Real American Entertainment: Performance and Nationalism in Branson, Missouri

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

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My dissertation focuses on emblematic performances in Branson, Missouri, the "Live Entertainment Capital of the World," and demonstrates that Branson's performances are both commercial artistic properties and cultural and political markers of belonging for its audiences. After an introduction that lays out the basic history and scope of Branson, each of my four chapters is centered on a major idea used by Branson to market its "authentically" "American" entertainments, and paired with a corresponding archetype that producers perform and after which consumers are encouraged to model their behavior.

Chapter One deals with the theme of rurality, and demonstrates through two case studies, *The Shepherd of the Hills* and *The Baldknobbers Jamboree Show*, how the Hillbilly functions as the archetypal figure of pleasure and identification. Chapter Two discusses differences between "history" and "heritage" through a reading of Silver Dollar City, and traces the use of the Soldier-Patriot at the Veterans Memorial Museum, *Celebrate America!* and *Dolly Parton's Dixie Stampede*, which explain how history is simultaneously invoked and ignored in the name of national unity.

Chapter Three inspects the role of evangelical Christianity in national identity, and assesses the role of the Evangelical in two spectacles, *Noah, The Musical*, and *The*

Jim Bakker Show. The final chapter engages with the American Dream and uses the figure of the almost-assimilated Immigrant, as employed by headliners Shoji Tabuchi and Yakov Smirnoff who carefully craft and maintain perpetual "outsider" status.

I detail how this popular but overlooked site functions culturally for both its producers and its consumers, with two larger goals: to create a fuller picture of the American performance landscape and to interrogate the idea of "Americanness" at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

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Introduction: "Real American Entertainment"

The serious study of popular and commercial cultural products has a relatively short history, despite the fact that the forms themselves are as old as the societies which produced them. Lawrence Levine, in *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, details how the dominant classes of nineteenth-century America borrowed the concept of "brow levels" to code various cultural products as appropriate for certain social groups and then to enforce social hierarchies with them.[1] A class of professionals—including mid-twentieth-century critics and scholars like Theodor Adorno, Clement Greenberg and Russell Lynes—had a crucial role in building and maintaining these distinctions by focusing their attentions largely those products that qualify as "highbrow," and dismissing the others as beneath notice.[2]

This bias has resulted in the marginalization of the study of theatre, typically considered a popular form, and as such dismissed as less worthy than more "elevated" cultural products like poetry or the novel. But even within the discipline, hierarchies exist: literary "drama" outranks comedies, which outrank musicals, which outrank variety entertainments, unscripted performance, and so forth. While the field of performance studies has done a fair job of broadening the disciplinary boundaries of theatre research. In recent years, excellent studies like Robert C. Allen's *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture*, Andrew L. Erdman's *Blue Vaudeville: Sex, Morals and the Mass Marketing of Amusement*, Robert M. Lewis's *From Travelling Show to Vaudeville: Theatrical Spectacle in America 1830-1910* have been written on the *history* of these

[1] Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 176-77.
[2] Levine's chapter "Order, Hierarchy, and Culture" treats the development of this model in the nineteenth century.

various “lower” forms, but very little attention has been paid to present-day performance that ranks at or below the “variety” level.[3]

Susan Bennett, in her 2005 article in *Theatre Journal,* notes this continuing bias: “[w]e have not yet provided a properly inclusive account of contemporary work insofar as we have neglected, almost entirely, a significant segment of the market. This is the segment we might simply identify as commercial theatre.”[4] It is within this segment that I direct my own work. While Bennett’s concentration on commercial endeavors in New York, Las Vegas, and in her forthcoming book, Ashland, Oregon, is certainly a worthwhile contribution to the discussion, she overlooks many venues that, although they have received even less scholarly attention than her objects of study, make up a significant percentage of live performance taking place in the contemporary United States. Because the cordoning off of commercial or tourist attractions from the scrutiny that is regularly given to “art” upholds the dichotomy of high and low, and because I agree with her assertion that this neglect has “very real consequences for…how we devise our approaches to understanding contemporary theatre and performance in both its production and reception contexts,”[5] I intend to concentrate my research and writing on one of these large, and largely overlooked, sites of commercial theater and performance: Branson, Missouri.

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[3] Robert C. Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991) ; Andrew L. Erdman, *Blue Vaudeville: Sex, Morals and the Mass Marketing of Amusement, 1895-1915* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2007); Robert M. Lewis, *From Travelling Show to Vaudeville: Theatrical Spectacle in America 1830-1910* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).
[4] Susan Bennett “Theatre/Tourism,” *Theatre Journal* volume 57, no. 3 (October 2005): 407.
[5] Ibid., 408.

To date, very few academic investigations have focused on Branson at all, and none give careful attention to the role that performance plays in its continuing success. This lack means that I will necessarily draw from a wide variety of models drawn from very different disciplines: sociology, architecture, cultural studies, economics, etc., as well as interdisciplinary studies which inspect the cultural significance of tourism, including Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's *Destination Culture*, Lucy Lippard's *On the Beaten Track: Tourism, Art, and Place,* and Dean MacCannell's pioneering *Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*.[6]

A subset of this sort of work focuses on particular tourist or spectacular sites, including Las Vegas, an area that has much in common with Branson, however different it might seem at first glance. The cultural effects of this more familiar site of American spectacle and entertainment have been well documented, beginning with 1977's *Learning from Las Vegas*, by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, to Mark Gottdiener, Claudia C. Collins and David R. Dickens' extraordinarily thorough *Las Vegas: The Social Production of an All-American City*, through to Marc Cooper's recent, if nostalgic, *The Last Honest Place in America*.[7] Though these have ranged from celebrations of the desert town's populist spirit to polemics against its soul-deadening

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[6]Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Heritage and Museums* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Lippard, Lucy R. *On the Beaten Track: Tourism, Art, and Place* (New York: New Press, 2000); and Dean MacCannell, *Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). I reserve my discussion of texts specific to Branson for Chapter One.

[7] Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas (revised edition): The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977); Mark Gottdiener, Claudia C. Collins and David R. Dickens, *Las Vegas: The Social Production of an All-American City* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 1999); Marc Cooper,*The Last Honest Place in America: Paradise and Perdition in the New Las Vegas* (New York: Nation Books, 2004).

influence, they have each taken seriously a place dismissed as superficial and provided a fairer, more nuanced account of its effects, both immediate and longer lasting.

In addition to these works, I take as models a number of recent scholarly texts from within my own field on the musical—another popular genre with a relatively brief scholarly record—which have made a serious mark on the field of theatre and performance. Scholars in this field, such as Andrea Most, note that popular forms are perhaps most worth studying because they are popular: they are what most people are exposed to and hence what may have the greatest cultural effects.[8]

Although producers of popular forms are generally loath to admit any serious intentions, Gerald Mast, another musical theatre scholar, believes such forms disavow their seriousness precisely so that they may accomplish their cultural work.[9] French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu contends that not only is this unavoidably so, but that the disavowal is supported by both producers and consumers:

> Unlike legitimate, i.e., scholastic, popularization, which overtly proclaims its pedagogic objective and can therefore unashamedly reveal the means its uses to lower the transmission level, ordinary popularization cannot, by definition, admit to being what it is, and the imposture it presupposes would necessarily fail if it could not rely on the complicity of the consumers.[10]

One of the questions that I will investigate, even as I am unsure of settling on any single answer, is the degree to which those who participate in Branson's performance culture acknowledge or deny its role in shaping the lives of their audiences.

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[8] Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 4.
[9] Gerald Mast, *Can't Help Singin': The American Musical on the Stage and Screen* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 1987), 2.
[10] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 323.

So, with the intent to address a significant blind spot and help remedy the "scholarly myopia" Bennett mentions,[11] I center my investigation on a number of emblematic performances available in the Branson/Lakes Area of southwest Missouri. The project is an attempt to identify how this popular but overlooked site functions culturally for both its producers and its consumers, with the larger goal of creating a fuller picture of the American performance landscape.

What is Branson?

In part because it is located among the rural Ozark Mountains of extreme southwest Missouri, Branson is much better-known throughout the Midwest than along the coasts of the United States. Nonetheless, its annual tourist flow reaches into the millions—in 2010, more than 8 million.[12] While this equals less than twenty-two percent of Las Vegas's draw of 37.3 million,[13] it is statistically staggering when these numbers are compared to their relative populations. In 2000, Branson claimed only 6,050 permanent residents, while Las Vegas could boast more than 79 times that number of citizens: 478,434.[14]

Equally impressive are the leisure offerings available in Branson, which claims to be the "Live Entertainment Capital of the World." The roster for 2011 includes more than

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[11] Bennett, "Theatre/Tourism," 408.
[12] Branson/Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce/Convention and Visitors Bureau (hereafter, Branson/Lakes Area CC/CVB), "Branson/Lakes Area Final 2010 Results," February 25, 2011. All information contained in Branson/Lakes Area CC/CVB documents are a matter of public record and were provided to me upon request.
[13] Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority, "Las Vegas Year-to-Date Executive Summary," accessed February 28, 2011, http://www.lvcva.com/getfile/624/ES-YTD2010.pdf.
[14] The estimated 2009 populations for Branson and Las Vegas are 8,502 and 567,641, respectively, for a 1:66.7 ratio; the official 2010 survey results are not yet available. U.S. Census Bureau, "2009 Population Estimates," accessed February 28, 2011, www.census.gov.

100 shows at various times in fifty-plus theatres, which accommodate more than 64,057 seats—more than all forty Broadway theatres in New York combined.[15] Branson is not quite a twenty-four hour town (only the Wal-Mart and a few diners are open around the clock), but performances are widely available, and almost every theatre hosts several productions throughout the day, keeping the large venues full of patrons and financially solvent. The "breakfast shows" begin early, at 8:00, 9:00, 9:30 and 10:00 a.m.; and various afternoon productions start at 12:00, 12:30, 2:00, 3:00, 4:00, 5:00 and 5:30. Evening performances begin at 7:00, 7:30, 8:00, and several late-night shows are available at 9:00 or even 11:00 p.m.

In addition to these performances, Branson offers opportunities for fishing, boating and other water sports on three area lakes; three amusement parks, including the 1880s-themed Silver Dollar City, which played an important role in developing area tourism, as well as other family-oriented activities like water slides, miniature golf, and go-kart tracks, an IMAX theatre; and several museums variously dedicated to wax celebrities, antique toys, monsters both real and imagined, and even the Titanic disaster. Numerous opportunities for shopping exist at three outlet malls, a brand new waterfront retail center, and dozens of craft and souvenir stores. Add twelve golf courses, 242 restaurants, and lodging available in 22,000 hotel rooms, and Branson has plenty to offer.[16]

And more and more people are coming. Since 1991, Branson has seen fairly consistent rise in tourism. Only five years out of the last twenty—2000, 2001, 2004, 2009

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[15] Branson/Lakes Area CC/CVB, "Branson/Lakes Area 2011 Fact Sheet, Revised 2/25/11," accessed February 28, 2011, http://www.explorebranson.com/media/factsheet.php. The Broadway theatres have a combined total of 49,857 seats.
[16] Ibid.

and 2009—have seen downturns in the number of tourists to the area, and none were drastic. During the 2002 season, when most tourist attractions were suffering serious losses due to post-September 11 anxieties, Branson continued to grow, seeing increases in hotel occupancy rates, tax revenues, and total number of visitors. The financial crisis of 2008 resulted in a slight dip in numbers for a two consecutive years, but as of the 2010 season, Branson's star seems to be on the rise once again [Fig X.1].[17]

Not only is Branson growing, it's also extending its reach. Although a major part of Branson's appeal is its rural-Midwestern image, which I will cover in Chapter One, Branson is not just a regional phenomenon. Statistics indicate that since 1998, when records were first kept on the matter, more than half of tourists traveled more than 301 miles from their homes to reach Branson.[18] In fact, although they don't represent the largest total proportion of visitors, the two fastest-growing markets for Branson are the Dallas and Chicago metropolitan areas.[19] Since 2004, at least several thousand people from every state in the union, including Alaska and Hawaii, have visited Branson each year. My unofficial survey of license plates during visits in 2007 and 2008 bore out this diversity, revealing visitors from nearby in Missouri, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Kansas, but also from Iowa, Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan, North and South Dakota, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, as well as a belt of southern states including Florida, Georgia, North Carolina and Alabama, and the occasional vehicle from Connecticut, New York, and

[17] Associated Press, "In down travel year, Branson still puts up big numbers," October 9, 2002, via Lexis-Nexis.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Branson/Lakes Area CC/CVB, "Branson/Lakes Area DMA Comparisons," February 22, 2007.

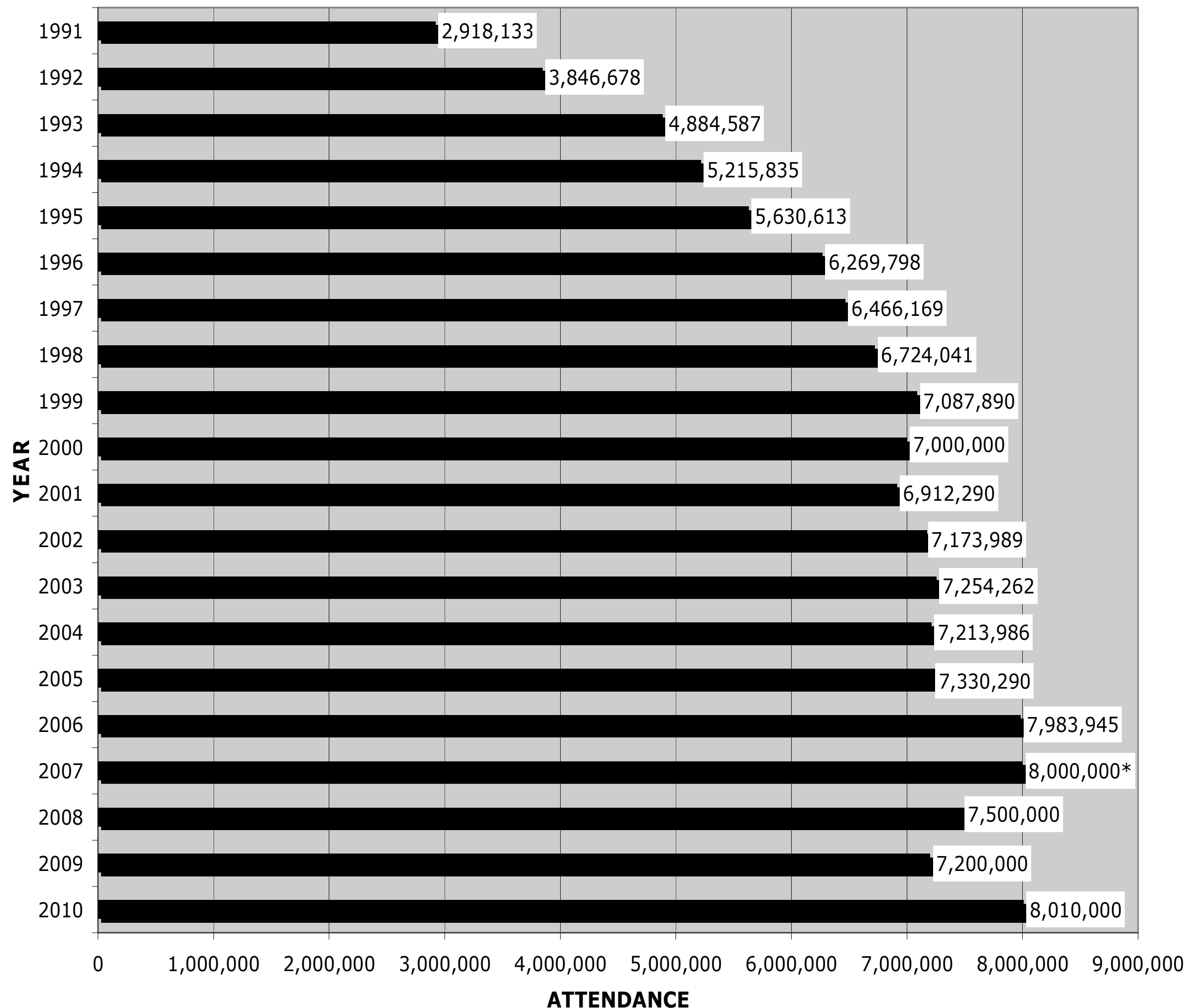

Fig X.1. Total Branson Visitors, 1991-2010.[20] Amounts from 2007-2010 are estimates.

[20] Branson/Lakes Area CC/CVB, "Branson Visitor Profiles 1991-2006;" "Branson/Lakes Area 2009 Fact Sheet, Revised 9/29/10," accessed February 28, 2011, http://www.bransoncourier.com/branson-reference/Branson-shows-attractions-lakes-tickets-1343.html; "Branson/Lakes Area 2011 Fact Sheet, Revised 2/25/11;" and
1991 is the first year that statistics were gathered by the CC/CVB.

beyond.[21] Statistics also prove that Branson's appeal extends beyond mere curiosity. According to market research covering 2000 to 2006, Branson visitors consistently reported a high level of satisfaction with their experience, ranking it, on average, as 4.46 on a scale of 5.[22] Branson is far more successful as a repeat vacation destination; only one year, 1992, which followed the national 60 Minutes broadcast featuring Branson, has brought more first-timers than repeat visitors to the area [Fig X.2]. Clearly, whatever Branson is selling is attractive enough that consumers will pay to experience it again and again.

While the entertainment options enumerated above appear to provide more than enough variety for the tourist market, a quick survey reveals that many of these options are in fact remarkably similar. Live music—primarily country and gospel—is the focus of the majority of venues, as well as the bulk of almost every show, whether or not they feature musicians as headliners. Another common element is comedy that might be, in all fairness, best described as "corny," or that of the more physical sort represented by baggy-pantsed clowns wearing snaggle-toothed dentures. Performing animals, magic acts, large chorus numbers, and big patriotic displays are also very common, and frequently a single show will, in the style of vaudeville, incorporate multiple acts on the same stage.

One major type of show features an extended, eponymous family group—The Presleys, The Duttons, The Hughes Brothers, etc.—skillfully playing and singing, telling

[21] Rental cars no doubt skew this survey, and obscure the presence of any foreign visitors to Branson.
[22] Branson/Lakes Area CC/CVB, "Branson/Lakes Area 2011 Fact Sheet, Revised 2/25/11."
[16] Branson/Lakes Area CC/CVB, "Branson Visitor Profiles, 1991-2006," July 23, 2007.

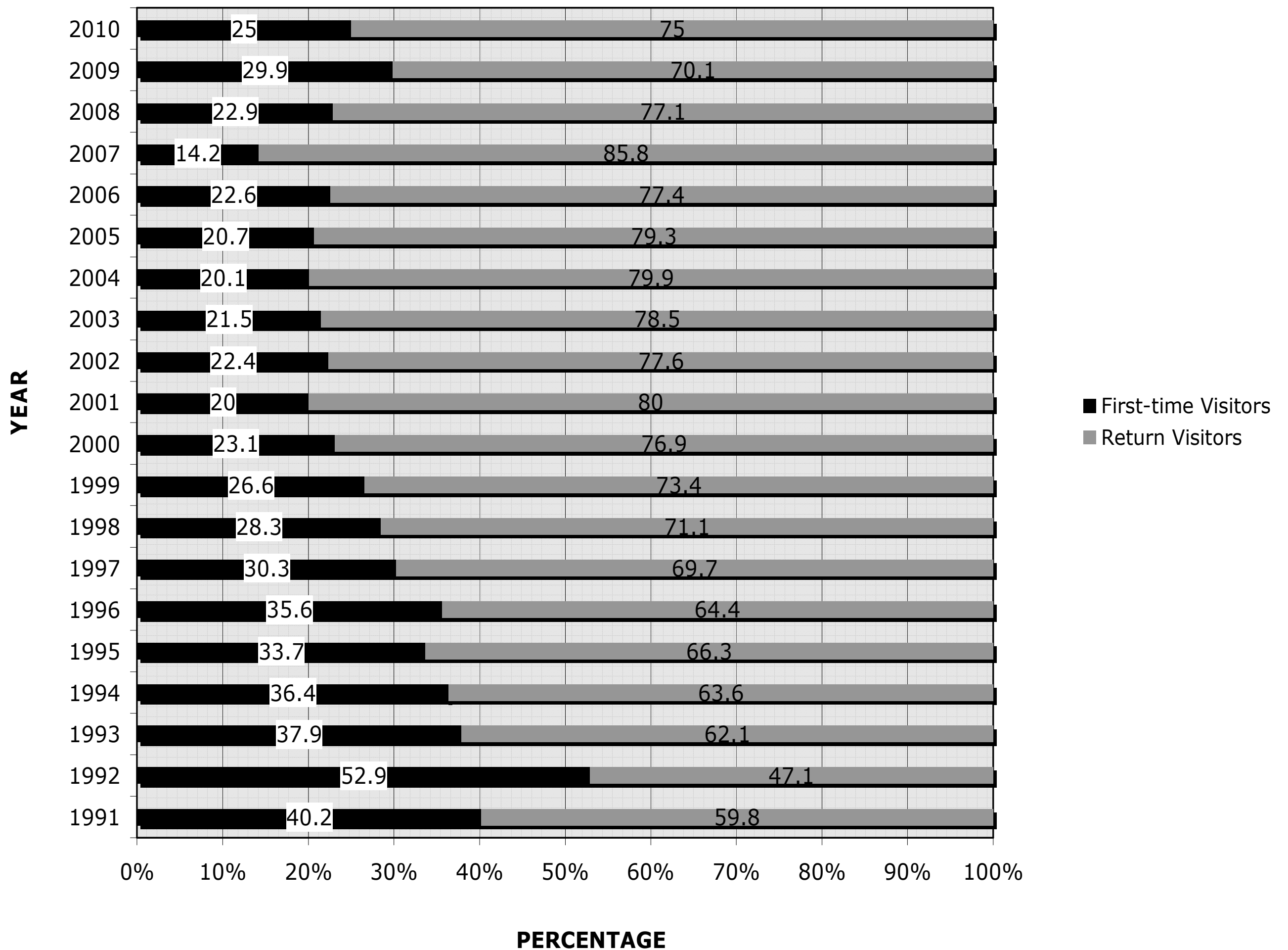

Fig X.2. Proportion of First Time to Repeat Visitors to Branson, 1991-2010.[23]

[23] Branson/Lakes Area CC/CVB, “Branson Visitor Profiles 1991-2006,” and “Year-End 2010 Marketing Report To the City of Branson,” February 22, 2011, accessed February 28, 2011, http://www.bransonmo.gov/reports/chamber/Presentation_Chamber_Year _End_2010_Report.pdf.

stories and cracking jokes. Other shows trade primarily in nostalgia for days gone by: "Lost in the Fifties with The Platters," "50's at the Hop" "70's Music Show," "#1 Hits of the 60's," "The Music of Your Life." These typically feature either glossy young actor-singers dressed in stylized, "retro" costumes, or once-popular entertainers now past their prime, like Andy Williams or Tony Orlando.[24] Given that the average age of an adult Branson-goer is 56.7, this is sound business.[25]

Regardless of the medium, the message of Branson can be distinctly encapsulated in a simple phrase: God and Country. Indeed, one venue is named the God and Country Theatre, and hosts four different productions, including *Smoke on the Mountain*, a "Hilarious Gospel Comedy Musical!" as well as something called "Cowboy Church" on Sunday mornings. Other religiously-themed shows include *God Rocks!*, *Sunday Gospel Jubilee*, *The Promise* (a life-of-Jesus pageant), and a weekly lecture called "Exploring Life in Heaven with Rose Martin." Other shows include overt references to God, Jesus, the Bible, and prominently feature gospel music or well known hymns in their repertoire.

Nationalism and civic pride are the other overwhelming subjects: "American Pie," "Branson's American Star," "Celebrate America," and "Broadway! The Star-Spangled Celebration," are just a handful of recent offerings. Generally, these traffic in relentless optimism about American opportunity, and also incorporate patriotic music, from the national anthem, to martial hymns, to Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the U.S.A."

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[24] Two episodes of the long-running prime time cartoon *The Simpsons* have parodied Branson's excessive fondness for this sort of revue/re-view, spoofing Andy Williams in one episode and taking its characters to see a Branson show entitled "That's Familiar!" in the other. See Episode 148/3F17, "Bart on the Road," originally aired May 31, 1996; and Episode 282/DABF09, "Old Man and the Key," originally aired March 10, 2002.

[25] Branson/Lakes Area CC/CVB, "Branson/Lakes Area 2011 Fact Sheet, Revised 2/25/11."

Refining "the Middle Class"

Part of the difficulty in dealing with commercial cultural products, as Bennett notes, is that the tourist audience "is characterized as a singular and undiscriminating entity, marked only by its antithesis to a committed and cultured spectatorship," which leads to its ready dismissal as lowbrow or in poor taste.[26] I've found that this characterization too often takes on a regional bias that champions the urban over the rural, and, in the United States, at least, the coastal over the interior regions, which are figured as impossibly provincial: the sticks, the boondocks, or worthless "flyover country." But of course, this sort of labeling says more about the labelers, who are interested in claiming "good taste" for themselves. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett is quick to point out in her study of heritage and tourism, "[g]ood taste is cultural capital masquerading as the natural attribute of an elite."[27] Its counterpart, bad taste, is the provenance of the masses—undistinguished and undistinguishing. Crucial to adequately dealing with Branson, or indeed any commercial performance venture, is first to identify as clearly as possible who makes up its audience. Only then can we begin to eradicate that idea of the masses as an "undiscriminating entity."

This is complicated by the fact that although Branson is meant for a specific audience, it is marketed to and consumed by those audiences *as if* that audience were its own kind of "undiscriminating entity," often figured as "plain folks." But there are no "plain folks;" great effort has gone into identifying who and where these people are, and what they are interested in. "Plain folks" is a marketing strategy for a particular marketing niche. Branson audiences are—as I believe are all audiences—specialized.

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[26] Bennett, "Theatre/Tourism," 409.
[27] Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*, 278.

Fortunately for those of us who study popular forms, marketing research meant to sell products can help identify our audiences for scholarly, not economic, purposes.

While I am not a trained sociologist, and while my data is hardly exhaustive, the effort is necessary. I draw inspiration from the sociocultural method forwarded by Pierre Bourdieu. Since I cannot use his data, I will borrow from his method, which entails a discussion of class and class *habitus*, or "the set of dispositions [of any given individual or class group] which generates practices and perceptions."[28]

The United States is commonly celebrated as a "classless society," particularly in contrast to the various caste systems of Old Europe, but this is clearly untrue. However, to the extent that a U. S. citizen is class-conscious, she would likely self-identify as "middle class." Although "middle class" is so encompassing and elusive a term as to be useless as a category, it must be dealt with, for the idea of American-ness (at least in popular culture) is very tied to middle-class-ness.

Early Americanist Sacvan Bercovitch notes that the United States, although it has always included the very rich and the very poor, has, since its founding as a nation, been thought of as average and middle-class, enjoying "a *commonplace prosperity*."[29]

> Americans regard 'middle-class' not as a relative position in the state but as an absolute state of mind. It meant not 'bourgeois' but 'aspiring"; not 'ill-educated' but 'self-taught'; not 'unaristocratic' but 'unshackled by tradition,'' not 'uprooted' but 'authentic'; not 'engaged in various occupations' but 'mobile' and 'adaptable.' To be 'middle-class' in the United States was to have a moral outlook, rather than a certain income.[30]

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[28] Randal Johnson, "Editor's Introduction: Pierre Bourdieu on Art, Literature and Culture" in *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 5.
[29] Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 46. Italics in original.
[30] Ibid., 49.

Middle-classness may be a mathematical reality for some, but it remains largely an aspirational standard, and one which is constantly on the rise.[31] Imagining the country as middle-class gives citizens something to strive for while still acknowledging a level of comfort.

Surveys seem to bear this out. A recent survey showed that 84% of Americans polled described themselves as "middle class," although their incomes ranged widely.[32] Borrowing their statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau, which identifies the 2005 median income at $46, 326, the non-profit Drum Major Institute for Public Policy brackets the middle-class across quite a broad range: those earning between $25,000 and $100,000 annually.[33] By this measure, Branson-goers easily qualify as middle-class. According to statistics gathered by the Branson/Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce and Convention and Visitors Bureau, the average income of a Branson tourist in 2004—the last year for which information is available—registers as $51, 391.[34] This seems to be fairly

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[31] Marina Moskowitz, *Standard of Living: The Measure of the Middle Class in Modern America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004). Moskowitz, like earlier chroniclers of "standard of living" studies, points out that the middle-class standard of living is actually beyond the reach of those making an average salary; to live *at* the standard is to rely on credit or other external sources of income.

[32] David Wallechinsky, "Is the American Dream Still Possible?" *Parade Magazine*, April 23, 2006, accessed February 28, 2011, http://www.parade.com/articles/editions/2006/edition_04-23-2006/Middle_Class_feature. This study of 2200 Americans with incomes ranging from $30,000 to $99,000 annually was conducted by Marc Clements Research, Inc., for *Parade Magazine*.

[33] Carmen DeNavas-Walt, Bernadette D. Proctor, and Cheryl Hill Lee, U.S. Census Bureau. Current Population Reports, P60-231, *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2005*, accessed February 28, 2011, http://www.census.gov/prod/2006pubs/p60-231.pdf; and Drum Major Institute for Public Policy, "The Myth of the Middle? Campaign 2004 on America's Middle Class," accessed February 28, 2011, www.drummajorinstitute.org/pdfs/myth.pdf.

[34] Branson/Lakes Area CC/CVB, "Branson Visitor Profiles 1991-2006." Surveyors stopped asking about income after 2004, due to the strong negative response from respondents and a growing percentage of those who refused to answer the question.

representative, as the income hovered on either side of the fifty-thousand dollar range, with a low of $46, 510 in 1993 and a high of $54,925 in 1998 [Fig x.3].

While Branson-goers are not terribly wealthy, even within the range considered "middle class," they are able to afford, both in time and money, a vacation several days long. According to 2006 data, visitors stay an average four nights in Branson, and spend about $52.36 per person, per day, during their trip.[35] Branson is, across the bar, far more affordable than many other domestic destinations. Motel lodging is available for as little as low as $30 per night, show tickets run between $15 and $40 for adults (with many discounted options for seniors, children, and groups), and a variety of inexpensive restaurant options include fast food, diners, and buffets. For those used to traveling by car and already paying fixed costs for personal vehicles, Branson is an affordable destination within a day's drive for more than a third of the national population. 79.6% of all visitors in 2010 used a personal vehicle to travel to Branson.[36]

Affordability and "value" are promoted as part of Branson's appeal. Not only are costs comparatively reasonable, but modest coupons are widely available, both online and at many area locations, for restaurants, hotels, attractions and shows, with seasonal discounts also available. There are three outlet malls offering discounted goods for bargain hunters, and the local Chamber of Commerce offered "gas buster" rebate promotions during the summers of 2007 and 2008 to prevent high fuel prices from biting into tourism revenues. Many shows feature pre-show acts (jugglers, comedians,

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[35] Figures calculated using data from Branson/Lakes Area CC/CVB's "Branson Visitor Profiles, 1991-2006," July 23, 2007. A full data set from 2010 was not yet available.
[36] Branson/Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce, "Branson/Lakes Area 2011 Fact Sheet, Revised 2/25/11."

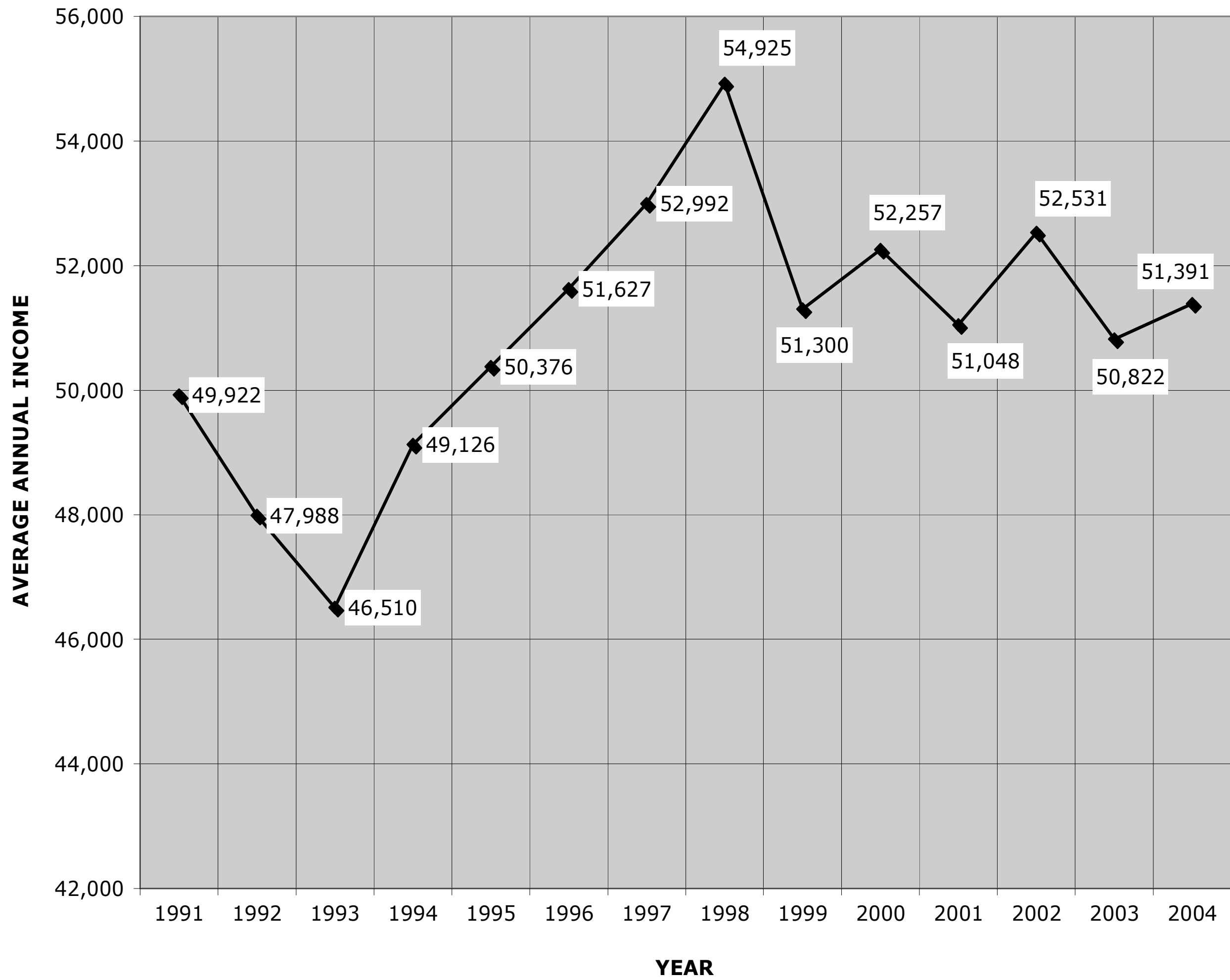

Fig X.3. Average Annual Income, in U. S. Dollars, of Branson visitors, 1991-2004.[37]

[37] Branson/Lakes Area CC/CVB, "Branson Visitor Profiles 1991-2006.

participatory events, etc.) included in the admission price to make visitors feel that they are receiving even more for their money. This approach is also used in promoting Branson's burgeoning real estate market. Branson rates below the mean on the national Cost of Living Index, and notes that average list price in 2007 for a three bedroom, single family home is $145,000, far below the recent national average of $230,100.[38]

But middle-class status, through all its various permutations across time, has relied on more than just income. Recent profiles on social stratification note multiple interpenetrating variables, and each scholar has a preferred set.[39] Occupational prestige, level of education, race, sex, and religion all inflect class status, and their mixture makes clear or consistent delineations between the working and middle classes impossible. Regardless, statistics on these categories are not collected by Branson producers, and to collect them would be a separate project. However, these lacunae are revelatory in their own way.

If statistics on occupation and educational level (which are often strongly correlated) are not collected, one may assume that Branson's producers are not aiming at either the working or the middle class, specifically. Certainly, their emphasis on affordability might be attractive to either group, and higher-end options are available for those who want them. If statistics on race are not collected, one may assume that the

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[38] Branson/Lakes Area CC/CVB, "Branson: The Community Guide 2007," 7, and realestateabc.com, "Real Estate Home Appreciation," accessed August 13, 2007, http://www.realestateabc.com/outlook/overall.htm. Given the subsequent banking crisis and the burst of the housing bubble, these numbers may have changed significantly since 2007.

[39] See Leonard Beeghley, *The Structure of Social Stratification in the United States* (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1989) and Dennis Gilbert and Joseph A. Kahl, *The American Class Structure: A New Synthesis*, fourth edition (Chicago: Dorsey Press, 2005) for examples.

absence of race as a meaningful category means that racial diversity is neither expected nor necessarily sought. The city of Branson is 94.5% white, and Taney County is 96.0%.[40] This placid attitude toward a lack of diversity is reflected in the less numerical, but no less legitimate evidence in the many brochures published by the tourism industry. Though they are printed in full-color, these promotional documents present an image that is almost entirely white. Likewise, the prevalence of Christian references as well as the near-absolute absence of non-Christian houses of worship underscores the tacit understanding that Christianity is the default religious practice of the vast majority of Branson's many visitors.[41] This is not to say that non-whites and non-Christian do not make up some small proportion of the audience, but they are largely invisible to—and hence ignored by—marketers. The matter of educational level is not clearly resolvable, and since occupations are also unavailable, one is unable to make any but the broadest generalizations about this aspect of the community.

But if we can identify Branson-goers as, generally speaking, "middle-class," or perhaps "lower-middle class," can we then classify Branson's entertainments as "middlebrow"? In that they blur the line between art and commerce: yes; in that the two

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[40] U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Profile of General Demographic Characteristics: 2000 for Branson city, Missouri," accessed February 2011, http://censtats.census.gov/data/MO/1602907966.pdf; and "State and County QuickFacts, Taney County, Missouri," accessed February 2011, http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/29/29213.html.

[41] The only synagogue in the area, the Tabernacle of Praise, advocates Messianic Judaism, which believes that Jesus/Yeshua is the Messiah, and which is not considered a legitimately Jewish faith by any other Jewish denominations. The more commonly known "Jews for Jesus" hold many similar beliefs, but have no direct affiliation with Messianic congregations.

are not caught up in an “anxious relationship”: no.[42] The two major marketing tools used by Branson advertisers—television and the internet—are meant to reach a mass audience, not just a middle one. Much of the market research done by the CC/CVB is meant to help identify “designated market areas” used by the Nielsen Media Research company to note the reach of television stations into various regions, and which serve as a unit affecting price when buying advertising. And the influence of the internet continues to grow. Most theatres and attractions have their own highly developed interactive websites, complete with streaming audio and video, and more general Branson tourism sites abound (the now-obligatory Google search of “Branson Missouri” yields more than one million results). From this, we can surmise that Branson’s audiences are more “mass” than specifically “middle.” They might be more accurately identified as “consciously lowbrow,” or, to borrow John Seabrook’s term, “nobrow,” in that it what Branson offers are overtly commercial cultural products which “do the work that both high and folk culture used to do—not only enlighten and teach but bond families and communities,”[43] as the rest of this project will demonstrate.

According to a major tourist website: “All of Branson’s entertainment and activities are based on family values, so whether you are a family, friends, a couple, or a large group you will not find anything to offend or embarrass you.[44] This statement would seem to categorize a Branson audience as working class, according to Bourdieu’s

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[42] See David Savran’s history of this term in “Middlebrow Anxiety” in *A Queer Sort of Materialism: Recontextualizing American Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 3-55.
[43] John Seabrook, *Nobrow: The Culture of Marketing, the Marketing of Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 126.
[44] Branson, Missouri! “Branson, Missouri!—Every Bit of It!”, accessed August 13, 2008, http://www.branson-missouri.com/.

formulation, in that it "make[s] references, often explicitly, to the norms of morality or agreeableness. Whether rejecting or praising, [the working class's] appreciation always has an ethical basis."[45] This may be a slight oversimplification of working-class tastes, but wholesomeness is an integral part of Branson's image. The vice economy that can make up a large part of income for other vacation destinations barely registers here. Alcohol sales and consumption are legal and accessible, though almost exclusively limited to restaurants; gambling, legal in Missouri on "boats" docked in the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers, was rejected for a development on the White River in nearby Rockaway Beach in 2004; and the area's only "gentleman's club," Spanks, is fourteen miles away in Reeds Spring.

So, while their "moral capital" is high, this group, relatively homogenous compared to the larger culture, does not rank particularly highly in any other kind of capital, including their cultural capital (evidenced, in one way, by the lack of scholarship on this cultural site that so many enjoy). Identifying the class status of Branson's visitors is a complicated issue, and one that I will discuss in more detail in Chapter One.

On "Real American Entertainment"

For years, Branson's key marketing slogan was "Real American Entertainment." Although another motto, "Someone you love is always playing in Branson℠," is now the primary catchphrase, the first slogan has been loaned to an annual promotional event, BransonFest, no doubt because it so perfectly encapsulates what Branson claims to offer its visitors. As such, it also offers one a way to begin discussing how Branson—and, possibly, other American spectacular sites—functions culturally.

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[45] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 5.

The idea of “real” American entertainment is inherently problematic, for any quick survey of the area shows that there is almost nothing about Branson that hasn’t been manufactured, modified, or simply made up for maximum profitability. Even the land on which it rests has been engineered, drastically and repeatedly, over the course of the last century, through multiple damming and development projects. The idea of realness or authenticity remains crucial to Branson’s image. Promotional materials of all sorts tout the historical status of this or that, or the accurate (or accurately reproduced) attraction: genuine soldier’s uniforms, the actual car used in the making of *The Beverly Hillbillies*, or, more generally, as I heard repeatedly during my visits, “authentic Ozark hospitality.” This marketing tactic is hardly specific to Branson, but its ubiquity across attractions is striking. Compared to other spectacular sites like Las Vegas or Disneyland, which are more directly and obviously fantastic (“real fakes,”) Branson is carefully calculated to seem real, or at least *real enough*, a “fake real.”

The image of realness goes beyond advertising, however—authenticity is widely performed in Branson. First and foremost, Branson’s many attractions are set among a larger context of an American *heritage*, a topic I will treat more thoroughly in Chapter Two. Though it makes appeals to its age and historicity, heritage is rather contemporary and manufactured, “a mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past”; neither old nor authentic, but “often concocted, generalized and idealized” to serve the needs and desires of the present.[46]

By this definition, much of Branson qualifies as Baudrillardian simulacra: images that refer only and endlessly to other images, all of which are beyond judgments of truth

[46] Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*, 7, and Lippard, *On the Beaten Track*, 154.

and fiction.[47] It is impossible to identify to what degree Branson's simulacra are recognized as such by its audiences. Certainly some, exhibiting a case of allodoxia, "the mistaken identifications and false recognitions which betray the gap between acknowledgement and knowledge," accept Branson's vision as authentic. This is common to those who lack or are denied cultural capital, and wishing to possess it, approach cultural products with a "pure but empty goodwill." [48] Others likely recognize it as a synthetic experience and still enjoy it, perhaps because they feel that if it doesn't show reality, it shows how things *used to be*, or at least how they *should be*. There may be others, what Urry calls "post-tourists," who recognize and embrace the synthetic for its artificiality, but irony seems in fairly short supply in Branson.[49] And, as the point of this popular vacation destination is ease and entertainment, rather thancritical appreciation, it may reasonably assume that simulacra are not only acceptable, but possibly even preferable to the reality that they reference and replace. Whether Branson is hyperreal or simply fake, its effects are real enough. Baudrillard believe that America's (by which he means the United States') fictiveness that makes it so potent, because fiction clarifies, polishes off rough edges, streamlines things. "[E]nter America as a fiction. It is, indeed, on this fictive basis that it dominates the world."[50]

Although Branson may not be dominating the world (yet), hunger for the authentic manifests itself in another way: *participation* in many attractions. One can participate in many various non-spectator activities (golfing, shopping, skiing, riding

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[47] Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra" in *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 6.
[48] Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 323.
[49] See John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze,* second edition (London, Sage Publications, 2002).
[50] Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1989), 29.

roller-coasters), but even in shows, participation is encouraged in ways that are suppressed in more conventional performance environments, where quiet, mostly passive attention is requested. Bourdieu attributes the desire for participation to the working- and middle-class factions, which prefer familiarity to formal experimentation.[51] A lively audience response is explicitly encouraged at some shows, and at all shows there is some level of audience participation. Visitors interact with the environment in real time: public announcements welcome various groups (tour companies, veterans, senior centers, school groups, etc.), programs include directed sing-a-longs ("now the left side!") and audience questions, as well as designated times, either during intermission or after the show, for audience members to personally meet performers, collect autographs, and pose for photos with them.

While this exposure reinforces the "realness" of performers' personas and connects them to those beyond the footlights, all of these interactions are, to some degree or another, carefully controlled. The lack of formal experimentation is evident not only in the variety-show patterns of any given production, familiar from television models, but in the repetition of certain formulas and characters between and among shows. Branson audiences aren't, by and large, theoretical aesthetes in search of an auratic experience. Indeed, many people post comments to show websites or online bulletin boards like TripAdvisor indicating that they return to see the same shows again and again. I was strongly encouraged by a person seated next to me to see another show down the Strip, because it was "just like" the one we were currently watching.

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[51] Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 32.

Arguably more important than realness is the importance of America, or American-ness. For the purposes of this study, I will be using "America" and its descriptive form "American" interchangeably with the far more accurate designation "the United States." This usage is problematic for any number of reasons, but I have chosen to adopt the equivalency primarily because it is the language that Branson uses, relentlessly, but also because I'm operating under the assumption that any nation is "imagined," and my object of study is not identical to the US American nation.

Central to this project is understanding the American nation as a kind of imagined community, as defined by Benedict Anderson in his book of the same title. No nation is a solid, monolithic entity, but Anderson's notion has particular significance for the United States, where the nation began as an ideological paradigm and where national identity is based in "explicit allegiance, not involuntary inheritance."[52] Throughout the project, I'll interrogate the idea of "Americanness" as a primary cultural marker that is powerfully inflected by other, more commonly recognized cultural markers like class, religion, and race. Just as it's fair to say that there are many ways to claim these markers of identity as they shift and intersect, there are many "Americas" within the United States, and I aim to inspect one that has been strangely overlooked—given the scope of its influence—but one that claims its authority based on long-standing, if ill-defined, "American" ideals.

