

June 2008: Family Vacation - South and Midwest

4. Tennessee

Thursday June 26: Chattanooga: Shortly after noon, we arrive at this beautiful little city. The original plan called for visiting the riverfront park and downtown, but we decide to drop that (waah) and go directly to the attractions at Lookout Mountain.

Lookout Mountain is really the southernmost end of the Appalachians or Smokey Mountains, and stretches into Georgia and Alabama. The northern end is abrupt, just southwest of town, and strikingly visible. Many people live up here (rather like many people live on Monte Sano) (many people live on Mount Lemmon, too, but since Mount Lemmon is a *real* mountain, they are in a different category) in beautiful houses on the slopes and at the summit overlooking the valley, and there are at least three attractions: Rock City, the Incline Railway, and Ruby Falls. We are here to see those.

On the south side of the Mountain, just over the Georgia state line, is an interesting formation of huge limestone rocks with deep, narrow clefts. An enterprising couple in the early 1900s layed out an imaginative fantasyland which they named "Rock City". Part of the advertising was to paint "See Rock City" on barn roofs for miles around - this ad campaign is now legendary.

The attraction is real, and very interesting. A path threads among the tops of the rocks and through the little valleys, over suspension bridges and along cliffs, such as where this view of the falls is seen. I'm not quite sure if this fall is natural or if there is a pump at work, but it's pretty all the same. There are little nooks with benches to sit and enjoy the closeness, and too many people going through to have it last long. It really is quite popular; the parking lot had plates from all over the east.



(At the start of the path, we stood for a photo. At the end, we got to look at it - under politeness pressure, we bought it.)



At the furthest point of the trail is a plaza with what they claim is a view of seven states. Three I can believe, since the park is *in* Georgia, the Tennessee state line is real close, and Alabama isn't very far. But Virginia?

Toward the end of the path are features for which Rock City is famous as much as for the rocky scenery: caves with little grottos with fairy tale displays in fluorescent paint and black lights. Some are quite good, some are just sappy. In a large wooden building (but still part of the "cave") is a large display of fairy tales and nursery rhymes. Really quite amazing how much work went into these displays, and how well they are kept up.

We spend a lot of time at Rock City and thoroughly enjoy it, but the time comes to move on to the next attraction: the Incline Railway. This isn't a "ride", but a working transportation system, originally built in the late 1800s (and revamped and updated in the late 1900s) to serve residents on the mountain. There are two cars that balance each other; when one goes up, the other comes down, and there is a bypass in the middle where they pass each other. The railroad becomes steeper as it nears the top. While at the bottom, the slopy car's seats were tilted back, by the time it gets to the top (10 to 15 minutes later), they are tilted forward! The ladies found the ride up to be alarming, but entering the car for the trip down and staring at this steep (50 degree? 60 degree? *Steep.*) hill and the terminal visible *way* down there was downright uncomfortable. The Incline Railway was the least favorite experience. Except for me, I rather liked it, but I agree it wasn't as interesting as the other two attractions.



(At the lower terminal, we stood for a photo. At the end, we forgot to even look at it.)

At the top terminal is a gift shop and snack bar, and an exit to the community at the mountain summit. Two blocks walk brought us to the Lookout Mountain Battle Site. This is a National Park (out comes the new Golden Eagle Pass!) to preserve some sites of the "Battle Above the Clouds". Union forces had taken

the railroad hub of Chattanooga, but Confederate forces held the heights of Lookout Mountain and Missionary Ridge (east of town) and blockaded their supply lines. A force was gathered to dislodge the Rebels. I thought the Rebels would have the better of it, defending an elevation, but it turns out that muzzle-loading cannons don't work very well firing downhill. Also, with the fogs and mists at the altitude that day, it was hard to distinguish friend from foe. Sustaining heavy losses, the Confederates withdrew during the night, and the Union took Lookout Mountain.

The park has a couple of Confederate batteries and a monument built by the State of New York to commemorate the event and the New York units that participated. Most interesting is the gate to the park, which is a castle-like structure intended to model the insignia of the Army Corps of Engineers, who built it.

After our descent, we travel over to Ruby Falls, and get on the last tour of the day. Not surprisingly, the limestone Lookout Mountain has caves, especially a huge one visited by prehistoric Indians and used as a temporary hospital during the War. When the railroad built a new line at the foot of the mountain, they sealed the entrance. Now, a young man who explored the cave as a boy thought that people would pay money to visit the cave, so he formed a company, bought some land on the hillside, and sank an elevator shaft. A few hundred feet down, they hit an unexpected cavity. Upon exploring it, they found an underground waterfall, which was named after the entrepreneur's wife, Ruby. Even though they continued the shaft all the way down to the target cave, the Ruby Falls cave proved so popular that nobody was visiting the larger cave, so they stopped that part of the tour.

