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Cover: Photo of Peter Hauer, the subject of the article in this issue. The photo was taken in 1974 or 1975 near Peter’s farm in rural Pocahontas County, West Virginia. Hauer was a noted speleo-historian whose mysterious death in 1975 is the subject of this issue. Photo by Dennis Slifer.
The Bizarre Story of Caver Peter Hauer, an Innocent Victim or Murderer?

by Henry Rauch,
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Introduction

This is my true-crime story of caver Peter Hauer, a well-respected northeastern caver and cave history scholar, who in 1975 suffered a bizarre ending to his brief but productive life in Pocahontas County of southern West Virginia. Peter was born on Nov. 11, 1945 in Lebanon PA, and died mysteriously on or after June 9, 1975 on a lonely mountain near Hillsboro WV. As Henry composed this story, he’s reminded of that chilling movie Deliverance starring John Voight and Burt Reynolds, and even that bad classic horror movie Wrong Turn, supposedly set in West Virginia.

There are several versions of the Peter Hauer death story circulating, some nonfiction and some historical fiction, some prose and some poetry, and even a few published book chapters and a web blog. Amazingly, about 43 years later, several other new story versions reportedly will be forthcoming by cavers who knew Peter Hauer or the initial murder victim Walter Smith. This is my story, told seemingly without end.

Literature references and persons consulted for information on this story are given at the very end, just prior to the photo figures section.

Early History and Accomplishments of Peter

Peter grew up in Lebanon PA, and was the son of Lloyd Jacob Hauer and Carmelita Carrie (Leddy) Hauer. His only sibling was his 5-years-younger sister, Lisa Hauer, who later married and had one child, a daughter Meagan Wright. Peter himself had no children, and was never married.

First, my story is prefaced with a summary of academic and professional accomplishments by Peter, as told by: his friends Jack Speece and Mike Cullinan in Peter Hauer’s obituary and memorial; Ellen Snyder (Peter’s former girlfriend); and even Peter himself (from a letter of his obtained by the FBI). Peter was a respected caver and academic who to this day is still highly honored by the National Speleological Society (NSS). Peter started his professional education after moving to Norwood in eastern Massachusetts in the early 1960s as a teenager. He first attended a college prep school, Cornwall Academy at Great Barrington in western MA, and then attended Boston College for a semester. He then transferred to Gettysburg College in PA in 1965 and graduated with a B.A. degree in Biology in 1968. Finally, he gained his special education school teaching certificate by taking 25 hours of course credits in Education and Ecology at Shippensburg State College, PA. He then taught Outdoor and Environmental Education courses during 1968 – 1973, at the Outdoor and Environmental Education Center of the Harrisburg PA School District.

As reported in Peter’s obituary by Jack Speece, Peter was a member of many organizations, including: Sierra Club, Audubon Society, National Speleological Society (NSS), American Spelean History Association, Appalachian Trail Conference, West Virginia Highlands Conservancy, Germany Valley Task Force, Beaver Defenders, Isaac Walton League (as president of a local chapter), and the West Virginia Beekeepers Association.

Peter was a prominent researcher of cave history and science, especially concerning saltpeter caves. He had published many articles in speleological publications, especially the Journal of Spelean History. He also published survey bulletins for the Caves of Massachusetts and the Caves of Schoharie County, NY, and gave many talks on caves at caving conventions. Peter was awarded Fellow status by the NSS in 1970, and then received the first NSS James Mitchell award in 1972. He was also secretary-treasurer of the American Spelean History Association (ASHA) during 1969 – 1975. After his death a special fund was raised on his behalf by the ASHA, from which the Peter M. Hauer Spelean History award was made annually; beginning in 1979, the NSS took over the annual gifting of this award to the NSS member who has made the most significant contribution to spelean history that year.
Peter was an ardent conservationist, cave researcher, and educator. Peter also received a small grant from the National Geographic Society to partially fund his cave saltpeter research, and had applied to the National Endowment for the Humanities for additional funding in 1975 shortly before he died.

**Peter’s Association with West Virginia**

After becoming familiar with caving in WV, Peter bought his Lobelia WV area farm in Hills Creek Valley from Gilbert Workman and others, on August 29, 1970, for reportedly about $4,200. Peter’s farm was located about five miles west of Hillsboro and one mile east of Lobelia. He named it “Cave Run Farm.” He first set up his farm house as a field house for visiting cavers. In 1971 during Thanksgiving weekend, Ellen first met Peter there during a caving excursion led by Roland Vinyard, who was an instructor teaching a caving class out of the University of Connecticut. Roland had previously met Peter at Gettysburg National Military Park, PA, when Roland worked there one summer while Peter was attending Gettysburg College. Then in early summer 1973 Peter and Ellen, now a couple, moved from the Harrisburg area of Pennsylvania to his farm. There they became subsistence farmers, growing vegetables and fruit, and raising farm animals (including chickens, goats, two pinto ponies, and a horse) and honey bees. Peter even had two pet cats, a pet buzzard (turkey vulture), a pet black snake, and was fond of handling wild snakes. They also made and sold leather craft goods. Peter owned a Volkswagen Beetle car, a Volkswagen bus (van), and a Willy truck.

They were part of the “back to the earth,” or “counter culture” revolution, enjoying that life style in many ways. Peter was heavily involved with drugs, according to several unnamed caver friends; he regularly smoked marijuana, and recreationally used many other drugs as well.

Had it not been for Roland, Ellen would likely not have been a part of the Peter Hauer story. Roland and his wife Janet composed and presented a “cranky,” a song ballad and a 26 foot long scrolled embroidered and quilted cloth figure show of the Peter and Ellen saga, at the Fine Arts Salon sessions of the June 2012 NSS National Convention in Lewisburg, WV. It was very well received by the cavers there, including this author, and they performed their show repeatedly by popular demand. Their cranky presentation received that year the NSS Fine Arts Salon award.

While in WV, Ellen reports that Peter continued to work as an ardent conservationist, was a member of the West Virginia Highlands Conservancy, and also was instrumental in saving the Falls of Hills Creek, and Beartown (sandstone canyon rock), what is now within Watoga State Park of WV. Peter once saved the life of a neighbor whose truck went off a bridge and into Cave Creek in front of his farm, and even rescued a neighbor’s calf that had fallen into a sinkhole. Peter was a gentle person, had a mostly vegetarian diet, and would not harm animals, including his farm animals, Ellen states.

**Henry’s Connection to Peter and His Former Girlfriend Ellen**

My initial contact with Peter, when he was a member of the Boston Grotto, occurred in the summer of 1965 or 1966, as Henry and friend Paul Westbrook, who both grew up in Voorheesville NY near Albany, were exiting Knox Cave during a summer early evening. We encountered a group of cavers from the Boston Grotto, including Peter, at the nearby old Robinson family roller skating rink building, as they were preparing to enter the cave. Some of them treated us like local country hicks as Henry recalls. Incidentally, that roller rink is where Henry’s parents first met in 1940; without that rink he wouldn’t be here to tell this story!

Flash ahead about 8 to 9 years, to 1974. Henry had then been a professor for about four years at West Virginia University (WVU) in Morgantown, following my PhD geology graduate degree studies focusing on caves and karst under William B. White at Penn State University, State College PA, during the late 1960s. In 1974 Henry got a visit from Peter and his girlfriend Ellen Snyder at my WVU office, 214 White Hall. Peter and Ellen were interviewing with him to apply for becoming students at WVU. That meeting went well, and Ellen enrolled at WVU in the fall of 1974 to become a B.S. geology major. She later earned her B.S. geology degree, and then her M.S. geology degree in 1983 at WVU with Henry as her thesis advisor.

In mid-June 1975 Henry got visited and interviewed by the FBI! The FBI agent, from the Fairmont WV office, wanted to know everything he knew about Peter, who was then a nation-wide fugitive from justice, being a suspected murderer!
Disappearance of and Search for Walter Smith

It turned out that an acquaintance of Peter’s, a young man named Walter T. Smith, a native of Follansbee WV, was reported missing on June 4, 1975 after a bike trip he made from Watoga State Park to the Hillsboro WV area, riding his 10-speed Schwinn bike. Walter was the son of Janet Keener Smith and William (Bill) M. Smith. William Smith was a National Steel Corp. (then owner of Weirton Steel Company) executive, who was a good friend of then WV governor Arch A. Moore; it was also reported by some cavers and local Pocahontas County officials that Walter was a nephew or nephew-in-law of Arch Moore, although Henry couldn’t confirm that fact. Those personal connections to the governor might explain the massive manhunt that followed for Peter, both within West Virginia and nationwide, by the FBI and cooperating local law enforcement agencies.

Walter (Walt) was an 18 year old (born Aug. 26, 1956), a rising WVU Sophomore Forestry student with a Parks and Recreation major, who worked as a summer recreation attendant and counselor at Watoga State Park in southern Pocahontas County in 1975, and previously as a campground attendant at this park in summer 1974, reports Richard Dale, former superintendent of that park. Peter, a former school teacher originally from PA, may have originally met Walter in the summer of 1974 while working at Watoga State Park as a handyman, often doing carpentry work.

Although such a meeting could not be confirmed, Richard Dale and Ellen Snyder report, Donna Walton Fowler, who grew up as a neighbor to Peter, reports that Peter told her that he had met Walter at that park and that they were friends, and even occasionally socialized on some evenings after work. The reported last time that Peter met with Walter was on Wednesday June 4, 1975, after Walter rode his bike from Watoga State Park to Lobelia Road and had stopped at Peter’s house “for a drink of water.” Peter himself stated this to at least two persons during phone conversations. It has been speculated by some cavers that Walter had previously caved with Peter, but this scenario could not be confirmed from information sources.

Preceding Walter’s arrival at Peter’s house on June 4th Peter had a busy day, as reported by Donna Walton Fowler. First, Peter drove Mrs. Macel Walton to a hospital in Covington, VA to visit her ailing husband Henry Walton, starting about 10:00 a.m.; this was a 1 – 1.5 hour trip one-way. Upon their return to the local Lobelia area that afternoon, Peter took the Walton family’s gathered laundry to his house for washing as a favor.

The last time other cavers had witnessed Peter and Walter together, as reported by Dennis Slifer, was a few days prior to June 11th, on June 4th, starting 7:30 to 8:00 p.m. at Dennis’s rented property located 1 – 2 miles north of Peter’s farm along Bruffey Creek Road. Peter stopped by with Walter to say goodbye to Dennis, knowing Dennis was about to move away to Lexington VA the next day. The next morning, on June 5th, Dennis reports that he started on his trip to VA. As he drove past Peter’s house about 10 a.m., he honked his car horn in a friendly goodbye gesture, not realizing the unfolding tragedy.

After Walter’s disappearance on June 4th, the West Virginia State Police investigations began. Had Walter been kidnapped, injured in some accident, or murdered? At first, the Pocahontas County sheriff’s office, headed by sheriff Clyde Cochran, along with the WV State Police, were involved in the search for Walter, traveling throughout the local area and interviewing many local residents. Ex-sheriff Cochran is no longer available to interview as he died a few years ago after a fatal car crash caused by a foreign diplomat’s relative, who was never punished for that crime, reports Richard Dale.

Also searching for Walter Smith were his father, William Smith, and William’s brother-in-law Stewart Keener, reports Richard Dale. They rented a cabin at Watoga State Park during their search, reports Richard. William told Richard that he was armed, and not afraid of encountering nefarious persons during their search.