Anderson notes that any "nation" is defined by four qualities.[53] First, it is *imagined*, meaning the majority of relationships among its constituent members will live solely in the minds of those members. Branson fosters this aspect, promoting the notion

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[52] Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 6.
[53] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991), 6.

that so many millions who briefly pass through are united by the consumption of the same cultural products. Second, Anderson says is that nation is *limited*—it has boundaries. While these boundaries may be geographical, Anderson, who ties the rise of nationalisms to the spread of print media, is more concerned with the role of cultural products in fostering national identity. These products often link ideas of nation with natural phenomena like geographical boundaries and borders, essentializing the former and simultaneously obscuring the fact of their construction.

Anderson might also include other, less tangible elements: anything that discriminates or draws conceptual boundaries between "us-the-nation" (who prefer assurances of nothing to offend or embarrass us) and "them-not-the-nation" (who presumably do not). Bourdieu makes it clear that "every petit-bourgeois profession of rigour, every eulogy of the clean, sober and neat, contains a tacit reference to uncleanness, in works or things, to intemperance or improvidence.[54] And such references are nothing new; Branson's focus on tidiness and moral uplift might have been borrowed from the late-nineteenth-century vaudeville promoter B. F. Keith and his "Sunday School Circuit." Although Branson is not explicit about matters of class, neither does it try to deter all associations with the working-class, which makes up some proportion of its audience.[55]

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[54] Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 247.
[55] For historical examples of the relationship between working-class entertainments and wholesomeness, see "The Institutionalization of Burlesque" in Robert C. Allen's *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 159-193; and Trav S. D.'s "Good Clean Fund" in *No Applause—Just Throw Money: The Book that Made Vaudeville Famous* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2005), 54-81.

Third, Anderson says that any nation is imagined as "sovereign," meaning that its freedom is claimed only by its sovereignty from other nations. I don't believe that Branson positions itself as a sovereign nation *within* the US—quite the contrary—but rather as the truest, most authentic expression of the nation that may be considered to be losing its way. There is also some sense that what Branson is offering through its many performance venues is not available elsewhere, that in fact affordable, safe, "family-friendly" entertainment is a rare and precious commodity, one that may be under attack by secularism and anti-American sentiment.

Lastly, Anderson notes that a nation is imagined as a *community* because "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a *deep horizontal comradeship*."[56] The idea of horizontality seems particularly important for America, as an expression of its democratic ideals. America's long esteemed bourgeois values like populism and egalitarianism seem particularly relevant for a place as demographically homogeneous as Branson, which purports to offer something for everyone. However, for the average worker, the democratic ideal manifests primarily as a bootstrap mentality that equates upward mobility with hard work, and disregards social supports that encourage actual upward mobility for all. Although Missouri is not a "Right-to-Work" state, there is no union presence in Branson. Many jobs are in the low-status, low-paying, non-skilled service industry in restaurants, hotels, and retail shops, and neither these workers nor the many performers and backstage crews employed in the area has any leverage as groups.

[56] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 7, italics mine.

The idea of the nation as *imagined* is particularly important to this project as I operate from the basic premise that, through its many performance venues, and even through sites that are not explicitly about performance, Branson is involved in building, or one might say *performing*, an ideal American community, which I refer to as “the Branson nation.”

Finally, we come to the importance of “entertainment.” It should be clear from the brief discussion above that Branson has plenty of entertainments on offer, and that by providing “more direct, more immediate satisfactions” through spectacles like “fabulous sets, glittering costumes, exciting music, lively action, enthusiastic actors [in order to] satisfy the taste for and sense of revelry, plain speaking and hearty laughter,” they are intended for a popular audience.[57] Plain speaking and hearty laughter are at the heart of Branson’s appeal, which begins by being comprehensible to everyone with a basic level of American cultural awareness. If you’ve watched U.S.-produced, English-language television in the last forty years, been a part of the day-to-day life of a family, or observed that the world can sometimes be a comically frustrating place to live, Branson’s brand of entertainment is within your ken. It is a place where the fun is accessible, where, according to the General Manager of one of the longest-running shows on Branson’s Strip: “everyone gets the jokes.”[58] The question is whether or not you find those jokes very funny.

Branson’s producers have gone to great lengths to make their attractions accessible to as many people as possible. Apart from the financial and topical

[57] Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 34.
[58] Hollye Gurley, General Manager of the Baldknobbers Jamboree, interviewed by the author, July 20, 2007, Baldknobbers Jamboree Theatre, Branson, Missouri.

considerations previously mentioned, their physical layouts are designed to accommodate the needs and preferences of the modern guest. Parking lots are large, since most travelers arrive by private vehicle and some attractions offer shuttles to ferry patrons from outlying areas directly to the ticket windows. Once inside, auditoriums are spacious, with as many as 2000 seats spread across single, gently raked level, resulting in few stairs for older or handicapped patrons, or for those with small children in strollers. Huge, closed-circuit video screens on either side of the stage magnify the live action for those not seated front and center. Concession stands sell drinks and snacks which can be enjoyed during the show.

All these things are meant to increase the comfort of patrons as they consume the various cultural products, which "constitute[s] one of the supreme manifestations of *ease*, in the sense both of objective leisure and subjective facility."[59] Bourdieu connects "ease" to the development of the cultural field's "pure gaze," but this makes less sense for a popular cultural phenomenon, where no attempt at appearing disinterested in the commercial exists—that interest is explicit and even celebrated. But the idea of ease is important, if only as a reminder that ease is not the sole provenance of the dominant classes. If it "represents the most visible assertion of freedom from the constraints which dominate ordinary people,"[60] Branson appears intent on democratizing ease by putting it within the reach of more "ordinary" people

People from all class factions, regardless of their financial, cultural, or educational capital, are willing to exchange what they do have for cultural forms that reinforce their sense of well being and membership within a group. Branson is a place where

[59] Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 55.
[60] Ibid., 255.

abundance—a long-held characteristic of America and necessary to ease—is celebrated. Much of Branson's spectacle is based on the fundamental allure of excess. Everything is not only available, but bounteous: the food, the shopping, the pastimes, the land itself. Shows are populated by enormous casts in multiple, brightly colored and spangled costumes, theatres seat thousands of spectators, meals are all-you-can-eat buffets, and you can shop 'til you drop. Even if one never sets foot in a mall, reasons to part with one's money can be found at every turn. Every theatre features a gift shop to "bombard the audience with explicit retail opportunities before and after their theatrical experience," and most also feature on-line stores, as well.[61]

But no matter how important the retail market is to the bottom line, Branson is not simply about the things you can take home. It goes far beyond the actual cultural products available for consumption (although this may explain why the cultural products themselves are so interchangeable) to what they represent on a larger scale. Branson sells what Dean MacCannell calls "pure experience," which, although it is immaterial, is no less commodified.[62] It is a pleasure dome where every aspect of your trip, up to and including the toilet facilities, is meant to amuse, delight, and comfort, to contribute to one's experience of ease.[63] Ease, however, requires laborious erasures, because there *are* "constraints which dominate ordinary people," like a lack of education, limited income,

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[61]Bennett, "Theatre/Tourism," 424. Here Bennett is discussing the proliferation of retailing surrounding shows in Las Vegas, although there seems to be little difference between the two sites on this point.

[62] Dean MacCannell, *Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 21.

[63] At the Shoji Tabuchi Theatre, the men's and women's lounges are an advertised highlight: the ladies' room features "live cut orchids at every granite and onyx pedestal sink" and the men's, an extravagantly decorated billiards table and "black lion head sinks imported from Italy." Shoji Tabuchi Show, "About the Show," accessed February 28, 2011, http://www.shoji.com/show.html.

arthritic knees and high blood pressure, or the demands of a fussy toddler, all of which Branson struggles to elide. One of the most important erasures, however, is that Branson is *only* about entertainment.

If the pure gaze can be defined more generally as “an ethos of elective distance,” Branson’s pure gaze is not economic in nature, but political.[64] That is, it assumes an elective distance from politics, an apolitical stance. Apoliticality is a myth, for to claim an apolitical view is, in effect, its own political stance. But early in my research process, I was notified that the area’s focus on god-and-country was explicitly *not political*.[65] I assume the speaker meant that shows are careful not to espouse explicitly partisan positions, but the messages it sends are internally consistent and clearly in alignment with conservative American values: love your country, support the military, praise the (evangelical Christian) Lord, and don’t ask questions, just enjoy yourselves.

One of the larger questions I explore through this project is this: if high-art forms disavow commerce, as Bourdieu points out in *The Field of Cultural Production*, what, other than the fact that they have any kind of “pedagogic objective,” do unabashedly commercial cultural products disavow? A false dichotomy has long been operative between artistic culture and commercial culture. This study will demonstrate that just as high culture is ever mindful of its financial dimension, these popular forms are self-aware and promote themselves not only as commercial artistic properties, but even more importantly as cultural and political markers of belonging. Although it presents itself as a

[64] Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 5.
[65] Interview with Hollye Gurley, July 20, 2007. Ms. Gurley went on to note that she wanted *to be sure* I understood that Branson does not espouse a political view, “since [I am] from New York.”

guileless good time, I argue that Branson takes great care to position itself in the cultural field through a number of disavowals.

While I don't presume that what applies to the Branson Nation applies everywhere, reading deeply into this particular case address questions with broader applicability: what are popular forms appealing to? What fundamentals are being invoked? What difficulties are being ignored? How do these function in performance? What image of America is being sold, and to whom? While Branson actively embraces its commercial position and claims to serve a broad American audience—more than eight million people in 2010—demographic information shows that they are indeed reaching many individuals, but only within a pre-selected group of white, Christian, largely Midwestern and Southern "middle-class" citizens who own private vehicles and are able to afford vacations.

It is my contention that there are multiple Andersonian nations within the United States, and here I focus on one that proclaims abstractly "American" values (like freedom and faith), but is more realistically rooted in performing an America as based on identity markers like rurality, conservative politics, and evangelical Christian belief. It is only free to proclaim these abstractions as paramount because these identity categories allow it some amount of cultural power over those who fall into other categories—non-whites, non-Christians, and those who fall into class factions on either side of "middle." Branson sells itself as a kind of escape from the average pop culture offerings that alienate conservative, suburban or ex-urban, white, middle- or working-class Christians, but its audience is not in fact a minority group, even if they are a dominated group in

comparison to coastal tastemakers who mock or simply dismiss Branson and its amusements.

I discuss both producers and consumers of performance in Branson, since each group helps produce the other. This is particularly important, as an accurate portrayal of Branson must take care to avoid both a simplistic, top-down imposition by the dominant culture, and an equally unsophisticated view that Branson's spectacles represent the true vision and voice of "the people." It is too easy to think that Branson's spectacles are primarily ways of disciplining audiences to be passive consumers (of performance and everything else) while making them rather proud of and content with that identity. It is more complicated than that; there must be some benefit to the consumer. Bourdieu, unsurprisingly, puts it best:

> In the cultural market—and no doubt elsewhere—the matching of the supply and demand is neither the simple effect of a conscious endeavour to serve the consumers' needs, but the result of the objective orchestration of two relatively independent logics, that of the fields of production and that of the field of consumption.[66]

What are audiences are finding so very appealing? Perhaps, in a time where national anxiety is high regarding security, shifting demographic profiles, and economic unease, what's being disciplined is the border between Us and Them, so as to symbolically—and to some degree effectively—shore up the Branson Nation as the "real" American nation, complete with Real American Entertainment.

A Note on Self-reflexivity

Prior to my recent research, my exposure to Branson was already more than that of the average theatre scholar. I became aware of Branson's existence in the late 1980s

[66] Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 230.

after moving to southeast Missouri with my family. Many people I knew had visited Branson at least once, and I travelled there myself several times with youth groups during my high school years. I briefly visited twice during its mid-1990s boom, while chaperoning large groups of high school arts students to see performances of The Jim Stafford Show and The Osmond Family Hot Country Revue on Ice. Although I was personally unimpressed about these two productions, I was also fascinated by how enthusiastically these shows were received by most of the audience, including a healthy proportion of the teenagers I was supervising.

Demographically, I fall mostly within Branson's target audience: white, native-born, a Midwestern daughter of Midwestern parents, raised in Protestant and economically "middle-class" small town environments. Although a younger than the average guest, I'm not far off the mark many ways. However, my relationship to it is more complex. Although my race, economic class, regional background, and religious identity of my childhood put me squarely *in* the nation that Branson claims as the Real America, my current regional position as a resident of New York City, my educational level, cultural preferences, and lack of religious affiliation place me very clearly outside.[67] I am neither completely in nor outside of the Branson Nation. I am connected enough to find the subject matter intelligible and worthy of serious investigation, but not blind to its biases.

My current research reflects this dual position. Much of my research was gathered as I spent days in Branson as a tourist much like any other. Over the course of four, four- and five-day visits during the 2007 and 2008 seasons, I paid for tickets, stayed in motor

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[67] Although my educational and cultural capital are relatively high, my purchasing power has always been far below that of average Branson-goer in 2004, the last year average income was tallied. As such, I am particularly aware of the allure of affordable entertainments.

inns and spent a lot of time crawling along Country Music Boulevard in rental cars.[68] I ate at “Ozark” restaurants, browsed through gift shops, and loaded up on promotional brochures and magazines to plan my activities. But unlike the average Branson visitor, I also interviewed a number of cultural producers, pointedly eavesdropped on fellow patrons’ conversations, and scoured the regional archives at the College of the Ozarks at nearby Point Lookout, Missouri, documenting my findings with copious notes and photographs all the while. Over the course of these visits, I attended more than twenty attractions from the scores that were available, making sure to include many of the various types generally on offer. I attended each spectacle included here as a case study at least once, and purchased digital video recordings of several of them to allow repeat viewings.

Since there is so little scholarship on the subject, I necessarily drew from a broad range of disciplines, each of which has different criteria for legitimacy. As a result, I use different kinds of evidence, as I hope this introduction has already demonstrated. While this is a primarily a theatre and cultural studies project, I complement my more subjective, experiential evidence with as much scholarship as is reasonable. Any single type of evidence has faults—statistics, photos, anecdotes, one’s own recollections of performances—each is incomplete, unrepresentative, or otherwise unreliable, so I’ve created a collage from a wide range of elements, in order to inspect how Branson performs American authenticity as a way to frame itself and draw business from those who benefit from identifying with the particular brand of authenticity being sold.

Thus, I will be combining evidence drawn from, in Diana Taylor’s terms, both the archive, including permanently and formally recorded materials as well as standard,

[68] My visits were in July and November of 2007, and in April and September of 2008.

generally acknowledged cultural manifestations; and the repertoire, the evanescent, often embodied practices which transmit cultural messages.[69] Performance texts in Branson were unavailable, and in any case, their format—largely a mix of old jokes, patter, and well-known songs—sit somewhere between the two. Other "repertoire" materials will include paper ephemera and web sources, self-generated public relations material that, while in some ways rightly considered archivable "texts," are intended as quick, cheap, and disposable means of promoting a product, rather than preserving it for the ages. Many of these sources are meant to sell a product, and therefore are inherently biased, but inspecting those biases leads to a better understanding the phenomena they promote. Other evidence for this project will include selections from the popular press (legitimate because my object of study is popular), including some "puff pieces," and my personal experiences of the environment and individual shows.

"Archival" evidence will include the modest number of books published on Ozark history and development, as well as newspaper and magazine articles, including those which unapologetically promote the area and those which are interested in more equitable reportage. Much of the history of Branson, even in these published works, shows the influence of the repertoire in its reliance on anecdotal evidence. While one can't totally discount anecdotes, one must also note that anecdotes are a significant way of myth-making. And Branson is in the business of myth-making. In fact, most of what Branson is doing—as all popular culture products do—is selling *mythical* ideas, in this case, of a unified, largely homogeneous American nation. While this seems desirable and appears to be "natural," these ideas undergird and obscure power structures that divide Americans

[69] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003),

from one another. I cover four of the most power ones in the subsequent chapters: Rural America, Heritage America, Christian America, and the American Dream.

Chapter Descriptions

Each of my four chapters is centered on a major idea used by Branson to market its authentically American entertainments, and a corresponding archetype employed as a model upon which producers perform and consumers are encouraged to model their behavior.

Chapter One, "Rural America" begins, literally, from the ground up, with a focus on the geography of the region. The wholesomeness of the rural in general, and the mountainous Ozarks in particular, are a crucial part of Branson's mythology. A discussion of the shifting divide between urban and rural includes the history of Branson's development from an isolated backwoods village in the late nineteenth century, to a rural destination promoting physical, mental and spiritual health, to an outdoorsman's paradise and mountain music center, and, finally, to the thriving entertainment mecca and rapidly growing, permanent ex-urban community that it is today.

Along with this comes a discussion of a figure crucial in negotiating the rural/urban divide so important to Branson's ongoing success: the hillbilly. After dealing with this figure, borrowing from Anthony Harkins' recent cultural history on the subject, I turn to two primary case studies: *The Shepherd of the Hills* Homestead and Outdoor Drama, and the *Baldknobbers Jamboree Show*. These two attractions are among the oldest in Branson, and continue to rely on both the appeal of the natural terrain of the Ozark region (although that terrain will be shown to be anything but natural) and the

character of the hillbilly in order to frame the "real" American in exceedingly narrow terms. The hillbilly in particular is used to position Branson—and by extension, the Branson tourist—in a particular middle-class fraction that is able to count itself superior to those both above and below it on the class scale.

Chapter Two, "American History," discusses the ways that Branson markets heritage, history, and nostalgia as consumable and interchangeable commodities. This is not simply limited to the invocation of American history, but includes the reframing of historical events through forms and practices that have little to do with the realities of that history. Every image of the past is constantly re-historicized to serve the purposes of that present, reflecting the biases of the creators of the "historical" monument. Even a quick glance at Branson's efforts reveals that its re-historicization serves primarily to de-historicize or otherwise flatten out the difficulties of American history in the name of national unity, using the figure of the soldier-patriot.

After establishing the differences between "history" and "heritage," best demonstrated through a reading of Silver Dollar City, a frontier-themed amusement park, the chapter includes three case studies: a museum, a musical, and "The Most Fun Place to Eat in Branson!" The National Veterans' Memorial Museum covers most of the United States' major military conflicts of the twentieth century from the perspective of the individual soldier. Exhibits are designed to lead visitors to identify with the personal sacrifice and heroism of those who fought, without questioning the policies that sacrifice and heroism institute or reinforce. The musical *Celebrate America!* presents a longitudinal pageant of American history that focuses on the spirit of American patriotism from the Founding Fathers to the present day, expands identification with

soldier to include those who don't serve in a military capacity and offering a unified, contemporary image of patriotism as suffering. *Dolly Parton's Dixie Stampede* provides food and a Civil War-themed spectacle that separates the audience into two groups which root for—and play as—soldiers of the Union or the Confederacy, before symbolically uniting them as Americans. Its rhetoric allows the history of both North and South to be heralded for vague, feel-good sentiments that everyone can support. In flattering every audience member, regardless of her viewpoint, its upholds a culture of American martial pride and might, while erasing any source of internal conflicts—in essence evacuating the meaning of the war it purportedly invokes.

Chapter Three, "A Christian Nation," deal with the unavoidable impression in Branson that to be an American is to be Christian. There is some factual basis for this assumption, as the vast majority of contemporary Americans claim that religion,[70] but the brand of faith most often promoted and performed in Branson is Evangelical Christianity.

Boundaries between religious observance and entertainment in Branson are already rather blurry. Most programs incorporate religious music or motifs of some sort, but a growing proportion of acts have explicitly religious messages. This chapter will include a discussion of the relationship between evangelicalism and entertainment, and discuss how the figure of the evangelical is presented as a model for both producers and consumers performing their faith. The two case studies for this section are Sight & Sound Theatre's Branson premiere, *Noah, The Musical*, and *The Jim Bakker Show*, a daily live

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[70] Barry A. Kosmin, Egon Mayer, and Ariela Keysar, "American Religious Identification Survey 2001," accessed February 28, 2011, http://www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research _briefs/aris.pdf. This study identified that 77% of adult respondents self-identified as Christians.

talk show hosted by the long-time televangelist and disgraced former leader of Praise the Lord Ministries.

Chapter Four engages with the most powerful of American myths, that of the American Dream. Whether it means improved employment prospects, home or land ownership, or providing a better life for one's children, it typically involves some level of financial success and social ascendancy, and is allegedly within the reach of anyone who works hard. The myth has a long history in the United States, and seems particularly potent in Branson, where the trope of the hillbilly emphasizes the importance of hard work and self-reliance. But even for those who are unable to realize their financial goals (and there are plenty of them), Branson is a place where the American Dream is given its due.

This is in part creditable to the performances of two long-time headliners in Branson: Shoji Tabuchi and Yakov Smirnoff, the case studies for this section. Both men are immigrants to the US and have been wildly successful in Branson, in large part because of their carefully crafted and perpetually maintained "outsider" status. Although many, many performers in Branson perform patriotism as part of their acts, these two men embody the American dream for their audiences in a way few other Branson acts can, by combining unrestrained American patriotism with their ethnic or national Otherness. Even so, the *fact* of their Otherness isn't sufficient, so both proclaim their Americanness and loyalty to their adopted home, while simultaneously demonstrating their many cultural differences. These two are among the most successful performers in Branson, living their own American dreams, owning their own theatres and profiting handsomely from the performance of the (almost-) assimilated foreigner who makes it

big in the States. My conclusion reviews the many paradoxes that govern Branson, and speculates on the changes it is undergoing as it becomes increasingly commercialized. In addition, I deliberate to what degree Branson is able to achieve what Jill Dolan calls the "utopian performative," and challenge the limits of her formulation.

Summing Up

It seems absurd that so little work has been done on Branson, or on the many other sites of performance that, by virtue of their commercial status, "popular" tenor, or geographical isolation have gone ignored. It is my hope that the current project continues an inspection of an important site of American popular performance, and will encourage research on other performance venues with similar characteristics.

I also hope to question divides between high and low culture by arguing how each functions both to entertain and uplift certain populations. I believe that every contemporary manifestation of performance is meant both as entertainment and as a strategic move to affirm the self-identified members of a particular group. It is important to make it clear to those who critique the study of identity politics as shallow, divisive, or unproductive that the label "identity politics" is not limited to those who qualify as marginalized populations. Identity politics are identity politics, even when they serve a majority and are consequently invisible. One way of making this a more academically fruitful discussion, and one that will help to abolish the artificial divisions between high and low, is to keep questions of class in mind even when it masquerades in the guise of religion, race, ethnicity, or regional background, as identity politics often does.

Scholarship on Branson will have important repercussions for future studies on other places or popular genres that have rarely been the subject of concentrated

investigation, but will also contribute to correcting the lopsided view of the current US theatre and performance scene. My study contributes to a fuller, more inclusive picture of the contemporary performance terrain that extends to reach communities who might never find themselves at a Broadway theatre or "Sin City" spectacle, and provides a significant step towards redefining real American entertainment.

CHAPTER ONE:

Performing Rural America, Performing the Hillbilly

> "Before many years a railroad will find its way yonder. Then many will come, and the beautiful hills that have been my strength and peace will become the haunt of careless idlers and a place of revelry. I am glad that I shall not be here."
>
> 'Dad' Howitt[71]

The above quote was more prophetic than anyone could rightly expect from a sentimental novel by a largely unlettered country preacher. But not only was Harold Bell Wright's 1907 novel prescient about the progress that would change Branson, it was ironically also largely responsible for the booming tourism and live entertainment industry that would permanently alter the landscape and its people. The present-day reality of the Branson area stands in stark contrast to the unspoiled hills and valleys that Wright depicted in his second work. A view from Inspiration Tower, a 230-foot high glass-and-steel tower built in 1989, just yards from where the author camped during summer stays in the Ozarks, reveals a landscape that would be barely recognizable to Wright. Television antennae tower over the trees, scars cut into the rock make way for housing developments, and big-box stores pop up like mushrooms just north of the city limits. Visible everywhere are roads and cars and construction. The wildness is disappearing, but the image of Branson as a rural paradise—the first of several contradictions central to Branson's appeal—continues to be marketed.

This chapter focuses on the development of Branson's tourism industry from its roots in the early twentieth century and traces the ways in which it has promoted itself as pastoral Eden through contrasts with urban and coastal areas, and through the figure of

[71] Harold Bell Wright, *The Shepherd of the Hills* (Gretna, Louisiana: Pelican Publishing Company, 2004), 302.

the hillbilly. I also include a survey of the few sources covering Branson as an entertainment destination and propose my own larger narrative of its growth, emphasizing the role that live performance has played in its continuing development. Benedict Anderson stresses the importance of print culture in the formation of national identity, but I argue that another kind of iteration—performance—is as crucial to the construction of identity in the Branson nation through the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

As mentioned in the introduction, there are very few scholarly sources that deal specifically with Branson's performance industry, and only two of them are terribly recent. While each has something to offer, they all, by virtue of their brevity, age, or differing perspective, fail to understand how performance in Branson has functioned socio-culturally. George Carney argues that Branson's pre-eminence as a country music hotspot has a long history, but he spends very little time on the pre-1959 era. His article gives a general, but not inaccurate, wash on Branson's history: it began in the late nineteenth century as a sporting man's paradise before eventually developing entertainments to profit from visiting hunters and fishermen.

Carney goes on to divide the post-1959 era into three periods: 1959-1982, which featured local talent; 1983-1990, during which veteran country performers took up residence; and 1990-1994—which was his "present day"—when the neo-traditionalists (younger-generation country performers) came to the fore.[72] This breakdown is echoed by the Ozark geographer and scholar Milton Rafferty in his chapter on the area's country-

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[72] George O. Carney, "Branson: The New Mecca of Country Music" in *Fast Food, Stock Cars and Rock-and-Roll: Place and Space in American Pop Culture*, ed. George O. Carney, 44-50. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1995).

music industry.[73] However, these overviews are partial, and it is unclear whether or not such periodizations are particularly *useful*, as their authors fail to contextualize them within the larger historical and social contexts of performance in the area. Carney establishes a dichotomy between Branson (down-home, fan-oriented, and authentic) and Nashville (slick, product-driven, and commercial),[74] but I maintain that Branson is as relentlessly commercial as Nashville, and that it uses its down-home, authentic image to achieve commercial ends.

A more useful article, anthropologist Damien Francaviglia's "Branson, Missouri: Regional Identity and the Emergence of a Popular Culture Community," takes a slightly longer view. While Francaviglia also periodizes the development of tourism in three phases, he acknowledges that Branson's rise to regional prominence began in the late nineteenth century, as interest in nature as a retreat from rapid urbanization grew, and tourism based on hunting and fishing developed. Francaviglia briefly mentions Wright's novel *The Shepherd of the Hills* as an important development that, along with the creation of Lake Taneycomo, "placed the Ozarks, and Branson, on the map as a national tourist destination," but doesn't go into greater detail.[75] His description of the latter phases is similarly general: phase two "incorporate[d] publicly appreciated Ozarks symbols" and phase three introduced "strong national influences."[76]

Two more recent sources are even more valuable. Lynn Morrow and Linda Myers-Phinney's *Shepherd of the Hills Country* can be credited for what is to date the

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[73] Milton D. Raffety, *The Ozarks, Land and Life,* 2nd ed. (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2001), 223-24.
[74] Carney, "Branson: The New Mecca,"51.
[75] Damien Francaviglia, "Branson, Missouri: Regional Identity and the Emergence of a Popular Culture Community," *Journal of American Culture* 18 no. 2 (Summer 1995): 61.
[76] Ibid., 66.

most complete early history of the greater Branson area.[77] Their excellent archival work takes the roots of the tourist industry into account, placing it in context with other areas of socio-economic development. However, they are more generally focused on the modernization of rural southwest Missouri in the early twentieth century, and end their discussion in 1930s.

Aaron Ketchell's *Holy Hills of the Ozarks*, for good or ill, comes closest in scope to my study.[78] Ketchell, who hails from a religious studies background, looks at Branson over better part of a century. While his scholarship is sound, his chapter divisions inexplicably divorce a short discussion of the hillbilly from a discussion of the land, and his segregation of live theatre and performance into a single short chapter seems to deny the paramount role that performance and performativity have played, and continue to play, in Branson's development. His view is more historical than sociological, and while his thesis—that a particular brand of Christianity has undergirded Branson's commercial successes—is entirely legitimate, I feel it gives short shrift to an entire dimension of the place, and moreover, fails to explain *how* that undergirding functions.

Ketchell's book was based on his 2004 dissertation; Jessica H. Howard's 1997 dissertation on Branson is the only other book-length study on Branson that approaches my own.[79] Harrison's research took place in the mid-1990s, during some of Branson's greatest years of growth. Even though her general thesis—that Branson employs a limited number of themes—is not exactly incorrect, her analysis is damaged by a lack of

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[77] Lynn Morrow and Linda Myers-Phinney, *The Shepherd of the Hills Country: Tourism Transforms the Ozarks, 1880s-1930s* (Fayette: University of Arkansas Press, 1999).
[78] Aaron Ketchell, *Holy Hills of the Ozarks: Religion and Tourism in Branson, Missouri.* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).
[79] Jessica H. Howard, "America's Hometown: Performance and Entertainment in Branson, Missouri" (Ph.D. Dissertation, New York University, 1997).

attention to the actual performance events, instead focusing on the surrounding environment: water parks, municipal layout, etc.. While this context is important, the performance events, which I argue are Branson's major draw, are treated to a purely formal assessment that is as homogenizing as anything Branson might offer. Additionally, she contends that "America's Hometown" is greatly reliant on a local, small-scale business model, and that, as we shall see, is no longer applicable.

Although I borrow from all of these sources, I believe that they have failed to account for the most important dynamic in play: performance. My aim is to restore and integrate that link, briefly, by retracing the history of Branson with a eye toward the role that performance—both "traditional" stage performance and the more complex contemporary understanding of that term—has played in making the area the tremendous site of live performance that it is today.

All of these texts contribute important pieces to the story which I believe—and nearly all scholars of the region agree—must begin with a basic understanding of the area's geography. Rafferty defines "The Ozarks" as very large area indeed, covering forty thousand square miles, stretching from the Mississippi River in the east, to the Missouri River in the north, and including most of southern Missouri, a good portion of northern Arkansas, and a few counties each in Oklahoma and Kansas.[80] The landscape is varied, often rugged, heavily timbered, with karst features like caves, springs, and sinkholes peppering the limestone and dolomite bedrock. Although there are four distinct seasons

[80] Rafferty, *The Ozarks*, 1.

and relatively mild winters, poor soil quality and rough terrain have prevented significant agricultural development, and most industry has centered on logging.[81]

Francaviglia believes that this particular landscape and its capabilities greatly influenced development in the area. Settlements were few and far between, and the subsistence lifestyles of their inhabitants inhibited exposure to the outside world, leading to the valorization of "self-sufficiency."[82] Rafferty calls the area "semi-arrested frontier," which, while attractive to the eye, was difficult to wrest a living from, and has, as a result, lagged behind other areas in terms of economic and cultural capital.[83] Whatever its terrain hasn't yielded in durable goods, the landscape's beauty has been a big selling point for Branson from its earliest days to the present moment.

Prior to the Civil War, settlement in Taney County was sparse. Local historians Jo Stacey Albers and Dorothy Stacey indicate that there were fewer than 200 families known to be in the area in 1850.[84] Even after the war, settlement by whites was relatively new. What was to become the "live entertainment capital of the world" was established in 1882 as a general store-cum-post office by a man named Reuben Branson in the wooded bottoms of the White River, not far from the Missouri-Arkansas border. The nearest train station was in Springfield, some sixty miles away, and Branson's store helped provide those throughout the hills of the area with the few things they couldn't grow, catch or manufacture on their own. Growth was slow, and Branson didn't file for township with the state of Missouri until 1903, and incorporated only in 1912. Although it would soon

[81] Ibid., 24.
[82] Francaviglia, "Branson, Missouri: Regional Identity,"57.
[83] Rafferty, *The Ozarks*, 3.
[84] Jo Stacey Albers and Dorothy Stacey, *Hometown Branson: Early History* (Branson, MO: Loafers Glory Publications, 2001), 57.

be preserved as timeless, the rural life that would come to typify the area had existed for barely three generations.

Morrow and Myers-Phinney note the increasing importance of the idea of "the rural" in the late nineteenth century, as mounting urbanization "spurred a cultural competition" between the value of the urban and the rural, triggering a fervid public debate in newspapers and books.[85] Frederick Jackson Turner's *The Frontier in American History*, first published in 1893, directly connected the development of the America spirit to the pursuit of the frontier, and warned that a loss of connection to the wild was possibly damaging to the national character. This resulted in the "country-life movement" and, in the Ozarks, the rise of the conception of the White River Valley as a modern-day Arcadia.[86]

The idea of Arcadia—a classic pastoral idyll of rural life—is nothing new, as Raymond Williams details in his classic study *The Country and the City*: the contrast between these two *topoi* "is one of the major forms in which we become conscious of a central part of our experience and of the crises of our society."[87] Where the city is typically figured as urban, modern, changing, and fabricated, the country is figured as rural, traditional, static, and natural. However, as Williams demonstrates, the contrasting characteristics change over time, reflecting the values and viewpoints of the time and place they were created in. And so, at certain times and places, the city is wealthy, refined, educated, and virtuous, while the country is impoverished, brutal, ignorant, and corrupt; and at others, it is the city that is poverty-wracked, violent, foolish, and

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[85] Lynn Morrow and Linda Myers-Phinney, *Shepherd of the Hills Country,* 9.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 289.

depraved, while country life is one of plenty, peace, simple wisdom, and morality. It is the latter characterization that has, for the most part, typified Branson.

Cultural geographer James Shortridge notes that the pastoral image has done much to define the United States as a nation. Since colonial times, Europeans figured the New World as an unspoiled Eden, and Americans have so often embraced the image of their country as a rural paradise that pastoralism is "the principal myth" of America.[88] The fact the Branson is located in the middle of the country, and widely identified as a "Midwestern" or "middle-American" phenomenon is, I argue, crucial to its success.

According to Shortridge, the term "Middle West" was a recognizable regional designation by 1912, and applied to twelve states, including Missouri.[89] It was at this same time that the Midwest, linked as it typically is to ideas of pastoralism and maturity "came to symbolize the nation," where the East represented urbanity and senescence and the West the frontier and youth.[90] Although which states qualify as "Midwestern" has shifted quite dramatically across the century, Shortridge's study points out explicit connections between the pastoral image and so-called American values like "self-reliance, democracy, and moral decency" in a wide variety of twentieth-century texts and images, and concludes that because the Midwest exemplifies the pastoral, it also exemplifies the nation: it is the "most American part of America."[91]

To be fair, the image of the Ozarks is not purely Midwestern. Missouri is literally a state in the middle of the country: a mix of southern and middle west, and has at various

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[88] James R. Shortridge, *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1989), 7, 9.
[89] Ibid., 24-5.
[90] Ibid., 33.
[91] Ibid., 91.

times been included or excluded, or, most often, partially included, as “the Midwest.”[92] Joel Garreau, in his *Nine Nations of North America*, divides Missouri in two—drawing a line straight through the middle of the Ozark Plateau—between the regions he labels “Dixie” and “The Breadbasket.” Although he does designate physical boundaries between these nations, he focuses more on the intangible and symbolic, noting that Dixie’s boundaries are mostly strongly defined by emotional attachment to the idea of “Dixie,” and that the Breadbasket is “the ratifer of what constitutes a truly mainstream…idea.”[93] Garreau is not generally complimentary in his assessment of the Ozarks, which he likens to other “Dixie” states Kentucky and West Virginia (we will see at least one reason for this below): “The Ozarks have had precious little going for them except beautiful mountains, restful lakes, peaceful small to medium-sized towns, and cheap, available, if rarely horizontal, land.”[94] Like so many others, Garreau focuses on the qualities of the landscape and goes on to reify the pastoral connection between the natural world and morality, noting that the Ozarks have drawn more than a few people seeking a “simpler” (that is, purer) life than that available to many in the modern age.[95] Phyllis Rossiter, author of *A Living History of the Ozarks*, reiterates this difference, painting a bleak picture of enervating urban life and contrasting it with the Ozarks’ physically and spiritually restorative ways.[96] Art critic Lucy Lippard notes that the

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[92] Ibid., 118.
[93] Joel Garreau, *The Nine Nations of North America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 131, 336.
[94] Ibid., 135-36. Garreau makes no mention of the entertainment industry; his book was published several years before Branson began its rise to a national profile in 1983, when musician and television personality Roy Clark built a theatre there.
[95] Ibid., 136.
[96] Phyllis Rossiter, *A Living History of the Ozarks* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 1992), 34-35.

distinction between inside and outside (which echoes or substitutes for the urban/rural dichotomy) is crucially important to the tourist industry: "Going 'out' to nature is supposed to recharge our batteries, run down from staying 'in' our own social niches."[97] Whether or not this is true, the contrast of the city and country and the valorization of the country holds strong, even as its wildness is increasingly domesticated, curtailed, cushioned with amenities, and, of course, *very* clearly labeled, the better to enjoy it, and ourselves.

If the rural middle of the United States is the "most American part of America," the Ozarks might be said to epitomize the rural heart of the nation. Rafferty, in his discussion of the "typical Ozarker," mentions a number of characteristics (like independence, thrift, and common sense), noting that although they are common to much of rural America, "these traits are accentuated, drawn together and combined" in those from the Ozark region.[98] Branson, deep in the midst of the Ozarks, undoubtedly serves (for better or worse) as representative of Ozark culture to the millions who visit it each year. Whether or not Branson accurately represents the Ozarks, whether the Ozarks fairly characterize rural America, or whether the rural Midwest aptly signifies the greater United States, Branson has built an enormous industry based on its Arcadian-American image.

As early as 1891, a group of wealthy businessmen from the St. Louis tobacco company Liggett and Meyers founded the St. Louis Game Park in Taney County, a preserve which they paid to be stocked and managed, allowing them to play the role of

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[97] Lucy R. Lippard, *On the Beaten Track: Tourism, Art, and Place* (New York: New Press, 2000), 145.
[98] Rafferty, *The Ozarks*, 4.

"big game hunter" out in the country.[99] Locals guided float trips along the many area rivers and streams, and well-to-do women from St. Louis and Kansas City visited hot spring-based health spas scattered throughout the area, underscoring the image of the Ozarks as a restorative rural retreat. These recreations, while far more rustic than the escapes taken by today's vacationers, were largely fun, well-controlled adventures amidst the beauty of nature. Guests did not really "rough it," or perhaps only roughed it for a few days, as a lark. These safe exploits served primarily to further romanticize the rural in city-dwellers' minds.

The Shepherd of the Hills

As important as the late-nineteenth-century industries were to the area, it was 1907 that brought *the* landmark event in Branson-area tourism: the publication of Harold Bell Wright's *The Shepherd of the Hills*.[100] One of the best-selling novels throughout the first quarter of the twentieth century, *The Shepherd* incorporates so many of the positive characteristics of rurality that it can fairly be credited with "writing the book" on Ozark tourism.

The contrast between city and county is pervasive. The titular Shepherd is an urban man (later revealed to be from Chicago), variously described as a poet and a scholar, who, weary with life, has come to the Ozarks, and specifically to the Mutton Hollow area (just west of present-day Branson) to heal his city-sickened soul. There he meets the kindly, well-respected Matthews family, who run a small sheep ranch and the local grist mill. The city man, who becomes known to locals as "Dad" Howitt, finds this

[99] Rafferty, *The Ozarks*, 197; Morrow and Myers-Phinney, *Shepherd of the Hills Country,* 62-63.
[100] Rafferty, *The Ozarks*, 193-94.

rich and wild land and the warm, noble-hearted Matthews clan much to his liking, so he agrees to serve as shepherd to their flock. He lodges in a simple cabin most locals believe to be haunted. The Shepherd's only son committed suicide, and Mr. Matthews, known to all as "Old Matt," has only one surviving child, "Young Matt," out of seven he fathered. The two men bond over their shared grief. While Old Matt grieves for his five lost sons, it is the death of his only daughter that pains him most deeply. Old Matt tells Dad her sad story: she fell in love with a city man, an artist who wooed her and left her pregnant, driving her mad with grief. She died giving birth to his child, Pete, a harmless mooncalf who wanders the hills and seems to have an uncannily direct connection with both God and Nature. Dad Howitt is shocked to realize that the artist was none other than his own son, who eventually killed himself out of guilt for betraying his mountain sweetheart, but he cannot bring himself to confess to Old Matt.

While these sorrowful events provide the back story, the novel is largely concerned with the long-denied courtship between Young Matt, whose strength and bravery are a local legend, and Sammy Lane, the best and most beautiful girl in the hills. Although everyone knows the two are a perfect match for one another, Sammy has been engaged to Ollie Stewart since childhood. Though he is a local boy, Ollie has family in the city where he has gone to live and work, and he plans to take Sammy there once they are married. In stark contrast to Young Matt, Ollie is physically slight and ill-suited to the hard work a man must do to make a life in the hills. Young Matt is silently devoted to Sammy, and while she doubts her feelings for Ollie, she never speaks of them. She dutifully prepares for her marriage by learning how to be "a real genuine lady" from the educated, cultured, and morally impeccable Dad, who is content with his simple life.

Sammy's life is made less simple by the presence of Wash Gibbs, the villain of the novel. Not only do his rough solicitations revolt her, he is also a drinker and a member of a local vigilante group known as the Bald Knobbers. He is convinced that Dad Howitt has been sent by the government, and he and his posse do their best to scare him out of Mutton Hollow, even attempting to burn him out of his home. They are thwarted by the combined efforts of his arch-enemy, Young Matt, and Jim Lane, a former Bald Knobber and one of the most fearsome men in the hills, but a tender father to the motherless Sammy.

As the story stretches over the course of more than a year, a mysterious figure, reputed to be the ghost of Old Matt's daughter, furtively intervenes at key moments, financially saving the Matthews and Lane families from the repercussions of a severe drought, physically rescuing Young Matt and Ollie from a ferocious mountain lion, and even helping the forces of law and order rout Wash Gibbs once and for all. Eventually, the Bald Knobbers are defeated, and the Shepherd learns that the mysterious figure in the hills is actually his own son, Howard, who faked his own death in order to return to Mutton Hollow to be close to his son and the spirit of his beloved. Howard is fatally wounded in the Bald Knobbers melee, and Dad is prompted to confess the devastating truth to Old Matt, who hesitates before whole-heartedly forgiving the dying man. Sammy, having lost her beloved father and yet learned that one can be a lady in the hills, forsakes the puny Ollie for her strapping Young Matt and is welcomed into the Matthews clan. The book ends with the story of another young painter's visit to Mutton Hollow, some years later, as a path for the coming railroad is being blasted out of the hills. There

Mrs. Sammy Matthews, now mother to a brood of beautiful, strong children, relates the story of the Shepherd of the Hills, just as it has been revealed to the reader.

The novel, though mostly forgotten today, was a phenomenon, in part because of how it was echoed by its author's own story. Harold Bell Wright was born in Rome, New York, on May 4, 1872 to a poor and unstable family that fell apart after the death of his mother, Alma. Eleven-year-old Harold was passed around the community and then to relatives in Ohio, and only sporadically educated. Wright biographer Lawrence Tagg indicates that as a youth, Wright worked odd jobs in a brothel before undergoing a religious conversion and enrolling in a ministerial program at Hiram College, a Disciples of Christ-affiliated institution.[101] His rough early life had left him in poor health, and a serious illness at 22 led him to visit family in the Ozarks, where he mended and began preaching when local circuit riders weren't there to lead Thanksgiving services.[102] This informal arrangement led Wright to a career in ministry, first at a small church in Pierce City in the Ozarks and then for a Pittsburgh, Kansas, congregation. It was during these years he wrote a series of sermons embodying his theory of "Applied Christianity" that were then turned into his first novel, *That Printer of Udell's*, published in 1903 and intended as a "ministry in print."[103]

Wright returned to the Ozarks the following year to recuperate from another bout with respiratory illness and to write a second novel. Wright and his wife camped in a small cornfield belonging to John K. and Anna Ross, who lived on a ridge overlooking a beautiful valley. Tagg reports that during the summer of 1904, Wright heard a local

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[101] Lawrence V. Tagg, *Harold Bell Wright: Storyteller to America* (Tucson: Westernlore, 1986), 23.
[102] Ibid., 27-28.
[103] Ibid., 32.

legend “of a man from the city who came into the hills, fell in love with a girl there, but then deserted her. The young girl died shortly thereafter giving birth to a child.”[104] That narrative, apocryphal or not, became the root of *The Shepherd of the Hills*, which was published in 1907 and which brought Wright both fame and wealth.

It wasn’t just the story of the city man and the country girl that Wright appropriated for his story. Wright focused heavily on the natural beauty of the hills, using specific place names like Mutton Hollow, Fall Creek, and Dewey Bald in his novel, and folded in a number of historical elements in order to give his story authenticity. One of the most important local details was the Bald Knobbers.

The Bald Knobbers took root during the lawless Reconstruction era, as settlers eager to take advantage of the Homestead Act of 1862 arrived more quickly than the civic infrastructure, destroyed by the Civil War, could be rebuilt to manage them. The Bald Knobbers, a group of men who met on treeless hilltops, known locally as “bald knobs,” flourished for more than a decade, although formally only from 1884-86.[105] There were several “vigilance committees” scattered throughout Taney, Stone, and Christian Counties, and the Bald Knobbers was one of the largest. Although founded with the intent to stop lawlessness, they quickly became a mob that ruled through violence and the threat thereof. Even after their formal disbandment, vigilante activity continued until 1892. The political origins of the Bald Knobbers, who were almost entirely Unionist Republicans, are left out of the novel, leaving only a lurid image of bootlegging, thievery, and violence against “outsiders” like Dad Howitt and government “revenuers” coming to

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[104] Ibid., 32-33.

[105] Mary Hartman and Elmo Ingenthron, *Bald Knobbers: Vigilantes on the Ozarks Frontier* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 1988), 8; Gerry Darnell, “Bald Knobbers: The Ozark Vigilantes” in *Bittersweet* 6, no. 4 (Summer 1979): 21.

collect taxes. Shortly after *The Shepherd*'s publication, Wright moved to California and turned almost exclusively to writing, completing another eighteen books by 1942, two years before his death. Fifteen movies were made from his novels; four of these were adaptations of *The Shepherd of the Hills*.[106] Writing in 1984, Tagg estimates that Wright's readers numbered at least 50 million, including an international audience.[107] Other scholars point out that Wright was among the top five best-selling novelists through the first quarter of the twentieth century.[108] One hundred years later, parts of Taney neighboring Stone Counties are still generally referred to as "Shepherd of the Hills Country" by locals and by far-flung others, as evidenced by a ceiling mural found in an "American"-themed 24-hour diner in Berlin, Germany in 2007 [Fig 1.1][109].

