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ROCK CITY BARNs: AN AMERICAN ICON

Since 1936, they have stood as genuine highway Americana, their bold white-on-black signs compelling both snowbirds and Sunday drivers to a spot near Chattanooga, Tennessee, where they could “See Rock City.”

The barns first appeared as advertising icons more than 80 years ago. Around 60 remain out of a rural network that once numbered near 900. Clark Byers painted the barns for three decades and became a legend in his own right by braving bulls, slippery roofs and lightning bolts. When he retired in 1969, he had painted some 900 barns in 19 states. He died in 2004.

Today, spotting one of these ever-recognizable structures not only gives tourists a look at a historic landmark, but takes them on a nostalgic jaunt back to a time when motorists drove blacktop lanes in search of family fun.

Depression-weary Americans were just rekindling their love affair with the automobile when a marketing brainstorm by Garnet Carter turned some country barns into billboards that spread the word on Rock City’s charms.

Carter was a promotional genius who invented Tom Thumb miniature golf, developed rich mountaintop homes and in 1932, opened his wife’s lushly landscaped gardens to the public.

A preserve of panoramic views and ancient geologic formations, the site the Carters christened “Rock City Gardens” had its marvels further enhanced by Frieda Utermohlen Carter. She had transplanted 400 species of wildflowers and shrubs along trails she’d marked out and strewn with pine needles - a botanical bounty that earned Rock City a coveted award from the Garden Club of America.

“Beautiful Beyond Belief,” is how some of the barn signs billed Rock City, “The Eighth Wonder of the World,” according to others. “Bring Your Camera,” urged many of the messages because, “When You See Rock City, You See The Best.”

The man behind both the slogans and the signs was 22-year-old Clark Byers, a self-taught painter who worked for a Chattanooga advertising firm. “When I started, Mr. Carter told me what barns to paint from the ones he’d made notes on while driving up and down U.S. 41,” said Byers.

“In the beginning, we mixed up our own paint using lampblack and linseed oil,” said Byers. “There were no such things as rollers; we used a 4-inch brush, never had to measure letters and always worked freehand. Once that paint got on, there was no getting it off.”

The eye-catching signs were as abundant as they were enduring, too. Trekking by pickup truck loaded with ladders, ropes and plenty of paint, Byers and his crews painted or touched up as many as three barns a day in 19 states.

At their heyday in the late fifties the barns were such beloved landmarks that onlookers often asked Clark Byers for his autograph. Their “See Rock City” slogan was so universally familiar that it was even found on an army PX in Vietnam, along with the whimsical notation, “Only 13,400 miles to Lookout Mountain.”

But the highway beautification movement of Lyndon Johnson’s mid-60’s presidency saw roadside signs as more of an eyesore than an icon.

The “Ladybird Act,” as the billboard-banning legislation was nicknamed, meant that many of Rock City’s rooftop messages had to be removed.

The Rock City barns that once dotted the map from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico are disappearing, bowing to time’s decay or being replaced by other marketing mediums.

Some of Clark Byers’ most clever catch phrases were buried under new, plain coats of paint and after nearly being electrocuted during a thunderstorm while on a repainting job, he retired to his home in Falling Water, Georgia in 1969 where he continued farming until his death in 2004.

His successors still paint Rock City barns, with most found in communities with colorful names like Stamps, Arkansas or Sunflower, Alabama. Home to most, however, is Tennessee, where several of the nostalgic structures have been named historic landmarks.

Today, Rock City’s charms are touted, not on the guest checks of country cafes, but in glossy print, television or radio campaigns. But, much like the perennial allure of the gorgeous gardens themselves, the new mediums’ message is unchanged, just the same as it was when rural barns beckoned vacationing motorists with the enticement: “SEE ROCK CITY.”

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

Rock City Gardens is open every day year-round at 8:30 a.m. EST (except for Christmas Day). For more information, visit www.seerockcity.com.

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