

**The truth is...**we gather on the Third Monday of each month (except January and February where it is the fourth Monday) to practice our writing skills. We listen and share in each other's work. We are small in number and our commitment is strictly to produce and foster creativity among our members.

**We started** in July 1999 and consist of adults that enjoy writing memoirs, commentaries, essays, poems, and/or prose. Our simple method each month is to use a pre-selected word or phrase as the basis of a story, an idea, an opinion, a derivative of, or an implied essence of and write a document of no more than 1000 words (approximately 2 pages). We share our stories, comment, and in that way build up our writing skills through practice and presentation. The atmosphere is friendly and supportive, and the feedback is gentle.

**Curious?** Always wanted to try writing for fun, entertainment, or even profit? Come visit with us at any of our open meetings. Bring a sample of your work. Sit in and see what we do. If you like it, join us every month and become a member. Contact Nancy at [nestewart@ameritech.net](mailto:nestewart@ameritech.net) [for information.](#)

**Original Works by Members of the Pen & Ink Writers' Group**  
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**March 2024 Selection – Cavern**

**Caverns along the Way**  
By Carol Carvon

Sometimes I think I should be standing in front of my class reading a paper I wrote entitled "What I did on my summer vacation."

My remembrance takes place during the summer between graduating from 8<sup>th</sup> grade and becoming a high school freshman.

My mother and I embarked on a lengthy train trip across much of the United States from Chicago to Mexico to Northern California and back with many planned detours for sightseeing along the way.

My mom needed a vacation and I won the chance to go along. When I say "won" I mean exactly that. Mom pulled out three straws from a broom and made them different lengths. She held them in her fist with only a little bit of them showing. We each pulled one out and I won. I don't remember if it was a long one or a short one. But I do remember my siblings accusing me of cheating! I didn't, but they never believed me.

We boarded a Santa Fe Super Chief train at Union Station. Back then train travel was something special, like watching an old movie. If you were lucky enough to have sleeping accommodations, they would have been in a Pullman car. In the daytime, it had coach seating, but at night the train porters transformed the seats to upper and lower Pullman berths. There was a small step ladder used to climb up to the upper berth, my spot. Mom was happy to stay below in the bottom berth.

The dining cars were special too with their exotic menus, at least to a young girl. I'll always remember dining on swordfish and feeling very worldly. Mom was allergic to fish and played it safe with pork chops. The French toast was another specialty of the dining car.

Our journey lasted several days with stops along the way for many interesting tourist attractions. One memorable stop was to the Carlsbad Caverns in Carlsbad, New Mexico. We were on a tour and our leader led the group into a huge room I'll always think of as a bat's cave. The ceiling was very high and strung with hundreds of bats hanging upside down. They were resting; awaiting nightfall to make their way outside for the evening. I think they left the caverns at sundown to feast on insects. They returned in the early morning hours.

The Caverns were magnificent. There were many different rooms even an underground dining hall where we had a box lunch.

No caverns I've ever been to or heard of can compare to the enormous Carlsbad Caverns. They made an indelible impression on a teen-age girl. It is a place I will never forget from the huge formations either hanging from above or growing from the ground up and of course the bats.

I do remember the cool air and sometimes slippery ground we were walking on. There were some places that got quite narrow to walk through. I'm not sure if Carlsbad Caverns were part of the National Park System back then but they are now. What I am sure about though is that I'm so glad I was there once to see this remarkable place because I don't think I'd venture into a cave these days.

And that's how I spent one very special summer vacation. I'll never forget it.

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**Mother Nature**  
**By Kelly Tansor**

Do you believe in fate? A higher power? Just something in the universe looking out for you? Personally, if I needed proof of any of that, I would look to the story of Jill Heinerth.

In 2001, seasoned cave diver Jill Heinerth and her crew explored an ice cave: a cave inside of an iceberg. Jill had been diving inside of underwater caves for years at that point, but this was a first! An Antarctic iceberg called Iceberg B-15—which is, to this day, the largest recorded iceberg by area, being about the size of Jamaica—had fractured and formed tunnels underneath that fed into the sea floor. Jill *had* to explore.