It is hard to overestimate the effect that Wright's novel has had on the area. *Shepherd* contributed significantly to the image of the Ozarks as Arcadia and "would transform the region into a commercialized imitation of the novel itself."[110] The land that gave birth to the myth of the city man and the country girl began to reform itself through performance to fit the myth that Wright had created. Within three years, readers-turned-tourists started arriving. Though the events of the book were set in the 1880s, some twenty-five years prior to publication, visitors seeking their piece of Arcadia's timeless

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[106] These four—made in 1919, 1928, 1941, and 1964 --will be briefly discussed below.
[107] Tagg, *Harold Bell Wright*, 34, 167-68.
[108] Erin A. Smith, "Melodrama, Popular Religion, and Literary Value: The Case of Harold Bell Wright" in *American Literary History* 17, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 217.
[109] I was astonished to discover that "Shepherd Nills (sic) Farm," "Old Mill Theatre" and "Old Matt's Cabin" were included in a mural of Route 66, found on the ceiling of The Sixties Diner, located at 11 Oranienberger Strasse in the Mitte district of Berlin. The accuracy of the images and scale of the map have little connection to their real-life counterparts, but the presence of these images alongside those of golden-era-Hollywood film stars and classic cars speaks to *The Shepherd*'s symbolic "American-ness."
[110] Morrow and Myers-Phinney, *Shepherd of the Hills Country,* 31.

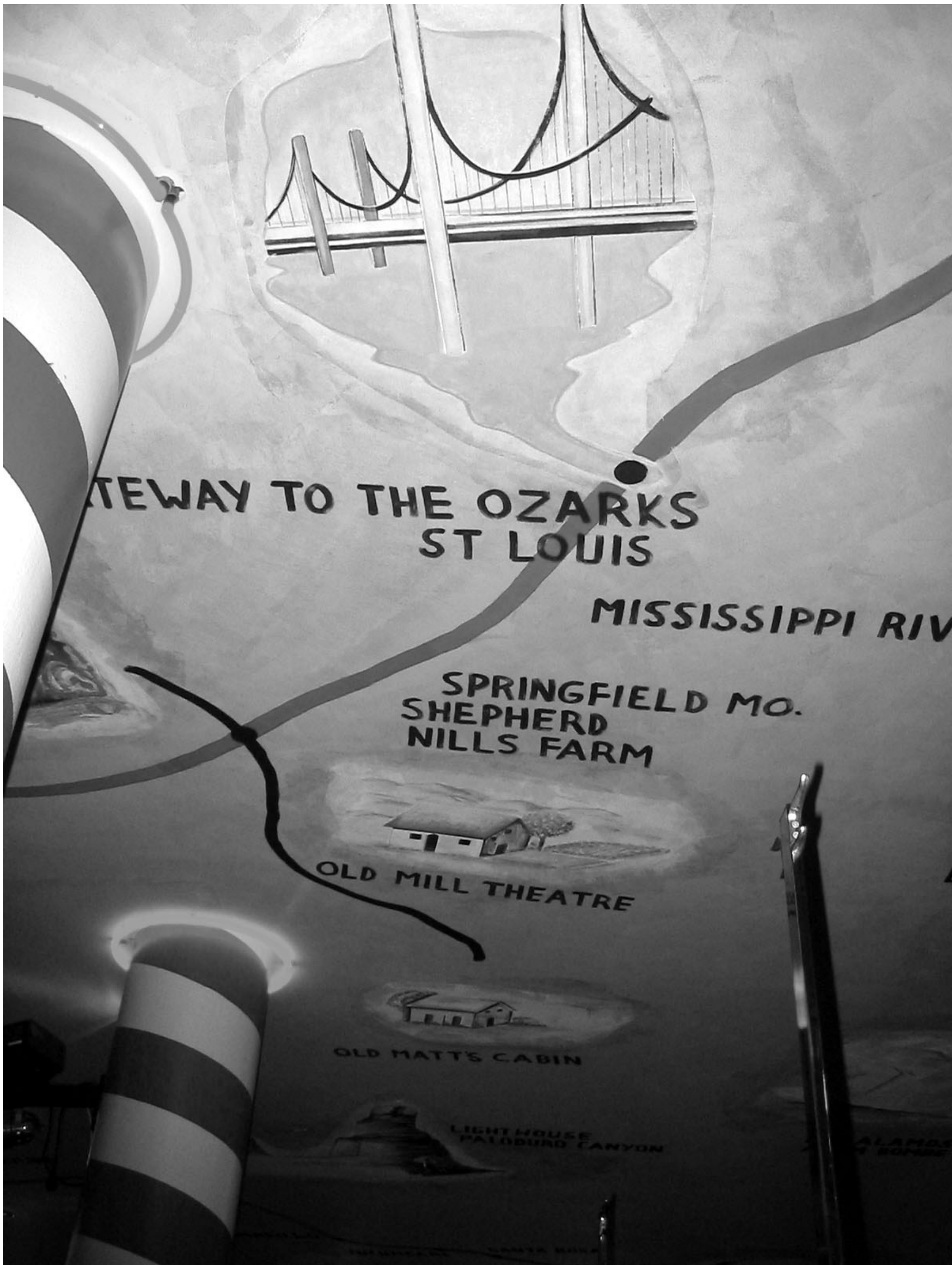

Fig 1.1. Part of a ceiling mural of U.S. Route 66, showing “Gateway to the Ozarks,” “Shepherd Nills [sic] Farm,” “Old Mill Theatre,” and “Old Matt’s Cabin.” Photo by the author.

pastoralism were insistent about seeing the "real" places and people made famous by the book. Many locals were happy to oblige, for a fee.[111]

By Wright's own admission, only one "real" person served as a character model: Levi Morrill, the postmaster of tiny Notch, Missouri, was the pattern for folksy "Uncle Ike."[112] Regardless, John and Anna Ross, whose cornfield had served as a campground for Wright during his 1904 visit, became famous as "Old Matt and Aunt Mollie." None of these three were Ozark natives. In fact, all were relatively recent arrivals to the area; they came in the 1890s, after the events in the novel purportedly took place, from far flung places—Morrill was a New England native and a Bowdoin graduate—and pushed hard to promote the tourist economy through their embodiment of Wright's characters.[113]

Morrill and the Rosses were the most famous, but they were hardly the only ones. Various locals claimed to be Preachin' Bill or Mandy Ford, and many pretty girls claimed to be the model for Wright's young heroine. In a letter, Wright himself documents that in 1918, while visiting the area with plans for filming his story, he met a local man who identified a particular young woman as Sammy Lane. After Wright's gentle protestations that the "real" Sammy Lane would have long since become a mature woman, the man became indignant and demanded to know Wright's identity. "I'm just the fella what wrote the story," he responded.[114]

Local performance of the characters and chronicles of Wright's novel were a huge part of Branson's appeal in its earliest days as a tourist attraction. Even after "Matt and

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[111] Ibid., 35; Rafferty, *The Ozarks*, 220.
[112] Harold Bell Wright to W. Gibbons Lacy, September 1, 1932, folder 0868, Townsend Godsey Archives Ozarkiana Collection, College of the Ozarks, Point Lookout, Missouri (hereafter cited as Ozarkiana Collection).
[113] Morrow and Myers-Phinney, *Shepherd of the Hills Country,* 113.
[114] Wright to Lacy, September 1, 1932, folder 0868, Ozarkiana Collection.

Mollie" left their now-famous cabin on Inspiration Point for a quieter life several miles down the road in Garber, Missouri, *The Shepherd of the Hills* continued to have an enormous effect on the area. While Branson's mythologized Arcadian image may have been the brainchild of a single individual—and this is disputable[115]—it was largely perpetuated by people *performing* as if it were real, and re-performing it until its heritage has become as entrenched as anything "real" about the hills. Today, more than 100 years after the publication of the novel, Wright's story is taken for one of the most authentic manifestations of Ozark culture. Aaron Ketchell takes pains to note the importance of *The Shepherd* to Branson's tourism industry, but he completely ignores that it was—and is—*the living embodiment and repetition* of the novel and its characters that has made Branson a phenomenon. The book spread far and wide, and live performances of the story outside of Branson followed shortly thereafter.

Wider Performance, Greater Exposure

Circuit Chautauquas were an important distributor of common culture throughout the nation in the early twentieth century, and even more so in the rural Midwest. Charlotte Canning, in her history of the movement, claims that by 1913, Iowa, Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, and Missouri had the greatest concentration of Chautauquas.[116] Even though the data is thin and partial, there can be little question that Chautauquas played an important role in the Branson area. According to an article from an unidentified newspaper in the archives of the College of the Ozarks, Kansas City was the hub for

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[115] Smith reads *The Shepherd of the Hills* as a "story a culture tells itself about itself." Reputedly, Wright got the idea for his novel from stories he heard from locals and then elaborated upon them. This complicates matters: did Wright bring out an "authentic" hillbilly story to share with the world, or is this just another layer of the myth?

[116] Charlotte M. Canning, *The Most American Thing in America: Circuit Chautauqua as Performance* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005), 10.

Chautauquas in southwestern Missouri, managed by Moreland Brown, who, during his peak years, had "four circuits serving 350 towns."[117] It is clear that a Chautauqua Ground was built in the Branson area by the Southwest (Missouri) Presbyterian Assembly some time shortly after 1910. The church bought bluff land, named it "Presbyterian Hill," and set up a pavilion for performances and rustic accommodations.[118] Events other than Chautauquas, including church activities and assemblies by socially minded groups like the Women's Christian Temperance Union were held there, but "official" Chautauquas ran from 1912 to some time in the 1920s, bringing all the usual suspects, including William Jennings Bryan, Champ Clark, and Russell Conwell and his "Acres of Diamonds" speech.[119] Alongside these notables, Canning claims, were presentations of "a perennial favorite:" *The Shepherd of the Hills*.[120] Wright's novel was first dramatized in this venue.

It was under Chautauqua's brown canvas tents that the novel began to come to life through the solo performances of elocutionists, or "play-readers," like Bess Edith Barton and Myra Casterline Smith, who wrote her own adaptation. Another performer, M. Beryl Buckley, advertised her interpretation as especially authentic, having rehearsed it while residing in the Pierce City house where Wright himself lived while composing the book.[121] Later, the novel was dramatized into a full cast play and presented in the early 1920s on the Standard Chautauqua System, before expanding to other circuits: "by 1922,

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[117] Townsend Godsey (Will Townsend, pseud.) "Chautauqua Meant Culture, Before Motor Car Era" (1964), folder 353, Ozarkiana Collection.
[118] Morrow and Myers-Phinney, *Shepherd of the Hills Country,* 156-57, 160.
[119] Ibid., 160.
[120] Canning, *Most American Thing*, 111-12. Canning mistakenly gives the author's name as "Harold Wright Bell," but there is no question which text she means.
[121] Ibid., 112.

the portable stage-play version of the novel had run for two years in New York before opening in southwest Missouri."[122]

These performances accomplished two important things relevant to the current topic: first, they ensured that the Ozark region was being advertised all around the rural Midwest—and far beyond—effectively sowing the seeds for its burgeoning tourist industry; and second, through its affiliation with Chautauquas, the Branson area was touted as a particularly "American" locale. The Chautauqua movement ("the most American thing in America") rode the wave of nationalistic, often nativist ideologies commonly held in the early twentieth century, by aligning itself with ideals and definitions typically predicated on identity markers that included affiliation with certain religious denominations, political affiliations, and specific racial/ethnic identities.[123]

Chautauquas' image of America was not unlike Wright's image of the Ozarks: rural, white, and Christian. And like Chautauquas, which "claimed to present…a true depiction of a United States that was predominantly homogenous, unconflicted, and stable," *The Shepherd of the Hills* performed a national Arcadian myth that attempted to make real "a much-longed-for America," at least for its participants.[124] It is little wonder that his novel found such success on circuit stages.

Popular vs. Critical Response to *The Shepherd* and the Hills

Despite his popularity with readers and Chautauqua audiences, Wright was never very admired by critics; he was pilloried for his sentimentality and generally seen as a

[122] Ibid.; Morrow and Myers-Phinney, *Shepherd of the Hills Country,* 160.
[123] Canning, *Most American Thing,* 34-35.
[124] Ibid., 39. *Shepherd* was also performed around the nation in the late 1930s, as part of the Federal Theatre Project. See Hallie Flanagan, *Arena: A History of the Federal Theatre* (New York: Benjamin Bloom, 1940), 150.

hack. Of course, during this era of high modernism, there was a great deal of distance between the tastemakers and average American. H. L. Mencken was particularly brutal, calling the works of authors like Wright "the natural outpouring of a naïve and yet half-barbarous people" and maligning the authors themselves as "liberated yokels" from "cow and hog States."[125] Wright's biographer notes that he might be considered "the most ridiculed writer of this generation" and cites a 1921 *New York Times* book review, saying "certain things we have with us always. To death and taxes has been added the name of Harold Bell Wright."[126] But people from the "cow and hog states" responded to Wright's work, likely because "[a]s the increasingly urban, increasingly literate, larger culture communicated to rural, poor, or poorly educated citizens that they mattered very little, Wright's melodramas invested their ordinary lives with transcendent meaning."[127]

The rural areas of America, and particularly the Ozarks, have suffered the scorn of coastal, particularly Eastern, elites for more than a century. It is true that the area has struggled with wide-spread poverty and a related lack of education and infrastructure, but the attitudes portrayed by urbanites about the area smack of classist othering. Mencken was hardly the only writer to craft insults like "cow and hog States"; journalist John Gunther in 1947's *Inside U.S.A.* slurred the Ozarks as "The Poor White Trash Citadel of America. The people are underdeveloped, suspicious, inert."[128]

A similarly disrespectful tone is taken in more recent essays like "Town of the Living Dead," where *Village Voice* critic Gary Indiana summarized Branson-goers as

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[125] H. L. Mencken, *Prejudices, Second Series* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1920), 38.
[126] Tagg 73; Review of Helen of the Old House, "Why is Harold Bell Wright?" *The New York Times Book Review*, Aug 28, 1921, 40.
[127] Smith, "Melodrama, Popular Religion, and Literary Value," 234.
[128] John Gunther, *Inside USA* (New York: Harper, 1947), 342.

"lumpen middle- and working-class" people with "a phobia-driven inner life." Another commentator, writing for the upmarket publication *Gentleman's Quarterly*, noted that Branson is strictly for those who feel "forsaken by the machinery of popular culture," (never mind that Branson's culture is nothing if not popular). Yet another New York journalist, Joe Queenan, smeared Branson as a "cultural penal colony," a "Bayreuth for Bozos" and, most viciously, a "Mulefuckers' Mecca."[129]

Admittedly, most of the vituperation aimed at Branson has come from urban centers on the east coast, but there also has been plenty of good press—both self-generated and from outside sources. Such stories present Branson as the best of what the United States has to offer, a wholesome, "real" America, in stark contrast to the reputedly dissolute parts of country where people "who think same-sex marriage is fine, advocate abortion rights, and believe burning the flag is a constitutional right" live.[130] Most people have strong feelings about Branson one way or the other, and use the rhetoric of urban and rural—with accompanying "blue" and "red" political profiles—in their discussion.

Although the two sides differ in their opinion of its cultural *value* of its Otherness, neither side denies that Branson's America is decidedly different from the larger cultural image of the nation, and many (though not all) explicitly attribute that difference to Branson's rural location, just as they did when Wright's novel was published. These two diametrically opposed views of Branson are epitomized in a cultural figure that remains crucial to the area's tourist appeal: the hillbilly.

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[129] Gary Indiana, "Town of the Living Dead," *Let it Bleed: Essays 1985-1995* (New York: Serpent's Tail, 1996), 53; Jeanne Marie Laskas, "Branson in My Rearview Mirror," *Gentlemans' Quarterly,* May 1994, 168; Joe Queenan, *Red Lobster, White Trash, and the Blue Lagoon* (New York: Hyperion, 1999), 80-81, 89.
[130] John Sonderegger, "In Branson, Reagan's America is doing just fine," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Jul 13, 2006, D1.

The Hillbilly

Hillbillies are not exclusive to the Ozarks, of course; the term also applies to residents of Appalachia, but Anthony Harkins, in his excellent full-length study of the hillbilly, notes particular regional differences and contends that it is the image of the Ozark hillbilly which endures. While he appears to be a timeless American figure, the hillbilly was crystallized in the twentieth century, and continues to resonate with us into the twenty-first. Although the term is thought to have originated among Scots-Irish immigrants in the mountainous regions of the southeastern United States, the second use in print—Charles S. Hibler's 1902 pamphlet *Down in Arkansas*—referred to residents of the Ozarks. The link was emphasized in 1903, when Thomas Jackson's comic compendium of "standard jokes, puns, and minstrel stage quips," *On a Slow Train through Arkansaw*, was published, and the following year, linguist Joseph W. Carr of the University of Arkansas provided the first academic use of "hillbilly" in an article documenting Ozark regionalisms.[131] Given that that the Ozarks were settled, early on, by people coming from Tennessee, Kentucky, and the southern Appalachians, gives some practical reason for the "hillbilly" connection between the two regions, although Harkins believes they are even more strongly linked in popular imagination through cultural figures, like the larger-than-life nineteenth-century personalities Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett, both of whom moved from the former area to the latter late in life. Literary

[131] Rafferty *The Ozarks*, 5-6; Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 50-51, 55.

representations of these men and others served to effectively conflate the wild land and the people who lived on it into "an indivisible cultural construct." [132]

Although the hillbilly has been irrevocably linked to the hardscrabble hills from which he wrests his living, he didn't simply wander down out of the Ozarks in the mid-1800s. The rube, a "nearly universal cultural character," and particularly the stage Yankee "Brother Jonathan," dating from the late eighteenth century, are two figures who predate the hillbilly, and who share many of his traits.[133]

The uncultured yokel who wins out over the posh and the citified may seem, at first glance, to be a simple comic stereotype, but Winifred Morgan begins her study of Jonathan by noting that he was in fact a complex character perpetuated across multiple media. He embodied both "humor and complex social tension." While he was always figured as a patriot, Morgan notes that Jonathan was simultaneously an "American and a regional or social 'other'" who "allowed the actors and the audience who saw them to explore regional tensions between the city and the country, the North and the South, and between the United States and Europe."[134] She might as well have been writing about the hillbilly, so closely does her assessment echo Harkins' take on the figure "through which modern Americans have attempted to define themselves and their national identity and to

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[132] Harkins, *Hillbilly*, 21-22. I will be using "he" and "his" not as a default, but in recognition of the fact that the vast majority of the time, the hillbilly, as he is performed in Branson, is gendered male.

[133] Harkins, *Hillbilly*, 14, 21. It is important to briefly note the difference between the hillbilly and his cousins White Trash, the Redneck and the Hick. "White trash" shares the race and low class status of the hillbilly, but like "Redneck," he is not necessarily a rural figure. "Redneck" evokes a strain of racist behavior not necessarily endemic to the hillbilly, who is by definition racially and culturally isolated. "Hick" is a closer relative, but is a more generic type who can be non-white and who might be found in any rural location.

[134] Winifred Morgan, *An American Icon: Brother Jonathan and American Identity* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1988), 51.

reconcile the past and the present" during an age when urbanization and technology were ever-growing forces in daily life.[135]

If Brother Jonathan was a champion of American forthrightness, simplicity, and plain-dealing, compared to European urbanity, the hillbilly represents a regional type—the self-reliant and morally upright rural resident—standing in contrast to the urban and/or coastal citizen who, in his rush to embrace "progress," has thrown the baby of integrity out with the bathwater of custom. Jonathan was characterized by a "volatile" nature. Although he seemed ordinary, he was also exceptional, and while he was a much-romanticized figure, he was also presented as boorish and vulgar.[136] Likewise, J. W. Williamson, in his study of the figure in twentieth-century cinema, contends that the hillbilly serves as a sort of funhouse mirror that reflects extremes of behavior: a distorted but not altogether unrecognizable image of ourselves.[137] American ambivalence about our hillbilly reflection helps explain why both positive and negative representations can exist side by side, or even within a single character.

Ultimately, the hillbilly is a direct descendant of Brother Jonathan and the human counterpart to the "natural" terrain on which he lives. As an American symbol of a time and place untouched by technology and the complications of modern life, like most mythologized symbols, he can be either a positive or a negative figure. The positive face of the hillbilly, sometimes referred to as a "mountaineer," presents a family-loving, god-fearing, hard-working type who lacks book-learning, but is full of homespun knowledge

[135] Harkins, *Hillbilly*, 4.
[136] Morgan, *An American Icon,* 34.
[137] J. W. Williamson, *Hillbillyland: What the Movies Did to the Mountains and What the Mountains did to the Movies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 26, 44.

and good common sense. The negative face inverts those traits: he is hostile, godless, lazy (except when it comes to making or drinking moonshine), ignorant, violent, and animalistic in terms of hygiene and sexuality. This Janus-faced figure is marked by three important elements: his location ("wholly isolated from modern civilization"), his racial purity, which echoes the purity of the land, and the recognition that, whichever face appears, it is an "essential" and "authentic" representation of the rural.[138] As I've already established, the vast majority of people—both natives and visitors—in the Ozarks are white, and as Lucy Lippard points out in her book on tourism, "[i]n monocultural areas…class is the vehicle of otherness." The hillbilly's whiteness allows him "to serve as a seemingly apolitical site for often highly charged political struggles over the definition of race, class, gender norms and roles, as well as the nature of mass culture."[139] It is for this reason that Harkins identifies the hillbilly as a "white other," and it goes some way to explaining the strongly binary opinions people have expressed about Branson.[140]

Surveying the use of the hillbilly in Branson lends credence to Harkins' arguments and opens up a productive avenue for discussion of the role of performance in the area. *The Shepherd of the Hills* includes both faces of the hillbilly. The noble mountaineer is personified by "Old Matt" and his son, while the savage backwoodsman is embodied in the marauding Bald Knobber Wash Gibbs. The novel goes so far as to tie the inner characters of these two types to their physiognomy: both are physically strong, but the morally upright Matthews men are described as attractive, with open features and

[138] Ibid., 4-5.
[139] Lucy R. Lippard, *On the Beaten Track,* 84
[140] Harkins, *Hillbilly*, 8.

light coloring, where the violent alcoholic Gibbs is demonized as ugly, swarthy and bestial.

***The Shepherd* on Film**

While *The Shepherd*'s popularity was spreading along the Chautauqua circuits, it was also publicized through a new technology that took full advantage of the hillbilly's visual cues: film. Wright himself first adapted the story as a silent film for his Story-Picture Corporation in 1919. Although it was necessarily edited to fit into ten reels (running approximately two hours), publicity at the time seems to indicate that it hewed to the novel fairly well, promoting the rural characters as "as clean cut and unaffected by the veneer of civilization as the rock bound hills in which they live."[141] A second silent film was produced in 1928, by First National Pictures (which would later become Warner Bros.). Unsurprisingly, Hollywood took more liberties with the story, expanding an episode in the novel about a threatening drought into the central conflict of the story, resolved when the Shepherd's earnest prayers bring rain, saving the area from ruin. Although it was not particularly well-reviewed by *The New York Times*, according to a Motion Picture Almanac poll, *The Shepherd of the Hills* was the seventh highest box-office draw of the year.[142]

These early adaptations of the novel are lost, but the third filmed version, Paramount Pictures' 1941 Technicolor rendering, is still available, despite the fact that the story has been rendered almost unrecognizable. Against an eerie rural backdrop called

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[141] "*The Shepherd of the Hills* Promotional Movie Brochure," Harold Bell Wright, American Author of the Early 20th Century, last modified July 30, 2008, accessed February 28, 2011, www.hbw.addr.com/images/sheppremier.jpg. The film itself is lost.
[142] Gerry Chudleigh, "The Shepherd of the Hills–1928," last modified July 30, 2008, accessed February 28, 2011, www.hbw.addr.com/shepmv1928.htm.

"Moanin' Meadow," Young Matt (played by John Wayne) has been recast as a violent ridgerunner with murderous intent towards the father who abandoned him—in this version, the Shepherd. Old Matt has been almost entirely written out of the story as an ineffectual drunkard, and gentle Aunt Molly has been replaced by a vicious moonshiner who dabbles in witchcraft. None of the Ozark residents is presented as much more than an ignorant and credulous hayseed, mystified by the Shepherd's sophistication, religious faith, and not least, his vast amounts of money (a detail utterly lacking in the novel). Ultimately, the citified Shepherd is the savior—both financial and spiritual—of the people and their land, convincing them to give up their reliance on alcohol and superstition, although he is only able to reconcile with his son by revealing that it was his incarceration for murder that kept him away from the hills and his family. Aunt Molly is burned alive in the Matthews cabin, but Young Matt repents his criminal ways and is at last paired with Sammy. Despite the numerous deviations from its source material, previously hailed for *its* true vision of the area, a *Variety* reviewer commented favorably on the 1941 film, noting "the authenticity of the Ozark characters and country."[143] Regardless of the images presented, Wright's story, on page, the stage, or the screen, has been thought to be an accurate representation of life in the hills—at least by those who don't live there.

This version appeared, certainly not coincidentally, after the discovery of widespread poverty and privation in the Ozarks by "New Deal" agencies in the 1930s. It was during this era that the area began to receive significant federal relief, and the image of the hillbilly, as an object both of fascination and derision, expanded even further, with

[143] Review of *The Shepherd of the Hills*, *Variety*, June 18, 1941, 13.

the help of other pop culture images like Paul Webb's *Mountain Boys* (1934-58), Al Capp's *Li'l Abner* (1934-77) and Billy DeBeck's *Snuffy Smith* (1934-42) cartoons.[144]

But for those in the area, the term "hillbilly" was often a label of regional pride, and slights were taken to be as offensive as the meddling of any "revenuer." When the 1941 movie premiered at Branson's lone movie house—the Owen Hillbilly Theater—it met with great protest, and some locals, proclaiming to be from "Hillbilly Local No. 0001" picketed it as "unfair to original characters."[145]

A Different Kind of Hillbilly Performance

These original characters were much loved, particularly, it seems, by those who were not from the area. Few of the individuals responsible for driving Branson's ever-growing tourist industry were natives of the area, and almost all were decidedly of higher economic ranks than those they chose to "protect" or memorialize. As Williams notes, those who are most invested in preserving the rural are often the socially middling set:

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[144] Rafferty, *The Ozarks*, 41. For in-depth discussion of these cartoon images, see Harkins' "Luke, Snuffy, and Abner: Hillbilly Cartoon Images in Depression-Era America," 103-140. DeBeck died in 1942, but *Snuffy Smith* was continued by his assistant, Fred Lasswell, until his death in 2001. The comic is now drawn by John Rose. The proliferation of rural images in the 1930s was almost certainly for the entertainment of urban audiences. In 1935, *Variety*'s George McCall encapsulated this sentiment in what is perhaps the most famous headline ever written: "Sticks nix hick pix." Story available at www.variety.com/index.asp?layout =variety100&content=jump&jump=article&articleID=VR1117922332.

[145] Jerry Madsen, *Branson: A Time Line History* (Galena, MO: Ozark Trails Magazine, Inc., 1997), 24. The 1964 film, given the alternate title "Thunder Mountain," makes other drastic changes: the Shepherd is no longer a city man, but a reclusive ridge-runner with a secret gold mine. A bank heist by the Baldknobbers results in Ollie Stewart's death, prompting the Shepherd to confess his relationship to the community: he is grandfather to Young Matt (not Little Pete), who is now free to marry Sammy Lane.

"the shifting intermediate groups…who had risen by change, were quick to be bitter about renewed or continuing change."[146]

One of the first of these was Pearl "Sparky" Spurlock. Having come to the area with her husband, an auto mechanic who didn't have enough business to get by on, she started a "Shepherd of the Hills Taxi" service in 1923. She would drive tourists through the hills, telling colorful stories and playing the role of the rustic local with a long memory. Toward the end of her career, in 1939, she published a book called *Over the Old Ozark Trails in the Shepherd of the Hills Country*, which included a photo of herself beside her taxi, captioned "Pearl Spurlock, typical hillbilly, at Powersite, Mo."[147]

Elizabeth McDaniel was another Branson early promoter. She cannot be said to have "performed" the role of the hillbilly the way that Spurlock clearly did, although she did much to forward the image. The daughter of a well-to-do banker from comparatively cosmopolitan Springfield, McDaniel, who "loved Harold Bell Wright's immortal story of the true Hillbilly so much she wanted to preserve its surroundings for future generations," purchased the Ross homestead in 1923 (barely fifteen years after the novel's publication) and used her assets to repair and significantly overhaul the then-derelict Ross cabin, opening it as an inn and museum dedicated to preserving the memory both of the real minister-turned-author Wright and the fictional families of the hills. McDaniel is also responsible for the first locally dramatized version of the novel in 1926, although regular performances were not to happen for several more decades.[148]

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[146] Williams, *Country and the City*, 43.
[147] Madsen, *Branson: A Time Line,* 20; Morrow and Myers-Phinney, *Shepherd of the Hills Country,* 32, 35; Rafferty, *The Ozarks*, 198.
[148] Madsen, *Branson: A Time Line,* 22; Morrow and Myers-Phinney, *Shepherd of the Hills Country,* 34; Ketchell, *Holy Hills*, 40.

It was during this era that Branson began to industrialize quickly, as roads and bridges were constructed. The White River Railroad, part of the Missouri-Pacific line, was expanded, taking on stops specific to tourist attractions like nearby Marvel Cave (see Chapter 2) and making travel easier for tourists and locals alike. The completion of the Powersite Dam in 1913 created Lake Taneycomo, contributing greatly to the boating-and-fishing aspect of the tourist industry, and eventually supplied electricity to the area in 1922, the same year that Highway 65 connected Branson to Springfield and Route 66.[149]

Such developments brought more people like Jim Owen to the Ozarks. Having moved to the area in 1933, he began a mini-empire of development, launching a float-trip business, building an air strip, a bowling alley, and then, in 1938, his Hillbilly Theater. Although the 1930s saw a general downturn in tourism everywhere, due to the combination of the widespread economic depression and severe droughts throughout the Midwest, Branson was not as hard hit as many areas, and the hillbilly image seemed a surefire way of drawing tourists. J. W. Williamson theorizes that the Great Depression was largely responsible for maintaining the popularity of the hillbilly in the 1930s. As ongoing economic troubles made middle-class Americas consider the possibility of total financial collapse, the hillbilly, who endured despite the most wrenching poverty, served as a "nervous clowning talisman to wave off the evil of failure."[150]

Through the 1940s and particularly the 1950s, as post-war prosperity and the expansion of the road system—including the Interstate Highways Act that turned Route 66 from St. Louis to Springfield into Highway 44—brought middle-class families now

[149] Madsen, *Branson: A Time Line,* 21.
[150] Williamson, *Hillbillyland,* 41.

able to afford cars and time for a relaxing sportsman's holiday. It was the prevalence of these tourists that spurred the next wave of performance in Branson.

In 1959, the four Mabe brothers began performing country music and corny jokes under the name "The Baldknobbers Hillbilly Jamboree" in Branson's community center. Although they took their name from the lawless marauders documented by Wright, these Baldknobbers presented themselves as nothing more than an assortment of rural gentleman and laughable hillbillies—a formula that they have maintained for fifty years now. The act included Jim Mabe as "Droopy Drawers," a comically-dressed yokel who played at being the Mabes' country cousin. Around that same time, another family, the Presley's, began playing on stages at Fantastic Caverns, a complex of caves in the area, before building their Mountain Music Theatre along Highway 76 in 1966. They, too, employed a comic hillbilly character, called "Herkimer." Both groups quickly found audiences and have, over the years, built larger venues to accommodate their fans: The Baldknobbers took over the town's roller-skating rink in 1965, before constructing their own theatre—which now seats as many as 1500 patrons—on Highway 76 three years later.[151] These two shows are among the earliest of the music-and-comedy performances that have become Branson's stock in trade, and their theatres are located almost exactly across the highway from each other.

No doubt due to their proximity as well as their formal similarities, the two vie for legitimacy as the "originators" of entertainment in Branson: The Baldknobbers are technically the older institution, but the Presley's Mountain Music Theatre was the first built on "the Strip." In both their shows and promotional materials, each group makes

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[151] Carney, "Branson: The New Mecca," 45.

repeated references to their role in founding Branson's entertainment dynasty and to the geography from which it sprung, underlining the connection between the hillbilly and the land: "They didn't always play to a packed theatre. Sometimes it was a packed cave."[152]

1959 also saw the official opening of Old Mill Theatre at The Shepherd of the Hills Homestead. After the death of Elizabeth McDaniel in 1946, the land went briefly into a trust before being sold to Bruce Trimble, a law professor from Kansas, who developed the site further and, with the help of his wife Mary and their son, Mark, added the outdoor amphitheatre for summer performances. 1960 saw its first full season of the pageant's performance. In the mid-1950s, several dramatic versions of *The Shepherd* had been produced by a number of local boosters, who had employed the theatre departments of Southern Illinois University and then Central Missouri State College (now University), with the intent of reclaiming the story of the Shepherd and the image of the hillbilly that had been maligned in the 1941 film. The establishment of the Homestead and Theatre continued that effort.[153]

The positive connotation of the term "hillbilly" even became a matter of legal record in a 1960 divorce case in Stone County. As reported in the Springfield Daily News, Judge Justin Ruark expounded at length on the epithet an aggrieved wife directed at her husband, relying heavily on the urban/rural dichotomy and the values commonly associated with it:

> Webster's New International Dictionary says that a hillbilly is "a backwoods man or mountaineer of the southern United States;-often used contemptuously." But without the added implication or inflection which

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[152] Presley's Country Jubilee, "Branson's Original Show On The Strip," (2004). Author's collection. Information also available at www.presleys.com/history.html.

[153] Dorothy Stacey, *Hometown Branson II: The Ozarks Town with Millions of Visitors, 1940-2003* (Branson, MO: Loafers Glory Publications, 2006), 66; Ketchell, 45.

> indicates an intention to belittle, we would say that, here in Southern Missouri, the term is often given and accepted as a complimentary expression. An Ozark hillbilly is an individual who has learned the real luxury of doing without the entangling complications of things which the dependent and over-pressured city dweller is required to consider as necessities. The hillbilly forgoes the hard grandeur of high buildings and canyon streets in exchange for wooded hills and verdant valleys. In place of creeping traffic he accepts the rippling flow of the wandering stream. He does not hear the snarl of exhaust, the raucous braying of horns, and the sharp, strident babble of many tense voices. For him instead is the measured beat of the katydid, the lonesome, far-off complaining of the whippoorwill, perhaps even the sound of a falling acorn in the infinite peace of the quiet woods. The hillbilly is often not familiar with new models, soirees, and office politics. But he does have the time and surroundings conducive to sober reflection and honest thought, the opportunity to get closer to his God. No, in Southern Missouri the appellation "hillbilly" is not generally an insult or an indignity; it is an expression of envy.[154]

Whether or not this assessment held true for other parts of the country, the image of the hillbilly was changing into something not only more socially benign, but also more politically relevant.

As one of the longest running comics of the twentieth century, spanning from 1934 to 1977, Al Capp's *L'il Abner* was a cultural touchstone that reached an enormous, and enormously diverse, public—at its height, as many as 90 million people daily. Early in the strip's history, Capp's satire had targeted "wealthy urbanites, snobs, bureaucrats, profiteers, the irresponsibly powerful who impinged on the lives of ordinary folk," as might be expected of any left-leaning populist. But the conservatism of the 1950s led to a more common turn, what Capp himself referred to as "weak domestic comedy."[155] After eighteen years of fruitless Sadie Hawkins' Day Races, Daisy Mae finally landed Abner,

[154] Joe Clayton, "Judge Rules Hillbilly Epithet Complimentary," *Springfield Daily News*, (July 30, 1979), folder 552, Ozarkiana Collection.
[155] Kalman Goldstein,"Al Capp and Walt Kelly: Pioneers of Political and Social Satire in the Comics," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 25, no. 4 (Spring 1992), 83; Jane Kramer, "The Schmoo's Return," *New Yorker*, October 26, 1963, 39.

and their marriage was a public sensation, making the cover of *Life* magazine on March 31, 1952. The same year, Alan Jay Lerner acquired the stage rights to the *Abner* property, although it would not come to fruition for several years, and only under other auspices.

"Weak" only in Capp's view, his strip seemed increasingly popular, and was adapted into Broadway musical in 1956. Ethan Mordden notes that the musical was faithful both to the satirical spirit of the strip (if not the detail of Abner and Daisy's already-established marital bond), and the structures of the conventional musical.[156] Along with the main plot of getting Abner and Daisy to the altar, authors Norman Panama and Melvin Frank intricately interwove two subplots: one involving the government's plan to use Dogpatch as a nuclear testing site, and another about an industrialist's plan to market Mammy's yokumberry tonic, which turns any pigeon-chested lad who swallows it into a strapping (if asexual) he-man like Abner, as "Yoka-Cola." After a multitude of absurd twists and turns, Dogpatch is saved from nuclear annihilation, the industrialist is thwarted, and Daisy and Abner wed.

Both musical and film portray the Dogpatchers as comic hillbillies; whether they triumph like Abner and Daisy, or are stymied like Earthquake McGoon, it is due to their ineptitude and brainless, mostly good intentions. The musical was nominated for three Tony Awards, winning two, and after a run of 693 performances, was directly adapted for film, which premiered in 1959. Both the stage musical (through its Tony exposure and subsequent licensing) and its filmic counterpart spread the image of the hillbilly as a figure to be laughed at, but also to be celebrated and protected from ravaging interests of

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[156] Ethan Mordden, *Coming Up Roses: The Broadway Musical in the 1950s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 165. Mordden also describes the musical as "rich in authenticity," whatever that means.

big government, big business, and the big city as represented by Senator Jack S. Phogbound, plutocrat General Bullmoose, and the scheming, zoot-suited city-slicker, Evil Eye Fleagle.

Even before the musical's premiere, Americans were encouraged to identify with the Dogpatchers. Sadie Hawkins' Day Dances were popular on college campuses by the late 1930s, and in 1953, *The Li'l Abner Official Square Dance Handbook* was published. Although Capp's characters do not visibly appear, their names and spirits are continually evoked, encouraging readers to (winkingly) embrace the silly, wholesome hillbillies—and they do use that term—and their simple pastimes of folk singing and square dancing, pleasures accessible to everyone "from Hoboken to Hollywood, from Alaska to Australia."[157] The book details how to pitch a real hoe-down, including decorations, music, food (including cookies shaped like Schmoos and non-alcoholic punch to label "Kickapoo Joy Juice"), and costumes. Men are particularly urged to dress up, donning "false beards, mustaches, goatees, rubber buck-teeth, [and] large rubber 'bare feet.'"[158] Not only does author Fred Leifer encourage young people to adopt the role of the hillbilly for private fun, he goes to emphasize the profits that can be made by hicking up for the enjoyment of others.

The transformation of the hillbilly in mass culture continued under the involvements of Paul Henning, the creator, producer and writer of *The Beverly Hillbillies*, which ran from 1962 to 1970 and concerned the changing fortunes of an Ozark hill family. Amidst the various social upheavals of the 1960s and the recognition of poverty

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[157] Fred Leifer, *The Official Li'l Abner Square Dance Handbook : Easy-to-learn Steps, Calls, Games, Profit-making Ideas, Music and Illustrations* (New York: Toby Books, 1953), 11.
[158] Ibid., 18, 17.

in areas of the states (to be addressed by President Johnson's "Great Society" programs), the presentation of sanitized hillbillies on television served to take the edge off the idea of poor whites, showing them as a cultural pocket of colorful and charming eccentricity, rather than groups living in isolated squalor. Judge Ruark declared the hillbilly's remoteness and impoverished existence as a preference, and *The Beverly Hillbillies*, and other Henning-produced shows like *Green Acres* and *Petticoat Junction*, helped redefine rural poverty as "a lifestyle choice of a people who valued leisure pursuits over material advancement." By altogether removing the objectionable aspects of the hillbilly character, like slovenliness and inappropriate sexuality, which had clung to Dogpatch (if not to Li'l Abner himself), he made the hillbilly palatable for a truly mass audience. As the president of Filmways Television, Al Simon, put it, Henning's work gave a new meaning to the word hillbilly: "Now, it denotes charming, delightful, wonderful, clean, wholesome people.[159]

Despite never being a critical success, the show was quite popular with viewers, remaining in Nielsen's top twenty until the last year of its run. It was during these later years that the show shot four episodes on location at Silver Dollar City, the 1890s-themed amusement park just outside of Branson's city limits. Broadcast during October of 1969, the episodes were built around a trip back to the hills to find Elly Mae (Donna Douglas) an appropriate Bug Tussle boy as a husband. Although the quest was ultimately unsuccessful, the show brought more attention to the area and explicitly tied the hillbilly to the Branson area for millions of viewers. The following season, tourism numbers saw a

[159] Harkins, *Hillbilly*, 186, 191.

fifty percent increase.[160] Additionally, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, like many of the most significant cultural manifestations of the hillbilly, portrayed both the positive and (highly sanitized) negative faces of the figure, thereby "blending a celebration of wealth and a lifestyle of leisure with a sustained critique of affluence, modernity, and 'progress.'"[161] The importance of the show to the area is documented at the Ralph Foster Museum ("The Smithsonian of the Ozarks"), on the campus of the College of the Ozarks, which displays the fictional family's cut-down 1921 Oldsmobile along with other memorabilia of the series [Fig. 1.2].

By the time Silver Dollar City was promoted on *The Beverly Hillbillies*, the park had been in operation for nine years, and the previous year, fewer than 45 miles down the road, another country-themed amusement park, Dogpatch U.S.A. (based on Capp's comic strip) had just opened. Although Capp began his strip with social satire pitting the common man against the rich and powerful, by the opening of Dogpatch U.S.A. in 1968, his politics had shifted drastically to the Right, and *Li'l Abner* was casting the Yokums not as simple country folk, but rather "tax-burdened working stiffs who felt victimized by freeloaders clamorously demanding entitlements."[162] And rather than targeting types, Capp's poison pen more frequently aimed at liberal-leaning *individuals*, like folk singer Joan Baez and Ted Kennedy, against whom Capp mounted a short-lived run for a

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[160] "Utopia, Missouri." *The Economist* 33, no. 7895 (December 24, 1994-January 6, 1995), 25 .
[161] Harkins, *Hillbilly*, 193. The four episodes in question are "Hills of Home," broadcast 10/1/69; "Silver Dollar City Fair," broadcast 10/8/69; "Jane Finds Elly Mae a Man," broadcast 10/15/69; and "Back to the Hills," broadcast 10/24/69.
[162] Goldstein, "Al Capp and Walt Kelly," 85.

Fig 1.2. The Beverly Hillbillies' Oldsmobile on display at the Ralph Foster Museum. Photo by the author.

Massachusetts senate seat.[163] Capp's shift helped change the hillbilly from a symbol of rural poverty to one that also represented conservative social views.

Although Dogpatch U.S.A. eventually failed, both traded in the tropes of rural white America. Silver Dollar City, for example, profitably played with both sides of the hillbilly, presenting hourly shoot-outs in the streets between rival hill clans, yet offering worship in a rough-hewn woodland chapel and meals served with "real" hillbilly hospitality.[164]

As the century progressed and the conveniences and vexations of modern life spread throughout the Ozarks, the hillbilly—to the extent that he ever was "real"—became an ever rarer manifestation of rural America, but one that area boosters were determined to keep alive. Townsend Godsey, the photographer, author, and Ozarks historian whose files form a significant piece of the Ozarkiana Collection at the College of the Ozarks, demonstrated this attitude in his notes for a speech called "Where Have All the Old Hillbillies Gone?" Although no date is included in the speech, references in it and its thematic similarity to his 1977 photo book *These Were the Last: Ozark Mountain Folk* places the speech in the early-to-mid 1970s. The speech is arranged thematically, and is focused on reclaiming the values of the traditional hillbilly—here referred to as "the old Ozarker"—for contemporary locals. Godsey somewhat sniffily refers to this latter group as "Neo-Ozarkers," who have been "diluted…acculturated by experiences outside the Ozarks and by association with newcomers," and his speech offers reminders of all that is

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[163] Denis Kitchen, "Al Capp Biography," accessed February 29, 2010, http://deniskitchen. com /Merchant2/merchant.mvc?Screen=CTGY&Category_Code=bios.capp.
[164] Silver Dollar City will be dealt with in more detail in Chapter Two. For more on the rise and fall of Dogpatch U.S.A., see The Arkansas Roadside Traveler, "Dogpatch U.S.A." at users.aristotle.net/~russjohn/attractions/dogpatch.html.

valuable about hillbilly heritage, as well as a few points the might be considered less-flattering, but still important.[165] According to the speech, the old Ozarker:

- Had, and exercised, common sense
- Had an unhurried concept of time
- Was fiercely independent
- Operated on his own moral code
- Was proud
- Was resourceful
- Loved his country but was suspicious of the government
- Had definite likes
- Was suspicious of furriners [sic]
- [Was] strongly fundamentalish [sic] in religion
- Had a keen sense of humor
- Was superstitious
- [Had a] strong sense of family

These characteristics not only echo Shortridge's list of American pastoral values, but are also a reiteration of the values found throughout *The Shepherd of the Hills*. As a whole, the speech laments that the "real" hillbilly values listed above are lacking not only in the larger culture, but also among contemporary locals who have been "diluted." Godsey attributes this deterioration in part to the Depression, which both took people out west to find jobs and brought the "intrusion" of government programs like the WPA, leading the hillbilly to lose his initiative and independence. Then, with the building of further dams and their accompanying lakes (Bullshoals Dam dates from 1951, and Tablerock Dam was finished in 1958) waves of tourists flooded the valleys, making the "the native Ozarker and his offspring…a minority in their own county."[166] Old ways are held up as the best ways, and the notes seem to ignore the hardships, poverty, and violence which made up a significant part of the area's past. More importantly, there is

[165] Townsend Godsey, "Where Have All the Old Hillbillies Gone?" folder 1090, Ozarkiana Collection.
[166] Ibid. There is more than a whiff of racism in this statement.

also the sense that the hillbilly is more than just an image, it is a performative identity based on a set of behaviors that can be reenacted and reclaimed by those who recognize their value. This idea was put forth as early as 1915, when John "Old Matt" Ross published an article in a local paper, decreeing that to become a hillbilly one could simply trade his fancy clothes for a pair of overalls and "go to work" in the community.[167]

The importance of these behaviors as authentically American has increased in importance as Branson has continued to change and expand. Although growth has been persistent, there have been several significant leaps. In 1983, the same year that Ruth and Paul Henning (of *Beverly Hillbillies* fame) State Park opened, Roy Clark, best known from television's *Hee-Haw* (a country-variety show, which has much in common with Branson's live performances, that ran from 1969 to 1992) was the first national celebrity to establish his own theatre in Branson. Others, including Boxcar Willie, Ray Stevens, and Moe Bandy, followed in the next several years. A second national boost came in December of 1991, when the television magazine *60 Minutes* did a feature on Branson's rising profile as a country music mecca that resulted in land deals, a boom in population and what a local producer, referred to as "uncontrolled growth." [168]

Although this has since been reined in and is now considered sustainable, growth continues, and wealth continues to pour in and roads expand, corporate entities proliferate, and more far-flung spectacles (like The Famous Acrobats of China, detailed in Chapter Four) are imported. This wealth has brought much of the change to Branson that Wright's Shepherd predicted at the end of his novel, but the importance of the

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[167] John Ross, "The Hill Billy," *White River Leader* (September 10, 1915), folder 1163, Ozarkiana Collection

[168] Hollye Gurley (Baldknobbers' General Manager), interview by the author, July 20, 2007.

rural—whether as fiction or reality—and the popularity of hillbilly doesn't seem to have waned in the least, even as the number of Americans who live in rural areas has been on the decline for years. According to the 2000 U.S. census, even the Branson-Hollister area is now defined as an "urban cluster" with a population density of more than 500 residents per square mile.[169]

Since "hillbilly-ness" can be defined at least as much by behavior as birth, both performers and consumers, locals and visitors (wherever they're from), can take on the role of the hillbilly for themselves, to some degree. I argue that hillbilly performances then and now are best understood as a kind of minstrelsy—what I'm calling "hickface"—that both appropriates and devalues the rural white other. Like any type of minstrelsy, it can be performed by those who claim the identity (or alternately, are identified by others as) rural whites, and those who merely adopt it. Whether or not it is fully accepted as a kind of truth, it is presented as one, not in the least because the hillbilly's close ties to the land give it a particular semblance of authenticity.

