

Early History the Appalachian Search and Rescue Conference

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Part I: The Founding

This is an account, from famously-fallible memory, of the events that lead up to the founding of the ASRC. When I find the time, I hope to write some more about the early years of the Conference, which is why this is labeled as Part I.

You can skip the first page or so, unless you want to learn what motivated us (or at least me) to form the Appalachian Search and Rescue Conference.

Prologue

As long as I can remember, I was interested in the outdoors. When I was just a wee child, my parents regularly took me to stay at Big Meadows in Shenandoah National Park. Now, my parents weren't particularly athletic or woodsy. For that matter, they didn't even want to go out on walks. They just wanted to hang around the lodge and absorb the (admittedly very pleasant) ambiance. But I started going on short walks, dragging along my mother or father, even if just a few hundred feet to Blackrock cliff's outstanding view across the Shenandoah Valley to Massanutten Mountain. My parents gradually trusted me to go on such short walks by myself.

One day, when I was about six, my parents allowed me to go for a "short walk" along the famous Appalachian Trail. It was a beautiful summer day, warm but with clear skies. (It's well-documented that Shenandoah National Park in the late 50s and early 60s had fewer particulates in the air, so crystal-clear days were common, even in the summer.) I followed the AT a bit, and then a bit more, and then there were views as the trail curved around the campground, and then there was a sign that pointed to Franklin Cliffs. I guess I didn't understand about distances, because it took me a while to get there; it was a couple of miles. When I got to the cliffs, which were right next to Skyline Drive, there was a very nice Ranger there in a pickup truck who offered me a ride back to Big Meadows. To this day, I have no idea why my parents were concerned enough to alert the Rangers. My feet weren't tired. It *was* just a short walk, after all.

I kept up my interest in the outdoors. I joined a Boy Scout troop, but after a couple of miserable winter camping experiences, I woke up to the fact that these Scout leaders were pretty clueless about how to manage in the woods. When I was maybe about 12, I joined the *Potomac Appalachian Trail Club*, which my parents approved of. The group was mostly made up of older people. (Not just older to me, "older than me" was pretty much everyone except babies and little kids. But these people were older even to my parents; very few teenagers, and even lots of people with gray hair.) The PATC was also devoted, not just to enjoying the outdoors, but also serving the outdoor public by building and maintaining trails (including a 400-mile section of the AT), and shelters and cabins along the trail. And as far as outdoor clubs go, PATC was quite rich and well-organized, with a permanent headquarters building, maybe 20 rental cabins in the mountains that provided a steady source of income, and a lot of hardworking and highly-capable people who invested a lot in the organization. And the PATC had been growing since it was started in 1927.

I was for a while an overseer for the Overall Run Trail in Shenandoah National Park, and the Manassas Gap shelter in northern Virginia, where my high school outing club helped with maintenance chores. Along the way, I joined the Mountaineering Section and learned to rock climb. I remember with fondness the section's

Dave Templeton, one of those older adults that made my parents happy. He was patient and always emphasized safety in everything he did, which became even more important to me after he died years later in a climbing accident. Among its other programs, the PATC established an Appalachian Trail Patrol to monitor the AT, much of which traverses private property, and its hikers, serving a public-safety and public-education role. I was privileged to be the first to serve in this role.

In junior high and high school, I used thumbtacks to cover one of my bedroom's walls with topographic maps of Shenandoah National Park. I kept track, and by the time I'd finished high school, I'd hiked every inch of trail in the park.

As a freshman in high school, my science teacher, Lyle Conrad, took some of us on a caving trip. We went to the *Sinks of Gandy*, in shadow of West Virginia's highest mountain, Spruce Knob. In a field there, Gandy Creek disappears into a hole and emerges on the other side of Yokum Knob half a mile away. The Sinks has few calcite formations, and the trip consists mostly of a half-mile wade in a stream. But I was hooked. I spent most of my high-school weekends in the outdoors, often caving with the DC Grotto, a highly-organized and competent caving group. With others of my high school outing club, who were also members of DC Grotto, we would even occasionally spend a week or more at the DC Grotto Fieldhouse in southeast West Virginia's Greenbrier County. Along with many others, we were exploring and mapping *Organ Cave*. It's one of the longest caves in the world, and in places, one of the prettiest. My one "first" in the outdoor world, along with partner David Engel, was to do an ambitious "push" trip. We entered the main Organ Cave entrance and exited the Master's entrance, miles away via cave passage. As I remember, it took us more than 24 hours of continuous hard going. (To cavers, a "first connection" is a lot like a "first ascent" to a climber.)

