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Sean C. Halverson

Whitney A. Snow

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From “Fuller’s Folly” to National Natural Landmark: Huntsville’s Shelta Cave

by

Sean C. Halverson and Whitney A. Snow

A small cave in Huntsville, Alabama, gained fame when it was thrust into the national limelight in 1888. Area locals had known of the cave’s existence, but few had taken the initiative to brave its entrance. Its mysteries were soon uncovered by Henry M. Fuller, a new arrival to the city, who hoped to commercialize the cave and make it into a world-class tourist attraction. Though Fuller placed enormous efforts into advertising the cave, which he named Shelta, he had difficulty making a profit as many locals scoffed at his idea of an underground club. Struggling financially, he formed the Shelta Caverns Land and Investment Company with several cohorts from Huntsville and Des Moines, Iowa. It was no more successful, and due to negligent taxes, Shelta was sold at auction and came under the ownership of Lawrence Cooper. Decades later, the cave was purchased by the National Speleological Society, members of which saw Shelta, with its over 40 species, many “cave-restricted,” a biological treasure trove. Subsequently, Shelta Cave was declared a National Natural Landmark. This geological wonder, once, at best a curiosity and at worst a local joke, had finally been vindicated.

In early 1888, fruit grower Henry M. Fuller moved from Greenville, Michigan, to Huntsville. He had temporarily considered settling in Paw Paw, Michigan, but when he saw Huntsville, nestled in the foothills of the Appalachians, he knew he was Alabama bound. Upon purchasing 160 acres from Bolen James, he began planting peaches and became more familiar with his property. While the bulk of newspaper articles later sensationalize the story by claiming Fuller was the first to find the cave, its presence was well known by locals who referred to it as the Bolen James Cave. Rumors abounded that it had been used as a hideout by bandits and Civil War soldiers. People who lived nearby knew of it the maw, but few had bothered to investigate.¹ When he first heard of the cave, a captivated Fuller opted to explore it as soon as possible.

“Another Mammoth Cave,” a March 2, 1888, newspaper article in Pennsylvania’s *Tyrone Daily Herald*, relayed Fuller’s first glimpse at the inner recesses of his newly acquired cave. Evidently, this “discovery,” for that is how it was billed, made nationwide headlines. If the newspapers are to be believed, Fuller and two companions ardently planned their venture inside the cave for none of them knew what to expect. Once they made their way to the entrance, the men began what they perceived to be a

¹ Ranee Pruitt, ed., *Eden of the South: A Chronology of Huntsville, Alabama, 1805-2005* (Huntsville: Huntsville-Madison County Public Library, 2005), 83; and “Great Shelta Caverns,” *Memphis Daily Appeal*, Feb 17, 1889.

fifty-foot descent. After this initial rappelling and afoot again, the men looked around and realized they were standing in an enormous chamber. Thrilled and overwhelmed, they made doubly sure to mark their trek with lights so as to avoid becoming lost in the cave's overwhelming depths.² What they found took their breath away.

As the men took in scores of stalagmites and stalactites, they marveled at their beauty as well as that of formations, some of which seemed covered in crystals. After several hours, they came upon a beautiful, clear lake which, much to their amazement, contained odd-looking, almost luminous fish. Having only lanterns, Fuller and his friends could not gauge the size of the lake but assumed it to be exceptionally large and rather deep, at least forty feet. The men soon came upon the opening of another chamber, but they were obstructed by high water levels. Given that they had been in the cave some five hours, they decided to save further investigations for another day.³ That evening, Fuller made a fateful choice.

Fuller wanted to commercialize the cave by transforming it into a tourist attraction which might rival Mammoth Cave. To begin with, he thought it ought to have a snazzy name and what better namesake than his daughter Shelta. After naming it Shelta Rock, he set about turning the cave into a

² "Another Mammoth Cave," *Tyrone Daily Herald*, March 2, 1888.

³ *Ibid.*

nightclub, one with a dancefloor, bandstand, bar, Chinese lanterns, boat rides, and even electric lights.⁴ Ever since, newspaper and journal articles reported that Shelta Rock may have had the first electric lights not only in a cave, but Huntsville.⁵ Whatever the case, many Huntsville locals thought Fuller, who was often referred to as “Yankee,” an utter fool and called his scheme “Fuller’s Folly.”⁶ Undeterred by ridicule, Fuller installed electric lighting in late June, an act which proved rather expensive so he doubled the admission price from fifty cents to one dollar. Patrons could purchase season tickets for \$10.⁷ The *Huntsville Gazette* was largely optimistic of Fuller’s efforts and said, “It is only a matter of time until he reaps a golden reward for developing this, the greatest of the world’s wonders.”⁸

By July, Fuller’s ingenuity had caught the attention of the *Atlanta Constitution* which described Shelta Rock as “a wonderful cave.” This newspaper spread the following unsubstantiated rumor: “This had never been explored until he appeared on the scene.”⁹ It

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Pat Houtz, “Historic Cave on Pulaski Pike is wealth of scientific treasure,” *Huntsville Times*, July 15, 1968; and *The Alabama Review* 28-29 (Jan 1975): 247.

⁶ “Henry Fuller,”

http://huntsvillehistorycollection.org/hh/index.php?title=Person:Henry_Fuller (accessed February 11, 2017).