Like many kinds of performed Others, hickface is both easily recognized and reproduced. Although I argue that it is above all behavioral, it is also clearly marked by both visual and auditory clues. Tattered or tacky clothing, unkempt hair, and absurd physical proportions, particularly of the mouth and teeth—a significant indicator of class in contemporary society—are the most common corporeal markers. Hillbilly speech is equally stylized, with its distinctly twangy drawl and reliance on "countryisms" and pun-based humor. The latter, alongside talk of "'possums," outhouses, monstrous (offstage)

[169] "Census 2000 Urban and Rural Classification," www.census.gov/geo/www /ua /ua_2k.html;"State Sorted Corrected List of UCs" www.census.gov/geo/www/ ua /uc_state_100302.txt. Accessed February 28, 2011.

wives, and stories of meeting with confusion in the modern world are largely borrowed from the conventions of blackface performance.

Visitors to Branson can take on aspects of a rural identity by choosing to vacation in a rural paradise, by eating "country cookin'," by engaging in rustic pursuits of fishing and boating (and, apparently, outlet shopping), and by partaking in the various shows, many of which have actively participatory elements. Outside the Hillbilly Inn and Restaurant, a sheet of plywood has been painted with the immediately recognizable cartoon image of a hillbilly trio: the man bearded, wearing overalls and beat-up hat and clutching a rifle, the woman in a shapeless dress, carrying a rolling pin (a sign of both domesticity and potential violence) and a grotesquely proportioned infant. The faces of the three are absent; cut-out ovals invite visitors to literally take on the image of the hillbilly for a photograph—to "hick up" for a photo—as a way to commemorate their visit. While this particularly activity is clearly meant in jest, there are other ways that this temporary performance on behalf of visitors is in earnest, and even solicited by area producers [Fig. 1.3].

The Hillbilly in Branson Today

As evidenced by the briefest of surveys of Branson today, "the country" continues to be a big part of the draw. The hillbilly is pervasive. His name and image is used in marketing both tourist-focused enterprises like restaurants and hotels and locally-oriented business like auto body shops. The contemporary version of the character established as a local symbol can also be seen in many of the shows that play throughout the year, perhaps most notably in *The Shepherd of the Hills* and *The Baldknobbers Jamboree*, for

Fig 1.3. The Hillbilly Inn invites guests to “hick-up” for a commemorative photo of their visit. Photo by the author.

which I have already provided a basic history. Over time, the homestead has undergone changes and additions, and since its acquisition by the Snadon family in 1985, has continued to expand, adding Inspiration Tower in 1989, an early-twentieth century clapboard church said to resemble one that Wright pastored early in his career in 1990, and in 2004, a pavilion theatre staging a "Chuckwagon Dinner Show" featuring the cowboy singing group Sons of the Pioneers.[170] The eponymous nighttime pageant is only one of the entertainment options available at the Homestead. Trail rides, the mid-day dinner show, trips to the top of Inspiration Tower, and a guided tour of the homestead fill the days. While visitors are encouraged to engage in as many of the options as possible, the latter is the most linked to the story and hence relevant to the area's mythology.

The tour is led by pairs of amiable men in overalls, driving canopied flat-bed trailers equipped with benches that seat approximately twenty patrons. They guide us around the grounds, stopping at the various points of interest, which are often accompanied by small retail outlets where one can buy refreshments and souvenirs, including the questionable 1941 film version of the novel, which is apparently profitable enough to keep in stock. The regular stops on the route include the cabin, Inspiration Point (where you can ride to the top of Inspiration tower, linger over the larger-than-life statues of characters at its base [Fig. 1.4], or ponder the spot where Wright pitched his tent more than one hundred years ago), the empty amphitheatre and its various outbuildings, and a mock-up of a whiskey still.

[170] Sharena Naugher, "The Shepherd of the Hills Celebrates Their Centennial," *The Shepherd of the Hills Gazette* (Spring 2007), 3.

Fig 1.4. A statue of the eponymous Shepherd of the Hills. Photo by the author.

Guests are able to walk to all of these sites, but the tour guides provide a detailed (if not strictly accurate) back-story of Wright and his famous novel. While the tour guides themselves don't play time-bound roles as they might at a living history museum like Plimouth Plantation, they do adopt a rustic mien, emphasize the historicity of the location, and promote the widely held (but no less false) idea that the novel's characters were real people.

Visitors are first allowed inside the small Ross cabin, which has been outfitted with various effects said to represent "the era," but whether that era is the setting of the novel (the 1880s), the years that Wright spent in the area (the first years of the twentieth century), or slightly later, as prosperity allowed the Rosses to buy a carpet sweeper that currently sits in a corner of the cabin, is unclear. These historical objects are mixed in with electric lights, security measures, and various signage, further contributing to the chronological confusion.

The novel's love story between Young Matt and Sammy Lane is sold as the thinly-veiled romance of young Charles Ross and his eventual wife Corace Shearer, although there is no clear evidence either for or against this. Two pictures, hung together near the cabin's hearth are purportedly photographs of the lovers, but what at first appear to be cloudy tintypes are, on closer inspection, merely unlabeled illustrations. This sort of ahistorical "enhancement" is seen throughout the home site. Some trees are wrapped with strings of Christmas lights, and various dells and woodland nooks have been accentuated by cement statues of deer and squirrels, not unlike what one might find on a manicured suburban lawn. A barely-concealed pipe provides a small, picturesque waterfall over the mouth of "Little Pete's Cave." Given the emphasis on the "realness" of the homestead,

these details are somewhat confusing, although no one in my tour group remarked on them.

During the tour, the guides tell the story of Wright, as well as bits and pieces of his most famous novel. Among members of my tour group, I was one of the few who had read the novel (available for sale at several locations), and the guides took the opportunity to play up drama and passion of the pageant as we disembarked in front of the Old Mill Theatre. While being informed of the many spectacles that would shortly take place—thundering horses, a beautiful love story, and a log cabin exploding in flames—they also successfully "staged the back area," giving us glimpses of the stables, the casts' dressing rooms, and the specially-treated fiberglass "logs" that resist searing flames, hyping the production for those of us with tickets, and encouraging those of us without to purchase them.[171]

The last stop on the grounds tour was at the still, an image that stood in stark contrast to the tidy cabin and visions of church-going people. The vehicle paused and one of the guides jumped down to offer up a dipperful of "moonshine" to any willing tourist. He was quickly interrupted by the first and only female hillbilly I encountered on any of my trips in Branson. With a blast of her shotgun, an extremely overweight young woman, later addressed as "Iza Dumbell," burst out of a ramshackle shed next to the still. Dressed in a shapeless pink calico smock (and incongruously wearing pink Crocs), she proceeded to engage in a short skit with the tour guide and the passengers, lobbing "city slicker" insults and mock-threatening us with blowing up the still. The stereotypically negative

[171] See Dean MacCannell, "Staged Authenticity" in *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 91-108. MacCannell borrows the term "back region" from Erving Goffman.

hillbilly traits of violence, ignorance, and grotesquerie were painfully obvious, but she mostly elicited giggles from her audience, before the still "exploded" in fountains of water and she jeered us on our way.

Touring the site reveals both sides of the hillbilly, although we were not particularly invited to identify with either of them. The performance of the pageant, however, takes this extra step. The show has been performed every during the summer every year since 1960, albeit in various incarnations.[172] With the help of some voiced-over narration, the basic story of Wright's novel remains intact: The Shepherd arrives, there is a devastating drought, Sammy realizes that she can't marry Ollie, the Baldknobbers are defeated, the young couple is united, and the truth of the mysterious figure is revealed. No doubt because this is a performance, the hillbilly becomes particularly marked. The dichotomous hickface of the heroic Young Matt and the demonic Wash Gibbs is central to the action, but the production also incorporates a character called "Lem"—barely mentioned in the novel as "Big Lem Wheeler"—who embodies the most contemporary face of the hillbilly, hinted at by the still and on view all over Branson: the comically lovable rascal. Accompanied by his recalcitrant mule, Lem is physically ridiculous, often drunk, and always good for a laugh—whether one is laughing *with* him, or *at* him. Crucially, the actor portraying Lem plays an important role in the pre-show entertainment, interacting with the audience and serving as master of ceremonies for bullfrog races for children. He is voluble, relatable, laughable, and the only "character" who appears outside the fiction of the pageant.

[172] Over its fifty-year history, the Pageant has been adapted many times. While comparing the various editions might yield some insights into the changing face of the hillbilly over time, this chapter will treat only the version I witnessed in 2007.

The trio of rural characters contrasts sharply with a pair of urban types. The first is Ollie Stewart, the local boy who left to make his fortune with his city relatives, as well as Young Matt's rival for Sammy's affections. The pageant presents him as a consummate nerd: slightly built, fussily dressed in a hound's-tooth driving costume, and unable to defend either himself or his woman. The second is David Collins, who comes to the hills to retrieve his friend the Shepherd. Effete, over-educated, and conspicuously unmarried (but living with his sister and her five spinster daughters) in middle age, Collins takes on a greatly inflated role in the stage production, but not one that does his character any favors. Whereas in the novel he is notable mostly for his concern for his friend and his readiness to use his medical skills to help others, the stage production emphasizes his foolish inadequacy and childish wonder ("What will Sarah and the girls say?") when faced with these strange, rustic surroundings. Both men have been rendered as sissies, complete with outlandish (compared to the sensible dungarees worn by the locals) garb, affected walks and treble voices.

Lem is a certainly a figure of fun, but he is at least able to survive, unlike the city-dwellers, whose urban lives have coddled them to the point of vulnerability. Young Matt, of course, is above reproach, but even the wicked Wash Gibbs has the basic dignity of competence that the others are denied.

Generally speaking, the hill people are portrayed as strong individuals who understand simple pleasures and value family ties and religious faith, which almost every audience member can support. Even outside the fiction of the play, audience members are encouraged to identify with the rural folk—they have come to the land where the story "really" happened, and have very likely spent the day touring the home site and learning

about the good-hearted folk who inhabit the hills. Additionally, before the show and during the intermission, the audience is invited from their seats onto the stage to participate *with* and perhaps *as* the characters in frog-jumping contests and a community square dance that has been grafted onto the plot. The play ends with the Baldknobbers being thwarted, Wash being killed, while Matt wins the girl and the Shepherd—himself a city man—chooses to remain in the hills which have brought him peace. Through him, the redemptive qualities of Arcadia and the positive traits of the hillbilly become accessible, if only temporarily, to the urban-dwellers in the audience, even if our rural sojourn is less permanent.

The Baldknobbers of *The Shepherd of the Hills* pageant are destroyed in a shoot-out, but a few miles up Highway 76, another group of Baldknobbers has survived, if altered almost beyond recognition. Their transformation reflects the more general change in the hillbilly's image that Harkins argues took place in the 1960s. I believe Branson has played its own important role in that change.

Jim Mabe's Droopy Drawers, who was followed by "Willie Makeit," has since been replaced by a trio of comic hillbillies: Stub Meadows, Hargus Marcel, and the mostly mute Droopy Drawers, Jr. The conceit is basically the same: cousin Hargus and his buddies have come into Branson from the hills to spend some time with his more sophisticated family members, and their antics alternate with the musical numbers in a pattern familiar from vaudeville.

Just as the original Baldknobbers have been watered down from vigilantes to country entertainers, here the hillbilly has been rendered toothless—both literally and metaphorically—transformed from wild man to clown. While still clearly rubes marked

by their speech, they've traded their patched and faded dungarees for outlandish garb: garishly colored high-water pants, ugly, oversized ties, mismatched sneakers, and battered hats. Although they have lost the standard scraggly beards, their faces still mark them as Other. Stub Meadows, a rubber-faced comedian, seems to lack teeth entirely, and spends most of the show grimacing, stretching his lips and cheeks into improbable configurations of empty-headed consternation, to the delight of audiences. Likewise, Hargus puffs his cheeks and purses or wiggles his lips, obscuring teeth, while Droopy Drawers, Jr. wears a grotesque dental appliance that gives him a jack-o-lantern grin [Fig. 1.5].

Their comedy has been sanitized, as well: no mention is made of white lightnin' or plug tabacky. The humor is mischievous and only mildly vulgar: gags referencing outhouses or undergarments are common, and offstage wives cast in the Iza Dumbell mold are frequently the butt of jokes. Most of their interactions happen with emcee Bob Leftridge, who plays the classic straight man by setting up the yokels for their punch lines:

> Hillbilly: So while I was fixin' to come down here, I realized I'm not as young as I used to be.
> Emcee: Oh really, what made to think that?
> Hillbilly: Well, you know you're getting older when you pack more medicine than clothes…

The General Manager of the Baldknobbers, Hollye Gurley, acknowledged that the hillbillies' appeal to audiences lies in their duality: while they look ridiculous and seem

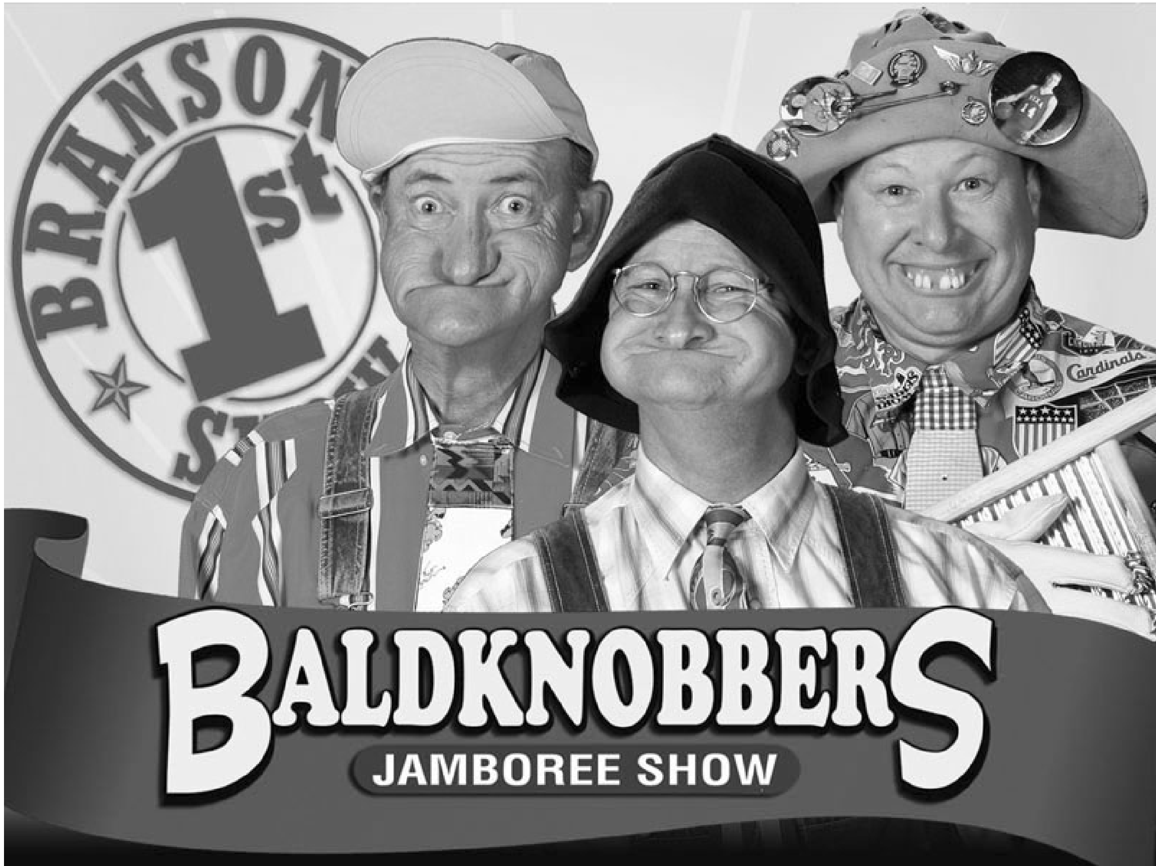

Fig 1.5. The clowns of the Baldknobbers: Stub Meadows, Hargus Marcel, and Droopy Drawers, Jr. Image from the Baldknobbers' website, http://www.baldknobbers.com/.

like dupes, they (like their ancestor Jonathan) prevail in the end, confounding their supposed betters.[173] Their role as comedians allows them to be laughed at, but it also makes them the stars of the show and in control of much of the action. As at *The Shepherd of the Hills*, it is only with the clowns that audiences are allowed personal interactions. Before the show, they crack jokes about shopping at Wal-Mart and lead an unchallenging 1950s TV trivia contest with prizes like a "hillbilly washer and dryer": a nickel-sized metal washer and a wooden clothespin.

The Baldknobbers' hillbilly clowns are easily the most loved stage characters. Although the musicians are admired and applauded for their skill, the hillbillies themselves are seen as role models. At intermission and following the show, the three are mobbed by camera-toting tourists eager to pose for pictures: sometimes smiling, and sometimes literally donning "hickface" by mimicking the comics' grotesque mugging. This type of interaction gets to the heart of the hillbilly's appeal. Even as audiences feel superior to them, with their foolishness, their tacky clothes, or their horrifying orthodontia, they admire their playful way with a joke as well as their uncharacteristically serious declarations of patriotism and piety that are a part of every show. In choosing to identify with the triumphant underdog who is lower on social ladder, they claim for themselves the cultural authenticity the hillbilly represents, without ever having to embrace or even recognize the very real deprivation, economic and political, that many rural whites have suffered. In effect, Branson goers, in performing the hillbilly, are briefly exchanging their cultural capital for a kind of moral capital: that of the humble "plain folk," economically disadvantaged but rich in humor and religious faith.

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[173] Hollye Gurley, interview by the author, July 20, 2007.

This kind of cultural trading is also demonstrated in the many wares available for purchase, as shopping is another way that consumers can access the hillbilly. The Baldknobbers not only offer souvenir t-shirts and recordings, but a variety of hillbilly paraphernalia, including plastic "hillbilly teeth" that can give the wearer the temporary experience of resembling Droopy Drawers, Jr., or a "hillbilly cell phone" made of scrap wood, with hand-written instructions ("Go to the highest hill & holler. If no answer? HOLLER LOUDER!") in black permanent marker [Fig. 1.6]. Novelties like these (whether purchased, or just briefly enjoyed while in a retail environment) simultaneously congratulate modern, technologically savvy visitors on their sophistication, but also allow them to take on, through identification and consumption, the role of the hillbilly, baffled by newfangled gadgets, but able to thrive despite adverse conditions, and wise enough to know that in case of an emergency, the only "text message" one really needs can be found in the Bible: John 3:16. In other words, because the Branson's hillbilly "incorporates both 'otherness' and self-identification," he allows a "generally nonrural, middle-class white, American audience to imagine a romanticized past while simultaneously enabling [them] to recommit [themselves] to modernity by caricaturing the negative aspects of premodern, uncivilized society."[174]

The image of the hillbilly has been rejected by some Ozarkers, (neo- or otherwise) and embraced by others. A third group, including those who live and work there today, recognizes that performing the hillbilly, whatever their actual relationship to poverty or rurality, brings at least as much money as derision from (sub)urbanites seeking the

[174] Harkins, *Hillbilly*, 6-7.

Fig 1.6. A basket of “Hillbilly Cell Phones” allows guests to simultaneously mock and embrace the hillbilly. Photo by the author.

purification that they believe rural culture affords them. In other words, they trade their moral capital for economic gain, and embrace being laughed at, all the way to the bank.

Conclusions

Wright's book ends with the coming doom of the Ozarks' purity, epitomized in the quote that heads this chapter. Almost from its very beginning, Branson capitalized on its old fashioned ways, and foreboded the threat of their imminent demise. The loss of the rural (either the land or its human counterpart, the hillbilly) is figured as down-grading, or even a fall from grace.

This chapter and the sources from which it draws have shown that Branson, despite claims to the contrary, has always been moving towards greater development and integration with the "outside world." Today, the pace of change in the Branson/Lakes Area is increasing as rapidly as ever: a $140 million regional airport opened in May of 2009; housing, hotel, and retail developments are booming; and people from ever more far-flung places are pouring in. Despite the hillbilly image of satisfied simplicity, Branson's producers are racing to embrace late capitalism with open arms and de-ruralizing themselves in the process, as the hazards of urbanization—deforestation, traffic, pollution, and crowds—increase.

Now "the haunt of careless idlers and a place of revelry," Branson must go to significant lengths to prop up the imaginary boundary between country and city in order to maintain its image as an American Arcadia. As the actual differences in life between Branson and an urban center like New York or Chicago have significantly diminished in the one hundred years since the publication of *The Shepherd of the Hills*, the *perceived*

differences, and the performance of them, have become more important to the tourist industry.

As such, there is little reason to think the hillbilly will disappear anytime soon. His image may have changed over the last hundred years, but his position as a "white other" in Branson's shifting landscape will likely keep him around for a long time to come, as he has always functioned as a way for white audiences "to come to terms with the ambiguities in their own lives in a time of rapid and often disorienting change."[175] *The Shepherd of the Hills* Homestead and pageant and *The Baldknobbers Jamboree* are just two examples demonstrating how Branson invites its visitors to step into the role of the hillbilly, and suggests reasons why so many choose to identify with him, if only for a short time.

[175] Ibid., 8

CHAPTER TWO:

Performing American Heritage, Performing the Soldier-Patriot

"You've Got A Great Past Ahead of You!"

Silver Dollar City slogan[176]

Branson's specific middle-American geographic location has great import for how it functions symbolically. Likewise, its "place" in the continuum of time is equally important. Branson's growth throughout the last century shows how it expanded in spurts, as growing cultural changes threatened the image of a stable, homogenous national identity. And like Adorno's Angel of History, perpetually blown by tragedy into the future, Branson's gaze is focused backward. Not on the immediate wreckage of history, but further back, to the time that matters most: The Past. While there are a few specific "pasts" that get the most play and which will be covered in this chapter, a generic sense of pastness is more than serviceable.

Although Branson's spectacles and attractions create an atmosphere of fascination with and reverence for history, the examples included in this chapter (among many others for which there is no room) will demonstrate how they evoke the *value* of history, even as they distort its realities through mythification and dehistoricization. This Angel's backwards focus is neither surprising nor necessarily problematic for a conservative community, but while it gazes into the past, it's also covering one eye.

The blending of fact, fiction, and folklore into an ersatz history has already been demonstrated in the previous chapter's discussion of The Shepherd of the Hills Homestead and Pageant, but Branson is full of examples of other "historical" displays: a

[176] Silver Dollar City, "You Should Know," accessed February 28, 2011, http://www.bransonsilver dollarcity.com /you-should-know/default.aspx?id=588.

wax museum, shows featuring impersonators of now-dead celebrities, collections of antique toys or farm implements, and even a Museum dedicated to the sinking of the Titanic, created after and prompted by the popularity of the eponymous 1997 feature film. Very often, history is not only augmented or viewed through a bent lens, but is cheerfully laid cheek-by-jowl with pure fantasy, as seen in the combination Dinosaur Walk Museum and "Haunted House and Monster Asylum."

There is already significant scholarship on the links between history and performance that sheds light on how Branson uses history, although "history" is perhaps a misnomer for what Branson is selling. The more accurate term is "heritage," as defined by David Lowenthal. In his 1998 text on "the heritage crusade," Lowenthal takes great care to distinguish history from heritage. He notes that while they are deeply intertwined with each other—heritage is founded in history, and history is flavored by heritage—each has a distinct aim that isn't always reconcilable with the other's. Both are based on past events, but history is documentary, intended to record something in the past, while heritage is essentially performative: intended to *do* something in the present.[177]

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, writing that same year, agrees that the two are significantly different; history might be understood as "the past," but heritage is "a mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past" and, even more specifically, "the *performance* of history."[178] Heritage, by showing history, changes it into a consumable product, and while both heritage and history can be consumed, the difference is *intent.* Unlike history (the people and events of the past), heritage displays

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[177] David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[178] Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 7. Italics mine.

are meant “not to understand” something, but simply “to perform it.”[179] As the director of the British Museum put it half a dozen years earlier, the point of heritage is “not that the public should learn something but that they should *become* something.”[180] What is that something? I argue that Branson is trying to make their audience into “ideal”—that is, *based o*n ideas, if not living up to them—citizens.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s *Destination Culture* examines how the stuff of history (people, places, and things), by virtue of being set apart through exhibition, performs a different—and heightened—function. Things that are no longer valuable or viable as items or practices can be saved by “adding the value of pastness, exhibition, difference, and where possible, indigeneity.”[181] They trade, as Marx might have it, use-value for exchange-value. An excellent example in Branson is the Ralph Foster Museum, dubbed “The Smithsonian of the Ozarks,” which houses a large if sometimes indiscriminant collection of objects marked as part of the indigenous, regional past. The museum is affiliated with and located at the College of the Ozarks, with a mission “to collect, preserve, interpret and exhibit items relating to the Ozarks region.”[182] A visit to this haphazard collection—some gathered by undergraduates at the College—of rudimentary farm implements, Depression glass, and kitten stamps, fails to elucidate Ozark history. Lacking careful contextualization, the items merely perform themselves as representatives of a lost way of life that is held up as simpler, more authentic, and ultimately more valuable, if only for being lost [Fig 2.1].

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[179] Ibid., 159.
[180] Neil MacGregor, “Scholarship and the Public,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 139 (1991): 191-94.
[181] Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*, 150.
[182] Ralph Foster Museum Homepage, accessed February 28, 2011, http://www.rfostermuseum.com/.

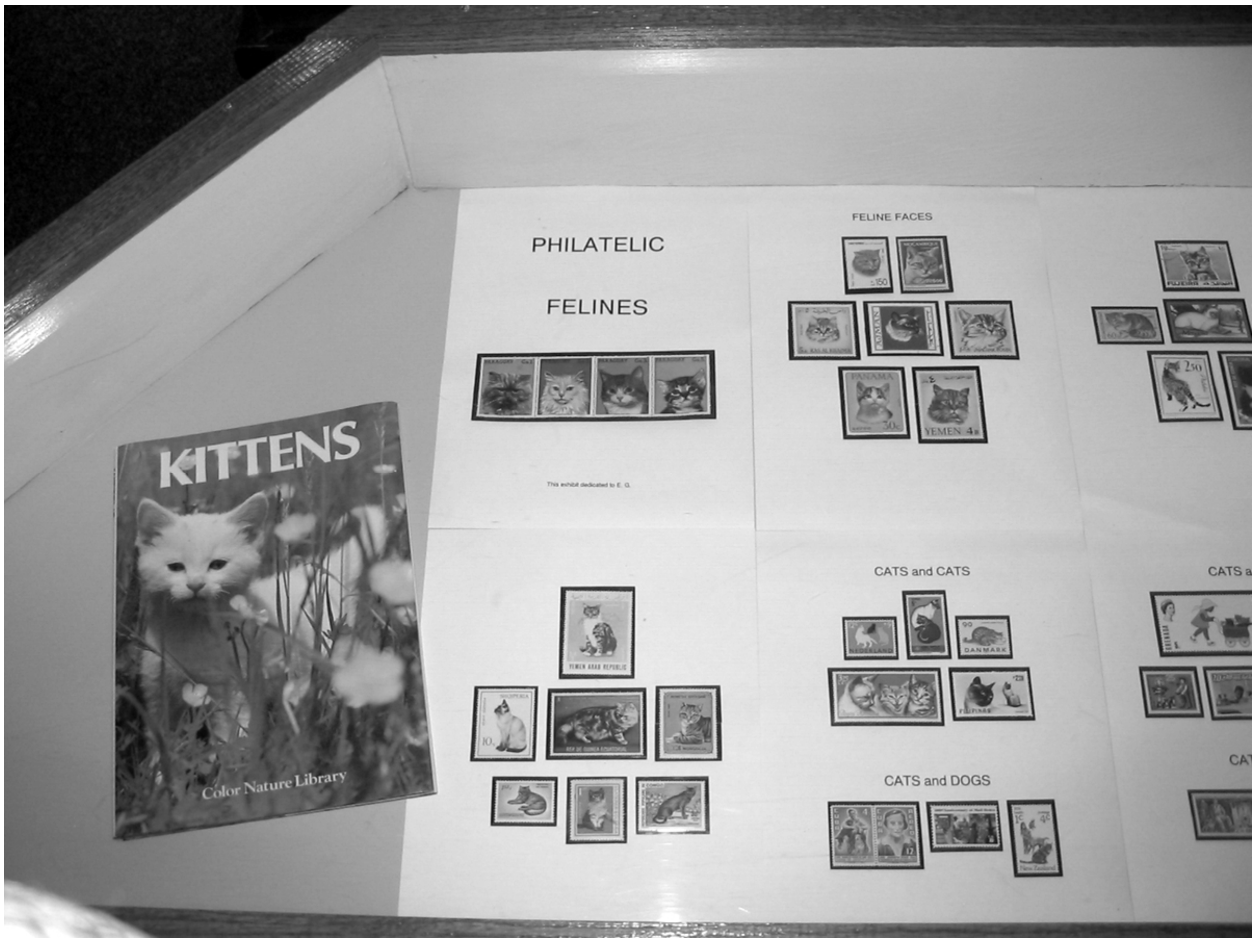

Fig 2.1. A display of international stamps featuring cats and kittens is presented at the Ralph Foster Museum without contextualization or comment. Photo by the author.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett focuses on objects, but Lowenthal declares that today's heritage crusade has become more about intangibles than actual material things; his examples include "kinship, language, poetry, [and] music."[183] This contrasts with earlier times when monuments and other physical constructions were considered the primary transmitters of Heritage. He argues
that the people who are marginalized (through poverty, minority status, etc.) are "most apt to demote material legacies" and instead focus on methods of experience and *performanc*e: religious faith, music and dance, storytelling, and food (which, while material, is not durable), which more easily allows heritage and legacy to revolve around ideas and images rather than artifacts.[184] By this light, it makes sense that Branson—which I've already established as culturally marginalized both historically and contemporarily for its rurality, poverty, and "low class" milieu—would concentrate on experiences. Lowenthal sums it up this way: "History is still mostly written by the winners. But heritage increasingly belongs to the losers."[185] To some degree, however, material culture remains important, for tangible goods allow us to domesticate the past, personalize it, and connect it to our own immediate experiences, whether through purchase, use, or mere recognition.

Writing at the end of the twentieth century, both Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Lowenthal acknowledge a significant uptick in heritage-based entertainment and

[183] Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade,* 19.
[184] Ibid., 21. In this, Lowenthal echoes Bourdieu in *Distinction*: "Dominated agents…tend to attribute to themselves what the distribution attributes to them, refusing what they are refused…adjusting their expectation to their chances, defining themselves as the established order defines them, reproducing in their verdict on themselves the verdict the economy pronounces on them, condemning themselves to what is in any case, their lot…" trans. Richard Nice (Boston: Harvard University Press 1987), 471.
[185] Ibid., 78.

educational sites, as well as an increasingly heritage-obsessed public to go with it. Lowenthal doesn't claim that heritage is new; rather that it is more of an industry than ever before. He dates the explosion in heritage tourism to approximately 1980—a mere three years before Roy Clark first brought national attention to Branson—and notes that it became the fastest growing sector of the travel industry as of 1992.[186] They give varying reasons for heritage explosion, but agree that it arises primarily out of unease with a rapidly changing world. Since heritage is built from the vestiges of dying or dead ways of life, the more quickly things change, the more we have from which to build heritage. And the more dead they are, the more we cling to them; the more we insist on their authenticity.

As national demographics shift and new technologies create and reveal an ever-shifting and -shrinking world, the desire for a stable identity, based in a comforting view of the past, grows. This might account for the mini-boom in Branson's growth concurrent with the turmoil of the late 50s and early 60s, its development during the culture wars of the early 1990s, and the remarkable expansion seen after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. By presenting and asserting a stable—or at least resilient—American heritage, producers in Branson serve to assure its visitors of a stable, resilient American future. Or, as Raymond Williams asks, "Is it anything more than a well-known habit of using the past, the 'good old days,' as a stick to beat the present?"[187]

Benedict Anderson has convincingly argued that the advent of print media helped create nations, without regard for what exactly was being printed and disseminated. I—

[186] Ibid., 99. Although surely not the cause of this boom, *60 Minutes*' feature on Branson in December of 1991 seems consistent with this trend.
[187] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 12.

and I believe Lowenthal—would extend that line of thought to the heritage industry: heritage culture encourages simplistic, binary thinking, allowing lines to be drawn between American and UnAmerican, past and present, Us and Them. An imagined nation requires an imagined past, perpetuated not only through print media (in Branson's case, the internet and a proliferation of brochures and other ephemera are certainly doing their part), but through heritage's complete toolkit, which includes nostalgia, folklore, myths, stories, lies, and many practices—Taylor's "repertoire culture"—which are communal, performed, *and* performative.

This chapter will focus on how American heritage is performed in Branson by detailing a few emblematic sites. After establishing how heritage generally functions, I will concentrate on a specific subset of this heritage, which is built around honoring America's military past and martial present.

Silver Dollar City

When it comes to promoting "American heritage," the largest single site in Branson is Silver Dollar City and Marvel Cave. After the *Shepherd of the Hills Pageant*, it is the site with the longest record of selling its heritage. In fact, although they are owned and operated by different entities, the two attractions are bound up with each other, in part through their shared commitment to regional heritage tourism.

What has come to be known as Marvel Cave has always been swaddled in myths; determining reality, other than the existence of the cave itself, is difficult. Rumors of Osage Indian rituals and Spanish explorers' riches hidden within it circulated in the antebellum era, but because accessing the cave was so dangerous, it remained unexplored for a long time. Later, when the Baldknobbers roamed the hills, the cave was reputedly

used as a hide-out, or a place to dispose of their enemies. The first recorded expedition was in 1869, led by mine mogul Henry T. Blow. No relics or treasure were found, only mountains of bat guano, and what appeared to be marble. What had previously been known as "the Devil's Den" was re-christened Marble Cave.

Another entrepreneur, Truman Powell, fueled by others' investments, created Marble Cave Mining and Manufacturing Company in 1884. His plan was to extract the marble, and turn the area into an extravagant resort town of parks and spas, to be called Marble City, with the eventual profits. Powell quickly learned that the marble he sought was only limestone, but determined to make his fortune however he could, began extracting the nitrogen-rich guano, which could be used in making explosives and much-needed fertilizer. The resort never advanced beyond initial planning, but the shantytown that sprang up to house the miners and their pneumonia-afflicted donkeys was dubbed Marble City, then even more grandly renamed Marmaros, from the Greek word for "marble." The Company and the town were short-lived, only lasting until 1889, when the guano supply was exhausted. Marmaros retained a tiny post office until 1929, and it was about that time that the myth of a lost city began to swell.[188]

Having swiftly outlived its promise as a natural resource or profitable resort, Marble Cave was heritage-ized. Quebecois businessman William Henry Lynch bought the land and opened the cave to visitors in 1894, making it the first commercial cave in Missouri and the oldest attraction in the area still in operation.[189] Lynch struggled for

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[188] Lynn Morrow and Linda Myers-Phinney, *The Shepherd of the Hills Country: Tourism Transforms the Ozarks, 1880s-1930s* (Fayette: University of Arkansas Press, 1999), 40-42.
[189] Phyllis Rossiter, *A Living History of the Ozarks* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 1992), 194.

years to make his tourist business solvent. After railroad expansion into the area in 1906, the cave became a significant regional draw, and the site was renamed "Marvel Cave," a more accurate descriptor, in 1913.[190] Impressive despite its rusticity, the cave was run by Lynch daughters Genevieve and Miriam and gradually augmented with cabins and basic dining accommodations for explorers.

Although some updates were made to improve safely and accessibility, tours remained a muddy, lantern-lit, and dangerous affair well into the twentieth century, when Hugo Herschend, looking to retire from an engineering career in Chicago, came along. In 1950, Herschend and his wife, Mary, signed a 99-year lease with the by-then-elderly Lynch sisters. Under Mary's management, the Herschends proceeded to construct permanent staircases, safer walkways, electric lighting, and eventually a tram system to facilitate more customers.[191] Growing crowds prompted the family to add above-ground attractions to entertain waiting guests. Having heard the story of the mythical Marmaros, they decided to reconstruct this "lost city" as an adjunct to their cave-tour attraction.[192] The result was Silver Dollar City, which opened in 1960, only five years after Disneyland. It grew quickly, becoming a more popular draw than the cave within two years, and experienced a significant boom after being featured in *The Beverly Hillbillies* in 1969.[193] Upon the death of Genevieve Lynch three years later, the land was deeded to the College of the Ozarks, but the Herschend sons continued to serve as direct owners

[190] Morrow and Myers-Phinney, *Shepherd of the Hills Country*, 47-49, 52. The full account of the fortunes of Powell and Lynch can be found in Chapter 2, "The Bottomless Pit: Marble Cave."
[191] Crystal Payton, *The Story of Silver Dollar City: A Pictorial History of Branson's Famous Ozark Mountain Theme Park* (Springfield, MO: Lens & Pen, 1999) 37-38.
[192] Damien Francaviglia, "Branson, Missouri: Regional Identity and the Emergence of a Popular Culture Community," *Journal of American Culture* (Summer 1995): 63.
[193] Payton, *Story of Silver Dollar City*, 62.

and operators of Silver Dollar City until 2005, when it was corporatized as part of the publically-traded company Herschend Family Entertainment (HFE), which operates twenty-one properties in nine states. Begun with a few rough-hewn buildings meant to amuse cave-curious travelers, Silver Dollar City is now the largest single attraction in Branson, having hosted more than 65 million visitors since it opened.[194]

Founded on myths with only tenuous links to reality, Silver Dollar City continues to build on its early success by performing its heritage as history. To critique heritage for being poor or biased history is absurd; heritage's *job* is to misrepresent history. Confusing the two, however, is problematic: to embrace heritage *as* history, disguising authority as authenticity, "cedes it credence it neither asks nor deserves."[195] And confusing the two is what Silver Dollar City appears to have in mind. In a self-produced and -published account of its own institutional history, *The Story of Silver Dollar City*, the organization tries to play it both ways, privileging both the historical and the apocryphal to suit their purposes.

Along with a wealth of images culled from their archives, this simplified account of the cave's history and the park's creation eliminates any but the most straightforward and certain of routes leading to its current success. According to the park's own legend, Silver Dollar City is direct expression of genuine hill folk culture and down-home values. Its "easy-going atmosphere" is authentic, not "artificially conceived of in a distant

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[194] Silver Dollar City Publicity, "Silver Dollar City Celebrates 50 Years with New Ride, Year-Long Party: 'Take Time to Celebrate,'" last modified November 2009, accessed February 28, 2011, http://hfeimages.aristotle.net/Pressroom/SDC%20 50th %20 Release%20FINAL%20%282%29.pdf.
[195] Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade*, 250.

corporate boardroom."[196] The original buildings weren't constructed by professional architects, but by amateurs equipped only with simple tools and can-do spirit, who produced a modest, but satisfying result that had "neither the transitory glitter of the carnival, nor the often pretentious historical repatriation of other frontier villages."[197] In the world of the City, professionalism and precision are presented as the stuffy affectations of outsiders: the park proudly "avoids a rigid, literal interpretation of the past," and disdains "exactitude in details, required by academic interpretations of history."[198]

Repeated throughout this text are concerns for authenticity, but the formally academic is abjured; authority is to be sought in the devoted amateur's study of the past. Those first buildings were constructed by locals, but only after Mary Herschend "insisted that they research 19th [sic] century construction methods and build them authentically."[199] Claims and assurances of the legitimacy of the constructed environment and the realness of the people who "slipped naturally into their roles" with "authentic dialogue…on their lips" are legion. [200] A delicate balance is struck: for every mention of their reliance on history, there is a dismissal of any need for historical accuracy.

There is some recognition of the difference between heritage and history, but no concern for limning that boundary. In fact, the Park claims that its "free, fluid, and improvised quality" is exactly what makes it like the frontier village it claims to be.[201] In Baudrillardian terms, its hyperreality is what makes it authentic. The goal may simply be

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[196] Payton, *Story of Silver Dollar City*, 10.
[197] Ibid., 53.
[198] Ibid., 9.
[199] Ibid., 59.
[200] Ibid., 59, 52.
[201] Ibid., 84.

to create a playful frontier ambiance, but the serious cultural work that Heritage is meant to do continues with the less-obviously-biased imprimatur of History. When fantasy can be legitimized by the mere evocation of authenticity, heritage becomes history, and simulations become as good as, or better than, the real thing. This blending is also seen in attractions within the park. Alongside roller coasters and snack bars, one finds "history"—both recognizably false and apparently unfeigned—performed on a daily basis.

A Heritage of Cheerful Destruction: The Baldknobbers

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Baldknobbers did exist, and their exploits make up a significant chapter in regional history. One some level, then, it is unsurprising that they would be included in heritage display, even if domestic terrorism hardly seems like a family-friendly subject.

At Silver Dollar City, however, it is colorful history appropriate for a themed, all-ages rollercoaster called Fire in the Hole. While waiting to ride, visitors are treated to pictures and other memorabilia of the vigilantes displayed on the walls of the ride's shelter. Once seated in chunky black wagons not unlike coal-pit cars, riders are sent through a series of dark tunnels with views on a number of nearly full-scale dioramas of the "lost" town of Marmaros—here depicted as a prosperous community, half Victorian, half Wild West—being burned to the ground by hooded outlaws. Mannequins dressed as villagers flee from buildings and their hooded attackers aim guns and cannons at the passing patrons. Cries, variously comic and horrific, echo through the gloom: "Git 'em, boys!" "Help! My baby!" The destruction increases, and the town is shown to be increasingly engulfed in flames, before a voice roars "Fire in the hole!" and the tracks

drop steeply. Riders are splashed with water, presumably to quench the flames of the blazing town they have just escaped.

In a history of the Baldknobbers written with regional historian Elmo Ingenthron, journalist Mary Hartman delineates the development of the group in the post-war era, and distinguishes various bands that "ran" each county and often clashed against each other. The most notoriously violent of the groups, which controlled Christian County, were also the most theatrically disguised, sporting black hoods ornamented with colorful details and fringed, cone-like horns. Those in Taney Country—where the real and fictional Marmaros is located—were known to simply pull flour sacks over their heads, but it is the former group which is featured in Fire in the Hole and other area attractions [Fig 2.2].[202] Though their book is rather luridly written, Ingenthron and Hartman are clear: the Baldknobbers were terrorists, even before they "went bad." Nonetheless, the City's own description seems to take pride in the fact that their wrongdoers are locals; the ride is touted as a romp wherein "the town is set on fire by *the Ozarks' own vigilante group*, the Bald Knobbers."[203]

Presenting stylized, homegrown violence for the delectation of audiences has a history at Silver Dollar City; guests in the earliest days were treated to hourly Hatfield-and-McCoy "shoot-outs" up and down Main Street. But the dynamic has shifted for audiences. Rather than simply laughing at the hickface characters, guests of Fire in the Hole passively play the part of Marmaros/Silver Dollar City citizens, watching "our"

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[202] Mary Hartman and Elmo Ingenthron, *Bald Knobbers: Vigilantes on the Ozarks Frontier* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 1988), 81, 85.
[203] Payton, *Story of Silver Dollar City,* 109. Italics mine.

Fig 2.2. The image of the hooded and horned Baldknobbers is selectively remembered and presented. Image from the Shepherd of the Hills Homesite. Photo by the author.

town, which we have spent the day enjoying on other rides and exhibits, be torched by brigands. "Our" brigands.

A Heritage of Solemn Creation: The Performance of "Traditional" Crafts

Scott Magelssen, in his book *Living History*, uses this eponymous term to

> cover individuals or groups that engage in practices that evoke a different historical time from the present. These practices include costuming, pageantry, battle reenactment, buckskinning, rendezvous, pioneer villages, living history museums, imitative research institutions, cemetery walks, living dioramas, and the production of crafts by artisans using time-specific methods.[204]

Silver Dollar City, with more than one hundred craftspeople displaying their techniques through the season, falls squarely into this category. This practice, common to many heritage sites, is integral to Silver Dollar City's success, and was part of the attraction since the very beginning. In a press release dated September 29, 1959, the nascent City promoted itself as "not a museum or a ghost town, but a living, working Village."[205]

Though crafting was and is a part of the park's daily routine, just three years after opening, they initiated a special program, the Missouri Festival of Ozark Craftsmen, as "a stirring tribute to the self-sufficiency which characterized the pioneer."[206] The festival has been celebrated each fall, and over time has expanded in scope to become a national festival with artisans from all corners of the country. Stretching over seven weeks, the festival is promoted by the City as the biggest and most important of their five seasonal

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[204] Scott Magelssen, *Living History Museums: Undoing History through Performance* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2007), xxi.
[205] Payton, *Story of Silver Dollar City*, 51.
[206] Ibid., 119.

celebrations.[207] Employees strolling the grounds create fictional 1880s characters with names and personal narratives, but the artisans, scattered throughout the park in large, low-slung cabins, mostly reject the fanciful frame, instead demonstrating a craft while wearing a historically evocative costumes and occasionally reporting the steps of their process.