The Potomac Appalachian Trail Club connection

Before 1970, there were few if any search and rescue teams in the central Appalachians. Members of the PATC and DC Grotto and another caving club, the Potomac Speleological Club, had some expertise in search and rescue. Many were knowledgeable about self-rescue, some had military search and rescue experience, and a few had been members of Mountain Rescue Association teams in the western US before moving to the DC area.

In the late 60s, a couple of incidents made members of these organizations think that their members needed better search and rescue training, and that the clubs should organize a bit so they could better respond if called for a search or rescue.

One late fall, a boy scout troop was out for a hike along the Virginia/West Virginia border, on the west side of the Shenandoah Valley. The place is called Wolf Gap, and it's pretty wild compared to, say, Shenandoah National Park. As the crow flies, it's about twenty miles due west of Front Royal, Virginia, which is at the northern tip of Shenandoah National Park. The PATC maintains a cabin up the trail from the gap, and makes maps of the trails in the vicinity.

Wolf Gap is in the George Washington National Forest. I don't know if you know this, but National Forests and National Parks are as different as night and day. There are many differences, such as hunting being allowed in forests but not in parks. But for our purposes, the main difference is that, whereas national park rangers have "exclusive jurisdiction" – they are in charge of all search and rescue and other emergency services and law enforcement within a park – forest rangers have "concurrent jurisdiction" and most emergency services within a national forest are handled by the local counties and other municipalities.

Anyway, this boy scout troop was out on the trail from Wolf Gap up to Big Schloss (“big fortress” in German, a reference to the big blocky cliffs). Actually, they were on the way *back*, and they were behind schedule. It got dark. And it started snowing; hard, and fast. When they straggled back to the cars in misery and disorder, a couple of the scouts were missing. So two adults set out back up the trail, in the dark, in heavy snow.

Well, the two kids showed up at the cars, but they hadn’t seen the adults, and as it got later and later, there was no sign of the two adults. And after waiting, and waiting, someone finally went to a pay phone (remember, this was long before cellphones) and called PATC headquarters in DC and asked for help. They said they needed people with headlamps and snowshoes to go out and look for the two adults. Now, the PATC had no callout roster nor any sort of emergency response plan – this was even before the days of the Trail Patrol, not that even to this day the Trail Patrol is any sort of response team. The people at PATC HQ suggested they call the local County Sheriff and the Forest Service District Office, which they did. Finally the next morning the local county and forest service people managed to get some people out on the trail, and of course they just found two frozen bodies.

Now, all the officers of the PATC were talking about this tragedy, and wondering what to do. There was some talk that there out to be some sort of search and rescue training for those interested, and maybe a callout roster, so that PATC could help if (or, more likely *when*) this sort of thing happened again.

About this same time, another incident got reported back to the PATC. It happened at Harper’s Ferry.

Harper’s Ferry is where the Shenandoah River joins the Potomac River, and the greatly-enlarged Potomac pours through the Blue Ridge. It’s an impressive gap, with some nice cliffs on either side. The cliffs on the northern side are about 500 feet high, and known as Maryland Heights. I’ve climbed there, and it’s a real challenge. There are some overhangs, but the real interesting challenge is that there’s a train tunnel through the bottom of the cliff. And this is for the B&O mainline, so quite frequently the whole cliff shakes as a big freight train barrels through the tunnel.

Here’s the story as we heard it. Now this was back before the National Park Service Rangers at Harper’s Ferry (it’s a National Historical Park) had their own vertical rescue capability, as they do now and have had for the past several decades. Well, there was this climber who was hurt and stuck halfway up the cliff (or halfway down, I don’t know if he was climbing or rappelling or what). The Park Rangers had a mutual aid agreement with a local fire department to handle cliff rescues there, so they called the fire department. And the way we heard it, this fire department lowered a wire-basket Stokes litter down to the guy, with a rope on the head of it, and a tag line on the bottom. And I guess someone rappelled down and strapped him in the litter. But then, instead of lowering with someone tending the litter, they just lowered on the top line while pulling on the bottom line from below. And as they guy got lowered down, the litter kept spinning around, and it kept crashing against the cliff face, and apparently the guy got his face smashed up pretty bad, enough to keep him in the hospital for quite a while.