⁷ “Nature and Art: Shelta Rock Cave in a Flood of Beauty and Brilliancy,” *Huntsville Gazette*, June 30, 1888.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ “A Wonderful Cave,” *Atlanta Constitution*, July 15, 1888.

referred to the largest chamber as an “amphitheater” just right venue for frivolity. It made much of the formations as well as the boat rides on the underground lake. The article closed with the following assessment: “Taken as a whole, it is very interesting, and will, in time, prove a popular point with sightseers.”¹⁰

One month later, Fuller attracted even more notice with multitudes of newspaper advertisements. Even the Memphis and Charleston Railroad called Shelta Rock a must-see for sightseers. The *Atlanta Constitution* dubbed Shelta Rock “the greatest natural curiosity in the world.”¹¹ Due to its fauna, the lake was spoken of as the “principal attraction.”¹² Fuller’s confidence in the project continued to rise, and he sought to build a railroad spur to Shelta Rock.¹³ Though he remained enthusiastic, he failed to stir that same passion in the public.

In his zeal to disprove skeptical townsfolk, Fuller invested substantial funds in the cave and went into debt. Part of the problem may have been his doubling of the admission price. Some tourists visited, but the bulk of patrons were Huntsville locals who soon wearied of the novelty. Many locals visited the cave once, but few returned. Stressed, Fuller intensified his advertising in the hopes of attracting tourists from

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ “The Shelta Caverns,” *Atlanta Constitution*, August 10, 1888.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ “The World Around Us,” *Columbus Enquirer*, September 3, 1888.

outside of the city and state. A typical ad read as follows:

Come and see and be convinced of the fact. Walks and pleasant guides to accompany people to all parts of the cave. The cave is now lighted throughout by electricity. Fountain basins, over 20 feet in diameter and five feet deep formed of crystals. The largest lake ever known underground. It rises and falls 15 feet during the season, without any known source from whence it comes, or where it goes. Navigable for large boats most of the season, and beautiful scenery all above and around its placid waters. The largest stalagmites and stalactites ever before discovered. This cave has just been fitted up with walks, chairs, tables and platforms and lighted with electricity.

*Excursion or other parties will be allowed special rates Season tickets for families at reasonable rates. H.M. Fuller, proprietor.*¹⁴

Despite such endeavors, Fuller did not turn a profit. Rumor had it that he resorted to operating a still in the cave so as to make some much needed funds.¹⁵ True or not, his financial circumstances had worsened to the extent that he decided to create a company and bring in investors.

¹⁴ "1888 Ad Lists Wonders Seen in Shelta Cavern," *Huntsville Times*, November 17, 1913.

¹⁵ Kelly Kazek, "On Repeal Day: 7 places Alabamians bought illicit liquor during Prohibition, including speakeasy caves, underground tunnels," *Huntsville Times*, December 5, 2014.

On December 31, 1888, Fuller sold Sam H. Watson of Vinton, Louisiana, 86 lots for \$20,000; George T. Carpenter of Des Moines, IA, 243 lots for \$49,600; and the Shelta Caverns Land and Improvement Company (SCLIC) 32 acres, including Shelta Rock, for \$300,000. The investment company was comprised of businessmen from Iowa and Minnesota. Its contract stipulated “the free and exclusive right, use and enjoyment, in fee, to all caverns, subterranean lakes, channels, openings and other under earth passages which may be hereafter discovered or explored lying below and under the surface land—together with such natural wonders and curiosities.”¹⁶ Fuller remained heavily involved as he served as a SCLIC director along with Captain D.R. Ewing; E.J. Fairall; and Dr. L.M. Sandford, all of Des Moines. Huntsville lawyer Lawrence Cooper represented the company in the purchase. Rather than disappointment at the changing of hands, the local newspapers radiated excitement and an expectation that a hotel, botanical garden, and large fishing pond would soon be built on the property and a dummy line might finally be created.¹⁷ Perhaps, the cave might yet make a popular tourist spot.

¹⁶ C.M. Stanley, “BBQ Served Editors in an Alabama Cave,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, Sep 21, 1952.

¹⁷ Untitled, *Huntsville Times*, December 31, 1888; and “Great Shelta Caverns,” *Memphis Daily Appeal*, Feb 17, 1889. On this purchase, see also, untitled, *Huntsville Gazette*, January 5, 1889; and *The Street Railway Journal Index to Volume V* (New York: Street Railway Journal, 1889), 47.

Though no longer a sole operation, Fuller received most of the publicity whenever references were made to Shelta Rock. In January 1889, the *Atlanta Constitution* credited Fuller with having “discovered one of the most notable caverns in the southern states.”¹⁸ It added, “Mr. Fuller’s luck and enterprise have made him a half millionaire, and he will probably enjoy life in his own way, while the new company takes all the risk of booming the resort.”¹⁹ The following month, the *Columbus Daily Enquirer* remarked, “The Shelta park at Huntsville is to be greatly improved and the attractions of Shelta Caverns opened up extensively.”²⁰ Shortly thereafter, the *Memphis Daily Appeal* spoke of Shelta Rock as a pleasantly cool “Alabama Attraction,” one large enough to host 75,000 guests and which surpassed “Mammoth and Luray Caves in variety, effect and grandeur.”²¹ This particular article, titled “Great Shelta Caverns,” gave one of the most detailed descriptions ever printed.

