

# Field Guide to Coronado History: Underground Cavern of Jewels

*Fascinating, intriguing, or thoughtful tales about people and places in Coronado history -- presented by your Coronado Historical Association*

**By Bruce Linder**

A craze seemed to grip the country during the 1880s involving fresh discoveries of underground caverns. Incredible tales were written of new findings, expeditions of exploration, and descriptions of marvels never witnessed before. Many well-known caverns (that are national parks today) were discovered during this era and Americans were fascinated with stories and pictures that circulated widely in newspapers and magazines.

Suddenly, in the midst of this intensity, word broke of the unexpected discovery of Coronado's own immense subterranean cavern!

Almost everyone was surprised and taken aback on New Year's Day 1888 when a bold headline stretched across the front page of the San Diego Union reading: "Discovery of an Immense Subterranean Cavern in San Diego."

New Year's  
Edition.

## The San Diego Union

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### THE BOWELS OF THE EARTH.

Discovery of an Immense Subterranean Cavern in San Diego.

A Prehistoric Race Found Entombed in Coffins Chiseled Out of Solid Stone—A Cave of Crystals Under the Bed of the Bay.

BY CHARLES F. DEGELMAN.

Nearly a month ago a reporter of The Union obtained from an eminent visiting scientist the full particulars of a wonderful discovery made by him in the earth underneath San Diego. Before revealing the details of the discovery the scientist exacted a solemn promise that the matter should not be made public till he gave his permission. The reason for this secrecy were recognized as valid. The user, however, is of such tremendous interest and importance that it is felt that it should not be kept

secret for our torches lit up the narrow opening through which we passed, but suddenly nothing was revealed but darkness through which faint points of light could be seen here and there overhead. My first thought was that we had again reached the outer air with its starry sky, but soon realized that we were in the mouth of an immense cavern, whose top and sides were hung with sparkling crystals. This discovery did not surprise me, as judging from the formation and situation, I had expected to find a subterranean cave. Crystals are formed by the action of water on various kinds of minerals, and it was certain that we were now under the bed of the bay. When I looked up and saw the height of this portion of the cave, I shuddered to think how thin the crust of the earth must be that was between us and the great volume of water from the top and sides of the cave water was constantly dripping, which formed a small rivulet that flowed through the center of the cave. Without doubt it ran in the ancient course of the subterranean river. Looking ahead we could see that the cave was divided into innumerable compartments, so that the river must have been very much broken up in its underground course. This forcibly reminded me of some verses from Coleridge. I imagined that I was in

"Where Alps, the sacred river ran,  
Though swains were none to man,  
Though the winding of the little stream,  
We continued our explorations, and found new wonders awaiting us at

hermetically sealed after being embalmed. The coffin was full of a black, grimy and very ill-smelling substance. It probably was a combination of honey, wax and spices, such as was used by the ancient Egyptians, Persians and Assyrians for preserving their covering of a human body was revealed. I am not certain what the material of the cover was. From my hasty investigation I got the impression that it was the skin of an animal, but it might have been cloth. My examination of the contents of the coffin was cut short at this time, as I could not possibly proceed further from this apartment, so we hastened from the apartment. We were suffocating and intolerable. We breathed in a distant part of the cave and did not return. Just before our flight, however, I noticed a triangular piece of slate lying on the ground in one of the coffins. I picked it up and took it away. To my intense delight it proved to have characters chiseled on its surface. I thought that it was a few standards, it is the only evidence I possess of my underground explorations.

At this point the Professor took a snapshot from the table and carefully examined what was about eight inches long. The Professor was about half an hour on the surface there were a number of wedge-shaped chert ore that would be scattered around promiscuously. The character

throughout the extent of the cave there are more stone coffins and human beings preserved in them. They are inhabitants in this city to-day.

### A TALE OF

Rider Haggan's Latest Wilds

A Duel to the Death Night of Terry Its Str

BY H. H.

CHAPTER I.  
Most of you boys will have heard of a Quakerman, who was one of the party discovered King Solomon's mines a little time ago, and afterwards came to us England near his friend Sir Henry Co. He has gone back to the wilderness, not these old hunters almost invariably do one pretext or another. They cannot stand civilization for very long, its noise racket and the omnipresence of its

The headline story told of the explorations of one Professor Robert E. C. Stearns, Paleontologist of the US Geological Survey who had been studying the California coast. Taken by the unique shape of

San Diego Bay, he speculated that a geologic uplifting and an ensuing underground stream had caused the bay's distinctive curve 15,000 years ago.

His studies convinced him that the mouth of that stream had closed at some point and he theorized that a great underworld cavern ran the length of the bay as a remnant of that stream.

His studies led him to Coronado where he started exploratory digs. During one of these digs, he broke through the surface into a large open void. Exploring further, he discovered an underground entrance and a pathway leading downward further into the dark.

Excitedly following a narrow underground path, the professor soon entered an immense and towering cavern, just as he had forecasted. Everywhere he looked, crystals and raw jewels shined in his torchlight. He and a companion continued to explore throughout the cavern, paying out string so they could find their way back each time to the entrance.

In one corner of the cavern (and even more surprising), Stearns found what appeared to be stone coffins with ancient inscriptions that pointed directly to a prehistoric race of advanced cave dwellers, superior to the Aztecs.

Immediately fearful of looters who might defile his "ancient city of the dead" before scientific investigation, the professor carefully hid the cavern's Coronado entrance until proper security could be obtained.

The entrance remained hidden until, ultimately, Stearns decided to open his discovery to the public and fellow scientists. He approached the San Diego Union and spilled his story to an intrepid reporter by the name of Charles Degelman who created the front-page story for everyone's astonished reading.

The story incited a tidal wave of excitement and chatter. "Coronado" was on everyone's lips. The San Diego Union was flooded with inquires; the paper quickly sold out.

The only problem with this swashbuckling tale was that ... (wow!) it was all a hoax ... from beginning to end. And it was NOT a hoax engineered by the mysterious Professor Stearns but by the San Diego Union itself!

Today, of course, no respectable newspaper would ever pull such shenanigans, but back in the nineteenth century anything was fair game when it came to profits. The Union was never apologetic about their ruse – even declaring a “Journalistic Success” (of all things) when they sold out the New Year’s edition.

To learn more of this entire captivating story, come to CHA’s Wine & Lecture on Friday November 14<sup>th</sup> when author and historian Jack Innis, author of “San Diego Legends” will speak on his research into this unusual tale of history.

*Come visit the Coronado Museum and the Coronado Historical Association archives for this story and others. The entire compendium of intriguing “Field Guide” tales is posted on [www.coronadohistory.org](http://www.coronadohistory.org). © CHA*