

# Collecting and Selling Troglodytic Fish: A Novel Idea

Jan Jeffrey Hoover

U.S. Army Engineer Research and Development Center, Waterways Experiment Station, ER-A,  
3909 Halls Ferry Rd., Vicksburg, MS 39180-6199, hooverj@erdc.usace.army.mil

**T**wo young men, equipped with dip nets, venture into the desert searching for a small, brightly-colored, cave-dwelling fish they hope to collect, keep, breed, and eventually promote as an aquarium species. What sounds like a collecting report from one of NANFA's southwestern chapters is actually the storyline of an obscure, somewhat rare novel written for young people.

*The Cave of Living Treasure* (Lantern Press, Inc.), published in 1958 and reprinted as *Teen-Age Treasure Hunt* (Grosset and Dunlap), is an interesting book for modern native fish enthusiasts. Author Richard M. Elam wrote this primarily as a juvenile mystery-adventure, but he sought technical advice from the staff of the Eastern Garden Aquarium in Miami, Florida. As a result, the story contains occasional (and usually accurate) references to fishes and fish-related topics. (Note: A four-page glossary in the back of the book defines most of the aquarium and fish terms used in the text.)

*Teen-Age Treasure Hunt* lists tropical fishes popular at the time and describes their reproductive biology. It provides a brief overview on cave-adaptations of troglodytic fishes and a discussion on why native fishes are not marketed as ornamental species. An interesting and contemporary component of the plot is the difficulty faced by a small, independent fish dealer competing in a market dominated by a single large retailer. This struggle prompts the search for a fabled local fish of unusual beauty. No mention is made of collecting permits or the fragility of desert- and cave-dwelling species, but this is hardly surprising since the Endangered Species Act and widespread appreciation for imperiled species would not be realized for more than a decade.

Illustrations by Victor Prezio have negligible ichthyological appeal but the dust jacket illustration is eye-catching if

misleading (Fig. 1). It depicts the young protagonists in the cave dipnetting tropical platies (*Xiphophorus* sp.) and angelfish (*Pterophyllum* sp.) into an enormous (and unwieldy) glass jar while a threatening and shadowy figure looms nearby. In the story, however, the collectors capture a colorful, albeit undescribed, species of mosquitofish (*Gambusia* sp.), carefully transferring specimens into a thermos bottle before being interrupted by an unhinged prospector (who has no interest in native fishes).

Volumes from the Grosset and Dunlap *Teen-Age* series are frequently encountered in used book stores, but are usually shelved separately with other books having similar themes (sports, animals, science fiction, etc.), so copies of *Teen-Age Treasure Hunt* may be difficult to find. A quick Internet search in May 2004 turned up a single copy (sans dust jacket) for \$15. The copy shown here, from a Florida bookstore, sold for \$13.50. It was well worth the price, though, as it's probably the only widely distributed novel with the native fish aquarium hobby as its theme. ←

Fig. 1. (right)

Dust jacket of the Grosset and Dunlap edition of *The Cave of Living Treasure*, reprinted as *Teen-Age Treasure Hunt*. White spots on the face of the boy in the foreground are paper abrasions.

## Where Will You Be June 9-12, 2005?

The Ozarks?  
The Ouachita Mountains?  
The Gulf Coastal Plain/Saline River Basin?  
The Delta?  
The Arkansas River Valley?  
*All of the above?*