

The LOST World of Sid and Marty Krofft

May 24 marks the 25th anniversary of the opening of the Kroffts' theme park in the Omni International complex, which is now home to the CNN Center. This is a story of a city trying and failing to find itself. By Ben Mayer.



Way before Wolf Blitzer reported or Larry King went live, the CNN Center was inhabited by a different breed of men in suits. Names like Bernard Shaw and Peter Arnett that made the network famous were preempted by the likes of Witchiepoo and Hoo Doo. Now, former inhabitants prepare to blow out the candles on their 25th anniversary cake. Though most people do not know about its past, the Cable News Network's building was once occupied by a less conventional cast of characters, Sid and Marty Krofft's creations. Yet, on the tour, guides do not tell patrons of the first occupants, making it difficult to discover the lost World of Sid and Marty Krofft.

To understand how the World of Sid and Marty Krofft came to Atlanta, it's important to understand Atlanta in the '70s.

The CNN Center was originally built as a part of the Omni International complex. The growing trend in urban development in the 1970s was large commercial centers, like the Rockefeller Center. "When I first came to Atlanta, the white power structure was dominant," said Dr. Dana White, a professor of Urban Studies at Emory University and an accomplished urban historian. "[Maynard] Jackson was vice-mayor in 1973. When the Omni came into being, the only new thing was Peachtree Center, which was one third of the size it is now." The task of building the Omni was contracted to Tom Cousins over John Portman at a time when Atlanta was just beginning to boom. The first to go up were the parking decks that remain today and the Omni Coliseum, which has since been torn down and rebuilt as the Philips Arena, in 1972. After that, the two main office buildings, the hotel and what is known today as the CNN Center were erected, completing the Omni International complex in 1976.

Though they were not the first inhabitants of the building, Sid and Marty Krofft brought national attention to a section that occupied 10 percent of the Omni International complex and made up 10 percent of its income. The Kroffts had humble beginnings hailing from Athens, Greece, where their family had maintained puppet theatres for generations and achieved national fame. After living in Canada, the Kroffts settled in Long Island where Sid and Marty grew up. As a young adult, Sid decided to study abroad at the Lido in France to hone his puppet skills, already nationally renowned from his performances on "The Jack Benny Show." When



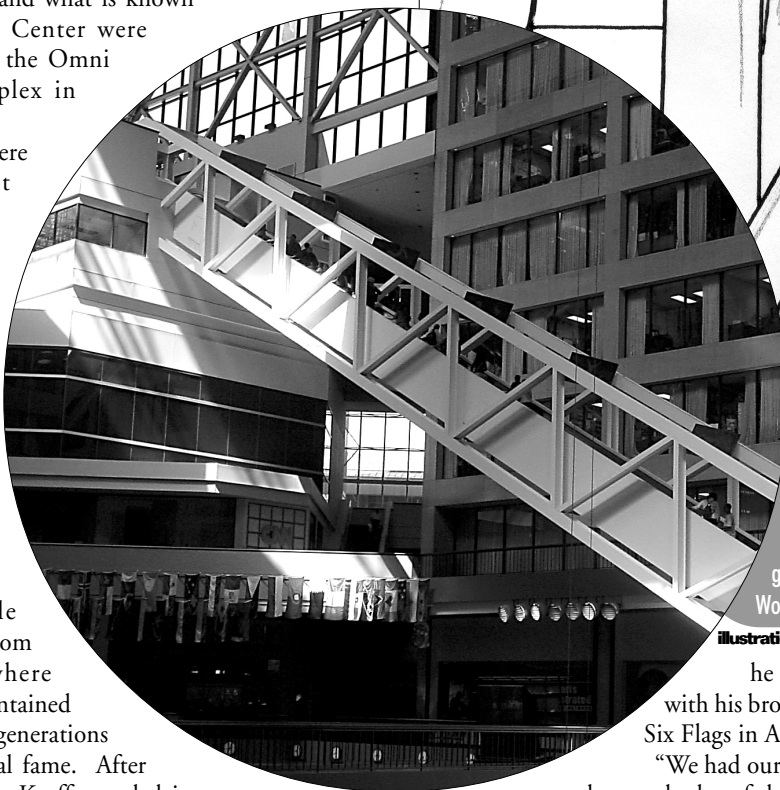
Upon entering The World of Sid and Marty Krofft, park-goers had the choice of either riding the world's longest free-span escalator to the Grand Entrance of the park (now the entrance to the CNN Center Tour), or descending to the "Living Island Adventure" via a mineshaft elevator. At the Grand Entrance, park-goers were greeted by 18-foot high mimes holding huge balloons that reached the roof. Live mimes sculpted balloons into animal caricatures. On this same level, park-goers entered Fantasy Fair, a spoof of a carnival. Here, visitors also viewed sideshow acts such as The World's Littlest Little Person, The Fat Lady and The Tattooed Belly Dancer. -- Luli Petersen

