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## **It Never Floods in Summer**

By

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### **McFail's Cave**

McFail's is a river cave in Cobleskill, NY, near Schoharie. Like all caves in the US Northeast, McFail's is cold and damp year round, and one caves there in a wet suit, with extra thermal protection for hands and feet. McFail's is too wet to enter in the early spring, but by late summer the area is dry enough to be safe from high water. In fact, I've been told that it never floods in summer. This is the record of our trip there early in August, 1996. We had planned a seven-hour sporting trip through McFail's, but spent a total of eighteen cold wet hours there.

### **Entrance**

11:00 a.m. -- Our group of four, Bob Z., Monika and Luis E. and the author, arrives at the main entrance to the cave. All four of us are experienced cavers, but only Bob, the leader, knows McFail's well. The entrance to the cave has been sealed with a gate by the local caving club to keep out vandals, but we have been given the keys. A small stream of water enters the cave, flowing under the gate. The water level is a little higher than we had expected, but still below the lowest bar of the gate and safe for caving. We pass through the entrance and padlock ourselves in, joking about how long we will be down there, should the key get lost. It is placed on a safe ledge near the gate.

Within a few feet of the entrance, we reach our first obstacle: the sixty foot pitch to the bottom of Coeyman's Dome. The Dome is a bell shaped cavity, formed by water dissolving the limestone. There is still a lot of water that enters at the top of the dome and we will have to rappel down through a ribbon waterfall.

We rig two ropes, one set for a straight rappel through the waterfall, and the other rebelayed (diverted) for our ascent at the end of the trip. Descending through the waterfall is acceptable because the flow is light, and the descent quick. The purpose of the rebelayed rope is to keep the climbers out of the main stream of the waterfall when we exit the cave.

11:30 a.m. -- We are all down, and leave our vertical gear on a ledge near the entrance. The Dome is windy and cold because of the waterfall and we leave quickly. We head downstream through Coeyman's Passage, a narrow fissure in the limestone, between two and three feet wide. The passage has some low spots where we must crawl, and there are some small falls or rapids. As we go, we rig two nuisance drops. At twelve feet and eight feet, these are tempting to free climb, but the limestone is wet and slippery, so we take the time to do it right. We rig a cable ladder for one and an etrier for the other. An etrier is a rope with foot loops that is climbed like a ladder.

12:30 p.m. -- Having worked our way steadily downstream for the last hour, we are now 1250 feet into McFail's, near "Dreamland." Dreamland is a chamber about twenty-five feet above the level of the main stream, with low ceilings from which hang hundreds of delicate branched formations called helictites. Dreamland's name originated in the other-worldly beauty of these fragile formations. We make the climb up to Dreamland squeezing through a narrow and twisted crawl passage coated with mud, and linger a short time to admire the view.

1:00 - 4:00 p.m. Over the next three hours, we penetrate nearly two miles into the cave. Bob and I are in the lead. We traverse narrow meandering fissures, and crawl through long low sections that fill with water during spring floods. The crawls take about twenty minutes, but, as crawls do, seem longer.

By 4:00 p.m., we have gone as far as we can go, and turn back. Within five to ten minutes, we pass Moni and Luis heading in, and agree that they will continue to the end and then turn around to join us. Our plan is to be back at Coeyman's Dome between 6:00 and 6:30 p.m. for the climb out. We move slowly to allow them time to catch up.

5:00 p.m.-- Moni and Luis catch up to us toward the inner end of the low crawl sections. We work out our exit plan: Bob and I will lag behind 20 minutes so that they will already be up and off rope when we arrive at Coeyman's Dome. The idea is to avoid having to wait there in the cold while they are still ascending.

5:30 p.m. -- Bob and I have passed through the crawl sections and reach an area known as the First Breakdown Room. The Room was formed by a partial collapse of the cave's roof and walls, which enlarged the passage. At its center is a twenty foot tall pyramid of limestone boulders left over from the breakdown. We decide to rest for a few minutes, leaning on the flat surfaces of the boulders.

### **The Cave Floods**

5:35 p.m. -- We start heading upstream through the meandering fissure, not fully realizing that we already have a serious problem. Bob later tells me he remarked to himself that he didn't recall the flow around the breakdown having been that strong. Moni and Luis, fifteen minutes upstream of us, actually experience a wave washing past them, so they have a clearer announcement of the flood.

