

Vale Bill Halliday – a tribute and some personal reflections

Greg Middleton

It is with deep regret that we record the death, at age 98, of William Ross Halliday, M.D., on 24 September 2024, at Shoreline (north of Seattle), Washington, USA.

Bill was born 9 May 1926 in Atlanta, Georgia, the son of Jane Wakefield Halliday and William Ross Halliday.

Medical Career

During his medical career, Bill was a thoracic surgeon, medical consultant and specialist in vocational rehabilitation. He first graduated in 1946 with a Bachelor of Arts in Zoology from Swarthmore College, a Quaker liberal arts college near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Two years later he graduated M.D. from the George Washington University School of Medical and Health Sciences, Washington, D.C. – among the most selective medical schools in the U.S.



A young Dr William Halliday
(photo – Patton Funeral Home 2024)

Initially he worked at the Huntington Memorial Hospital in California (1948-49) and then served as a medical officer in the U.S. Navy, in Long Beach, California (1949-50). He remained in the Naval Reserve until at least 1957. Subsequently he became a thoracic surgeon, medical consultant and Director of the Department of Labor and Industries from 1971 to 1976. From 1976 to 1982 he was Medical Director for the Washington State Division of Vocational Rehabilitation.

Initial Caving

In parallel with his medical career, Bill became a speleologist and it is in that sphere that he became most widely known.

He was introduced to caving in 1946 when, working at a summer camp near Washington, he went to see Clarks Cave in company with the owner. Bill later recalled, “It was everything a cave should be – a network of passages, it smelled old and musty, just enough mud to get your attention, stalactites and stalagmites, old artifacts. We didn’t know at the time, but I found out much later that the ladders had been constructed by saltpeter miners” (Halliday, Fleury & Chavez 2007).

Founder of Speleological Groups

It was Mr Clark (of Clarks Cave) who told Bill about the National Speleological Society (NSS). It had been founded in 1941 but was not widely known and Bill had trouble making contact. Eventually (1947) he located the District of Columbia Grotto and got to know Bill Stevenson (the founder of the NSS) who became his friend and mentor. Stevenson encouraged Bill to set up grottoes in the west as there were none west of the Mississippi. He subsequently founded the Southern California Grotto (1948), the Cascade Grotto (Seattle 1951), the Colorado Grotto (Denver), the Salt Lake Grotto (Utah) (and, much later, in 1989, the Hawaii Grotto). These achievements led to Bill often being referred to as the “Father of Western Caving”.

Not only was Bill a mover in getting new grottoes established, he went further and set up groups focussing on cave recording and surveying. His first was the Washington Speleological Survey (a unit of the Western Speleological Survey)(Cole 2002, Halliday 1963, p. 3), of which he was the Director from 1955 to 1981 (Patton 2024). He founded the Hawaii Speleological Survey in 1989. He founded the Vancouver Island Speleological Survey (late 1950s; Cole 2002). Also, about this time he co-founded the Northwest Cave Rescue Association (Cole 2002).

Bill was made an Honorary Member of the NSS in 1965, and in 1988 he was awarded the Spelean History prize for his work in documenting cave histories. He was elected to the NSS Board of Governors, many times between 1950 and 2001 (Encyclopedia.com. 2005). He was made a Fellow of NSS and of the Explorers Club.

Vale Bill Halliday

Because of the huge encouragement that Bill gave to John Pint when John moved to Saudi Arabia, John regards Bill as the “Father of Speleology in Saudi Arabia” (Pint, pers. comm. Oct. 2024).

Role in Vulcanospeleology

Bill encountered volcanic caves early in his caving career. In compiling his comprehensive report on the caves of Washington State (1963) he observed:

Persons concerned with broader implications of speleology will find Washington a fruitful area of study. This is particularly true of the student of lava tubes and of vulcanism in general. Ape Cave, the longest lava-tube cave known in the continental United States, and perhaps the world’s longest, is in Skamania County. The concentration of lava-tube caves in Washington is not so great as in Lava Beds National Monument in California, or perhaps in the Bend area of Oregon. However, Washington’s numerous and extensive lava tubes provide a great variety of features of these caves and their enveloping bedrock.