Jill and two others went into the iceberg and met the sea floor in order to document the beautiful underwater life they had found—and it *was* beautiful, by all accounts. Well into the dive, however, they began hearing cracks, groans, and other strange noises that they couldn't identify. Additionally, Jill had noticed that the current was picking up in a way that she had not experienced before. They tried to go back the way they came, but by then, a large chunk of the iceberg had broken off and sealed off their path.

At this point, the current was getting stronger and stronger, and Jill began to think they might not make it out. Luckily, she had noticed tiny fish that lived in little burrows in the ice shelf; essentially, they had made their "homes" by forming holes inside the walls of the iceberg. Thinking quickly, the team all jammed their fingers inside these holes and used the holes as climbing aids to pull themselves up to the surface.

Upon reaching safety on their boat, Jill turned to a scientist onboard and told him something truly chilling, “The cave tried to keep us today.” Two hours later, the very same iceberg cracked and dissolved, completely crushing the cave they were just inside. In a later interview, Jill said, “Mother Nature was telling us it was time to go home.”

Quick aside: Much of this can be seen in the film *Ice Island*. I recommend it for anyone who isn't as claustrophobic as myself.

Somehow, some way, Jill and her team made it out alive. Maybe it was their quick thinking, maybe it was dumb luck, or maybe it was a higher power in the form of Mother Nature. Regardless, it's not lost on them—or anyone, really—how fortunate they all were to have this once-in-a-lifetime experience, document rare and beautiful wildlife, and live to tell the tale.

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### **The Sapper** **By Dennis Johnson**

I had down time in the pressroom that day and really had nothing to do. So, I eased my way into the scanner department for a visit with "Buki." We were a small trade shop in the suburbs and a kind of a country club so to speak as far as working atmosphere was concerned. In layman's terms this shop was easy.

With the older employees it wasn't unusual for a discussion about WW2 to arise. And, of course, one's participation in that conflict.

You never could find anybody nicer than John B. "Buki." And that day he started the conversation with the exclamation "I was a Sapper!" "John, what's that?" was my enquiry. "I was a combat engineer. It was the name given to European combat engineers in previous wars, usually British and French" was John's response to my curiosity. Well, I looked it up. 'A sapper is a combatant who performs a variety of military engineering duties such as breaching fortifications, demolitions, bridge building, laying or clearing minefields, preparing field defenses, and road and airfield construction and repair.'

Buki's job was laying metal pontoon bridges across bodies of water, usually rivers and creeks in order to get armor, trucks, supplies, and personnel to the other side. These metal bridges were designed to be put up very quickly and usually not far from where the normal bridge stood of which the Germans blew up to stop the Allied advance in that location.

Buki laughed when he told me about what he went through on some occasions. "I had my tools to the ready, my M-I Carbine on my back, and when we started to lay the bridge down you had to move quickly, no time to waste, because the Germans were shooting at us from across that river. Ping, ping, pang. The bullets were bouncing off of the bridge and the heavy equipment that was laying it down as we were bolting the bridge together with our tools."

Later on I thought about what he went through. The Germans on one side of the river with snipers, machine guns, potential mortars and then our guys on the other side with the same.

And John was in the middle with his buddies in true harm's way. It wasn't funny back then I thought. What if the Germans zeroed in on them with 88's and 105's. I wanted to hide my head in a cave just thinking about it.

Another greatest generation story? One among the innumerable to be sure! A gentleman and a scholar. Many of which never came back. I thank God for John and his service and my memory of him when we worked together. The End

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## **Back to the Dark Age: Part 2** **By Mark Moe**

While in the "**cavern**" of Cerebro, sitting upon a golden floating hover chair, Professor Charles Xavier broke his mental connection to his psychic amplification device. He placed the helmet on its stand and turned to float out toward the exit. The inner door opened with a quiet hiss as the door rolled back allowing the Professor to float toward the outer door. It opened more slowly due to the fact it was pressurized and required massive hydraulics to open it. He headed toward the elevator and was greeted by Logan.