Illustration by Lauren Yarbrough, photo by Carin Berger

he returned, he teamed up with his brother to set up a booth at Six Flags in Atlanta.

"We had our show at Six Flags Parks and created a lot of the attractions for them," Sid Krofft said. From there they set their sights on Hollywood and set up shop with a light budget for a fantastic, psychedelic show with full-body puppets and elaborate sets. They dipped into their own pockets and were soon enjoying

success with their Saturday morning children's TV shows like *H.R. Pufnstuf*, *The Bugaloos*, *Lidsville*, *Sigmund and the Seamonsters*, *The Land of the Lost* and *Far Out Space Nuts*. Most of their shows featured strange creatures ranging from dragon mayors to hats to a winged rock 'n' roll band whose lives were hampered by classic villains like Benita Bizarre. Their work in television, however, was not all puppets and fantasy. They also tried their hand at variety shows like *The Brady Bunch Hour*, *Barbara Mandrell and the Mandrell*



Sisters and The Donny and Marie Variety Show.

Soon thereafter, the Kroffts set their sights on a slightly more epic undertaking: a theme park. They decided to put what would they hoped would be the first of many indoor, amusement parks on the edge of downtown Atlanta, seeking to bolster depressed urban areas.

"The whole idea of the park was to bring people together," Sid told *The Catalyst* in an exclusive interview March 30. "It's not like you were wandering around with just your friends. Everybody was having a huge party and people got to talk together and go get on the rides together, and you met people there. That was an important factor of the park."

Great pains were taken to raise revenue and recruit several national banks and investment groups for the venture. Initial projected costs were estimated at \$14 million for the park.

"We built the park in Los Angeles and we shipped it to Atlanta so we probably had about 200, 40-foot trucks going to Atlanta to deliver everything," Sid's brother Marty remembered.

The hoopla began to mount with slews of advertisements from major Atlanta businesses like Rich's, where park tickets were sold, boasting: "Now all the fun is indoors."

On the Sunday before it opened, Atlanta's elite enjoyed a champagne toast, black-tie affair in the recently completed park. Prominent guests like Tony Orlando toured the park in what Mayor Maynard Jackson called "the greatest opening in Atlanta since *Gone With the Wind*," and "the most fantastic thing that ever hit any downtown in the world." Performances included Kate Smith's rendition of "God Bless America" and a Peggy Fleming routine in the ice skating rink located in the center of the facility. Yet Cousins was pessimistic from the beginning, telling the Atlanta papers about the great risk involved, even as the rest of Atlanta was basking in glow of a grand opening.



Sid and Marty Krofft's grand experiment officially opened for business on Monday, May 24, 1976, the same year as the Georgia World Congress Center. The park operated on several levels, with each floor having a different theme. First, patrons took the 205-foot, Westinghouse escalator that still remains in the CNN Center today to the top of the park for the Fantasy Fair, which featured a midway with talking cats, tattooed belly dancers, fire-eaters, snake-charmers and magicians.