5:40 p.m. -- We realize we have a problem with rapidly rising water, and increase our speed upstream. Within a few minutes the flow is too strong to continue in the water. We move up the walls of the narrow fissure doing chimney walks (one leg braced on each wall, with the feet jammed into horizontal crevices in the stone). The water makes a sizzling sound as it races beneath us. We choose our foot holds very carefully.

5:45 - 6:25 p.m. -- We chimney upstream. It is not difficult to do, because the fissure runs through the Manlius limestone strata, and Manlius has lenses of chert that form projecting horizontal ledges for footholds. Nevertheless, occasionally, one of these ledges crumbles. I look for the solid ones and brace my arms against the walls each time I step so that I can catch myself, if necessary. Sometimes it is necessary. Bob is ahead of me. A ledge crumbles under his right foot, but he recovers. I concentrate harder.

I have three worries, each related to mortality. The first is the obvious possibility of falling in. The water is cold, deep, and swift, and the narrow passage is lined with sharp knives

of chert. Even if one could get out of it uninjured after a fall, it would be in a weakened state. The second is that the roof of the cave is coming down to us as we head upstream. I try to recall how high the channel was when we walked through it a few hours earlier, but I cannot remember. I am not worried that the roof will come so low that we have no air. Simply that its coming down will limit my scope for vertical movement. It is necessary to change levels to find the good ledges to chimney.

My third worry is that we would reach a point where the chimney trick would no longer work. The ledges could run out, or the walls could become too far apart to span. I ask Bob about this (he knows the cave well, having explored and mapped major portions of it). His answer is "let's cross that bridge when we get to it." This is not fully reassuring and I ask no more.

6:25 p.m. -- Bob is ahead and calls back, "I know where we are. We are at 'The Brain.'" The Brain is a formation that has surface convolutions that resemble a cerebrum's. More important, it is on a wide ledge to the side, where we might be safe. Moni and Luis have reached The Brain, and are waiting for us.

We have covered over 1200 feet in safety. There are fewer than 60 feet to go, but we must pass a place where the walls are too far apart for me to straddle. Bob, being tall, is already by it.

The water is shallower and calmer in the wide spot, so I move down, planning to resume the chimney upstream. I discover, however, that I can't move upstream because the current is far too fast. Downstream, where I might resume the chimney, the current is also too fast. I try to climb the walls, but can't. The water is waist deep and cold, and I am beginning to feel the chill.

I take off my pack and remove a length of Spectra cord I always carry for an emergency. I look for a projecting ledge above to get the loop over, but nothing looks promising.

By this time, Bob and Luis have returned to help. Bracing themselves against the walls, they hold the cord for me. I jam my feet against one wall and my back against the other and, using the cord, lift my weight. My shoulders hit a ledge and I drop back into the water. I try again, and this time manage to attain a position above the water's surface. I push my upper body up with my arms and recover a chimney position. We all continue upstream to the Brain. The effort and the cold water have sapped my energy. I was in for over ten minutes.

6:45 p.m. -- The slab called The Brain is at the outer edge of the ledge, six feet above normal water level. It is now awash. The ledge itself is wide enough, so we are temporarily safe. Nevertheless, water laps at its edge and could rise further. We cannot proceed upstream till the flood recedes. Should the level rise further, we may run out of options. We are unsure of our prospects.

### **A Chill Sets In**

McFail's is a cave where you must keep moving to stay warm. Now, however, we are compelled to stay put. We are all soaked and the passage is breezy. My ten minutes in the water have not helped. Quickly, we start to get cold, and we know we will not be leaving soon. We must conserve heat to survive.

Luis and Moni have carbide lamps. Bob and I are using electric. We shut down our electric lamps to conserve power and we huddle together to conserve heat. We empty our packs

and sit on them to insulate us from the rock. The ledge is too narrow for us to do other than sit in a row. Moni and Luis are the smallest and are seated in the center with the lamp. Bob and I are at the ends. Small plastic bags over our heads under our helmets serve to limit heat loss. We cut a larger plastic garbage bag into a single sheet to use as a heat tent. One carbide lamp is lit and gives a little heat, but we all know it is going to be a difficult time. I have packed a mixture of peanuts and raisins, for an emergency, and pass the food around. It will be our only food for the rest of the stay.

