

Don L. Widener

February 1936 – July 1996, 60, NSS 3224

Don Widener was an active caver in the **Dallas Speleological Society**. In 1957 he started the **Texas Cave Survey**, forerunner to the Texas Speleological Survey. In 1959 Don was the TSA Chairman. Unfortunately, we have no photos of Don. Carl Kunath's *50 Years of Texas Caving*, 2007, looks back at Don's caving career on pages 208–209:

“Don Widener was taken to Steam Cave by Al Malone. Widener got his grade school buddy, Edgar Bryan, and returned four more times. Don then went to the public library and found a copy of NSS Bulletin Ten and, in 1953, he and Bryan founded what would later become the **Dallas Grotto**. A bit later, in the spring of 1955, Jack Prince and Claude Head were talking about exploring a cave and did some research in the SMU library. Here, they learned about the NSS and a letter to that organization resulted in a pointer to Bob Hudson, then living in Waco.

Their first adventure was Mural Cave near Austin. Soon, Bob put them in touch with the Crisman brothers in Abilene. The Crismans mentored the new group for their first few trips and gave them a lead to Mayfield Cave [Caverns of Sonora]. On September 24, 1955, Jack Allen, Allen Cain, Pete Cobb, Claude Head, Jack Prince, and Dan Sheffield crossed the now famous ledge in Mayfield Cave (Caverns of Sonora) and discovered what many consider to be the most beautiful cave in the world.

Soon, the Widener and Prince groups united but because of their isolation in north Texas and the general lack of communication between caving groups at the time, the Dallas cavers were slow getting started. Prior to 1956, they were known simply as the Dallas Group. In April 1956, Don Widener and others decided to form an NSS grotto and call it the **Dallas Speleological Society**. It took almost a year for the group to formalize their efforts and they became an NSS Grotto on April 8, 1957. Founding members were Don Widener, Wally Martin, Ed Bryan, Al Malone, and Charles and Yvonne Groening, but soon they had ten or 12 members. They changed their name to the Dallas Grotto of the NSS in the spring of 1958 because Oscar Hawksley, VP for Organization of the NSS, suggested that the use of the word “society” in the name of groups affiliated with the NSS was “undesirable.”

Widener had an article titled “Underground Mountaineering” published in the September 1956 issue of Summit magazine and, more importantly, he also founded the **Texas Cave Survey** in 1957. This was the first successful attempt to unite the cave files of all the individual Texas groups into a single archive and was remarkably successful. In a two-year span, 11 issues were published (see TSS chapters). By January 1959 there were 25 names on the membership list. Quantity did not insure success however, as Widener wrote to Dudley Roberts on July 16, 1959: “DSS is practically non-existent.” When Widener entered military service in November 1959, it appears that the spark went out of the group as they soon ceased all activity. There was a gap of perhaps a year before a new group arose almost spontaneously with but a single member, Bob Littlefield (NSS 3854), carried over to the new group (see Dallas-Ft. Worth Grotto).”

Edited by William R. Elliott, 1 March 2020.