

# JACOB'S WELL CASTS SPELL

*Mystery caverns lure divers to death*

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WIMBERLEY — No one knows the depth of Jacob's Well, but at least nine people have drowned trying to find out.

Last Sunday, the lure of the seemingly bottomless water-filled cave took Austin mail carrier Wayne Wood Russell, 36, to his death. He was the second diver to drown there in the past four months.

No doubt others will die in the pristine waters of the natural spring as the legend of the infamous Jacob's Well — posted as off limits to trespassers — lures more divers into its mysterious depths.

With publicity now surrounding the most-recent drownings, people in and around this picturesque Hill Country town agree it will not be long until the body count rises again.

What entices divers to explore the recesses of Jacob's Well and risk dying in its submerged caverns?

"It's just different," said Paul Battaglia, a diving enthusiast who has helped recover four of the last five victims from the spring. "It's not like any other diving spot in Central Texas, or anywhere in Texas."

Jacob's Well offers something that few of the state's natural watering

owns land that extends a few yards from the creek bed.

Four property owners who share ownership of the site have tried to keep the curious away from what has been referred to as a natural "attractive nuisance," but nothing so far has worked.

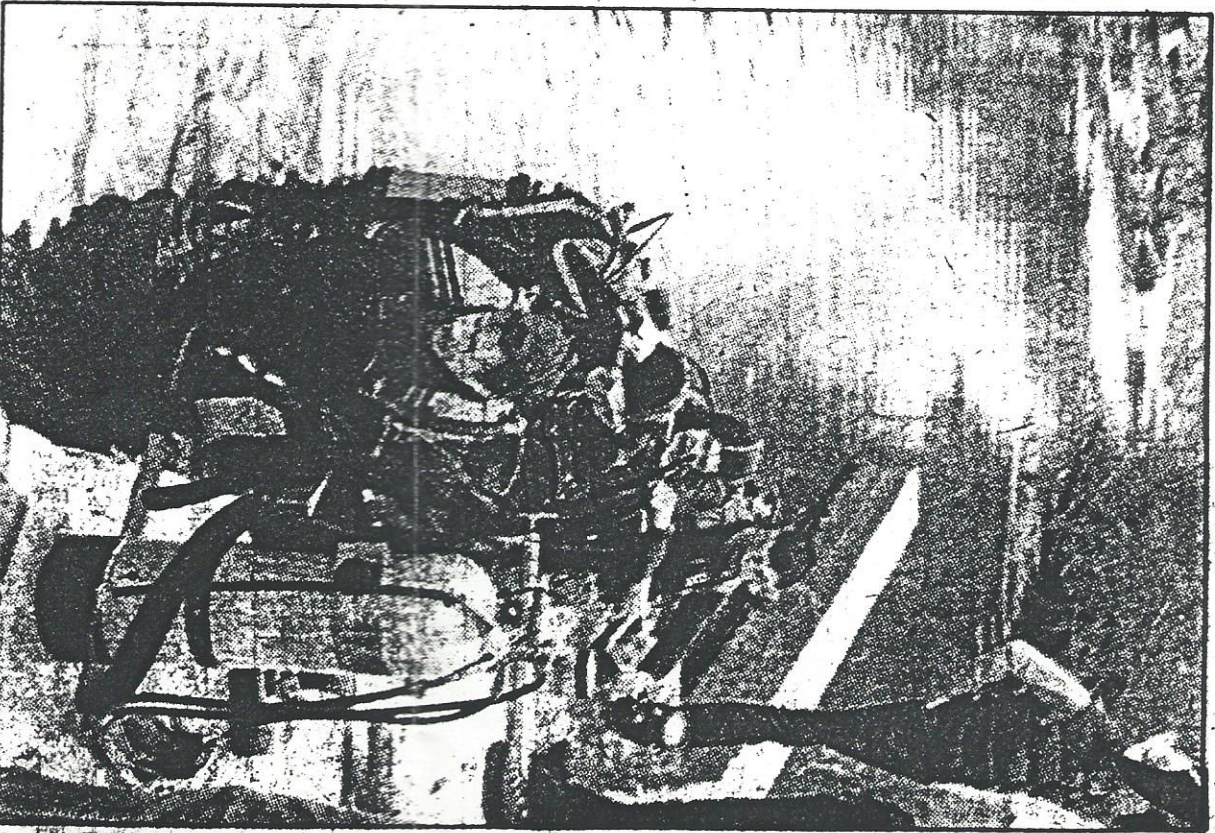
In 1980, at the request of the owners, a group of area divers embedded a steel grate in concrete at the mouth of a tunnel that begins about 90 feet below the spring's serene surface.

The intent was to keep trespassing divers from venturing too far into the submerged caverns. But the man-made obstacle did not last long.

By hacking away at the grate, anonymous divers eventually re-opened the passageway to the spring's infamous fourth chamber.

Divers who say they have seen the fourth chamber — counted as the fifth chamber by those who call the surface opening the first — describe it as a place where their underwater flashlights seem to shine into infinity.

To get into the fourth chamber, divers often must remove their air tanks to slither through a tunnel. The passageway usually is narrow, but its width can vary due to shifts in currents.



Air tank of Wayne Wood Russell, foreground, was recovered by divers 90 feet below the surface of Jacob's Well.

Special to The Light/Paul Battaglia



Lake Travis nor Canyon Lake can rival the clarity of its waters, Battaglia said. Bubbling up to an otherwise dry river bed, the spring known as Jacob's Well is the headwaters of Gypress Creek.

Old-time residents say the spring is named for a man who settled in the area in the early 1800s.

Its water remains between 66 and 70 degrees year-round. A Spanish explorer is said to have first recorded the spring in the late 1700s when his party came upon a geyser that shot water 30 feet into the air.