Bob later remarked that he had often wondered what people talk about under such circumstances. I had never envisioned myself as part of a survival party, and had never thought about the question. We soon discover that in such situations, there isn't much talk. We maintain an optimistic mood and speak about only positive things. This keeps the courage up, but greatly limits the number of acceptable conversation topics.

7:30 p.m. I check the level of the water and see that it is no longer washing over the Brain. This is the first good sign we have and I point it out to the others. I think the cause of the flooding must have been a sudden storm, which has surely passed. We will be very uncomfortable from the cold, but will eventually escape.

7:30 - 10:45 p.m. -- The water recedes slowly, but steadily. We are all anxious to try to leave, but know that most cave flood accidents happen when trapped cavers make their exit moves too soon. Patience translates into safety.

9:30 p.m. -- We sit in a row because the ledge is too narrow to do otherwise, and the positions at the ends are the coldest. After two hours, I am thoroughly chilled. I stand up and try to build up heat by exercise. I do 300 fast steps in place, but the motion is increasing the rate of heat loss from my limbs. It just won't work, so I sit again, and we change positions. Within five minutes, seated between Bob and Moni, I am warmer.

### **Return to Dreamland**

10:45 p.m. -- We are all very cold, even with our tight huddle. The water has fallen some more, and we decide it is time to work ourselves upstream. We head for Dreamland, where it should be less breezy and warmer. Besides, the effort to get there will warm us up. We feel that if the cave floods again, we will be safe only in the upper reaches of Dreamland.

11:05 p.m. -- We reach the level of Dreamland, 600 feet upstream. Bob knows the cave best, and he and Luis head further upstream to assess conditions. Moni and I remain behind on a narrow ledge above the water but below the level of the upper passage. We will move up if the water rises further. I decide that if they do not return by 12:30, we will go after them.

12:10 a.m. -- Bob and Luis have reached Coeyman's Dome and returned to report that the water is still abnormally high, but the way upstream manageable. No one really knows whether it is best to wait or to exit immediately. We all want to exit, but don't want to make our move prematurely. Although the water is low enough for us to reach the entrance, the waterfall is still too strong for a safe ascent. The only fatalities recorded for McFail's were on the ascent through the waterfall. Go hypothermic on rope in a waterfall and you are dead in fifteen minutes. We decide to wait in the upper reaches of Dreamland.

1:00 a.m. -- All four of us make the muddy crawl up to Dreamland. Moni sits next to Luis and I sit next to Bob. The two pairs are back to back, and we afford ourselves the luxury of turning

both carbide lamps on full blast under our two heat tents. I can feel the warmth of Moni's back against mine and the heat of the lamp on my face. But it isn't really working. My shoulder is touching rock and I am losing heat faster than I am gaining it. I have the perception of the heat passing through me, without warming me. My situation is no different than that of the others. We are all exhausted and chilled and must weigh the advantages of waiting against its dangers.

1:40 a.m. -- Bob goes down to check the water level. He returns to say that it is only slightly lower. Nevertheless, we have all had it with waiting, and decide to attempt an exit. We discuss carefully how this will be done. We work out the whistle signals in advance and ready our equipment. All lamps get fresh batteries and carbide charges.

The plan is for Luis and Moni to go first. Luis will climb rope first and check out the situation. Two blasts on the whistle will mean the key to the gate was lost in the flood and that we should not ascend. One blast will mean that all is well, the climber has reached the top and is off rope.

### **Ascent Through the Waterfall**

2:20 a.m. -- Moni and Luis depart, Bob and I wait and shiver for twenty minutes. At 2:40, we head upstream, walking in the water. The current is strong and our feet must be placed carefully, but it is safe to walk.

3:00 a.m. -- I hear a waterfall ahead and spot the yellow etrier. I climb it first, and I help pull Bob onto the ledge when he follows me. He derigs the etrier and stuffs it in his bag.

3:10 a.m. -- A little further upstream, we reach and climb the cable ladder, and derig it. I pack it in its box, and we head upstream.

3:25 a.m. -- We continue in Coeyman's passage and see Moni's lamp in the Dome 50 feet ahead of us. We hang back because of the danger of hypothermia.

3:35 a.m. -- A single blast on the whistle signals that Luis is at the top and that he has the key. I rush ahead to make sure that Moni's climbing gear is okay. In the cold it is difficult to think straight, and two pairs of eyes checking a rig are better than one.

By the time I reach her, she is already on rope and four feet up. I stop her and check the rig, which is on and fastened tight. I hold the rope to make it easier for her to ascend, and she is off like a shot.

