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### SHA celebrates 50 years of tourism professionalism

Southern Highlands Attractions (SHA), a group of like-minded tourism attractions stretching from the Shenandoah Valley to just into Georgia along the Blue Ridge Mountains, is celebrating fifty years of sharing information and seeking a higher level of professionalism and visitor service during 2007. Founded with 16 members, and despite a few members coming and going along the way, SHA today has 17 members and continues to meet on a regular basis.

When a group of tourism leaders met in Chattanooga to discuss forming the SHA in 1957, 16 sites signed on. Twenty-five years later, 12 of those 16 were still active. Today, nine of those have been active since the formation: Chimney Rock Park, Chimney Rock, N.C.; Gatlinburg Sky Lift, Gatlinburg, Tenn.; Grandfather Mountain, Linville, N.C.; Lookout Mountain Incline Railway, Chattanooga, Tenn.; Luray Caverns, Luray, Va.; Natural Bridge, Natural Bridge, Va.; Rock City Gardens, Lookout Mountain, Ga.; Ruby Falls, Chattanooga, Tenn.; and Tweetsie Railroad, Blowing Rock, N.C.

By that 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1982, Biltmore Estate, Asheville, N.C., and Christus Gardens, Gatlinburg, Tenn. had joined the group, followed by The Lost Sea, Sweetwater, Tenn. and Old Salem Museums & Gardens, Winston-Salem, N.C. by 1987. More recent members include Barter Theatre, Abingdon, Va., the Museum of the Cherokee Indian, Cherokee, N.C., Great Smoky Mountains Railroad, Dillsboro, N.C., and the Nantahala Outdoor Center, Bryson City, N.C.

Spencer Robbins, now a real estate agent in the North Carolina High Country, remembers the first days of the SHA, where he was active for 30 years.

“We had started a smaller group with about a 50 mile radius when I represented The Blowing Rock, including Chimney Rock, Biltmore, Grandfather Mountain and some others,” he recalled. “Working together had gone well, so Hugh Morton at Grandfather and I saw the benefit in extending the reach of the group.”

Ultimately, when the SHA was formed, it reached for hundreds of miles along the Blue Ridge, from Luray Caverns in the north to Rock City Gardens in the south. Representing natural wonders, points of scenic and historic interest, and top-rung entertainment, members were selected and approved only if they would meet and maintain the strict standards of the organization.

“Everyone got along so well, and everyone saw the benefit of exchanging information,” Robbins noted. “We also started the practice of privately inspecting each other’s attractions, and providing constructive criticism to professionalize the ways we greeted and treated customers. Those types of ‘mystery shops’ are still being done today as one of the requirements, and benefits, of membership.”

Teaming up also provided expanded but affordable promotional tools. Robbins recalls working with Kodak at one point to create films that promoted all of the family-friendly tourism stops. Kodak distributed the films; they often turned up on television being used as a filler when other programming was canceled for one reason or another, or in movie theaters.

In later years, collective brochures and posters were distributed, and the various members have always displayed the promotional brochures of fellow members. Today, a group website shows all of the sites for potential visitors.

While promotion has been valuable to attracting visitors, the networking and information sharing have been just as important to members over the years.

Bill Chapin, president and CEO of See Rock City, Inc., first officially attended SHA meetings 25 years ago.

“As a manager/operator, I think SHA’s value comes in providing an opportunity to network with people who have similar attractions, where we discuss changes and opportunities that impact travel and recreation,” Chapin said. “Although our specific attraction may not be the same as some others in the group, we’re all hospitality related, trying to find ways to meet the needs of our guests. Sharing those experiences is how you learn.”

It’s not just finding out what works well that benefits businesses such as Chapin’s. “Perhaps equally important, people in this group are willing to share their mistakes as well as their successes. Furthermore, over time, I have learned a lot from other professionals through the SHA, and I look forward to sharing some of that experience with younger people who are entering this industry.”

Mary Jaeger-Gale, general manager of Chimney Rock Park, attended her first SHA gathering in September 1981. “We learn from each other, but beyond that, we have traveled outside of the Blue Ridge region on a number of occasions to learn from travel businesses elsewhere in the country. That expands our knowledge and willingness to consider other ways of doing things,” she noted.

“But for me, the networking encouraged by the SHA has created business associates who have, in many cases, become lifelong friends. I know that the mentoring of earlier attendees has helped me and helped to grow Chimney Rock Park’s business. We have learned from our fellow members, and learned with them.”

Joe Waggoner, general manager of Christus Gardens, has helped represent the Gatlinburg attraction for twenty-three years, plus nine years before that with The Lost Sea, an attraction he encouraged to join.

“For me, it has been a great experience banding together with a group of well-recognized, well-thought-of, first-class family oriented attractions who respect each other and are willing to recommend each other,” Waggoner said. “Information sharing has been very valuable to all of

us, I believe. But equally, in good times and bad, the fellowship and the networking are meaningful, too. These are people you know and can call on when you need input.”

At the time of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the group, Tom Erwin, who had represented Gatlinburg Sky Lift and Ruby Falls over the first quarter century, stated, “The SHA has been remarkably successful as an all-volunteer organization because of the strong and consistent participation and inter-relationship of the attractions’ owners and top management.”

“That on-going commitment to top service and quality has not changed for fifty years now,” said Richard Rose, producing artistic director of Barter Theatre and current SHA president. “We believe our attractions stand above the crowd out there competing for travelers’ time and money, because we insist on doing a better job. It was the SHA’s original purpose, and we plan to continue to provide the best value and experience to visitors now and in the years to come.”

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The Southern Highlands Attractions website is [www.southernhighlands.org](http://www.southernhighlands.org).