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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 25th 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, mostly in North Carolina,” he recalled. “Working together went well, so we 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.

At the time of the 25th 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.