

Early Explorers of the Modoc Lava Beds

Bruce Rogers

Humans have roamed the Modoc Lava Beds for at least 5,000, perhaps as many as 11,000, years and most probably visited the caves in Medicine Lake Volcano during that time. Following the influx of white settlers in the 1820's-40's, visitors began exploring the "Beds." Local ranchers, especially Eugene Hopkins, stockmen, and settlers explored some of the more accessible and impressive caves, giving them descriptive and oftentimes whimsical names. In 1916, a newly settled flour mill builder, Judd D. Howard, arrived, became enthralled with the area, and proceeded to explore the Lava Beds for nearly 25 years. He lobbied everyone he could and finally in 1925 Lava Beds National Monument was officially set aside. "JD" discovered, explored, and mapped many caves, giving many of them whimsical, classic, and local settlers and explorers names. Exploration lagged between about the early 1930's when the newly formed US Forest Service (USFS), then the Public Works Administration (PWA), and, finally the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) did about a decade of improvements in the Monument, including building cave trails and other facilities. A notable exception was during 1936, when Univ. California Berkeley's volcanologist Walter Glaeser spent more than a year locating and beginning mapping lava tubes with a shoe string budget (unfortunately due to a bureaucratic blunder, he was never paid for the work).

In about 1960 another local group, Spelunking Unlimited that was based in Klamath Falls, Oregon, began to explore and map caves. In 1964, the Park Service engaged newly graduated biologist Stewart Peck for a season and asked him to start mapping some of the approximately 300 lava tubes known caves; he managed to do about a dozen caves during his short season at the Monument. Modern organized cave studies started in 1972 when Dr. Aaron Waters of the USGS spent 4 years mapping the caves and wrote a lengthy paper on the geology of the area's spelean features. During the 1980's, NSS cavers began to realize the potential of the area and began exploring, mapping, and writing reports for the Park Service. Also in 1980 Dr. Julie Donnelly-Nolan, also from the USGS, located Waters' long lost paper and finally published it along with Waters and USGS geologist Bruce Rogers as USGS Bulletin 1673 in 1990. Since the late 1982 and early 1990's, the Park Service, San Francisco Bay Chapter, Shasta Area Grotto, and the Mother Lode Grotto of the National Speleological Society, Cave Research Foundation, and other groups pushed the known number of caves to about 600. That said, only about a quarter of the Monument itself has been systematically searched for lava tubes and much of the immediately surrounding US Forest Service land is virtually untouched. At present, continued exploration has located about 810 lava tubes are known from

within the Monument itself out of nearly 1600 in the surrounding counties.

A quarter million dollar Research Center was cooperatively planned by concerned caving community and the Park Service, financed largely by the caving community, and was opened in 2005 to all doing research and educational activities in the Klamath Basin.