Live displays like those at Silver Dollar City "create the illusion that the activities you watch are being done rather than represented," which makes them seem authentic and unmediated. However, purposefully framing events as displays for audiences, which the City does by installing glass walls and roped-off viewing zones, renders them a performance, as well. A glass blower or basket weaver is actually performing the task of glass-blowing or basket-weaving, but the artisan is a performer, representing herself, and the artisanal process, too, is a representation of itself.[208]

Whether understood as real or representational, the spectacle of craftsmanship is touted as authentic historical display of nineteenth century tools and techniques. This is somewhat disingenuous, since glassblowers are working with specialized, technically advanced ovens and woodworkers use machined tools to create their rustic products, but the rarity of hand-made goods and the still-rarer experience of seeing the manufacturing process confer the authority of "realness" to the performance. If the popularity of their many stalls and shops is any indication, the appearance of realness is perfectly sufficient.

The artisans' demonstrations are consistently fascinating to watch, and their skills are undeniable. Some explain their techniques as they proceed through the steps of their

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[207] Ibid. They also observe World Fest in the spring, followed by the Great American Music Festival, the National Children's Festival in mid-summer, and at the end of the season, an Old Time Christmas Festival.

[208] Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*, 55.

trade, but the crafts are being *demonstrated*, not taught. Audiences watch, not to learn how to replicate the item being produced, but in order to appreciate it, and the skill necessary to produce it. Each artisan's workshop has a corresponding gift shop, where guests can buy a sample of the work to take home. Having witnessed the methods used to make the piece adds to its value (even if one rarely buys the actual item one saw being made), as does the "pastness" of those methods.

The vast majority of items manufactured and sold at Silver Dollar City are decorative items like metal sculptures, carved wall hangings, and corn brooms "too nice to use." But whatever the item's actual function, its primary value is as a tangible memory machine. The presence of the basket or ornately carved candle in a tourist's home serves to remind its owner of her visit to the City, the demonstration of the craft that resulted in the item (or its duplicate), and the value of pastness that heritage crafts represent.

"Living History"

Through two different kinds of heritage display—one recognizably false, the other apparently real—Silver Dollar City embraces "living history." Although they seem to promote contrasting images of their rural setting and function in distinctly different ways, both enable visitors to connect to the past though co-presence at a specific site and overt, if not careful, attention to the stuff of history.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes the heritage industry as "resurrection theatre," committed to reviving history otherwise abandoned as dead or dying.[209] In the case of Silver Dollar City, "resurrection theatre" can also mean a tribute to a history that might

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[209] Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Afterlives," *Performance Research* 2, no. 2 (Summer 1997), 4.

not ever have existed. The presence of and reliance on material objects serve as "proof" of the history being presented, but the framing of these items as heritage, whether done purposefully or just sloppily, distorts or misrepresents that history. Ultimately, though, its realness or falsity is immaterial. Nor does it matter whether the heritage being preserved is one of carefully refined skill or mindless violence. What matters most is that the past is being represented at all, and that we bear witness to it as proof of its—and our—worth. Baudrillard puts it: "We require a visible past, a visible continuum, a visible myth of origin, which reassures us about our end."[210]

Part of heritage is concern for the *loss* of heritage. This is true of the Herschends' theme park, where a "lost city" was recreated and "lost arts" are practiced for all to see. Silver Dollar City even thinks of the present in terms of heritage. Its mission, to "Create Memories Worth Repeating," relies on what Eric Hobsbawn calls "future nostalgia": projected memories of the present recalled in an imagined future.[211] The audience is engaged as witnesses to and consumers of a past, whether lost, recovered, or invented, in order to reclaim it. The lesson is: remember. Witness but do not understand. Consume but do not digest. Reverence for the past is valued, but, like historical accuracy, "not strictly necessary."

Through observing the past and consuming evidence of one's witness to it, guests at Silver Dollar City help to produce the very past they seek. By constantly looking backwards, the City legitimizes its present and justifies the future. A sign over the entrance to the park sums it up neatly: "You've got a great past ahead of you."

[210] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 10.
[211] Eric Hobsbawn, "Inventing Traditions,"*The Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawn, and Terence Ranger, eds, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1-14.

Reverence for the past, whether real or fabricated, can be read even more clearly in the spectacles of America's military might. Generic "heritage" attractions in Branson are legion, but U. S. military history is what gets the most—and arguably the most heritage-ized—attention. The prevalence of and reliance on military themes may be partly due to demographics; an enormous proportion of Americans (approximately 16 million) served in WWII, with millions more in Korea, Vietnam, and more recent conflicts in the Middle East and Afghanistan. The same working- and middle-class citizens who are more likely to serve in the armed forces are heavily represented in Branson's audiences. The prevalence of senior visitors in Branson practically guarantees that veterans will be heavily represented, and producers in Branson avidly court them. Since 1993, the Chamber of Commerce and Convention and Visitors' Bureau has sponsored a city-wide, week-long celebration of those who have served in the military, promoted as "the nation's largest Veterans Day festivities." This annual event has helped foster an environment of military pride and made the figure of the soldier-patriot a crucial identificatory figure. Just as the trope of rurality is embodied in the hillbilly, who represents the Rural Nation, the trope of "authentic," living history is personified in the soldier who signifies the Military Nation.

While few could argue that the hillbilly is meant to be understood as a sincere representation, the power of the soldier as a character comes from his perceived authenticity. Unlike the historical re-enactors, the soldier derives authority from history, but is not tethered to it; he, like the militarized nation he represents, exists in every time and can come from any walk of life, adding to his influence. The audience's lived experience (past or present) as citizens in a nation at war and likely the friend or family

member of a serviceman or woman gives reality and immediacy to the concerns of the soldier. And in case that isn't obvious, Branson's insistence on formally recognizing veterans at nearly every attraction highlights their physical presence and serves to universalize, or at least familiarize, their experience to everyone.[212]

Through an array of attractions, Branson encourages American identity through identification with the soldier; his suffering, might, honor—and ultimately, his triumph. This seems especially effective in a time of long, drawn-out war—on two fronts—where world sentiment is negative, problems are legion, and victory is uncertain. So Branson encourages us to look back to the Good War, the one with a clear ending and a clearer victory, which, if it can't promise future victory, at least holds out hope for it. The connections between the soldier and the spectator are made explicit in a pageant celebrating American military history.

Veterans Memorial Museum

The annual Veteran's Week festivities were augmented in 2000 by the opening of the Veterans Memorial Museum, a privately-owned and –run institution dedicated to American veterans of the five major conflicts of the twentieth century: World Wars I and II, Korea, Vietnam, and those in the Persian Gulf area. The museum is the brainchild, and some might say the obsession, of sculptor Fred Hoppe, whose father, Fred, Sr., was a decorated World War II soldier. Hoppe is responsible for "designing, funding, and building" the museum, even using a homemade sawmill in his backyard to provide 70

[212] The soldier is a much more generic figure than the hillbilly. Although there are a number of studies on the changing image of the soldier in U.S. discourse, including John Bodnar's *Bonds of Affection: Americans Define Their Patriotism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) and particularly George Mosse's *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), tracking "the soldier" across decades is far beyond the scope of the present project.

tons of siding and lumber for its construction. The ten separate galleries display more than 2,000 items, most collected and curated by Hoppe himself.[213]

Other than the presence of a small fighter plane out front, there's nothing particularly warlike about the museum's timbered exterior. It might be mistaken for a hunting- and fishing-supply store. The inside, however, sends a clear message: Americans are warriors. After glancing at the first room's hodge-podge of items from different eras, visitors progress through the century and its attendant clashes in roughly chronological order. As a museum dedicated to veterans themselves, rather than the causes or timelines of war, its exhibits are based in material culture, and dozens of large, acrylic cases are filled with things that real people used, wore, made, or had, at a time of war.

Artifacts of World War I fill the second gallery, one wall of which is lined with tiny, sepia-toned photographs of doughboys, each one representing two Americans killed in action during the conflict. Nearly all of the uniforms and gear on display appear to be original, and most of them are identified as the property of a particular veteran. Typically, the belongings (uniforms, diaries, etc.) of a single person are displayed as a unit, with the name, rank, and hometown of the soldier who donated them displayed on computer-printed slips of paper. Frequently, an era-appropriate photograph of the individual and a brief story of his or her military service are included [Fig 2.3].

Galleries three and four are dedicated to veterans of World War II. All branches of the service, and many different jobs within them, from chaplains to nurses to pilots, are represented. Landmark moments in the fighting are given special attention, but they too

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[213] Fred Hoppe, "Museum History," accessed February 28, 2011, http://www.veteransmemorialbranson.com/history.html.

Fig 2.3. A display case devoted to the service and objects of Fred Hoppe, Sr., father of the museum's founder. Photo by the author.

are contextualized by the belongings of a particular veteran, who may have only a coincidental relationship to the event. A display on the Enola Gay's role in the bombing of Hiroshima is accompanied by the flight suit of Dewey Meeks, a B-29 pilot who did not fly the Enola Gay.

Scattered among cultural artifacts like medical supply kits and posters promoting war bonds, are self-contained historical displays devoted to various "special interest" topics, often indicating the presence of a racial or sexual Other: the internment of Japanese-Americans, women's labor contributions, or the Tuskegee Airmen. One case is dedicated to the World War II service of George Herbert Walker Bush, the youngest Navy pilot to serve in that conflict. There are no personal items, but a large bronze bust of Bush accompanies photographs and a replica of his Distinguished Flying Cross. The only other soldier to have an entire case devoted to him is Fred Hoppe, Sr. His uniform, weapons, and photographs are displayed next to a large oil painting depicting his heroic rescue of a fallen comrade.

The World War II theme continues into the fifth room, the central hall, where the museum's masterpiece is housed. *Fifty Soldiers Storming a Beach* is one of several of Hoppe's original sculptures on site, and demonstrates both skill and impressive scale. The monument depicts a column of fifty life-size bronze figures, lead by Fred Sr., racing to meet the enemy on the beaches of Normandy [Fig 2.4]. Its placard informs viewers that each of the figures was modeled on a real veteran: one from each state of the Union. Each individual in the seventy-foot-long statue is labeled with a name and a state identity. Included among them is a man identified as Bob Dole, of Kansas. The walls surrounding

Fig 2.4. Fred Hoppe, Jr.'s sculpture *Fifty Soldiers Storming a Beach*, led by the figure of his father. Photo by the author.

this memorial are papered with the names of the more than 400,000 American war dead.

Gallery six features "war trophies" claimed from German and Japanese soldiers, including uniforms, weapons and various accoutrements like a silver tea service reputedly the property of Eva Braun. Among these spoils of war is a small case devoted to the millions imprisoned and murdered in Nazi concentration camps. Unlike the rest of the costumes on display, the instantly recognizable striped uniform is given no provenance.

The following two rooms, about the Korean War ("The Forgotten War") and the "military action" in Vietnam are comparatively scanty, though both document the names of those who died while serving. Signs note that the fighting in Vietnam was politically divisive, but takes no position on the conflict beyond asserting that as a result, veterans were poorly treated upon their return home. A ninth gallery documents conflicts that don't fit neatly under the
rubric of war, but are linked by their connections to a current military hotspot: the Middle East. The Iranian hostage crisis of the 1970s, the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 in 1988, and Desert Shield and Desert Storm operations of the early 1990s, bring us up to the present day, and are mostly represented by photographs of fighter planes and arid landscapes.

The final room is centered not on any particular instance of armed conflict, but the likely outcome of that conflict: death. A large pine box of the sort used to send home a soldier's remains occupies the middle of the floor, and pictures of memorial sites and graveyards dotted with white crosses decorate the walls. To exit the museum, one must pass through a doorway over which hangs a sign reading "WE MUST NEVER FORGET

THAT MEN AND WOMEN HAVE DIED TO WIN THE FREEDOM THAT WE ENJOY TODAY!"

Military Heritage, not Military History

The Veterans Memorial Museum is exceptional in its focus on the individual soldier's experience. While this provides a valuable, "bottom-up" counterpart to the version of American history presented in most museums, it eliminates any grounds for understanding the conflicts that led so many to serve and die. Notably, there are no displays explaining either the causes or the outcomes of the wars. Visitors are meant primarily to connect emotionally to the personal heroism of those portrayed, without regard for the politics that those soldiers' sacrifices were intended to protect.

To rewrite war on an exclusively personal scale, individual experience must be foregrounded at any expense. So although items are carefully labeled, events are tied to names and faces regardless of historical accuracy. Dewey Meeks is not identified as the pilot of the Enola Gay, but the presentation of his uniform in the context of the bombing of Japan implies that he is, while granting an event of global significance a personal, distinctly American perspective. The Veterans Memorial Museum deems every soldier's wartime experience important, whatever it might have been. But if one service member can be so easily substituted for another, "individual experience" becomes nothing more than a hollow signifier, and soldiers intended to be portrayed as unique and precious are rendered as generic and replaceable as G.I. Joe.

The relaxed approach the museum takes toward presenting military history is paradoxical, since it relies on the materiality of its displays as proof of an authentic experience of service, suffering, or victory. A sign in the "trophy room" reads (in part):

"Artifacts of a repugnant nature are displayed for the sake of historical truth, and as tangible symbols of our triumph over evil."

The mixing of fact and fiction in the "purely" historical displays is seen again in the works of art found throughout the museum. *Fifty Soldiers Storming the Beach* claims authenticity on the grounds of its real faces and real names, but the statue is a fantasia on national unity through military service. The iconic World War II sculpture boasts the likeness of a soldier from each state, even though Alaska and Hawaii were not admitted to the union until well after the end of the war. Similarly, Kansan Bob Dole is shown "storming the beaches" of France, when he was actually stationed in Italy. For the Veterans Memorial Museum, historical truth is dispensable when historical fiction better serves to unite the nation. Likewise, a significant number of original paintings by James Dietz, an artist specializing in battle scenes, hang throughout the museum. Dietz represents himself as one who "labors to achieve that rare combination of historical fact and the adventure and color of fiction."[214]

The museum is the work of a reverent son, and its heavy focus on WWII is due in part to Fred Sr.'s service in that conflict. But as the largest war in recent memory, and as "The Good War," where our victory was certain and celebrated, World War II allows the clearest lines to be drawn between Good and Evil, Us and Them. To maintain that division, examples of error or confusion on behalf of the US government or its agents are omitted or downplayed. Despite its attention to individual soldiers, those who are famous for atrocities, like Vietnam's Lieutenant William Calley, are simply left out. One of the few displays that does acknowledge fault—a blurb about the internment of Japanese-

[214]"About James Dietz," accessed Feb 28, 2011, www.jamesdietz.com/bio.

Americans—couches its vague regret in passive language: “mistakes were made.” While the glory of individual soldiers is promoted (even at the expense of accuracy), their suffering and death also play a crucial role. The museum aims to “educate present and future generations of the sacrifices made by our veterans,” and the images and names of the dead, intended to show the scale of destruction, fill every room.[215] The final image in the museum makes the message explicit: their death means our freedom.

At the center of the story of the Veterans Memorial Museum is the figure of founder Fred Hoppe Jr., whose biographical information never mentions any military service, embodies the ideal soldier. He is a significant part of all the museum’s promotional materials, and including the story of his dedication to honoring veterans does two things. First, it casts Hoppe himself in the role of the soldier who suffers for a righteous cause. Having seen how vets were being shamefully neglected, Hoppe, the proud son of a war hero, took up the cause. After spending four fruitless years trying to raise money for his museum, growing concern with the death rates of veterans led Hoppe put his own money, time, and physical labor into the project, working “18-hour days, seven days a week, living up to his pledge to complete the project in just 10 months.”[216] The resulting museum stands as a tribute not only to his father and fellow vets, but to Hoppe himself, a victorious soldier in the battle to honor dying vets.

Secondly, by casting Hoppe as a soldier on a civilian battlefield, the museum opens the possibility for guests to perform as soldiers, regardless of their real-world relationship to the military. Our duty as visitors at the Veterans Memorial Museum is similar to Silver Dollar City; we are to look at and honor the past. Visitors serve as

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[215] “A Hero’s Legacy,” Veteran’s Memorial Museum brochure. Author’s collection.
[216] Fred Hoppe, “Museum History.”

witnesses to "the undeniable courage of those who stood strong in the face of the enemy, no matter what the battle."[217] Merely attending the museum is figured as a patriotic gesture; advertisements invite us to make a military gesture of respect: "salute all who have died in the name of freedom by paying a visit."[218] Consumption is another way of saluting the past, shared by the City and the Veterans Museum. At the end of our tour, freshly reminded of the large body count that ensures our way of life, we exit the museum through the gift shop, where snacks and drinks, pins and patches, and all sorts of military paraphernalia featuring the insignias of all branches of service can be purchased for our reverent enjoyment at home.

The Veterans Memorial Museum is not intended to teach us about global conflict, but through sights and sounds from the military past, about how to behave: like a patriotic soldier. Our job is not to learn or understand, but like Fred Hoppe Jr., to labor to remember the military past with awe and respect for the sacrifices of our fathers, literal or metaphorical. Hoppe declares, "I just want the American public to be as proud of our veterans as I am."[219]

The soldier appears in multiple attractions in Branson. At the Museum, guests are asked to steadfastly bear witness to and passively empathize with soldier's individual experience, but across town, a musical encourages direct identification with him.

Celebrate America!

The musical play *Celebrate America!* was written by a Kansas businessman and self-proclaimed "self-made-man" named Gene Bicknell, whose entrepreneurial flair—

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[217] Heather Berry, "Honoring our heros," [sic] *Rural Missouri* November 2002, Accessed February 28, 2011, http://www.ruralmissouri.org/02pages/02novVets.html.
[218] "A Hero's Legacy," Veteran's Memorial Museum brochure.
[219] Ibid.

he's self-published a book, *Never Fry Bacon in the Nude*—is a good match for Branson's do-it-yourself ethos. Written in response to the events of September 11, 2001, *Celebrate America!* was first presented in 2004 at Bicknell's nearly 3000-seat plantation-styled Mansion Theatre. Sold as "a Broadway-style musical," the pageant reads—and, yes, celebrates—American history primarily through its military engagements.

Audiences are prepared for a heritage display well before the curtain rises. The cavernous lobby of The Mansion houses several fully restored 1930s-era cars, a classic motorcycle, and a display of Victorian historical costumes. Advertisements for other shows, including Bicknell's life-of-Christ pageant *The Promise* and a solo tribute to/impersonation of mid-century slapstick comedian and clown Red Skelton are also prominently featured. Military costumes dating from World War I through Iraq occupy one corner, surrounded by photographs and stories of service members and veterans related to the cast and crew.

Performed seven times a week for more than five years, *Celebrate America!* is set in a small, Midwestern anytown. Like most other attractions in Branson, the show is introduced by a jovial emcee, an older man who reminds guests to visit the gift shop, café, and Mansion America's other shows. Before he leaves the stage, he declares—to hearty "Amen!"s from audience members—that "God and Country" are welcome on this stage.[220] Due to the relative obscurity of the show (which has subsequently closed), and the lack of an available script, a synopsis of some length is necessary.[221]

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[220] In addition, he talks about how the cast of *Celebrate America!* doubles as the cast for *The Promise*, a life-of-Jesus pageant, at eight o'clock.
[221] I attended Celebrate America! on September 3, 2008. My requests to The Mansion for a script were ignored.

The play itself begins with an image of a tattered American flag projected onto a large screen, and a male voice-over notes that the story is about the flag and its relationship to small town America, here a village called "Promise." In dumb show, a soldier dressed in camouflage fatigues says an emotional goodbye to his wife, their young daughter, and an older man, before marching resolutely off, presumably to war. The older man, who will be our raissoneur for the evening, turns to directly address the audience about the necessity of war and the role it plays in preserving America's freedoms.

The curtain finally opens, revealing a town square borrowed from a Thomas Kinkade painting[222], with a gazebo, a church, some sort of public house, and what looks like a private residence, against a projected background of lush green fields. Music swells, and several dozen citizens of Promise emerge, wearing contemporary red-white-and-blue clothing and singing an original song, simply called "America." This patriotic anthem includes a solicitation for members of the armed services, both veterans and those on active duty, to stand and be recognized in turn: Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force, and the Coast Guard.[223]

After this initial salute to service members, the audience is finally ushered into the narrative. The young daughter of our soldier, little Abigail Appleberry, is troubled that her father has gone to war. In order to help her understand where he's going and for what,

[222] Kinkade, known as "The Painter of Light,"™ specializes in images of cozy cottages and idyllic villages nestled in pastoral landscapes. His skills as a painter are adequate, but his genius is in marketing, and he earns millions for prints of his work, which are mass-produced and sold in "Signature Galleries" across the country. There is one such showroom in Branson. Representative images of his work can be found at www.thomaskinkade.com.

[223] Although the audience was small on the day I attended, nearly half of the men, and a percentage of the women, rose at some point to accept the applause of their peers.

her Grandpa ushers her—and the audience—through a series of scenes explaining the crucial role of war across more than two hundred years of American history.

Grandpa Appleberry begins his tale in the colonial era. We are introduced to Ben Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and George Washington, who discuss the injustices they face at the hands of King George III. In "We Hold These Truths," which sounds like a patter song if it were written by Handel, the Founding Fathers lay out their case against England and construct the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution, frequently repeating the phrase "and provide for the common defense" [Fig 2.5]. During the song, the rear projection screen is filled with footage of soldiers marching, with details of rifles, drums and boots, and John Trumbull's famous painting, *Declaration of Independenc*e, which hangs in the rotunda of the U. S. Capitol building.

Having painlessly won the Revolutionary war, we cut to the frontier, where the citizens of Promise sing a medley of traditional songs, hymns and original tunes, culminating with "When Johnny Comes Marching Home" as photographs of Union and Confederate soldiers float and zoom across the screen in the background in a style familiar from the documentary features of Ken Burns. This is followed by a scene between a Confederate soldier and two Union fighters. Cut off from their regiments, they draw guns on each other, but gradually their need for companionship overcomes their wariness. They share a rough campfire meal together, during which they realize they have much in common, including traditional foods, love of home and family, and a profound sense of patriotism (albeit to different states). They part ways, as the chorus joins in a rousing verse of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," ending, as do many of the

Fig 2.5. Franklin, Washington and Jefferson contemplate the birth of a nation in *Celebrate America!* Part of Trumbull's *Declaration of Independence* can be seen at the top right. Photo by the author.

songs, with the company at the edge of the apron, belting full-front, into the audience.

The audience is given a respite from war with the expansion of the frontier and the building of the transcontinental railroad. A group of pickaxe-wielding men sing "16 Tons" and "Drill Ye Tarriers Drill," before being joined by little Abigail for a somewhat incongruous rendition of Patsy Montana's "I Want to be a Cowboy's Sweetheart." The act ends with an extended saloon scene, with carousing, can-can dancers, and comic shenanigans.

Act Two opens at the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis. As several hootchy-kootchy girls undulate for the delightfully scandalized crowds, Grandpa's voiceover warns of the challenges that lay ahead for the country, but then assures us that our forebears were not afraid to meet them. Voiceovers become more prominent in the second half of the show, and the patriotic messages become even more explicit. America is presented as the superlative imagined nation: "as much an idea as a place."

Plains Indians, briefly shown on the screen behind the singing railroad workers, now reappear, and Grandpa regretfully admits that the United States' treatment of its Native Americans was less than fair. He also makes the briefest of references to the nation's legacy of slavery, but this merely serves as an entrée to the topic of America's heritage as a nation of immigrants. The scene shifts to the deck of a rag ship entering New York Harbor. This number, identified in the program as an "Immigrant Hoedown," features a dozen or more individuals who appear to be variously Irish or Eastern European, distinguishable by the presence or absence of argyle socks. Clearly delighted to be reaching their destination, they celebrate with a jolly step dance. Grandpa

Appleberry informs Abigail that "immigrants have made the US stronger," as well as a culturally richer place.

Leaping ahead to World War I, we meet Abigail's great grandfather Abner, a fast-talking Southern doughboy far from home. In the barracks, he reads a letter full of puns and corny humor—dusty jokes that sound straight out of a Branson variety show—to his three companions. Fortified by humor and thoughts of home, the four march off singing "Over There." With victory thus assured, we zoom into the 1920s, and the full cast, in brightly colored costumes, presents a spirited Charleston. Grandpa notes that this era was full of change, both exciting and disorienting, even in a little town like Promise. The idea is clear: change is the opposite of comfort. This dichotomy is accentuated by the next event: the Wall Street crash of 1929. Projections of mobsters, Lucky Lindy, and It Girls are replaced with pictures of bread lines and signs reading "no men wanted." A man in a bowler hat and ragged suit sings "Nothin'," an obvious pastiche of Yip Harburg's "Brother Can You Spare a Dime?," famous for its references to the disenfranchisement of men who labored to build railroads and great cities, and fought and died in the trenches of Europe.

The voice of Will Rogers, broadcasting live from Grand Central Station on Armed Forces Radio, informs us we have reached the 1940s. He pokes fun at the corruption and venality of government before introducing the Andrews Sisters, who perform "Chattanooga Choo Choo," only to be interrupted by a newsreel-style montage and voiceover about the attack on Pearl Harbor and the nation's subsequent entry into World War II. American valor in the face of dire threat is lauded, and personal sacrifice and familial separation are lamented in voiceover: even when faced with great difficulty,

"we have always done the right thing." Two small set pieces representing a bombed-out European city (or a set piece from *White Christmas*), and a little yellow house in Promise are rolled on, and a GI writes a letter home while singing the lyrics to "I'll Be Home for Christmas," which his beloved tearfully reads. The tempo picks up and the location changes again, to a large airplane hangar where groups of Rosie the Riveters and Girls He Left Behind, eventually joined by triumphant sailors and soldiers, hurtle through an up-tempo medley of Glenn Miller numbers including "In the Mood" and "Sing Sing Sing" [Fig 2.6]. This section is probably the single longest segment of the pageant, and the most professional in execution. A full fifteen minutes of ebullient song and dance by the full company flatters "the Greatest Generation" (who still have a considerable presence in Branson audiences) and emphasizes the message that war brings out the best in Americans: we fight, we win, and we have fun doing it.

With only half an hour left in the show and more than half a century to cover, audiences are treated to the "Last 50 Years Media Montage." Each decade is given representative political images and soundtracks in rapid succession. The 1950s look like the Korean War and sound like classic "oldies" music; the '60s, Kennedy, the space race, and surf rock; the '70s are Nixon, Vietnam and disco; the'80s Reagan, the Challenger disaster, and the rock ballad "Missing You;" and lastly, the '90s are Desert Storm and Latin-inflected pop of Ricky Martin. The 2000s are encapsulated in one day: September 11. Footage rolls of planes exploding into fireballs and buildings collapsing, and iconic images of the calamity—a fireman covered in dust, a flag raised in front of skeletal ruins—flash before our eyes.

Fig 2.6. A World War Two-era dance medley makes up the largest single section of *Celebrate America!* Photo by the author.

This is immediately followed by a scene set in front of the Vietnam War Memorial, where the ghost of a soldier watches as two of his surviving war buddies search for his name on the Wall. Marked by the experience and still upset by loss, the two living men struggle with guilt and each other. The dead man speaks, reminding them that death does not mean absence, and that their service was not in vain. The men embrace as brothers-in-arms, soothed by these words from beyond the grave. Then the "Finale Spectacular" begins. In ones and twos, individuals dressed in military costumes representing conflicts from the Revolutionary War up through the current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, march in to martial music and take their places in front of an enormous image of the statue of Abraham Lincoln, the Great Emancipator.

With the help of her Grandpa, Abigail has learned how important her daddy's job as a soldier is, and that, like all soldiers, he is a hero. The two end their journey through the military past and return to the little town of Promise, where the citizens have gathered in the town square for a Fourth of July celebration. Together, they sing two original anthems: "I Wouldn't Trade America," and "Stand and Be Proud." During these songs, Abigail's father returns from his tour of duty, and the Appleberry family is joyfully united, amidst tears and hugs, with their soldier. The swift curtain call was vigorously applauded, and the event ended with a rousing chorus of "God Bless America," with both actors and audience members taking part.

The Distory of Heritage

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls the type of heritage display presented in *Celebrate America!* "Distory"; a Disney-style retelling of "history as it should have

happened—the best, only the best, nothing but the best."[224] If we accept this definition, then the ideas that American history is best understood as a history of its armed conflicts, and that those conflicts are the "best" and most valuable part of its heritage, become particularly striking. In Branson, this is evidenced by the fact that the essence of the production is set in historical moments, mostly during periods of war. The emcee, the opening voice-over, and the fictional world of Promise, Abigail, and Grandpa Appleberry are merely a series of frames for a procession of historical dioramas not much more realistic than those seen in Fire in the Hole. Grandpa and Abigail, who are able to move freely between times and places and interact with the historical characters, serve a choral function: Grandpa forwards the action with his explanatory remarks, and Abigail, who listens dutifully to her Grandpa's martial tale, is an audience surrogate. The real messages are found in the skits themselves.

The first message is that war is personal. The "history" presented in *Celebrate America!*'s internal scenes is focused not on matters of geopolitical concern, but on a series of deeply felt, if utterly nonspecific personal moments. These serve to render complex events comprehensible to any audience member. The second message is that war is both good and necessary: vague, feel-good sentiments about honor, loyalty, and the nobility of personal sacrifice as distinctly American traits echo throughout the production. The disproportionate focus on World War II as the Good War seen in the Veterans Memorial Museum is repeated here, but augmented with song and dance: the Good War was a Good Time. The third is that war is a manly endeavor. The military is defined as a brotherhood of men, united across time and across different branches of the

[224] Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*, 173, 175.

service. Military masculinity stands in sharp contrast to the feminized homeland, symbolized not only by the land, flag, and the Statue of Liberty (all highlighted and explicitly referred to with feminine pronouns), but also represented by female children like Abigail, and the sisters, mothers, wives, and sweethearts left at home.

Celebrate America! does portray women in military uniform, but female presence is more often tied to service and suffering on the home front, where they provide material support as war workers and emotional support in the form of American culture: song and dance, food, and the promise of love and sex. Though women are more likely to be considered "part of heritage, not sharers in it,"[225] sacrifice—variously personal, professional, or economic—on behalf of the nation is open to, indeed, required of, all citizens. In fact, as seen in the Immigrant Hoedown, to sacrifice for the ideals of America is enough to make one American. The show takes its obsession with the connection between sacrifice and patriotism even further. Whether active or passive, sought out or imposed upon, all sacrifice, like that suffered by new immigrants, or during the Depression years, is a matter of national service. Sacrifice, whatever form it takes, is what makes one an honorary soldier and a true patriot: an American hero.

Of course, writing Distory requires that much must be omitted. Although *Celebrate America!* claims to be "about 232 years of freedom," and historical events provide the framework for the production, specificity in dating or locating the action is spurned. The generally forward-moving chronology keeps audiences oriented, and focusing on dates too closely is likely to result in confusion: why are the Founding Fathers drafting the Preamble to the Constitution (1778) in song before the Declaration of

[225] Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade*, 48.

Independence is signed (1776)? Why are nineteenth-century railroad workers singing a country song from 1935? The general idea of "pastness" tracked along a vaguely linear path is sufficient.

The focus on the personal results in a Distory almost completely detached from geopolitics. This is a world where causes and effects of national conflict are largely ignored, and military leaders other than briefly pictured, carefully selected Commanders-in-Chief are unimportant.[226] Even enemies are mostly overlooked: among the many archival images that float across the audiences' view, no fascists, Nazis, Japanese, or shadowy Middle Easterners appear. The United States fights *for* something (freedom, equality), not *against* anyone. For all of its focus on the righteousness and inevitability of war, there is really almost no conflict in the production. *Celebrate America!* is better understood as in an epic, rather than dramatic display.[227]

Another noteworthy omission is an image of a racially diverse nation. The cast of *Celebrate America!* is entirely white, and the States' long and contentious past of racial discrimination is only suggested. These internal disputes are not even permitted to be addressed in their appropriate fictional time-slots: references to the mass displacement of Native Americans and centuries of African-American slavery are only mentioned once the narrative reaches the early twentieth century, presumably well after the worst conflicts have receded safely into the distance. There is no idea of "my country, right or wrong"—such a thing is inconceivable if wrongs are simply erased—but once again an

[226] The inclusion of Kennedy, not Johnson, and Nixon, not Ford or Carter, to represent their respective decades, and two-term Reagan to represent the 1980s but the absenting of two-term Clinton in the 1990s evinces the sort of Distoric, mostly conservative, highlights-reel image of the nation *Celebrate America!* seeks to uphold.
[227] In its erasure of antagonists, *Celebrate America!* is significantly different than Fire in the Hole, which foregrounds the activities of the Bald Knobbers.

Us-Them dynamic, with the intent of uniting a homogenized “us” against a vaguely threatening “them.”

With war comes the threat of physical anguish and death, but the production manages to ameliorate even that. By ignoring the real conflicts and messy realities of battle, enemies dissolve into disembodied forces of Evil. Deprived of fleshy reality, their casualties cease to exist, rendering war virtually guilt-free. But death is inevitable, even though it is held safely at arms length, where it serves only to raise the emotional stakes in the theatre of war. The specter of death is only summoned once, near the end of the show, with the literal ghost of a soldier. The nameless Everyspirit invokes death, only to reassure us that it is not a permanent condition; those who are gone not only have given their lives for just causes, but, as long as we remember and honor their legacies, they aren’t really dead at all. This is the very message that all heritage displays convey: the act of remembering keeps things, whether people or traditions, alive. Death can be overcome through the power of our own memories. But even this reassuring note is too somber to end on, so the shadow of death is pushed aside completely for a triumphant finish with the return of the Soldier returning, safe and sound, to Promise.

This happy ending is only possible because we fight, and, to fight, America needs soldiers like those presented in the production. Although the Soldier is arguably the central figure in *Celebrate America!*, he is only a placeholder: nameless, rank-less, and almost entirely offstage. The soldier is lionized as the symbolic ur-citizen, but his avatar, represented by Abigail’s father, must be absent in order to make room for others to take on the role. Immediately after his exit, mere minutes into the production, the invitation to audience members to identify themselves as soldiers is issued, first with the formal

recognition of current and former service members in the audience, then expanding to include larger and ever more varied segments of the audience, both the real one in the auditorium and the imagined one beyond its walls. Through sacrifice, *all* Americans serve their country. All are soldiers to the national cause, whether they serve on a foreign battlefield or while vacationing on the home front. *Celebrate America!* is a kind of affective draft: we are all made into (or recognized as) citizen-soldiers bound to serve our country, and our enlistment is sealed with a patriotic sing-along, hands over our hearts. To be American is not to be free from the horrors of war; to make war—literal or symbolic—is to be free.[228]

Though a bit more displaced and fantastic, Dolly Parton's Dixie Stampede is another heritage spectacle that relies on the trope of the Soldier and encourages identification with him. *Celebrate America!* goes to great lengths to liken patriotic citizens to soldiers, but the Dixie Stampede ups the ante through an atmosphere of audience participation, recruiting audiences to physically take on the role of the soldier-patriot.

Dolly Parton's Dixie Stampede

The Dixie Stampede Arena is found on "the Strip," in the heart of Branson. This location is only one of three locations across the nation, all below the Mason-Dixon line; the other two are located in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, and Myrtle Beach, South

[228] Audiences at *Celebrate America!*, like audiences at most Branson theatres, are made up almost exclusively of U. S. citizens. A few exceptions exist; they will be noted in Chapter 4. Regardless, *Celebrate America!* (understandably) assumes that its audience are exclusively "American," and treats them that way.

Carolina.[229] Started in Pigeon Forge, Parton's hometown and the site of Dollywood, a heritage-themed park similar to Silver Dollar City, the Dixie Stampede franchise is now owned and operated by Herschend Family Entertainment.[230]

The Dixie Stampede is marketed as a "dinner attraction," and "the most fun place to eat!" in Branson. For around $40 per adult, audiences are served a multi-course meal including a cream-based soup, roast chicken and barbecued pork, corn on the cob, baked potato, biscuit, and a dessert pastry, to be eaten without benefit of utensils (the soup is served in a handled ramekin), and presented with a Civil War-themed games and skits featuring live animals.

Both the name and the settings, inside and out, imply a Southern—and, in light of the era represented, a Confederate—consciousness. From the outside, the theatre resembles a grand plantation house surrounded by wholesome, red-and-white, barn-like structures. This may simply reflect Parton's own Tennessee roots, but the "south" being conjured invokes a bloody era in American history that seems at odds with the a rose-tinted atmosphere of bucolic ease.

The Pageant

After some vaudevillian pre-show entertainment in the lofty, two-level "carriage house," the audience is herded into a large, rather damp performance space. Surrounding

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[229] A fourth location near Orlando, Florida, closed suddenly in early 2008 after a real estate deal. Christopher Boyd, "Orlando Premium Outlets' owner buys Dixie Stampede" *The Orlando Sentinal*, January 9, 2008, http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2008-01-09/business/dixie09_1_orlando-premium-chelsea-property-group-premium-outlets.

[230] Among its attractions, Dollywood includes an indoor coaster called Blazing Fury, promoted as "an out-of-control fire is just minutes away from engulfing this 1880s town. If you choose to ride, you're instantly recruited to battle this mighty blaze." Contrast this with Fire in the Hole, where guests are presented at best as passive witnesses to the destruction of Marmaros, and at worst, as the arsonists themselves. "Blazing Fury," accessed Feb 28, 2011, http://www.dollywood.com/ride-q6-Blazing_Fury.aspx.

all but one end of the U-shaped stadium are six rather steeply raked levels of tables facing the carefully groomed dirt floor arena. More than one thousand patrons at a time can enjoy dinner with a clear view of the proceedings. Once seated, the audience is informed that half of the auditorium (house left) is considered "the North," and the other half is "the South." Each side is attended to by a phalanx of servers dressed in Civil War-era military costumes: the North in Union blue, the South in Confederate grey.[231]

The show begins when Dolly Parton appears on screen to welcome us to the Dixie Stampede for a celebration of American pride and shared cultural heritage. Music swells and the curtains at the far end of the arena open, revealing a pillared plantation façade not unlike the one through which the audience entered. Our emcee appears on horseback to quickly establish the frame for the production. He references the enmity between the Union and Confederacy, but glosses over the details, instead emphasizing the ongoing rivalry which today's events will conveniently settle, once and for all. The emcee for the evening encourages both sides to take an active role in the proceedings by cheering our team with Yankee cries or Rebel yells, and by mocking our opponents: he suggests insults like "flat-headed Southerners" or "walrus-faced Northerners." He tests each side in turn—the "Southerners" were far louder at the production I attended—and then explicitly instructs the entire group to holler, stamp, clap, and generally make as much of a ruckus as possible whenever they hear the keyword "stampede." Having set up the guidelines for participation, the emcee then introduces the teams with great fanfare: vigorous young people in color-coded military regalia thunder in on their beautiful

[231] I attended the Dixie Stampede on November 15, 2007. I bought my ticket over the internet, and was (I assume randomly) assigned to the "North" team. Unlike most attractions in Branson, the Dixie Stampede forbids the taking of photographs.

horses, each performing a flourish as their names are called. They perform some simple stunts, taking their horses through various figures on the floor, then race off, trailing "Dixie Stampede" banners behind them.

The first half of the performance, while the audience is focused on their meal, is less interactive and more strictly spectacular. Scenes portray pioneers in covered wagons settling the West, prosperous citizens enjoying the pleasures of a town picnic, and uniformed soldiers marching and drilling, are accompanied by distinctly American songs like "Buffalo Gals." The highlight of this portion of the program brings a platform, decorated like a summer pavilion, down from the center of the ceiling, bearing a several hoop-skirted, parasol-toting belles who dance and flirt with the handsome scion of a plantation family.[232]

These heavily amplified and clearly lip-synched episodes are intermingled with visits from the mounted cast members, who demonstrate trick riding and dressage skills, and broad comic business courtesy of the local yokel. "Skeeter" is a self-proclaimed hillbilly and typical Branson clown, with loud clothes and a thick drawl. His comic antics, heavily reliant on puns and pratfalls, recur throughout the performance, often in counterpoint to the emcee, creating the classic comedy duo discussed in the previous chapter. This pair is responsible for physically drawing the audience into the action, which begins about halfway through the production.

The contest between North and South takes over the second half of the Stampede, and is comprised of ten matches: half are competitions between the riders and their array

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[232] There is some variation in the scenes and games presented at the different locations. I have heard of, but not personally witnessed, a "salute" to Native Americans, miniature horse races, and an aerial act between a man on horseback and woman suspended from above. Clips of a number of these scenes can be viewed on YouTube.

of animals, and half are played by audience members, as representatives of their respective factions. Regardless of who is competing, the emcee explains the rules of the competition, while Skeeter provides comic business and color commentary. The games themselves are ridiculous variations of carnival attractions: children are charged with chasing chickens across a finish line, married couples ride hobbyhorses through a simple obstacle course, and pairs of men are brought down to throw toilet seats like horseshoes. All audience members who compete are given commemorative Dixie Stampede medals. The games between the riders are mostly races, but the inclusion of saddled ostriches and piglets prevents monotony. At the end of each match, a winner is announced, the audience is encouraged to show their appreciation, and an attractive young woman raises a brightly colored flag on the winner's side of the arena.

Careful attention to the scoring process reveals that the rounds executed by the riders are played to balance out the results of the games of chance—those played by audience members and unescorted animals—and thus keep the score even. At the end of the ten matches, the emcee pauses to note that the valiant efforts of the teams have resulted in a tie, which must be broken with one final game, to be played by the entire audience. Each row on both sides is presented with five flags: again color-coded blue or grey, but all emblazoned with the Dixie Stampede logo. Audiences must pass each flag down their row in turn, ensuring that each member of their team touches the flag as it passes. The first team to move all of their flags from one end to the other will be declared the winner of the competition.

Regardless of the outcome, the ending is the same. The riders of the winning team circle the arena to howls of acclaim, but the emcee lauds all the players. Parton's image

returns to the large screen with an important message of unity. She congratulates the winners, but reminds us all that whoever won, "north or south, east or west, *WE* are the United States of America." This pronouncement is followed by an original patriotic number, "Color Me America," with the full cast, which has replaced their team-specific costumes with matching red-white-and-blue regalia and enormous American flags. The emcee calls out, "*Are you proud to be an American?*" and is answered with whoops and cheers. Servers return to shake hands with every single member of their team—their country—and a pyrotechnic display closes the production on a note of exuberant national feeling.

The version of the Stampede offered during the holidays serves as proof of the inherent emptiness of the display, but also of the importance of its message.[233] The Christmas season begins in late October and extends through the end of the calendar year. Rather than simply decorating the theatre for the holidays and continuing as before, or devising a program that replaces the pugnacious theme with a peaceful one, The Dixie Stampede transforms its soldiers (both those serving the meal and those competing on horseback) into elves. The emcee informs us of a new reason for the rivalry: after Santa Claus established a workshop at the South Pole, a feud broke out between the elves as to who makes the best toys. Union blue is swapped with North Pole green, and Confederate Grey is traded in for South Pole red.

Scenes of patriotic picnics and antebellum gentility and are replaced with

[233] Another similar attraction is the Medieval Times Dinner and Tournament, a show which uses this same model, but with a misty Arthurian setting, complete with jousting and sword fights. See http://www.medievaltimes.com/.

Dickensian characters singing carols and a romantic skating duet on an artificial ice rink, and the climactic cotillion number makes way for an explicitly religious moment. The voice of the late Don LaFontaine, recognizable from his work on movie trailers, intones the Christmas story as told in the Gospel of Matthew, while from the ceiling, a tableau of the Holy Family descends. A shepherd drives sheep and goats to the scene, wise men enter on camels, and an angel descends from above to complete the living nativity.

The second half of the show remains mostly unchanged. The final, tie-breaking game is played with large plastic candy canes, rather than flags, but the ending message of harmony and fellowship (here seasonally- and religiously-inflected) is the same. The teams are united in song, and the affair is capped off with the appearance of Santa Claus and gently falling snow.

War Games

The trope of competition is a device to tie the Stampede's variety of Buffalo Bill-style tricks and comic antics together, but any number of narratives could have been selected (as attested to by the Christmas version). The Civil War is chosen for a reason; not only to reflect an easily recognizable era of historical importance, but to emphasize national harmony in the present day.

However, the message of unity can only be achieved if the internal division is first established, which the Dixie Stampede endeavors to accomplish even before the action begins. Promotional materials ranging from brochures to television advertisements make the theme explicit not only through words, but through colors, symbols, and regional descriptions ("southern pride!") that any American citizen can understand. The divisions made clear, audiences are invited to identify with one side or the other before setting foot

in the theatre. Knowing they must choose the Union or the Confederacy, advance ticket-buyers are asked which team they prefer to root for.[234]

The Dixie Stampede goes to remarkable lengths to exploit the narrative that the Civil War provides, but then tries even harder to root out those elements that distinguish it from any other conflict, real or fictional. The most obvious omission is about the cause of the war. There are no references to slavery or circum-Atlantic commerce; even the soft-peddle term "states' rights" is ignored. This is permissible only because the existence of African Americans is complete erased.[235] By reimagining the South (and later in the program, the Mythic West) as a land of romance and high-stepping jamborees populated entirely by people of European descent, the Dixie Stampede summons History only to eviscerate it, placing the taxidermied falseness of heritage in its place.

Even the Stampede itself is given a fabricated history. In the gift shop, guests can learn how, in 1879, an East Tennessee boy named Lee Parton won a horse race against a skilled carriage maker and previously unsurpassed Missouri horseman named Sam Mott, who invited all comers to "Great Mott's Challenge." While this might have engendered bad blood, tempers were snuffed and harmony reestablished by Mott's marriage to Parton's daughter Dixie Lee. Mott renamed the race in his bride's honor, and the legacy of Dixie Stampede, a resolution of tensions between the southern Partons and the northern Motts, was thus handed down through the generations to Dolly Parton herself.[236]

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[234] Walk-up customers may also be asked, but the necessity of filling the house (and keeping the sides roughly balanced, numerically) means that not everyone is given her preference.

[235] The company in Branson was racially homogeneous, although some brochures do include one or two non-white faces among the cast.

[236] Here Missouri is figured as a "northern" state, despite its entry into the Union as a slave slate under the Missouri Compromise of 1820. The story of Great Mott's

Parton's persona is crucial to the success of the Dixie Stampede. An unmistakably "American" entertainer with a geographically specific, rags-to-riches personal story, Parton appeals to a wide array of people with her pop-country hits. Her friendly, folksy, distinctly southern identity is a thematic fit for the South, as represented in the Stampede. Indeed, she seems to personify the kind of representation that goes on in heritage attractions. As famous for the obvious, joyous fakery of her physical appearance as for her considerable skills as a singer and songwriter, she's the perfect representative for this sort of portrayal, and her imprimatur gives us permission—even asks us—to play along with this fun-house distortion of a troubling chapter of American history.