(After exiting the elevator down inside the cave, we stood for a photo. At the end, we got to look at it - but turned it down. An unwise decision, in light of future events, I think.)



The cave itself is not so interesting, by the standards of people who have seen Carlsbad and Kartchner, even though they *do* have a few speliothems they show off. There aren't really very many passages, either, which I find strange for a limestone cave. But the waterfall truly is breathtaking.

An interesting (in not a very positive way) aspect of our tour was our companions. The young tour guide was unappreciative of his opportunity (in contrast to the volunteers even at lowly Colossal Cave in Tucson, who really enjoy their jobs), and made light of the canned audio explanations installed at points along the way, and made the remarks and "jokes" about cave features in a detached, uninteresting way that made it clear he had said the same lines too many times. But the family we were with - loud, laughing at every poop remark, know-it-all, off-color tee-shirt themes. The mom kept lagging behind to take pictures of every cave feature. The grandpa passed *a great deal of gas*. Yes, my daughters were quite amused with their encounter with a *Redneck* family!

It is late now, and growing dark, but we have one more thing we "must" see, so back into town we go, following our low-resolution atlas to find the Chattanooga Choo Choo. Chattanooga is still a railroad hub, judging from the switchyards we saw from the Mountain, and back when passenger rail was popular (that is, before Amtrak), the run from Cincinnati to Chattanooga was given this imaginative name - in the tradition of "Wabash Cannonball" and "Empire Express", and continued even today; the Amtrak service to Tucson is called the "Sunset Special". Of course, the rail route doesn't run anymore, but there's something on the map, my girls like singing the "pardon me boys" song, so we *have* to see it.



Turns out it is a serious attraction in its own right; a convention hotel in downtown Chattanooga, several nice restaurants, and a few museums, including one featured around this train. No way of telling whether this locomotive was actually used for the line, but here it is, it's clearly authentic, and there's nothing that says it wasn't!

It is quite late now, and another two hours to Huntsville, so we get our dinner to eat in the car, and drive out of town and over the Tennessee River, glittering in the faint moonlight filtering through the clouds.

On to Alabama: See Part 5

Saturday June 28: Nashville: Today will be a busy day, so we start as early as we can (9-ish) and jump on the freeway for Opryland.

Way back, a young executive in an insurance company tried to jump on the bandwagon of advertising his company by having it host a radio program of classical music. So the company set up a studio and started into the broadcast business. At one point, their scheduled program couldn't come off, but "the show must go on", so he put his uncle (or some relative) on, who played folk songs on his fiddle. Judging from all the positive mail that resulted, they knew they had a hit on their hands. The program gradually evolved into groups playing folk, country, and western music; Roy Acuff introduced singing; more popular musicians came on the program, even more musicians were made popular by the program. It turned into the most listened-to radio show in America, then television. The live audience outgrew the radio studio in the insurance company building, so they moved to the Ryman Theatre (formerly a church) downtown. When they outgrew the Ryman, the new theatre was built. And that is the story of the Grand Ole Opry, which *made* Nashville the capital of country music, and which is still a giant step in the careers of musical entertainers today.



We got there a bit early. Well, lots early, so we already got our showboat tickets. We are waiting to get tickets to the backstage tour. The Opry complex includes the Opry House, Roy Acuff's home, a museum, a huge shopping mall, the Gaylord Opryland Resort Hotel, the General Jackson showboat...

(The tour started with a family picture. At the end of the tour - we turn down the offer.)

Here is the sound stage where they still film or televise events. This is the sound stage where they filmed "Hee Haw". Our tour guide was a feisty lady who called herself "Texas Ruby" and clearly enjoyed her job. We thought she might be an Opry member. Afterwards, we found out that there *was* a Texas Ruby who was an Opry member, but she died quite a while back.



Here's the auditorium that is filled solid every Saturday night. We thought about getting tickets for tonight's show - but there's just too much on our schedule. Note the pews; they wanted to keep the feel of the Ryman, which, being a former church building, had pews.

On the stage of the Grand Ole Opry.



When they built the Opry House, they cut a circle out of the stage of the Ryman and inset it here. Kind of a "carrying the torch" for the past. Neat.

After leaving the Opry House, it is time to board the General Jackson Showboat for our luncheon cruise.

