

A Pocket Full of Mud – The Grease Rack Climb, July 3, 2010

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At 10:30 AM on July 3, 2010 Brad Cooper, Tony Canike, Yvonne Droms and I headed into Butler Cave with heavy packs to finally climb the Grease Rack. This was my first trip upstream in Sand Canyon in over 35 years. Fortunately Tony had been there more recently and proved to be an excellent guide. Penn State Lake was not a problem, being only about 8 inches deep max, and we didn't even have to dig any to get there. It was possible to keep our packs and upper bodies dry as we passed through the lake. We made rapid progress toward our goal until we got past Pittsburgh, at which point we became temporarily disoriented.



Tony Entering Penn State Lake



Brad on the 'Up' Climb to Ike's Fissure

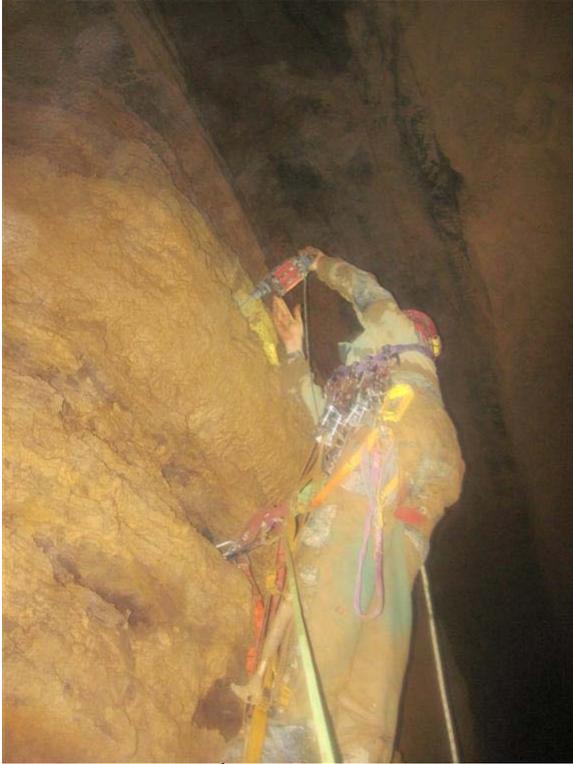
We had taken a different passage out of Pittsburgh than Tony intended, and then turned into what we thought was Mbagintao Trail too soon. Before we knew it we were back at Pittsburgh without realizing it, trying to figure out why the water was flowing the wrong way and looking for the Grease Rack in the wrong place. Nothing fit, including the survey stations, and it took a while to realize our error. Finally we figured it out and backtracked to where we had gone wrong. Once into the proper passage we arrived at our destination in short order. It took us three hours total to get there, although only 2.5 hours was actual travel time.

The Grease Rack was definitely sloppy. While Yvonne set a bolt for a belay stance, I spent quite a while digging through goopy mud trying to find solid rock on the wall. The lower part of the climb was in thin limestone interbedded with red shale. The beds were too thin to take bolts face-on horizontally, so I dug out shelves and put two bolts in vertically. The extra-long, 6.5-inch bolts Tony provided worked perfectly and provided a secure hold. The shelves I dug had the added benefit of providing footholds once I was up on them. Too bad digging them rained crap down onto the belayer and bystanders below. Sorry, guys!

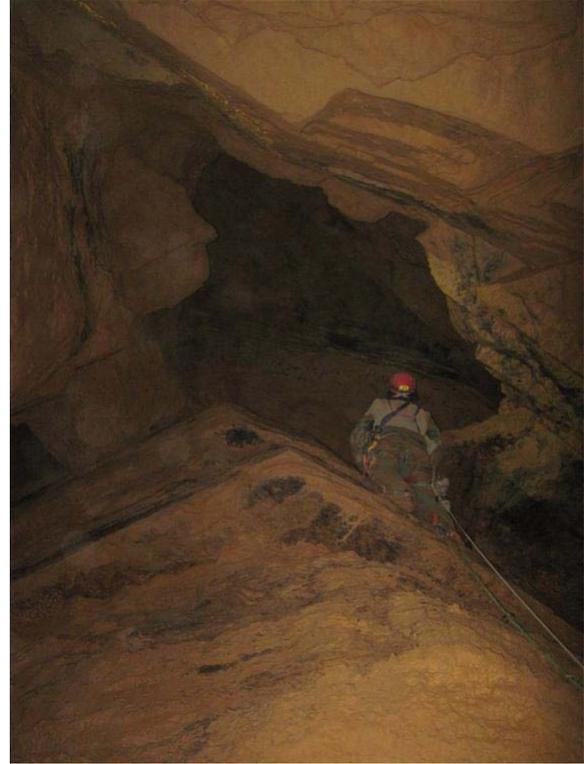


Yvonne Belaying at the Grease Rack (Tony Canike)

