

# Tom Barton “Digs as Hard as He Caves” The Exclusive Interview

*Over the past decade, **Tom Barton** has become one of the most prolific diggers in the Northeastern United States. His reputation as a thorough project manager for digs in Upstate New York, as well as West Virginia, has become solid. The work done by Tom and those who accompany him has been chronicled in his website found at the following URL:*

*<http://www.galaxy.net/~trbarton/cavenews/>.*

*Digging in the Northeast is an education no matter how one looks at it. The glaciers that covered the region some eight to ten thousand years ago left few natural entrances. Now, those who wish to explore new caves must somehow get through the “till” left by the glaciers. Tom Barton is the digger who gets through the till, and we were lucky enough to catch him between trips to Hellhole for this EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW...*

Aaron Bird: What got you interested in caving and specifically digging open caves?

Tom Barton: I was out rock climbing around 1991, in late November, and had an ice storm move in. My partner and I decided to call it a day, and he suggested visiting a small cave at the bottom of the mountain instead. We went to the entrance and poked around, but got caught by the landowner. He referred us to the NSS and local grotto. That led to my introduction to Bob Zimmerman, then chairman of MET Grotto, and the first real caver I'd ever met. I still have that little slip of paper filed under "spelologists" in my phone book.

It only took 2 years for me to tire of "sport" caving. In that time I had visited many of the usual caves in upstate N.Y., and a few (Organ and others) in W.Va. By then, I'd met and caved/climbed a good bit with Al DeMaria, who got me interested in looking for a back door entrance to Skull Cave, N.Y.

We spent several weekends ridge walking the farm over the back of Skull, and did wind up digging open a really nice cave on the property - now known as Ken's Kave. Not the back door entrance that we were looking for, but my first taste of digging, and it got me hooked. Ever since, I've been much more of a project caver rather than a sport/tourist. Embarrassing as it may seem, there are a good number of well known, popular caves, that I've not been to, as the projects always seem to dominate my time.

Interview with Tom Barton continued...

Aaron: What special techniques have you found useful in your digging experience?

Tom: One of my favorite aspects of digging is the engineering challenge. I'm always looking for creative new and better ways to get the job done.

Over the years, my group has perfected the use of wire rope zip lines and pulleys to get dig buckets up and out of sink holes, settled in on using Rubbermaid brand small dish pans for mud tube digs, designed & constructed several tripods from electrical conduit to hoist out buckets, and trashed several kiddie sleds.

I worked with Carroll Bassett (BMS) to build a gas powered hoist/winch for one project. Like all good diggers, I frequent the home centers looking for the perfect digging tools. I'm very particular about having the right tools; the right sized crow bar- 22", the perfect caving sledge - 5 pound head with a 15" ribbed yellow fiberglass handle. (Tony Hopkins buys the sledges in Brooklyn, NY; Rick Royer loses them in deep joints in Germany Valley).

The absolutely most successful technique, perfected over the past 7 years, has been the use of Hilti drills and custom-made rock breakers. This surgical passage enlargement technique has been the single most important breakthrough in recent years for diggers to gain access to otherwise un-enterable passages. It has been passed on to others and resulted in the discovery of many other caves in several states.

Aaron: What are the three or four most significant caves you've dug into?



Tom Barton at the Akwa Slot in Germany Valley. 2002. Copyrighted photo used with permission of Devin Kouts.

Tom: Ken's Kave, Cross Bones Cave, Peggy Hole, and other lesser known holes & pits in New York; Kahn (Convention 2000) and Memorial Day in W. Va.

Aaron: What are some characteristics of New York State digs that require special digging techniques?

Tom: We do lots of sinkhole digs, and have one major enlarged joint passage dig - Thunder Hole Cave - ongoing. These all require some degree of engineering to stabilize the entrance areas, from the placing of a simple small piece of 30" culvert pipe to an entire up-ended oil tank, to keep the dig from collapsing.

Most digs require some sort of hoist arrangement, for which I build a tripod out of electrical conduit, and use a construction "wheel" pulley with 1" rope. Buckets are 5-gallon plastic pails,

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<http://www.galaxy.net/~trbarton/cavenews/>

Tom Barton bagging dirt at the dig in the entrance of Memorial Day Cave. Copyrighted photo used with permission of Devin Kouts.

modified with 1/8" wire-rope handles.

In most cases we are dealing with narrow joints, and the Hilti drills get a workout. Wherever possible, we use a TE-14 or TE-15 AC powered drill, generator, and long cords. Several digs are "permanently" rigged with extension cords.

My TE-14 drill has been caving with me for years, has drilled thousands of holes, and been rebuilt a few times. It will run in extremely wet conditions, under falling water and in sloppy mud. In fact, some weekends the mud is so bad that the drill gets hosed out and hung up to dry. It's even got one successful rescue to it's credit.

Aaron: In what other areas, outside of New York, have you dug for caves?

Tom: Mostly W. Va., and a bit in Highland County, Va. A few years ago, I worked on some

pits nears WVACS, opened a few, and helped survey other new projects in that area.

I got interested in Germany Valley, W. Va. at the 2000 [NSS] Convention, got hooked on the GVKS projects, and have spent considerable time there ever since. I was involved in the opening of Kahn Cave, Memorial Day Cave, and have helped out on others.

Aaron: What level of success have you found in these places?

Tom: All of the dig efforts that I have been involved with in both Va. and W.Va. have resulted in caves. I guess it's much easier to get into caves in those areas than in New York, although I must say that the record for our group in N.Y., The Rock Eaters, has also been very good, considering the area that we have to work with.

