

## THE CITY THAT DOES NOT EXIST

By John F. Hall

For decades, as far back as I can remember, I've seen signs painted on barns with the words: "See Rock City." Clark Byers, an American sign painter, became famous for



painting those slogan words on over 900 barns in over 19 states, from 1935 to 1969. He braved bulls, lightening bolts, and slippery roofs to paint those signs. Byers was hired by Rock City founder, Garnett Carter, to turn those country barns into billboards. But there is more to this history that had previously not been told. The Rock City's owners offered the barn owners a free paint job and Rock City souvenirs, in exchange for allowing Clark Byers to paint those words on their barns. Because the barns came in different sizes and shapes, many signs were different. All of the signs have

white lettering on a black background. On some of the larger barns, Byers painted: "See 7 States from Rock City atop Lookout Mt. near Chattanooga, Tenn." On smaller barns,



Byers painted: "See Beautiful Rock City today." Byer's sign painting led to Rock City, Lookout Mountain, and Chattanooga, becoming a national tourist attraction. **Clark Byers** enjoyed a rich and colorful life. He died at the age of 89. As American motorist turned more to interstate for travel, they began to bypass the narrow back roads. Rock City began maintaining fewer signs. The paint on the fewer signs began to fade, and the barns began to decline.

Millions of motorist viewed Clark Byer's barn paintings. He was a unique American artist that promoted Rock City. When I was a much younger man, I wondered who was painting those signs.

My grandson, John (John-John) Andrew Hall II, when he was little, liked to watch "Thomas the Train," cartoons. So my wife, Paula and I drove to Chattanooga, Tennessee, with our grandchildren, Andrea, Heather, and John-John. We paid to sleep in the Chattanooga Choo Choo historic caboose. The caboose has thin mat-beds enough to sleep seven people. It has a cook stove, a port-a-John, and the Conductor's desk, chair, and file cabinet. Take it from me, it is very uncomfortable to sleep in a caboose. I say that from sleeping in a caboose for two weeks back. In 1965 John-John wanted to sleep in the caboose, which they usually did not rent out. It was dirt cheap for one night's rent. Today, the company is called the Chattanooga Choo Choo Hotel. They have 25 Pullman cars, that are fully modernized, and that rent for \$425.00 a night. I believe they might have donated the caboose, that we slept in, to the Tennessee Valley Railroad Museum. After spending the night in what I named the "Hard Rock Caboose," we drove up to Lookout Mountain, in search of Rock City.

It may seem strange to say that we went looking for a city that does not exist. Even Lookout Mountain is shared between the states of Georgia and Tennessee. It turns out that Rock City is not a city. It is a hospitality and entertainment company, named Rock City Inc. The Garnett Carter family owns about 12 acres of land on the top of the Georgia

side of Lookout Mountain. Garnett envisioned his wife, Frieda's rock garden as something others would want to see. And that is how the famous non-city got its name.

You can take a guided tour, or a self guided tour of Frieda's rock garden. The walking tour takes about 60 to 90 minutes to complete. The 4,100-foot walking trail takes you by soaring rock formations, caves, a 90-foot water fall, an 180 feet Swing-A-Long bridge, Fairyland Caverns, and. Mother Goose Village. My wife, Paula has a fear of heights, and she was not happy to cross the bridge, especially when the granddaughters were shaking the side rails of the bridge. Across the Swing-A-Long Bridge, the trail leads to the flower gardens. In the gardens are 400 species of native wildflowers, shrubs, and trees. I recommend that you wear a good pair of shoes to wear on the trail. You can bring your own food and water. A ticket to enter Rock City Gardens cost, the last time that I checked, \$39.00. The address for Rock City Gardens is 1400 Pattern Road, Lookout Mountain, Georgia 30760. It is best to order tickets online. Choose a decent time of the year. I purchased a red wooden birdhouse with the woods on its roof, 'See Rock City'. It had two circle hooks that I attached to a V in my old maple tree. One day a storm broke a branch of the V, and it crashed down, and crushed the birdhouse. Never again, perhaps, to be misled by the city that never existed.

Debra Ann Belka wrote the poem, "The Bridge." These are her words: "There is a bridge you can take, it leads to water' living...it's there you'll find peace merciful and forgiving. Over trials and tribulations, it will take you across the span of His loving hands, will lead you to the cross. It is a bridge of assurance, troubled waters will not last for you and. me. He has a future much better than the past. The hardships in this life, will, take faith to get through, and Jesus is the bridge linking His Father to you."

Johnathan Moya wrote a poem called, "See Rock City." These are his words: "I don't know if See Rock City is stilled stenciled in white and black on red barns along dusty Southern highways. The old black and. white photos weren't arrows, more like anchored. arks that floated menageries of tourist to Lookout Mountain to see miniature Fairy Tale Caverns, villages of Mother Goose creatures, a Lover's leap with a view of seven states on a clear day. Hidden inside was a fall that turned red, green, black, orange and holiday colors on valentine's, St. Patrick's, Halloween and Thanksgiving and Christmas. The last two miles were a treacherous thrill ride up a snaking two lane mountain highway filled with all the breathless ascent of a roller coaster ready to be propelled at its zenith. The tourist coming down, amped up on sugarcoated dreams, soda pop, rainbow squirts, and homemade fudge dissolving like cotton candy in their mouths, would dare the decent without a tap of the brakes, making it the only place on earth where heaven could only collide with hell. I'm sure those old barns have rotted down, filling their fields in creosote abandonment. Perhaps the whitewash of time has eroded ROCK and even CITY leaving the passing soul wondering what there is left to SEE. The dream still exists amidst the fairy tale caverns and meandering limestone/sandstone trails on the very top of Lookout Mountain, waiting for a family of woodpeckers to roost in the metal SEE ROCK CITY birdhouse hooked to the V of my old oak."

John F. Hall

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