The third bolt went into pure gray-green shale, which was present as a one-foot-thick layer between the limestone and overlying sandstone. Again I put the bolt in vertically on a dug-out shelf to get a more solid placement. From there on it was a smooth sandstone face, although even that was not terribly solid. Two shorter bolts in the sandstone got me to the lip of the obvious lead. Unfortunately I could already tell that there was nothing up there but a pocket full of mud. I put in one last bolt, again vertically into the top of the sandstone shelf, and climbed onto the ledge, where I could stand easily. The whole climb was about 25 feet and took only a bit over one hour to complete, once we got started.



Mark Drilling 2nd Bolt on the Grease Rack



Mark on Sandstone Face Looking at Lead

From my perch on the ledge it was obvious that nothing went. There was about 8 feet of mud-covered wall before another, overhung sandstone face appeared overhead. I tried to dig into the mud to see what kind of rock was in this middle layer, but I could never get through to anything solid. Above the next sandstone layer I could see a small dome continuing up another 10 feet or so, but it looked grim. There was only one small spot that I could not see clearly, and it seemed unlikely to go. The ceiling above that was another flat sandstone layer. Since there seemed to be no reason to continue the climb, Yvonne lowered me down and I cleaned the route as I went. Remarkably all of the nuts could be unscrewed and I retrieved all of the bolt hangers save the top one. We packed up and headed out at 4:30 PM with plans to check a few leads along the way.

Just past Snake River I noticed a small hole in the ceiling that opened into darkness. I chimneyed up but could not quite squeeze through the opening. Since we had extra electronics, I drilled several holes that we can use next time for straws to enlarge the hole enough to get through. It looks like there is virgin walking-height canyon up there, and no other holes in the area led to a similar passage, nor is anything shown on the map in this location.

Only a few feet beyond my hole in the ceiling a short side lead is shown on the map. Brad said it looked like it opened up only 6 feet ahead. We had a hand trowel, and used it to open the lead through mostly dry sand. After Brad gained a couple of feet, Tony took over and dug several feet more. Finally Yvonne dug the last bit and squeezed through into a small room. Immediately she came to a solid wall with only a small hole in the floor. The “room” turned out to be just the end of an enlarged joint.

Past the Elephant Graveyard I chimneyed into an upper level heading out above Ike's Fissure that I had seen on the way in. It was virgin. I progressed to a corner and then quite a ways vertically up a side fissure until I came to a ceiling of chocked rocks, gravel and mud. Back at the corner it might be possible to continue chimneying forward toward the 'Up' Climb, but we were tired so I turned around. There is also blackness above the 'Up' Climb, so this could lead to something.

At the Climb we installed a rope to make ascending, and especially descending, easier and safer. Most of us rappelled down since we had vertical gear with us. There is enough rope that one person can climb up on the way in and belay others, if need be. Ascenders are not necessary. While I was installing the bolt Yvonne saw crystals in a pocket in the wall. She wiped off some mud and exposed a Herkimer diamond $\frac{3}{4}$ inch across! I tried to scratch the crystal with a stainless steel blade but could not, ruling out calcite or gypsum. There were other, similar crystals further back in the pocket and a smaller one on the opposite wall. Cool!

We proceeded back through Penn State Lake and up the sand crawls – noticeably more tiring than on the way in. Out in the main passage we took a high route and marveled at the huge size of the passage. On the way in we had mostly stayed low and didn't realize how high and wide it was. We also saw the Natural Bridge, which we had missed on the way in. Remarkably we made it out in daylight, arriving at the entrance at about 8:45 PM after a very enjoyable 10+-hour trip. The Grease Rack is history, but we have a good new lead to return to.