The unnamed journalist thoroughly illustrated the interior of Shelta. He began with the cave’s most popular feature “Jumbo,” a stalagmite which resembled an elephant. Roughly 11 feet high and 24 feet wide, it was thought, at least by Fuller, to be one of it not one of the largest stalagmites in the world. Another feature called the “Marble Stalagmite” was

¹⁸ “Gossip of the Day,” *Atlanta Constitution*, January 7, 1889.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ “In Alabama,” *Columbus Daily Enquirer*, February 14, 1889.

²¹ “Great Shelta Caverns,” *Memphis Daily Appeal*, February 17, 1889.

said to have a peak “which seems to have passed through an angry volcano, where it reduced to a fluid, and leaping over the sides formed a drapery of beautiful marble points.” The “Sierra Snowdrift” almost appeared covered with snow while “Lady’s Beauty” had the appearance of a crystal beehive. “The Crystal Canopy” looked like a waterfall made of foam. Both the “Diamond Bluff” and the “Stalagmite Firmament” were said to be of such beauty as only an artist might capture. The “Gould Pyramid,” so named because of its layers, struck one visitor to the extent that he attempted to purchase it. The Egyptian theme extended to an array of stalagmites and stalactites called the “Egyptian Columns.” Yet another feature, “The Horn of Plenty,” was discussed but not well defined. Perhaps the name was self-explanatory. Other sights included but were not limited to “Stone Chimes,” “Devil’s Bathtub,” “Mary’s Lamb,” and “Royal Bengal Tiger.”²² In addition to the above features, the cave boasted many water-related sites.

The “Eighth Wonder of the World” included “a number of basins arranged like stair steps, so that when one is filled with water it overflows into the next lowest, and so on until the last one is reached.”²³ One spring was called “Glen Springs Retreat” while another was labeled “Kris Kringle Spring” due to a nearby formation which looked like Santa Claus. The author

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

of this article seemed most besotted with “Cupid’s Sanctum”:

This place caused me to stagger with bewilderment; its beauties are beyond the power of mankind to describe, and were I endowed with all of the learning which the human intellect is capable of receiving and retaining. I would feel incompetent to do justice to this

palace of beauty. The sides are literally lines with festoons, draping and curious laces. Cupid is seen here resting upon the wall in all of his loveliness, with wings ready to fly at the first appearance of some beautiful and charming maiden.²⁴

The author closed the article by claiming, “I would most willingly travel 1,000 miles to feast my eyes on these hidden and marvelous freaks of beautiful nature.”²⁵ A flurry of similar items began appearing with more frequency all over the country.

On May 3, 1889, the *Daily Arkansas Gazette* printed an interesting tidbit about Shelta in regards to the Memphis and Charleston Railroad. For three days in early May, the railroad offered half off a round trip ticket from Memphis to Huntsville because “this rate has been made at the request of a large number of persons who desire to thoroughly explore the wonderful Shelta Caverns.”²⁶ The advertisement included the following enticement:

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ “We Are Built That Way,” *Daily Arkansas Gazette*, May 3, 1889.

*“Shelta Caverns are the only successful rivals to Mammoth Cave of Kentucky. Electric lights flash through many miles of internal geological wonders and soul inspiring melodies, over rippling streams, heralds the venturesome musical troubadour on his nautical explorations in the bowels of the earth. Do you ‘catch on?’ If so, don’t miss this opportunity.”*²⁷

Of note, newspaper articles had begun to use the names Shelta Rock, Shelta Caverns, and Shelta Cave interchangeably. While the number of people traveling to Shelta by railroad is unknown, a slow but steady stream of tourists came.

The bulk of tourists had arrived in Huntsville on other business or leisure and visited Shelta Caverns on a lark or in the company of locals. In July 1889, 160 delegates of the Alabama Press Association held a meeting inside Shelta.²⁸ That same month, Lola Roane and Fannie Williams, a couple of Kansas City, Missouri, teachers visiting “Prof. and Mrs. Council,” explored the cave.²⁹ The following year, in mid-June 1890, Fuller provided a personal tour to a Mr. Mastin as well as an unnamed *Huntsville Gazette* journalist who wrote, “It is a rare treat to enjoy the beauties of the unsurpassed stalagmitic and stalactic formations,

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Pat Houtz, “Historic cave on Pulaski Pike is wealth of scientific treasure,” *Huntsville Times*, July 15, 1968; and C.M. Stanley, “BBQ Served Editors in an Alabama Cave,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, Sep 21, 1952.

²⁹ “Misses Lola Roane and Fannie Williams,” *Huntsville Gazette*, July 27, 1889.

the half mile boat ride on the underground lake, and the grand and weird scenes only there to be found. It was our first visit and surpassed any descriptions we have read of it and all our expectations."³⁰ Obviously, Shelta impressed any who saw it, but the SCLIC struggled just as Fuller had.

Toward the end of 1890, the SCLIC reorganized and added a few more investors. The *Tennessean* reported that "several capitalists from the North . . . intend to make this wonderful cave beautiful."³¹ Among the stockholders were Des Moines, Iowa, natives George Carpenter; D. R. Ewing; D.S. McQuiston; and J. Wisheart as well as Huntsville residents Fuller; E.B. Fuller; and Ben P. Hunt.³² This effort brought more funding, but the influx of tourists remained largely unchanged.

