

Barnyard Rembrandts

The roster of dangers remains perilously similar, though they painted "See Rock City" barn signs decades apart. Clark Byers of Rising Fawn, Georgia, began salt-and-peppering the country's landscape with the black-and-white logo in the mid-1930s. He retired in 1971. Jerry Cannon of Georgetown, Tennessee, signed on in 1993 to promote the tourist site on Lookout Mountain overlooking Chattanooga.

Between them, Clark, 82, and Jerry, 37, have encountered angry yellow jackets, a nosy bear, a swooping vulture, biting dogs, an enraged bull, an errant power line, and unplanned descents from their lofty barn perches.

Clark, the first Rock City painter, recalls his 30-plus years on the job as precisely as the exact lettering he painted freehand. The shy man promised farmers a free roof repair and paint job, souvenirs, and, eventually, \$3 to \$5 for the privilege of banner-ing the words on the barn.

In 1968, he tangled with a 7,200-volt power line. "All of a sudden, pow! Like a shotgun went off at my head," he says. "The nurse said, 'It wasn't your time to go.'"

Travel and tourism twists and turns threatened the future of Rock City painting along the way. The Highway Beautification Act of 1965,



Clark Byers recalls once painting the Rock City logo backwards to intrigue gawking tourists. He also developed Sequoyah Caverns near his home.

which called for strict regulations of roadside signs, almost obliterated the Southern graffiti. But painting over the barn roofs after their message's delivery proved as futile as closing the barn door after the horse's escape.

"The signs are what send people to Rock City," says president Bill Chapin whose great-uncle, Garnet Carter, opened the site in 1932. The craggy mecca of rock formations and gardens hosts about 500,000 visitors annually.

For Clark, the barns meant steady pay during the De-

pression. "I was broke as a haint," the itinerant artist says. Humor smoothed the lumpy road just as linseed oil thinned his homemade paint. "Out of paint, out of money, going home to see my honey," he once wrote his benefactor. Wife Frances and their five children waited at Rising Fawn.

Derring-do antics broke up the monotony. "When you step in some slick wet paint, the only thing you can do is start a-runnin' [toward the lowest point of the roof], jumping those letters as you go," Clark recalls. "I've done that with a paint bucket in my hand and not spilled a drop."

"I don't think I can go that route," Jerry admits, as he paints on a gravity-defying barn in Crossville, Tennessee. The young painter creates such an exact forgery of Clark's legendary logo, his newly painted signs could fool even the master.

See *Rock City*. Three words transformed from vilified disfavor to valued icon. Or as Clark Byers puts it, "Ain't no use in lettin' it die. That's a no-no." Nancy Dorman-Hickson



Armed only with paint, brushes, and nerves of steel, Jerry Cannon takes on the challenge of a high-pitched roof in Crossville, Tennessee.

