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SATURDAY, MAY 24, 2003

Boomtown

M I S S O U R I



The new Celebration City theme park in Branson, Mo., has a downtown lined with Victorian architecture.

TOM UHLENBROCK/St. Louis Post-Dispatch

New Branson offerings cater to 'next wave' of visitors

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 will have the formal grand opening of 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 will be an outdoor show preceding the park's closing each day at 11 p.m.

The production will include lasers, fireworks, pyrotechnics, water cannons, confetti cannons and images projected on a water screen and a 160-foot-tall molded concrete mountain with a reflecting pool in front. The crowds will 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 will be dark, with lighted paths and theatrical lighting on the mountain."

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

Celebration City, which opened for business May 1, is aimed squarely at what Schroeder called "the next wave" — baby boomers and their families. All of 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 who show up each year.

During a walk-through, 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 '56 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 'Route 66' and the phrase '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 fewer are stacked outside the theaters, and many

Getting there

■ Branson is about 200 miles southeast of Kansas City, Mo. Take U.S. Highway 71 south to Harrisonville, then Missouri 7 south to Clinton. From there, follow Missouri 13 to Springfield. In Springfield, take Interstate 44 east for a short distance, then U.S. Highway 65 south into Branson. Highway 65 runs into Missouri 76, also known as "76 Country Music Boulevard" or simply "the strip," where many of the city's music theaters and other family-friendly destinations can be found.

■ Celebration City is half a block west of Missouri 76 at 1338 Missouri 376. Gates open at 3 p.m. Admission, not including tax, is \$27 for adults; \$22 for children 4 to 11. Call 1-800-831-4FUN (4386) or visit www.silverdollarcity.com.

For more information

■ Branson-Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce and Convention and Visitors Bureau: (417) 334-4084; www.explorebranson.com

■ Missouri Division of Tourism, 1-800-519-6300; www.missouritourism.org

When it comes to music,

Andy Williams, left, and Glenn Campbell perform at the Moon River Theatre in Branson, Mo. The

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arrive half-empty.

That drop-off started in the season that preceded the Sept. 11 terrorist attack. Tourism picked up in 2002 in the aftermath of the tragedy, 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 has started slowly — motels all along the Branson strip advertise "two for \$24.95" — and folks at the Chamber of Commerce and Convention and Visitors Bureau are watching this summer with bated breath.

Ross Summers, executive vice president of the visitors bureau, said some of the 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 0.05 percent or negative."

On the up side, 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 changing, slowly but surely, 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 and Williams' Moon River Theatre, along with 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.

"We also have the world's largest fiddle and world's largest banjo," Robinson said.

Robinson noticed a disturbing trend a few years ago. "All of our wonderful little old ladies and men that had been jumping off the buses 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. Tourists not staying at the inn 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 attraction to a new level when it opened the \$1 million Lumber Jack, a wooden three-level track, in 2001.

The ride was such a hit that the company came back the next year and spent \$1.5 million on another wooden track, the Wild Woody.

"They have all the aspects of a wooden roller coaster — twists and turns, changes in elevation," said company president Larry Schmitt. "You're 40 feet in the air — that's the biggest thrill. We call them our go-cart coasters."

Moments after meeting Tom Beck, you put together his soft speaking voice with the personality he sounds like.

"Mr. Rogers," Beck said. "I've heard that a lot lately."

Which is perfect for Beck's job as owner and curator of the World's Largest Toy Museum, a recent addition to the Branson scene.

Beck, 54, and his wife, Wendy, have been collecting much of their lives and have put it all on display in a two-level building on Country Music Boulevard. He'll gladly walk you through the thousands of

items on display.

"This is a Hopalong Cassidy chair, the kind you'd send in your boxtops and a few dollars for," he said. "It's very rare. I understand they don't even have one in the Hopalong Cassidy Museum (near Wichita, Kan.). This is a Three Stooges scooter. The rear wheel is off center, so you go up and down like you're riding a horse."

"Upstairs is motorcycles, antique fishing, 1800s carriages, cars, trucks and construction, ships, Star Wars and GI Joes. The back is cap guns, BB guns, peddle cars, bicycles and trains. You come out through dolls, Disney, ventriloquist dummies, Barbies and Shirley Temples."

"Every one of these toys belonged to someone — we didn't get them out of the box or a store. They all have memories attached to them."

Beck has been known to reduce some customers to tears. They spot their childhood doll or toy and want to buy it.

"We've never sold an old toy," he said. "We sell lots of reproductions in our gift shop."

There's another Mr. Rogers at the newest museum in Branson: the Roy Rogers-Dale Evans Museum & Happy Trails Theater will open Memorial Day weekend.

"Dad was one of those guys from the old school — he never threw anything away," said Roy "Dusty" Rogers Jr., who performs in the theater. "We'll have up to 40,000 items in the museum. We cover their entire careers, all of Dad's 88 movies."

Nellybelle, the Jeep driven by sidekick Pat Brady, is on display, but the stars of the show are the mounts of Trigger and Buttermilk, the couple's longtime horses. Buttermilk Jr. and Bullet, the German shepherd dog, also are mounted and displayed nearby.

"Dad first met Trigger in 1938 when Dad was 26 and Trigger was 4," Rogers Jr. said. "He was on his back for 29 years. Dad used to say, 'When I die, just skin me out and put me

on Trigger and I'll be happy.' But there's laws against that."

The Presley family and Baldknobbers first opened theaters in Branson 40-odd years ago to attract the sportsmen who showed up to fish the lakes. The Chamber of Commerce once again is pointing out the beauty of the Ozarks and urging tourists to take a spin on the lakes.

You can rent a kayak from Trek the Ozarks at the Branson Adventure Center to explore the water, or you can take a more leisurely ride.

Capt. Richard Sober was at the wheel of our World War II amphibious vehicle when we pulled out of the Ride the Ducks headquarters on Highway 76. He issued "wacky quackers" to the 36 people onboard so we could annoy drivers of passing vehicles, and we headed to Table Rock Lake, with a stop in between to enjoy the view from the top of Baird Mountain.

Sober provided a running monologue of one-liners along the way. "There were 21,000 Ducks built for World War II," he said. "Women built them, but the reason they lasted so long is women didn't drive them."

Sober revved up the engine

and entered the lake with a splash. We pattered around for a while before heading to dry land. "Water's in the mid-60s," he said. "Wouldn't take long to get done with all the swimming you need to do out there."

The Duck tour was fun, but that evening we went searching for the talking dogs on the Showboat Branson Belle. I had spent time on the showboat during my last visit to Branson and came back with tales of comedian Todd Oliver and his talking dog, Irving.

Nobody believed me, but then Oliver and Irving showed up on the Jay Leno show in February, and I was vindicated.

Irving, a black-and-white Boston terrier, not only talks, he tells jokes and sings. "I gotta be me," sang Irving. "I gotta be me. Every tree that I see, I gotta be me."

Oliver has introduced a second talking dog to the show this season. Lucy, a shaggy white Westie, was cute, but frankly she seemed sort of ornery, and Irving wasn't charmed.

"Get rid of her," Irving told Oliver.

Oliver asked Lucy why the two dogs didn't get along. "He's always sticking his nose where it doesn't belong," Lucy replied.

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