While his suggestion that Ape Cave may be the longest volcanic cave was not subsequently borne out, he embraced lava caves at a time when other cavers tended to discount them in favour of karst caves. Although he maintained an interest in karst, his strong advocacy of volcanic caves – particularly from his organisation of the first International Symposium on Vulcanospeleology (ISV) in 1972 – led to the establishment, by the International Union of Speleology, of first a working group, and then (1993) a fully-fledged Commission on Volcanic Caves – with Dr Halliday as its founding chairman/president. Under Bill’s oversight, the Commission has become one of the International Union’s most active and productive. Bill personally organised the first, third and sixth international symposia and, while running the Commission, encouraged and assisted others to organise them at appropriate locations so that they have become a regular biennial event.

Author of Cave-related Books

Bill was a prolific writer. Early on, he was a major contributor to *Celebrated American Caves* (Halliday 1955a, 1955b). His first major book was *Adventure is Underground* (1959), followed by *Caves of Washington*, published by the Washington State Division of Mines and Geology in 1963, *Depths of the Earth: Caves and Cavers of the United States* (1966, followed by an



Bill examining lava speleothems in Cave #13 at Mt Suswa, Kenya, on the field trip following the 8th ISV, February 1998.

enlarged edition in 1976), and *American Caves and Caving: Techniques, pleasures, and safeguards of modern cave exploration* (1974). He also wrote or co-authored a series of more focussed booklets: *Discovery and exploration of the Oregon caves* with Frank K. Walsh (1971), *The Paradise Ice Caves* with Charles H. Anderson (1972), *Ape Cave and the Mount St. Helens Apes* (1983), *Carlsbad Cavern: The Early Years* with R. Nymeyer (1991) and *Floyd Collins of Sand Cave: A photographic memorial* (1998). In addition, Bill wrote and edited numerous reports on various caves and papers recording his exploration and documentation of caves in the USA and elsewhere.

He contributed no less than ten entries to *Gunn’s Encyclopedia of Caves and Cave Science* (2004): *America, North: History*; *Caves in History: The Eastern Mediterranean*; *Crevice Caves*; *Disease*; *Hawaii Lava Tube Caves*; *Piping Caves and Badlands Pseudokarst*; *Pseudokarst*; *Talus Caves*; *Volcanic Caves*; *Vulcanospeleology: History*. This was more in number, and over a broader range of topics, than any other contributor.

His books have been highly influential in encouraging new generations of cavers and cave scientists in the USA and around the world. His first book, *Adventure is Underground*, was pirated by Russians and 65,000 copies were printed – “the most my books have ever sold” Bill later joked (Halliday and others 2007). It is reported the book was influential in encouraging speleology in Russia. Bill Halliday was probably the greatest contributor to popular works on caves since Casteret.

Family

Bill had married Eleanore in 1951 but she passed away in 1983. He married Louise (‘Sis’) in 1988 and she passed in 2018. He is survived by daughters Marcia Gojan and Patricia Halliday and

son William Ross Halliday III, two grandsons, four stepchildren and a number of great-grandchildren, step-grandchildren and step-great grandchildren.

Some personal reflections

I first met Bill Halliday after he contacted me while I was working on the Indian Ocean island of Mauritius in 1994. He was a keen speleophilatelist but he didn't just collect stamps with caves on them – he liked to visit the depicted caves himself. He had found a stamp of Mauritius featuring a cave and wondered if I could help him locate and visit it.



A side entrance to Caverne Patate featured on a Mauritian stamp of 1985

Bill arrived in Mauritius on 12 May 1995, having just visited Kenya to check out the possibility of holding a symposium there for the Volcanic Caves Commission. I showed him some lava caves within minutes of the airport and next day we flew to Rodrigues (the second island of Mauritius, 650 km to the north-east). There I was able to take him to the very spot shown on the 1985 stamp.



Bill at the entrance to Caverne Patate shown on the 1985 stamp.

As Bill expressed it later:

I have used postage stamps as a cave hunting technique in several places, with particular results in the Republic of Mauritius, where the Patate Cave on the island of Rodrigues, is shown on one of their postage stamps. An Australian caver and I got together to go check out the whole new cave area that had not been studied before. (Halliday and others 2007).

