

# ARTIST CORNER

BY TETH BURNS



Repairing the Rose Window from the Chapel at Spring Hill College, which had been damaged by Hurricane Fredrick in 1979

## CRAIG SHELDON

Craig Turner Sheldon. Where does one begin to write on a subject that has already been so well written about, and so widely acclaimed? I could start with the beginnings of his life in Tennessee, where he was born, and lived until he fled to Alaska in the early 1930s. I could talk about the adventures that he had during his lifetime and the people he met along the way, including his wife, Annie, or 'Butch', as so many called her. I could discuss his inspiring involvement in local politics and environmental issues. I could even expand on his writings and musings he graced the pages of the Fairhope Courier with in his column *Knee Deep In Fly Creek*. All of these elements are fascinating in themselves, with stories upon stories decorated with Sheldon's personality and charm attached to them. There's so much to explore on the subject of Craig Sheldon. So much of his life was devoted to his work, whether it was his job or his art, because "Without their work," Sheldon was once quoted, "men are a dime a dozen."

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The many layers of Sheldon began in Tennessee where he was born and raised. A tough childhood and an abusive step-father eventually drove him from home and out into the world where he began his adventures that led to a life full of spectacular accomplishment. Along the way, he met many people and built up more character than you could ever imagine one person possessing. Stories and legends of Craig Sheldon include being captured and put into slavery at a saw mill in Georgia before he burned it down to make his escape; moving to Alaska where he fished, panned for gold, carried mail via dogsled and worked as a forest ranger; a valiant tour as a Marine during World War II, and even a brief interlude with the movie star, May West. When he finally settled down in Fairhope in the mid-1940s, he had already had a life that most of us could only dream about, but this was when his artistic legacy really began to take flight.



Dean Mosher, married to Sheldon's daughter, Pagan, has worked hard to keep the memory of Sheldon's legacy alive since his passing in 1997. He knows the legends, recalls the stories and has a sense of pride about him when he talks of his late father-in-law. Dean, himself, learned a lot from Sheldon and has continued to live by Sheldon's example through his involvement in local political and environmental issues, as well as his continued work on the second 'castle', complete with some of Sheldon's carvings and sculptures. "I loved that man," Dean says. "He wasn't just my father-in-law, he was also my friend."

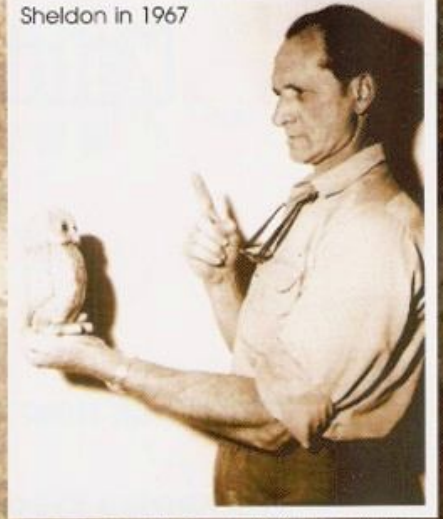
Dean, a renowned artist himself, as reflected in our first issue a year ago, has always been a huge supporter of Sheldon's, in both his art and his character. "Craig was a real character," Dean tells me. "He was crafty, witty and clever, but above all, he was genuine and he was incredibly imaginative. You can see it reflected in his sculptures." Indeed you can. You can definitely recognize his love for nature and fantasy, from his animal carvings of owls, turtles and pelicans, to his portrayal of mythical creatures such as the *Fool Killer*; and even in the powerful statement of *The*

pelican to Mobile Bay and is one of the most treasured among locals.

I have not had the pleasure of seeing Dean's entire collection of Sheldon's art, but I do have my favorites among the ones that I have seen, such as the fireplace mantle and the pelican he hangs from the ceiling in Dean's home. My favorite picture of Craig Sheldon, that seems to capture him most to me, is of him sitting in the middle of elaborate window frame that he was repairing for Spring Hill College that had been damaged from Hurricane Fredrick. The window frame seems to reflect the essence of Sheldon; complex, beautiful and memorable.

Through the stories that I've been told, and by the art that he left behind, it saddens me a little that I never had the pleasure to meet this incredible artist. His wit, his charm and his talent are not only reflected in his art, but also in the eyes and expression of those who knew him and who remember him well. But, I am glad to know the Mosher's, who have been a wonderful asset in the art community, and who were so accommodating and helpful on my quest to know more about this famed carver of the Eastern Shore. And although I didn't know him, nor

Sheldon in 1967

*The Fool Killer*

## THE LATE GREAT SCULPTOR OF THE EASTERN SHORE

*Divine Obscenity*, which reflects the contempt he had for the Klu Klux Klan's philosophy of hate.

His love for his community and home were also reflected in his work. He was commissioned to do many pieces throughout Alabama and the Mobile Bay area. He has sculptures and artwork at the City Hall, Court House and Fine Arts Museum in Mobile and the Recreation Center in Chickasaw. Among his many works located throughout his hometown of Fairhope, the sculpture on the campus of Faulkner State Community College, *In "Celebration" of Life*, reflects the return of the brown

could I possibly do him justice in the wonderful way he deserves, even based on what seems to me now, a crash-course in Craig Sheldon 101. I am glad to have been able to experience parts of his life, his art and some of his writings through memoirs, articles, stories and old newspaper and magazine clippings from his past. It's been a real treat at least getting to know the spirit of Sheldon. Just as he was in life, he is still not a man that you could ever forget, especially once you've gotten to know him. As local artist, Dr. Lynne Yonge once said, Craig Turner Sheldon was and will always remain, a "beacon of creativity".