So, what has this to do with the PATC, you ask?

Well, this fire department had told the park rangers that they’d been trained in mountain rescue by the PATC Mountaineering Section. Now the Mountaineering Section said they’d never trained any fire department and, other than self-rescue, didn’t teach mountain rescue.

As you can imagine, the PATC Council wasn’t happy about this. Certainly, *someone* ought to be providing search and rescue training, but PATC wasn’t sure it should be them.

Now in about 1970 the cavers already had themselves organized. There was something called the Cave Rescue Communications Network (CRCN) that later sort of mutated into the National Cave Rescue Commission (NCRC). This was basically a bunch of regional coordinators who kept lists of people who could respond to cave rescues, and lists of cave rescue equipment. Later, NCRC even established actual caches of specialized cave rescue equipment. NCRC also offered an Orientation to Cave Rescue one-weekend class, and later developed a series of longer classes, colloquially known as *weeklong* which were actually nine days long because it included the weekend on either end.

Individual Grottoes (those were what the local chapters were called) of the National Speleological Society (that's the national caver's organization) ran cave search and rescue training for their members (it was sort of unofficial to start with, but by the 1970s had become pretty standardized, thanks to NCRC), and kept a callout roster of those qualified to respond to a cave rescue. Local authorities were officially in charge of a cave rescue. But when a big bunch of organized people who seemed to know what they were doing showed up, and especially when the local authorities knew they didn't know squat about cave rescue, the CRCN/NCRC people ended up pretty much running the search or rescue. Officially, to this day, NCRC is nothing more than a communications and resource management organization. But somehow the people who are regular instructors at NCRC classes somehow end up running a *lot* of cave rescues.

When I started at the University of Virginia in 1971, I immediately joined the Cave Club and the Outing Club, becoming quite active in each. (I ended up being President of the Outing Club, and even Executive Secretary of the Intercollegiate Outing Club Association, but that's another story.)

Now it also turns out that back about 1970, one fine hot summer day I was driving down Route 7 when I noticed that the green van in front of me had a license plate "CAVE RSQ" or something like that. And of course it had the obligatory bat sticker (some black bats on a yellow reflective background) which is the unofficial official mark of an experienced caver. So of course I honked at the driver furiously and he pulled over and so did I. and then we stood on the side of this busy highway in the summer heat for a couple of hours (at least it seemed like that long in retrospect) talking about cave rescue. Now Gene Harrison (that was the green van's driver) was with PSC and I was with DC Grotto and at that time, the two were pretty much rivals, but our shared interest in rescue completely overshadowed that, and we became instant friends.

The summer after my first year of college, David Engel and I decided we wanted to go out west and climb some there. So we headed first to the Pacific Northwest and did some climbing and hiking in Washington (Mt. Ranier of course) and Oregon, but after a few weeks of being wet and cold, we hitchhiked to California and ended up in sunny Yosemite Valley, staying in the climber's camp, which was then known as Camp 4, later Sunnyside Camp. After we'd been there for a while, we got to know some of the Rangers and then we got unpaid jobs with the Park Service through this Volunteers in the Parks program. We ended up as uniformed though unpaid Rangers, primarily doing naturalist work, but also some fire/search and rescue. I ended up working as a summer seasonal Ranger at different parks all through college.

Now back to about 1970 and the PATC Council, which was trying to figure out what to do about this search and rescue business. As a big and respectable organization with a strong sense of public service, they figured they had to do *something*.

And indeed this was a big motivation for all of us that started being involved with this project. We all loved the outdoors, and thought we had a responsibility to take care of others in the then small, outdoors-loving public. We figured that if we didn't take care of ourselves, then the government would step in and start taxing us and making all sorts of regulations that we didn't like. Don't laugh, this was a really big motivator back then.

You have to understand that back then, things were different than they are now. Only a small fraction of the public liked to hike or climb or cave, just a fraction of a percent. Seems like now that everybody likes to hike or climb at least a little bit. I know it's still only a fraction of our couch-potato population, but in any city, I'd guess that there are now a thousand times the outdoor-loving people there were forty or fifty years ago.