"The whole park had shows everywhere but you didn't go into a theatre; it was out in the streets," Sid said. "As you walked down the streets there were all kinds of performers, hundreds of them. The park was a show just for you."

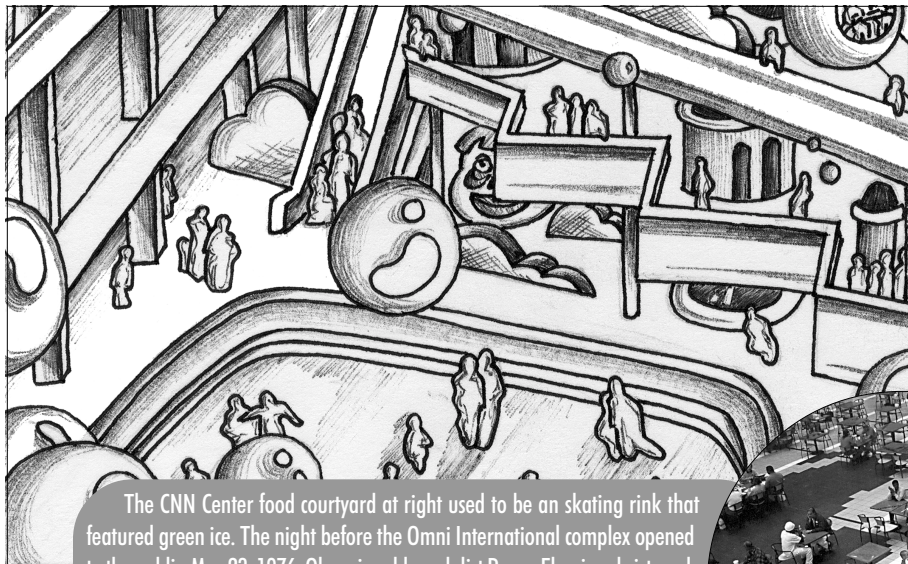
"I remember the escalator and thinking it was gigantic," said Atlanta Braves merchandise associate Ward Jones. "I was about 3 when I went and I remember thinking it was the greatest thing I had ever been to."

From there, guests descended into Tranquility Terrace where they were entertained by jugglers and puppeteers and rode mythological characters on the 47-ton, crystal carousel, which was later bought by Disney after the park closed.

"It was based on Greek mythology characters and we had sculptors come to Los Angeles from all over the world," Marty said.

The next level down, Uptown, featured an arcade and the center of attention in the park, the pinball ride. Guests sat in a giant silver pinball and were shot through flippers and bumpers and into holes with flashing lights.

"[The] Headline News [studio] is where the human



The CNN Center food courtyard at right used to be an skating rink that featured green ice. The night before the Omni International complex opened to the public, May 23, 1976, Olympic gold-medalist Peggy Fleming christened the ice to a chorus of cheers from the upscale crowd in attendance. The same night, Mayor Maynard Jackson remarked "the World of Sid and Marty Krofft surely is the most fantastic thing that ever hit any downtown in the world. It's the greatest opening since the opening of *Gone With the Wind*." -- Mark Anderson

Illustration by Lauren Yarbrough, photo by Trang Nguyen

"It was just wonderful"

Mary Elizabeth McMahon is a senior sales manager for the Savannah Marriott Riverfront Hotel. Twenty-five years ago, however, she was a group sales manager for the World of Sid and Marty Krofft.

Catalyst: What was a typical day of your job like?

McMahon: My job was to get companies or groups to have functions there. I contacted a lot of companies in Atlanta to have outings and did a lot of site inspection tours for meeting planners.

Catalyst: What do you remember most about the park?

McMahon: The crystal carousel was just beautiful. It was such an impressive sight, even looking from the bottom up. They had an Elton John Stage show, There was a puppet that looked just like him that played the piano and sang some of his songs.

Catalyst: Why do you think the park closed?