The story of the Civil War is important to establishing the framework that drives the Dixie Stampede, but adherence to any particular narrative thread is even less important than it is in *Celebrate America!*, which symbolically made its audience into soldiers by asking them to identify as such. Dolly Parton's Dixie Stampede uses spectacle and affect to compel its audience to physically behave and compete as soldiers for the North or South cause. This starts immediately, with the division into teams and the emcee's repeated encouragements to cheer and boo. This level of engagement is comparatively undemanding, but it establishes an active role for the audience, which ramps up as the show continues.

Challenge is a fabrication. Although Parton's father was known as Lee Parton, he was born in 1921, decades after the purported race. There is no "Dixie" in her family tree, and no mention of "Sam Mott" or a horserace in either her autobiography, *My Life and Other Unfinished Business* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995) or Stephen Miller's more recent biography *Smart Blonde* (New York: Omnibus Press, 2008).

The transition from spectator to actor (or "spectactor," to borrow Boal's term[237]), begins mid-way through the first half of the program. Skeeter singles out a volunteer, typically a pre-adolescent girl, to help him play a shell-game-like trick on the emcee. He boasts that he can magically move the girl from one place to another in the arena, and bets the emcee he will not be able to correctly guess from which barrel or box the girl will appear. The emcee accepts the bet. Skeeter hides the girl in one barrel, invokes some mountain "hoodoo," and invites the emcee to identify the child's location. As expected, the incredulous emcee repeatedly chooses the wrong place as the girl is revealed first in one spot, then another. This first direct interaction is still relatively passive on the part of the audience—the girl is "the pea" in this shell-game, not the hustler or the mark—but those watching are moved inexorably into the role of historical actor.

Once competition becomes the primary focus, audience members are "drafted" (with varying degrees of enthusiasm) to compete against each other directly. Bringing the audience members into the ring to fight for their side elevates them from invested spectators or acted-upon instruments to dynamic participants in the "war." Because the audience-participation segments can't be rigged—lest they give away the game to so many participants—it is those games that determine the dramaturgy of the staged competitions, to ensure the games end in a tie. So not only are spectators transformed into combatants, they also become responsible for the shape, if not the result, of the war being played at.

[237] I use the term loosely, to imply that guests have some effect on the outcome of the performance. I do not intend this as a political designation; spectators at the Dixie Stampede are not rehearsing an uprising against their oppressors.

Having reached a tie, the action is briefly suspended to laud the valiant and honorable efforts of each team, while simultaneously coaching each side into a jingoistic frenzy for the final match, the battle royal. The tie-breaking game is determined entirely by the audience, and rightfully, the entire audience is involved. This round determines the ultimate winner, but more importantly—as promised by the emcee at the top of the show—*ends the rivalry* once and for all.

Whichever side prevails, it *is* ended, always the same way: *America* wins. The lines that so clearly delineated the differences between North and South are rapidly dissolved to focus on the *United* States of America. Early in the competition, each child who participated in the chicken chasing contest is honored with a medal, regardless of individual performance. And no matter who manages to pass their flags faster, all are honored, first by being assured of their value and equality before the final game, and by celebrating their true identity as Americans after.

The "history" of the Stampede is told as a lively contest between two worthy sides divided by geography, which are then united through marriage into a peaceful, loving, and fruitful whole. Likewise, the Civil War: a hard-fought competition between valiant competitors is resolved as the sides are "married" under the national banner. And just so the audience: their "fun and friendly rivalry," neatly settled in under two hours, is capped off with an over-the-top patriotic display. No bitterness remains; there is no shame in having lost, for the last moment symbolically unites the crowd as part of the one nation, under God—or Santa Claus.

This story matters enough to repeatedly re-enact, but the details of history are less important than the lessons of heritage. By making its audience historical actors in a

heritage pageant of America's past, the Dixie Stampede repeatedly attempts to repair our fractured national past (and perhaps even our fractured present), while allowing audience members to maintain their regional affiliations after they leave the theatre. The frame is an obvious fake—in this war pageant suffering and death are never mentioned—but the emotional experiences and the lessons they impart are real. What matters is that we pay homage to the past and cheer for our team, the United States of America.

Conclusion

Heritage is performed across many venues in Branson to audiences eager to connect with the American past. But that past is constantly being re-historicized through the lens of the present, unavoidably reflecting the biases of the creators and intentionally serving the purposes of those at whom it is directed. Together, producers and consumers create the story of their own heritage by choosing what to feature, and what to ignore. The image of "American heritage" as presented in Branson is remarkably consistent, but the means by which it is communicated differ.

The biggest disparity is in the varying proportions of patent nonsense and documentable reality from which heritage draws. Silver Dollar City's Fire in the Hole is an outright fantasy, while just yards away, its resident artisans manufacture usable items in full view of appreciative eyes. Many attractions fall somewhere in the middle: Dolly Parton's Dixie Stampede uses the framework of American history as a pretense for a Wild West show, and *Celebrate America!* employs a highly selective version of the recognizable past to add clout to its one-sided view of the United States' martial legacy. The Veterans Memorial Museum, full of arguably authentic military paraphernalia, presents them in a fashion that undermines their authority. With this heterogeneous mix

come various emotional tones, ranging from farcical to somber, occasionally within the bounds of a single attraction.

The other significant variable is the role assigned to the audience. Whether by passively observing a "historistic" experience, actively identifying with the past in the present moment, or affecting the outcome of the past in a re-written history, consumers play a crucial role. In every case, they are to serve as witnesses to the nation's heritage, whether it is made up of criminals, skilled craftsmen, sacrificial lambs, war heroes, or old-fashioned good sports.

Despite their differences, all of these spectacles are united by their desire to remember the past in a particular, and particularly distorted, fashion. By using historical events as the mold around which they cast their displays, then filling the hollow shell with the slanted perspective of heritage, they are able to erase nuances and paper over difficulties that reveal internal conflicts both in the past and the present.

Heritage's dehistoricization simplifies conflicts into Us vs. Them, where "we" always triumph, even if that means that both sides win. Someone must prevail, but like the Baldknobbers and the citizens of Marmaros at Fire in the Hole, and the Union and Confederate soldiers of the Dixie Stampede, the stakes of losing are erased, because "us" and "them" are revealed to be "we the people." It doesn't really matter who wins, because the story is endlessly repeated, and the game itself is simply a way practice war—not military skills, but a jingoistic perspective suited to citizens of a nation at war. What one fights for matters less that how one fights—with honor, vigor, etc—and *that* one fights. Fighting, suffering, and dying are all important, although death plays many

roles: The Veterans Memorial Museum relies on the specter of death for its power, *Celebrate America!* defeats it through memory, and the Dixie Stampede erases it entirely.

The events and archetypes of World War II continue to heavily shape many of the narratives, even as (or particularly because?) veterans of that conflict are dying out, and veterans from more recent battles are becoming more common. It is unclear how this will change the martial display in Branson in years to come, but the concern for and identification with the blank soldier-citizen will likely allow military pride and nationalism to continue unabated.

Just as the hillbilly serves as a figure of rurality to which audiences are coached to aspire though identification, imitation and consumption, "the soldier-patriot," drawn from American history, is the role that audiences are urged—through methods subtle and not-so—to take on. In contrast to the comic hyperbole of the hillbilly, the soldier is generalized; rendered so bland that spectators may easily project themselves onto him and share in his past victories, which offer a reassuring assessment of present and the promise of a triumphant future. Branson's focus on heritage that supports a seductively simplified worldview of a brave, culturally rich, and—most importantly—united nation.

CHAPTER THREE:

Performing American Faith: Performing the Evangelist

"Where else does every venue of live entertainment contain a Gospel segment, often even a Christian testimony and a short Gospel message, whether it be a show of music, comedy, magic or dance?"

Richard Freihofer[238]

From History Tourism to Religious Tourism

Branson's reliance on heritage makes even more sense when seen side by side with its focus on religion. As Mircea Eliade claimed half a century ago, these two are frequent companions, since "*by its very nature sacred time is reversible* in the sense that, properly speaking, it is *a primordial mythical time made present*."[239] And, after all, heritage functions in much the same way as religion: on faith. Both rely on creative, usually highly repetitive acts, with the goal of allying a group and eliciting—some might say coercing—certain behaviors that "[*reactualize*] the [mythical/religious] event" for those who observe.[240] Lowenthal argues that heritage can even serve as a replacement for loss of religion, since both religion and heritage rely on "revealed faith rather than rational proof," but in Branson, the two are constant companions.[241]

Separating heritage- and religiously-based elements in Branson's spectacles isn't a straightforward matter. Once could easily scrutinize the religious elements of the attractions in the preceding chapter, and the historical subtexts in the upcoming chapter

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[238] Richard Freihofer, "Message to Church Leaders: Fun! Fellowship! Outreach!," Branson Church Getaway Planner, accessed February 28, 2011, http://www.bransonchurchgroups .com/Branson/Coupons_408/Free_Travel_Guide.pdf.
[239] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: the Nature of Religion.* Trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, 1987), 68.
[240] Ibid., 81. Italics in original.
[241] David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 2.

are irrefutable. Nonetheless, looking specifically at the faith-based aspects of performance in Branson is crucial to understanding its appeal for certain populations.

This chapter will treat the larger religious environment of the nation, Branson's particular spiritual climate, and eventually turn to close readings of two particular examples of religious entertainment that have arrived in Branson in recent years, and found considerable success.

A Religious Nation

As conventional wisdom would have it, the United States was founded by those seeking religious freedom. Whatever the real reasons, the spiritual fervor of the U. S. has been often remarked upon by foreigners, and, despite politically motivated statements to the contrary, the United States remains a very religious nation. According to the Pew Forum's U.S. Religious Landscape Survey from 2007, only 10% of those surveyed indicated that they have no religious affiliation, instead describing themselves as atheist, agnostic or "secular unaffiliated," while 78.4% identified as Christian.[242] An earlier (1997) survey by the then-Angus Reid Group identified the United States as having the largest proportion of Christian "true believers" of all countries surveyed: 35%.[243]

Although religious faith is officially separated from the state apparatus, Americans are generally a nation of believers. According to religion scholar Laurence R. Moore, American rhetoric has always blended the secular and the sacred, and religious and political leaders have claimed both divine and popular ordination for the country,

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[242] Pew Forum, "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey Summary of Key Findings." http://religions.pewforum.org/reports Accessed June 28, 2010. The number warrants further breakdown. See discussion of evangelicalism below.
[243] See Mark A. Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity: an Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 41. This Canada-based market-research giant was acquired by Ipsos in 2000, and subsequently renamed Ipsos-Reid.

tying faith and national identity together.[244] Whether the discourse focuses on the nation-as-deity, or on a God imagined as a celestial Uncle Sam, national fervor is portrayed as godly, and religious observance is figured as a patriotic duty.

The religiosity of the larger culture has not prevented various sects from bemoaning the godless, morally degenerate state of the nation, and believers' need to withdraw from it. To meet the needs and wants of this population, producers have created a huge range of explicitly Christian commercial products and attractions. In *Rapture Ready!*, Daniel Radosh documents "the parallel universe of Christian pop culture," which includes book publishing, the recording industry, theme parks, and even a wrestling circuit, which has grown to a seven billion dollar industry.[245] Radosh's study doesn't include Branson, but its vigorous development since 1983 tracks with the rise of other pop-Christian products and was largely created by and for the same, mostly white, evangelical Christian audience. The links between religion and popular culture have an even longer history in the United States.

Moore argues that this connection can be traced to the nineteenth century, when increased leisure time, money, and options for entertainment led churches to compete for audiences. A country without a single, state-sponsored religion essentially created a market economy for religions, with different faiths competing both for members and their dollars.[246] During the nineteenth century, various denominations rose to prominence not only by exploiting the various leisure industries that already existed; but also by

[244] Laurence R. Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 70.
[245] Daniel Radosh, *Rapture Ready: Adventures in Christian Pop Culture* (New York: Scribner, 2008) 3.
[246] Moore, *Selling God*, 7.

attempting to replace them, banning them entirely or substituting sanctified parallels. Some Protestant denominations had so many restrictions on entertainments that substituting parallels was necessary.[247] However, over the course of this substitution, religion itself “took on the shape of a commodity” and has been the most effective when it has appealed to market tastes and “most popular in its intellectually debased forms.[248]

Although they were intended as anything but “intellectually debased,” Lyceum organizations, which connected religion, performance, and commercialization, and which were a predecessor to the Chautauqua movement, reached extreme southwest Missouri as part of this development. As mentioned in Chapter 1, and thoroughly discussed by Charlotte Canning, Chautauqua had the aim of inserting a Christian atmosphere and explicitly Christian messages into secular activities, leading Moore to dub it “a chainstore of Protestant values.”[249] Another manifestation was the camp meeting, an itinerant summer tradition in small towns throughout the eastern and central United States, which reached its full flowering in the community of Ocean Grove, New Jersey. As detailed by Troy Messenger in *Holy Leisure*, Ocean Grove was established in 1869 as a permanent society dedicated to Christian—specifically Methodist—living. Week-long holidays were common for its middle-class visitors, and while much of the time was spent in church meetings, listening to sermons and singing hymns, a wide variety of popular amusements were also available.

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[247] Ibid., 5, 149**.** Moore singles out American Methodists as the main promoters of “holy leisure” in this era, but as we shall see, Southern Baptists and other evangelical denominations are now leading the practice. See also Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2004), 51.
[248] Ibid., 11.
[249] Ibid., 149, 152.

Ocean Grove's inclusion of seemingly secular entertainments was not meant as a break from worship, but as a continuation of it. Key to understanding how this functioned are two Methodist theological concepts: "perfection" and "means of grace." The first refers to living an already-forgiven, not sinless, life; the second to ritual actions and objects which aid a believer in the quest for perfection. Messenger warns that understanding these concepts, or "trying to use belief as the sole means for understanding Ocean Grove" is insufficient both for those who visited Ocean Grove and for scholars of it.[250] His title, "Holy Leisure," reflects that *performance* of these beliefs was also necessary. The environment at Ocean Grove provided models, "both figurative and quite literal," for how to be a perfected Christian. "[C]onstituted through performance, [these models] made explicit what perfection was, while simultaneously requiring it."[251]

While Branson postdates "God's Square Mile," and although can't be said to officially promote a unified doctrine, the southwest Missouri area has deep ideological ties to the brand of Methodism that spawned Ocean Grove.[252] The parallels between the two—including a single, concentrated location, a focus on connection to the natural world (already treated in a previous chapter), its religious ideology, and the tension between inclusiveness as an ideology and the reality of its very narrow span—make the comparison worth pursuing.

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[250] Troy Messenger, *Holy Leisure: Recreation and Religion in God's Square Mile*, (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1999), 24.
[251] Ibid., 26, 125.
[252] Although today's United Methodist Church is a far cry from the church that resulted in Ocean Grove, nineteenth-century American Methodism and its offshoot, the Holiness Movement, share doctrinal points with the evangelical churches found around Branson today. See Chapter 1, as well as Moore, *Selling God*, 47-48, 150; Aaron Ketchell's *Holy Hills: Religion and Tourism in Branson, Missouri*.

In this chapter, I argue that Branson functions in much the same way as Ocean Grove: through tropes both obviously secular and sacred, as well as truly hybrid, models of an ideal Christian community are presented to and practiced by—even required of—visitors. In the case of Ocean Grove, means of grace are explicitly aimed at conversion, salvation, or renewal of faith; in Branson, expressions of religious (and, not coincidentally, patriotic) fervor are also a goal, modeled and compelled by the recognizable figure of the Evangelist.

Faith in Branson

Although the Ozarks themselves are fairly isolated from the outside world, religiously-themed or –focused attractions in the area are legion. In terms of religion, Branson is enmeshed in a well-established context. Branson's *Shepherd of the Hills Pageant* is the oldest such site, but a number of faith-based tourist attractions scattered through nearby counties can be easily reached by car. An hour south in Eureka Springs Arkansas, *The Great Passion Play* ("America's #1 Attended Outdoor Drama") has been running since 1968 in the shadow of the nearly 70-foot tall Christ of the Ozarks. Nearby, one can take the New Holyland Tour in a mockup of a first-century Palestinian village depicting scenarios from the Bible.[253]

Many Branson-goers (400,000 a year, according to their website) stop just up the road in Carthage, Missouri, at the Precious Moments Chapel and Gardens. Precious Moments began as a greeting-card-based ministry in 1975, it swiftly grew into a marketing empire. The Chapel and Gardens, established in 1989 and "inspired by the Sistine Chapel," include religious murals and tableaux peopled with Samuel J. Butcher's

[253] The New Great Passion Play, accessed February 28, 2011, http://www .greatpassionplay.com/passionplay.asp.

instantly recognizable, pastel nouveau-Hummels. The visitors' center and grounds are studded with statuary and soothing spiritual messages intended to "touch the visitors' hearts and bring them to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, our Lord."[254]

Even closer to Branson is a wooded retreat known as Prayer Mountain in the Ozarks. This religious hideaway was founded in 1995 as part of Billye Brim Ministries, a Pentecostal organization which includes a local church group, written and recorded materials distributed through the internet, and an annual conference in Branson. Prayer Mountain, less than twenty miles from Branson, serves as central command for Brim, where a handful of cabins are rentable to individuals or small groups dedicated to intense prayer retreats.[255]

The newest religious attraction is the Creation Museum of the Ozarks. Under the guidance of Rod Butterworth, a bible literalist, this non-profit is being planned for the Branson area. Incorporated in 2008, CMOTO has since established a temporary site about an hour north in Strafford, Missouri, and is raising funds for a permanent home.[256]

Branson is at the heart of an environment saturated with evangelical Christian messages, entertainments, and iconography. According to an online directory of churches, "more than 100 places of worship in the region represent a wide variety of beliefs and denominations," with Baptist, Assembly of God, and Presbyterians making up

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[254] Precious Moments, "History/Timeline," accessed February 28, 2011, http://www.preciousmoments.com/content.cfm/precious_moments_history_timeline.
[255] Billye Brim Ministries, "About Billye Brim," accessed February 28, 2011, http://www.billyebrim.org/content/about_billye_brim, and "Prayer Mountain in the Ozarks" http://www.billyebrim.org/about_us/prayer_cabins.
[256] Creation Museum of the Ozarks, "About Us," accessed February 28, 2011, http://www.creationmuseumoto.org/aboutus.htm.

the largest groups.[257] Sprinkled among the shopping malls, live theatres, and attractions are a number of explicitly religious spectacles, including The Living Word National Bible Museum, which keeps dozens of manuscripts on display, and the God and Country Inspirational Garden along Highway 76, a small plot of land meant for reflection, amidst seasonal plantings and a large metal sculpture of the Ten Commandments [Fig 3.1].

God and Country are conflated in Branson far more than at Ocean Grove, which was less concerned with emphasizing a patriotic mission. It's a phrase one can see in titles, and hear promoted in slogans and songs as the special provenance of Branson, as if the two concepts were utterly estranged in the larger environment. The briefest visit to Branson suggests the strength and pervasiveness of its national-religious tone. Side by side with handbills for various shows are religious tabloids like *Ozarks Christian News*, available at restaurants, hotels at the various tourism bureaus. These include advertisements for religious services—both church rituals *and* Christian businesses—as well as a religiously-framed take on current news issues, current events at nearby Evangel University, and devotional readings.[258] Many businesses advertise their Christian *bona fides* with either explicit references to Jesus, Biblical passages, and patriotic slogans, and include common symbols of faith and patriotism like crosses, fish, and flags. Christian-courting businesses, including tour companies focused on shepherding church groups, flourish online: a company called Branson Christian Tours (formerly Trinity Tours) is aimed at planning and escorting explicitly Christian tour groups to make their visits

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[257] Branson Churches Directory, accessed June 12, 2010, http://www.bransonchurches .com/html/area_info.html. The Directory defines "the region" as an area of 17.5 square miles.

[258] The complete archive of OCN (and its erstwhile sister publication, Branson Christian News) is available for perusal online at http://www.ozarkschristiannews.com/backissues. htm.

Fig 3.1. The God and County Inspirational Garden is just one of the many overtly religious sites open to the public. Photo by the author.

easier, more comfortable, and even safer by vetting attractions to ensure that they are unobjectionable. Flyers scattered in hotel lobbies and commercials on local television networks encourage visitors to attend Sunday services, either at area churches, a number of hotels, or at special, para-religious shows by popular performers like Dino Kartsokis and Jim Stafford.[259] Another option is "Cowboy Church," which mixes patriotic, country-and-western style entertainment with Bible readings, hymns, and prayer in a casual-dress atmosphere.

Most shows contain religious elements, but a number base their appeal in Christian religious witnessing. *The Promise*, a musical Life of Jesus pageant performed in repertory with *Celebrate America!*, mentioned in the last chapter, was regularly performed at The Mansion America between 2004 and 2009. Although this show has subsequently closed, the Mansion opened a new attraction on its campus in the spring of 2010: the Shrine of the Holy Spirit. Advertised as "open to the public," the Shrine is also available for private rentals.

Another explicitly religious show, *Smoke on the Mountain*, has found long-lasting success in Branson, where it has run at various locations for at least twelve years. Although it had a secular debut at New Jersey's McCarter Theatre in 1988 and enjoyed two short runs at The Lamb's Theatre in Manhattan, *Smoke* presents the musical members of the Sanders clan, who perform nearly thirty traditional hymns and gospel

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[259]Aaron Ketchell, *Holy Hills of the Ozarks: Religion and Tourism in Branson, Missouri.* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 209. Ketchell's description of Sunday morning services at the Jim Stafford Theatre sounds not noticeably different from the actual Jim Stafford show I attended, with perhaps the exception of the smaller cast. See below for more on the commonalities between shows and services.

songs, and profess their religious beliefs to the audience, who play members of the Baptist Church in Mount Pleasant, NC.

Aaron Ketchell has already provided a rich and convincing argument for the deeply-rooted religious context of Branson in *Holy Hills of the Ozarks*, but his assessment includes two major flaws, which need addressing: first, his lack of specificity about this "popular variant of Christianity" and what it means; and second, his nearly complete disregard for performance as a dominant means in Branson. These failings weaken his reading of contemporary evangelicals and obscure why Branson has been so successful. Though he claims that behavior is important, Ketchell focuses on the history of belief in the area, as opposed to its performance.[260] This is understandable, as he comes from Religious and American Studies, not theatre or performance, but it compromises the "how" of his otherwise cogent assessment. This chapter will attempt to remedy these errors, and will focus on two major examples of explicitly religious entertainment—one of which did not yet exist in Branson at the time of his study and the other which was just beginning—that will simultaneously enrich and refine his argument.

"Evangelical"?

Ketchell recognizes the difference between evangelical sects and mainline churches, but his hazy definition relies primarily on what evangelicals are *not*.

It is a hard group to define. In a 1996 poll by the Angus Reid Group from Toronto, churches self-identified as Adventist, Alliance, Baptists, Brethren, Church of Christ, Church of God, and Mennonite were categorized as "Evangelical Protestants." It

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[260]Ibid., 6. Ketchell references the Social Gospel movement of the early twentieth century and its focus on the figure of Jesus as a model for how to behave. The remnants of the Social Gospel are now more likely to be found in liberal-leaning mainline congregations.

also included other denominations with the words charismatic, evangelical, fundamentalist, holiness, and Pentecostal in their descriptions.[261] Laurence Moore believes that "evangelical" serves as the overarching term, and the two branches thereof are "fundamentalists" (including Southern and Independent Baptists) and "Pentecostals" (Assemblies of God, Church of Christ, etc.).[262] He admits the terms are problematic, in that they fail to account for any number of factors, but are united by their conservative social standards. Another religious studies scholar, Stephen Prothero, echoes these sentiments in describing evangelicalism thusly: a "combination of enthusiasm and egalitarianism, revivalism and republicanism, Biblicism and common sense."[263] The Barna Group, a religiously-affiliated research company, defines "evangelicals" the most strictly. Not only are they "born again," but they also believe that:

- "faith is very important in their life today;
- a personal responsibility to share their religious beliefs about Christ with non-Christians;
- Satan exists;
- eternal salvation is possible only through grace, not works;
- Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth;
- the Bible is accurate in all that it teaches;
- God as the all-knowing, all-powerful, perfect deity who created the universe and still rules it today."[264]

By this definition, the Barna Group classifies only 7% of the population as evangelical. Doctrinally, the group has long been defined by David Bebbington as those who share four basic characteristics. Two are matters of belief: Biblicism (the Bible is the ultimate

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[261] Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity*, 30-31. Further reference to and explication of this survey can be read in Noll, 32-42.
[262] Moore, *Selling God*, 245.
[263] Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2004), 48.
[264] The Barna Group,"How People of Faith Voted in the 2008 Presidential Race," accessed February 28, 2011, http://www.barna.org/culture-articles/18-how-people-of-faith-voted-in-the-2008-presidential-race.

authority; sometimes this extends to Biblical literalism) and crucientrism (a focus on the sacrifice of Jesus for the salvation of mankind). Two others are centered in performance: conversion, figured as a spiritual rebirth, and Christian activism, typically in the form of witnessing.[265] "Evangelical," which literally means "bringer of good news," is at best a loose, affinitive term that unites Christians who take seriously the charge to share the good news of salvation through Jesus, and it is this charge where the connection between evangelical Christianity and performance finds its footing.

Performance and Evangelicalism

Although anti-theatrical prejudice has often been couched, in the West, in moralistic and specifically Christian Protestant religious objections, Moore makes a case for a connection between theatre and the church beginning with eighteenth-century Anglican minister George Whitefield, whose tours of North America spurred the First Great Awakening. This was concentrated in the eastern colonies and among Presbyterians and Episcopalians, but it really took hold in the first decades of the nineteenth centuries, after the Cane Ridge (Kentucky) camp meeting in 1801. This era saw the birth of Pentecostalism and a number of charismatic evangelical sects still flourishing in Branson today, and is largely responsible for linking Protestant revivalism with "theatrics" on the part of the archetypal revival preacher and fainting, fits, or spells of glossolalia as proof of one's faith and communion with the divine by believers.[266]

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[265] D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: a History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989). Bebbington is talking about the rise of movements in eighteenth-century Great Britain, but other religious scholars, including nearly all used in the present study, look to Bebbington for the definition of evangelicalism.
[266] Moore, *Selling God*, 46-69.

Even for sects that don't engage in the histrionics of the charismatic groups, a focus on embodiment remains. Jesus' personhood and physical suffering are paramount, and being "born again" through baptism in the faith is merely a starting point from which to build and maintain a living, personal relationship with the Christ. In *American Jesus*, Stephen Prothero argues that this turn toward Jesus-as-individual, what he calls "from *sola scriptura* to *solus Jesus,*" was established by the end of the nineteenth century, and has remained a major aspect of Christianity to the present day.[267] If developing a personal relationship with Jesus is of primary import for evangelicals, testifying to one's conversion is a close second.

Enter the Evangelist. As iconic as the hillbilly, and as timeless as the soldier-patriot, the Evangelist has manifested in many different eras, and has been particularly influential to conservative Christians, who take the charge to live the faith and spread the gospel seriously. Whether envisioned as a pilgrim, a rural revivalist, or a contemporary mega-church minister, the Evangelist struggles and sacrifices to bring the "good news" of the Christian gospel to others in much the same way that the soldier-patriot sacrifices in the name of the nation. The familiarity of the soldier as a national archetype (one on particular display in Branson), combined with the linking of nation and faith, encourages and facilitates audience identification with this key figure.

As set forth in the New Testament, a Christian's Great Commission is "to go forth and make disciples of all nations."[268] This charge is active and embodied, and "witnessing," or narrating one's experience of divine grace for an audience, is both a performance and a performative act, meant not only to strengthen one's own religious

[267] Prothero, *American Jesus*, 14.
[268] Matthew 28:19-20, KJV.

commitment, but to effect the salvation of others.[269] Typically the centerpiece of a revival meeting or Sunday service, Christian testimony is just one of the several overtly religious elements found in many of Branson's nominally secular shows.

Religion and Entertainment in Branson

Whatever the relationship is between evangelicalism and performance elsewhere, in Branson, they're symbiotic. As Ketchell puts it, "theaters temporarily become formal worship sites on Sundays, and worship sites rely on theater patrons for their livelihood and growth."[270] From one attraction to the next, religious and secular elements are largely the same; only the proportions change. That many venues host religious services only serves to further confuse the two.

Construction is always happening in Branson, and the newer buildings—theatres, churches, or retail outlets—share a similar aesthetic. This resemblance may be intentional; many new "seeker-sensitive churches," which are part of the massive growth of evangelicals in the last several decades, have been built to look like shopping malls. A description of the physical plant of a mega-church like Willow Creek Community Church, with its large atrium, concession stands, and small shops planned around an enormous auditorium equipped with elaborate audio-visual technology is very like the image of a Branson theatre found in the introduction to this project. [271]

Many parallels can be drawn between the pacing of shows in Branson and he structure of protestant church services. In addition to interludes of song and homiletic

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[269] 2 Timothy 2:3; Ephesians 6:11-18; KJV. For a discussion of contemporary passion plays staged by evangelicals, see Dorothy Chansky, "North American Passion Plays: 'The Greatest Story Ever Told' in the New Millennium," *TDR: The Drama Review*, Volume 50, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 120-145.
[270] Ketchell, *Holy Hills*, 217.
[271] Prothero, *American Jesus*, 147-148.

stories, emcees invite their audiences to introduce themselves to their neighbors, shaking hands and taking part in a quasi-secular version of the common "Kiss of Peace" ritual. Most obvious are the elements of overt Christian testimony, as live performances nearly always include mentions of personal faith on the part of the headliner.[272] Just as important is what *isn't* said. A number of Mormon families perform in Branson—among them, the Osmonds, the Duttons, the Haygoods, and the Hugheses—but there is concern among evangelicals about whether members of the Church of Latter-Day Saints are indeed Christians. As a result, Mormon entertainers soft-sell the particular ideologies of their faith, and focus on their love of God, family, and nation.[273]

The role of music in these shows is of particular note. Music was crucial to revivals and camp meetings, and today, as much as half of a mega-church's service is spent in song.[274] In Branson theatres, live music is the primary draw. Shows promise gospel, oldies, country-and-western, new country (both of which frequently have religious overtones), and contemporary Christian music, and they deliver, with skilled players and talented vocalists. Some songs are presented in sing-along or call-and-response formats, and audiences frequently croon along to well known songs of every genre, whether or not they've been coached to do so.

This participatory spirit is another point of commonality with evangelical worship. Unlike the top-down, leader/follower model of ministry found in Catholicism and mainline Protestant denominations, the differences between pastors and laity in

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[272] Having seen dozens of shows over a period of years, I can attest that performers frequently refer to their relationship with Jesus or faith in God. Ketchell confirms this in chapter 4 of *Holy Hills*.

[273] This phenomenon was also on display when The Duttons were featured on the NBC reality competition *America's Got Talent!* in the summer of 2007.

[274] Moore, *Selling God*, 49; Prothero, *American Jesus*, 148.

evangelical groups in terms of how they behave, dress, and live, are downplayed—whatever the realities might be—and focus during worship services is often placed, say critics both within and without the faith, on "authentic experience rather than correct doctrine."[275] Whether or not it meets doctrinal standards, an egalitarian approach may account for the vast growth in evangelical churches in the United States and around the world, while traditional congregations continue to wither.[276]

As referenced in the introductory chapter, "authenticity" matters greatly, and not just in religious concerns. The liveness (of music, of interaction with performers) and participatory elements are a portion of what set Branson apart. Ketchell, picking up a thread first mentioned by George Carney, highlights the contrast between Nashville and Branson. The former, the site of recording and distribution of much country, gospel, and contemporary Christian music, might be figured as the brain of the industry, but Branson is the beating heart, where visitors not only can see and interact with the people whose recordings they buy, but will likely have the chance to shake hands with a headliner, or even spy Andy Williams buying shampoo at Wal-Mart.[277] Evangelicals, whose religion endeavors to humanize Jesus in service of personal, "authentic" spiritual communion

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[275] Prothero, *American Jesus*, 148. This is not to equivocate between the structures of the Catholic Church and various Protestant denominations. Catholicism remains the most clearly hierarchal of Christian sects, and most religious reform movements are based in opposition to abuses of power that result from strict hierarchies. Although significant doctrinal differences exist among them, they are united in their concern with the methods of evangelicals. A United Methodist minister, when interviewed, expressed concern that visitors saw church as simply another site of entertainment, and that his discomfort was shared by Catholics, Methodists, and Episcopalians in the area. See Ketchell, *Holy Hills*, 216.

[276] John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, "Spread the Word, God is back." *The Times of London*, 46-47, May 2, 2009.

[277] George O. Carney, "Branson: The New Mecca of Country Music," 51; Ketchell, *Holy Hills*, 101.

with him, might understandably seek out, or even demand, a similar sense of intimacy with entertainers—particularly those who proclaim the same faith—as well as with their religious leaders.

Whether or not these interactions—many of which are manufactured to add appeal to a performer—beget any deep connections is insignificant. The liveness of fellowship creates a feeling that can be labeled "authentic," regardless of how canned or contrived the experience that begets the feeling. If, for evangelicals, everything can be a way of worshipping, then an artist's musical authenticity, personal authenticity, and religious authenticity are inextricably joined and exhibited as a kind of religious testimony through performance. [278]

A connection between religion and entertainment may be the norm for this group, but that doesn't lessen its spiritual heft: the two reinforce each other. This certainly seems to be the case in Branson. Ketchell goes so far as to claim that spoonfuls of sugary entertainment are what drive the consumption of potent Christian medicine, citing a number of "explicitly gospel acts" that failed to take hold.[279] However, the following two case studies, which treat more recent additions to the performance landscape, will testify

[278] Steve Jones and Kevin Featherly survey the concepts of "authenticity" most often employed by critics of popular music; they include: the articulation of the ideas or desires of a particular audience (i.e., not pandering to the "mainstream"); historical authenticity (roots oriented music); cultural or ethnic authenticity (being true to one's musical culture of origin); and personal authenticity (self-expression, and connection to the audience). See Steve Jones and Kevin Featherly, "Re-Viewing Rock Writing: Narratives of Popular Music Criticism," in *Pop Music and the Press*, ed. Steve Jones (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 32. This breakdown has value for more than the musical elements presented in Branson theatres. Connection and closeness – meaning both physical proximity and the "just folks" attitude on the part of performers – is a big part of Branson's appeal.
[279] Ketchell, *Holy Hills*, 97.

to the growing desire for more explicitly and intensely religious attractions aimed directly at evangelical visitors.

Sight & Sound Theatres

Glenn and Sandy Eshelman began their marriage as dairy farmers, but shortly thereafter entered the spiritual marketplace by spreading the Christian gospel through live performance. They started as a small touring enterprise based in Lancaster, Pennsylvania in the 1970s, presenting spiritually uplifting slideshows with musical accompaniment. Their success on the road allowed them to establish a permanent venue in nearby Strasberg, which led to additional performers and, by 1987, to a transition to live-action productions full of song and spectacle. Their philosophy and tactics haven't changed much since the mid-1980s, but their capabilities and reach clearly have. A second, larger venue was built in Strasberg, and increasingly elaborate technical effects were added. A fire destroyed this theatre, but they persevered, opening an enormous, state-of-the-art complex in 1998.[280] This new and improved theatre was taken as the model for the company's expansion into Branson, and Sight & Sound West opened late in the spring of 2008. Their mission is still "to present the Gospel of Jesus Christ and sow the Word of God into the lives of our customers, guests, and fellow workers by visualizing and dramatizing the scriptures, through inspirational productions."[281]

The company's long-running productions—there have been a total of seventeen thus far—are loosely knit musical extravaganzas based on Old Testament (and later, life-of-Christ Gospel) stories familiar to anyone who attended Sunday School. They flesh out

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[280] Sight & Sound, "Company History," accessed February 28, 2011, http://www.sight-sound.com/WebSiteSS/gethistory.do.
[281] Sight & Sound, "Our Name and Mission," accessed February 28, 2011, http://www.sight-sound.com/WebSiteSS/getpage.do?id=51.

their source material, rarely longer than a few pages, with character, dialogue, subplots, and original songs and dance numbers to fit modern notions of conventional musical theatre structure, and downplay romantic couplings in favor of a sublimated, spiritual desire to please God. They don't expand these stories in order to add nuance—generally protagonists and antagonists are made even clearer—but to pad the action to the standard two-hour length of a Hollywood film or Branson attraction. They also construct musical numbers to traditional standards: "I" songs, spectacle numbers, and love duets, many in 32-bar AABA form, are backed by recordings of a synthesized orchestra and a creamy-voiced chorus.

In addition to these palatable details, Sight & Sound (as their name implies) have endeavored to employ an enormous, intentionally overwhelming variety of eye- and ear-candy. Live theatre's appeal is based in part in its ability to charm all the senses, so in addition to the bright colors, tuneful music, and swirling lights, they incorporate live animals, animatronics, and elements of audience interaction in their productions. Accordingly, their physical plant is designed to prepare audiences to receive a dazzling spiritual message.

The theatre, built to look as much like a temple of worship as a showplace, sits upon a hilltop, its domed, angel-bedizened, peachy-orange facade visible from miles away. In front of its main entrance, a large sculpture of a heavy-maned lion protectively curled around a lamb sits atop a rocky, flower-covered fountain, referring to the book of Isaiah's description of the peace following Christ's return[282] [Fig 3.2]. The exterior's

[282] The saying "The lion shall lie down with the lamb" is a popular distillation of the ideas found in several verses from Isaiah, including 11:6-7 (KJV): "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the

Fig 3.2. The Sight and Sound theatre’s imposing façade is equal parts church and show-place. Photo by the author.

young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.” This is echoed in Isaiah 65:25: “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the bullock: and dust the serpent's meat. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, saith the LORD.”

sanctified character is interrupted inside, where high ceilings, dramatically patterned carpets, and large fake silk plants bring to mind a casino or a cruise ship, albeit one with faux-plastered walls designed to look like mud-brick construction.

Scattered among snack bars and small retail installations selling various animal-themed items along with the standard promotional objects are enormous promotional posters showing scenes from the current production. Tucked into overhead nooks are dioramas of life-sized animals nestling among great stores of provisions: big cats wander through a grape arbor and jugs of wine; goats graze amid sacks of grain.

If the front-of-house shifts you from the outside world to the world of *Noah!*, the narrow passageways and tight stone arches that guide you into the auditorium are reminiscent of an ancient coliseum or the winding lanes of old Jerusalem. Approximately half of the 2085 seats are set on the floor at a gentle rake, while the back half is ranged in what is known as "stadium seating," providing a clear view of the enormous stage for every spectator. Large black drops extend from the edges of the stage all the way back to the level of the floor seating, promising—and delivering—a panoramic, 180° (or greater) view of the action for more than half of the audience.

The production was preceded by the typical self-promotional announcements and coming attractions, and a visit from a smiling young man who stated the company's mission: "bringing the Word of God to life with exceptional quality, honoring God, and encouraging the faith of our guests."[283] The show was overtly presented, without

[283] Sight & Sound, "Company History." Many shows in Branson begin with self-explanatory announcements, but Sight & Sound's was one of the few that explicitly stated its Christian mission. The following description of *Noah!* is based on the performance I attended in September of 2008. Perhaps because of the presence of

apologies or excuses, as a method of evangelism. The action of the play was preceded by additional information, now given in a sonorous, masculine voiceover, that the familiar tale of Noah had been fleshed out with characters that were not in the original story. The Voice directed us to read the verses that provided the basis for this "fictional account of the factual occurrence."

The Voice also launches us into the story by recounting the major events found in Genesis: Creation, the bliss of Eden, and the subsequent Fall into sin. Humans' sinful nature is harped upon, but fortunately for humankind and especially those present in the audience, one man, the booming Voice says, pleased the Lord: "NOAH!" The curtain rises, revealing a stylized thatched cottage and matching barn that evoke the Midlands of the United Kingdom more than the Fertile Crescent at the dawn of time. Noah appears singing praises to Jehovah (as the Supreme Being is always referred to in this production), and shows himself to be a happy, decent fellow, with a happy, decent life, and happy, decent family who sing of their contentment with the live animals they tend and the land they work. Noah is milking a cow when Jehovah speaks, promising to destroy all the wickedness of humankind with a great flood, and commanding him to build an ark. Shocked but dutiful, Noah promises obedience and informs his family of their great charge, which they accept with various exclamations of joy, shock, and grief.

Scenes with elaborate settings alternate with shorter episodes played on small, rolled-on units in front of the main drop, and the Voice facilitates shifts in time and place. The first such interlude introduces Uncle Methuselah and a merchant called Emmelach discussing the rumor of humanity's imminent destruction. Emmelach, a city-dweller,

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animals, Sight & Sound, like the Dixie Stampede, forbids the taking of photographs during the performance.

scoffs at this pious tittle-tattle and rejects Noah's offer to board the Ark once it is completed. Despite this early rejection, Noah and his sons decide to take their message to the city, called Nod, where Noah's brother also lives, and inform as many as possible of their terrible fate if they don't repent.[284]

The curtain opens to reveal the garishly-colored central square of Nod, which throbs with sensual pleasures straight out of a Cecil B. DeMille biblical epic: feasting, drinking, dancing girls with at least seven veils. Idolatry, astrology, and harlotry are all celebrated in song, and Meloch, Noah's brother and the King's advisor, surveys the scene and approves of the great many freedoms available in Nod. Noah and his sons arrive, horrified by what they find. They are more horrified still when the King declares himself a god, and the people, led by Meloch, worship him.[285] When Noah and his sons refuse to bow to the King, they are bullied and cast out from the city, forbidden to return.

At home, Noah's wife and daughters-in-law are visited by friends who plan to leave the labors of country life for the ease of Nod. The women are sad to lose their friends, but remain satisfied with their own rural life. Their men folk return and relate their story, distressing the women with the knowledge that their friends are doomed. Disheartened that their banishment from the city will make their task of building and outfitting the Ark that much more difficult, they pray, and resolve to make what they need with the help of their kinsmen, rather than buy it. The Voice, accompanied by a short video display, explains that it took 75 years to complete the exterior of the Ark.

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[284] There is no mention of Nod in the biblical story of Noah, but it is mentioned in Genesis as land to which Cain fled after killing his brother Abel. "Nod" is related to the Hebrew for "wandering." See Genesis 4:16, KJV.

[285] Meloch, whose name may be a variation of Melech, Hebrew for "king," or Moloch, an ancient Phoenician god, stands out as one of the few roles played by a black actor.

When the curtain re-opens, the first set has been restored, with the addition of the enormous Ark. The family's happy working song is interrupted when the King, seeking workers to construct a great tower, intrudes. He promises them greater pay for their labor, and all but the immediate family rapidly deserts their posts, causing a crisis of faith for oldest son Shem. Noah counsels him through it with prayer and song, but their troubles aren't over. That night, the King's minions return to torch the Ark, resulting in onstage mayhem. The Voice states that another 120 years passed as the Ark was rebuilt, while the King of Nod's tower, where he and all his people were to be safe from a flood, was quickly constructed.

Another small scene in front of the curtain brings us to within one week of the deluge. Despite nearly 200 years of unstinting labor, the women of the household recall the joy of working in service of Jehovah. They are joined by their men, who refer to the recent death of Methuselah and begin a list-song detailing all of the animals to be loaded onto the Ark. The act ends with the Procession of the Animals, which elicits delighted gasps from the audience. Some, like zebras, camels, pigs, macaws and goats, are live animals; some are stuffed and in cages; some are people dressed in costumes, like orangutans; and still others are animatronics. The first act ends on a note of joyful, controlled chaos.

After the intermission, a clever bit of stagecraft transitions the audience's perspective from outside the Ark, watching it be loaded, to *inside*. The central playing space shows housing for humans as well as animals, and the side-stages, previously obscured with black drapes, have been opened to reveal a spectacular, three-story display of animals—real, stuffed, and animatronic—as well as enormous stores of provisions.

This *coup de théâtre* not only kicks off the second act with style, but also places its audience among the righteous, with Noah, who pleases the Lord. The family's last-minute preparations allow the audience to linger over the visual delights, but the reverie is interrupted by the entrance of the King and his minions, who have suddenly returned to destroy the faithful family. However, all make it aboard the Ark, and the door slams shut behind them, moved by the hand of Jehovah.

There are several mentions of disbelief at the concept of water falling from the sky, so when the rain begins, everyone is terrified by the phenomenon. Those left outside cry out for salvation, but all those who rejected previous invitations onto the Ark, including Emmelach, the mother of one of Noah's daughters-in-law, and the King are themselves rejected, despite their terror-stricken pleas. In a matter of a few minutes we are led to believe that rain has flooded the world, even overtaking the King's great tower. With a loud crash, the Ark's rustic chandelier swings wildly, creating a convincing illusion of the Ark lurching upon the water.

The Voice reports that rain fell for forty days and nights, and the younger members of the family, who initially give thanks for their salvation in song, fall victim to internal strife. Even when the rain stops, they are unable to leave the Ark, and the men fight amongst themselves, as do the women. Their squabbling is interrupted when the Ark, with another great swinging of its chandelier, crashes violently upon Mt. Ararat and springs a leak. They work together to save themselves, but bad feelings linger. Alone in front of the closed curtain, Noah is nearly overcome by worry and anger, but his wife soothes him, warning against discord that comes from the Evil One.

The curtain opens again on an external view of the Ark beached upon the rocks. Noah, his spirit renewed, sends out first a raven ("a selfish bird," according to the Voice), and then a dove, which faithfully brings back an olive branch. Laughing gleefully, Noah at last flings open the doors of the Ark where, the Voice announces, the family spent 375 days.[286] The family exits the Ark with talk of repopulating the land, and one makes an oblique but unmistakable reference to someone in the line of Noah who will redeem mankind's sinful ways for all time.[287] Jehovah speaks to Noah, and a rainbow appears on the upstage scrim while colored lights dance over the audience.

The play ends as it began, with the Voice referring to a number of Old Testament stories, including that of Abraham and Isaac. Parts of the Ark fold away, cunningly turning the boat shape into an enormous cross with an open doorway at its center. The Voice announces that today, Jesus is the vessel of salvation, much as the Ark was for Noah and his family. Jesus appears in the doorway of the cross, wearing a sparkling white robe and purple cloak, looking very much like Warner Sallman's famous portrait of the *Head of Christ*.[288] Jesus announces that he is coming soon, but not with water, with *fire*. This veiled threat is softened by a gentle smile and a beatific invitation to "enter the door." The Voice mourns that today's world is so like the city of Nod, where people are "eating, drinking, and marrying" (the last presumably a euphemism for "fornicating"?):

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[286] The reasoning behind these numbers is not entirely clear. Different faith traditions interpret the length of Noah's ordeal variously, but the concern here seems to be about establishing the factuality of the flood story.