Advertisements for Shelta Caverns increased in 1891, but word of mouth helped spread its fame. For example, on April 2, a man named H.F.H. of Troy, New York, focused on Shelta in his newspaper article titled "In the New South: A Northern Tourist's Impressions of a Typical Alabama Town."³³ Such pieces may have inspired readers to research and maybe even visit

³⁰ "A Visit to the Shelta Caverns," *Huntsville Gazette*, June 14, 1890.

³¹ "Takes the Premium," *The Tennessean*, November 5, 1890.

³² *Ibid*; and C.M. Stanley, "BBQ Served Editors in an Alabama Cave," *Montgomery Advertiser*, Sep 21, 1952.

³³ H.F.H., "In the New South: A Northern Tourist's Impressions of a Typical Alabama Town," *Troy Times* (New York), April 2, 1891.

Shelta, believed to be one of the major cave discoveries of the century.

The stockholders of the SCLIC certainly thought just that. However, they realized that in order to give Shelta world-class allure, the surrounding land needed more appeal. On April 25, 1891, the company sold 20 acres to Sandford B. Coulson of Yankton, North Dakota. Coulson planned to erect a hotel and "an electric car line from the city."³⁴ This sale was mentioned in the *Dallas Morning News* as "a big deal."³⁵ In June, Coulson was even elected to the SCLIC's Board of Directors alongside Carpenter; Ewing; Fuller; Cooper; Hunt; and E.B. Miller. At this annual meeting, Fuller, who served as General Manager of the cave, suggested better lighting as a means of drawing more tourists, the flow of which had come to a trickle.³⁶

The grandiose ideas of Fuller and his cohorts failed to come to fruition and neither did the hordes of tourists they sought. SCLIC expenditures rose, and it quickly fell into arrears. When the company failed to pay taxes, the land containing Shelta Caverns was sold at auction by Huntsville's Sheriff Oscar Fulgham

³⁴ "Big Deal Near Huntsville," *The Tennessean*, April 25, 1891.

³⁵ "Alabama," *Dallas Morning News*, May 4, 1891.

³⁶ "The Shelta Caverns," *The Tennessean*, June 5, 1891.

on June 28, 1897.³⁷ It was purchased by Cooper, a local lawyer who had been affiliated with the SCLIC.³⁸

Under Cooper's tenure, Shelta Caverns remained open to tourists and kept making headlines. On September 19, 1897, the *Birmingham Age Herald* printed, "Mrs. Cadden of Montgomery chaperoned a party of young people Wednesday night on a drive by Shelta Caverns. These young folks spent a very pleasant hour in the cave, while delicious refreshments were served."³⁹ Roughly a year later, on September 17, 1898, the *Tennessean* commented that "a coaching party to Shelta Caverns was given Monday afternoon complimentary to Miss May Watkins, by men of Company E. Second Georgia."⁴⁰ A few days later, the *Pittsburgh Press* included a lengthy article about Shelta. Evidently, Ralph Hay, who lived in Huntsville, wrote to his Pittsburgh brother about a visit to the cave. The letter read in part:

The other day some of us went to see the Shelta Caverns, and enjoyed the trip very much . . . [the cave] being about three miles in extent, and some places form large chambers 200 yards long by 75 yards wide. We went down many steps, the guide did not know how many . . . we then followed a boardwalk all the way

³⁷ C.M. Stanley, "BBQ Served Editors in an Alabama Cave," *Montgomery Advertiser*, Sep 21, 1952; and Untitled, Caves, Vertical File, HMCPL.

³⁸ "They Will Be Open Again," *Atlanta Constitution*, August 5, 1901.

³⁹ "Huntsville," *Birmingham Age Herald*, September 19, 1897.

⁴⁰ Untitled, *The Tennessean*, September 17, 1898.

through. During the winter or rainy seasons of the caverns is about filled with water and the guide takes you around. In one place the lake remains and there are fish (blind ones). At some places you see formations of rock and sand, but none beautiful.

The walls are studded in places with shells . . . never could you imagine [them] ever being made by man . . . You could see . . . water so clear that you could not note there was water in it. I drank some and it was very pleasant to the taste.⁴¹

Hay grossly overestimated the size of the cave, a typical mistake. Amidst a plethora of statements which lauded the cave's beauty, his stood in mark contrast because he thought the interior rather plain. Of note, many visitors noted an odor in the cave whereas Hay noticed none and even tried the water. While this sampling of press coverage was cheery, others were in context of a local tragedy.

On July 22, 1900, Susie Priest, a thirteen-year-old worker at Huntsville's Dallas Mill, was walking with her little sister Nellie when the two were confronted by a "negro" assailant. Nellie ran, but Susie was forcibly detained and raped. When Nellie informed her family of what had happened, a posse was assembled. When Susie was found, she identified her attacker as twenty-year-old Elijah Clark.⁴² Clark was arrested, but a mob from the mill village dynamited the jail, overwhelmed

⁴¹ "Shelta Caverns," *Pittsburgh Press*, September 24, 1898.

⁴² "Excitement in Madison County Big Mob Searching for Negro Named Clark; Assaulted Young White Girl," *Birmingham Age-Herald*, July 23, 1900.