Even though she climbs the rebelay rope (the one out of the main stream of the waterfall) the water is so high that it falls on her as she climbs. The main danger is to move too slowly and become chilled on the rope. In this regard, she is in no danger. Luis later told me that it was his intention to rappel down to the rebelay anchor to make sure she passed it properly, but before he could rig to get down there, she had already reached it.

The Dome is cold and windy from the waterfall and I move back into the passage to await my turn. I start to put on my seat harness, but I am shivering and not thinking straight and it takes longer than usual. Eventually, I get it right. Everything is on and locked correctly.

Bob is very experienced in vertical techniques, but on this one occasion is trying out a climbing system he does not normally use. I know the Frog system extremely well, so I head back to check his rig. It never hurts to check, and I ask him to look at mine, also.

4:00 a.m. -- The whistle blows and I move into the Dome. I take my time to make sure I am clipping into the right rope. The two ropes hang a few feet apart, and clipping into the wrong one could be fatal.

I am pleased to be on rope, but still fear the effects of the waterfall on my ability to climb. The Frog system utilizes two ascender devices which slide up the rope easily, but do not slide down. The lower ascender ("Croll") attaches to the seat harness and is your main point of attachment to the rope. The upper ascender ("Poignee") has foot loops hanging off. You climb like an inchworm, alternating progress between the two ascenders. Proper technique is to use your legs and not pull on the poignee with your arms. I want to pass through the waterfall quickly, and use my arms to speed the climb. As I ascend the rope, I find that the force of the water is not too great, and the helmet diverts it from the face, so I can breathe comfortably. The water is cold, but I will not be in it for long, and it will be warm at the surface. My electric lamp is bright, and I take a few seconds for a parting glance at the Dome. The splashing water and the wet rocks are quite beautiful.

I reach the rebelay anchor and am out of the lower waterfall. I take my time and clip one safety onto the rope above the anchor, and another into the rebelay knot. I pass the poignee to the upper rope, stand on the ledge and pass the croll over. The upper rope takes some arm strength to climb, because it doesn't pass of its own accord through the croll.

The flow volume is so great that the upper section of the rope, which was set to be out of the upper waterfall, is in its direct path. Luis sits on the edge to divert the flow for those who follow.

4:30 a.m. -- Moni and I are out of the cave as Bob climbs. The mosquitoes begin to attack us, but I don't mind.

5:00 a.m. -- Bob is out and the party is safe. We derig, organize our equipment, and walk back to our cars for the drive back to Scoharie. The cars are covered with branches and leaves, evidence of a violent storm.

Luis later asked me why Bob and I had headed upstream when the flood hit, rather than turning back to the First Breakdown Room where we could have climbed above the water. That might have made more sense, but, luckily, our instincts were to head out. Had we headed downstream, we would have been there much longer, and without the benefit of carbide lamps for heat. This experience has converted me into a carbide caver.

It is also clear, but only in hindsight, that once we reached the Brain, there was more discomfort than danger. Had the flood caught us in the crawls of the sump section, however, the story might have been very different, and written by someone else. Those crawl spaces we had traversed just moments before the flood hit probably filled rapidly and completely. We escaped being there by just a few minutes.

7:00 a.m. -- The Alley Cat Diner in Scoharie. I have roast beef and mashed potatoes in gravy and salad and rolls and vegetables in butter for breakfast. I eat it all and then order some buttered toast with jam. No sense in leaving the restaurant hungry! All of us are tired, but Luis looks absolutely exhausted. We will head back to our camp to sleep for a few hours before heading home. I telephone my wife, but just tell her I will be home a little later than planned. She reminds me to drive safely on the way back. I readily agree.

We ask a local about the previous night's storm. He said that when it hit, the rain was so heavy it was like a "white wall." Also, we learned from the newspaper that over three inches of rain had fallen near Cobleskill the previous few days. With the ground soaked, all the water from our storm flowed into the cave.

Many cavers visit McFail's and, as far as was known, it had never flooded from a summer storm. It floods in the spring from the melt of snow, but by August it is always nearly dry. What befell us, then, was unprecedented. It is no longer so, and future visitors to the cave must bear that in mind.

Monday, August 5 -- I'm back at work, but there isn't a single muscle in my body that doesn't ache. The only part free of pain is one finger, numb from frostbite.