McMahon: People didn't want to come downtown. Everyone thought it would be a major competitor with Six Flags. The price was too high, too. You could go to Six Flags and spend the whole day for less.

Catalyst: What did you think when it closed?

McMahon: I remember hearing rumors and then it closed suddenly. I loved my job. I got to show people a fun time. It was such a wonderful place; it was like fantasyland. They spent so much money on it that it should have worked.

Ben Mayer

pinball was located," said Turner Store associate Stephen-Troy Campbell.

On the park's next level, Lidsville, guests enjoyed a fireworks display, dancing water array and ice-skating show celebrating America's bicentennial. Finally, guests descended by mine shaft, service elevators that were converted to compensate for space constraints in the high-rise, into the Living Island where H.R. Pufnstuf and other Krofft creatures tried to stave off Witchiepoo and her henchmen, all in three to four hours.

At first the park enjoyed success. The rides were filled and visitors enjoyed themselves. Adults paid \$5.75 for their tickets and \$4.25 for their children while the park was open Wednesday through Sunday. Even the American Bar

2. The Pinball Machine: the main attraction and Marty Krofft's favorite ride in the park. Park-goers rode inside a 6-foot pinball, which took them on a ride through a life-size pinball machine. After riding the Pinball Machine, visitors could partake of the Uptown Arcade or the International Food Fair.

3. Lidsville: the home of hat-habitats. The main feature was "Celebration," a Bicentennial musical located in the Lidsville Theater. Spectators viewed live performances featuring tap-dancing eagles and marionettes. The Grand Finale featured an Electric Flying Parade filled with American symbols, like the

American Eagle, Columbus and the Liberty Bell.

4. The Living Island Adventure: entered via a mineshaft elevator, this level featured the never-ending battle Mayor H.R. Pufnstuf and park-goers against the evil Witchiepoo. Also on this level, the "Heavenly Slumber Cemetery," where visitors see lightning and bats, vultures and mushrooms with faces. After entering the Great Hall of Witchipoo's castle, park-goers exited through a forest of singing trees with Witchipoo and her cohorts flying overhead.

-- Luli Petersen

Association visited. Yet, attendance dropped by as much as 50 percent below projected figures by September and it seemed that the park was on the ropes. In addition, rides required more maintenance than initially anticipated, as mounting costs approached \$24 million.

"The reason the park closed is because the city promised us that they were going to clean up downtown," Sid said. "There was a lot of crime down there, and people were afraid to go down, especially that far down to the Omni and they promised us that they were going to clean it up. It's like what's happening in Hollywood: they keep promising us that it's going to happen, but you just don't go down there at night."

"The complaints I've heard from people who went are that it was overpriced," Dr. White said.

"People were thinking of it as full-day, family experience but it

only took a couple hours. It wasn't worth the money or the drive."

"The illusion was that it was dangerous to go downtown so people didn't want to bring their kids down there," Marty said. "The park was the eighth wonder of the world, but we were just in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong people."

Consequently, five months into the noble experiment, Marty Krofft, Krofft Enterprises, Inc. and Maurice Alpert of Omni International Parks Inc. and of International City Corp, the firm that funded the endeavor, announced that operation would be suspended in what *Business Week* called "one of the worst real estate disasters in history." In addition, the Morgan Guaranty Trust Co. of New York, who had a \$100 million interest in the Omni sought to foreclose on it altogether in 1978, despite the hotel running at 90 percent occupancy, with retail space 80 percent occupied and office space 70 percent occupied.

"We didn't have the opportunity to prove the thing out," Marty said. "We never will know whether it would have succeeded."

"I think there was a feeling in the city that the Kroffts didn't know what they're doing," Dr. White said. "They tried to make a fast buck and pulled out when it didn't work."

