

## Notes to accompany donation to Roanoke Public Libraries of photos of Explore Park

Photos taken by Rupert Cutler,  
Executive Director, Virginia's Explore Park, 1991-1997  
Notes by Rupert Cutler  
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This narrative is an informal overview and summary of the subjects shown in the 4x6-inch color and black-and-white "snapshot" photos in three albums. Many of the photos are self-explanatory. I have written the names of people or places on the backs of some of the photos. They are in random order. A few photos unrelated to Explore Park are included. This narrative is being written from memory some 30 years after the photos were taken and the information is subject to error. The early history, before my time with the project, is second-hand and fragmentary.

*Those interested in reading a day-by-day history of Explore Park during this time that provides details on the people, places and events illustrated by these photos are referred to my personal papers in Virginia Tech Libraries Special Collection at Blacksburg. See, [https://digitalsc.lib.vt.edu/Ms2020-005\\_CutlerMRupertPapers](https://digitalsc.lib.vt.edu/Ms2020-005_CutlerMRupertPapers)*

Other park staff members and co-workers who were associated with the park during this time can provide additional information on the places and persons in the photos. They include Joyce Waugh, Scott Sarver, Eddie Goode, Louise Hunley, Scott and Laurie Spangler, Richard Burrow, Virginia Laubinger, Roger Ellmore, Elmer Hodge, and Mrs. Menno Kinsinger.

Explore Park was the brainchild of Bern Ewert, City Manager of Roanoke in the late 1980s. Bern and his city engineer friend Richard Burrow were invited to leave their city posts and were, using a contract with Bern's consulting firm Clearwater Consultants, hired by the board of the River Foundation. The board included the men who had created Center in the Square and were among the leading citizens of the Roanoke Valley including T. A. Carter, Jack Hancock, George Cartledge, Norman Fintel, Larry Hamlar, and Horace Fralin. The purpose of the River Foundation was to create a tourist destination along the Blue Ridge Parkway that would encourage travelers to stay overnight in the Roanoke area.

Bern Ewert had been an assistant city manager of Charlottesville prior to coming to Roanoke and in that role had proposed creation of a frontier village/Lewis & Clark-themed park as Charlottesville's contribution to the 1976 celebration of the 200th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, but the city opted to bring Queen Elizabeth to town instead. Bern kept the theme park idea in mind and when asked by the River Foundation to propose an attraction for the Roanoke area he drew upon his Charlottesville idea and came up with the Explore Park concept. Bern hired the Jones & Jones company in Seattle that had designed several theme parks and zoos to create a plan for Explore Park.

Their plan, described in an 11x17-inch, inch-thick spiral-bound document, was ambitious and expensive to implement. It included a zoo, water features including a water slide and a bateau boat ride, a university research campus, a youth summer camp, and an Indian village. Simultaneously, the Explore Park leaders lobbied for and won a federal grant to fund an extension of the Blue Ridge Parkway into Explore (\$10 million, thanks to Senator John Warner) and state funds to buy 1,100 acres of private land along the Roanoke River just below the Parkway for the land base of the park (\$6 million, thanks to Delegate Dick Cranwell). The land acquisition process was complex. Roanoke County Administrator Elmer Hodge and Joyce Waugh helped with the land acquisition process. Bern scouted the region for historic structures to move to the park to populate the envisioned Blue Ridge frontier community and bought several houses and barns and had them disassembled and brought to the park site. Ren Heard was hired to do this work.

Delegate Cranwell and his Roanoke Valley colleagues won passage by the Virginia General Assembly of an act creating the Virginia Recreational Facilities Authority to be the administrator of Explore Park. It is not a state agency but is empowered to sell bonds and raise funds to run the park. It continues to be the owner of the park which it has leased to Roanoke County.

In late 1990 I was contacted by Bern Ewert and asked to join him for lunch in Washington, D.C. At the time, I was President (chief executive officer) of a national environmental nonprofit organization, Defenders of Wildlife. Bern heard about me through Ohrstrom family member Maggie Bryant of Middleburg, VA with whom Bern and I had spoken about funding for Explore. We met and he spent the night with my wife Gladys and me at our home in Reston, VA. He asked me to join his staff as park Education Director. I would be tasked with creating an environmental and historical education center at Explore. At that time, I was considering how I might leave Washington, D.C. where I had worked on and off for 30 years because I was tired of the commute and the pressure of working for a board of directors that was unclear within itself of the purpose of Defenders of Wildlife. I knew I could carry the \$30,000 per year grant I had been receiving from the Cordelia Scaif May Family Foundation in Pittsburgh and the \$5,000 per year grant I had been receiving from the Ohrstrom Foundation in Middleburg with me to help fund my Explore Park position. I accepted Bern's offer and moved to Roanoke in December of 1990. Gladys and I lived in the Patrick Henry Hotel until we bought a house in South Roanoke.

The offices of Explore Park at that time were in the Liberty Trust Bank building downtown. Joyce Waugh was leaving her post there and I took over her former office that included a closet used as storage for "buffalo feed" for the bison that had been given to the park and kept in a fenced tract on Rutrough Road owned by the park across the road from the main campus of the park. The feed attracted flies, and I was greeted by a cloud of flies when I opened the door. Joyce explained the situation and removed the buffalo feed. Penny Lloyd was Bern's administrative assistant and Richard Burrow was project engineer.