The thrill of diving into the unknown and largely uncharted caverns also is a major part of the attraction, Battaglia said.

The fact that the spring has been declared off-limits since the mid-1970s only adds to the excitement.

The area is patrolled around the clock by security guards hired by Woodcreek Resort Properties, which



Divers descend into the cave to retrieve equipment of Wayne Wood Russell, who drowned there last Sunday.

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SECTION  
SAN ANTONIO LIGHT  
SUNDAY  
MARCH 4, 1984

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# Jacob's Well

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Removing the equipment is a dangerous move for divers. But divers agree that sometimes it is the only way to avoid getting trapped.

From the surface, the spring appears to be a single cavern about 25 feet deep. The first-time diver cannot readily see how the water snakes through a series of caverns.

Even divers who have entered the inner sanctums may not recognize the chambers on their return trips. The shifting currents change the cave's composition from day to day.

"It's deceptive," said Battaglia, who in 1978 almost died in the cavern when a cloud of silt disoriented him as his scuba tank began running out of air.

"It's too easy," added Don Dibble, the owner of a scuba gear shop in nearby San Marcos.

He, too, barely escaped with his life as he searched the depths of Jacob's Well for two drowning victims in 1979.

Dibble's stomach ruptured during his rescue from a gravel slide in the tunnel, and he was hospitalized for four months.

Divers never were able to retrieve the bodies of the two victims Dibble was trying to find in the fourth chamber.

Parts of one victim's body were discovered months later downstream in Cypress Creek.

A partial skull and a swim suit wrapped around a pelvis helped the parents of Mark Brashier, 27, of Pasadena, identify their son.

The body of Brashier's diving partner, Kent Maupin of Pasadena, still is missing.

Both were reported lost Sept. 9, 1979, by a third companion who told authorities that Brashier and Maupin had entered the fourth chamber. It lies beyond

through the first chamber, peer beyond and think to themselves: "This is easy. I can do this."

"It's ego and arrogance," Dibble said of the drive that spurs people to go deeper and deeper into the cave.

Inquisitive divers, in the worst cases, push their luck beyond the limits that their scuba gear can bear. By the time they realize their air supply is gone, it is too late.

Battaglia believes that probably is what led to Russell's death.

On Thursday, divers working under the direction of Dibble recovered the tank and regulator apparatus that Russell had removed just before he drowned. The tank was all but empty of air.

The rented gear was found next to Russell's corpse Monday but, because the divers had only enough air to retrieve the body, it was left at the mouth of the tunnel. Russell's own depth meter and underwater flashlight also were recovered.

It is theorized that Russell removed his tank to make it easier to negotiate the slender tunnel, one of several serious mistakes Dibble said Russell made.

Divers returned to the depths Thursday at the request of Hays County Sheriff Alford Hohman, who was hoping to deter another clandestine descent by Russell's two diving companions.

Dibble said Self and Willcox had vowed to return to the spring to salvage the gear whether they received permission or not. Self denies that.

Self and Willcox are scheduled to return to Hays County March 22 to face criminal trespass charges filed against them by Eddie Sheek, the manager of Resort Park at Woodcreek, a separate entity from Woodcreek Resort.

The private campground owns a quarter-interest in the land on

Russell was found last week. "It's a narrow son of a gun," said Russell's diving partner, Danny Self, who said he only has looked through the passageway.

That spot also is believed to be where Richard Patton, 22, of New Braunfels, ran out of air last Nov. 23.

His body was recovered from a large chimney near the spring's surface, an indication that he hurriedly tried to escape the cave and, in his panic, confused the device with the opening of the pool.

Patton had taken part of his thanksgiving break from classes at the University of Texas at Austin to dive for an air tank presumably left by either Brasher or Maupin.

Battaglia said Patton apparently had a hold on the abandoned tank but released it during his frantic ascent for air.

Russell's diving partners — Self, 26, of Austin, and John Willcox, 29, of Thrall — brought the rusted tank out with them last Sunday.

Self and Willcox, both licensed diving instructors, told authorities they had gone into the spring with Russell, a diving student who Self said had been cave diving for 10 years, to map the caverns.

But Dibble called that claim a "smokescreen." He said the trio's equipment indicated they were not prepared to accomplish the task.

Unfortunately, Dibble said, divers use whatever excuse they want — and the cover of darkness — to sneak onto the property and dive into the cave. And once underwater, Dibble said, it is up to the individual to take risks.

Dibble said divers are misled by the cave's treacherous passages.

He said many divers swim

tent site at the park before they trekked through the woods to the cave.

Russell's recovered gear included an improperly rigged regulator and a faulty depth gauge, Dibble said.

He claims that is evidence Russell and his companions were not properly equipped for cave diving, which Dibble described as an endeavor "completely outside the realm of sport diving."

Without the right equipment, Dibble said, the divers were asking for trouble.

"They violated some very basic rules of cave diving. What they did was something akin to playing Russian roulette with one empty chamber," he said.

Dibble said his shop has been flooded with telephone inquiries from other divers asking about Russell's death. They want to know the details of the accident and to learn more about Jacob's Well.

He said the landowners or some other authority must do something with the cave before another diver drowns there.

"I think it's going to have to be closed, or opened to the public and controlled," Dibble said.

Sheek said the landowners thus far have made no such plans.

One thing is fairly certain about the next person who drowns in Jacob's Well, said Hays County Justice of the Peace Clarence "Sonny" Gold.

It will not be a local resident, he predicted.

Gold should know. He is the man who pronounced six of the last victims dead, and his children learned to swim in the surface pool.

Local people, he said, are too smart to probe the submerged chambers.

"There's never been a local drowned in that well," Gold said.