



'Holes in the ground' fascinate Leo Schotter

BY MARY ANN SEBREY

Holes in the ground have always fascinated Leo Schotter.

He grew up during the "poverty days" on a farm near Wyandotte Cave. (I-64 now cuts through his old home place.) Leo, 66, lives in Milltown and is retired from the plumbing and electrical business. (He still works part-time as the town's water superintendent.)

During boyhood tramps through the woods hunting for ginseng, he often saw deep pits.

"I'd see these holes — these forbidden holes," he said.

Leo had always wondered what was at the bottom of those deep, dark shafts. "When you're a kid, there's no way of getting down in there."

He and some of his boyhood buddies had been in some of the easily accessible, walk-in caves in the area, and, in fact, there was a cave on the Schotter farm.

But the deep, mysterious pits fascinated him, and he vowed to go in one the first chance he had.

That chance didn't come for 16 years.

Two Muncie, Ind. spelunkers, Clarence Lindsay and John Baker, drove to Wyandotte Cave on an Easter Sunday, Leo recalled. They took a road going north and stopped at the first farmhouse they saw to ask if there were any caves nearby.

A boy told them, "I know where a cave's at. Mr. Schotter showed me." The boy gave them directions to Schotter's place.

When the men arrived, saying they'd heard he was an authority on caves, Leo told them, "I know about the caves. I been in a lot of 'em, but not the deep holes. If you've got the nerve and the equipment, I'll go."

We think we do," the men answered. Leo said, "Come on down and we'll find out."

That was his first taste and by no means his last.

From his caving he learned how to make rope ladders and other devices necessary to descend into the deep pits. Now he could explore many of the "forbidden holes" that had beckoned him since childhood.

Since that day, he has explored most of the caves and pits in Harrison and Crawford counties and has even discovered a few himself. "I suspect I been in more than a lot of people," he said.

There are "maybe more holes per square mile" here than anywhere, he said.

190 caves in 2 counties

Maps on which Leo has charted the location of caves and pits show 57 in a seven by nine-mile area around Milltown and 190 caves in the Crawford-Harrison county area.

One cave he discovered was named Thundering Pit, for an appropriate reason. Leo and his companions had spotted a depression in the woods north of Milltown. Leo began scraping leaves off the surface, hoping to discover a shaft, when suddenly he heard a roar that "sounded like a freight train."

His buddies ran for their lives, and Leo found himself straddling a small opening that dropped 80 feet into the ground. The earth between his feet had collapsed.

Leo said he thinks he was the first person to explore a cave he calls Virgil's Haunted Pit, named because Virgil Poe of Milltown explored it with him and because it runs under Mt. Zion Cemetery north of Milltown.

When Poe, Leo and his sons Gary and Allen prepared to enter the 85-foot shaft, a woman living nearby sent her children to warn them not to go in because it was

"haunted."

Lindsay's Slipper Cave is a cave that, by all rights, shouldn't have been there. It turned out to be Leo's greatest discovery.

One time Leo, Gary and Lindsay had stopped at Perry McCutcheon's place north of Milltown to ask if he knew of any caves on his property. McCutcheon told them, "Got a big sinkhole, but no cave."

Leo decided to give the sinkhole the leaf test. That's the method cavers use to determine whether there's a cave at the bottom of a pit. Throw a few leaves over the opening, and if they drift back out, that means there's air movement, which usually means there's a cave, Leo explained.

But when he threw the leaves into this pit, nothing happened.

They decided to go down anyway. Lindsay had only worn his house slippers because they hadn't planned on doing any serious caving. He got his slippers stuck in the mud, so the cave they discovered was dubbed Lindsay's Slipper Cave.

When they had descended into the pit, they found a cave "as pretty as caves are in this country."

Another cave, Tiny's Pit, was named in honor of the Schotter's canine caver, Tiny, a Pekinese.

Tiny, now deceased, loved to go in caves so much that if anyone so much as picked up a rope, she was ready to go. She would raise such a fuss that he hated to leave her behind, so Leo found a way to take her into the deep holes. She was lowered in a canvas bag, with only her head sticking out. She never panicked inside the bag, Leo said.

When Leo and Gary were hired to install electrical wiring in Wyandotte Cave eight years ago, Tiny went along and stayed with them in the cave, eight hours a day for seven weeks.

Two of Leo's five sons, Gary, 30, and Allen, 26, shared their father's love of the underground. Gary went on many expeditions, but Leo had never taken his son



LONG-TIME CAVER Leo Schotter of Milltown (right) and a friend, Patrick Sebrey, Milltown, inspect "tobacco leaf" stalactite formations in Swarens Cave, located on property that once belonged to Squire Daniel Swarens, southeast of Milltown. The small "wild," or non-commercial, cave has a surprising variety of formations.

Allen — who had polio as an infant — until the day when he was about 12.

Allen begged to go in one of the deep holes. Leo told him his legs were too weak to climb the rope. His legs were so weak that they finally decided to make a harness to lower him into the pit.

When Allen was inside a cave, where you have to do more crawling than walking, his handicap proved an advantage.

"He could crawl faster than we could walk," Leo said.

"Throughout all his years of cave exploring, Leo has never had an injury or an accident. He goes prepared and doesn't take any unnecessary chances. He carries extra ropes, flash lights, matches and candles, wears protective clothing and uses the proper caving devices for descending into the shafts.

He never goes alone.

He never explores during threatening weather. Many caves and pits serve as natural drains. Two boys once drowned in Salamander Cave near Bloomington, Ind.,

when water rushed in after a heavy rain.

Leo said he is surprised that he has never found any human remains. As a boy he often heard tales of people "just disappearing," and he was "just sure" he'd find a body in one of those deep holes.

One of the biggest thrills of caving is finding "virgin cave" — where no human has ever set foot before.

"That's a thing I really get a joy out of — to discover a new one," Leo said. "It's just that urge to be some place where no one has ever been."

What else about the silent, dark world of caves fascinates Leo and other cavers?

How could this happen?"

It's partly the beauty of the strange formations, unlike anything above ground. Some, like the helictites, which grow twisting and curving from a cave ceiling like gnarled hands, defy explanation.

Leo marvels at how mineral-rich water dripping from the cave ceiling can produce such a variety of formations right next to each other. You may find a delicate "soda straw" hanging right next to a massive stalactite that looks like a sheaf of tobacco leaves hanging in a barn. Some of these formations "represent a million years," Leo said.

Leo said of Jewel Box Cave in the Harrison-Crawford State Forest, "I could just go in there and sit and wonder, 'How could this happen?'"

There is also something timeless about being inside a cave, where there are no sounds except the slow drip of water and no light but the caver's flashlight.

Even if you're not infected with the caving "bug," it's easy to be caught by Leo's love of a world we seldom see and to understand, for a moment, what makes him want to crawl into holes in the ground.