Professor, I was just coming to get you. We need you in the briefing room. We have a situation."

Yes, Logan we do have a situation, but I suspect we are not talking about the same thing.

Logan saw the concerned look on the Professor's face, nodded with understanding and followed the Professor back into the elevator. Neither man spoke on the quiet ride up to the mansion's main floor. When they arrived in the briefing room, The Beast started pulling up the situation Logan had referenced earlier on the computer, but Professor X interrupted him. My students, my half-brother the Juggernaut was killed in a long, drawn-out battle with Apocalypse. He ripped the Gem of Cyttorak from him as he killed him."

Logan reacted by saying, "I will not miss him."

The Professor ignored Logan's comment and continued, "I believe there must be a greater reason beyond simple revenge or just collecting a souvenir from the battle. Beast, pull up the files on the Gem of Cyttorak. Let us try to figure out Apocalypse's next move."

The sound of rapid typing could be heard as Beast searched the X-men database.

"I got it, Professor. The Gem of Cyttorak is an ancient gem that has been around for several thousand years. Until recently, it was in the possession of your half-brother. It was also believed

to be one of the three gems of Neptune's trident, but there is no way to confirm that fact. That part relies on believing Roman mythology and the power of Neptune to control the sea."

Professor X responded, "Considering all the powerful beings we have fought and the existence of the Celestials, I am certain that Neptune was more than a myth and that is where we must begin our search. Do we know anything about the other two gems or the location of Neptune's trident?"

More rapid typing from Beast continued for a longer period, until Beast replied, "The trident has been lost to history and the other two gems were recorded as destroyed back in the 1600s possibly by another Celestial. We do not know for certain.

Cyclops's visor flashed red as he made the connection. He stated, "Apocalypse is an immortal being who has access to great ancient power. He knows the other two gems are in the past and he plans to get them before they are destroyed. He might not have Neptune's trident, but he must have a time machine in his base."

"Scott, I agree with your insight. We must send a team to stop Apocalypse in the past. I know the perfect mutant to lead this team. Beast, call our friend Kurt Wagner here. We need a known pirate who can chase Apocalypse around the Horn of Africa to his pyramid in Egypt."

Scott interrupted again to ask, "If Nightcrawler is leading, who will comprise the rest of his team?"

Without missing a beat, the Professor replied, "Gambit, Rogue, Cyclops, Forge and Sunspot. Beast called the other X-men to the briefing room on the intercom and when everyone was present, Professor X gave these instructions.

"The six of you will use Cable's time travel equipment to go back to the 1600s and stop Apocalypse from getting those two other gems. If you cannot stop him, then you are to destroy the gems. I will also ask that you destroy his time machine and hopefully leave him stranded in the past. Good luck to each of you, my X-men. I pray for your success."

After listening to the briefing, Nightcrawler responded, "Do not worry, Herr Professor we will stop him before he can use the power of Neptune's trident, you have my word."

The next few days were a flurry of activity as Nightcrawler, and his team prepared to go back into the past. Cable's time travel equipment took longer to prepare because it had to be recoded to all the mutants instead of Cable's unique mutant signature. Fortunately, Beast and Forge spent a good two days on the problem and were able to bypass Cable's security protocols. The destination was set for them to go to Sao Jorge da Mina Castle as it was still one of the most active ports through the 1600s. From there, Nightcrawler and his crew would commandeer a ship and set sail around the Horn of Africa to Egypt.