Peter’s last known telephone communications with the police searching for Walter occurred on June 7th and 8th. Trooper C.R. Shaffer also reported that on Saturday June 7th he was told by Walter’s father, William, that he had actually talked with Peter by phone about his missing son. Then Peter indicated that Walter had visited him on June 4th, first at his house for “a drink of water”, and then again later at his house during that evening, following a visit they both had to Dennis Slifer’s house nearby; Peter indicated that Walter had then left to return to Watoga State Park on his bicycle late that evening or night. On Sunday morning, June 8th, Watoga State Park Conservation Officer Dick Morris called and interviewed Peter, who again admitted that during Wednesday evening, June 4, 1975, Walter had been visiting him twice at his residence, but that Walter had then left that same night to return to Watoga State Park on his bicycle. Walter never returned.
Trooper C. R. Shaffer then contacted Peter by phone at 12:10 p.m. on June 8th, right after the previous interview with Morris, but Peter would not talk with him then, being suspicious that other party phone line neighbors could be eavesdropping, as reported by Shaffer in the official WV State Police report.

Had Peter lied to William Smith and Dick Morris to try to create an alibi to cover up a possible murder of Walter, or after leaving Peter’s house had Walter gone to another place where he was murdered by another person? To complicate matters, various probable false witness accounts (not given here) were made of Walter’s live presence following his June 4th disappearance, as indicated in the WV State Police report. If these accounts are true, then Walter could have been murdered a day or more later after June 4th.

The final breakup between Peter and Ellen Snyder occurred in early 1975 (January or February), but they still remained friends thereafter. In early 1975 Peter spent some time in Morgantown WV and at WVU, doing library research, probably on saltpeter caves. At that time, according to some cavers, he had been dating another woman caver, Ryn Agnew from Baltimore, MD, who reportedly had broken up with Peter about two weeks before he disappeared. Mysteriously, the WV State Police never interviewed Ryn, and no story contributions have been made by Ryn, despite solicitations made to her. It had been erroneously reported in several past Peter Hauer newspaper stories that Ellen was Peter’s girlfriend in June 1975 when Walter’s murder occurred.

On Sunday, June 8 Ellen called Peter between 6 and 8 p.m. for about a 10 minute conversation, as reported by Ellen’s then boyfriend Keith Kirk in his WV State Police interview statement with Trooper Shaffer. Ellen had called to inquire of Peter if he had the registration papers for her Husky dog Sitka. Then Peter told Ellen that he was the “last person to see the boy” (Walter Smith), and that “he was worried about the boy,” and “he was also fearful for his life too.” Ellen related to Henry by phone that Peter mysteriously indicated to her that day that “he had something else to tell her”, but that he didn’t say what that was then. Ellen also told Peter then that she would be traveling to Lobelia on Friday, June 13th, to visit with him; presumably then Peter was going to tell her his mysterious “something”. However, June 8th was the last time they communicated before Peter’s disappearance and death.

Peter’s activities on Sunday, June 8, 1975, the day before he disappeared on June 9th

1. Pete returned at 2:00 a.m. on June 8th from a side trip that started on June 7th after 4:30 p.m. and a later supper that day, with friends (Lory and Mike Condon, Jimmy Hannah, and Billy Allan) to go swimming at Sherwood Lake in nearby Greenbrier County; he stayed then overnight at Lory and Mike Condon’s house, early on June 8th, and at about 10:00 a.m. on June 8th, Jimmy drove Peter home to his house. This information came from a June 13, 1975 interview of Lory Condon by Trooper Shaffer.

2. Peter visited the neighboring Walton family at about 10:30 a.m. or later that morning, for ~ 1 hour, reports Donna Walton Fowler (in phone conversations of June 27th and July 1, 2018).

3. Peter visited the neighboring Scott family, Donna Walton Fowler reports during that July 1, 2018 phone call.

4. Peter received his first call during late morning (exact time unknown) on June 8th, from Dick Morris, a conservation officer at Watoga State Park, questioning him about Walter Smith’s disappearance. This call may have occurred before Peter’s visit with the Waltons, above.

5. Peter was witnessed working in his garden by the local friend (name unknown) who had been hired to euthanize his sick or dying farm animals, shortly before 12 noon; this was reported by Joseph L. Koenig on Feb. 22, 1976 in his Inside Detective magazine article, based on his prior interviews of the police.

6. Peter received his second phone call that day from WV State Police Trooper C.R. Shaffer at 12:10 p.m., who also questioned Peter about Walter Smith’s disappearance.

7. Peter bought a big bunch of groceries at some unknown place, probably in Hillsboro or Marlinton, as Donna Walton Fowler and her sister Robin Walton separately reported via phone conversations. No time for this purchase is known, but possibly about 1:00 p.m.

8. Peter attended the funeral service for Henry Walton at 2:00 p.m. on June 8th, at the white Methodist Church in Hillsboro. Peter did not attend that Van Reenen Funeral Home viewing (wake) evening session that occurred prior to the funeral service on June 7th (since he was away on a trip then). Peter did attend the burial ceremony at the local graveyard of the Emmanuel Church
located along Bruffey Creek Road (route 29/2) right after the funeral service, reports Donna Walton Fowler, by phone conversation on June 27, 2018.

(9) Peter visited neighbor friend Lester Barker, starting 3:30 – 4:00 p.m., to discuss the truck that he sold to Lester, and to comment about the continued search for Walter Smith. There Peter called Richard Dale to ask about the search for the missing Walter Smith. Peter was very upset then, Lester reports, in his WV State Police interview with Trooper Shaffer on June 11, 1975.

(10) Peter visited friend Marty Saffer next, reports Ellen Snyder, and Donna Walton Fowler, probably starting around 4:30 p.m., to show Marty some of his photos (slides?) and to party with him. He must have then gone home, to pick flowers.

(11) Peter visited Macel Walton at her home, probably after 5 p.m., to check up on her in that evening, and delivered her a bunch of honeysuckle flowers to cheer her (the new widow) up. He visited there a while then, and when he left, his excuse was that he had to put away many groceries at home that he had just purchased earlier that day (time unknown); however, those groceries were never put away by Peter, and were left sitting on the kitchen table (as discovered later on June 9th, 1975 when his house was finally entered by neighbors).

Before Peter left the Walton house, he told the Waltons that Donna Walton could stop by his house the next day (June 9th) to pick up a new rototiller belt from him that they said they needed, reports Donna Walton Fowler by phone on June 29, 2018.

(12) Peter received a phone call from Ellen Snyder, starting between 6:00 and 8:00 p.m., with conversation lasting about 10 minutes then, with Keith Kirk present as a witness, as reported in Keith Kirk’s WV State Police interview.

(13) Peter’s activities after that last known phone conversation on June 8th are unknown (no documentation of them). However Peter may have written three letters that evening, to mail out the next morning.

Also, caver VA Bill Biggers reports that he and his first wife Susan stopped by to visit Peter, on either June 7th or June 8th, when Peter said he was about to visit his Lobelia Saltpeter Cave. The Biggers asked Peter if he would like their company going into that cave, but Peter strangely declined their offer. Did Peter then have something to hide in the cave?

The Disappearance of Peter, and Discovery of His Confession Document

Neighbor sisters Donna and Robin Walton, of the neighboring Walton family, visited Peter’s house on Monday June 9, only to find a house door open about 1 foot wide, with the inside lights on, but no one home. They had stopped by to pick up a rototiller belt from Peter, which Peter had offered to them during his visit to the Walton family the preceding day. Peter specifically requested that Donna Walton come by then for that belt, but she was too scared and suspicious to come by herself so she had her sister Robin Walton accompany her there. They knocked on the frame of the open door for Peter, but got no response, so they then went back home without even entering Peter’s house first. There are two different time accounts for this event that day. Robin reports they arrived at 9:30 to 10:00 a.m. at Peter’s house, but Donna reports that they were there at 7:30 a.m. That arrival time was probably closer to 7:30 a.m.

Donna reports that for the remainder of June 9th and the morning of June 10th she or other Walton family members tried to reach out to Peter by repeatedly calling for him by phone every half-hour or so, being concerned for him being missing. They never reached him, or saw him again.

Donna reports that sister Robin Walton and her local girlfriend Ellen (last name unknown) picked wild strawberries the morning of June 9th, and delivered them to Peter’s house, going inside the open door and putting them on the kitchen table in a bowl along with a note. However, they still did not find Peter home then.

State Police officers Shaffer and Burner also separately visited Peter’s house at different times that same day, June 9th, mysteriously finding again that Peter’s rear door had been left open and the house lights left on, but no Peter there.

Neighbor boy Doug Scott reportedly spotted a man he thought was Peter on June 9th working in his garden. Doug was probably driving by in a car that day, and he later reported to both Donna and Robin Walton that he had seen a man bent over working in Peter’s garden, located behind Peter’s house, but with his back turned towards Doug’s line of sight so that Doug could not see his face. Donna reports that this incident occurred about 9:00 a.m. that day, but Robin reports that it occurred that evening. Was that man really Peter or was it another mysterious person who was harvesting some plants
there? The reclusive Doug Scott has not been further consulted to confirm this story.

Cindy Clutter Johnson reports (by phone conversation on July 2, 2018) that as a girl she was driven to Peter's house by her parents, during some afternoon the week of June 5th to June 9th, to deliver $5.00 in cash to Peter from sales of his leather goods; many neighborhood children helped Peter sell these items. She found a sullen Peter hoeing in his garden, his back turned to her. He wouldn't then respond to her calls, but finally turned around and silently accepted the $5.00. Cindy was frightened by Peter's behavior then. This event could have possibly happened on June 9th, she stated, but she doesn’t specifically remember the date.

June 9, 1975, the exact date of the new moon that month, was the last day that Peter was presumed to have been seen alive (by Doug Scott) before he disappeared, and it was presumed by the WV State Police that June 9th was his earliest assumed death day based on no confirmed live sightings of Peter on June 9th or thereafter. Peter may have disappeared from his house and property as early as the night of June 8th.

Trooper Shaffer again visited Peter’s house on June 10, and again did not find Peter there but still finding the back door unlocked and the house lights on. They apparently never went inside to investigate further then. Strange!

On June 11 the WV State Police finally entered Peter’s house for an inspection, led by Corporal D. A. Burner. By 3:00 p.m. they discovered a typewritten document, reportedly first discovered earlier that day by cavers Fred and Jerry Kyle, lying on Peter’s kitchen table. This document contained a “confession” to the murder of Walter Smith, a description of where to find Walter’s body, and a “Last Will and Testament” for Peter describing how his estate was to be distributed. A copy of this two-page document was consulted for pertinent story information, but the document itself was withheld from this story at the request of Ellen Snyder. A copy of this document was obtained from Jack Speece, who received it in July 1993 from Peter’s sister Lisa Hauer, who in turn obtained it before then from Sergeant Robert Alkire of the Buckeye WV State Police office.

Ellen Snyder and Lisa Hauer, two of the most knowledgeable persons who got to inspect the document, both state that Peter indeed composed, typed, and signed it, making it genuine. Henry also personally confirms that Peter signed it, after comparison to his signature on his old letters, but strangely with a much larger signature than was normal for him. Also there were not many typos or other errors in his typed document.

In his document Peter meticulously lists what intended heirs were to receive his various possessions, but in hindsight not everything was distributed according to his last wishes. Interestingly, Peter indicates that whomever got his chickens should not eat them, maintaining his love of animals to the last. Peter indicated that his pistol, which he referred to as his Walter Smith murder weapon, had already been “thrown away” by him; it was only discovered many years later, hidden under a rock in the stream (Cave Run) near his house, where it was found in the 1980s by children of a family renting his old house, probably the Cutlips.

Peter states in his document that Walter “did not suffer” (maybe implying that he was not tortured before or as he was being killed). He specifically indicates where he had buried Walter’s body, under a pile of rocks inside his Lobelia Saltpeter Cave, and he expressed his heartfelt sorrow for the murder he committed. Peter only offers hints concerning his motive for murder. He indicated that Walter was “in the wrong place at the wrong time,” and that Peter himself was admittedly “mentally sick,” even implying “over years.” He even stated that “Fantasy of the evil kind has become my reality.” To this day we still don’t know what Peter meant by these comments, but scenario guesses can be ventured.