(Just before boarding, we get our picture taken. During dinner, a girl walks around the tables selling the packages. This is pretty clever, as it's more difficult to hand the package back and say "No" than it is to simply avoid the counter displaying the portrait packages. We succumb.)

We explore the boat, including the upper deck where a band (a la Nashville) is entertaining, and the little on-board gift shop. It's like the Disneyland riverboat, only... real. This is off the starboard side.



It becomes clear that there are three classes of passengers. The cheap fare are for those who simply want to ride for a couple of hours, and there are benches, tables, and indoor lounges for people to sit with their drinks from the bar and watch the river roll by. A second class has bought into a buffet lunch on the second deck. The best class has bought into a fancy dinner in the Victorian Theatre, and entertainment by the Peking Acrobats.



A view of the Cumberland River from the bow of the riverboat. Classic riverboat gangplank, now unused. Yes, this boat is also registered with the Coast Guard, and we get a safety orientation after getting underway.

Unlike Disneyland, *this* paddlewheel is the actual propulsion of this boat. We notice there is a set of steam calliope pipes at the upper deck; I assume they get used for special occasions.





Shortly after leaving the dock, the dinner class passengers are called into the Theatre. We have assigned seats, and share a table with a young couple from Memphis (although the man came from Milwaukee and spent time in Chicago, so he had some tips for us) and a family from Bowling Green, Kentucky, who had brought an Austrian exchange student with them. Interesting conversation. Great dinner. Then the Acrobats started their show - a group of young Chinese men and women (mostly performing separately) who did balancing, contortions, falls, and other amazing feats. At the end of the show, we got their video - everybody is selling something.

The show and the dinner end just before the boat returns to the dock. We disembark, return to our car, and roll out east for our next destination: Andrew Jackson's home, the Hermitage.

Andrew Jackson did a pretty good job of running his plantation; his heirs did not, and eventually ended up donating the property to "The Hermitage Ladies' Association", which is kind of a hereditary thing like the Daughters of the Confederacy, and they run the place. And do a very good job. The Visitor's Center has a nice little museum with a very good historical film about Jackson, and a pricey gift shop, and will soon be adding a cafe. The HLA girls dress in period costumes and take visitors in bite-size groups through the mansion.



The mansion is a marvel of conservation. Most of the furniture was owned by Jackson. Perhaps the most amazing thing is the original wallpaper (almost 200 years old); scenes from The Odyssey, in vibrant color. One of the stories about the place is that, during and after Jackson's Presidency, he would entertain a lot of

visitors here, and put them up for the night. There were a few guest rooms upstairs, separate for men and women I assume, and the double-size beds would be used by three people! Then they would spread mats on the floor in the rooms and in the upstairs hall for more guests! *That's* entertaining!

Outside is the garden, with the tomb of Rachel and Andrew, and the family cemetery plot. Further out are slave quarters, including the original farmhouse when Jackson was just getting started. As the plantation grew and the mansion was built and more slaves were acquired, the two-story log farmhouse was dismantled and reconstructed into two one-story slave quarters.

It was interesting, and well worth the trip, but now they are closing, so we get back in our car and head back into Nashville. On the other side of the town, around the bend of the river, is downtown, which includes the Parthenon.



There was some big exhibition in the early 1900s that was hosted in Nashville (before they had become the big music capital), and to show off their sophistication, they

built a reconstruction of the Parthenon in Athens. Impressive.

It would be even more impressive if it had been open when we got here. There is a statue of Athena inside, and probably other classical sculptures. Hmmm... wonder if the neo-Greek pagans gather here to worship...



The Parthenon is located in a nice park on the west side of the city, and there is some sort of street fair or festival going on, so there are cars parked all over. After looking around a bit, we decide we'd better leave.

But not before we at least look at Downtown. So using our crippled atlas map, we try to navigate eastward. Somehow (not surprisingly) we get a little bit lost, and wind up in Vanderbilt University! Big place. Didn't realize it was here. But we strike the right road, and drive through downtown, narrowly missing a fourth disaster for stupid tourist traffic moves (whew!).



Nashville really has an interesting and walkable downtown area. We don't really see them with a quick drive-through, but there are several key areas, including the Music district (with the recording companies and the Hall of Fame and the honky-tonks where aspiring musicians hope to be discovered), the Historic district, the Capital district, and so forth. We drive past the Ryman Theatre and the Tennessee Capital Building, and then decide it really is time to quit. Oh, the AT&T Building is visible all over the area, although it is really known as - the Batman Building!

On to Kentucky: See Part 6