The team was confident that Nightcrawler would be able to scare a crew of humans into following him since his physical appearance resembled that of a demon. He has dark blue skin, sharp, pointy ears, a mouth full of sharp teeth and a prehensile tail that can be quite intimidating. Once they arrived in the past, the mutants emptied out one local tavern because they forgot they

had two mutants who looked like demons, Nightcrawler and Sunspot. So where one demon might be intimidating, two caused total panic and terror from the local population. Cyclops's visor probably did not help much either. They had to go to a smaller tavern farther inland to recruit a crew and this time they used only Nightcrawler to convince the crew to join them. Cyclops and Sunspot went ahead to commandeer a fast ship to not have a repeat performance of the terror they caused.

While Sunspot and Cyclops sat on the deck of their ship, they saw Nightcrawler, Gambit, Forge and Rogue approaching the docks looking for them. Behind them came about thirty men following in a drunken fashion. "Apparently, we will have to wait for them to sober up before we set sail," Cyclops remarked to Sunspot.

###

### **Cavern** **By Pauline Bastek**

Whenever I see the word, cavern, which fortunately is not too often, I start humming, out loud, if I'm alone, or in my head if others are present.

"In a cavern, by a canyon, excavation for a mine, dwelt a miner forty niner, and his daughter Clemetine. Light she was just like a fairy and her shoes were number nine, herring boxes without toposes, sandals were for Clementine. Drove she ducklings to the water every morning just at nine, struck her foot against a splinter fell into the foamy brine. O my darling oh my darling Clementine.

I am once again eight years old, sitting at the Oakley show on Chicago Avenue and Oakley Blvd at a Saturday matinee, admission twelve cents, with my best friend, Ruth, munching buttered popcorn at fifteen cents a box, literally hypnotized by the actors and actresses on the black and white screen.

The five-dollar box of popcorn offered at theaters today doesn't come near that butter-soaked popcorn of yesterday.

This was during the war years of the forties and the third run Oakley theater was a safe entertainments venue for the local children, proving a respite for parents who worked all week and half days on Saturday in the World War II defense plants.

I can still see the manager, Mr. Grossman, balding, no taller than five-foot two walking up and down the aisles with his oversized flashlight, policing our behavior and threatening noisemakers with eviction.

For some reason the song Clementine stayed in my mind all these years, even though I couldn't tell you the stars of the film. I just know it was a western. Yes, I know I can Google it but I prefer to picture a young girl feeding ducks.

Can't imagine what a herring box would look like, much less sandals made of from a box. But these are mere details. The important thing is that in the midst of that awful war, for the price of twenty-seven cents, an eight-year-old girl with her best friend were safely transported to the wild west of yesterday while happily munching the best buttered popcorn ever.

That memory is evoked by the word cavern and the song of the miner's daughter, the darling Clementine.

Strangely, her demise into the foamy brine, a very sad ending to be sure, seems to have cast no shadow on my memory or was it overshadowed by the memory of that buttered popcorn.

For the security we found at the Oakey show during those grey days of war rationing and air raid drills, my thanks to the movie industry of yesteryears, and Mr. Grossman the manager for a happy memory that is evoked with a single word.

###

**Road Trip**  
**By N. Stewart**

"Come on, it's time to get up. We have a big couple of days ahead of us."

"I'm already packed," said Kennedy.

"Do I have to get up, Mom," said Oliver.

"Yep let's go. Breakfast is ready downstairs. Aunt Sara has eggs, bacon, pancakes ready to eat. Wash your faces and come down. Our bus leaves in 30 minutes for Mammoth Cave and overnight camping in a Conestoga wagon. Don't forget your bathing suits."

"I'm not packed," said Oliver.

"Well, get going. Both of you." The children jumped out of their beds and ran around the room. Oliver picked up a few things and threw more airplanes, train cars, and guns than clothes in the bag. Kennedy washed her face and dressed in white shorts and a red polka dotted top. They clambered down the stairs and sat at the table. Kennedy was too excited and managed to eat only very little. Oliver attacked the food like it was his last meal.