Peter also indicated he would be punishing himself for his sin by committing suicide, stating “I take my own life,” and “I remove myself from this existence.” He said “My body will eventually be found in a cave in the nearby hills.” He also stated that “I fear not death,” and that he believed in “neither heaven nor hell,” but in the “eternal form” as “one consciousness.” Whew! May we older caver friends and colleagues of Peter all meet with him again, in the hereafter?

**Discovery of Walter Smith’s Body**

The State Police then assumed Peter was guilty based on his document, and on Wednesday June 11th they put out a call for help from WV cavers to search for Walter and Peter in local caves. This search began in Lobelia Saltpeter Cave, located on Peter’s farm about 200 yards behind (southwest of) and uphill from Peter’s old farm house. The search
quickly turned up Walter’s body at about 7:20 p.m. The search, led by Jerry Kyle, was conducted by southern West Virginia cavers Ed and Reggie Swepston; Fred, Debbie, and Jerry Kyle; and Dudly Bare. Walter’s nude body was found by Ed on the right side of a cave room about 50 to 100 feet inside from the cave entrance. Ed used a little-known principle of forensic geology to help make his discovery. He was tipped off by seeing a pile of cave breakdown rocks (cobbles and boulders) which did not have the right natural black manganese dioxide top coating, indicating that they had recently been turned over. Being suspicious, Ed moved aside some of these rocks, revealing Walter’s lower legs!

According to the two State Police reports referenced below, after Walter was killed but before his cave burial, Walter’s head had been wrapped with a piece of wool blanket from Wilson College, and his head and upper body had been wrapped in black plastic. Also, the blanket and plastic had been secured using two pieces of baling wire wrapped around his neck and rope securely wrapped around his chest, supposedly to absorb blood from the ghastly gunshot wounds.

Walter had been shot three times with a .25 caliber pistol, twice in the head above each eyebrow, and once in the neck. Peter was known to have purchased a .25 caliber pistol with ammunition in Dec. 1974 when he had “feared for his life.” Walter’s body showed no signs of ritual mutilation, but he had been rectally sodomized or raped, probably prior to his death, according to the West Virginia University (in Morgantown WV) medical autopsy report, as summarized in the official WV State Police report.

Also on June 11, samples of the same materials found on Walter’s body were discovered by the police in or near Peter’s house, and cavers reported to police that the piece of wool blanket used to wrap Walter’s body also came from Peter’s house. Also found in that house then were Peter’s recently worn dirty blue jeans and T-shirt, both stained with dirt and apparently Walter’s blood on their back sides. However, no blood analysis was apparently done by the police. The official police report indicates time of death for Walter was after 9:30 p.m. on Wednesday, June 4, 1975. The official report motive for Walter’s killing was “sexual gratification, and possible use of drugs,” in reference to Peter Hauer, alias of “Pete,” the only “accused” person listed. That WV State Police report is dated Nov. 21, 1975, number L-1125, and authored by Trooper C. R. Shaffer of unit 539, Marlinton (actually Buckeye) WV.

Also, the second State Police report dated Dec. 5, 1975, number L-1126, authored by Corporal W. R. Dyer of unit 84 of the Marlinton (Buckeye) WV office, shows more gruesome details of the death scenario for the murder victim. Their hypothesized scenario is that the victim (Walter) and the accused (Peter) had been drinking together the night of June 4 at the home of a friend and neighbor of Peter’s (Dennis Slifer, as Dennis reports separately). Dennis indicates that he was likely the last person to see Walter alive, other than Peter himself, and that Walter and Peter arrived at his rented house on Bruffey Creek Road (route 29/2) between 7:30 and 8:00 p.m. and left his house about 9:00 p.m., driving off in Peter’s Volkswagen car. Dennis also states that the three of them were not partying (doing drugs) but were drinking beer while Walter and Peter visited him; the beer drinking was documented in a separate interview that Dennis had with the FBI, in Lexington VA, on July 29, 1975.

The second WV State Police report has speculation that Walter and Peter drove back to Peter’s house, where Peter raped Walter. It further speculates that Peter first shot Walter in his neck with his .25 caliber revolver, causing Walter to become unconscious, and then shot Walter twice into his forehead to kill him. Finally, the report speculates that Peter partially wrapped up Walter’s body, drug him to his cave (using the rope tied to his chest), and buried him there under cave floor rocks.

These WV State Police reports also indicate that a few items belonging to Walter had disappeared and were never recovered later. These were his clothes (blue bib overalls, red flannel shirt), white tennis shoes, gold wire rimmed glasses, wrist watch, and lemon colored 10-speed 28-inch Schwinn bicycle.

A phone conversation on Feb. 15, 2018 with Jaynell Graham, editor of The Pocahontas Times weekly newspaper in Marlinton WV, indicated that Walter’s missing bicycle had still not been found. One rumor is that it was hidden in a small local cave passage. Another rumor, Jaynell said, is that it was hidden in a hole over which the new fireplace was constructed at a new house construction site of Boyd Thompson, a neighboring farm owner to Peter’s farm along the south side of Lobelia Road, Route 29/1.

Lisa Hauer, reporting in her July 8, 1993 letter to Jack Speece, says that the police interviewed a woman (unnamed, date unknown) who said she
witnessed a yellow Schwinn bicycle being buried in that fireplace construction hole, but that the police had insufficient probable cause to destroy that fireplace to search for that bicycle. No written or typed copy of that interview has been discovered.

In an interesting phone conversation with Henry on July 1, 2018, Donna Walton Fowler stated that during a local school bus ride when she was a young girl, she was told the fate of Walter’s missing bicycle! On that school bus ride, DeWitt Thompson, a stepson of Boyd Thompson, said that Boyd had buried that bicycle behind the fireplace of his newly constructed house on Lobelia Road. Was that a true confession against Boyd, or just idol schoolboy gossip? To this day many local persons in the Lobelia – Hillsboro area still believe this rumor.

Manhunt for Peter

William Smith grew increasingly impatient with the police search for his son’s (Walter’s) killer, and complained to then governor Arch Moore for more help with that search, reports Richard Dale. Moore then called up the WV National Guard troops out of Richwood WV to join in that search.

They were part of the massive local manhunt for Peter that ensued on June 11th. Conducting the search within WV were at least 125 persons over various times, mostly cavers, with about 80 persons looking during the search’s peak; many WV State Police troopers led by seasoned Corporal W. R. Dyer of the Marlinton (Buckeye) WV detachment; about 20 – 30 West Virginia National Guard persons out of Richwood WV; and a few to 10 WV Department of Natural Resources conservation officers. Ed Swepston, Chuck Hempel, and other caver friends of Peter spearheaded the cavers’ search. The searchers included the “Freundshaft”, a mysterious term used by Bobbi Nagy in her undated 2002-2003 letter to caver Paul Steward, apparently describing a group of close friends of Peter. Also among the searchers were a reported 28 members of the Follansbee WV Hunting Club, which Walter’s father William Smith belonged to; they arrived on trucks with at least six four-wheelers (ATVs), searching many places on their ATVs.

The FBI also officially entered the search on June 18, by invitation of the WV State Police and Pocahontas County Prosecutor Eugene Simmons, after U.S. Magistrate Paul Fourney issued a “fugitive from justice warrant.” Peter could have committed the murder and then fled to other states, hence the FBI participation. The FBI and other police in June and July 1975 did extensive interviews of scores of WV persons, and Donna Walton Fowler states that many FBI agents arrived on horseback to the Lobelia area to question local residents and search for Peter.

The FBI also did an extensive nation-wide manhunt for Peter, involving special agents from over a dozen offices throughout the U.S. Thanks to Roland Vinyard, many printed summaries of the FBI interviews were obtained for inspection, although names of interviewees were redacted. In the FBI bulletin Peter was described as having “long hair, beard, 5’10”, 160 lb, green eyes, glasses…,” also warning they considered Peter “armed and dangerous!” Gulp!

One of the persons interviewed by the WV State Police and later by the FBI was Dennis Slifer, a caving buddy of Peter who then resided on Bruffey Creek Road (route 29/2) near (north of) Peter’s property. Dennis happened to be the last known person, other than Peter, to see Walter Smith alive. Dennis reports he had lived in four different houses near Lobelia, first in Peter’s house for a few months in 1973; second, in one of the local communes for a while; third, with another family; and finally in his rented Bruffey Creek Road farm house from 1974 to June 1975.

Dennis had, coincidently, left his last rented house twice on trips out of state to his new house in Lexington, VA. One such trip was on June 5th, one day after Smith’s murder (that was unbeknownst to him or others then), and the other trip was on June 12th, one day after the police discovery of the Walter Smith murder (of which Dennis was not then aware). This combination of coincidental circumstances made the police suspicious, and Corporal Dyer searched Dennis’s house on June 14th when Dennis was in VA, and became more suspicious after finding blood stains on a chair and bullet holes in some walls. The stains turned out to be just dog blood, as Dennis later stated (from an injured dog paw of his Irish Setter), and as a police lab analysis of the blood confirmed. The police even drained Dennis’s pond looking for crime evidence (missing items), finding nothing. On June 15th Dennis was interviewed by Trooper Shaffer at his Lexington VA home.

During the process of cavers converging on Peter’s property in mid-June to aid in the search for Peter, suspicions were evident by some cavers regarding other fellow cavers about their suspected (imagined)
involvement in Walter Smith’s murder, Peter’s disappearance, and the disappearance of crime evidence. This is evident from police interview statements and personal letters. One caver friend of Peter (name withheld here) mentioned he/she felt lucky to still be alive and not falsely imprisoned, after all of the accusations and police and FBI investigations related to the Peter Hauer case. Henry will not comment further of these suspicions – too much information!

During 1975 or shortly thereafter, a few other unnamed or anonymous persons started their own personal investigations into the Walter Smith – Peter Hauer story, looking for additional evidence and interviewing local Lobelia area residents including other cavers. They were reportedly warned away from Lobelia by some local residents as tensions were running high then. For example, VA caver Bill Biggers relates that he and an anonymous caver friend of his were threatened and warned away, and that his caver friend to this day is still fearful of incarceration if he speaks up about this case. It is likely that this caver friend is the same unnamed afraid person Henry is aware of, referenced in the preceding paragraph.

Next described are five additional accounts of interview encounters by the FBI, police agencies, and a sheriff of specific persons of interest; these are just a few of the probably scores of interview accounts conducted nationwide.

In late June FBI agents tracked down cavers, especially WV cavers, at the 1975 NSS National Convention in Angel’s Camp of Frogtown, CA, after a reported rumor that Ellen Snyder was seen with Peter at that convention. The FBI was also searching for Dennis Slifer, another particular caver person of interest there, reports Chuck Hempel. Those FBI agents talked with dozens of cavers in Angel’s Camp at Frogtown, including Albert Ogden, who reports that he was sitting with his then girlfriend Sandy Flint and a group of Texas cavers around their campfire at night, when two well-dressed agents came walking over the nearby hill and confronted him. They accused Albert of harboring Peter in Sandy’s car! Albert was indignant, and pointed out that they couldn’t possibly be hiding Peter in the car, a Volkswagen Beetle, as it was packed to the ceiling! The agents checked the car briefly anyway.

Susie Rock, another WV caver, was also sought out at her aunt’s home in Charleston WV. Susie reports that the FBI staked out her house for several days, before confronting her aunt, who was very suspicious of them. Only later did the FBI find and interview Susie at the Angel’s Camp NSS Convention in CA.

In late June or July 1975 Ellen Snyder and her then boyfriend Keith Kirk were sought out by the FBI and local police, with Ellen being especially a person of police interest as Peter’s ex-girlfriend. In a twist of fate, this search resulted in the temporary arrest of Keith Kirk for murder! Keith and Ellen were then living in an apartment in Ambridge PA, while Keith worked at the Coraopolis PA firm of Chester Engineering. First the Auxiliary Police from Ambridge (as neighbors reported to Ellen later) surrounded their apartment building and hunkered down with guns drawn! Then an FBI agent and the Ambridge Chief of Police George Carriers visited Ellen at the apartment (while Keith was gone at work), searched it, interviewed her, then left; they were searching for Peter and suspected he was there with her. While they searched the Chief became suspicious when he saw a photo of Keith, who superficially looked similar to Peter.

