



BY FRAN SEVERN-LEVY

Our flashlights showed an eerie landscape of sharp-edged boulders scattered haphazardly across the damp, sandy ground. The echo of trickling water told of a stream running somewhere nearby. There was no sky overhead, just a ceiling of ragged rocks.

We were deep underground in a cave in western Pennsylvania, exploring part of a system of caverns still being mapped. Perhaps only a dozen people had found this spot so far. Probably only a few hundred ever will.

Topside, mobs of outdoor lovers interface with nature via their hiking boots and snowmobiles. Underground, tightly-knit groups of cavers check the straps on their helmets, stuff extra batteries into the pockets of their worn jeans and

tighten their scruffy boots before moving even deeper underground. Daylight is far behind them as they discover the secrets of Mother Nature on a very personal level.

A sense of adventure and exploring the unknown are the attractions of caving. (That's what the enthusiasts call their sport, by the way. "Spelunking" has fallen out of favor as being too academic and archaic—not to mention hard to spell and pronounce.)

The exact number of cavers is unknown, but the National Speleological Society (NSS)—the largest collective group of cavers—has 12,000 members. Cavers share a certain affection for moles and other creatures that shun the light. And they enjoy playing outside the box.