

Features

'Cave man' searches for unexplored beauty

United Press International
For the last 30 years, Joe Hoffman has crawled into just about every hole in the ground he could find.

"It's an exhilarating feeling," Hoffman said. "The inside of a cave is different from anything else on earth. It's like departing from reality."

When one listens to Hoffman's tales of exploration, the fantasy-like, underground world of caves becomes illuminated — much like the rainbows of color reflected from draperies of calcium carbonate or the white light that glimmers off walls made of rock-hard "snow" and "ice."

"You're not looking at anything man-made," said Hoffman, a 51-year-old spelunker from Wichita Falls. "It's really something to find beauty inside a cave, especially if

you are the very first person to see it."

Hoffman's love affair with cave exploration began in 1951 when he was a member of a touring group traveling through Oklahoma.

When he wasn't performing, the bored actor longed for adventure and when a local land agent told him about an unexplored cave, Hoffman began a week-long search to find it.

"Finally, I met some Apache Indian kids and they showed me the cave's opening," he said.

Later, Hoffman talked about the cave with a local police chief, who told him of a newspaper article he had read about a gigantic cave near Ruidoso, N.M.

"I went there (Ruidoso) and found the entrance and explored the cave for six weeks," he said.

"That's what hooked me. It (the Fort Stanton cave) is one of the most beautiful in the world. I've gone back every year since 1959."

Hoffman says the Fort Stanton cave contains formations with every color in the rainbow and has crystal balls made of calcium carbonate that has precipitated from the ceilings for millions of years.

Hoffman says he enjoys going into unexplored caves — laying the groundwork for others and seeing the beauty before anyone else.

"I remember this one small cave about 20 feet long," he said. "I looked at it but passed year after year. Then I found a hole with a slant opening and crawled in. Some of the rooms were full of 'popcorn' — small blobs of calcite formation which were sticking out from everywhere."

Hoffman has been digging toward another unnamed cave near Hunt for nine years.

"When the first, small hole was drilled, the air just shot out because of the pressure inside," he said. "We've dynamited down to 37 feet and we're still going. The air is coming up more and more. I know there's a cave there."

Next year, Hoffman plans to make his first attempt at a cave in Acquismon, Mexico. The cave, with sheer walls plunging 1,092 feet, is thought to be the second deepest in the world.

"We will have to rappel all the way down," he said. "Once you start, there's nothing to hang on to at all."

But Hoffman is not afraid of the dangers spelunking can offer and he has found himself in some tight spots. At Fort Stanton, he once

became wedged between a rock and the cave wall and could not be pulled out by a fellow explorer. Finally, Hoffman loosened his belt, slipped out of his pants and was pulled to safety.

"My behind was sore and red but that was the only way out," he said.

Hoffman founded and is currently president of the North Texas Speleological Society, which tries to explore at least one cave per month. In 1971, the group formed a film company and made "Cavern Fantasy," which took eighth-place honors last year at a French film festival.

"Cavern Fantasy" was filmed in the Guadalupe Mountains of Texas in a cave full of dramatic features.

The Guadalupe film will be edited to depict what the cavern

might have looked like thousands of years ago and how it evolved through time.

Hoffman also has some dramatic footage of bats, swirling clockwise from the mouth of the Devil's Sinkhole, a cave near Rock-springs.

"The bat flight started at about 7:50 in the morning and at 12:30 that afternoon they were still going," he said. "We were filming from the inside of the cave and the bats were so thick, we couldn't see the entrance. We estimated there were about 8 million of them."

In November, the film crew will begin a tenth film at Fort Stanton, one of Hoffman's favorite caves.

"You just can't believe Fort Stanton," he said. "As far as beauty, it's the best. The stalagmites are 30 to 40 feet high and there is a wall of color, about six feet high, that has every color of the rainbow."

Twice each year, Hoffman opens the exploration club to new

members, who must first explore an "easy" cave to see if any one has claustrophobia. The cave, near Quanah, has small ledges to climb and water holes to cross. For those who want more, a second, more difficult gypsum cave, also near Quanah, provides the real test for prospective members.