Later that evening reports Ellen, she and Keith visited the local stream swimming hole in Big Sewickley Creek, PA, where Keith demonstrated how to do Eskimo rolls underwater with his kayak, impressing local children there. Keith was just completing one such roll when he popped up out of the water with great surprise. To Keith’s amazement he saw that five or six Ambridge policemen had also just popped up from vegetation surrounding the pool, with rifles aimed at him, yelling for him to “get out of the water now!” The police did not believe Keith’s ID card, grabbed him dripping wet, having been allowed no towel and no clothes to change into, and shoved him into their police car. As this was occurring, Ellen reports she was screaming “He’s not Peter! He’s not the man you want!” Then as one of the cops threw his loaded gun into the car trunk, it discharged, bam! At the Ambridge police station, a gun was held to Keith’s head as they questioned him, trying to coerce him to admit he was Peter! The investigating FBI agent by phone had to demand that they release Keith; he wasn’t their man! They ordered him to “not leave town”, but Keith did anyway the next day on a business trip.

The fourth FBI event reported here involved Dennis Slifer and his wife, who were interviewed a few times by an FBI agent and Rockbridge County (Lexington, VA) Sheriff William Chittum, in June and July 1975. As described above, Dennis had coincidently traveled twice from the Lobelia area to
Lexington VA where he bought his new house in early June. He had then gone on vacation to Nova Scotia later in June. The FBI and the Sheriff got both Dennis’s and his wife’s story information in separate interviews, and confirmed that they hadn’t smuggled Peter to VA or Nova Scotia!

The fifth FBI event reported involved William B. White (Will), a professor at Penn State University, who was interviewed on Sept. 16, 1975, at his faculty office. Will knew Peter on a professional speleologist basis. Will reported that he had last seen Peter on the first weekend of May 1975, when he had brought his karst geology class of 25 students to visit Peter’s farm and his Lobelia Saltpeter Cave. He reported that Peter was in good humor, and he had even given a lecture to Will’s class then.

The search for Peter, by cavers, police, national guardsmen, the FBI, and WV DNR agents, included checking out woods and at least 10 local caves and pits near Lobelia Road and on the vicinity of Droop Mountain, including Boyd Thompson’s Cave, as Peter stated in his confession note that he would be committing suicide inside a cave.

One such search involved Peter’s Lobelia Saltpeter Cave, right after Walter’s body was found, when Ed Swepton and Chuck Hempel, each separately, led two parties of DNR agents on an extensive search along separate cave paths. Ed reports that his party was moving around a cave passage loop when they spotted another light ahead; was that Peter? With guns drawn by the DNR agents they approached, only to encounter Chuck’s party. Luckily there was no shootout! However, the extensive cave searches never revealed Peter’s body, dead or alive. Also, Walter Smith’s bicycle was extensively searched for, including diving in a few local ponds, but was never found. Could Walter’s murderer have stolen and escaped on that bicycle?

Meanwhile, various hysterical rumors circulated about the fate of Peter, including that he was an innocent victim and had been framed for Walter Smith’s murder. The British Caver newsletter of Aug., 1976 even reported the speculation that Peter had been kidnapped by a “hippie coven hiding out in the nearby thick forest and would be sacrificed and eaten at the next full moon!” Alternatively, some cavers were reportedly concerned about Peter’s safety, assuming he was still alive, but kidnapped and framed for Walter’s murder, and that they had to find him before the summer solstice (June 21st) when he could possibly become sacrificed. Yet another wild rumor by locals was that the “kidnapped” Peter would be sacrificed at the next full moon, which was to be on June 23rd.

Is it a coincidence that Peter died apparently on June 9th, the exact date of the new moon that month? Had Peter’s death, by his own hand or by others, been planned as a ritual for then? The actual new moon peak occurred at ~6 p.m. that day. In the June 14, 1975 issue of The Charleston Gazette, reporter Andrew Gallagher reports that “Police quoted a neighbor of Hauer’s that there was some kind of ritual nearby at 12:45 a.m. June 9th at the rising of a new moon.” That neighbor was not named. Peter had disappeared from his house that same day, or maybe the night of June 8th; could he have died at this new-moon ritual, or a potential follow-up one on the next night?

The Discovery of Peter’s Body and Mystery of His Death

Over five and one-half months passed since early June, and Peter was still not found, until a grisly discovery made during deer hunting season about 1:00 p.m. on Nov. 27, 1975, Thanksgiving Day, as detailed in the WV State Police report dated Dec. 5, 1975. A deer-hunting party composed of a father (Samuel Dean, a cook at the Denmar State Hospital, age 51) and his son (Larkin Dean, age 11), stumbled on a death scene as they stopped for lunch above Bruffey Creek near a ridge top on or near Viney Mountain, reportedly at “Buzzards Knob”, about 1-2 miles north of Peter’s farm house. The name “Buzzards Knob” is apparently a local name, possibly named after the WV Buzzard family, but it does not appear labeled on any topographic map, and several local residents consulted had not heard of it.

At the base of a tree were scattered bones of a decayed headless skeleton; hanging in a noose at the end of a rope tied to a tree branch, Larkin Dean discovered the body’s decayed head and upper spine “swinging in the breeze” with shreds of clothing attached. Samuel Dean said he finally figured out that the upper swinging object was a human head, when he saw the exposed white teeth. Sam and Larkin Dean then went home and called the Marlinton (Buckeye) detachment of the WV State Police with news of their discovery. Before the police showed up that afternoon, Eugene (Groundhog) Dean (not a direct relation to Sam and Larkin Dean) also arrived at this site independently while deer hunting, reports Robin Walton (his
girlfriend), Jimmy Smith, Larry Dean, and Eugene Dean himself.

Corporal C. R. Dyer and Trooper E. V. Boylan of the WV State Police arrived at the death scene with other persons and the two Dean families, including Sam Dean and Larry Dean (older brother of Larkin Dean), and also Eugene Dean and his brother Tucker Dean, at about 3:30 p.m. that day, Nov. 27th. They did a several-hours investigation there, lasting until after dark, with Dyer in charge. They strongly suspected they had discovered Peter Hauer’s missing body!

Accompanying the police and Dean families then was Shirley Kessler, a state police secretary, reports Larry Dean. Also present were undertaker James (Jimmy) Smith and another employee (unnamed, now deceased) of the Van Reenen Funeral Home in Marlinton, who drove their ambulance, following the state police car and the Deans’ vehicles north along John Wymer Road (route 29/7) from Lobelia Road (route 29/1) to the top of Viney Mountain, reports Jimmy Smith.

Trooper Boylan took 10 black-and-white police photos of the hanging tree scene and the body parts. Henry Rauch eventually got glossy paper copies of these photos made from the original negatives from the WV State Police Records Division in South Charleston with the help of Melinda Craddock there, after going through an extensive search for Peter Hauer’s closest living relatives for permission.

The first five of these photos show a dead large black locust tree trunk, broken and leaning against two small-to-medium-sized white ash trees, one of which is the hanging tree. Visible on that hanging tree is the manila (hemp) three-strand braided rope, about one-half inch in diameter, with what appears to be an animal-type halter loop tied to a steeply up-sloping branch. The vertical length of that rope is short, only about three feet. These five photos also show the hanging head with its dangling upper spine wrapped in a pullover sweater. Also, pictured in the second set of five photos is a nearby farmer’s box wire and top barbed wire fence attached to locust posts; some of these fence photos also show Peter’s skeletal bones and skin hide scattered across the ground.

Jimmy Smith still works for the Van Reenen Funeral Home, where Henry first spoke to him by phone, the first of three phone conversations. Jimmy said that Trooper Boylan first tried to retrieve the swinging head and upper spine from the hanging rope by shooting it, like in a wild-west movie! He emptied his revolver, but missed hitting that rope. Therefore Jimmy had to climb up the dead leaning black locust tree to reach the rope in the nearby hanging tree, cut it, and lower the human remains to the ground as he climbed down.

It then took several hours, lasting into the dark of night, to search the ground and gather up the human bones and hide, along with clothing and other possessions of the deceased person. Clothes found suspended in trees, as shown in some of the police photos, included a pair of blue jean pants, white articles (maybe underwear), and a pullover sweater; the head and upper spine were found wrapped around the hanging rope by that sweater. In the jeans pocket was found a mysterious folded paper map. On the ground were found a pair of boots at the base of the dead locust tree, several feet from the hanging tree, and a pocket knife. No glasses were ever found. Some of the human bones were found scattered across the ground, as if animals had dragged them.

It was concluded by the police that the remains were those of Peter Hauer, and that he had committed suicide by hanging himself. The remains and other articles were gathered onto a gurney and carried a few hundred feet upslope to the waiting ambulance in the field by the police and civilians; this exercise reportedly exhausted Corporal Dyer, reports Jimmy Smith. The human remains were then transported back to Marlinton to the Van Reenen Funeral Home.

The next day, on the afternoon of Friday Nov. 28th, Jimmy Smith and a co-employee drove the ambulance with the human remains to State Medical Examiner Dr. Ivan Sopher in South Charleston WV for identification, after Pocahontas Prosecuting Attorney Eugene Simmons had made prior arrangements for that trip. Dr. Sopher quickly (by 4:00 p.m.) identified those remains as belonging to Peter Hauer, based on the color of his hair, and on dental and skull X-ray records that accompanied the delivered remains.

The boy Larkin Dean was reportedly so badly scared on the Nov. 27th day of the hanging tree discovery that he couldn’t sleep that night. He had known Peter and Ellen, having hung around their place frequently, and he knew the discovered body was that of Peter Hauer, even before the pathologic identification, because he recognized Peter’s boots lying on the ground, reports Ellen Snyder, based on a subsequent conversation with him. These boots were found upright at the base of the dead leaning black locust tree, reports Jimmy Smith, implying
that Peter had taken them off before climbing that tree to hang himself. Even now Larkin is reluctant to discuss this lingering traumatic incident, according to his current girlfriend, Sarah Parker. That incident reportedly continues to severely impact Larkin’s life, even presently, reports Sarah and Larkin’s brother Larry Dean.

Peter’s hanging tree was apparently discovered before Thanksgiving Day 1975 when Peter was still hanging in it, during the late summer or early fall when leaves were still on the trees, reports William (Bill) Wimer, who lives within one mile of that tree along Lobelia Road; he currently owns the Viney Mountain farm along John Wymer Road where the hanging tree is believed to be located. This story involves Bill’s father, farmer K.K. (Krellion) Wimer, who used to own that farm, along John Wymer Road off of Lobelia Road. K.K. related to Bill that he was looking for his lost sheep one day, not far from his sheep shed on Viney Mountain, and walked over to where buzzards (turkey vultures) were circling overhead. He didn’t find any dead sheep there, but if he had looked up (in hindsight), he reportedly would have been the first person to discover Peter’s body, still hanging from the tree, and maybe being eaten by those buzzards!

Strange Anomalies with Peter’s Bones

A controversy occurred when Peter’s skull was first examined on Nov. 27th at the hanging tree site. Corporal Dyer at first thought there was evidence of foul play when an apparent skull fracture was evident, and some cavers present thought they saw a bullet hole there. Another policeman thought he instead saw a woodpecker hole. Had Trooper Boylan accidently shot Peter in the head while trying to shoot down the hanging rope? Medical Examiner Dr. Sopher later identified the skull anomaly as simply a natural bone growth line, during his forensic examination.

State Police sergeant Robert Alkire had verbally told Peter’s sister Lisa Hauer, as reported in her letter to Jack Speece dated July 8, 1993, that two of Peter’s right leg skeleton bones (probably the tibia and fibula) had been found broken; perhaps this was caused by the impact of his decaying body finally falling to the ground from the hanging tree. If his leg was broken prior to his hanging, Peter could not possibly have climbed up that tree to commit suicide by hanging. Henry has not had access to the Medical Examiner’s forensic report to confirm details about Peter’s bones.

