

No hibernation for Branson

Town anticipates busy fall after what may be its best summer.

By Kathryn Buckstaff
News-Leader

BRANSON — Today may mark the end of the best summer tourism season to date, but Branson business owners are getting ready for what's become the hottest season in town.

Over the past 10 years, the Ozark Mountain Christmas promotion has drawn more visitors each year. Add to that Silver Dollar City's fall craft festival, opening Wednesday with a quilt exhibition from the Smithsonian Institution and the weeklong events in November expected to draw thousands of veterans, and Branson could top the 7 million visitor mark this year, said city spokesman Jerry Adams.

Norma Bell of Excelsior Springs was shopping Sunday in Branson. She's never visited during the winter season, but she's heard a lot about it and plans to check it out.

"We've been talking about that — we plan to," she said. "Everybody always talks about the crafts and the lights."

There may be bigger budgets for Christmas decorations this year. Summer statistics indicate Branson has had its best season start since 1994, said Jerry Henry, director of corporate research at Silver Dollar City.

The second year of national marketing by the Branson/Lakes Area Chamber of

See **BRANSON**, Page 8A

Tourist traffic in Springfield slows down during fall. 8A



Steve J.P. Liang / News-Leader

John Tyrrell, 20, and his friend's child, Kim Tumlinson, 8, both of Mountain Grove, enjoy the Tarantula ride Sunday afternoon at Branson USA. Labor Day marks the unofficial end to summer, but Branson businesses expect to stay busy this fall.

Area lakes busy over long weekend

From Our Staff

Rain on Saturday evening and early Sunday slowed things down over the Labor Day weekend, but by Sunday evening things had picked back up at most area lakes, said Capt. Hans Huenink with the Missouri Water Patrol.

The weekend wasn't the busiest of the year, lagging well behind July Fourth and Memorial Day, but most lakes and parks were bustling, he said.

With no drownings or serious accidents reported by Sunday evening, Huenink was happy to report, it's been a "real safe weekend so far."

While Lake of the Ozarks has been the busiest this weekend, Huenink said, Table Rock and Stockton lakes saw their shares of visitors.

Darrel Skinner, owner of Table Rock Lake Pontoon Rentals, said business has been excellent despite the rain.

"This is the last hurrah

before the weather turns cold," Skinner said.

Table Rock Shores Campgrounds is just in its second year, but at 70 percent full, business is better than last year, owner Sandi Broyles said.

All the parks, inns and campgrounds around Stockton Lake are full, said Doug Huffed, owner of Stockton State Park Marina, and the weather wasn't stopping anyone from having fun.

"You name it, they are out

there on the water doing it," Huffed said.

Amusement park Branson USA is open for its first Labor Day weekend, and the park is seeing lots of people from about a 100-mile radius, said Wayne Leatherman, general manager.

"We had a great turnout and expect the same for Monday," Leatherman said. "We're glad to see more local people taking advantage of Branson."

Photo of Tarantula ride at Branson USA

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Branson/ Marketing change pays dividends

Continued from 1A

Commerce directed largely toward families outside a 300-mile radius of Branson seems to be working. That marketing also stressed the variety of entertainment available, dispelling the perception that Branson is limited to country music.

"It's the outer markets driving it," Henry said. "They tend to be first-time visitors, and they spend more money."

Here are some of the indicators:

- Fifty percent more people visited Silver Dollar City this summer from outside a 300-mile radius than from a core market within 100 miles.

- Branson's sales tax revenues are up 8.25 percent over last year, and the tourism tax on hotels and attractions is up 5 percent.

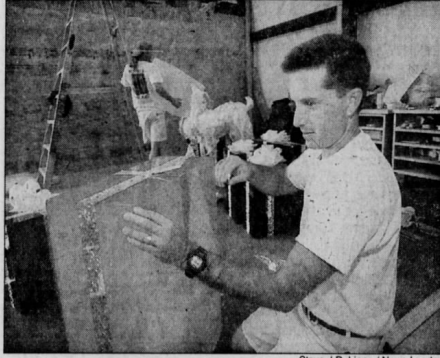
- Some theaters had a flat summer, with the average number of shows seen per person per visit down from 3.74 last year to 3.22 this year.

- Families accounted for 88 percent of summer business at Silver Dollar City, up 4 percent over last year.

- City traffic counts show an average of 23,000 cars a day traveled Missouri 76 in July, compared with 21,000 a day last July.

Targeting families

Although fall is peak time for



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Tom Gass (front), owner of Backstage Connections, has been busy creating sets for Branson entertainers' Christmas shows.

motor coach travel, those numbers have dwindled over the past two years as a generation of bus travelers ages. The average age of World War II veterans is 78.

So Branson marketers have beefed up family-friendly offerings to woo a generation of baby boomers.

Take the Showboat Branson Belle, for example. The attraction saw its biggest year since the paddle

wheeler took to the water in 1995, said Lisa Rau, spokeswoman at showboat operator Silver Dollar City. Through the end of August, 194,097 people rode the boat, up 22 percent from last year.

"We have tweaked the product to the point that it offers what people want, and that's national-caliber variety entertainment," Rau said.

That meant a circus-themed

show, fast-moving adagio dancers and a ventriloquist, "things kids find captivating," Rau said.

As Branson moves toward a year-round season, the January through March entertainment buffet looks promising for 2000, said Stephanie Gurley, the chamber's tourism development manager.

A raft of special events is motivating more businesses than ever to continue operations.

February kicks off with the Miss USA Pageant broadcast live from the Grand Palace for the second year. There's also the Service To Four Chaplains event to attract veterans and a week of events tied to Valentine's Day.

In March, Branson again will have a national audience when the NAIA Division II Men's Basketball National Tournament comes to College of the Ozarks at nearby Point Lookout.

Christmas planning

For Tom Gass, owner of Backstage Connections, the approach of fall means he's "sweating and hang-



Rau

Who visits Branson?

- Average age is 56.
- Average income is \$55,500.
- Average stay is four nights, during which time they see an average of 3.22 theater shows.
- Fifty-two percent come to the Branson area from outside a 300-mile radius with 15 percent coming from 100 miles or less.
- Ten percent of families coming to Silver Dollar City this summer were grandparents with grandchildren, up from 7 percent last year.

Source: Branson/Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce

ADVERTISING CAMPAIGN

Branson business owners hope television viewers in St. Louis, Kansas City and Little Rock will be lured to Branson this week with a

new television advertising campaign.

The Branson/Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce and the Convention and Visitors Bureau have purchased advertising through a grant from the Missouri Division of Tourism.

"The fall media buy is designed to extend the spring/summer television advertising exposure in key markets," said Bryan Harding, vice president of marketing for the chamber and bureau. "This advertising campaign will also help drive business to the Branson/Lakes area in the fall through the Christmas season."

The advertising campaign will include broadcast and print advertising, public relations, promotions, travel industry shows and special events.

ing tinsel."

This is crunch time for the former Californian who builds sets and stage props. Like many people, Branson entertainers often wait until the last minute to start their Christmas

plans, Gass said. Work on lighted gift boxes and acrylic reindeer is beginning to fill his shop.

"Working on Christmas in August is like being back home where it's hot in December," Gass said.

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