

Christina Hart

Coco80210@gmail.com

Dr. O'Donnell

ENGL-3130

December 5, 2024

ROCK CITY IN 1979: A MEMORY FROM MY CHILDHOOD

I was born at Memorial Hospital in Chattanooga, Tennessee in 1976 when Chattanooga was still a smoggy city with the dirty Tennessee River flowing near downtown and not yet the tourist attraction that it is now. As a child in the late 1970s and early 1980s, I was blissfully unaware of this, however, and only knew that there was a special place I liked to visit on Lookout Mountain. This magical place was Rock City.

My memories of touring Rock City with my family have come to symbolize much more than the fun of seeing the gnomes and rock formations. Rather, they epitomize an innocent, happy, and carefree time of my life when my family was intact, and it never occurred to me that someday it would not be. I have supplemented one such memory with details from my imagination to describe an excursion to Rock City when I was only three years old.

It is a hot July morning in 1979. At 8:30, the sun is filtering through the blinds in my blue room in a brick house in Chattanooga Valley, a suburb of Chattanooga. My mom comes into my room and asks, "Guess where we are going today?" I bounce up and down still in my bed yelling "Rock City, Rock City!"

"That's right, honey, we are going to Rock City."

She helps me dress quickly and eat the Pop Tarts I prefer for breakfast. While I eat, I watch her pack a picnic lunch of chips, bread, cans of potted meat, Cokes (the original – there is

no Coca-Cola Classic yet), and Little Debbie fudge rounds. She places the Cokes on ice in a small white and red cooler with “Campbell’s” printed on the side (no doubt given to my dad who was the manager of a Red Food grocery store as a promotional item).

After brushing my teeth, I carefully go down the stairs putting one foot and then the other on the same step before proceeding to the next. Safely in the basement, I go through the garage and to the car already pulled out into the driveway, and my dad boosts me into the front seat of our burgundy 1974 Plymouth Road Runner. No need to worry about car seats or seat belts for three-year-olds in 1979. The leather seats are already hot and stick to my legs as I scoot across to the middle of the bench seat carefully avoiding the metal clip of the seat belt holder that I have learned from sad experience will burn my little hand.

My dad pops a gospel music 8-track tape into the stereo system, and we are off! We soon come to the winding road that climbs Lookout Mountain. My dad takes the curves too fast for my mom’s taste. “Don! Slow down!!! There’s a car coming!”

“I know, I see it.”

“You make me so nervous the way you swerve over into the other lane.”

I sit quietly between them unable to reconcile the sudden tension in the car with the fun I am anticipating at Rock City.

Finally, we pull into the parking lot and park in a slanted space. Crossing a long gravel lot, we climb a couple of stone steps and walk across the plaza to the building that houses both the gift shop and the tickets. My dad pays for tickets, and then finally!!! It is time to enter this place of wonder. I approach the turnstile and position myself between its arms. My dad slides the ticket into the slot and tells me to walk forward while he turns the wheel to help me along.

We go through the door to the other side of the building where the pathway meanders past lush greenery and odd rock formations. This is exciting but only as a buildup to what I consider the main events – Fairyland Caverns and the Mother Goose Village. We venture on past Balanced Rock, and I giggle at my 250-lb dad’s theatrics as he inhales and slides through Fat Man’s Squeeze. We climb up towards Lover’s Leap and my dad hoists me up to look through the view finder. I look out over the mountains and valley and the seven states of Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, Kentucky, Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina that are indistinguishable from each other.

I don’t care though and am already skipping ahead towards the split that will take us to either the Swinging Bridge or the stationary bridge. My dad tries to cajole me into crossing the Swinging Bridge while my mom remains silent. I start sniffing so he capitulates, and we take the safer option. Birds chatter overhead, and the sun remains hot as it is now late morning.



My dad and I at Rock City in 1979

Finally, we reach Fairyland Caverns. The entrance to the cave is set into the side of the mountain. Once inside, we walk down the steps into the bowels of the earth looking up to see a gnome on a swing high above our heads. The first chamber is large with a waterfall that splashes into a wishing pool. Back then, people still carried money rather than debit or credit cards, and my dad rattles the coins around in his pocket and fishes out some pennies for me to throw into the water.

Then we start down the dim passageway where lights are set into the wall close to the ground to light our path. Soon, we peer into the first inset. Through the grills I see a mother reading her two children a nighttime story – presumably one of the fairy tales we are about to see. We pay attention to the path that features low long steps and carry on the adventure. Rip Van Winkle presses his hand to his forehead in confusion at this new world he wakes up in one hundred years after falling asleep, and Jack teeters in the air on his beanstalk. We proceed to peek in at Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and Little Red Riding Hood.

Now for the ultimate thrill – we enter the room dedicated to the Mother Goose Village. The room is set up so that multiple scenes are portrayed on what appears to be a huge table that is covered with castles, Mother Goose characters, and sundry props. Interspersed with the scenes are signs with the appropriate nursery rhyme inscribed. A rail keeps spectators back from the displays and we walk slowly clockwise around the room.

First, I see Little Bo Peep exhorting her sheep, and Tom, the piper's son, absconding with the pig. As we move along, one Jack jumps over the candlestick while another sits in a corner eating his curds and whey. Mother Hubbard opens her bare cupboard, and Little Miss Muffett is duly alarmed at the spider dangling in front of her face. Wee Willie Winkie runs through the town

in his night cap, but Little Boy Blue obviously slumbers on while the sheep frolic in the meadow.

On we go past Peter the Pumpkin Eater guarding his wife who is imprisoned in a pumpkin, the poor crooked man hobbling indefinitely through time, and Humpty Dumpty perching precariously on the wall. Then it's over as we emerge into the bright noonday sun, and I am starving, and my feet hurt, and "Please carry me, Daddy." He obliges, we slip hurriedly through the gift shop and get back in the car.

As we drive back down the mountain, we pass a few pull-offs with picnic tables. My parents choose one that is set a little farther back from the road than the others. My dad pulls our car off the road, and we pile out. As my mom opens the can of potted meat to spread it on bread for me, my dad rips open a bag of potato chips to share. After a few bites, I begin to feel better and start chattering about which Mother Goose exhibit I liked best. A couple of sips of cold Coke don't hurt either. And then my favorite – a Little Debbie fudge round! We focus on our lunch, surroundings, and conversation as there are no cell phones to distract my parents from the moment. They clean up our mess, throw it in the trash can, and we head for home where I will be carried into my blue bedroom, kick my shoes off, and take a well-deserved afternoon nap.

The rest of this page is intentionally left blank.

Lookout Mountain Fairyland Caverns, Rock City (00:06:51)



Video Tour of Fairyland Caverns and Mother Goose Village

Works Cited

“Fairyland Caverns / Rock City / Lookout Mountain / 2021.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Hidden

Atlas, 5 August 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=-dP72KpQxVA.