Hanging Tree Scene Mysteries

The only possessions found with Peter’s skeleton were his boots lying on the ground, remnants of a pullover sweater still caught in the hanging tree rope, his blue jeans and other clothes hanging from other tree branches, and his pocket knife lying on the ground. Also found on Peter’s body was a mysterious hand-drawn paper map of some sort. His wire rimmed glasses were missing and apparently never found later. Peter’s wallet, containing about $40, had earlier been found in the desk in his house.

One mystery was why Peter was wearing a sweater during the normally warm month of June. A check of the weather records, at the U.S. NOAA web site for June 1975 at Buckeye WV, revealed that the nights of June 9th and 10th were abnormally cold, 42 deg. F on June 9th (coldest night of the month) and 45 deg. F on June 10th (third coldest night of the month); on both days the daily high temperature was 74 deg. F. On Viney Mountain the temperatures should have been colder, given its high elevation of ~3,600 feet versus ~2,100 feet for Buckeye. No daily weather records are available for June 1975 for Lobelia, and Buckeye is the closest available weather records site for that month. In conclusion it makes sense that Peter was wearing his sweater then, assuming he was hanged on June 9th.

Bobbi Nagy, a caver who knew Peter well, reported in her letter of Sept. 30, 2003, addressed to Paul Steward, that she had talked with an unnamed WV State Police sergeant in his office after Peter had been found. That sergeant stated to her that he was sure Peter was still alive and struggling after initially hanging from the tree rope noose, based on forensic evidence (residual nose cartilage, and sweater sleeve caught in the rope) that they found at the scene. The rope did not contain the classic hangman’s noose design. That information was not made public and not included in the State Police final report. However Peter still had his pocket knife on him while hanging and yet apparently made no effort to cut his rope then. Sadly, Bobbi Nagy later died by committing suicide on Sept. 19, 2014, allowing herself to be decapitated by a train in Mexico where she had moved from Franklin, WV a few years earlier.

Hanging Tree Location Searches

James (Jimmy) Smith, one of two ambulance attendants from the Van Reenen Funeral Home in
Marlinton, who accompanied the State Police officers and others to the hanging tree site on Nov. 27, 1975, indicated to Henry the route he traveled to reach the hanging tree. He first drove west from Marlinton to Hillsboro, then west along Lobelia Road (Route 29/1), then north on John Wymer Road (Route 29/7) to the proximity of Viney Mountain where that road ends. Jimmy said that the walk from their vehicles to the hanging tree was “not far,” and that Peter’s hanging rope was located 4-5 feet out on a tree branch, ~20 feet above the ground.

Also Bill Wimer, owner of a Viney Mountain farm, stated that the hanging tree was located about 200 - 250 yards from one of their old family farm barns, located near the extension of John Wymer Road, and on the top west side of Viney Mountain. Robert (Bob) Wymer, whose parents once owned an adjacent farm to the Wimers’ on Viney Mountain, confirmed this tree site description. Robert Wymer is not a direct relation of Bill Wimer.

Based on the tree-site descriptions by Bill Wimer and Bob Wymer, Henry and his posse of other persons traveled to the Viney Mountain site on Friday May 11, 2018 to search for the hanging tree. The posse was composed of Roland Vinyard, George Phillips, Chris Nicola, Bob Wymer, and later Bill Wimer. The first persons are three seasoned cavers; Bob is a former resident of the Wymer farm on Viney Mountain (now owned by Norman Walker); and Bill is the current owner of the Wimer farm there. Bob and later Bill led our group to where they thought the hanging tree was located, but neither person had actually seen the hanging tree before.

An extensive seven-hour search of woods fringing the hay farm fields near the top of Viney Mountain did not reveal the hanging tree site. Our search was concentrated along the west side of Viney Mountain, at the former location of one old Wimer barn with a still-standing white concrete silo. Many hundreds of feet of woods line were searched, with Henry’s five photocopied sets of the 1975 police photos (showing the hanging tree and nearby fence) in hand. This search even penetrated down-slope a couple of hundred feet into the woods.

Our most interesting encounter that day occurred during our return vehicle convey trip down Viney Mountain along John Wymer Road in the dark, about 9 p.m., when we encountered a parked pickup truck that had been coming up that road with two women standing by it. One woman (unnamed) was crying that her son was lost on Viney Mountain on a dirt bike excursion; he was later found, having returned safely by the next day. The other woman was Sarah Parker, girlfriend of Larkin Dean. An informative conversation then ensued about Larkin and his family. We learned then that Larkin’s sister Linda Dean is or was married to Jacob Beard, an infamous character who is described later in this story in relation to the Rainbow Girls’ murder case of 1980.

George Phillips later continued to search with other friends for the hanging tree on several days in late May 2018 on Viney Mountain, still without success.

Henry led another search for the hanging tree on Aug. 31, 2018, with another posse group, based on information supplied by Jimmy Smith to Henry and George Phillips several months earlier. Henry’s group consisted of Jimmy Smith, and cavers George Phillips, Ed Swepston, and Harold (Rocky) Parsons. We concentrated our search mostly along the southern upper side of Viney Mountain then, with police photo prints in hand, but again could not locate the hanging tree site.

We had pleasant weather for that search, and the Wimer farm hay fields had been recently cut, allowing greater ease of vehicular travel over the mountain top, accompanied by an armada of airborne dragonflies. We then met and had an informative conversation with Larry Dean, an older brother of Larkin Dean, who had just finished cutting the upper Viney Mountain hay field. Larry firmly believes that Peter Hauer was an innocent victim, and that neighbor Boyd Thompson had Walter Smith murdered and had framed Peter for that crime, and then later killed Peter and composed a suicide-by-hanging scene.

Jimmy next introduced us to Eugene (Groundhog) Dean, at his house along Lobelia Road near Hillsboro. Eugene entertained us (George, Jimmy, and Henry) with his tales then.

The exact site of the hanging tree remains unknown, but is believed to be somewhere on Viney Mountain, north of Lobelia Road. In fact that tree may not even still exist. That tree appears to be a white ash, from the police photos, and such trees normally have a high mortality rate due to the Emerald Ash Borer (an invasive beetle). However, as of summer 2018, white ash trees are plentiful on Viney Mountain, and even commonly exceed 1 foot in diameter. Perhaps the high elevation of upper Viney Mountain (3,400 to 3,700 feet) creates a type of Shangri-La, protective of its ash trees.
The hanging tree was thought to have been destroyed by timbering, blowdown, or disease in the 1980s, reports Larry Dean and Eugene Dean, during Henry’s posse tree-searching trip of Aug. 31, 2018. Therefore no more searches for the hanging tree are anticipated, and it most likely will remain a mystery forever in time.

**Memorial Services for Peter**

After Peter’s bones were collected, and examined by State Chief Medical Examiner Ivan Sopher for his official autopsy report, they were cremated. On Saturday Dec. 13, 1975 a ceremonial procession of 40 to 50 of Peter’s caving friends and neighbors solemnly trudged up the sloping meadow high on Peter’s farm, stones in hand. They first buried his ashes in a pre-dug hole on the site where Peter had dreamed of building his future home; then each person placed his/her stone in the hole to mark his grave. Caver Jack Speece, a close friend of Peter, then gave a farewell and memoriamation statement there.

Later on Dec. 13th, a memorial service was held at the Van Reenen Funeral Home in nearby Marlinton, with the eulogy given by Jack Speece at Peter’s mother’s invitation; additional farewell statements were also given by cavers Bobbi Nagi and John Tichenor. Many caver friends and neighbors of Peter attended that service.

Undertaker Jimmy Smith relates that in addition to the 1975 funeral services for Walter Smith and Peter Hauer, deceased cavers have been a good business for the Van Reenen Funeral Home over the years. He stated that about half of the accidental cave death cases for cavers in his geographic area have been handled by that business!

**Murder-Suicide Theory for the Deaths of Walter Smith and Peter Hauer**

The official WV State Police report dealing with Peter Hauer’s case is dated Dec. 5, 1975, number L-1126, composed by Corporal W. R. Dyer, of unit 84, Marlinton, WV. According to that report, Peter, alias “Pete”, raped and murdered Walter Smith. Peter was born on Nov. 11, 1945, but his official death date is “not known”, but presumed to be on or about Monday, June 9, 1975. Suspects listed for Peter’s death are “none,” as the police assumed Peter hung himself. The listed motive for his death is “mental illness.” This publically available portion of the police report does not include the “last will and testament” and “confession note” document by Peter, nor the forensic autopsy report by Doctor Ivan Sopher (Chief Medical Examiner for WV in Charleston), nor the many police photos. However, as already noted, Peter’s document was obtained indirectly and is described in this story.

Case closed? Only for the WV State Police and the FBI. To this day there are two general theories regarding the deaths of Walter and Peter, one by the police that it was a murder-suicide, and the other a double murder. The police theory of murder-suicide is that Peter committed the murder of Walter, after either a surprise encounter or planned encounter with Walter, when Peter was in a distraught mood. The distraught mood theory is speculated by some to have been from drinking too much alcohol, a bad drug trip that created paranoia with Peter, and/or a mental disorder condition in Peter; the latter explanation was suggested, Ellen and Jack report, because of some of mental disorders noted in at least one of Peter’s close family members (details omitted here). Another version of the murder-suicide theory is that it involved a homosexual suicide pact.

Peter was reportedly paranoid and volatile in 1974-1975, and had acquired a used .25 caliber Titan pistol with a pearl-white handle, and ammunition for it, in December 1974. This gun was in addition to a shotgun Peter owned, and a .22 caliber Winchester rifle from Ellen’s grandfather, who had worked for Winchester in Connecticut; that rifle had been on hand for varmint hunting on Peter’s farm. By coincidence, the man Peter had purchased the hand gun from (name withheld here) died at the Marlinton hospital shortly after the gun sale; prior gun ownership history is detailed in the State Police report.

Chuck Hempel reports that shortly after Walter Smith’s body was found in the cave, he searched under Peter’s house porch and found several .22 and .25 cartridge shell casings. Could these have been fired from Peter’s gun and Ellen’s rifle?

Another caver (unnamed) said that Peter had been thrown out of a local Pocahontas County Bluegrass music festival held May 24th and 25th 1975 after acting exuberant and causing a scene. Also some of Peter’s farm animals had been tortured and killed (as described later), which of course additionally made Peter jumpy, and thus caused him to purchase the .25 caliper pistol.

Also, Ellen reports that Peter had mentioned to her by phone, sometime before June 1975, that he had finally found his favorite natural place in the forest.
of the Droop Mountain general area, not very far from his house. Could this place have contained his later-selected hanging tree spot?

Another fact implicating Peter, stated in State Police report L-1126, is that WV State Trooper C. R. Shaffer claimed to have encountered Peter riding Walter’s bicycle at the intersection of State Route 39 and the Briery Knob road, about 1:30 p.m. on Saturday June 7, 2 ½ days after Walter was later presumed murdered but prior to discovery of Walter’s body. Could this be a case of mistaken identity? The trooper had never previously met Peter, and later in hindsight thought he had seen Peter on that bike after talking to locals to learn Peter’s description.

Ellen Snyder’s theory is one of accidental murder of Walter by Peter. By this theory, Peter and Walter first returned to Peter’s house after a visit with Dennis Slifer at his house in the evening of June 4th. Then Walter could have left Peter to visit somewhere else where he was raped, and afterwards tried to visit with Peter again later that night; Peter then could have mistaken Walter in the dark for the vengeful neighboring Tommy McNeill, assuming that he had been recently released from the Weston WV mental institution where he had been convicted of torturing and killing some of Peter’s farm animals (as explained later), and shot him. His actual release date is unknown.

