Huntsville was quickly becoming known as one of the more progressive cities in the South by 1888. In fact, brochures often referred to the dynamic city as the Queen City of the South.

The fabulous Monte Sano Hotel was no longer isolated on the mountain top with access by road alone. By early 1888, construction had begun on the Huntsville-Monte Sano Railroad to shuttle passengers from the valley to the hotel. The road ran from the hotel to the Maple Hill Cemetery area, from there on using track already in existence.

The line construction was reported by a new newspaper, the Monte Sano Breeze—in an 1890 edition—as having been completed in 1889. Further information disclosed that the line was eight miles long, running on a narrow gauge with a grade of 130 feet to the mile. Local residents referred to the railroads as the “dummy line” because the unusual engine and cab, used for the haul up the mountain, looked much like the passenger cars. Arthur Owen Wilson was the engineer and general manager for the road. The idea had been around for two years, but it was June 1888 before the Huntsville Belt Line and the Monte Sano Railroad Company
petitioned the city for permission. An 1889 ordinance, incidentally, set the speed limits for the train at six miles per hour.

Word of the mountain of health had spread far and wide—particularly to Florida where the scourge of yellow fever was devastating the population.

So serious was the epidemic that the U. S. Government had authorized transfer of 300 troops from Fort Barrancas, Florida to Monte Sano in hope of their escaping death. Monte Sano was considered as one of the healthiest regions in the nation.

Not only was Madison County considered an economic leader, but it was quickly becoming a tourist attraction as well.

Business was booming. In Huntsville, during 1888, were two banks, four hotels, three restaurants, an opera house, an ice factory, a cotton factory, the largest cottonseed oil mill in the South, a saw mill, two planing mills, a sash and door factory, a broom factory, a new cigar factory opened in 1888 by the Harrison brothers, and numerous other plants and businesses. Harrison moved to the present south side square location in 1895. The new Halsey building was completed in 1888 across from the Huntsville Hotel on Jefferson Street, and G. W. Jones began his full civil engineering firm this year too. Two other business names still in existence today had their beginnings in 1888, also. They were Hutchens Hardware, and J. D. Humphrey Drugs. Dwight Jones, great grandson of Humphrey, began Jones Hospital Pharmacy in 1954, and bought out Humphreys in 1976.

As for attractions—if Monte Sano thought it had a gold mine—Henry Fuller figured he could top it. A short distance from downtown Huntsville was a fascinating underground cavern, almost hidden by two small entrances.

Fuller, in 1888, purchased the land which included the cave, with the idea of turning it into a tourist profit.

If indeed that was the venture, Fuller would succeed. He named the cave Shelta after his daughter, made plans to incorporate the Shelta Caverns Company, and formally opened the cave to the public in 1889. Joining in the incorporation were Lawrence Cooper, Ben Hunt, L. D. Bass and O. S. McQuiston.

One room was said to be large enough to enclose six football fields side by side. A popular new attraction—the caverns had their share of visitors.

Before being sold for taxes in 1896, thousands had made the pilgrimage to see the cave. Before many years had passed, it became the first known cave in the nation to have electric lighting.

The owners, looking for things different, outfitted the cave with a bandstand and dance floor, luring tourists from throughout the nation, as well as the homefolks, for a unique experience.

The sound of a band in the yawning cavern must have been something to remember as the melodic tunes echoed underground.
But even more memorable to the courtships that developed there were the boat rides in the underground lake.

Editors of the Alabama Press Association came to Huntsville in 1889, and saw for themselves.

Cave formations were given proper names by the editors, including such names as Mary’s Lamb; Pink Cameo; Royal Bengal Tiger; Lion; Jumbo Elephant; Gothic Chapel; Hall of Statuary; Cathedral of Milan; The Titan Hand; Devil’s Bathtub; Stone Chimes; Cupid’s Court; Horn of Plenty; Diamond Cliffs; Titania Grotto; Gold Rock; Giant Ribs, and—for the underground lake—Stygia Flood.

Today many of the formations have been vandalized, but, too, the relics of the days of the big bandstand are still visible in rotted timbers of the dance floor that once vibrated to the rhythms of musical splendor.

The National Speleological Society bought the caverns in 1968 with a two-fold purpose. For one, there were those who wanted to dynamite the cavern entrance to make way for a shopping center parking lot, but the main reason for preserving the caverns was because of its ecological life found nowhere else in the world.

The cavern still possesses a certain variety of blind shrimp found nowhere else. Speleologists roam its bowels today, but the facility is closed to the public, except by special arrangement. The Huntsville Grotto of the National Speleological Society manages the cavern.

To add to the attraction, the Shelta Caverns Railroad was planned during 1888, to carry passengers from downtown Huntsville and to bring them south from Tullahoma, Tennessee, to see the cave.

Interestingly, another railroad—Tennessee based—held a directors meeting in Huntsville during 1888. Among the directors attending the meeting were W. D. L. Record of Moore County, Tennessee, and local director Dr. J. H. Bryson.

The North Alabama Improvement, too, was still engaging in successful ventures. In May 1888 the $200,000 Huntsville Hotel was opened by them, being a four story building with a solid iron and glass front, increased to 125 rooms, electric bells, gas steam heat, and a parlor of white marble. The building had been purchased October 9, 1886. Reuben Chapman took over the mortgage for $25,000, then sold it to J. F. O’Shaughnessy in 1887.

L. B. Wheeler of Atlanta, architect for the famed Atlanta Kimball House, had plied his trade well in Huntsville.

The Monte Sano Hotel, meanwhile, came through with a special benefit of its own for travelers. Ray’s Folly, the reservoir below the Hotel, was cleaned out and used as a swimming pool in 1888.