Sheriff Fulgham, and kidnapped Clark. The *Birmingham Age-Herald* reported, “The negro was carried to the girl and identified then taken to Moore Grove and swung to a limb, his body being riddled with bullets and shot.”⁴³ In the immediate aftermath, many of the participants in the mob as well as the Priest family were fired from Dallas Mill. The *Atlanta Constitution* claimed that during a secret meeting in Shelta Caverns, roughly 300 “greatly excited” blacks plotted revenge for Clark’s murder.⁴⁴ Nothing came of this ominous prediction, and Clark’s hanging remains a dark chapter in Huntsville’s history.

Shelta Caverns attracted very little press between 1901 and 1928.⁴⁵ Not until 1929, did the cave began to regain its reputation and then some. Rather than dancers as had been the case in the distant past, spelunkers began descending on the cave. On September 15, 1929, a *Huntsville Daily Times* article titled “Seek Location of all Caves” stated, “The state geologist stated that the most remarkable cave in Alabama is the Shelta Cave in Huntsville, Madison County. The cave is believed to have the largest unsupported roof of any known cave in the world. The roof is approximately 250 feet in diameter without a pillar or support. There is a large lake inside the cave

⁴³ “Mob’s Work at Huntsville,” *Labor Advocate*, July 28, 1900.

⁴⁴ Untitled, *Atlanta Constitution*, July 31, 1900; and “Preparing for Trouble,” *Birmingham Age-Herald*, July 31, 1900.

⁴⁵ “They Will Be Open Again,” *Atlanta Constitution*, August 5, 1901.

which rarely goes dry.”⁴⁶ Though cave explorers flocked to Shelta Caverns, it had lost its luster in the eyes of Cooper. In Spring 1930, Cooper placed the following advertisement in the *Huntsville Daily Times*: “Shelta Caverns. This tract containing twelve acres and embracing the most wonderful subterranean attractions. Price to purchase for development \$20,000.00. Terms to suit purchaser.”⁴⁷

At that time, what mention the cave received in local newspapers dealt with scientific expeditions and Boy Scout activities. On June 14, 1931, Dr. Walter E. Jones, James De Jarnette, Dr. T.S. Vanalla, and H.P. Loding performed a research-oriented exploration of Shelta Caverns. They were primarily interested in wildlife, especially the beetle.⁴⁸ In mid-June 1932, local Boy Scouts from Troop 4 visited Shelta Caverns and began making it a regular event.⁴⁹ Boy Scout Troop 15 went to Shelta Caverns in mid-November 1944. Those on this trip included Scoutmaster T.W. Cornell; H.G. Taylor, Jr.; Nelson Parish; Bobby Sims; Clarence Tidwell; Paul Lackey; Donald Steakley; Joe Gullatt; and Dorman Moose.⁵⁰ Boys were charged

⁴⁶ “Seek Location of All Caves,” *Huntsville Daily Times*, September 15, 1929.

⁴⁷ “For Sale,” *Huntsville Daily Times*, March 10, 1930.

⁴⁸ Joe Traylor, “Cave Here is Biological Treasure Trove,” *Huntsville Times*, July 23, 1968.

⁴⁹ “Fourteen Boy Scouts Explore Shelta Cave,” *Huntsville Times*, June 19, 1932.

⁵⁰ “Trip to Shelta Cave Made by Troop No. 15,” *Huntsville Times*, November 22, 1944.

with collecting data, for instance water levels.⁵¹ Even with these occasional guests, Shelta Caverns had ceased being a popular tourist site. As early as 1936, one journalist exclaimed, “Only tourists along Pulaski Pike who know of this cavern now occasionally turn their heads in its direction, and their view goes no farther than the wooded crown of the hill. Green flies and gnats come up from the opening concealed in one end of the crater-like depression, and the odor is not pleasant.”⁵² Aside from locals and the occasional tourist, it appeared the cave had begun to slip into obscurity.

A large part of the problem was inactivity on the part of the SCLIC which, as revealed by the *Huntsville Times*, had not been operational since 1925 and was sued in 1956. Builders Development, a company in Birmingham, purchased 60 neighboring acres, and its owners worried that the SCLIC retained underground rights. For several weeks, a bill of complaint against the SCLIC appeared in the local paper.⁵³ All the while, Shelta Caverns still piqued the interest of myriad spelunkers.

⁵¹ “Troop 15 Will Explore Shelta Caverns Saturday,” *Huntsville Times*, October 22, 1946; and “Boy Scouts Make Scientific Trip,” *Huntsville Times*, November 29, 1946.

⁵² C.M. Stanley, “BBQ Served Editors in an Alabama Cave,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, Sep 21, 1952.

⁵³ “Shelta Caverns, “Once Big Attraction, Back in News,” *Huntsville Times*, October 9, 1956; and “The State of Alabama Madison County,” *Huntsville Times*, September 10, 1956.