He was very pleased to actually visit the cave shown on the stamp and he agreed to help me finish the survey. What I didn't tell him was that this was the wet part of the cave – beyond the 'show cave'. He took it all in his stride, however, and, despite getting very damp, we completed the survey.



The author and Bill Halliday after surveying in Caverne Patate, 14 May 1995.

On that visit to Mauritius Bill invited me to attend the meeting of the Commission on Volcanic Caves which was being planned for Kenya. I became a member of the Commission and did attend the 8th International Symposium on Vulcanospeleology in Kenya in 1998. It was a significant meeting for Bill as it was there he handed over chairmanship of the Commission to Jan Paul Van der Pas.



The actual hand-over of chairmanship from Bill to Jan Paul at the Commission meeting in Nairobi.

Vale Bill Halliday

Naturally Bill continued to be involved and was made Honorary Chairman.

Bill was responsible for my documenting the lava caves of the Comoros Islands. As I put it:

When Dr Bill Halliday, chair of the IUS Commission on Volcanic Caves, appointed me to the Commission in 1996 he asked me to assume responsibility for the Indian Ocean islands (because of my efforts in documenting the lava caves of Mauritius and my interest in Madagascar) and pointed out that the Comoros Islands in that region were virtually unknown [vulcanospeleological] territory. (Middleton 1997).

I later learned I had been ‘conned’ (in the nicest possible way), when Bill revealed in an interview:

The Commission on Volcanic Caves, for instance, has been a tremendous success—its members are the people in the forefront of exploration throughout the world. When we find a void, we see if we can get some sucker to go fill that void.

Interviewer: (laughs) Do you usually find one?

WH: Yes. Greg Middleton of Australia was kind of flabbergasted when I appointed him to cover the whole Indian Ocean. But he rose to the challenge and went to places like [the Comoros] islands off Madagascar, and turned up some unsuspected but important lava tube areas. (Halliday and others 2007).

Bill took a particular interest in the numerous volcanic caves of Hawaii (well documented in Bosted 2019). In his later years he carried out a project to document the little-known lava cave features of the Kilauea Caldera and invited me along during his July-August 2000 field season (Middleton 2001). (Unfortunately, most of the features Bill recorded in the caldera were destroyed when it collapsed in 2018 (Bosted 2019) – but at least there is a record of the caves that had been there.)

In 2000, after surveying a number of small features in the caldera, we visited caves where rubbish had been dumped as Bill prepared for a conference he was organising on lava caves and groundwater contamination.

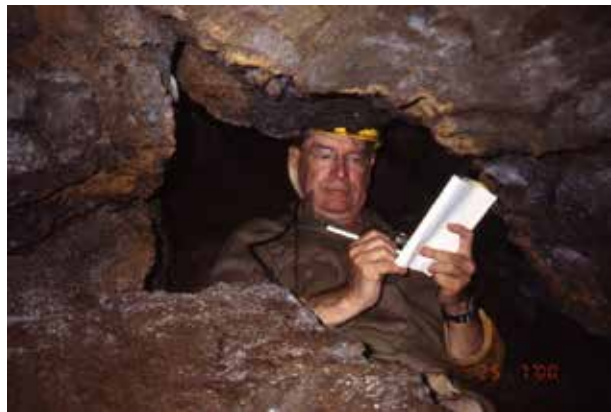
We also visited the Kalaupapa Peninsula on the small island of Molokai where he continued surveying the caves and we visited Kauhako Crater.



Bill pointing to his Kilauea Caldera study area July 2000



Bill campaigned against the dumping of rubbish in lava caves – under a Kaumana garbage puka.



Taking survey notes in Kaupikiawa Cave, Kalaupapa, Molokai, 25 July 2000

In November 2003, as a result of Bill Halliday’s recommendation, I was asked to advise on the possible tourist development of a most unusual cave in the Eastern Desert of Egypt. Though very impressed by the cave, I was also aware of the difficulties of providing safe access and was unable to recommend an inexpensive way to open the cave safely (Middleton 2005). I expect the Egyptian authorities were not especially pleased with my findings; in any case, Bill didn’t recommend me for any future such projects.

With Bill's passing volcanic caves have lost their greatest ever champion and speleology has lost one of its foremost promoters and practitioners.

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