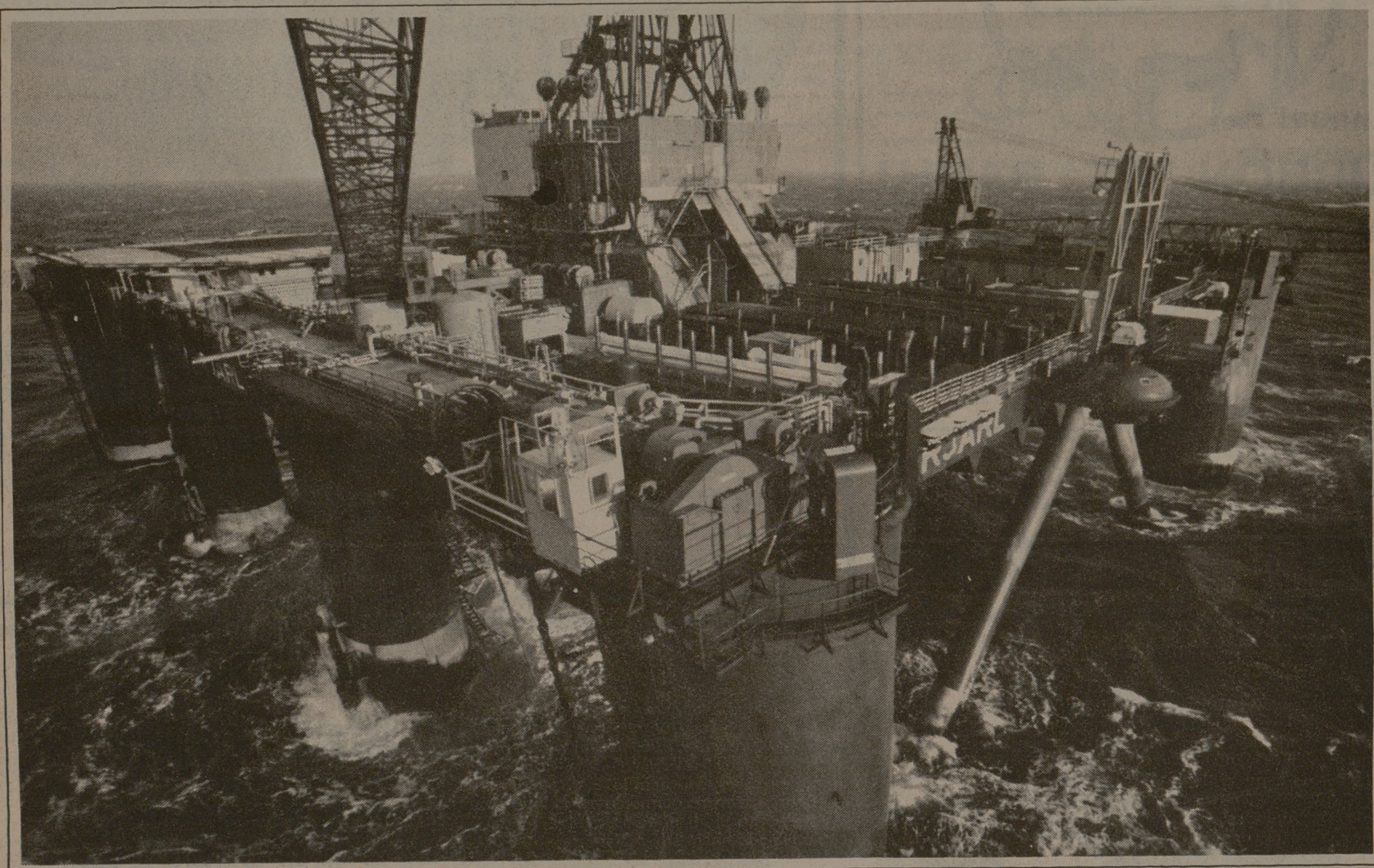
"The gypsum cave is harder to get into," he said. "There's a ledge over the ceiling that must be crossed. After that, if they (trial members) say it's great, they can join."

While not exploring caves, Hoffman is director of staff development at the Wichita Falls State School — specializing in emergency care and aid training and working with photography and audio-visual aids.

His experience with photography has led to the development of much of the compact, battery-powered equipment now used to film the fantasy world of caves — world he says he will continue to explore.

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Doctors overlook depression cases

WASHINGTON — Of all the potentially critical illnesses that require early diagnosis, a psychiatrist says none is more often overlooked than depression, the major factor behind suicides.

"The record suggests that greater alertness to this problem on the part of the medical profession could make a difference," said Dr. Samuel B. Guze, head of psychiatry at the Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis.

He said that most forms of depression can be effectively treated and many suicides prevented if doctors detected clues to potential suicide cases in time to take aggressive preventive measures.

Guze, discussing the problem in the doctors' magazine Hospital Practice, said the onset of depression is a relatively gradual process, covering weeks or months. He said the patient usually sees a doctor complaining of a variety of complaints such as constipation, weight loss, insomnia and constant fatigue accompanied by feelings of sadness, hopelessness and

apathy. "Given this clinical picture physicians often fail to recognize the depression, assuming that the psychologic symptoms are simply a reaction to the patient's physical complaints," Guze said.

He said most general practitioners and even some psychiatrists are not aware that half of depressed patients will complain about physical rather than psychologic symptoms. He said some patients seem unaware of the possibility of depression.

Guze said the doctor should take the time to become familiar with the patient's history, personality and life situation to look for clues to a possible case of depression.

"Without a high index of suspicion, even the most well-informed physician can overlook or miss a case of depression," he said.

The central feature of most depression, the psychiatrist said, is marked by inability to enjoy activities and relationships that were a source of pleasure.

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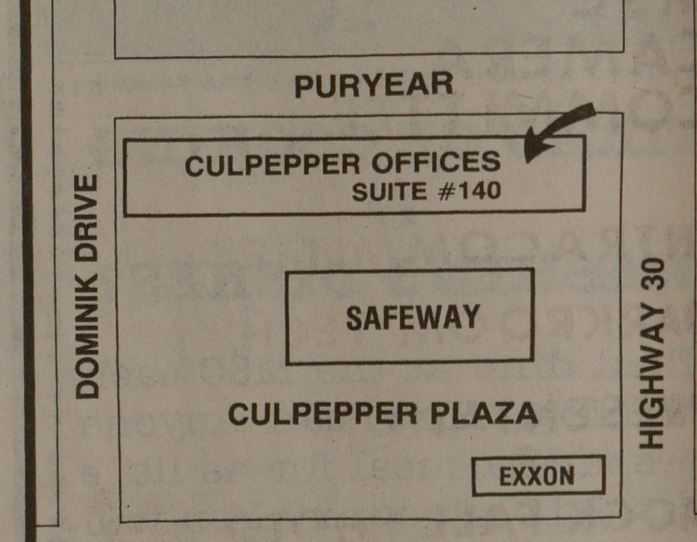
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