There were basically only two big places that sold hiking gear, REI in Seattle and LL Bean in Maine. Yvon Chouinard didn't even start making chocks and other "clean climbing gear" until about 1970, before that he had a garage-style operation making pitons, and you had to basically know someone who knew Yvon to get any of his pitons before that. (I still have a few of those originals in my basement.)

We used to order a lot of our gear from catalogs, but as the 1960s and 1970s wore on, a few local outfitters started. In the DC area, there was Appalachian Outfitters. It was only open a few hours a day, and was a single counter in the back of a hardware store in Oakton, Virginia, outside DC. In those days Oakton was a sleepy little village with a few stores and lots of trees, not the booming suburb it is now. I remember that when I was just into my teens my mom took me there and bought me my first pair of boots and a rope. She said that if I was going to do this outdoor stuff I should at least have the right equipment. The rope was the newest and best thing around, it was called Goldline, and it was made out of twisted nylon. When I first learned to climb, though, we were using Manila rope, made from the fibers of a plant found in the Philippines. And even after we got Goldline, my first set of Prusiks for caving was made out of Manila rope, as there was no small-diameter nylon rope at the time.

So PATC turned to several of their members who had been involved in cave rescue, which in the East was much more organized than above-ground rescue, and said, basically, "HELP!" The three that were tapped by the PATC Council were me, Ray Cole of the DC Grotto, and Gene Harrison of the Potomac Speleological Club. We were joined by Rita Cloutier, a representative of the PATC Council, and the four of us talked it over, and over, and over. And we finally decided that it would be best to start a search and rescue training organization outside of PATC, though with some support from PATC at least to begin with.

When we started, we didn't even have a name for the organization. And we started solely with the goal of providing better training in above-ground search and rescue to the members of the outdoor clubs in the mid-Appalachian area, starting with DC and nearby Charlottesville, where I started going to college. The four of us started recruiting other knowledgeable people to help.

We first started by making lists of those things that people needed to know for both search and rescue. We then grouped them under headings, and started planning training sessions. We scoured the country for whatever information we could find. We contacted the western teams of the Mountain Rescue Association, who sent us lots of information, and suggested that at some point, maybe some of the people we trained might like to form a Mountain Rescue Association team in our area. We made many contacts with the National Park Service. Like the military, many Park Rangers rotated between different parks, so some of the local Rangers had been to the National Park Service search and rescue school at the Grand Canyon, or had experience doing search and rescue at some of the big western National Parks. Several park rangers helped in major ways in setting up this initial training, and some Mountain Rescue Association members who were traveling to DC for business met with us.

We kept working at it through 1972 and 1973, and we scheduled our first training session for September 15, 1973, at Harper's Ferry National Historical Park. We used the PATC's house Highacre there in Harper's Ferry as a base. We had people from both DC and Charlottesville there, and from a variety of backgrounds. We devoted one day to search, the other day to rescue. One of my fondest memories of that weekend was the sound of Gene Harrison's alarm clock going off. We'd been up late talking search and rescue the night before,

and so I guess it was understandable that he wanted to go back to sleep for a bit. The alarm kept going off, though, a continuous, mechanical bell-ringing. There were various muffled curses and bangs – apparently it wasn't turning off. Finally, that ringing sound changed – you could hear it flying out the window, and bouncing down the cliffs, eventually landing in the Potomac River with a splash. There was a chorus of laughter from the various bedrooms and that was enough to get everyone up.

Part of the discussions that Saturday night ended up with a joint decision to establish standards and certifications for the various topics we'd come up with – a series of certifications available to members of outdoor clubs or whoever else was interested in search and rescue.

Since this was to be a consortium of clubs and individuals devoted to search and rescue training and certification (remember, initially we had no plans to be operational), we were having a hard time coming up with a name. Ray Fadner, then the Supervisor of Trails for the PATC, suggested the word "Conference." He explained that the term "Conference" can refer to an ongoing consortium – think of the Atlantic Coast Conference in college athletics – so we agreed on the name Appalachian Search and Rescue Conference.

Thus, in the fall of 1973, was born the Appalachian Search and Rescue Conference. We started working on more training classes, and on getting the organization incorporated. At about the same time, we started discussing the need for operational response teams, and by the time we filed incorporation papers that winter, we'd agreed that we needed to become operational, and included this in the Articles of Incorporation, but the details remained to be ironed out.

I will continue the story of the early days of the ASRC in a subsequent article. Thank you.