Laurie Cameron, a friend of Peter, has a similar theory of accidental murder of Walter by Peter, involving Peter being first startled by a sudden encounter with Walter that seemed threatening to Peter. Laurie explained that he once had a similar experience, almost having killed a French lifeguard trying to save him in an ocean rip current while swimming, thinking initially that the lifeguard was trying to drown him. Laurie also said that Elaine Buck, a then Penn State University student caver and amateur psychologist, had a similar theory, involving Peter having had a startling unexpected encounter with Walter.

Double-Murder Theories for the Deaths of Walter Smith and Peter Hauer

Many caver friends of Peter believe that some other party committed the rape and murder of Walter Smith, framed Peter for it by first hiding Walter’s body in Peter’s cave, then preparing the false typed and signed documents or else forcing Peter to do that, followed by holding Peter captive for a while, killing Peter, and then making it appear Peter had committed suicide by hanging himself. To support this alternate theory, the typewritten document that Peter apparently prepared was a little sloppy in its format, and apparently not compatible with Peter’s college education and writing experience. Peter’s signature was also a bit shaky, and larger than normal. Also, on page 2 of Peter’s document, he states “I hope my mountaineer old time friends will forgive me.” Some caver friends question his use of the word “mountaineer” instead of “caver”, but he could have been referring to his WV (mountain state) friends.

Also, why would Peter go to the trouble of hiding Walter’s body, and hiding the murder weapon as well as Walter’s bicycle and clothes, but then afterwards confess to his murder anyway? Also, why would Peter say he would kill himself in a cave, but instead die by hanging? Peter had also reportedly prepared and mailed out three letters to other colleagues the day he disappeared on June 9th, apparently indicating planned future activities with them. He also may have been seen by neighbor Doug Scott tending to his garden that day, an activity associated with looking forward to future harvests. Also, why would Peter have bought and left bags of groceries on his kitchen table on June 8th? These actions contradict the theory he had previously planned his own suicide.

A variation of the alternate double murder theory is that Peter killed Walter with an unknown accomplice, but that Peter was himself in turn killed. To support this theory, WV State policeman Sergeant Robert Alkire told Lisa Hauer that “both bones” of Peter’s right leg were broken when police examined his bodily remains on the ground near the hanging tree; if broken before Peter was hanging in the tree there was no way that Peter could have climbed into the tree to hang himself. Of course, it is also likely that Peter’s right leg was broken when his decomposed lower body eventually fell from the rope, a reported distance of about 20 feet to the ground.

Also in Peter’s defense, he had expressed his concern for the missing Walter Smith to at least Ellen Snyder (by phone), Lester Barker (in person), Richard Dale (by phone), and the Walton family (in person) on June 8th. Peter also asked Lester and Richard if they had seen Walter recently.

Additional evidence that may help exonerate Peter of murder is that it was alleged by some cavers that there was an unnatural hole found in Peter’s head that was recovered from the hangman’s rope. No
The Jealous Husband Suspect Theory

The “jealous husband” scenario was investigated by the State Police, and discarded as not creditable, on June 12, 1975. Then three troopers had intensely questioned the pertinent husband and wife couple, who were from New Jersey but also lived near Lobelia in a rented house (names withheld here). This couple allegedly ran the Morning Star Cult out of their Lobelia home, of which Walter Smith was allegedly a member. Lisa Hauer has seen (possesses) over 30 letters by that cult’s High Priestess (name withheld) addressed to Walter, showing clear evidence of Walter’s membership, as stated by Lisa in her letter dated July 8, 1993 to Jack Speece. These letters have never been made public.

The Witchcraft Suspicion Theory

There was at least one local commune or cult, allegedly practicing wiccan witchcraft, a kind of Pagan religion, living in the general geographic area; one cult, previously mentioned above, reportedly worshiped the morning star. Peter himself was friendly with local cults, as reported by some cavers (and related by Bobbi Nagy in one of her 2003 letters to Paul Steward); Bobbi reports that she and a few other cavers had warned Peter to stay away from these parties. However, Ellen Snyder reports that Peter was probably not interested in cults and witchcraft. Smith himself was fascinated by and had visited and interviewed various cults or communes, as reported by Smith’s parents to the WV State Police and as stated in the police report. Also, Smith reportedly even possessed witchcraft-like items - a half-moon cult ring and Morningstar cult medallion.

Rose Dale Clark, daughter of former park superintendent Richard Dale, had met Walter Smith when they both lived at Watoga State Park during the summers of 1974 and 1975. Rose reported that Walter was a member of a local cult, and that he wore the half-moon cult ring that was later found among his possessions. She also reported the rumor that if Walter were ever to remove his ring, that he would be murdered! He did remove his ring, and was murdered, a coincidence? That ring was found in his possessions at the park after his murder.

Shortly after Walter Smith’s murder discovery, as police were canvassing the nearby area, caver Ed Swepston reports that a local commune group was seen quickly departing the area along Lobelia Road.
in a truck with many of their possessions. State Police thought that was suspicious, and stopped their vehicle to question and roust the occupants (names unknown); the driver was witnessed by Ed to have fled on foot across the opposite field and to have been chased down and caught by the police up against a fence, questioned, reportedly relieved of his marijuana, and released. The fleeing party was apparently nervous about news of the recent murder of Walter and local intense police canvassing.

Searches by police and cavers up adjacent hollows revealed three suspicious properties, Ed reports. At one house they approached there was no one apparently home, but a wood fire was seen in a wood stove and hot food was set on the table. A search of that property revealed a backyard cave room containing a worship temple and devil witch’s pentagram with unlit candles. The property occupants had apparently hurriedly left. Could they have been the New Jersey witch couple referred to elsewhere in this story, who allegedly were renting a local house and had befriended Walter?

At another nearby house a self-admitted woman witch was interviewed (name unknown). At a third local home Ed states, no one was home, and a surreptitious break-in revealed a mysterious padlocked bedroom in the attic which had many .22 caliber bullet holes in the walls and ceiling, from which the police later extracted bullets. In the bullet-riddled room Ed found a mattress on the floor with rumpled blankets atop it; was that Peter lying underneath (gulp)? No Peter though. Peter’s mother Carmelita reports, in a letter addressed to Jack Speece dated March 16, 1976, that a caver husband and wife couple (names withheld here), told her that blood was allegedly found on a mattress and floor in a local house in an upstairs locked bedroom, under very similar circumstances. Could that be this same local house described by Ed?

Also in this same letter Carmelita describes a disturbing incident that she witnessed while she and her traveling party were visiting Mrs. Macel Walton (widow of Henry Walton) and her granddaughters Donna and Robin on Lobelia Road, on an unspecified day in winter 1976. The Walton women were then worried about Mrs. Walton’s grandson David Walton, then 13 years old, being late in returning home that night; they became hysterical then and were screaming that they suspected that David had been kidnapped and killed by the same unknown person or group that was suspected of having killed both Walter and Peter (assuming the double-murder theory). David had then been helping a man unload his truck of wood, and got home later than planned. Obviously tensions were still running high in the local community then.

An interesting side comment related to Mrs. Walton is mentioned in an e-message from Marshall Fausold to Paul Steward dated Feb. 6, 2001. Marshall Fausold and his wife had later purchased Peter’s house and property in 1977. When Mrs. Walton then told Marshall and his wife her version of the Walter Smith and Peter Hauer story, they were so badly scared that they “almost wouldn’t sleep at our new place.”

In June 1975, Chuck Hempel reports that while staying at Peter's farm house, a wiccan woman approached and told him and fellow cavers that she had divined that Peter was still alive and being held captive in a barn or shed, but she couldn’t say exactly where. This resulted in an extensive futile search of all such local buildings by the cavers.

Chuck Hempel and other cavers (unnamed) had also heard uncredited rumors that Walter Smith had been killed at a camp fire during a wiccan ceremony, and that Walter’s body had been hidden in Lobelia Salt peter Cave to frame Peter, after which Peter was kidnapped, held for some time, and then murdered by some cult as part of a June “new moon” or “summer solstice” ceremony. This is another example of the hysteria that surrounded the frantic search for Peter in the summer of 1975.

**The Disgruntled Neighbor Suspect Theory – Jacob Beard**

Another alleged suspicious party was a former northern Greenbrier County disgruntled resident, Jacob Beard, whom some reportedly said detested the northeastern U.S. invasion in the early 1970s of his local territory by the “back-to-the-earth” (some say hippie) people, including Peter and his friends. On June 4, 1993 Jacob was convicted and sentenced to life in prison for the murder of two Rainbow women, Nancy Santomero and Vicki Durian, who died on June 25, 1980 near Briery Knob on Droop Mountain, not far north from Lobelia Road and Peter Hauer’s residence. Jacob had also once bragged that a third Rainbow woman was killed by others, and disposed of in the corn chopper machine on Jacob’s farm, but a police investigation could find no evidence that had occurred.

Coincidently, there is a connection between Larkin Dean and Jacob Beard; Larkin’s sister Linda married...
Jacob, as stated to Henry by Larkin’s girlfriend Sarah Parker on Viney Mountain, May 11, 2018. Jacob was then exonerated in May, 2000 of that crime, and was even paid $1,300,000 by West Virginia and Pocahontas County after a lawsuit for his wrongful conviction. However, a former sheriff of that county, Jerry Dale, still believes Jacob committed those murders, and that another convicted serial murderer, white supremacist and neo-Nazi Joseph Franklin, had flippantly and falsely confessed to the Rainbow murders. Supposedly Franklin had picked up the Rainbow women hitchhiking in WV, but killed them after one of them admitted to having committed miscegenation. Franklin was executed in Missouri in 2013 by lethal injection. Jacob had reportedly been guilty of animal cruelty in wounding a dog and killing a cat of a former girlfriend (mistress). Was Jacob possibly involved in some of the adverse events surrounding Peter? Probably unlikely, but who knows? After his exoneration, Jacob published a book titled “Life without Mercy,” reportedly available on Amazon.

Later, Buddy reports, Boyd issued a complaint with the Sheriff’s office about his "stolen" sheep. The Sheriff, Mr. Cochran, told a surprised Boyd that Buddy had made an earlier complaint against him for stealing his sheep. The case ended in a draw, with neither side being charged with a crime for the sheep. Country justice?

Buddy also suspects that Boyd stole neighbors’ farm equipment and sold it for profit. Another former farmer resident (unnamed) also reports that Boyd was known to steal neighbors’ livestock, even those with the owners’ brands. Donna Walton Fowler also reports that Boyd stole or received three stolen bulldozers from near Richwood WV (date unknown). George Phillips reports that Boyd was caught in 1982 possessing two wood stoves stolen from a store in Gauley Bridge WV, for which he was prosecuted but let off on a legal technicality by the WV Supreme Court of Appeals; this law case is reported on the JUSTIA US Law web site, describing Supreme Court appeal cases.

What could have been a motive for murder by Boyd Thompson? In some past Peter Hauer stories, including from Peter’s sister Lisa Hauer and some (unnamed) cavers, Boyd is portrayed as being mean and angry with Peter, for having bought the farm that Boyd had also craved to buy. Some neighbor persons interviewed, including Larry Dean, even suspect that Boyd could have been a third-party murderer of both Walter and Peter. This suspicion was fueled by the rumor that Walter Smith’s missing bicycle was hidden in Boyd’s Lobelia Road home, either underneath or behind his fireplace there, as described earlier in this story.

In contrast to the above suspicious accounts of Boyd, Ellen Snyder reports that Boyd was a friendly neighbor to her and Peter, who shared in the expense of building a fence between their two farms, and that no fence destruction occurred that Ellen knows of. The fence was built to keep Boyd’s livestock from wandering onto Peter’s farm, at Peter’s request. Boyd paid for the new fence materials, and Peter provided the labor to install the fence.

When Peter was building that fence, caver Susie Rock visited him, and she reports that Peter said then that he wished he had been born earlier in time when folks were self-sufficient, and that he would have felt more comfortable being a pioneer.

