



The Tuckaleechee Caverns
Gift Shop unearths childhood memories
for Gen Xers, Baby Boomers.

EXPEDITION EXPERTS

STORY BY CHRISTINE SCHAFFRAN

Like most young boys, Bill Vananda and Harry Myers were known to explore the foothills beyond their Townsend, Tennessee, backyards.

“They found it in the early 30s, they knew it was there,” says Jill Williams, manager of the gift shop of Tuckaleechee Caverns. “But it didn’t become commercial until the 1950s.”

1953 to be exact. That’s when the duo staked their claim to the caverns and turned it into a tourist attraction. And it wasn’t until 1969 that the gift shop came along.

Known as the “Greatest Site Under the Smokies,” the Tuckaleechee Caverns are the highest-rated cave or cavern of the eastern United States, its website boasts. “Carved inside the earth’s oldest mountain chain and estimated to be between 20 million to 30 million years old, the caverns are rich in history and lore in recent years as well.”

A history that began as a playground for a couple of boys who became business partners. In 1983, the partners went their separate ways when Vananda bought his partner out and dedicated his life and family to showing others what lay beneath the surface some 150 feet down.

And above ground, the family keeps the legacy alive by selling their most popular treasures in the gift shop, a 2,000-square-foot capsule that preserves the history of the cavern and those it captivates.

ABOVE GROUND

The gift shop began as an afterthought in 1969 to cool the bodies of those who braved the mile and a half and 410 steps it takes to walk the length of the cave.

From name-drop hats to gems and crystals, The Tuckaleechee Caverns Gift Shop is known for its variety.





Among the T-shirts, jewelry and drinkware, visitors will find more nostalgic items, such as 20-cent 1970s postcards and leather change purses.

In the early days, the gift shop served as the buffer between the 58 degree cave below ground and the blast of heat one faced when they ventured outside in the summer heat. In fact, the cave fed the gift shop and was the air-conditioner that cooled the facility.

"They had to stop having it funneled in through the duct work because of the moisture and it started to [produce] mildew, and mold," says Williams, one of 15 employees at the cave operation. "So they did have it that way, but not anymore."

Among the T-shirts, hoodies, shot glasses, mugs, magnets, stuffed animals, stickers and other name-drop paraphernalia are more nostalgic items such as 20 cent postcards from the 1970s, glass-horse figurines, leather change purses, Indian headdresses, drums, miniature tepees, carved wooden train whistles and an Interstate Highway bingo game.

"We've got some stuff in here that we've had since the 80s that are still here like porcelain figurines and salt shakers," Williams notes with a laugh. "We're trying to phase them out but every once in a while, there will be this one customer that says 'I've been looking for these for like 20 years,' and I'm like, 'well, you found them.'"

Most notably, Williams says, are the geese salt and pepper shakers that are adorned with a

mauve ribbon on the neck of the salt shaker, and a blue ribbon on the neck of the pepper shaker.

OH, THE MEMORIES

As one wanders among the rows of figurines on shelves, rounders of apparel, and glass cases with knives and gems, Williams says, there are a select few items that invoke an audible gasp when a customer recalls them from their own childhood. Such is the case with a particular necklace that seems to be a cherished memory for many.

"There are people that are in their 50s, 60s, that say, 'we haven't seen these since we were children,'" she notes. They are referring to beaded necklaces — one has a little Native American papoose and another features a Native American woman wearing a hat and dress.

And for the men, a simple oval-shaped change purse convinces them to open their wallets.

"They're like an egg shape and you squeeze them and they open," Williams says. "And the men, the older men like my dad, he's 70, and he's like 'you can't find those anywhere' and those men they buy them every time they come in."

For the kids, it's the modern day toys that grab their attention, such as dinosaur hand-grabbers and foam kits and "anything that glows," like bouncy balls.

"It's amazing because the kids bypass the necklaces and the bead work, but then you see people who are 40 to 60 and they're like 'oh my goodness,' Williams points out. "So it kind of brings it back to them."

Other top-selling items include name-drop hoodies, T-shirts, shot glasses and keychains. Williams notes anything personalized or customized with the Tuckaleechee name, such as an ornament or a magnet, is a sought-after memento.

"Anything with our name on it, and possibly a picture of inside of a cave," she says.

Among the list of those helping to keep the Tuckaleechee name alive are the vendors behind the apparel, gifts and accessories. Williams says the shop relies on Souvenirs of the Smokies Inc., Squire Boone Village, Legacy Wholesale, J America

Glass animal figurines and geodes form an impressive display in Tuckaleechee Gift Shop's front window.