[287] Jesus is descended from Noah through his son Shem. The lineage from Noah through Abraham is detailed in Genesis 11:10-27 and Luke 3:34-38, KJV.

[288] Sallman's original oil painting of *Head of Christ* was completed for the Evangelical Covenant Church, a product of the Second Great Awakening. See David Morgan's *Icons of American Protestantism: The Art of Warner Sallman*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.

sure signs of the End Times. The Voice invites us to consider our relationship to Jesus and, should we need help, to consult with advisors waiting in the lobby of the theatre.

Old Testament Patriarch as Evangelist

Sight & Sound's expansion to Branson has been hugely successful. Since opening in 2008, they have presented the *Noah!* from the end of March through mid-October, and a nativity pageant, *The Miracle of Christmas*, during the last two months of the year. Rapt audiences email their comments, praising both the production values and the rarefied religious environment. One visitor wrote of *Noah!*: "A Must-See when you're in Branson! Whether you have Christian beliefs or not, you won't be disappointed in the production itself," and another praised *The Miracle of Christmas* for "[t]he passion of the actors, the beauty of the music, it all made a fire burn in my heart to see the Messiah, just as the people of Israel longed for Him."[289]

One reason for the preference for story-telling over lectures or sermons in religious traditions is that stories allow flexibility; room for both subtraction and addition, but also for audiences to interpret them and apply them to their own lives. *Noah!*, like many of the company's shows, is based in an Old Testament story, but the edits and revisions give it messages that address the beliefs and concerns of its evangelical Christian audiences. The Biblical narrative of Noah covers four brief, highly repetitive chapters in Genesis (6-9), which contain no mention of Emmelach, Meloch, or Nod and its evil king. The final episode of the story, which describes the curse Ham receives after seeing his father drunken and naked, is completely excised, and replaced with the

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[289] Rachel Clark, "NOAH the MUSICAL," http://www.sight-sound.com/WebSiteSS /gettestimonial.do?id=650, and Matthew Craig, "My First Visit to Sight and Sound" http://www.sight-sound.com/WebSiteSS/gettestimonial.do?id=524; comments on Sight & Sound Guest Memories blog, accessed February 28, 2011.

message of salvation through Jesus.[290] Biblical references are sprinkled throughout the play. Some are serious, such as those connecting hinting at the promise of the Messiah, and others, like naming the Ark's elephants "Abraham" and "Sarah," are more playful, and clearly brought the pleasure of recognition to many audience members. Despite the many alterations to the source text, Sight & Sound foregrounds its production with an assertion of Biblical inerrancy.

The conceit that rain was unknown to Noah and those of his time is another addition. No Biblical reference to the absence of rain exists, but the concept was not unpopular before the Enlightenment. It was revived in the twentieth century by fundamentalist Christians and solidified in a text from 1960, *The Genesis Flood*. In it, authors John C. Whitcomb and Henry M. Morris argue for a literal interpretation of Genesis and explain that prior to the Great Flood, rain would have been impossible because the earth received its moisture from a "thermal vapor blanket."[291] These theories have been embraced by certain (though not all) evangelical sects, and promoted by a growing Young-Earth Creationist movement that derives its authority not from the Bible directly, but from the evangelicals' tenet of Biblicism.

Another second benefit of storytelling is that, through character identification, audiences are encouraged to personally connect with leading figures and to use their trials and triumphs as models for how to behave in their own lives. Despite being one of the ancient patriarchs, Noah is intended as a model of the Evangelist. This is encouraged by Noah's association with the rural values celebrated throughout Branson. Although he is

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[290] Connections between Jesus' promise of salvation and Noah's suffering are made explicit in 1 Peter, 3:18-22, KJV.
[291] John C. Whitcomb and Henry M. Morris, *The Genesis Flood: The Biblical Record and its Scientific Implications* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1960), 256.

never portrayed as a hillbilly, the city/country dichotomy throughout the production is even more explicit than in *The Shepherd of the Hills Pageant*. The country is the land of simple people with deep values and faith in the Lord, and the city, rather than just the (offstage) habitat of sharply dressed namby-pambies, is an antediluvian Sodom that revels in its debauchery.

Noah's actions are even more important than his rural location. Noah unquestioningly obeys God's commands. Noah maintains a personal relationship with God—they even talk to each other like friends. Noah cleaves to, protects, and guides his family in holy work. A pre-Christian Evangelist, he delivers the word of God to others. Noah works faithfully and at length, despite long odds and repeated setbacks, to live up to God's commandment. Noah struggles against external attacks at the hands of his urban antagonists (the Ark's destruction by fire is not found in Genesis and is likely inspired by Sight & Sound's institutional history), as well as flickering internal doubts. Whether or not visitors are familiar with the principles of evangelical belief, they are provided with a model of Christian behavior worthy of Ocean Grove.

For those who don't already identify as Christian, or who fail to see themselves in Noah, a different model is offered. The darkest moment of the play is not devoted to the family's trials, but the destruction of the drowning masses, whose last-minute repentance is bootless: God's punishments are swift and sure. This, combined with Jesus' closing invitation-qua-warning to be like Noah and accept the salvation offered you by God, serves as an entrée to a reverse altar call. The penitent are directed to meet a facilitator in

the lobby, where they might give their life to the lord.[292] Somewhere between a soft sell and the forced reckoning of an evangelical hell house, *Noah!* reads as a twenty-first - century version of a fifteenth-century mystery play tradition.

Technology and Evangelical Christianity

The technical wizardry of the animatronic creatures at Sight & Sound stands out in Branson, but advanced technology is ubiquitous in this small mountain town. Robotic lights, closed circuit televisions, and instant digital recording and duplicating allow visitors to buy a disc of the very production that they saw in person. Computer technology of all sorts is used to create immersive environments for audiences that can subsequently be packaged and sent home with individuals to enjoy at will. This might seem like a strange trend in a place that markets itself as relentlessly countrified, but Evangelicals' embrace of popular entertainments has also resulted in their embrace of each new wave of technology, from the printing press to the internet.

The relationship between Evangelicalism and technology in the twentieth century is particularly remarkable for the many new media that it helped quickly evolve from experimental to everyday. In fact, the spread of radio in its earliest days was due to the efforts of religious fundamentalists like Aimee Semple McPherson.[293] Her 5,000-seat Angelus Temple was perhaps the first example of an evangelical mega-church, and its enormous radio towers transmitted her message far beyond her southern California

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[292] Though tempted to learn what happens to those who seek out one of these religious counselors, I decided against lying about my desire to be born again.

[293] Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity*.16. A panel at the Association for Theatre in Higher Education conference in August of 2010 discussed how "Sister Amy" employed theatrical and technological devices to great effect in her ministry. See also Matthew Avery Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

location. Both Norman Vincent Peale and Billy Graham followed her lead on radio, and later took advantage of television to reach out to millions of souls.

The 1950s also introduced the televised ministry of Pentecostal evangelist Oral Roberts, followed swiftly by Pat Robertson, a Southern Baptist, launching his Christian Broadcasting Network. Assemblies of God pastors Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart began their work in the 1970s. Cable television allowed more possibilities for programming, spawning dozens of networks and scores of evangelical preachers available around the globe, but in this same era programs began to homogenize in terms of format, which is still largely in effect today.[294] Most recently, the expansion of the internet and wireless web technologies has allowed nearly every religious subset, from Quiverfulls to Christian disciplinarians to polygamists, the opportunity to find like-minded people. Nonetheless, today's televangelists, says Moore, come nearly exclusively from the "conservative evangelical" camp of fundamentalists—meaning Southern and Independent Baptists—and Pentecostals.[295]

The exposure, accessibility, and networking that television and web-casting has brought manages a neat, paradoxical trick, in allowing groups both a wide reach and—if desired—the ability to remain increasingly isolated from those with differing views. Today's evangelicals are more able than ever before to close out the secular world and surround themselves solely with church-approved cultural products and environments. In Branson, one who has been using the latest technologies to build a hermetic Christian kingdom on earth is Jim Bakker.

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[294] Moore, *Selling God*, 248.
[295] Ibid., 245. For more information on how another new media, film, was used to popularize modern ideas of Jesus, see Prothero, *American Jesus*, 112-114.

Jim Bakker & Morningside

Raised and educated in the Assemblies of God church, Bakker began an on-air career in 1966 with the premiere of his variety-talk show “The 700 Club” on Pat Robertson’s Christian Broadcasting Network. A self-proclaimed “pioneer of Christian television,” he went on to found or co-found two additional Christian networks: Trinity Broadcasting Network, in 1973; and the PTL Satellite Network in 1974, based on the success of his talk show “The Praise The Lord (PTL) Club.”[296] PTL operations were based in Charlotte, North Carolina, where Bakker and his wife, Tammy Faye, also established a theme park and resort named Heritage USA. In operation between 1978 and 1989, the Heritage USA complex also included a conference center, timeshare apartments, a campground, a school, shopping opportunities, and a television studio for the Bakkers’ daily show. At its height, Heritage USA was the third most popular theme park destination in America, with millions of visitors a year.[297]

In 1987, Bakker, whose extravagant lifestyle brought him as much attention as his religious message, fell into disgrace for a sexual and financial scandal that led to further investigation of the PTL’s books and eventually, his indictment on charges of fraud.[298]

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[296] Jim Bakker Show, “Jim Bakker, Pastor and Pioneer of Christian Television,” accessed February 28, 2011, http://www.jimbakkershow.com/Publisher/Article.aspx?ID =1000088380.
[297] Ibid.; Heritage USA was closed and abandoned until 2004, when MorningStar Ministries, run by another evangelical couple, Rick and Julie Joyner, purchased a significant portion of it to refurbish it as the site of Heritage International Ministries. HIM is yet another far-reaching complex aimed at educating and training evangelical missionaries for “end-time” ministry. See Heritage International Ministries mission at http://www.thenehemiahproject.org/history.htm.
[298] Tammy Faye Bakker filed for divorce in 1992, while Bakker was incarcerated. She married Roe Messner, who had worked as a building contractor for Heritage USA, in 1993, and maintained a public profile unaffiliated with the church until her death from cancer in 2007.

Sentenced to forty-five years before being partially exonerated, Bakker served a total of five years in a federal penitentiary before his release in 1994. He spent several years working in urban Los Angeles, where he met and married Lori Graham and subsequently adopted five children. The family moved to Branson in 2002, where "The New Jim Bakker Show" was reborn in a small restaurant he had converted into a television studio.

Branson gave Bakker a perfect opportunity to rebuild his personal brand on the already established name of a wholesome site of Christian entertainment. Although some are skeptical, many in the area have welcomed Bakker as a prodigal son.[299] Bankrolled by Branson developer and longtime Bakker-supporter Jerry Crawford, he met with enough success to break ground on a new, Heritage USA-style entertainment complex he named Morningside. Crawford bought nearly 600 acres in Blue Eye, Missouri, a border town with a population under 200. On a site where a theme park called Camelot was hastily constructed and then almost immediately abandoned in the early 1990s, Bakker began rebuilding an earthly empire in 2008 with many of same elements that made Heritage USA a success.

The Jim Bakker Show

Although it is advertised as only twenty miles from Branson, winding country roads and an absence of signage make Bakker's retreat feel removed, even in an already out-of-the-way place. After traveling on an interstate highway, a rural route, and a country road, a sign hung on a tractor trailer directs visitors a down a narrow drive through heavily wooded acreage. The road ends in an enormous clearing, at the center of

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[299] Todd C. Frankel, "Reinvented Jim Bakker looks a bit like the old: TV ministry moves to Missouri complex," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, February 23, 2008, accessed February 28, 2011, http://www.rickross.com/reference/bakker/bakker26.html.

which stands a large parking lot and a multi-story, multi-colored building studded with windows and overwhelmed with mismatched crenulations and outcroppings. Topped by an enormous cupola, the fanciful but forbidding exterior seems straight out of an amusement park. This is Morningside, the home of the Bakker family and the broadcast site of The Jim Bakker Show.

Inside, the strange outward appearance begins to make sense. Morningside is a planned live-work-worship community, and the building is constructed of multiple condominium units arranged around a large, oblong central atrium, called "Grace Street." Bright finishes, park benches and light posts, and a truly staggering amount of silk flowers give the effect of a Disney-fied outdoor plaza, with an entrance to "Grace Church" at one end and the enormous, pillared portico of a grand house at the other.

The ground (street?) level units along the sides are awning-shaded storefronts, not all occupied, for boutiques, offices, and cafés. The second and third floors are all personal residences. The various colors visible outside correspond to highly-stylized townhome façades, each differentiated from its neighbors by cosmetic choices. A faux-stuccoed Tuscan villa sits cheek by jowl with a faux-timbered English cottage, which gives way to a faux-exposed-brick loft. Many windows are flanked by decorative shutters and silk flowers, and multiple balconies break out into the common space. A domed ceiling, painted and lit to resemble a cloudless spring sky, looms over all [Fig 3.3].

I attended a taping of The New Jim Bakker Show, which is staged in front of the grand house, in the fall of 2008. Although they appear to be set on the veranda of Tara, its raised table and bar stools are similar to those of secular morning talk shows. Several ranks of café tables and chairs are arranged to face the set, and were gradually filled in

Fig 3.3. The highly ornamented interior of Morningside fancifully combines various architectural styles, public and private spaces, and elements of a working television studio. Note lighting instruments at upper left. Photo by the author.

with people who appeared to be show workers—many of whom looked underage—and, given their points of entry into the atrium, Morningside residents. Behind the tables and chairs were rows of seats extending back to the Chapel, but these were almost entirely empty. Like most Branson audiences, this one was almost exclusively white (excepting the Bakkers' adopted children). The show, which is taped five days a week, is available to outside audiences through two media: a variety of broadcast and satellite television stations, and online at its own website: jimbakkershow.com.[300]

The frames and para-entertainments that precede all the live attractions in Branson were replicated here with the informal, possibly unplanned meet-and-greet period and a crowd warm-up. The show, scheduled to begin at 11: 30 in the morning, didn't get underway until just before 1 p.m.[301] To pass the time, contemporary Christian worship music was piped over the loudspeakers, and guests helped themselves to free popcorn or bought drinks and snacks from the cafés. Workers and camera operators bustled about, and several Morningside residents, including one of the Bakker's teenage daughters and Lori Bakker's mother, circulated through the audience to welcome them personally. Each table was supplied with sheets asking for guests' contact information, reasons for attending, and prayer requests; these were collected prior to the broadcast. When asked, Miss Bakker (also called Lori) informed me that Morningside operates a school for the approximately twenty kids who live on-site, and who are given two hours

[300] A current listing of affiliates, current as of February 15, 2011, is available at http://www.jimbakkershow.com/Publisher/Article.aspx?ID=1000098506.
[301] I overheard comments that a late start was not unheard of, but that day's technical problems seemed exceptional and were blamed on a large storm that had blown through the area several days before.

off each day from school to work as camera operators or production assistants for the show.

At 12:30 the official warm-up began with show emcee Kevin Shorey, who sang gospel tunes in a warm baritone and encouraged us to sing and clap along. He surveyed the audience for out-of-state visitors and those celebrating anniversaries or birthdays, bantering playfully with more vocal guests. Kevin informed us that the program we were about to witness would be streaming live over the internet, but air on television in one week. He also announced that the day's show would be a special one, as it fell on the Bakker's tenth wedding anniversary. He hinted of the surprises in store, and asked us to applaud loudly and enthusiastically for the Bakkers, "to help celebrate their love." With a last-minute reminder to applaud when the producer (whose eighteenth birthday had just been recognized) counted down from three, the show began with Kevin's vigorous, game-show introduction and Jim and Lori Bakker's entrance through the double doors of Tara.

After a chatty introduction, Bakker introduced his special guests: Reverend Jess Gibson of Springfield's Cornerstone Church, and Tennessee-based gospel group McMillan & Life (presumably named after the 1970s television drama "McMillan and Wife," although no direct reference was made). The show was roughly divided into four sections, the first of which was dedicated to celebrating the Bakkers' anniversary. Wedding photographs were shown, gifts were presented by the Bakker children, and a large cake was rolled out and served to the audience, while McMillan & Life sang. Reverend Jess led the second section of the program by asking for special "SOS Donations" of five hundred dollars to Bakker's Morningside ministries. Directly

addressing his plea to the camera, he promised that a donation would not only bring blessings from God, but would earn you a spot in the "SOS Hall of Faith Club," which came with a fancy Bible and a small, gold-tone clock shaped like a movie camera. [Fig 3.4]. Monitors visible to the audience displayed a phone number—1-888-988-1588—where credit card donations could be made, and Bakker explained that the SOS Club was dedicated to maintaining the program's satellite feed, which recently had been damaged by heavy storms.

This served as a segue to a discussion of the series of hurricanes then sweeping through the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico. Bakker characterized the storms as signs of the coming destruction promised in scriptures, and, citing the recent discovery of massive fault lines around New York City, warned of an imminent apocalyptic scenario. His mention of global warming was comparatively mild, and was primarily noticeable for his comment that belief in such a thing was "politically incorrect for Republicans or right wing evangelicals." Lori Bakker chimed in that her thoughts on global warming were cemented by then-Republican-Vice-Presidential-candidate Sarah Palin's recent statement on the issue: it exists, but is not a man-made phenomenon.[302] I attended September 4, 2008, and the show was set to air on TV on September 11 of that year. No mention was made of the significant anniversary or terrorism in general; a strange omission given the doom-saying otherwise given free rein. Even so, the world was clearly a dangerous, fearful place, but Bakker had the answer to every fear and uncertainty: Jesus. Following a

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[302] Matthew Mosk and Juliet Eilperin, "Palin Not Convinced on Global Warming," The Trail: A Daily Diary of Campaign 2008 (blog), *The Washington Post*, August 29, 2008, accessed February 28, 2011, http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2008/08/palin-not-convinced-on-global.html.

Fig 3.4. Reverend Jess Gibson (center) of the evangelical Cornerstone Church in nearby Springfield, Missouri, helps raise funds for Lori and Jim Bakker's Morningside community. Photo by the author.

chorus of “Amen”s from those all over Grace Street, McMillan & Life sang about the divine purpose of life’s suffering in “This Storm,” which includes the chorus:

> “Don’t let this storm go to waste
> Show Your glory, reveal Your grace
> There is a reason for my pain
> So that my suffering is not in vain
> Don’t let this storm go to waste.”[303]

The final section of the program was dedicated to more fund-raising, and was led by Lori and Kevin, who lingered over a trio of pieces called “God’s Heart” Jewelry. The two noted that they were available online, via phone, and in “Lori’s Little Shoppe,” located on the first level of Grace Street. A “love gift” of fifty dollars would net viewers one of the baubles; one hundred dollars paid for all three. With that, the show, less than an hour long, ended with a brief taped piece promoting the community.

From its intention to its aesthetic, Morningside is nothing if not a scaled-down Heritage USA, piggybacking on the already successful Branson-American brand. Like Heritage, Morningside is meant as a retreat from the secular world, and its main building serves as a concrete symbol of this urge. Although Branson sells itself as a haven of traditional values, Morningside holds even Branson at arm’s length. Isolated on its own tract of land and supplied with restaurants and shops, a church, and a “public square” under a single roof, reasons to interact with non-residents are reduced, if not eliminated entirely. Homes face inward, away from the world at large—which the show paints as a perilous place—and toward the dual altars of the church and its leader. It’s New Urbanism without anything the least bit urban.

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[303] The song can be heard at McMillan & Life’s MySpace page: http://www.myspace.com/mcmillanandlife. Accessed February 28, 2011.

The building is fanciful, but the taping of *The Jim Bakker Show* itself felt more "real" than any attraction in Branson. This is one of the few places in the area where the liveness wasn't slick and intended for a general audience. Residents and guests of Morningside are privy to rehearsals, camera tests, technical errors, and as many repetitions as are necessary to create smooth and seamless programs for later cable broadcast. On the day of my attendance, the Bakkers' entrance was staged at least three times. Significant technical errors had already pushed the starting time of the show back by an hour and a half, and it was clear, by looking at whatever the cameras were *not* directed at, that tempers were short. Although the hosts tried joking good-naturedly both on and off camera about how under-rehearsed the show was, the image of happiness being recorded for a mass audience contrasted sharply with the scowling and muttering visible to the several dozen people in attendance.

In *Noah!*, audiences are urged to identify with and fashion themselves after the eponymous servant of the Lord, but, at Morningside, Bakker takes a leadership role in molding the audience's beliefs and behaviors during and after their viewing of the show. The most overt manipulation is financial. Audiences, including those present at the taping, those watching live online, and those watching the taped and edited broadcast are called upon, *repeatedly*, to contribute financially. *The Jim Bakker Show*, unlike other spectacles in the area, doesn't charge admission (although one needs access to cable or satellite television, or the internet, to view the program on a regular basis), but it does repeatedly request donations of sums considerably greater than the cost of an average adult ticket (approximately thirty dollars) in Branson. Between one-third and one-half of the 58-minute show I attended was dedicated to fundraising; watching online episodes

confirms this as a representative amount.[304] The contact information requested of visitors led to mailings light on news from the community and heavy on requests for "love gifts," including a special request for the SOS Hall of Faith Club [Fig 3.5].

Religious organizations in a nation without a state religion have always had to compete for members and their donations, but the increased emphasis on giving as a sign of one's faith in and commitment to God connect to the evangelical movement known as "the prosperity gospel." Most clearly associated today with televangelists like Joel Osteen and the improbably named Creflo Dollar, this philosophy is variously referred to as Word of Faith, Name-It-and-Claim-It, or Health and Wealth theology. It has roots in the "abundant life" teachings of Oral Roberts and Norman Vincent Peale's "positive thinking," popular in the mid-twentieth century, although it can be traced even further back, at least to Russell Conwell's famous "Acres of Diamonds" speech, popularized on the Chautauqua circuit in the early twentieth century.

While there are variations among the individual groups' beliefs, the basis of the prosperity gospel is that God wants his believers to prosper both on earth and the hereafter. By extension, this position claims that God's favor—in the form of material comfort and financial security—is available to those who believe and act in accordance with its views.[305] Previously one of the prosperity gospel's foremost proponents, Bakker claims to have given up the doctrine after his fall from grace. He continues, however, to ask for donations to his ministry on a daily basis, offering earthly trinkets and the promise

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[304] Scores of the Bakkers' shows are archived at their website: http://www.jimbakkershow.com/Group/Group.aspx?ID=1000065835.

[305] David Van Biema and Jeff Chu, "Does God Want You To Be Rich?," *Time Magazine* September 10, 2006, http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1533448,00 .html.

SOS!
SAVE OUR STATIONS!

Will you be one of 200 needed?
with $500.00 gift

Join the SOS
Hall of Faith!

Have your name or loved one placed in the Hall of Faith

Miniature TV Camera & Clock

Actual Size

Receive one of the last of the Leather 3-version Parallel Bible & Commentary

Yes, Jim, I will help you keep broadcasting!

☐ Here is $500. I will be a SOS Hall of Faith member. Send me the Leather Parallel Bible & TV Camera Clock & put this name ______________________ in the Hall of Faith. *(code #900345)*

☐ Here is $100. Send me the God's Heart Necklace and God's Heart Bracelet and my **bonus** God's Heart Earrings. *(code #900346)* ☐ Here is $50. Send me just the God's Heart Necklace. *(code #300059)* ☐ Here is $50. Send me just the God's Heart Bracelet. *(code #300057)* ☐ Here is $50. Send me just the God's Heart Earrings. *(code #300060)*

430926 ML080901
Jennifer Worth

☐ Here is my best love gift: $__________.

Name:______________________ Email:______________________

Address:______________________

City:__________ State:______ Zip:______ Phone:__________

Signature:______________________ Total Amount Enclosed:__________

CREDIT CARD ACCOUNT NUMBER (ALL DIGITS) EXPIR. MO - YR

VISA MasterCard DISCOVER AMERICAN EXPRESS

Please make checks payable to " *Morningside Church, Inc.*", a tax deductible organization. Your gifts are greatly appreciated. Your gift will be used for ministry related purposes of *Morningside Church, Inc.* Gifts are considered to be without restriction as to use unless explicitly stipulated by the donor.

Morningside Church — PO Box 7330 Branson, MO 65615 — (417) 779-9000 — jimbakkershow.com

Fig 3.5. One of several solicitations sent in the months following my visit to The Jim Bakker Show.

of heavenly blessings in return. For viewers who accept Bakker's spiritual authority, refusal to contribute might be understood as sacrilege, or at least a rejection of one's evangelical duty to help spread the Good News.

What proportion of viewers donate is difficult to determine, but the fact that the show, website, and residential complex have expanded for several years indicates that a good many are. The latest development from the Bakkers' new compound is the addition of a chapter of Master's Commission, a junior-college-like "discipleship training program" aimed at turning young adults in missionaries who will "reach a world with the Word of God as their foundation, prayer as their passion, and evangelism as their battle cry."[306] An international organization established in 1995, Master's Commission runs programs through individual churches, which tailor their projects to meet their needs and capabilities. Morningside's program, the Media Master's Commission, is aimed at teaching the skills—including technical knowledge and experience in camera operation, production, and direction—needed for a broadcast ministry. Young people pay several thousand dollars for a year of training, room, and board, and spend their time volunteering in the community, studying the Bible, and helping produce *The Jim Bakker Show* on a daily basis.[307]

Bakker is still in considerable debt—as much as six million dollars—as a result of his fraudulent past, and one significant difference between Heritage USA and

[306] Master's Commission International Network, "The Purpose of Master's Commission International Network," accessed February 28, 2011, http://mcin.org/overview/purpose-of-mcin/.
[307] It's not clear what effect this program has had on the secondary-school-age students who live at Morningside. More information about the Morningside's Media Master's Commission can be seen in a promotional video at http://www.jimbakkershow.com/Publisher/Article.aspx ?ID=1000087745.

Morningside is who would be fiscally responsible, should the venture fail. If Bakker hasn't completely given up his ostentatious lifestyle, he has made conspicuous efforts to distance himself financially from Morningside and its ministries; the physical plant is held in developer Jerry Crawford's name, and the non-profit organization he leads is registered to Charlene Graham, his mother-in-law.[308]

Even without opening their wallets, though, Bakker's live audiences are asked to take on a larger part in producing the show than any other I experienced. All audiences in Branson are encouraged to heartily enjoy themselves, but Morningside's studio audience is explicitly asked to respond warmly, not only to the Bakkers and their guests, but also to *anticipated* future audiences. Emcee Kevin reminded us to smile "for God and the TV cameras," to show how happy we were to be there, and what a great blessing it is to be alive. Such requests, combined with the knowledge that their reactions to the show will likely be visible to uncountable thousands, obligate audiences—even non-believers like myself—to play along, whether joyfully, out of a sense of Christian duty, or for fear of embarrassment. Our approval was solicited (or coerced) to make us Evangelists for Jim Bakker, Morningside, and all it represents to a larger community.

Because it happened to be the Bakkers' anniversary, the show I attended was lighter than average on biblical exegesis. What little there was centered on end-times theology. Christian faith is defined by the belief in the return of the risen Christ, but evangelicals are more likely to believe in it literally and imminently, and televangelists of all stripes make a habit of warning of the End of Days. Bakker, a premillenialist who

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[308] Frankel, "Reinvented Jim Bakker looks a bit like the old: TV ministry moves to Missouri complex." A search for Morningside Church, Inc. on non-profit reporting site GuideStar (www.guidestar.org) turns up no information; Morningside has not made its finances public.

believes that we are currently living in what he refers to as “the Revelation days,” devotes segments of his program to the topic on a regular basis. He believes that the signs of Christ’s return are readable to those who are paying attention, and he interprets current events, from the continuing economic downturn to the prevalence of Atlantic hurricanes, as proof of Revelation’s promise of Tribulation preceding Jesus’ imminent arrival.[309]

Regular attention to eschatology is has a twofold effect on his audience of Evangelists. First, by drumming up fear about the destruction of the world, Bakker encourages his followers to step up in their role as Evangelizers, spreading the world of salvation- through-Christ to all. Second, by framing the Second Coming as an impending certainty, believers are pressured to behave in ways that make them ever ready and worthy of salvation, according to the tenets of the faith. If the pressure of being watched by a large public audience can coerce behavior in the studio, invoking the Panopticon of the Almighty presumably has more weight to control behavior beyond the parameters of the show.

Evangelical Politics

As the competitive religious marketplace is now bleeding over—or, rather, consciously stepping over—into the sociopolitical one, evangelizing is about more than donating money or smiling for the cameras. Churches have always operated in the larger culture, and while they have been affected by secular forces, they also shape their times. Political activism, frequently abjured as too worldly for the spiritually-minded, is a

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[309] Bakker keeps a running tab of “Breaking Revelation News” on his website, http://www.jimbakkershow.com/Publisher/Article.aspx?ID=1000092191, and since mid-2010, blogs on End-of-Days topics. There are similar accounts, like the online Rapture Index, which calculates the likelihood of Christ’s return based on dozens of factors ranging from the weather to geopolitics to the threat of ecumenism. “The Rapture Index.” http://www.raptureready.com/rap2.html

relatively new site of expansion for evangelical Christians. Having established their Ocean Groves and their Bransons, even their Morningsides, where faith can be modeled and practiced communally, the duty now is to expand and draw the outside world under Christian dominion through pre-existing systems. Writing in 2001, Noll notes "a resurgence of evangelical political action unlike anything seen since the years before the Civil War," and identifies the Assemblies of God—Bakker's denomination—as one of the most prominent groups on this front.[310]

Conservative politics have marked evangelicals as far back as the 1880s, but until the social and racial turmoil of the 1960s, white southern Protestants favored the Democratic Party, although Moore argues this was more about aligning cultural outlooks and social hierarchies than specific political aims.[311] Midcentury religious figures like Billy Graham were nominally non-partisan, but since approximately 1965, evangelical leaders like Roberts, Swaggart, and Robertson labored to transform the evangelical community from historically Democratic to contemporarily Republican, and deeply activist. The efforts of these men and others, including James Dobson and Jerry Falwell, succeeded in turning evangelical support to the right, where it has remained since the Reagan era.[312]

Because of official religious disestablishment, religious leaders have the freedom to disavow political intent, and indeed many go out of their way to claim as much, even

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[310] Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity,* 211, 188.
[311] Prothero, *American Jesus*, 81; Moore, *Selling God*, 70.
[312] Moore, *Selling God*, 250; Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity,* 23. A thorough accounting of this shift can be found in Jonathan Schoenwald's *A Time for Choosing: The Rise of Modern American Conservatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) and Sara Diamond's *Roads to Dominion: Right-Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1995).

as they "[enjoy] considerable leeway in the practice of religious politics."[313] While my attention has been to the rise of the Evangelist—a metaphorical Christian soldier—through the twentieth century, the efforts of the Christian Right have resulted in a parallel rise in *literal* Christian soldiers. As documented by Anne C. Loveland in *American Evangelicals and the U.S. Military, 1942-1993*, Evangelical interference in the armed forces during the post-war era served to grow the ranks of the faithful and ultimately, by the Vietnam era, to shape national military policy towards what has been referred to as "messianic nationalism" for decades to come.[314]

Producers and power brokers in Branson take a similar approach to their well-funded political activism. Although few overt political references were made during the taping of *The Jim Bakker Show* I attended in the fall of 2008, those that were made were based on the assumption that everyone present was politically conservative. Voting records confirm that they very likely were. On local, state, and federal levels, Taney County is represented completely by Republicans, and in 2008, 68% voted for Republican candidate John McCain, over eventual winner Barack Obama, who garnered a mere 31% of the votes. Surrounding counties show similar percentages.[315]

In his investigation of the HFE Corporation, the owners of Silver Dollar City, Ketchell documents the religious, business, and political ties of various members of the

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[313] Moore, *Selling God*, 69.

[314] Anne C. Loveland, *American Evangelicals and the U.S. Military, 1942-1993* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997). See also Michael Weinstein's *With God on Our Side: One Man's War Against an Evangelical Coup in America's Military* (New York: Thomas Dunne, 2006).

[315] Associated Press, "Results By County," Map by Nathaniel Vaughn Kelso; 3-D map by Gene Thorp, *The Washington Post*; data processing by Larry Sanderson and Hailong Wang, accessed February 28, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/interactives/campaign08/election/uscounties.html.

board, noting past and present connections to Bible publishing company Thomas Nelson Inc., the PTL network, and a Christian ministry called Family Wise. The Herschends themselves have long-standing relationships with conservative Republicans George H. W. Bush (who is lionized in exhibit both at the Veterans Memorial Museum and the Ralph Foster Museum) and former Missouri Senator and Governor John Ashcroft, a member of the Assemblies of God Church.[316]

Although Bakker may not be explicitly telling people how to vote, his efforts are part of a larger cultural movement at work in the United States. The "good news" many of these Evangelists are spreading is not simply about creating a personal relationship with Jesus: it's aimed at establishing neo-conservative policies and weakening the divide between church and state.

Conclusion

The current evangelical trends toward worship-as-entertainment and Christianity as a lifestyle have its roots in the Third Great Awakening, during which both the religious community of Ocean Grove, New Jersey, and the beginnings of Branson's religiously-inflected tourist industry were born. Both of these communities functioned, or continue to function, as distinctive performance spaces where audiences, already predisposed to particular religious beliefs, are presented with models of appropriate behavior and expected to reenact them together as part of the process of religious refinement.

Aaron Ketchell's deep reading of religion in Branson is not in the least false, but its focus fails to account for *why* religion functions as it does in Branson. His deep contextualization of religious faith across almost a century is rigorous and worthwhile,

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[316] Ketchell, *Holy Hills*, 75-76, 78-79.

but because he reads performance as incidental, rather than fundamental, to its success, he forgoes the possibility of understanding why evangelical Christianity has taken such a strong hold in its theatres, and how it interacts with the other primary themes on display.

In Branson, the Evangelist is the model that guests are asked to emulate in their time off. Holy leisure of the type found by visiting Sight & Sound Theatres or *The Jim Bakker Show* is not only meant to rejuvenate in the moment, are but also to reinforce the values one is to live after returning home. Whether or not one is evangelical—and perhaps particularly if one is not—the standards of behavior put forth by such attractions are overwhelmingly clear. In ways large and small, audiences in Branson are encouraged (and occasionally exhorted) to worship, witness, convert, donate, vote along conservative ideological lines, and always return to Branson for spiritual refreshment.

For evangelicals, the line between religion and entertainment is thin, as is the line between religion and politics, and performing the Evangelist allows consumers a way to combine pleasure and personal politics with a cover of plausible deniability and moral rectitude. Combined with the Hillbilly and the Soldier-patriot, the Evangelist presents a nation that is rurally, militarily, religiously, and often—but not always—racially reflected. The final chapter will demonstrate that even though Branson is strikingly homogeneous, ultimately, it is the *performance* of certain discourses that matters more than particulars of demography.

CHAPTER FOUR:

Performing the American Dream, Performing the Immigrant

"Only in America can a Russian and a Japanese own a theater in the middle of the Ozarks!"

Yakov Smirnoff[317]

Because most nations are, in Benedict Anderson's term, "imagined," people are free, and even encouraged, to affiliate with those they've never met and with whom they may have little in common. While this is the case for any nation, the United States might be considered the *most* imagined nation, crystallized in the idea of "the American Dream." Although the general idea is centuries old, the term dates only from 1931, with the publication of John Truslow Adams' book, *The Epic of America*. Widely defined and just as widely embraced, believing in "the American Dream" seems to be a crucial part of being an American, since "explicit allegiance, not involuntary inheritance, is the theoretical basis of American identity."[318] This certainly holds true in Branson, where American identity, however nebulously defined, is widely and enthusiastically celebrated.

There is no single American Dream; like every other cultural trope, it is shaped by the circumstances of time and place, but might include any or all of the following definitions: class transcendence, home ownership, freedom of worship, a better life for one's children, work opportunities, racial/ethnic integration, and the rejection or rehabilitation of the Other. While the American Dream is "a complex idea with manifold implications," what most definitions of the dream have had in common is "economic or

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[317] Yakov Smirnoff, "Show Description," accessed February 28, 2011, http://www.yakov.com/show.html.

[318] Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 6.

social advancement," both of which are connected to larger ideas of personal freedom and agency.[319] Political scientist Cal Jillson echoes this, noting that social mobility has been an important part of the Dream, especially for immigrants.[320]

One important facet of the Dream—and a particularly potent one—is that its opportunities for advancement are equally available to all people, regardless of race, ethnicity, or religious beliefs. Although it can work to unite those who otherwise have few commonalities, "too often [the Dream] serves as a form of lazy shorthand, particularly on the part of those who use it to ignore, or even consciously obscure, real divisions in American society."[321] While many national, racial, and cultural "Others" have been welcome in the US, many have struggled, and our history is interlarded with tales of legal and extra-legal ways that "native" citizens have responded to the expansion of their national brethren, even as they mouth the platitudes of the American Dream. Branson is no exception, in that it presents a dream "for all" to a population that is decidedly circumscribed by race, religion, and economic profile.

Another important way that Branson "celebrates America" is by pointing to its legendary (perhaps in multiple senses?) inclusiveness. While it puts forth an image of a nation made stronger by its diversity, both Branson's audience and its entertainers are almost exclusively white and native-born.[322] So, by some standards, Branson has a

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[319] Ibid., 7-8.
[320] Cal Jillson, *Pursuing the American Dream: Opportunity and Exclusion Over Four Centuries* (Lawrence: Kansas University Press, 2004), xii; Cullen classifies the "Dream of the Immigrant" as a subset of the "Dream of Upward Mobility."
[321] Cullen, *American Dream*, 189.
[322] To date, I have found evidence of only one program prominently featuring African Americans: "The World Famous Platters Morning Show," which presents "great romantic music from the 50's and 60's," according to their brochure. Other shows include non-white performers, but they are few and far between. Visitors to Branson are

challenge: how can it claim the Dream for all people when such a small proportion of "all people" are participating?

The two significant exceptions to Branson's white and native-born display will underscore that Branson, which seems to be about an all-encompassing national identity, is actually deeply particular, and about the adherence to and performance of particular ideological position-takings, a class habitus of politically and socially conservative white middle-Americans, reliant on the themes of Christian religiosity, fabricated history, and constructed rurality. This chapter will revisit the themes already established in the preceding chapters to show how the power of performance is greater even than the power of reality. While they will be dealt with singly, there are inevitable overlaps and intersections.

The previous three chapters have explained these themes and how they are articulated and perpetuated through performance. While no single one is particularly surprising to find in a pop culture environment, the uniformity with which they are deployed across entertainments is rather striking, and serves reinforce the homogeneity of the values that define the imagi(ned)nation. This uniformity exhibits itself not only in terms of what cultural artifacts it produces, but also in who creates and partakes in the entertainments and attractions available. In other words, on both sides of the footlights, Branson is largely composed of native-born United States citizens from suburban or rural areas, with a middle or working-class background, who are both Christian and white. But

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not racially identified in published tourism demographics, but my observations upon two visits to the area in the mid-1990s, two more in 2007, and the almost total absence of non-white faces in promotional materials support this claim.

there are a small number of performers who are in many ways demographic outliers and yet who have achieved great success with the mostly Anglo, native audience in Branson.

This chapter will focus on cultural/ethnic outliers in Branson, with particular attention to headliners Shoji Tabuchi and Yakov Smirnoff, and will demonstrate how a savvy reading and performance of popular cultural tropes allow some performers to combine and harness these themes into a powerful performance archetype--the American Dreamer—that compensates for the differences that might otherwise serve to exclude them from Branson.

Although there's no way to confuse the two men, Tabuchi and Smirnoff have much in common. Both have been in the country for decades (Tabuchi arrived in 1967; Smirnoff a decade later), and each has been naturalized as a citizen: Tabuchi upon his marriage to a citizen in 1968, and Smirnoff in 1986. Both men have been headlining in Branson, with remarkable success, for years.

Tabuchi's eponymous theatre, decorated in purple, pink, and turquoise, and lashed with neon, seats nearly 1,966. Today, adult tickets cost approximately $43.00 each, allowing a possible income of up to $169,000 per day on two-show days (of which there are 98). With more than 200 shows a year, Shoji is grossing millions from box office sales alone, to say nothing of the money from his gift shop and concession stands, and employs, as he announces during his show, a staff of 80.[323]

He wasn't always the celebrity he is today, but his progress in Branson was remarkably steady. Born in Japan, he first came to Branson for a six-month featured gig in 1980 (before Branson was more than a regional attraction), which quickly led to a

[323] Shoji Tabuchi Show, "20011 Show Schedule," accessed February 28, 2011, http://www.shoji.com/showschedule.html.

regular seasonal contract at the Starlite Theater, until 1985, when he moved to Country Music World as a headliner. In 1989, Tabuchi had the name and resources to strike out on his own, and with his wife Dorothy in the role of producer, he bought a lot off "the Strip" and opened his 30,000 square-foot theatre, the first on what is now the busy Shepherd of the Hills Expressway, in 1990.[324]

Yakov Smirnoff, the "famous Russian comedian," established his career comparing life in the former Soviet Union to that in the United States, with his oft-repeated refrain "What a Country!", in the 1980s. He has been playing in Branson since 1992, after the fall of communism undercut his Los Angeles-based comedy career. His success as a guest performer led him to build his own 1,300-seat showplace, Yakov's American Pavilion, in 1994. Ten years later, he moved to a new, 2,200-seat theatre just north of town, simply called the Yakov Smirnoff Theater.[325]

Smirnoff previously performed as many as 200 times a year at an average of $32.00 a ticket, doing brisk business.[326] After fifteen years in Branson, Smirnoff now performs mostly during the day, and brings in other performers like country star Joe Diffie to keep his theatre running. More recently, he has added a dinner-theatre circus act, called "Yakov's Dinner Adventure," in which he only appears in taped pieces (see below), and he spends time on new projects, like a short-lived local television talk show on the NBC affiliate in Springfield, Missouri, in late 2008.

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[324] H. Y. Nahm, "King of Branson," *Goldsea Asian American Daily*, accessed February 28, 2011, http://www.goldsea.com/Personalities/Tabuchi/tabuchi.com.
[325] Associated Press, "Comedian Smirnoff moves into larger Branson theater." November 19, 2003, via Lexis-Nexis. It was later renovated to seat 1800.
[326] As of 2010, Smirnoff is performing in Branson fewer than 100 times a year.

Their success may initially surprise, given that Tabuchi and Smirnoff represent countries that many Branson audiences, heavily populated with World War II veterans and those who lived through the chilliest years of the Cold War, might be predisposed to reject. However, inspecting how these "outliers" function will demonstrate how powerful performance is in Branson—provided it is the *right kind* of performance. A second surprise: the "right kind" of performance is not one that is simply about erasing one's differences. Quite the contrary; the men's success is largely reliant on their performance of their original nationalities, and throughout their shows, they play with various images of their homelands to connect with audiences. Themes of rurality, a mythical—or at least heavily revised—personal history of struggle and triumph, and Christian belief are, as we have seen, widely employed in Branson, and Tabuchi and Smirnoff play with aspects of their national/ethnic Otherness and the appeal of The American Dream to harness the power of all three tropes.

Smirnoff himself recognizes the power of imagination and dreaming in creating national affiliation when he notes late in his show that "[y]ou can go to Italy but you cannot become Italian. You can go to France but you cannot become French. But you can come to America and become an American."[327] He and Tabuchi stand before us, textbook examples of the (mostly) assimilated Other.

A skit in the second half of Smirnoff's show takes the idea of the well-integrated Other to its logical extreme when Smirnoff, in a kind of dream sequence, plays the ultimate avatar of American success: President of the United States [Fig 4.1]. The skit is

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[327] Yakov Smirnoff Show, "Yakov Smirnoff Receives Americanism Award," accessed February 28, 2011, http://www.yakov.com/news/035.html. Smirnoff repeated this sentiment during his show, almost verbatim.

figured as a press conference. Wearing a dark suit and standing at a podium in front of a large blue backdrop styled to look like the presidential seal, Smirnoff is flanked by pretty chorines dressed as Secret Service agents. He takes a number of questions from the audience, who are in essence playing the press corps. I learned from Terry Bowen, the Chief Operating Officer of Smirnoff's production company Comrade In America, Inc., that at least four of the six or seven questions were from plants placed in the audience, although it was unclear whether these were simply patrons who were fed specific questions, or if employees sit in on the shows for this purpose. Never mind that the Constitution forbids non-native citizens from holding that office; it is *the image* of success and identification that counts with audiences. Of course, in this deeply Republican part of the state, his right-leaning jokes don't hurt, either.

Scholars from a variety of disciplines, especially education, urban studies, and sociology, have studied how cultural, racial, and class differences serve to prevent some Americans from achieving their dreams, but the fantasy that the United States—the "melting-pot" of the globe—is a land of equal-opportunity, persists.[328] The myth of the

[328] See Jonathan Kozol's *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006), Lawrence Mitchell's *Stacked Deck: A Story of Selfishness in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), and Heather Beth Johnson's *The American Dream and the Power of Wealth: Choosing Schools and Inheriting Inequality in the Land of Opportunity* (New York: Routledge, 2006), among others.

"Fig 4.1. President Yakov" skit from Smirnoff's summer 2007 show. Photo by the author.

"melting pot," a term coined by a popular play in the early twentieth century, implies that all peoples will come together equally, but studies have shown that assimilation is more often unidirectional—immigrant Others must, and do, deracinate themselves to greater or lesser degrees to make it in the US. The performance of this assimilation is one of the strategies employed by ethnic others in Branson.[329]

Other Others

Not all groups of Others, like Native Americans and blacks, are equally accepted. Of course, ethnic Others in America have the long history of finding acceptance with native audiences through pursuing careers in the entertainment industry and very often that acceptance is gained by exoticization: highlighting the difference, or even basing their act *on* their Otherness, which allows them to reflect the dominance of their audience back at itself in particular ways.[330] Notably, many performers who use this strategy are found in popular entertainments, and are traceable to or parallel with the variety model. Branson features a number of these, including the Twelve Irish Tenors, and the Acrobats of China, who play at The New Shanghai Theater. In the case of the latter group,

[329] Israel Zangwill's play *The Melting Pot* premiered the same year that Wright's *The Shepherd of the Hills* was published: 1908. For studies on ethnic deracination in the United States, see Richard Dyer, *White* (New York: Routledge, 1997), Michelle Fine, Lois Weis, Linda Powell Pruitt, and April Burns, eds., *Off White: Readings on Power, Privilege, and Resistance, 2nd Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2001), and Ruth Frankenberg, *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

[330] This tension has been studied in the work of racially/ethnically "marked" performers in the United States as diverse as Anna May Wong, Bert Williams, Al Jolson, Fanny Brice, Eddie Murphy, Marlene Dietrich, George Lopez, etc. See Graham Russel Gao Hodges' *Anna May Wong: From Laundryman's Daughter to Hollywood Legend* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrels*, eds. Annemarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), among others.

strategies of both assimilation and exoticization are employed, in a balancing act as impressive as any other performed by these young people.