Boyd Thompson, of Hillsboro, passed away on Sept. 10, 2015 at age 87, according to a Sept. 12,
2015 notice published by the GazetteMail WV newspaper.

The Disgruntled Neighbor Suspect Theory – McNeill Family

Boyd Thompson had rented his Lobelia Road house and farm, adjoining Peter’s farm, to the Dempsey McNeill family, who acted as farm caretakers. According to an FBI-obtained letter from an unnamed friend of Peter, Peter indicated that this caretaker family were hillbilly types who disliked Peter because of his hippie ways. Also Dempsey McNeill was a “mean neighbor” to Peter and to cavers who later searched for Peter, reports Chuck Hempel. Peter himself, in an FBI-obtained undated letter written in late 1974 or early 1975, stated that the McNeill family were “ruffians who seem like characters right out of Deliverance.” This family had a mentally deficient 21 year old son, Tommy McNeill, who was not likeable and had once fallen off one of Peter’s pinto ponies during a ride in 1974, Ellen reports, after which Peter reprimanded him and told him not to return. It was after that event, in the fall of 1974, that strange animal happenings began occurring at Peter’s farm.

Four animal torturing-mutilation or killing events occurred at Peter’s farm within the time period of October through December of 1974, according to Ellen Snyder. These events occurred either at night or when Peter and his friends were away. In the first event, someone forced sticks down the horse’s throat. Peter then contacted a veterinarian who nursed the horse back to health. Later, the second event involved one goat in the barn being slashed in the left upper leg, after which Laurie Cameron, a friend of Peter, sewed up the slash wound using a curved carpet sewing needle. In the third event, in November or early December, Peter was talking to Ellen by phone when he heard strange noises outside his house. He apparently discovered his goats howling from his barn late that snowy night. Sam (Buddy) Walton and Donna Walton Fowler report that Peter then called the Walton family for help, after which Buddy Walton and his cousin Henry Scott arrived to investigate the goat slashings at Peter’s barn. Carrying their guns they attempted to follow the mutilator’s trail tracks leading south up the wooded mountain slope and towards Boyd Thompson’s property. However they were stopped in fear short of the border fence upon seeing a mysterious sudden flash of light and then a fire at the mountain top fence. Could this have been caused by the retreating animal mutilator having tripped an explosive booby trap? However Buddy recalled hearing no explosion at that time. Buddy and Henry then made a hasty retreat back.

The reports of additional animal mutilations and killings (such as for the chickens and other goats) have often been exaggerated in other Peter Hauer stories, reports Ellen.

Here is the whole key pertinent paragraph from the FBI above-referenced 1974-1975 (undated) letter by Peter: “Finally caught the madman who was terrorizing me. He is in jail awaiting trial or commitment. 21 years old with the mind of a child, part of a family of ruffians who seem like characters out of Deliverance. I’m out of money and wracked nerves, but I think the worst is over now. Been keeping busy with cave history work to get over all the guns, violence and awful things that have happened.”

A police investigation then resulted in the polygraph test and subsequent arrest of Tommy McNeill, who was first reportedly sent to the Pocahontas County Jail, starting about January 1975, and then was sentenced to the Weston State Mental Hospital for followed human tracks of the probable goat mutilator, a smoker (Ellen reports, based on cigarette butts), south across Peter’s farm in the snow and up the mountain back to the fence that bordered with Boyd Thompson’s property at the mountain top; they then assumed the culprit was from the McNeill family. A day or two later, Chuck and Keith Kirk set up two small Vietnam-War-style explosive trip booby traps across the trail that the culprit apparently used to access Peter’s farm. These traps involved plastic boxes with switches, blasting caps, and extended fishing line. An alarm explosion went off the next night, reports Chuck.

In the third animal event, of November or December of 1974 but prior to Christmas, Peter was talking to Ellen by phone when he heard strange noises outside his house. He apparently then discovered his goats howling from his barn late that snowy night. Sam (Buddy) Walton and Donna Walton Fowler report that Peter then called the Walton family for help, after which Buddy Walton and his cousin Henry Scott arrived to investigate the goat slashings at Peter’s barn. Carrying their guns they attempted to follow the mutilator’s trail tracks leading south up the wooded mountain slope and towards Boyd Thompson’s property. However they were stopped in fear short of the border fence upon seeing a mysterious sudden flash of light and then a fire at the mountain top fence. Could this have been caused by the retreating animal mutilator having tripped an explosive booby trap? However Buddy recalled hearing no explosion at that time. Buddy and Henry then made a hasty retreat back.

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A police investigation then resulted in the polygraph test and subsequent arrest of Tommy McNeill, who was first reportedly sent to the Pocahontas County Jail, starting about January 1975, and then was sentenced to the Weston State Mental Hospital for
six months as a mental-case criminal. It is not known when he was released from his prison hospital, but it was reportedly after the deaths of Walter and Peter in early June 1975.

Fearing the impending June release of the incarcerated Tommy McNeill that Peter had been warned about by the police, Peter was reportedly increasingly concerned for his own life, fearing that the young man would seek revenge upon him for getting him incarcerated. Peter had previously purchased his .25 caliber gun for additional protection in Dec. 1974, to supplement his shotgun and Ellen’s family Winchester .22 caliber rifle, after his animal torture and killing events.

Only years later, in the 1980s, was Peter’s missing .25 caliber revolver with a white handle found - in nearby Cave Run creek under a rock, across the road not far from the old garage. It was discovered by children of a family that was renting Peter’s former house from Marshall Fausold, who had purchased that house and farm from Peter’s estate in 1977 for a reported $7,500; this renting party was the Arnold (Arnie) Cutlip family, the second such party to rent that property starting in 1982.

In 1990 Ellen got to hear that story from the Cutlip children, and actually got to see this gun then during her last trip to Peter’s old farm house. Then the gun was not working, having been water soaked, and had not been turned over to the police. Ellen then encouraged that family to turn the gun in to the WV State Police, but it is unknown if it ever was. Ellen’s family rifle had been confiscated by the police during their earlier investigation; when she went to retrieve it after the case closed, the police strangely reported it as “lost” from their inventory.

The Disgruntled Neighbor Theory – Local Resident Snake Haters

Laurie Cameron, a former friend of Peter who now lives in Hillsboro, reports that Peter loved snakes, and there are several photos of Peter handling snakes, two of which are included below with this story. Laurie states that Peter reminded local residents about the importance of snakes, and that they shouldn’t be killed. Ellen Snyder reports the she and Peter had a pet black snake that inhabited their barn, but was intentionally killed on the road in front of their house by locals, who flaunted the dead snake in triumph by dragging it outside their vehicle, which greatly disturbed Ellen and Peter. Laurie further reports the rumor that one day Peter found a live rattlesnake in his mail box, a warning sign by some locals; however Ellen could not confirm that event. Could some locals have been resentful of Peter’s love of snakes and then committed crimes involving framing him for the murder of Walter Smith?

The Disgruntled Suspicious Party Theory – Eagle Lake Development Group

The fourth general theory for Peter’s death involves a Monongahela National Forest group of persons who were campaigning in 1974 for a new dam to create Eagle Lake and an associated new campground, to be built across a stream located north of Point Mountain and Spruce Mountain. Peter fought to prevent the dam construction, so as to preserve the view shed of the scenic waterfalls on Hills Creek, located about one mile south and downstream. Peter and his conservation friends won their battle in 1974 or 1975 and the dam was never built, although the campground was. Peter’s effort led to the creation of the “Falls of Hills Creek Scenic Area”. Perhaps someone in the pro-lake group took their revenge on Peter, according to an unnamed caver friend of his, but this theory is highly unlikely.

Other Assisted Suicide or Lynching Theories

Another theory regarding the demise of Peter Hauer involves the possible assisted suicide of Peter, proposed by a caver (name withheld) who knows a candidate for such a possible suicide assistant (name withheld). By this theory, Peter could have needed help to reach his suicide tree, so perhaps a friend of Peter drove him to his preselected hanging tree site along with some caving climbing gear, after which the friend drove away with that gear. This theory is probably unlikely.

Yet another theory about Peter’s death, expressed by another interviewee (name withheld) is that William Smith learned or suspected that Peter had killed Walter, his son, and had lynched Peter in that hanging tree but made it look like a suicide. However, Peter’s “confession note”, the first indication that Walter was dead, wasn’t discovered until two days after Peter himself disappeared, making this theory unlikely.

The details of the various crime scenario theories discussed above are not mentioned in this story. For a discussion of these details, one may contact
various investigators mentioned early in this story, including Chris Nicola, Roland Vinyard, Jack Speece, Jerry Dale, Robert Alkire, and of course author Henry.

Epilogue

Ironically, Ellen Snyder had enrolled at WVU beginning fall semester 1974 before her breakup with Peter, completed her credits towards a B.S. degree in geology, and then became Henry’s M.S. geology thesis advisee at WVU, graduating in 1983 with her M.S. degree. As a WVU student she became the girlfriend of another M.S. geology graduate student advisee of Henry, Keith Kirk. Decades then go by, and Henry learned that Ellen had many adventures, winding up currently living in Mexico. At the 2015 Old Timers caving party convention, held annually near Elkins, WV, Henry finally met Ellen again, and asked her what really happened with that Peter Hauer murder mystery. She then replied “I don’t know.” Subsequently, Ellen was very helpful in several conversations by phone and email in 2017 and 2018, patiently contributing many of the facts involved in this story. She said she will be telling her own Peter Hauer story soon, as she composes her own memoir.

There is more to the Peter Hauer mystery than Henry cares to relate in this story, especially from letters and stories by other cavers, and the more complete story should probably never be put into writing as being too offensive. Certainly the whole story, what really happened, will never be known. Unmentioned reported information not given in this story is perhaps best shared orally over a beer or around the campfire, but only with discrete company.

If you travel to Pocahontas County to view the setting of Peter’s former farm, the view has changed considerably there. That farm was sold on Feb. 17, 1977 by Peter’s estate heir, his sister Lisa Hauer, to Marshall Fausold and his wife. Marshall then rented this property to several different families, starting about 1981 - 1982, reports Donna Walton Fowler. Marshall first rented to the Arnold Cutlip family, then to Barry King (date unknown), and finally to the Martin family in the early 1990s. Julia Huffman reports that Barry King was the former boyfriend of her mother, Beth Little, formerly Beth Huffman. The old farm house burned down about the spring of 1998, due to a buildup of lint in the clothes dryer; this was left running by wife Teresa Martin when she was briefly away from the house.

On Oct. 27, 1998, the Fausold (former Hauer) 29.5 acre farm was deeded over to the Southeastern Cave Conservancy, Inc. as a cave preserve. That agency had cleaned up the old farm house debris and other trash that had accumulated there. Two gray monument stones now exist on Peter’s old farm; one is a tribute to Peter by his mother Carmelita Hauer, and the other one is a tribute to Marshall Fausold by his sons, Laurence and Roger Fausold. The property is now co-managed by the SCC Inc. and the WV Cave Conservancy, now looked after by nearby caver Dave Cowan. That property is now mostly overgrown with forest and meadows, with no farm buildings remaining.

By the way, while Henry was employed by WVU, 1970–2015, he almost always held his fall WVU karst geology class field trip during Halloween weekend (or close to it) every fall. Starting in the 1980s he would tell his class a brief summary of this Peter Hauer story (plus other macabre stories set elsewhere) about 1/2 mile underground with lights out above the “story rock” flowstone mound in a side passage of Snedegar Cave, a part of the giant Friar’s Hole Cave System, the longest mapped cave in West Virginia. We would first drive down Lobelia Road towards the cave and pass not far from Peter’s former farm. However we never heard any “Deliverance type” bluegrass music during those trips, nor had any negative encounters with any of the locals.

