



Contact: Brad Wuest
NBC Pres. (210) 651-6101
Media - Karen Adams
(210) 844-8973
klsadams@earthlink.net

Natural Bridge Caverns Hosts University of Texas at San Antonio Archaeological Team for First-Ever Historical Excavation on Sept. 15

**For immediate release:
September 9, 2003**

Natural Bridge Caverns, Tx...For the first time in the history of Natural Bridge Caverns (NBC), a skilled team of archaeologists from The University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) will perform a series of excavations that will span four weeks to investigate the historical remains at the largest commercial cavern system in Texas, beginning Monday, September 15, 2003.

"This is a particularly exciting project because of the range and age of materials associated with the caverns," said UTSA professor and excavation leader Steve Tomka, Ph.D. "Based on specimens found when trail development took place at NBC over 40 years ago, we estimate finding artifacts that are between 500 - 7,000 years old. We hope to obtain both archaeological and paleontological samples," Tomka continued.

The excavations are being conducted to demonstrate how important this site is to the history of the area in conjunction with the nomination of NBC to the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). The National Register criteria define, for the nation as a whole, the scope and nature of historic and prehistoric properties that are considered for listing in the NRHP, and are worthy of the protection afforded to them by the designation.

"For years our family recognized the special characteristics of the entrance/sink hole to Natural Bridge Caverns. We realize that an area with such historical significance should be studied, documented and protected for future generations," said Brad Wuest, president of NBC.

Two different excavation areas will be created on site: the archeological unit will be located directly outside of the cavern entrance, while the paleontological unit will be inside the first cavern room, which is named Bear Pit.

###

NOTE TO MEDIA: Principals of the project will be available for interviews during scheduled portions of the day. A limited number of "hands-on" opportunities will be offered. Please call Karen Adams to secure time and date options.

****Scroll down to see NBC Quick Facts & Texas Archeology Facts!***

NATURAL BRIDGE CAVERNS

QUICK FACTS & TIME LINE

1960: The main cavern system was first discovered by four cavers from St. Mary's University in San Antonio while exploring the area. Today, this world-class attraction hosts more than 250,000 visitors annually.

1963-64: Development-related excavations took place at the caverns to enlarge the entrance, provide a walkway and develop a trail system inside the cavern. At this time, a number of prehistoric artifacts, including projectile points, animal bones and debris from stone tools were found.

1963-1964: Staff from the Texas Memorial Museum and the Vertebrate Paleontology Laboratory of the University of Texas visited the site and surface collected a sample of faunal remains uncovered by the construction. Specimens belonged to species that became extinct near the end of the Pleistocene (12,000 years before the present), but a complete analysis could not be conducted due to the disturbed nature of the samples. These samples are currently in storage in Austin.

1964: Some of the samples, such as projectile points, various stone tools and an American Black Bear jaw bone were collected during trail excavations and were later classified by a local archaeologist. The spear points and tool specimens ranged in age from approximately 600 years old, to others that were approximately 5,000 years old. These samples are currently on display in the Visitor Center at NBC.

1964: Opening day to the general public was July 3, 1964. Governor John Connally on August 5, 1964, christened NBC as "A Jewel in the Crown of Texas' Attractions."

1967: The Texas Historical Commission designated Natural Bridge Caverns as a State Historical Site in ceremonies that were held on December 7, 1967.

1971: NBC was designated as a National Natural Landmark by the Department of the Interior.

1963-2003: Other prehistoric artifacts collected during cavern development were placed in a wooden crate and stored for the past 40 years with the landowner.

2003: In June the staff from the Center for Archaeological Research (CAR) from UTSA visited NBC to discuss the feasibility of the current project. Archaeologists from UTSA inspected the framed projectile points to identify types and age range represented in this sample. The framed collection exhibits specimens ranging in age from roughly 7,000-8,000 years before the present (BP) to approximately 500 years BP. CAR then examined the artifacts in the wooden crate at the university laboratory. Inside the crate were debris from flaked tools such as hide scrapers, knives, drill fragments of projectile points, crystal fragments and approximately 30-40 animal bones including the vertebrae, rib fragments, metapodials of deer-sized animals, numerous bone splinters and rodent skeletal elements.

**NATURAL BRIDGE
CAVERNS[®]**
TEXAS ARCHEOLOGY QUICK FACTS

- Range and age of materials already found on-site are documented as being between 500-7,000 years old, which is a huge span of time.
- Few professionally excavated archaeological sites in Texas have deposits that are older than 7,500 years. Caves and sinkholes provide an ideal area to conduct archeology because their sheltered environment preserves remains that do not normally survive the elements like that of open-air archaeological sites.
- The excellent preservation conditions lead to the recovery of large numbers of animal bones; these bones will provide archaeologists with a unique opportunity to reconstruct the diet of prehistoric peoples that lived at the site.
- Mastodons and Mammoths have been extinct for some 12,000 years but it is likely that some of the bones recovered from the caverns may be of animals that were contemporaries of these prehistoric beasts. Many small-bodied animals are very susceptible to changing climatic conditions and some species have become extinct since the end of the Pleistocene. Such species tolerate only a very narrow range of climatic conditions and encountering their remains will give us a good indication of what conditions prevailed during a specific time period.
- Prehistoric human populations faced dramatic challenges 10,000-12,000 years ago as the animal and plant species they relied on were rapidly becoming extinct and/or changing. The recovery of the bone of animals and the pollen and charred remains of plants will allow archaeologists to reconstruct not only changes in climate but also changes in the subsistence (food-getting) strategies of prehistoric peoples.
- As archaeologists, we are interested in reconstructing how our human ancestors coped with small and big changes in their surroundings. We hope that the rich, well preserved, and lengthy archaeological record from Natural Bridge Caverns will allow us to accomplish this in great detail.