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RETHINKING SLOSS FURNACE SITE

Birmingham, Alabama Mayor David Vann has revealed plans to transform the city's Sloss Furnace into an \$18-million museum for industrial and cultural history *cum* amusement park destined to rival "Fantasy Island." All this at the risk of jeopardizing earlier plans to develop one of the U.S.'s few surviving, fully-intact, early-20thC blast furnaces.

According to the *Birmingham News* David McMullin, a controversial, unorthodox, businessman and former film maker who recently was hired by the city, submitted a plan to Vann and the City Council outlining a scheme to transform Sloss into a major entertainment and cultural center. He expresses his belief that he can develop a unique industry attraction in the S.E. U.S. quite unlike other "theme parks." The plan calls for a German cafe, theaters, music and dance, bands, sound and light shows, fire eaters, jugglers, and a host of other attractions designed to instruct and entertain visitors. The museums of science, industry, and culture would be somewhat akin to Paris' Pompidou Center.

Birmingham voters, encouraged by Vann and the Council, in May 1977 approved a \$3-million bond sale to rehabilitate the furnace [SIAN Mar. 78]. McMullin believes the project can be accomplished in several phases with funding from government and private sources. To share the center's projected high cost, he



SLOSS FURNACE, skip hoists for charging in foreground. *Historic American Engineering Record photograph.*

proposes to invite corporations and foreign governments to exhibit there. The complex was donated to the city by the Jim Walker Corp. whose U.S. Pipe & Foundry Divn. was the furnace's last operator.

McMullin's approach is certain to raise some questions by the Birmingham Citizen's Planning Bd., appointed by the Mayor and Council, as well as by the Sloss Furnace Assn.* SFA has determined which elements of the Sloss complex should be preserved, and its suggestions appear to conflict with this latest scheme.

Development of the Sloss site could be a vital force in transforming the S.E. into a major cultural and historical center, but if the project is to pivot on the amusement-park aspect of the McMullin proposal, the question should be asked: "Is this the best that can be done for so historically important a site." *W.P.*

*The SFA, which is deeply concerned with the dignified exploitation of the furnace site, is anxious to broaden its constituency. A descriptive flyer is available: 13 N. 21st St., Birmingham, AL 35203.

BLUFF FURNACE UPDATE

Not all the iron-smelting news from Dixie is bad, however. The Bluff Furnace in Chattanooga, Tenn. not only appears to have been saved from the Walnut St. Bridge replacement project (another continuing sad saga [SIAN July 77:6]), but it appears likely that this site of the first Southern coke-fired blast furnace will be developed as a historical park. A master plan has been prepared, funded by the Chattanooga Chapter of the Assn. for the Preservation of Tennessee Antiquities. Funds are being raised and negotiations for ultimate ownership are well underway.

In addition, archeological excavations just completed by the Inst. of Archaeology at the Univ. of Tenn. at Chattanooga have shown that the furnace base and large pieces of structural cast iron survived destruction by occupying Union troops in the mid-1860s. *J.L.B.*

MARINE NEWS Canal Boat Reappearances

In June 1978, David E. Carr, Site Supt., Ill. & Mich. Canal State Trail, discovered the lower sections of five sunken c1918-33 canal boats. The discovery was made on the I&M between Aux Sable and Morris, Ill. A storm apparently had caused the canal bank to break and the reach between the two cities had temporarily de-watered. Carr sighted the hulks while repairing the bank.

Aerial photographs reveal that the top halves of the boats are missing, the result of inclement weather, years of water damage, and, probably, vandalism.

According to Mary M. Yeater, Canal Interpreter, the Ill. Dept. of Conservation, the IDC has tentatively decided against raising

the remaining hulks. Instead the Division of Land & Historic Sites, IDC, has planned to have archeologists measure, photograph and document the vessels. It is hoped that the next time the paper factory (which leases water rights in the area) is closed for repairs or retooling, the canal can be de-watered, and basic archeological and preservation procedures can be started.

In order to become more familiar with the problems of water-damaged vessels, Yeater has been studying the *Vasa*, a 16thC Swedish warship raised from Stockholm Harbor in 1960-61 and now exhibited in a special museum there. Yeater believes the *Vasa* will be instructive in setting up a successful preservation program.

Further up the I&M, between Dresden and Channahon, Carr has identified the remains of perhaps another canal boat. An investigation is underway to determine whether the submerged