Not all signs pointed to the park's imminent failure. The park attracted more than 300,000 guests in just five months of operation. Sensing potential, Omni officials and the city wanted to keep the park open, only in a different, more profitable format that would have been called Omni Fair. This plan would have employed 10 different firms that would have operated separate sections of the park. The Kroffts, however, contended that Omni did not have the right to do so without their consent and sought to block the move by appealing to Morgan Guaranty. Eventually, Krofft Productions, Inc. sued Omni International for \$20.5 million in damages that accused the Omni of sabotage and conspiracy to malign the reputation of the Krofft name. The Kroffts wanted to remain the primary managers of the park, but an agreement could not be met with Omni officials.



Perhaps the Kroffts' greatest success is yet to come. They are still very active in the public domain. In 1977, they sued McDonald's "McDonaldland" characters, which included Hamburglar, Grimace and Mayor McCheese. They alleged that, though the McDonald's characters were

PLEASE SEE 'LOST WORLD,' PAGE 25

THE BEST ATTRACTIONS IN THE 'WORLD'

1. Tranquility Terrace: A mix of vaudevilian theater, shopping, eating and hand sculpted mythological creatures, like Pegasus. Another attraction of this level was the Tranquility Amphitheater, which showed various performances featuring the Krofft television characters. Children performed here in the "participation theater," a popular spot for birthday parties and other celebrations.

LOST WORLD: It was 25 years ago next month that the Kroffts told Atlanta to play

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different, they were substantially similar, constituting copyright infringement. The court agreed and as a result, McDonald's had to obtain a license from the Kroffts to use the McDonaldland characters, setting the precedent for modern software cases. In addition, the brothers sued the popular boy band N'SYNC in January of 2000 for using images and selling toys of 25-foot puppets that the Kroffts had constructed for the band's American Music Awards performance. In 1995, 22 modern alternative bands came together to make a compilation of popular '70s cartoon show theme songs. The Murmurs and Tripping Daisy recorded versions of the "H.R. Pufnstuf" and the "Sigmund and the Seamonsters" themes, along with Collective Soul's performance of the "Bugaloos" theme. The Kroffts currently have projects underway in conjunction with Nickeloden and Paramount to make an H.R. Pufnstuf movie and a Bugaloos movie featuring Danny Devito with Jersey Films. Also, their company Krofft Pictures is working on a pilot for the WB called "Electra-Woman and Dyna-Girl."

In addition, traces of the park still remain in the CNN Center. "They remodeled the Headline News studio about two years ago," said Headline News graphic designer Dallas Howell. "When they tore the walls down they found walls with murals of old English cottages." The only item that remains of a once proud theme park is a miniature model Omni

tucked away in a corner of the CNN Center.

Then advertising mogul R.E. "Ted" Turner moved headquarters of his 1980-startup, 24-hour, international, all-news network, CNN, in 1987. Turner started his foray into television by purchasing the struggling WJRJ Atlanta TV Station, which would later become TBS, the Turner Broadcasting System, in 1970. From there it stemmed into a myriad of networks including CNNSI (Sports Illustrated) and CNNFN (Financial Network).

Two entertainment giants with international ambitions sought to settle in one urban Atlanta building to conquer the entertainment world. One lasted for five months and another nears its 15th anniversary. One left its imprint on a generation while the other has changed the way over a billion people view the world around them. Sid and Marty Krofft's legacy lives on in the hearts of countless thirty-somethings. Wary of cartoon television, they searched for something with heart and originality. Yet, the fate of the Kroffts' endeavor was nearly foretold in a 1976 *AJC* article chronicling the glitzy, Sunday-night soiree: "The ride ended after the people-carrying pinballs plunged into the dark innards of the machine. 'GAME OVER,' flashed the neon lights. 'GAME OVER. GAME OVER.'"

-- with reporting by Flynn Awotona, Carin Berger, Lauren Colvin, Sarah Del Castillo, Saijaad Hoossainy, Kelly Montgomery, Trang Nguyen, Chinedu Okpukpara, Luli Petersen, Elizabeth Record, Marissa Taylor, Alexis Torres, Lauren Yarbrough