



**SIDEBAR TO: Rock City Barns:
An American Icon**

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CLARK BYERS: THE BRUSH BEHIND THE ROCK CITY BARNs

A shy teenager from a tiny Georgia town, Clark Byers was only a painter's apprentice when he created the first of what would become perhaps the most recognizable advertising icon on America's roadways--rural barns emblazoned with the eye-catching invitation to "See Rock City."

The year was 1935 and Clark's employer was Fred Maxwell, owner of a Chattanooga, Tennessee advertising company. At the time, Mr. Maxwell had been brainstorming with his friend, Garnet Carter, for an idea to court crowds to Mr. Carter's newly opened attraction on Lookout Mountain near Chattanooga, the gorgeous 10-acre natural attraction he'd christened Rock City Gardens.

The two hit upon the novel notion of painting promotional signs on the barns and buildings, strewn along the scenic country highways then favored by most motorists.

"They drove up and down the roads, making notes on the barns they wanted to use," recalled Clark of the two entrepreneurs. "Then, they told me to get the owner's permission to paint the roofs or sides of the buildings."

It was a job that occupied him for more than three decades.

Lugging an armload of merchandise like Rock City bathmats and thermometers, Clark made his pitch to property owners from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico: for renting the barn as advertising space, the farmer got the structure painted free.

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“At first, they never thought about being paid,” said Clark. “Later, they caught on and received from \$3 to \$5 for the use of their barns.”

For Clark, painting barns--almost 900 of them, in 19 states during the advertising form's 1950s heyday--meant braving everything from labor unions to angry bulls.

In addition to ropes, extension ladders and a portable platform stage, sign-painting called for paint--a flat black liquid Clark originally mixed up with linseed oil and lampblack. On one occasion in the 1940s, he bought a similar product at bargain prices when he paid 30 cents a gallon for postwar, government surplus paint.

He and his crews generally used 4-inch brushes and did all the work freehand. “I sized up roof section and spaced out the letters,” Clark explained. “Most of the time, I got it right.”

Slip-ups happened, however. Clark, who sometimes attracted gawkers' attention by painting backwards, once transposed the letters in “City” to read “Ctiy”--a mistake, he said, that “broke me of backwards painting.”

But he was seldom a showboat, instead working well into darkness to complete as many as three buildings in a single day. It wasn't unusual for him to turn his truck's lights on a barn to finish a roof at dusk.

He found time to make friends with hospitable farmers, however. From some, he received lemonade and from others, invitations to go on raccoon hunts. Even after retirement, he corresponded with many folks he met during this “barnstorming” days.

Those days came to an end in 1968 when Clark Byers was almost electrocuted during a thunderstorm while atop a barn struck by lightning. His injuries resulted in almost a year of hospitalization and recovery; although he would return to paint a few barns, younger men do the touchups today on the handful of barns Rock City still maintains.

Clark's retirement closely coincided with the mid-60s death knell of roadway signs, sounded by the Highway Beautification Act of Lyndon Johnson's presidency. In 1996, fewer than 100 of the vintage landmarks remain; now, other advertising vehicles spread the “See Rock City” message.

Clark retired to his North Georgia farm until his death in 2004. “If I ever get disabled, or too old to work at farming,” the spry octogenarian would say with a wink, “I'm going to take up painting--not on a barn, but on an artist's easel.”

Rock City Gardens is located on Lookout Mountain, about 6 miles from downtown Chattanooga, Tennessee. It is accessible from Interstate I-24 from Nashville, Tennessee; I-75 from Atlanta, Georgia; and I-59 from Birmingham, Alabama.

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Rock City Gardens is open everyday at 8:30am (except Christmas Day). For more information, call 706/820-2531 or 800/854-0675 and visit www.seerockcity.com.

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