly vacation around attending the NSS convention.