"All done? Brush your teeth, and get your things. Bring them down. Don't forget to go to the bathroom. The car trip will be about two hours." She and Aunt Sara cleaned the kitchen and took their bags and camping equipment, loading the car. The children came out and Mom inspected their backpacks, sending Oliver up for more clothes, underwear, and less toys. He returned with an over-stuffed backpack. Everyone piled into the car and off they went for their camping adventure.

The children started to get restless at the two-hour mark, but they weren't quite at the camp site. Check in wasn't until one so they stopped at a Burger King. Back in the car, the trip continued. The two in the back seat started bickering and name-calling at each other. All that was said was "ENOUGH" and the commotion ended.

Arriving at the campsite and checking in, Oliver's eyes lit up. It was a real Conestoga Wagon just like the one he had studied in history class. He ran to the door but it was locked, ran back to his mom and she handed over the key. He unlocked the door and ran inside. "Wow!" he said. There was one huge bed, twin bunkbeds, a table, a small fridge, microwave and Keurig for coffee. It also had a heat and air conditioning unit. "Mom," Oliver cried. "There's no bathroom."

"We're camping, remember. There are facilities a little walk from here. And I'm reminding both of you that you do not, and I repeat do not use the facility without either Aunt Sara or myself going with you. Understand?" Heads nodded.

After unpacking the car and storing the food in the fridge, they spend the rest of the day exploring the area, swimming in the lake, playing games with new friends and picnicking. By night fall all were tired and went to bed early.

Breakfast the next day was by the campfire with pre-scrambled egg whites and Spam. Everyone got ready for the big day at Mammoth Cave. Oliver wanted to know more about how it was formed and why, but was told to wait to ask questions of the ranger guiding the tour. "Let's go. Take your jackets."

The tour was 3 hours. Oliver as he entered was impressed by the huge cavern of rock walls, ceiling and floor. People lined up to hear the ranger's explanation of the cave and what they were about to experience. The ranger emphasized that it would be dark, cold, all must remain on the path, and children needed to be accompanied by an adult. Each person was given a keepsake pen flashlight that said *Mammoth Cave*. It would be used during the tour. His mom took his hand and Aunt Sara took Kennedy's hand. As they walked, they saw sharp-pointed stalagmites, growing up from the ground and cone-shaped stalactites coming down from the ceiling. Awe and murmurs were heard. The tour entered an area where everyone had to go single file, squeezing through the narrowed entrance to the next chamber. Oliver pointed at a fat man attempting to flatten his belly so he could pass through. He felt his mom's hand getting sweaty as they waited for their turn to wedge through the tiny space.

In that chamber, flashing colored lights had been set up, reflecting blues, reds and white all around the room and coordinated to music. All stood in wonder. The ranger guided them along a wooden walk way into the next chamber and then another chamber and finally they entered a large stone room where the tour ended. Questions were asked of the ranger, pamphlets picked up, and souvenirs sold. Oliver and Kennedy each got to pick one souvenir. There was a small commissary where food could be purchased. After ordering, Kennedy picked a table and they sat down to eat lunch while chatting about the wonderful things they saw and how cold it felt inside the cave. They were grateful for their jackets



Back at the campsite in the late afternoon, the children spent time playing cards. The adults sat around the picnic table with a glass of wine and ate popcorn. Dinner was cooked over an open fire with all goodies that children like to eat and marshmallows to melt in the fire for the s'mores. Oliver talked non-stop about becoming a ranger and discovering more about the earth and its mysteries. He couldn't wait to tell all his friends all about the day he had. Kennedy didn't say much, soon falling asleep in her mother's arms. Eventually, the fire died, the air cooled, and all went into the Conestoga Wagon to sleep or dream. In the morning, they would start home from their cave adventure.

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**Your Next Steps**  
**By J. Smetana**

Hey man Jerry said he dug the Beatles when he was in Great Britain at the CAVERN. Peaches he must have been seeing some animatronic process—like Lincoln in Disneyland. He walks, he talks, but he's not real.

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