To end this story on a positive note, Dennis Slifer reminds Henry that he knew or still knows most former counterculture newcomer folks living in the Lobelia Road area, who migrated there during the early to mid-1970s, as he had lived in four houses there over several years. He notes that many folks still live there as respected community citizens, including many educated professionals (including at least one farmer, teacher, commercial airline pilot, naval officer, nurse, doctor, electrical lineman, building contractor, and conservation professional). A few of these current locals have been interviewed by Henry for this story. Dennis also points out that the frequent mention of witches and cults, from referenced sources in the above story, may in large part be associated with the hysteria surrounding the investigations of the disappearance and death of both Walter Smith and Peter Hauer. Most 1970s local residents were not associated with communes, cults, or witchcraft, Dennis reports. The lobelia area is still a great place to live in rural harmony.
Acknowledgements

Cavers contacted by Henry for story facts were Ellen Snyder, Keith Kirk, Roland Vinyard, George Phillips, Albert Ogden, Eb Werner, Ed Sweepston, Chuck Hempel, Paul Westbrook, Paul Steward, Dennis Sifers, Jack Speece, Chris Nicola, Chuck Porter, Mike Balister, Dave Cowan, Dean Snyder, Bill Biggers, Tom Hay, and Susie Rock. These folks either knew Peter and/or helped search for him upon his disappearance in 1975. Ellen, Ed, Roland, Paul Steward, Dennis, Chuck Hempel, George, and Jack were especially helpful with information. Also, West Virginia non-caver residents James (Jimmy) Smith, Jerry Dale, Richard Dale, Rose Dale Clark, Steve Swanson, William (Bill) Wimer, Robert (Bob) Wyrner, Cindy Clutter Johnson, Jaynell Graham (current editor of The Pocahontas Times), Angela Rudd, Robin Walton, Samuel (Buddy) Walton, Donna Walton Fowler, Sarah Parker, Larry Dean, Eugene (Groundhog) Dean, and Laurie Cameron were helpful with information. Earlier versions of this story were published by Chuck Porter in the Northeastern Caver March 2018 newsletter, and by George Dasher in the June 2018 West Virginia Caver newsletter. Thank you all!

References utilized in this story

Reported story facts were provided by several sources, not listed here in any particular order of importance:

1] Peter’s obituary (prepared by Peter’s friend Jack Speece, and published in 1982 in the Journal of Spelean History, Vol. 16, No. 2-3; article 51A), by the American Spelean History Association

2] Memorial statements by Jack Speece in the York Grotto Newsletter 13 (6) 97, and by Mike Cullinan in The Brass Light caver newsletter (3) 37, both reprinted in the 1976 Speleo Digest


4] Reports of Investigation by the West Virginia Department of Public Safety (State Police), Detachment file numbers L-1125 (Nov. 21, 1975) and L-1126 (Dec. 5, 1975), Headquarters file number 68611, courtesy of Paul Steward

5] Compilation of redacted FBI report files regarding search for Peter Hauer, June 1975 and later, from nation-wide FBI field offices, courtesy of Roland Vinyard. These FBI files are incomplete, at least for interviews conducted in southwestern PA and northern WV


7] The Daily News newspaper of Huntingdon PA, June 14, 1975

8] The Charleston Daily Mail newspaper, June 25, Aug. 7, and Nov. 28, 1975

9] The Charleston Gazette newspaper, June 14, and June 19, 1975


13] Last Will and Testament confession document authored by Peter Hauer, June 9, 1975, courtesy of Jack Speece and Lisa Hauer

14] Inside Detective magazine article, “We’ve Got a Cave, A Corpse and a Conundrum,” by Joseph L. Koenig, May, 1976


16] Recent (Nov. 2017 – Sept. 2018) numerous miscellaneous e-mails, phone conversations, letters, mailed paper documents, and photos from several current or former WV cavers and other persons first mentioned in the Acknowledgements section of this story

17] Ten Nov. 27, 1975 WV State Police crime scene photos, taken at Peter Hauer’s hanging tree site, and received by H. Rauch on May 10, 2018

18] Miscellaneous computer web sites, describing historical weather conditions, tree dendrology, and other subjects

19] JUSTIA US Law web site, describing law appeal case decisions of the WV Supreme Court; 358 S.E.2d 815 (1987); STATE of West Virginia v. Boyd THOMPSON, Jr., Case No. 17071

Below are several photos of Peter Hauer and other persons and places cited in the above story. Descriptive captions are displayed below each photo figure.

Figure 1. Photos of Peter Hauer, courtesy of Peter’s mother Carmelita Hauer, and Jack Speece. To the right is Peter’s prep-school teenager pre-hippie early 1960s photo, and to the left is his late 1960s college photo, exact dates unknown.

Figure 2. Peter Hauer (on right) with friend Jim Kramer (at left) at the “Haunted House” on Droop Mountain. Photo by Dennis Slifer, 1974-1975.
Figure 3. Peter Hauer lounging with his “pet snake” on porch of the “Haunted House” on Droop Mountain, southern Pocahontas County, West Virginia. Peter loved all animals. Photo by Dennis Slifer, 1974-1975.

Figure 4. Peter Hauer holding another “pet snake” at the main entrance to Snedegar’s Saltpeter Cave, part of the giant Friar’s Hole cave system, located a few miles south of Peter’s farm, in the early 1970s; photo by Jack Soeece.

Figure 5. Peter Hauer driving his truck at his Cave Run Farm along Lobelia Road. Photo by Dennis Slifer, 1974-1975.

Figure 6. Photo of Peter Hauer (left), Willa Koretz (middle), and Rick Banning (right), taken by Dennis Slifer, 1974-1975. Willa was Dennis’s former girlfriend.
Figure 7. Topographic map centered on Peter Hauer’s farm along Lobelia Road (red striped). Peter’s former farm house (black dot) is located ~80 m northeast of bench mark (BM) numbered 2529, on south side of the road. Cave Run flows through his farm, also situated on south road side. The former Walton family house (black dot) is located ~350 m east of Peter’s house, south road side, and Boyd Thompson’s former house is located ~250 m southeast of the Walton house and just north of the sinkhole pond. This map is courtesy of the TopoZone web site and Google.

Figure 8. Real estate property map showing Peter Hauer’s former farm tract, number 33 – 39, representing 29.5 acres. The Walton Family farm tract was number 32 – 3. Boyd Thompson’s farm tract borders Peter’s tract ~ ¼ to ½ mile to the southeast of Peter’s house. Map figure courtesy of Roland Vinyard.

Figure 9. Photo of Peter Hauer’s former farm house, along Lobelia Road near Hillsboro WV, taken by Dennis Slifer, 1974-1975. The boundary with the Boyd Thompson adjoining farm is located at hill top behind Peter’s house, as shown in the background.
Figure 10. Photo of caving group at Peter Hauer’s house, 1970-1971, photographer unknown. Left to right: Jack Speece, Jim Kramer, unknown (sitting on ground), Chris Kramer, Jim Bridge, unknown (standing), Peter Hauer. The two unknown African American guys were students from Harrisburg PA whom Peter had taught. Photo supplied by Jack Speece.

Figure 11. Photo of caver party in front yard at Peter Hauer’s farm house along Lobelia Road, near Hillsboro WV, taken by Dennis Slifer, Oct., 1973. This gathering was intended to be a wedding party for Peter Hauer and Ellen Snyder, but the wedding event was cancelled on short notice due to a medical crisis (required open heart surgery) for Peter’s mother, causing Peter to be absent then. Although Peter and Ellen never married, they went on with the party anyway! Pictured in photo are Ellen Snyder (center) with red top and blue jeans; Ellen’s mother (in blue pants suit and white hair); Ellen’s father (in blue plaid pants and sunglasses); Ellen’s “bridesmaid” (in blue top, blue jeans, and sitting just to the left of Ellen); Patty Mothes (extreme right) with blue sweater and dress; and Jim Kramer (extreme left) with blue cap and back to camera. Other persons are unidentified at present.

Figure 12. Photo of front yard scene of Peter Hauer’s property along Lobelia Road, near Hillsdale West Virginia, by Dennis Slifer, Oct., 1973. Pictured in center is Ellen Snyder standing beside her wedding carrot cake with butter cream icing that was edge decorated with Chrysanthemum flowers, and prepared by a neighbor. Other woman (sitting) is unknown at present.
Figure 13. Photo of barn on Peter Hauer’s farm, located across (north of) Cave Run Creek from Peter’s farm house, along Lobelia Road, WV. Photo taken by Dennis Slifer, 1974-1975. This is the barn in or near which Peter’s goats and horse were tortured and killed during Oct. – Dec. 1974. To upper right is entrance to Lobelia Salt Peter Cave, where Walter Smith’s body was found. To left side is waterfall of stream draining from cave.

Figure 14. Photo taken in 1973, looking north from stream waterfall towards Peter Hauer’s house and red Volkswagen Bus (van). Shown are Peter Hauer (left) and Ellen Snyder (right). Photographer is unknown. Photo supplied by Ellen Snyder.

Figure 15. Photo taken in 1973 showing Peter Hauer’s garden located behind (south of) his house. Shown are Ellen Snyder (left side) and Peter Hauer (right side). Photographer is unknown. Photo supplied by Ellen Snyder.
Figure 18. Photo of Walter Theodore Smith, ~1974, probably a high school graduation photo. Photo courtesy of Roland Vinyard, who copied it from a newspaper article from The Weirton Daily Times, Fri., June 13, 1975, page 1. Walter grew up in Follansbee WV, was born Aug. 26, 1956 and died a violent death on June 4, 1975.

Figure 17. Photo of the “Beast Man” himself, Peter Hauer, taken by Dennis Slifer, in 1974-1975. This photo was taken during a sauna party at a local commune.

Figure 16. View of Peter Hauer’s garage, south facing side, on north side of Lobelia Road and Peter’s house. Shown are cavers Dale Ibberson (left side), Ellen Snyder (middle), and Peter Hauer (right side). Photographer is unknown. Photo supplied by Ellen Snyder.
Figure 19a. Credit label and scale bar for map of Lobelia Saltpeter Cave, appearing in next figure below, published by the West Virginia Speleological Survey, Bulletin 10, The Caves and Karst Hydrology of Southern Pocahontas County, 1992.

Figure 19b. Map of Lobelia Saltpeter Cave, western portion, published by the West Virginia Speleological Survey, Bulletin 10, The Caves and Karst Hydrology of Southern Pocahontas County, 1992. See Figure 19a for map legend and scale bar.

Walter Smith’s body was found buried 50 to 100 feet (15 to 30 meters) inside the main cave entrance.

Figure 20. Main entrance into Lobelia Saltpeter Cave. Photo by Dave Cowan, taken March 28, 2016.
Figure 21. Photo of Lobelia Saltpeter Cave, taken at site in cave where Walter Smith's body was found on June 11, 1975 by caver Ed Swepston. Photographer unknown. Photo was published in The Charleston Gazette, June 14, 1975. Pictured from left to right are WV DNR conservation officers L. C. Guthrie and M. B. Pizzino, caver Ed Swepston, and Chief Deputy Sheriff W. H. Buzzard.


Figure 23. WV State Police photo, taken Nov. 27, 1975, afternoon, showing Peter Hauer's hanging tree on Viney Mountain. It is believed that this tree is a white ash tree. The right-leaning dead black locust tree was climbed to rescue Peter's suspended head, upper spine, sweater, and rope found hanging from that tree, by undertaker James Smith. Peter's other clothes, bones, and other body parts were found hanging from lower tree branches and laying on the ground nearby. This is photo 1, the least gruesome of the five WV State Police photos taken of the hanging tree site.
Figure 27. Peter Hauer’s memorial gravestone, in the Mount Lebanon Cemetery, Plot Section W, Lebanon, PA. Gravestone photo taken Jan. 20, 2010 by Bruce Speck, and copied from the “Find A Grave” web site, memorial ID no. 46925729. Lebanon was Peter’s growing-up home town. Lloyd J. Hauer and Carmelita Leedy Hauer were Peter’s parents.