In 1954, William "Bill" Varnedoe created the Huntsville Grotto, a branch of the National Speleological Society (NSS) which had formed in 1941. This group studied Shelta Caverns with frequency and exhibited some territoriality.⁵⁴ During the summer of 1957, a non-member named Don G. Blair visited the cave with the intention of collecting a fish specimen to send to the U.S. National Museum or more specifically, Dr. Leonard Schultz, the Curator of Fish. It seems Blair's purpose was misunderstood for Varnedoe wrote a letter of objection to the *Huntsville Times*. Varnedoe protested Blair's specimen collecting and what he assumed to be presumption. In Varnedoe's words, "The fish have been there a long time to lose their eyesight, and they will be there a few months from now—unless they are collected."⁵⁵ In response, Blair wrote a rebuttal in which he denied having taken a specimen, maintained the right to do so, and insisted the museum would be a marvelous home for the fish.⁵⁶ Varnedoe resented outsiders who wrote as if they had been the first to explore Shelta Caverns.

That is not to say that Varnedoe did not enjoy sharing Shelta Caverns with others. In summer 1959, he provided Weldon Payne and Ken Elkins with a tour of the cave. During the visit, remnants of the

⁵⁴ Weldon Payne, "Caveman Takes Pair on Underground Trek," *Huntsville Times*, August 5, 1959.

⁵⁵ William Varnedoe, Jr., "Should Go Slow," *Huntsville Times*, June 21, 1957. See also, Don Blair, "To Satisfy Varnedoe," *Huntsville Times*, June 24, 1957.

⁵⁶ Don Blair, "To Satisfy Varnedoe," *Huntsville Times*, June 24, 1957.

dancefloor could still be seen, but parts of the boat had been taken by people as souvenirs. Payne thought the cave “scary” and said, “I thought I seen two big ol white wasp nests once, but it was only Ken’s eyeballs when he was trying to squeeze around a sharp pointed rock on a half-inch ledge without falling 20 feet.”⁵⁷ Though this article was written tongue in cheek, most took on a more serious cast, especially as the Cold War intensified.

In 1962, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers enlisted the Brown Engineering Company to investigate a series of Alabama caves, including Shelta Caverns, for the purpose of discerning possible shelters. After all, old newspaper references to the cave had bragged that it could hold 75,000 people. *The Huntsville Times*, too, declared Shelta Caverns as a safe place not only in case of a Cold War calamity, but weather hazards like tornados.⁵⁸ While such talk raised cave’s importance in the eyes of locals, it took a change of ownership to truly revive Shelta Caverns’ popularity and bring credence to its ecological value.

When Shelta Caverns went up for sale in 1967, Varnedoe and the other members of the Huntsville Grotto, fearing the land might end up a shopping mall or parking lot, encouraged the National Speleological

⁵⁷ Weldon Payne, “Caveman Takes Pair on Underground Trek,” *Huntsville Times*, August 5, 1959.

⁵⁸ “Shelter Listing—City of Huntsville,” *Huntsville Times*, May 24, 1966; and Alan Moore, “Area Caves Could Shelter 124,879, Survey Reveals,” *Huntsville Times*, August 26, 1962.

Society (NSS) to purchase the site. While the NSS expressed interest, cost proved daunting. Eventually, the NSS borrowed about \$11,000, from the National Nature Conservancy to buy the cave and two acres. Dr. Walter B. Jones, who had been state geologist and an employee of the Alabama Museum of Natural History, helped orchestrate the transaction. Once the purchase had been secured, the NSS moved its national headquarters to Huntsville and appointed the Huntsville Grotto as caretaker of Shelta Cave.⁵⁹

One of the first things the Huntsville Grotto did as custodian was install a gate over the cave entrances. Members had a two-fold motive. First, children from a nearby school might have been injured. Second, the cave had been repeatedly vandalized. Used to bar access, the bars came from the old Madison County jail. Unfortunately, this barrier did not dissuade trespassers. According to the *Huntsville Times*, "Three bars of the cell have been twisted slightly."⁶⁰ Worse still, the bars had an unintended consequence on the bat population of the cave. Though bats could fit through, their presence in the cave began to

⁵⁹ Kelly Kazek, *Forgotten Tales of Alabama* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2010), n.p.; "Cave becomes classroom for Huntsville students," *Index-Journal* (Greenwood, SC), April 5, 1998; and Thomas Ress, "National Spelological Society," *Encyclopedia of Alabama*, <http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-2575> (accessed February 11, 2017).

⁶⁰ Joe Traylor, "Cave Here is Biological Treasure Trove," *Huntsville Times*, July 23, 1968.

diminish.⁶¹ This proved a setback in the Huntsville Grotto's mission to preserve Shelta Caverns in its natural state.

Those who desired to see the cave needed permission from the Huntsville Grotto. Visits of a scientific or spelunking nature were especially welcomed. The *Huntsville Times* advised potential guests to "wear old clothes, and flat heels, and bring your courage and a good flashlight. There is a ladder at the entrance and children seven and over will be allowed to enter with adults."⁶² People were advised to be careful for as Varnedoe warned, "I remember the time when a teenage couple came down here. They had gone into the cave and lost their flashlight. It was at night and naturally they couldn't see the entrance hole. They were smart enough to stay where they were until help came."⁶³ Throughout the year, Shelta Caverns received an increasing level of press coverage.

One 1968 article titled "Shelta Cave has Blind Shrimp" attempted to dispel several myths about the caverns. The old yarn about Civil War troops in the cave remained ever popular. Its most humorous rendition was given by *Huntsville Times* journalist Weldon Payne: "*Bill [Varnedoe] said he's heard tales*

⁶¹ Andy Duncan, *Alabama Curiosities: Quirky Characters, Roadside Oddities & Other Offbeat Stuff* (Morris Book Publishing, 2009), 140.