At that time Explore Park consisted of an undeveloped forested tract of land along both sides of the Roanoke River (partly in Roanoke County and partly in Bedford County) with a rough access road off Rutrough Road into it that led to the river. (All development took place on the Roanoke County side.) Bern and Richard had erected some small signs showing where envisioned future buildings would be built. I joined them in showing the rough, undeveloped tract and explaining the vision to Roanoke Mayor Noel Taylor and other local government figures. We spent months attending local meetings and overcoming a lot of local opposition to the proposed theme park development from neighbors who foresaw traffic and other problems.

Bern was unable to find funding to implement the Jones & Jones master plan which would have cost millions of dollars to build out. In early 1991 the River Foundation board, which was funding the project with its members' personal funds, decided not to renew Bern's consulting contract and Bern left the project. At that point I became the de facto chief executive officer of the park project and soon was given the title of park Executive Director. My first decision was to re-cast the vision of the park into a more affordable "living history" park, taking advantage of the several historic buildings that already had been acquired but scaling back the envisioned development to provide a west-of-the-Blue Ridge "mini" version of Colonial Williamsburg to show a different culture from the plantation society of Tidewater Virginia, that of the Scots-Irish and German settlement of western Virginia in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The potential audience of the living history park included classes of school children studying Virginia history.

The photos in the collection were taken by me, except (obviously) of the photos of me. They begin chronologically with shots of Ewert and me showing the undeveloped park site to Mayor Taylor and showing off the park to U.S. Senator Gaylord Nelson who was in Roanoke at my invitation to speak at the local observance of Earth Day in April 1991. There are several images of Brugh Taven on its original site in Botetourt County as well as a series of images of the disassembly, moving and reconstruction of the tavern and of the man who did that work, Menno Kinsinger of Stuarts Draft, VA.

There are many images of the Hofauger House that was moved from its original site on Colonial Avenue across from the intersection of Ogden Road in Roanoke including pictures of the house's interpreters cooking in the fireplace, cultivating a garden, raising livestock including chickens, geese, pigs, and sheep, hosting events including bluegrass music on the porch, and serving as the focal point of an Indians-frontiersmen battle.

Other structures shown include the Houtz Barn from Salem where the celebration of the grand opening the park was held on July 4, 1994. It is a bank barn and was used as a stable for horses that were hitched to a wagon that provided horse-drawn trips through the park. Local musician Curley Ennis performed on the guitar and banjo at this site and elsewhere in the settlement area. The one room schoolhouse was moved from Burnt Chimney, Franklin County to the park. The Mountain Union Church was moved from Botetourt County.

The Indian-style "sweat lodge" was constructed using instructions from a Cherokee leader and was later disassembled at the Indians' request because they decided it was not being used in a respectful manner. The high point in the use of the sweat lodge came in circa 1992 when the USDA Forest Service held an important national meeting in Roanoke at my invitation and a group of Forest Service personnel led by a Native American leader in the Forest Service entourage conducted a bona fide "sweat" experience there (I was a participant.)

Other structures shown include the Taubman Welcome Center and the visitor center that was funded in part with federal and state grants and is used by the National Park Service as an official Blue Ridge Parkway visitor center. There also is the Shenandoah (Life Insurance) Picnic Pavilion and the hand-made log structure used by interpreters Scott Sarver and Eddie Goode to portray the "long hunter" time period. There is the park store ("New Mountain Mercantile") staffed by Kristin Waters, at the end of the road to the river, and the blacksmith setup. The pens built to house red wolves, a joint effort with the Mill Mountain Zoo in collaboration with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's red wolf captive breeding program are shown at their opening ceremony. I raised grant funds for their construction from the Ford Motor Company and a West Coast oil company.

There are images of me with my successor as park director, Roger Ellmore, who came from a Holiday Inn background and later became head of the Smith Mountain Lake 4-H Center.

Perhaps the most "colorful" interpreters were Dan Abbott, the part-Indian interpreter of the Native American site and who was expert at making stone points and other Indian technology and was a fascinating speaker, and Scott Sarver and Eddie Goode, the outstanding interpreters of the Long Hunter encampment site, who fired a black powder rifle, showed the deer skin tanning process, and invited guests to participate in their work.

The staff offices of the Explore Park were moved from the Liberty Trust Bank building to the Vinton War Memorial second floor offices we shared with Blue Ridge Parkway staff, then to the park where we used two construction trailers obtained from the Carilion Clinic when they were no longer of use to them. We obtained a parking lot payment kiosk to use at the park entrance to accept entrance fees. (Income from entrance fees was miniscule. Contracts with area school districts to host school classes and grants from local governments and the Commonwealth of Virginia kept the park afloat financially until the state appropriation was no longer forthcoming at which point the park became unsustainable as a staffed interpretive site.)

There are photos of park staff social get-togethers including a Christmas party at which I played trombone, of a major cross-country bicycle race at the park, and of musical events held there. The grist mill and batteau demonstrations came into being after my tenure at the park.