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BRANSON: Celebration City salutes 20th century

Continued from I-1

audience a reason to come here, and Celebration City is a huge part of that.

"At the same time we have to maintain the more senior audience that we have nurtured and attracted over the years. The average age of a visitor to Branson is 53, and the Roy Rogers-Dale Evans Museum does very well in that market."

A reason to celebrate

Steve Honeycutt, general manager of Celebration City, has a long list of to-dos these days.

"I'm working on an overflow parking plan right now," Honeycutt said one day earlier this month as he toured the park amid bustling construction workers.

Built on the site of the former Branson USA theme park, Celebration City will open with 1,500 parking spaces — not nearly enough to accommodate the park's expected capacity of 9,000.

"Early on, it seemed adequate," Honeycutt said. "But we're the buzz of the town. I don't think we'll be able to meet the demand, and that's a nice problem to have."

Designed as a salute to the American 20th century, Celebration City features three distinct areas: Celebration Street (sort of a redux version of Disney's turn-of-the-century Main Street U.S.A., with a vintage carousel); the Boardwalk (specializing in amusement rides and arcade games in the style of the Roaring '20s); and Route 66 (a tribute to the 1950s and '60s car culture showcasing vintage automobiles, themed rides, shops and restaurants).

The 45-acre development also will contain a variety music show performed by the men's cappella group Chapter 6 and a state-of-the-art multimedia outdoor laser show utilizing a giant water screen, projections and fireworks. The laser show's time-traveling, patriotism-meets-pop-culture story will sport images of V-J Day parades, Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley.

"Branson has nothing like it," Honeycutt said.

Yet it's the largest of the park's three roller coasters — the new \$4 million Ozark WildCat, a wooden coaster with two camel humps and an eight-story drop — that's

stirring the greatest anticipation.

"Everybody in this area's been driving by and seeing that coaster come up from the ground," Honeycutt said. "It's like, 'We gotta go, we gotta go, we gotta go.' We put this big floodlight underneath it and it's really beautiful at night."

And nighttime is the time to be at Celebration City, given that the park won't open until 3 p.m. each day. Evening operation is intended to complement the daytime-only hours of nearby 1880s theme park Silver Dollar City, a Branson tradition since 1960. Both parks are owned by Herschend Family Entertainment.

"We're saying we're going to close at 11," Honeycutt said. "We may push that to 12. If we're busy and people are having a good time, we're not going to run them out."

Up close and impersonatable

A troupe of interactive characters will roam Celebration City, including three quip-happy veteran actresses portraying an array of comedic personas to fit any situation — or guest.

On this day they could be found filling out their final paper work at the park. And making one another laugh. A lot. They clearly couldn't wait to get started.

"We kind of play at what we do, and they hire us and pay us," said Connie "Tootsie" Freeman of Nashville. "So I guess we're working."

Freeman, who likes to play Tootsie Rose, winner of the Miss Pickled Pigs Feet Pageant in Sweet Lips, Tenn., then offered a brief Judy Garland imitation — all wild eyes and hands — that somehow felt more affectionate than exploitative.

She said she also can "channel" Marilyn Monroe, Mae West, Betty Boop — and maybe Dolly (Parton) with (added) body parts.

Jamie Oakman, who has performed with Freeman in a duo called the Pointless Sisters, said she was unashamed to be from Clarksdale, Miss.

"It's the home of the blues," Oakman said. "And if you went there, you'd know why."

Rim shot.

Oakman brings along her own small horde of personalities, too,

such as Southern belle Miss Magnolia.

"I like to describe her as a combination of Delta Burke, Delta Dawn and 'Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?'" Oakman cracked. "People won't know who they're going to meet."

Springfield playwright and actress Marilyn Harper will become "cosmic cosmetologist" Maybelline Stein, who bears more than a passing resemblance to makeup-challenged Tammy Faye, extroverted ex-wife of televangelist Jim Bakker.

"Yes-yes!" Harper exclaimed in character. "Jim Bakker may not like her."

The group giggled at that. (For more on Bakker in Branson — no joke — see the related attractions story.)

On the serious side — yes, they have one — the gals agreed that Celebration City would offer performers and patrons a great opportunity to feel good.

"With the turmoil that's happening in the world," Harper said, "it is time to come have fun."

Taking the high road

Fun was the last thing on Keith Thurman's mind in the early '90s. That's when the director of the Shepherd of the Hills outdoor theater was confronted by the success of imported big-name music acts in Branson.

The competition caused his attendance to plunge.

"Branson went from 11 nighttime entertainments to about 60 in four years," Thurman said. "Therefore, our 3,000-seat theater is now a 1,400-seat theater. It just ate us alive."

Ironically, the kick-start to the local economy attracted many new Branson residents who'd never heard of the city's decades-old live hillbilly morality play, "The Shepherd of the Hills." It is based on Harold Bell Wright's best-selling 1907 "true fiction" novel about the tribulations of area pioneers.

"When this town exploded, it was like a big old jelly sandwich," Thurman said. "And thousands of ants just poured in. They came here because this was a multimillion-dollar place. They knew about Andy Williams and Wayne Newton and Tony Orlando and the Osmond Brothers. But what

the hell's 'The Shepherd of the Hills'?"

Thurman, a seventh-generation Branson native, has since gotten the word out and reports that in the last two years "The Shepherd of the Hills" has grown in nightly attendance.

"I use 30 horses, five mules, a donkey, a flock of sheep, an antique car, several buggies and wagons, 30 pistols and shotguns, and a cast of 90 on a set the size of a football field," he said. "It's a love story. It's a mystery. It's a drama."

"We burn a log cabin every night. We have a shootout that will cause you to want to duck behind your seat. And all of this is built around a really good, clean, spiritual, moral message: It doesn't matter what you have. It's what you have inside."

Like other areas of Branson, there's new construction this year at the Shepherd of the Hills. Last May fire burned to the ground the ticket office, 35-year-old restaurant and gift shop. New buildings should be completed and open for business by midsummer, Thurman said.

Even with a new sit-down restaurant, last year's practice of serving nightly meals picnic-style out of the site's authentic 1880s barn will continue.

"It was so successful," Thurman said. "We're just going to cook the food on the property instead of off."

Showing a visitor around the thickly wooded grounds, Thurman pointed north to where the five-lane Ozark Mountain Highway is expected to open in July. That should only further enhance interest in Shepherd of the Hills, whose property abuts the new highway.

"The day it opens to the public, everything's going to change," he said. "The highway department will put up a sign that says, 'Shepherd of the Hills.'"

"We're coming back, yes, sir. Let's see, how do they say it? All good things come to those who wait. And we've been waiting awhile. So it's our turn."

To reach Brian McTavish, Arts & Entertainment writer, call (816) 234-4766 or send e-mail to bmc-tavish@kcstar.com.

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