⁶² Pat Houtz, "Historic cave on Pulaski Pike is wealth of scientific treasure," *Huntsville Times*, July 15, 1968.

⁶³ Joe Traylor, "Cave Here is Biological Treasure Trove," *Huntsville Times*, July 23, 1968.

that two Yankee soldiers got chased up in there by a buncha rebels during the Civil War and kept backing up and just disappeared, but we told Bill he musta got his story wrong 'cause we're sure it musta been two rebels that chased a buncha yankee soldiers up there instead."⁶⁴ Many locals believed the cave stretched miles, when it was roughly 2,500 feet. Some even imagined the cave connected with Big Spring, also a falsehood. Lastly, with the exception of Tom Jester, journalists had praised the cave's loveliness when. Jester said, *"It is not beautiful and contains few formations. It is wet and muddy and the floor consists mostly of irregular piles of loose rocks and boulders."*⁶⁵ No one could deny that though stripped of fanciful lore, Shelta Caverns, with its 40 species including fish, crayfish, beetles, and shrimp, had immense biological significance.

In 1969, many newspapers referenced John D. Cooper's study of the shrimp in Shelta Cave. Cooper, a PhD candidate at the University of Kentucky, and his wife Martha, a zoology student at Yale, investigated the cave's three varieties of crayfish, including *Aviticambarus sheltie*. The couple marked 400 or so crayfish to monitor. The Coopers expressed bewilderment as to where many of the animals disappeared to when the underground lake fell fifty feet in the fall. They imagined that the various species

⁶⁴ Weldon Payne, "Caveman Takes pair on Underground Trek," *Huntsville Times*, August 5, 1959.

⁶⁵ Tom Jester, "Shelta Cave has Blind Shrimp," *Huntsville Times*, July 22, 1968.

had escaped to holes and crevices which led to other chambers.⁶⁶ John stated, “Shelta Cave displays one of the most interesting and unusual underground ecosystems in North America. Perhaps, in the not so distant future, Shelta Cave may be recognized as one of the most important natural underground laboratories in existence.”⁶⁷ A few years later, his prediction came true.

Shelta Cave became a National Natural Landmark in 1971.⁶⁸ This Department of Interior designation came largely due to the fact that the site had so many “cave-restricted” species, including crayfish and a certain species of cave shrimp which were thought to live nowhere else.⁶⁹ In 1978, John Edward Cooper wrote *Ecological and Behavioral Studies in Shelta Cave, Alabama, with Emphasis on Decapod Crustaceans*.⁷⁰ Huntsville Grotto members had sought such national

⁶⁶ “Area has a rare ‘cavediver’ worker with wife in field never exploited in depth,” *Advocate-Messenger* (Danville, Kentucky), March 9, 1969; Jack Hartsfield, “Cave May Hold Crucial Secrets of Water Life,” *Huntsville Times*, March 16, 1969; and David C. Culver and Tanja Pipan, *The Biology of Caves and Other Subterranean Habitats* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 198.

⁶⁷ Pat Houtz, “Historic cave on Pulaski Pike is wealth of scientific treasure,” *Huntsville Times*, July 15, 1968.

⁶⁸ “Shelta Cave Approved for Landmark List,” *Huntsville Times Daily*, Nov 25, 1971.

⁶⁹ *Untitled*, Fort Walton Beach Playground Daily News, Feb 6, 1977.

⁷⁰ John Edward Cooper, *Ecological and Behavioral Studies in Shelta Cave, Alabama, with Emphasis on Decapod Crustaceans* (University Microfilms, 1978).

recognition for the cave and hoped it would fuel their preservation efforts.

Even with its new status, Shelta Cave obtained little press, even at the local levels. Not until 1981 did the next substantial Shelta article appear in the *Huntsville Times*. In this piece, journalist Tim Tyson described his visit to Shelta. He thought the fifteen-minute trek down the ladder seemed to take forever. Mesmerized, he gaped at the wooden remnants of the dancefloor. He then observed the large amount of graffiti in the cave. Special attention was paid to the spray-painted name Buddy Holly. Wryly, he urged viewers to restrain excitement for nearby was the signature "Leif Erikson, 1491."⁷¹ This lack of respect coupled with garbage strewn all over the place left him feeling frustrated. Tyson closed this bittersweet piece by remarking that Shelta used to be "Huntsville's largest underground attraction."⁷²

Shelta Cave may not have been the subject of many news reports, but it was a common sight in the Huntsville Grotto newsletter. A favorite spot, members often took their families inside to explore. In October 1983, Phil Laarkamp took his children Faith and Michelle into Shelta Cave. Faith, only eight-years-old, later wrote about the adventure. Thought she found it

⁷¹ Tim Tyson, "Shelta Cave: A Dark Adventure," *Huntsville Times*, April 5, 1981.

⁷² *Ibid.*

“muddy and slipper,” she had a great deal of fun.⁷³ In her words,

The further we got the prettier it got. There were beautiful formations. Finally, we saw the Diamond Cliffs. It looked like someone had stuck 1,000 diamond rings in there. Still we moved on further with the pretty stalactites and stalagmites.

