

TRAVEL

THE BLADE, TOLEDO, OHIO ■ SUNDAY, JUNE 15, 2003

SECTION F, PAGE 10



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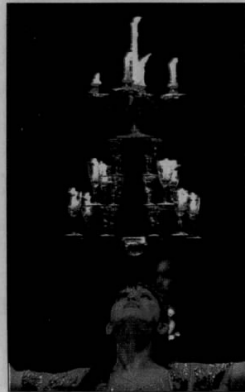
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ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH PHOTOS

Built on the site of
the former Branson
USA theme park, the
new Celebration City
in Branson, Mo., has
a downtown lined
with Victorian
architecture.



Stars of the Incredible Acrobats of
China are jugglers and contortionists.



Roy "Dusty" Rogers, Jr., performs at
the Roy Rogers-Dale Evans Museum.

A Branson boom

Plenty of changes are in the works for popular destination in Ozarks

By BRIAN McTAVISH
KANSAS CITY STAR

BRANSON, Mo. — The rise of this southern Missouri town from a backwoods tourist attraction nearly a century ago to a modern entertainment mecca was built on belief.

Every year 7 million visitors enter the city limits to enjoy their favorite music theaters and other family-friendly destinations — whether it's the Baldknobbers Jamboree, pop singer Andy Williams, Silver Dollar City theme park, Shepherd of the Hills outdoor theater, go-carts, miniature golf, or the pursuit of the perfect funnel cake.

But sojourners to Branson also want new stuff to do. Which is why so many who rely on the tourist dollar here are so pumped about the city's newest attractions: Celebration City, a \$40 million evening-oriented amusement park, which opened May 1; and the adjacent Roy Rogers-Dale Evans Museum & Happy Trails Theater.

It's enough to make a Branson booster burst with pride. "It's a very exciting time for us right now," said Ross Summers, executive vice president of the Branson Chamber of Commerce. "We have to give the younger 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."

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

"I'm working on an overflow parking plan right now," Honeycutt said in April as he toured the park amid bustling construction workers.

Built on the site of the former Branson USA theme park, Celebration City opened 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

■ As Branson shows go contemporary, veteran entertainers such as Andy Williams and Glen Campbell remain oldies but goodies. Page 8.

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 contains 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 sports images of V-Day parades,

Marilyn Monroe, and Elvis Presley.

Nighttime is the time to be at Celebration City, given that the park doesn'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 196C. 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."

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

"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

See BRANSON, Page 8

Paris after dark: Teens find a special lure

Nightlife and bright lights beckon younger visitors



There's plenty to do if you go to Branson, Mo.

ATTRACTIONS:

Here's a rundown of the major Branson attractions:

● **Celebration City:** This new \$40 million, evening-oriented theme park is devoted to 20th-century American pop culture, especially from the early 1900s to the 1960s. Thirty rides and attractions include a Ferris wheel and three roller coasters, one of which is the new \$4 million wooden WildCat.

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

city.com.

● **The Roy Rogers-Dale Evans Museum and Happy Trails Theater,** 3950 Green Mountain Drive. Steeped in the silver-screen memory and music of "The King of the Cowboys" and "The Queen of the West," this new 26,000-square-foot facility is open from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily.

The self-guided museum tour includes unique memorabilia — such as Rogers' late steed Trigger — interactive displays, videos, and children's activities. The 325-seat theater will offer two concerts a day by Roy "Dusty" Rogers, Jr., and his band, the High Riders.

Combination museum-theater tickets cost \$31.98 for adults and \$21.97 for ages 6 to 12. Separate museum and theater admission is available. Call (866) ROY-ROGERS (769-7643) or go to the Web at www.royrogers.com.

● **The Shepherd of the Hills Outdoor Theatre:** Branson's original live show, "The Shepherd of the Hills," is a two-hour outdoor pageant based on the 1907 novel by Harold Bell Wright. The "true fiction" tale of hill folk in melodramatic upheaval is performed at 8:30 p.m. daily near where the author first pitched his tent a century ago to get acquainted

with Ozark people and culture.

Admission is \$34.95 for adults; \$18.95 for children. Price includes show, dinner, a visit to Inspiration Tower, and a tour of the historic grounds, including a stop at the rustic Harold Bell Wright Museum, which contains Wright's original Shepherd of the Hills manuscript.

Call (800) 653-6288 or go to www.theshepherdofthehills.com.

● **Showboat Branson Belle:** The city's only floating 700-seat show palace offers two new acts this year: Ventriloquist Todd Oliver introduces Lucy, a new "talking" dog to go with his other glib mutt, Irving; and the "Steppin' Out" dinner show features a musical salute to American cities.

Admission — including meal, cruise, and show — starts at \$36 for adults and \$18 for kids. Prices vary with dates and times of day. Call (800) 775-BOAT (2628) or visit silverdollar-city.com.

● **Pam Tillis at the Yakov**

Smirnoff Theatre: The country singer and daughter of Mel Tillis will headline this summer at Yakov's place. Tillis performs at 8 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays and 3 p.m. Sundays through Aug. 10. Tickets start at \$30. (She'll do it again Nov. 1 through Dec. 14.) Call (800) 942-8226 or visit www.yakov.com.

WHERE TO STAY:

Branson boasts 17,427 hotel and motel rooms, from ultracheap to ultraluxe, so you're likely to find a place to your liking.

WHERE TO EAT:

● **Hard Luck Diner:** Affordable quality comfort food and big-voiced singing waitresses guarantee a good time for all. And be sure to check out the large autographed photo of country legend Patsy Cline.

● **Dolly Parton's Dixie Stampede Dinner and Show:** The country music superstar endorses (but doesn't appear at) this southern feast and Civil War-inspired spectacle. The arena show, featuring 32 horses and riders, pits "North against South in a friendly and fun rivalry."

● **Tall Timber Lumberjack Dinner Show:** Lumberjacks chop, saw, throw axes, and do other lumberjack stuff while the wait staff serves food.

TO LEARN MORE: Call the Branson/Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce and Convention & Visitors Bureau at (417) 334-4084 or visit www.explorebranson.com

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