

The Cincinnati Enquirer

COVER STORY

Sunday, July 27, 2003 3



Celebration City

The new Celebration City theme park features 30 rides, including one wooden and two steel roller coasters, to attract a young crowd and baby boomers reliving younger days.

Branson builds for boomers

By Tom Uhlenbrock
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

BRANSON, Mo. — The hottest show in Branson this summer isn't in a theater, it's on the side of a mountain.

A man-made mountain at that. Silver Dollar City formally opened its new theme park, Celebration City, on May 30. The motto for the \$40 million park is "a night place for families," and the nightcaper is an outdoor show preceding the park's closing each day at 11 p.m.

The production includes lasers, fireworks, pyrotechnics, water cannons, confetti cannons, images projected on a water screen and a 160-foot-tall molded concrete mountain with a reflecting pool in front. The crowds watch it all from a grassy terrace.

"We wanted to do something a little different," said Brad Schroeder, entertainment director for Silver Dollar City. "When you go in, it is dark, with lighted paths and theatrical lighting on the mountain."

Missouri tourism mecca targets post-WWII generation and their kids with new theme park, outdoor activities

The still and moving images projected on the water and mountain include people and events from the last half-century. Elvis and James Dean are there, and the Surfin' Safaris sing their sole hit, "Wipeout," as a surfer rides a pipeline and water cannons add a little splash to the audience.

"In the '60s, we talk about the space race," Schroeder said. "We have a Saturn 5 rocket starting to lift off; smoke, red lights and the audio woofers kick in. As the rocket clears the water screen, fireworks shoot off behind the rock wall."

Add 30 rides, including one wooden and two steel roller coasters, a boardwalk with vintage games and a theater for live performances, and Celebration City becomes the biggest thing to open in Branson since Andy Williams arrived in town more than a decade ago.



The Cincinnati Enquirer/ M. ROYER

Park relies on nostalgia

Celebration City, which opened for business May 1, is aimed at what Schroeder called "the next wave" — baby boomers and their families. Branson hopes the boomer market will help replace the dwindling numbers of the World War II generation, which has been a major part of the 7 million or so visitors each year.

During a walk-through in early May, Celebration City looked as if it was designed specifically for the boomers, with lots of art deco buildings, a penny arcade and old-time rides such as the "Tilt-a-Whirl" and bumper cars. The Diamonds' "Little Darlin'" was one of the golden oldies that played throughout the park.

In the Bijou building, a cherry red 1956 T-Bird and a white-over-turquoise '55 Chevy sat amid merchandise that included a pink poodle skirt for \$39.99, a Betty Boop lunch box for \$7.99 and a Barney Fife T-shirt that said "Nip it" for \$15.99.

"It does have sort of a retro feel," Schroeder said. "One of the real interesting characteristics we found is baby boomers love to experience things out of their youth, but share it with their kids. If you remember (the TV show) *Route 66* and (the line from the TV show

77 Sunset Strip) "Kookie, Kookie, lend me your comb," you will find a lot of things to reminisce about in the park."

Attracting the boomers is becoming increasingly important as age and the economy cause a decline in the number of tour buses bearing silver-haired visitors. The buses are still coming, but many arrive half-empty.

That drop started in the season that preceded the Sept. 11 attacks. Tourism picked up in 2002, largely because travelers were seeking closer-to-home destinations that didn't require flying, and Branson's central location fit the bill.

Branson's unabashed themes of motherhood, apple pie and Old Glory were perfect for the mood of the country.

But this spring started slowly — motels all along the Branson strip advertise "two for \$24.95."

Ross Summers, executive vice president of the Branson Chamber of Commerce and Convention and Visitors Bureau, said some of the

Continued on next page

COVER STORY

The Cincinnati Enquirer

Continued from previous page

tour bus operators are reporting cancellations approaching 40 percent. He blamed much of the decline on the hard times for folks on fixed incomes.

"People who travel a lot depend on dividend and interest income," he said. "Literally, people who were making 5.5 percent two years ago are making .05 percent or negative."

Subtle changes

On the upside, Branson's dubious billing as having the oldest clientele of any destination city in America is falling some.

"For the first time in 10 years, we saw the average age went down in 2002 from 55 to 53, and that's significant," Summers said. "When you get that kind of a drop, that's good news for us."

Branson is slowly changing to attract the boomers. Buffet lines and fried food still reign, but enough chains have moved in that there's more variety in the restaurants. In this bastion of the Bible Belt, a stir was caused a couple of years ago when the town's video ad campaign included a couple clinking wine glasses. Today, Stone Hill Winery is one of the tourist stops. Williams' Moon River Theatre and the Grand Palace

are the first to offer wine and beer at intermission.

"We had the Moody Blues for two concerts, and it went extremely well," Summers said. "And the week before, Styx and REO Speedwagon sold out for two nights. Pam Tillis will be here this year. It does point out that younger artists are willing to come to town."

And Celebration City, for the first time, gives families a place to go together at night.

"It caters to a different market than we have ever been able to attract," Summers said. "That's the focus of our ad campaigns. We're pointing to the outdoor activities with the lakes, the trail system we're developing. We're aiming for the younger families."

Some entrepreneurs in town are ahead of the youth movement.

Glenn Robinson started out selling Mexican pottery on the old Wal-Mart lot on Branson's main drag. Today, he owns the lot and has built Grand Country Square, which includes a music hall, indoor miniature golf, 30,000 square feet of retail space, a couple of restaurants and a 319-room inn.

A future with families

Robinson noticed a disturbing trend a few years ago. "All of our wonderful little old ladies and men that had been jumping off the bus-

es in front of the restaurant, they were dying on me," he said.

He saw the future, and it said "families, absolutely."

A friend told Robinson about the Wisconsin Dells and the success it had with water parks. He flew there, came back and built a small outdoor water park near his inn. Two years ago, he made a second trip to Wisconsin and returned with more ambitious plans.

He built Splash Country Indoors, a \$5 million indoor water park with a 250-foot-long lazy river, two spa pools, a basketball-shooting pool, a toddlers area and a three-level treehouse with two tube slides, a tipping bucket and all sorts of gizmos that shoot and spray water.

Guests at the inn get free admission to the park with their \$69 to \$79 lodging fee. Others pay \$15 admission to the park.

"This is the second year in a row we sold out the hotel for 16 days straight during spring break," Robinson said. "Grandpa and Grandma, down to the toddlers, you see them all in that water park, and they're all having fun."

Go-cart tracks also have been a mainstay of the Branson strip, but Track Family Fun Parks took the

Continued on next page

s appearing 'till the day I die'

Clipped By:
kevinperjurer
Jan 16, 2026