We went on and then my sister thought she had found

something but it was only water. Then we saw the thing we had been waiting for—the Devil’s Bathtub. The Devil’s Bathtub is something like a crater underground. It’s six feet deep, ten feet wide, thirty feet long and bowl shaped. Nearby there was a tiny hole in the cave floor. My sister turned her light on high and went in the tiny hole. She said there was a small passageway that went about thirty feet and who knows what is at the end of it.⁷⁴

Needless to say, Faith appreciated being able to see the ins and outs of the cave. It was an unforgettable experience. This family and others like it had sought and been granted permission. Sadly, many locals snuck into the cave to carouse and camp.

The Huntsville Grotto had found it extremely difficult to stop illegal entry. The bars had simply not worked, at least not at keeping humans out. In 1986, the NSS had expressed great concern about vandalism and

⁷³ Faith Laarkamp, “My Trip to Shelta Cave,” *Huntsville Grotto Newsletter* 24, no. 10 (Oct 1983): 84.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

even offered a \$500 reward to anyone with information.⁷⁵ Little was forthcoming, and trespassing remained a problem.

By the 1990s, Shelta Cave was primarily known for the endangered shrimp *Palaemonias alabamiae*. For decades, it was thought to reside only in Shelta. Unfortunately, around 1973, the species had disappeared from the cave.⁷⁶ Scientists were stymied by what led to the shrimp's absence. It was later found in three other caves in Huntsville. Spelunker Randall Blackwood described the shrimp as follows: "nearly invisible and real hard to find. Only around the thorax region do they really have any pigmentation. The only way you generally see them is they moved in the water or you see their shadow on the bottom of the pool."⁷⁷ Though unique fauna was most often associated with Shelta Cave, so was danger.

One need always be vigilant in caves, spelunker or no, and such was the case at Shelta. In mid-April 1992, Chuck Lewley of Jefferson County decided to explore Shelta Cave with five friends. While rappelling, he slipped and fell about 30 feet. Aided by his

⁷⁵ "Bats," *Almogordo News*, June 24, 1986.

⁷⁶ James H. Thorp and Alan P. Covich, ed., *Ecology and Classification of North American Freshwater Invertebrates*, 3rd ed. (Elsevier, Inc., 2010), 928; and *Tennessee River Chip Mill Terminals: Environmental Impact Statement*, vol. II (Tennessee Valley Authority, 1993), 838.

⁷⁷ James McWilliams, "Cave Shrimp Making Comeback," *Huntsville Times*, Dec 16, 1991.

companions, he was taken to Huntsville Hospital with several injuries, including a broken arm.⁷⁸ All things considered, Lewley was lucky. It was/is recommended to never explore a cave solo and had he not been with comrades, his fate may have been quite different.

As a general rule, the NSS did not want the public to visit Shelta Cave. This derived partly from an aim to preserve the site, but concern for mishaps served as a large motivator, too. Exceptions were made for spelunkers and students. In 1998, Jayne Russell, at teacher at the Academy for Science and Foreign Language, received a Kellogg Foundation grant which she used to create learning activities for students. She dubbed ten students from her school a “Shelta Cave Conservation Team.” Though young, her students took water samples and studied the presence of fish, crayfish, and bats. One article about Russell, which appeared in Greenwood, South Carolina’s *Index-Journal*, emphasized that the shrimp had left. Russell’s cohort Joan Morris, who taught science at Butler High School, suggested that the shrimp’s absence might be connected to the disappearance of gray bats, a keystone species. It was hypothesized that the shrimp had been somehow reliant on bat guano.⁷⁹ That same year, on April 21, 1998, the

⁷⁸ “Cavers here hurt in fall, rescued,” *Huntsville Times*, April 16, 1992.

⁷⁹ “Cave becomes classroom for Huntsville students,” *Index-Journal* (Greenwood, SC), April 5, 1998; and William Elliott, “Protecting Caves and Cave Life,” in *Encyclopedia of Caves* edited by William B. White and David C. Culver (Elsevier, Inc., 2012), 625.

Chicago Tribune claimed Shelta was special because of its wildlife whose position was precarious.⁸⁰

Today, Shelta Cave continues to enthrall onlookers. Studies have shown bats are making a comeback, and this return stands to rejuvenate the cave's ecosystem. In 2012, one project, performed by University of Alabama graduate students with support from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, resulted in "an intensive biotic inventory."⁸¹ The NSS's management plan for Shelta continues to allow for "scientific researchers, education organizations, general members of the NSS and the Nature Conservancy and their guests" provided that they are accompanied by a guide. Any studies need permission, no samples can be taken, the fauna is to be unmolested, and visitors to the cave are expected to practice "leave no trace."⁸² Thanks to the protection provided by the NSS and the Huntsville Grotto, Shelta Cave remains an exceptional geological and ecological treasure.

⁸⁰ "Alabama Cave Shrimp," *Chicago Tribune*, April 21, 1998.

⁸¹ "Shelta Cave Nature Preserve," <https://caves.org/preserves/scp/scp-info.shtml> (accessed February 11, 2017).

⁸² "Shelta Cave Nature Preserve Management Plan," <https://caves.org/preserves/scp/scp-mp.shtml> (accessed February 12, 2017). See also, Kenneth M. Wills and L.J. Davenport, *Exploring Wild Alabama: A Guide to the State's Publicly Accessible Natural Areas* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press), 29-30.