Advertisements for the show begin the process of Othering the young performers with keywords like "mysterious," "mystical," and "oriental" to describe the coming spectacle. No attempt at contextualizing the tradition of circus in Chinese culture was made; the focus was on sensationalizing and exoticizing the spectacle. The lobby of the theatre, which is one of the newer venues in the area, built only in 2005,[331] is plain by Branson's decorative standards. Red and gold paper lanterns hang from the ceiling and two replicas of Terracotta Warriors of Shaanxi flank the central door of the beige lobby, which may house one of the most diverse crowds in Branson, as many staff members were quite obviously Chinese nationals. They are accompanied by a number of local employees, who communicated with patrons. The gift shop displays a variety of ethnically-inflected items like polyester cheongsams, parasols, fans, and "good luck drums," as well as promotional postcards and a DVD of the show. The label "Made in China" is just as likely to be found in other gift shops, but here served as a sign of exotic provenance, not of the global economic market and industrial outsourcing.

Much of the framing prior to the show focuses on the differences between China and the United States, but that changes once lights go down and the audience is treated to a newsreel-style featurette on modern Shanghai: "a picture of prosperity and progress." The short film presents the city as highly developed, forward thinking, and business oriented, with strong manufacturing, information technology, and service industries: in

[331] Acrobats of China, "Our Theatre," accessed February 28, 2011, http://acrobatsofchina .com/en/ news_1.htm.

short, wealthy, prosperous, and—as many attractive, smiling Chinese citizens in fashionable clothing assure us—comfortably Westernized.

The young emcee of the show reminded us that Shanghai is the hometown of the performers we will see, but noted that after eleven nine-month seasons in Branson, they consider it their second home. This statement earned vigorous applause from the audience, and the emcee assured us that although they do not speak English, the performers enjoy the same pastimes as everyone else in Branson: shopping, fishing, and being outdoors. Then, having sufficiently demonstrated their relatability, he encouraged us to help them feel welcome and taught us two Chinese phrases with which to do that: "ni hao" (hello) and "shi shi" (thank you).[332]

The show itself continued this strange boomeranging between identification with the performers as modern Westerners, and the exoticization of them as Asian Others. The company always performed in sex-segregated groups, and in classic Orientalist style, this dichotomy was often emphasized by associating Western identification with the male performers and Eastern exoticism with the young women. Typically, an all-female act, such as a troupe of dainty plate spinners in gauzy costumes, to the accompaniment of reedy, "Asian" music was immediately followed by a tumbling act performed by the men, dressed in baggy shorts and T-shirts, backed by a thumping hip-hop track. Western dress, however stylized, was generally much more common for male performers: a young man executed a stunning balancing act dressed like late-era Elvis Presley, the bell-

[332] The likelihood that the same performers have been coming to Branson for over a decade is slim; many of them were clearly in their teens and early twenties. The anonymity and interchangeability of the performers is underscored when the emcee asks us to help them feel welcome in what has just been referred to as their "second home."

bottoms of his white jumpsuit swaying, and a male magician appeared in a spangled dinner jacket and ruffled white shirt worthy of Liberace.

Occasionally, images of Orient and Occident were combined, as in a balletically-styled performance by the women. The featured artist, backed by a corps of six, performed a Chinese acrobatic hand-balancing act to Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* while dressed in tights and tutus. The carefully chosen contrasts of Eastern and Western ideals of female beauty, control, and strength serve to present what Said has called dangerous, "falsely unifying rubrics" of Us and Them.[333]

Although both strategies were on display, the Acrobats of China, as their name implies, end up seeming more foreign than familiar, due in no small part to their lack of personal back stories and biography, information that is regularly included to give dimension to nearly all of Branson's famous performers. These exotics remain nameless, and though incredibly popular, are not considered headliners in Branson; that privilege is reserved for more-assimilated immigrants Shoji and Yakov.

Most of the ethnic/racial others on display in Branson are also national others, who relate their identity to that of "American citizen." None are of African extract. There are very few African-American performers permanently installed in Branson. Although there have been occasional headliners like Gladys Knight or Charley Pride, and The World-Famous Platters Morning Show has been running for years, they are the exception. "Race in America" is commonly conceived of as an issue of black versus white, even though this is neither accurate nor a particularly productive way of thinking about race, especially in Branson. It is notable, however, that the Others who have found success

[333] Edward Said, "Preface" to *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage, 1978), xxviii.

here are from racial/ethnic groups who are already higher on the "ladder of whiteness" than African Americans or people of African heritage who have immigrated to the United States.[334]

As a "model minority" Japanese and a white Russian, Tabuchi and Smirnoff aren't as disadvantaged by their Otherness as some, but through the performance conventions agreed upon in Branson, they are able to turn what might be difficulties to their advantage. Each of the three performance tropes—the hillbilly, the soldier, and the evangelist—is useful, and all are commonly employed by many local stars, history-based attractions, and born-again Christians all over Branson. However, they can also be used by anyone willing to perform them. Although the content of these men's acts are autobiographically-based, both Tabuchi and Smirnoff can more properly be said to be deftly enacting certain popular discourses around citizenship, race, and class, rather than strictly performing themselves.

Religion & the Evangelist

While playing up their exotic foreignness is a necessary element, Tabuchi and Smirnoff run the risk of undermining the identificatory connection between themselves and their audiences in a town where familiarity and homogeneity are embraced wholeheartedly. So it is incumbent on Tabuchi and Smirnoff to show the many ways that they are *like* their audience members. One important way they connect is through the performance of religious faith. Born into different faith traditions—Buddhist and Jewish, respectively—both make multiple, pointed references to Christian religious belief and

[334] Ruth Frankenberg "Introduction: Local Whitenesses, Localizing Whiteness" in *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*, ed. Ruth Frankenberg (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 4, 9.

practice. This is perhaps the one area where difference is least tolerated. Just as they have chosen American citizenship, they have also chosen (at least for the purposes of performance) the purported faith of America.

Both men make references and claims to indicate they are Christian, although there is some uncertainty on the matter. Regardless, their actual beliefs are less important than what they publicly avow and perform. Marriage and childbearing has always been a religiously-freighted signifier, and no less so in recent years as battles rage over the definition of marriage and the civil rights which accompany it.

Both Tabuchi and Smirnoff married white American women —though they both subsequently divorced and Tabuchi remarried—and produced and raised children as Americans. Tabuchi has a son from his first marriage, although the child (now an adult) is never mentioned in performance, and barely referenced in news articles. However, he often appears in promotional images beside his second wife, the white, American-born Dorothy, and Christina, his adopted daughter and Dorothy's child by her first marriage. This living "family portrait" is a perfect strategy, encapsulating both Tabuchi's difference from and his assimilation into white American culture. In earlier years, both women performed with him, but Dorothy has since retired from the stage, and Christina, a pretty blonde now in her twenties, has moved to Nashville to pursue her own country music career. Christina does occasionally perform with her father, but Dorothy never appears physically, though her presence is palpable.[335] Shoji's uxorious declarations pepper his performance, and he credits her variously as a producer, designer, choreographer, and

[335] I saw Christina perform with Tabuchi in a Christmas-themed show in November of 2008.

company manager. She seems to have more power than many women in Branson, but it remains in the service of her husband, the star.

Marriage with a white, native citizen is of great symbolic importance, not only for the mostly white audiences, but apparently for other Others, as well. A lengthy feature on Tabuchi written for an Asian-American audience ranks his marriage to a "beautiful, talented southern blond" [sic] alongside his professional career as evidence of "the universe of possibilities for an Asian male in America!"[336]

Smirnoff also touts the importance of marriage; in fact, he devotes much of the second act of his performance to a how-to "Lab of Laughter," which, while proclaiming to be new, science-flavored advice, is based in old-fashioned binary thinking that fits well with conservative religious perspectives on gender. While advice to take the time and effort to laugh with your spouse seems sound, his basic premise is a bit more problematic: according to Smirnoff, women and men are *completely different* from one another. For example: men fix cars, but women decorate homes. Men always want sex from women, while women always want money from men. However, this is not a problem; quite the opposite. Smirnoff declares that as men and women have become more alike, divorce rates have gone up dramatically. He claims to have learned the two-fold secret of successful relationships: first, *vive la difference!*; and second, make sure that every relationship is balanced by having one performer, whose job it is to entertain, and one audience member, whose job it is to appreciate the performance. Although he

[336] Nahm, "King of Branson." Previously included on *Goldsea*'s list of "The 118 Most Inspiring Asian Americans of All Time," Tabuchi is currently ranked as #29 on a list of 120.

doesn't come right out and say who should be the entertainer and who the audience, there is little doubt which gender is to perform which task.[337]

Smirnoff, though himself divorced, presents himself as a family man, and frequently mentions the joy he takes in his children, Natasha and Alexander, who are being given many advantages and opportunities that he lacked in his native land. Their faces become familiar to audiences through the slideshows during his live performance and in portraits in the theatre, which are also available for sale in the gift shop.[338] He also makes reference to his former wife and her busy career, which apparently didn't give her enough time to be an appreciative audience member.

As far as overt avowals of belief go, Tabuchi, at least nominally Buddhist by birth, appears to have converted. Although the Evangelist is the not the primary role he plays, he does make repeated Christian references in his shows, and has recorded a considerable number of hymns and gospel songs for sale in his gift shop and through his website. His regular season show includes a few of these numbers, as well as some religiously-inflected banter, but the final set piece of his holiday show is explicitly evangelical, dedicated to emphasizing the "true meaning of Christmas": the birth of Jesus, our Savior. The Biblical story from the book of Luke is briefly recounted, and the program ends with a few sacred carols, including "Silent Night," sung by the chorus, as three of the women dressed as angels appear, rigged in harnesses that allowed them to hover, as if in flight, over a tableau of the Holy Family.

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[337] This subject seems dear to Smirnoff's heart; his short-lived talk-show was built around this premise, and it also rated a mention in his 2003 Broadway show *As Long As We Both Shall Laugh!*

[338] I met Alexander, then about 11, in 2008. He seemed every inch the "normal" kid.

Although Smirnoff himself is at least ethnically Jewish, no mention is made of the fact in the press or during his show; and, in fact, he seems to veil this aspect of his personal history. When asked if Smirnoff was indeed Jewish, COO Bowen reluctantly conceded it, but added that he attends a local Christian service.[339] Anti-Semitism is not a terrible problem in southwestern Missouri, perhaps because there are almost no Jews.

There are no temples in Branson; the closest is a Reform synagogue in Springfield, some 45 miles away. Branson does have a small Messianic Judaic congregation, but this sect, largely comprised of Christians who wish to emulate Jesus by following Jewish ritual, is not recognized as a Jewish faith.

Whatever his faith may be—and ultimately this is of minor importance; what matters is his performance of a particular religious discourse—Smirnoff plays down his Jewishness in favor of his Ukrainian heritage. While nearly all shows in Branson include showgirls or chorus boys, Smirnoff's backup group—who, he informs audiences, are themselves mostly Russians or Ukrainians seeking U.S. citizenship—dress in spangled Ukrainian folk costumes and perform "traditional Cossack dances" like the leaping, high-energy Ukrainian hopak and the Russian folk dance know as the barynya.

These Cossack dancers are skilled and offer impressive spectacle, but they also help erase Smirnoff's Jewishness. He began this process by changing his surname from the recognizably Jewish "Pokhis" to the recognizably Russian—thanks to vodka advertising—"Smirnoff." But in promotional materials and during his show, Smirnoff too appears in "Russian dress." Given his age and the content of his act, this might have

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[339] Terry Bowen, Chief Operating Officer of Comrade in America, Inc., in discussion with the author. July 22, 2007, Yakov Smirnoff Theatre, Branson, Missouri. Bowen did not clarify what sort of church Smirnoff attends, nor did we discuss his actual religious beliefs.

meant Soviet-era military attire or the simple, twentieth-century civilian garb of his youth. However, Smirnoff dons the stylized dress of a nineteenth-century Cossack. Of course, the costume strikes one as distinctly "Russian"—that is, Other—but it also serves to mark Smirnoff as ethnically white, as Cossacks are reputedly of "pure" Slavic heritage, and religiously Christian, rather then ethnically and religiously Jewish. It is highly doubtful that Smirnoff is ignorant of the role that Cossacks played in oppression and ejection of Jews from Russia over more than three centuries, [340] making his choice all the more significant. He seems to have bet that, for Branson audiences, being Russian is "more American" than being Jewish.

Smirnoff makes no overt testimony of any faith during his regular act, but the months of November and December find him hosting a special Christmas-themed show for his audience. Even during the regular season, he makes religious references to the vaguely Christian promise of a heavenly afterlife and offers prints of his paintings of Jesus, entitled *Love and Laughte*r and *Joy to the World*, for sale in his gift shop, along with books, matryoshka dolls, and t-shirts trumpeting "God Bless America" [Fig 4.2].

Beyond profiting off vaguely religious merchandise, Smirnoff is also selling a quasi-secular version of the Prosperity Gospel: Positive Psychology. Launched as a social-behavioral science subfield by Professor Martin Seligman in 1998, Positive Psychology declares itself "the science of happiness," and a response to the disorder-

[340] For background on the role of Cossacks in Jewish eradication, see Zvi Y. Gitelman, A *Century of Ambivalence: The Jews of Russia and the Soviet Union, 1881 to the Present* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2001), and John Klier and Shlomo Lambroza's *Pogroms: Anti-Jewish Violence in Modern Russian History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

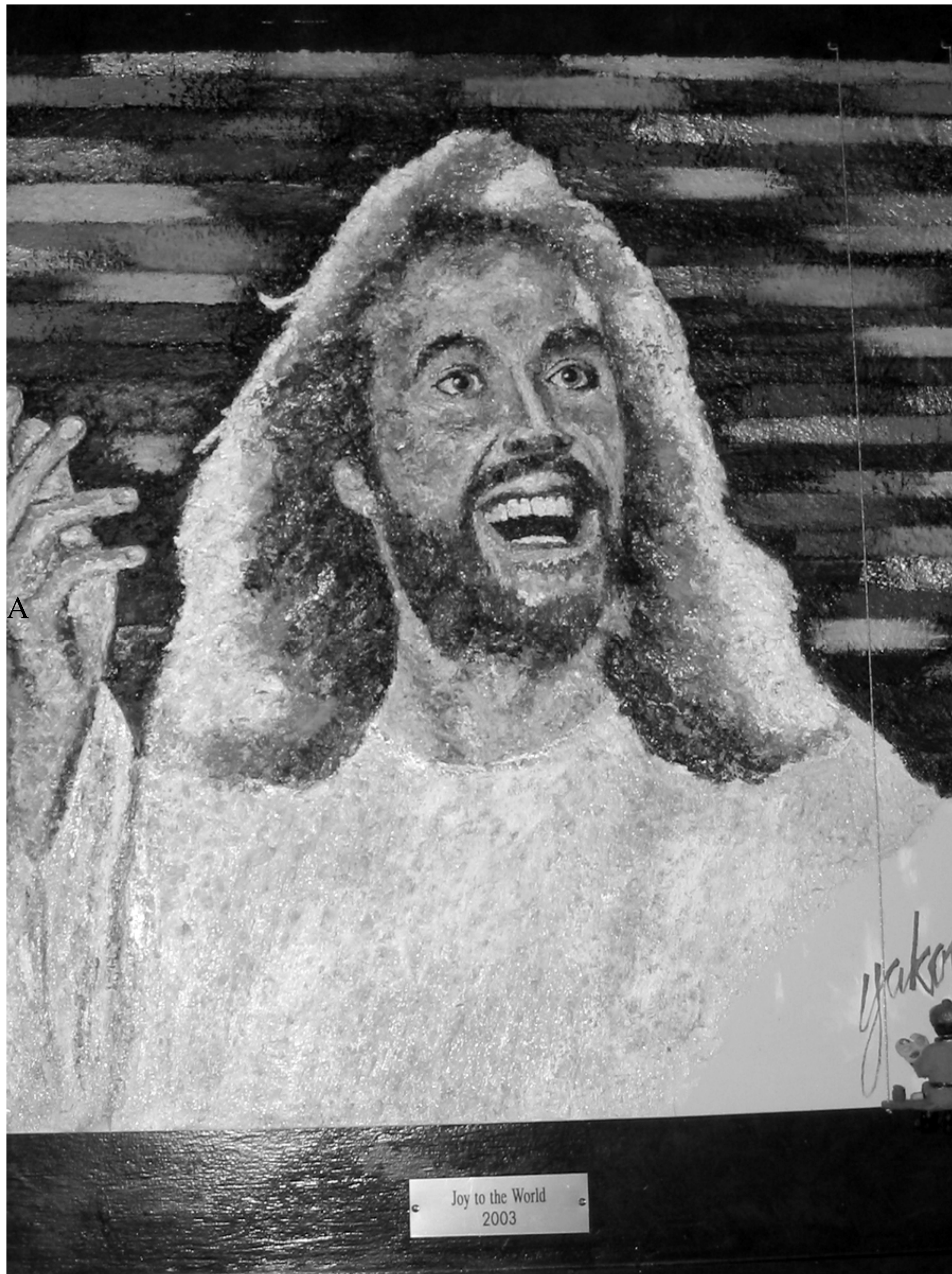

Fig 4.2. A painting of Jesus, entitled *Joy to the World*, is available for sale in Yakov Smirnoff's gift shop.

focused approach of mainstream psychology. Seligman has devised a formula for happiness (**H**appiness = genetic **S**et-point + intervening **C**ircumstances + factors under **V**oluntary control) and has helped establish the field through his Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania, where, in 2006, Smirnoff completed a one-year masters' program in Applied Positive Psychology.[341]

Although the field now has several degree programs, scores of university courses, a number of journals, and an annual conference, it lacks broader acceptance in academic circles, as Chris Hedges points out in *Empire of Illusion*, calling Positive Psychology "a quack science" that "gives an academic patina to fantasy."[342] Hedges and others, including Alistair Miller and Barbara Ehrenreich, are critical of its lack of scientific rigor, as well as of Seligman's criticism of what he terms "learned helplessness" (which leads pessimists to give up or fail) that conveniently ignores the real social, cultural, financial, and political contingencies of individual lives.[343]

Ehrenreich notes the connections between the feel-good messages of the Prosperity Gospel and those of Positive Psychology, placing chapters on these subjects back-to-back in *Bright-sided.* Psychologist Richard S. Lazarus, in an extended critique of Positive Psychology, also notes the links between the two: "In my opinion, they are promoting a kind of religion, a vision from on high, which is falsely clothed in a claim to

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[341] The MAPP degree is not a licensing program and has no direct practical application.
[342] Chris Hedges, "The Illusion of Happiness" in *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle* (New York: Nation Books, 2009) 117, 120.
[343] See Alistair Miller, "A Critique of Positive Psychology—or 'The New Science of Happiness'." *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 42: 3-4 (2008), 591-608; and Barbara Ehrenreich, *Bright-sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009).

science that never materializes. … As I read what they say, I found myself thinking I must have entered a house of worship rather than a scholarly or scientific debate."[344]

However questionable academe has found Positive Psychology, many popular manifestations of it have found great success with the self-help crowd. Rhonda Byrne's 2006 *The Secret* and its 2010 follow-up *The Power*; as well as Esther Hicks' series beginning with *The Law of Attraction: The Basics of the Teachings of Abraham*, also from 2006, argue that banishing negative thoughts will, through the power of "the universe," draw good things to the right-thinking individual. Although it has been revised with more ecumenical language, the idea is not significantly different than Norman Vincent Peale's perpetually-in-print *The Power of Positive Thinking*, an important link in the genealogy of the Prosperity Gospel.

Since completing his program, Smirnoff has found additional success folding some of the more glib elements of Positive Psychology into his show, as well as guest-lecturing on related topics at area colleges.[345] His history of proclaiming the United States a golden land of opportunity for all fits in well with the wish-and-work-yourself-rich ethos of Positive Psychology, and echoes the messages of the Prosperity Gospel seen in many of the churches and religious attractions in the area. Even without an explicit religious underpinning, Smirnoff is still the Evangelist, proclaiming the good news of

[344] Richard S. Lazarus, "Author's Response: The Lazarus Manifesto for Positive Psychology and Psychology in General" in *Psychological Inquiry* 14:2 (2003), 176.
[345] Yakov Smirnoff Show, "Professor Yakov Smirnoff Teaches Psychology of Laughter at MSU (And It's No Joke)," July 18, 2006, accessed February 28, 2011, http://news.yakov.com/2008/06/professor-yakov-smirnoff-teaches.html; "Adjunct Professor Smirnoff Teaches 'Living Happily Ever Laughter' at Drury University" January 1, 2007, accessed February 28, 2011, http://news.yakov.com/2007_01_01_archive.html; and "Yakov Smirnoff Is Getting Serious About Laughter," May 1, 2007, accessed February 28, 2011, http://news.yakov.com/2007/05/yakov-smirnoff-is-getting-serious-about.html.

prosperity and wealth for everyone who, like him, is a positive-thinking American Dreamer.

Heritage & the Soldier

This theme and its corresponding archetype is probably the single most important of the three for Tabuchi and Smirnoff, as they are unable to claim locality. Self-produced promotional materials and press coverage from both inside and outside Branson make it clear from the outset that a large part of the appeal of Tabuchi's and Smirnoff's shows is that they are based on the headliner's personal cultural narrative as an immigrant to the United States. Personal stories are a common theme on Branson stages, where entertainers regularly regale audiences with anecdotes about their children's antics, or relate charming stories about meeting their spouses.

Although both Tabuchi and Smirnoff trade in these kinds of domestic details as well, their shows are largely constructed around their immigration to the United States. There can be no doubt that immigration is a transformative event (thus partially explaining the performers' reliance on it), but it continues to sell to viewers because it highlights their Otherness, thereby making their voluntary American-ness visible and significant. The *fact* of their Otherness may be obvious, but it isn't sufficient. So, while both proclaim their Americanness and loyalty to the values of their adopted homeland, they simultaneously go to marvelous lengths to demonstrate to audiences their many cultural differences.

Shoji Tabuchi

There's no ignoring Shoji Tabuchi is not an American by birth, so his organization has chosen to play up his "exotic" background. Almost every interview and

feature concerning Tabuchi, whether produced by its own organization or from an outside source, mentions his ethnic background—as if his name and accent were not indication enough—and his immigration story.

The son of a business executive and a homemaker, Tabuchi was expected to follow in his father's conservative footsteps. He took Suzuki violin lessons as a child, but his first exposure to Country and Western music was in 1964, when, as a college student, he saw Roy Acuff and the Smokey Mountain Boys play in nearby Osaka. Shortly thereafter, he started a band called the Bluegrass Ramblers and found some measure of success while still a college student. His desire to become a professional musician led him to leave for the United States in 1967, without finishing his undergraduate degree.

Although he came to the San Francisco bay area on a tourist visa, he stayed and began to work off the books as a musician: that is, illegally, although this detail is conveniently omitted from his shows. He started a short-lived band with two other Japanese musicians called the Osaka Okies. Within a year, he met and married an American woman, which secured him a green card and brought him to the Midwest. He continued to play at night while working as a hospital orderly in Wichita, Kansas. Within a number of years, he was able to support himself as a touring musician, both in ensembles and as a solo performer, and landed in Branson in 1980.[346]

Although his appearance, which includes his persistently unfashionable bowl-cut hairstyle and signature spangled dinner jackets [Fig 4.3], and still significantly accented English might be sufficient to mark him as "Other," Tabuchi also interlards his shows with what appear to be randomly selected aspects of Japanese cultural history. There is

[346] Nahm, "King of Branson," 5-8.

Fig 4.3. Shoji Tabuchi , sporting his signature look, discusses his past in every performance. Photo by the author from 2007.

little discussion of the context or meaning of these displays, which include Noh costumes and a demonstration of the shamisen; the focus is on their exotic, spectacular nature. Taiko drums are a relatively new addition to this line-up, and are given a bit more explication, both during the show and on the website, which describes the drums as "a symbol of the rural community" and "the origin of the spirit of the Japanese people."[347] While these instruments do indeed have a long history, the "tradition" of taiko drumming was consciously adopted in post-war Japan as a way of reviving its lost cultural heritage in the face of encroaching Westernization. This dehistoricization serves to obscure the reality of contemporary Japan, and to situate Tabuchi among a mythologized, essential and ancient foreign-ness that serves him both as a Japanese and an American.

These arguably "authentic" elements are mixed in with fanciful fabrications of Japanese culture, including "many Geishas in obied kimonos and their Mikado," creating a hyperreal landscape that one local journalist described as "a Japanese Disneyland."[348] The casual blending of real and fake extends to the music; alongside his renditions of "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik" and "I Left My Heart in San Francisco," Tabuchi plays a "Japanese Medley" that includes "Sukiyaki" ("Ue o muite arukō") and another song popularized by Kyu Sakamoto, "China Nights" ("Shina No Yoru"). All of these elements—real, not real, and hyperreal—combine to make the message clear: Shoji Tabuchi is, first and foremost, Asian, non-white, Other.

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[347] Shoji Tabuchi Show, "About the Show," accessed February 28, 2011, http://www.shoji.com/show.html.

[348] K. L. Moore, "A Japanese Disneyland—Shoji Tabuchi," *The Branson Courier*, July 25, 2004, accessed February 28, 2011, http://www.bransoncourier.com/article_print.php ?news_ID=212.

This cultural chop suey is also reflected in the random mix of historical periods represented by the theatre's famed décor. Touted as the premiere showplace in Branson, the Shoji Tabuchi Theatre is, according to its website, designed to resemble movie palaces of the 1930s, but its neon and chrome are more reminiscent of a mid-century diner [Fig 4.4]. The design is further complicated by the elaborate and much-ballyhooed bathrooms, ostentatiously decorated with various elements drawn from the nineteenth century (a billiards table), alongside reproductions (carved sinks) and contemporary pieces in the same sort of hodge-podge that marks so many of Branson's "historical" displays. There is no particular meaning behind these historically freighted objects; they are simply valuable and noteworthy for being ornamental and, comparatively speaking, "old."

In addition to highlighting his unusual background, publicity for Tabuchi's show commends him for "American" characteristics long used to praise successful immigrants: Shoji Tabuchi is not only a talented musician, but he is also a "dedicated and hard-working" performer who "dreamed…worked for… and achieved what he set out to do."[349] Another local paper includes this variation on the trope of the plucky immigrant who risks it all for a chance at success in the United States: "Shoji arrived…with a violin, $500 in his pocket, $100 stuffed inside his shoe, with no promises and knew [sic] no one in our great country, but he had plenty of dreams."[350]

Tabuchi appears to know that this strategy is effective, since he repeats and embellishes these narratives during his performance. In the second act of his show, he

[349] Moore, "A Japanese Disneyland."
[350] Ibid.

Fig 4.4. The Shoji Tabuchi Theatre decorated and lit for the Christmas season. Above the threshold, Tabuchi is featured in a portrait with his wife, Dorothy. Photo by the author.

recounts the story of hearing country and western music for the first time. This led him to America: a country, he reports, built on people's dreams, and the place where his dream came true. He goes on to report his naturalization as a citizen, and straightforwardly expresses his pride and gratitude toward his adopted homeland, prompting wild applause from audiences.

As seen in *Celebrate America!*, the immigrant can be hailed as a patriot for his suffering in the name of his adopted nation. Both men use this to their advantage, emphasizing the difficulties of their lives before coming to America, and in the early days as strangers in a strange land.

Yakov Smirnoff

Personal history—its repetition and its revision in performance—is even more central to Smirnoff's success than Tabuchi's. While Tabuchi's performance is largely musical and is supported by a large ensemble of musicians, Smirnoff's personally-related history comprises the central thrust of his show. His performance documents the rewriting of his own history; one in which he transforms from a Soviet into an American (and from a Jew to a non-Jew). But his rewriting goes deeper.

The focus on heritage is clear from the very first images we have of Smirnoff. Advertisements, billboards, and pamphlets alike present Smirnoff garbed in his nineteenth-century Russian peasant wear—complete with fur ushanka—proudly waving an American flag. Even so, the threatening specter of a Soviet menace lurks in the shadows: Smirnoff is also pictured wielding a sputtering stick of dynamite, or plugging his ears in anticipation of an detonation, and his comedy is described as dangerous, leading to "explosive laughter" [Fig 4.5]. Likewise, the interior of his theater, a fairly

Fig 4.5. In promotional images like this one seen on the outside of his theatre, Yakov Smirnoff presents himself as a wacky, but still dangerous, Russian. Photo by the author.

bland beige structure from the outside, is elaborately decorated with vivid designs meant to resemble the colors and textures of the onion domes of St. Basil's Cathedral in Red Square. Shortly before he takes the stage, a taped piece briefly details Smirnoff's personal history: his arrival in the United States in the 1970s, his television and movie career, and his naturalization as a citizen in 1986.

Like the vast majority of Branson's spectacles, Smirnoff's show is patterned on variety-style entertainment, alternating skits, music, and dance, and audience participation segments with straightforward first-person address. This address is always taken on by Smirnoff himself, and is heavily based in personal narrative. The show is divided by an intermission; the first half is focused on Smirnoff's history, and what makes him an Other.

Not only does Smirnoff rely on a selectively remembered version of his history, he also presents an idealized image of the United States and its citizens. During his show, Smirnoff explicitly states his belief that in America, if you "work hard" and "put your mind to it," you can achieve great things (as, one must assume, *he* has). Later in his performance, he tells a story of American generosity. Having learned of his family's money troubles, the landlady at his first apartment in New York, "Mrs. Landau," took up a collection to pay their rent. She also brought warm blankets and other goods, including a waffle iron, which Smirnoff jokes burned a funny pattern on his pants. He credits her as one of many citizens who showed him compassion in those early days and notes that "in America, kindness is as natural as freedom." This establishes a dichotomy, based in Cold War ideology, between the cruel and repressive Russia/USSR (which in Smirnoff's

performances are variously distinct from, and then collapsed into, one another), and the gracious, liberated United States. However, the dichotomy is uneven: USSR is a cold and faceless monolith, while the USA is characterized as a warm, bustling matron bearing gifts.[351]

Through both structure and themes, Smirnoff is also engaged in rewriting his own Russian past, living off that past while replaying it endlessly in the present, *and* rewriting American history and its relationship to immigration and immigrants. He focuses on the small acts of goodness that he has benefitted from at the hands of individual Americans like Mrs. Landau, rather than acknowledging that larger acts, like US government policies, are what allowed him to immigrate and naturalize in the first place. He similarly ignores the policies that have been used to exclude or marginalize various groups, including Eastern European Jews. His focus on individualism not only plays well in do-it-yourself Branson, it also erases social and historical trends and characterizes an individual's success or failure largely as a matter of his or her own doing.

Smirnoff claims an American identity not only because he was naturalized, but because it is clear he *believes in the American dream*. He performs his patriotism quite movingly; it seems at one point that he might even have tears in his eyes, while making reference to America as a heaven-on-earth. And with good reason; he, like Tabuchi, has lived any number of versions of "the American dream." Both men have achieved remarkable wealth and significant fame. Both have integrated into American society through marriage and child-bearing. Both own homes and successful businesses. They have, by almost every standard, "made it."

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[351] This is a sharp contrast to the national gendering of China vs. America seen in the Acrobat act across town.

Smirnoff has been a citizen of the United States nearly as long as he was a resident of Ukraine, and a resident of the US for even longer. Tabuchi, too: he is currently celebrating twenty-two years in Branson, about as long as he lived in Japan. Despite their reliance on their sometimes fuzzily-defined cultural heritage, their actual connections to the nations of their births are comparatively slim. However, by re-enacting their choice of the United States in their shows, Tabuchi and Smirnoff achieve two important things.

First, by depending on their immigration narratives, they maintain a crucial degree of difference from their audiences so that their inclusion in the American nation—and in the Branson nation in particular—continues to mean something. Even as immigration remains a hot-button topic in national discourse, the idea of the poor, scrappy immigrant successfully assimilating and succeeding in the United States is deeply resonant. This absorption of the Other is a perpetual process, re-enacted by both Smirnoff and Tabuchi hundreds of times each season. Through both structure and themes, Smirnoff and Tabuchi are engaged in rewriting their own pasts, living off those pasts while replaying them endlessly in the present.

Second, they prove their adopted nation's superiority to their largely American-born-and-bred audience. Tabuchi's performance includes a brief salute to veterans, which segues into a big-band medley of World War II-era music. There is more than a little irony in a native of Japan saluting the veterans of what had been an enemy country, but Tabuchi seems to think of himself as a sort of ambassador for his birth nation, if not as a soldier for his adopted one. Although he claims to have dealt with a limited amount racially- or nationally-based negative feedback over the years, and has witnessed several

audience members walk out in protest of a Japanese headliner, he wants to serve as a symbol of peaceful resolution between former foes. He told a reporter: "A World War II veteran who was in bad fighting with Japanese wrote to us, 'I kept this bad memory all these years and came here and something lifted [it off me].'"[352]

Perhaps a note of bitterness exists for some audience members, but for others, it makes the salute even sweeter. After all, the United States and its allies won the Second World War, and Tabuchi's presence in Branson stands as further proof that the U.S. is victorious: not only do we have military might, but our culture and economic strength is such that our former enemies want to come and claim a piece of it. Smirnoff employs this idea in a more literal fashion, by nasally crooning a love song to a chorus member painted and dressed to resemble the Statue of Liberty. The superiority of the United States is proven because they chose it, and continue to choose it, as steadfastly as any soldier, with every new performance.

These claims rely on reading them as Other, first, so that their American-ness can mean something. Smirnoff is well aware of this, and regularly invokes the other highly successful non-native headliner in Branson: "Only In America can a Russian and a Japanese own a theater in the middle of the Ozarks!"[353]

Rurality & The Hillbilly

Both performers treated in this chapter are international figures: wealthy, famous and influential men. They are by almost no standard in the same class as their audience members, and their success places them at risk of being rejected as "elite." Just as they must carefully tread the line between exotic and assimilated, so they—like many

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[352] Tabuchi quoted in Nahm, "King of Branson," 12.
[353] Yakov Smirnoff Show, "Show Description."

headliners in Branson—also make sure to perform their everydayness and their connection to the simple rural or suburban life that is commonly held by their audience members.[354] This is expressed both as a love of Country (the United States of America), as noted above, and a love of country (the rural life). But there's more to it than that; they also put on their own kind of hickface. Both men emphasize their simple ways and comic personas, but are careful not to go too far, lest the negative attributes of the hillbilly are attributed to the racial/ethnic differences they have already labored so diligently to establish as harmless eccentricities.

Although one can easily point to examples of the negative face of the hillbilly on display in Branson, it is the positive face—more popular, anyway—that Tabuchi and Smirnoff embrace. Their "otherness" is undeniable, and I contend that their performance of the hillbilly trope is a way to access "white otherness" and hence "whiteness," which extends beyond skin color and is as much about creating empathy and identification with themselves in their audiences, who recognize that "He's not so different, after all!" Their versions of the hillbilly are more subtle than those of many white performers in the area, perhaps because embracing the mask too fully could taint them with the negative traits of the hillbilly.

Shoji Tabuchi

Of the two, Tabuchi is a bit more understated in his embrace of hickface, perhaps because his "otherness" is visibly phenotypic. Instead, his performance of hickface is largely based in the music he performs and the stories he tells about himself. Interspersed

[354] Of course, by coming to live and work and Branson, they have already chosen some level of rurality. There is a rather messy conflation of the rural and suburban here; what they have in common is that they are both *not urban* as defined by the standards outlined in Chapter 1.

with renditions of “Flop Ear Mule,” “Orange Blossom Special,” and “Swanee,” he recounts how his discovery of country and bluegrass music prompted him to move to the States and pursue a career in music. “I never picked cotton and my family never picked cotton,” Tabuchi tells every audience. “We don’t have cotton fields in Japan. We have rice paddies... but I can fiddle up ‘Those Cotton Fields Back Home.’”[355] Although he was educated in the Suzuki method, he demonstrates his fiddling skills as his chorus, kitted out in square dancing gear, do-si-dos amiably in the background.

That he has performed multiple times at Nashville’s Grand Ole Opry is emphasized as evidence of his *bona fides* not only as a musician, but as a performer and individual who fits in with the traditions of American country music. He does not compose any of his own music, but his popularity and skill have been recognized with nominations for the Ozark Music Awards and Country Music Awards.”[356] Tabuchi is mostly serious, if strictly populist, about his musicianship, although during each performance he demonstrates some tricks (playing over his head, behind his back, etc.) and does a few comic impressions.

Just as the hillbillies across town base a lot of their comedy in wordplay and silly puns, Tabuchi mines language difference for humor. He gently mocks himself for his imperfect English and jokes that he learned to speak from his neighbor Yakov Smirnoff, and his good friend Mel Tillis, who also worked in Branson for a time. Tillis is as famous for his stutter as his musical legacy, and Tabuchi does a bit of comic stuttering for his audience’s pleasure. He lingers on the subject, giving himself ample opportunity to

[355] Nahm, “King of Branson.” That Tabuchi regularly incorporates “Swanee,” a tune written and initially made famous by immigrant Jews seeking to achieve their own American Dreams, cannot go unnoted.
[356] Ibid.

contrast northern and southern accents and idioms, point out misunderstandings and difficulties, and repeat the word "humahuma-nukunukuapuaa," the name of the Hawaiian state fish, several times.

Fishing is a topic that Tabuchi uses to connect with his rural-identified audience. When he's not waving the flag or complimenting his wife (which makes him distinctly *unlike* the hillbilly) he relates his love for fishing—a popular activity in an area with tens of thousands of acres of well-stocked lakes—with his famous musician friends. He manages to joke about sushi, still an exotic dish in Branson, by mentioning that in his early fishing days, he got in trouble with Tillis for "eating the bait." Tabuchi undoubtedly draws on the conventions of hillbilly humor in his own gentle fashion, but this is as close as he comes to the comic grotesquerie of hickface.

Smirnoff

Smirnoff is a career comedian, so his connections to the hillbilly-clown are more obvious and conventional. Like the hillbilly, he regularly appears in outlandish costumes, employs puns and wordplay, emphasizes his pleasure in simple things, and mugs relentlessly.

Many of his jokes exploit language differences between Russian and English, or treat the comic confusion and culture shock he experienced upon arriving in the United States. Nearly all of the material has already been presented, either in his stand-up or his books, published more than two decades ago, including an anecdote around the affirmative American slang term "yep." In Russian, the word is a profane synonym for "to fornicate," and Smirnoff makes as much of his bewilderment at hearing an expletive

so casually used as if he had only recently arrived.[357] Whatever the topic—consumer culture, or gender relationships—Smirnoff returns to this refrain: “I bet you never thought of it that way… but you will now!” Audiences begin parroting him less than halfway through the show, taking on Smirnoff’s hickface antics as readily as they do Stub Meadows’.

Smirnoff is far wealthier than his largely blue-collar audiences,[358] but does two things to fend off any who might criticize him for being an elite. First, he acknowledges his success, which, following his impoverished Soviet upbringing and years as a struggling immigrant (which have already been carefully presented), serves as proof of his own worthiness as well as the superiority of the American free-enterprise system. Second, he takes pains to place himself as no stranger to the simple life. While taped pieces note his professional success in New York and Hollywood as a stand-up and comedic actor, Smirnoff is careful to articulate that although these coastal metropoles are good places to escape to for brief periods of time, Branson is home, the “real America.” The audience applauds approvingly at this notion. Though Branson is technically only “home” to a little over 7000 permanent residents, the idea is flattering to its visitors, many of whom live in other rural or ex-urban areas, and regularly spend vacation time in the Branson area.[359]

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[357] This story, as well as the anecdote about Mrs. Landau and the waffle iron, also appear in *America on Six Rubles a Day, or How to Become a Capitalist Pig* (New York: Vintage, 1987).
[358] As of 2004, the last year such data was collected, Branson visitors earned, on average, $51, 391 annually. Branson/Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce/Convention and Visitors Bureau, “Branson Visitor Profiles 1991-2006,” published July 23, 2007.
[359] Ibid.

Smirnoff also plays to the political leanings of his "red-state" audiences. In his "President Yakov" skit witnessed in the summer of 2007, questions, including queries on the price of gasoline (then, as now, drastically on the rise), health care, retirement planning, and the presence of troops in Iraq, were mostly nonpartisan. The answers, however, weren't. President Yakov said that in order to get out of Iraq, we should declare a war on Iran, "since it's not too far away." Though this was intended and generally received as a piece of lighthearted humor, it struck me as somewhat chilling, given current (and subsequent) geopolitics. Other responses revealed alignment with conservative Republican perspectives: global warming was shrugged off as a non-issue, and when asked his opinion of Vice President Dick Cheney, recently in the news for accidentally wounding a campaign contributor while out on a quail-shoot, Smirnoff remarked that he "should take Hillary [Clinton, then a contender in the Democratic primary for President] hunting."

However, the best example of Smirnoff's attempt to link his heritage with that of his audience through the figure of the hillbilly can be found in his original novelty song "From Red to Redneck," which he performs in the first half of the show. A number of short verses encapsulate the larger story of Smirnoff's life journey, which has already been presented. He begins the song dressed in the Cossack costume familiar from promotional materials, and at regular intervals in the narrative he tears away pieces—first his fur hat, then his tunic, then his full-legged trousers and boot coverings—to reveal a trucker hat, a plaid flannel shirt, jeans, and cowboy boots. With this he not only visually replicates his own transition, but also explicitly links the Cossack to the hillbilly. He ends the number by tearing open his flannel shirt to reveal a t-shirt emblazoned with "USA,"

to hearty applause [Figs 4.6 and 4.7]. The Cossack has already been noted as an effective mechanism to conceal or compensate for Smirnoff's Jewishness, but the popular image of the Cossack makes them something of a Ukrainian parallel to America's hillbillies. This has less to do with the reality of either cultural group than with the mythology surrounding them: both are fairly isolated, marked by their links to their land, and variously revered or reviled for their fierce independence and conservative values.[360]

This is not to say that Branson audiences, who likely know little to nothing about Cossack history or mythology, necessarily understand the reference explicitly, but parallels between the spangled chorus of foreigners in front of them—who, we are reminded, are seeking citizenship—and the wholesome American youngsters dressed in sequined country and Western gear on other Branson stages are clear enough. If indeed they do play similar roles in their respective national cultures, it may go some way to explaining why Smirnoff has been so successful in Branson, and makes some sense of the otherwise confounding tableau Smirnoff includes in the last few minutes of his show, of rural Russians saluting Lady Liberty.

Conclusion

Hickface is just one of the ways that Tabuchi and Smirnoff manage to balance precariously between difference and sameness; they also use the languages of heritage and faith to walk that careful line between their original nationality and their adopted American-ness. Because of this tension, these headliners are actually performing a

[360] See Anthony Harkins' *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), and Judith Deutsch Kornblatt's *The Cossack Hero in Russian Literature: A Study in Cultural Mythology* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992).

Fig 4.6. Smirnoff transforms from
“Red”…

Fig 4.7. to “Redneck.” Photos by the author.

continuous assimilation, which reassures audiences not only of the values of American identity, but also of the boundaries between Us and Them. There are many other performers who wave flags and proclaim America the Beautiful, but their declarations lack the *frisson* of Tabuchi's and Smirnoff's. These men show a before-and-after, or, better yet, a "both-and" image of a diverse, accepting nation to its native citizens. While it is fairly certain that they have been accepted into the Branson community, that is only an issue to the degree that they are different or otherwise marginalized to begin with. It is their "explicit allegiance" to the American Dream that matters.

The skill with which Tabuchi and Smirnoff are able to balance between exoticization and assimilation and among rurality, heritage, and evangelical Christianity overflows the boundaries of the stage and into real life, with real effects. In 2004, Tabuchi's success was recognized by the Missouri State Society of the Daughters of the America Revolution. He was granted the Americanism Award, reserved for naturalized citizens who have "demonstrated extraordinary qualities of leadership, trustworthiness, service and patriotism. They must have actively assisted others to become American citizens, or displayed outstanding ability in community affairs, preferably with emphasis on the foreign-born community."[361] In 2007, Smirnoff, too, was granted this honor.

While performances like Tabuchi's and Smirnoff's are willful, calculated acts, they fit nicely into a beloved national fiction which allows room for the inclusion of others, even (or especially) if they only exist in the imagi(ned)nation. Including exceptional Others like Tabuchi and Smirnoff into Branson's middle-American culture—while simultaneously highlighting their Otherness—bolsters comforting and conventional

[361] DAR National Society, "DAR Americanism Medal," accessed February 28, 2011, http://www.dar.org/natsociety/content.cfm?id=340&fo=y&hd=n.

ideas of the United States as land of inclusion and opportunity for all, even as it maintains a faint but permanent barrier between Us and Them. Although performance cannot perhaps override all differences in all cases, it can be effective at integrating Others, provided they are as savvy as the two treated here.

Conclusion: "Someone You Love is Always Playing in Branson"

"Real American Entertainment" is no longer the primary catchphrase in Branson. Its new slogan is "Someone you love is always playing in Branson." The first word, "someone," can reference both the performers one might appreciate and one's family and friends who participate in Branson as engaged audience members. "Playing" has a similarly double meaning: recreating, but also performing, putting on a role; both of these senses can apply to either type of "someone." This new motto underscores the importance of performance, previously overlooked by Howard, Ketchell, and others, to Branson's appeal and continued success. It also, through the choice of "playing" (as compared to "performing" or "participating") allows producers and consumers plausible deniability about the significant cultural work taking place there. Despite declarations to the contrary, there are plenty of politics on display in Branson, carefully planned and presented to play to the psychic needs of a community that craves the image of a steady, homogeneous world. Unfortunately, that display is at odds with the conditions of its performance.

The preceding pages demonstrate that Branson is governed by a number of problematic contradictions. It embraces the rhetoric of the natural world while constantly creating new, artificial landscapes and environments, and touts the value of wide open spaces, when most of it is privately owned and controlled. It trumpets the rhetoric of the United States' unique history and martial prowess, while ignoring the lessons of history and the high costs—financial, spiritual, and political—those military actions have. It praises the rhetoric of the United States' special role as a moral and spiritual beacon to the world, while espousing policies that increasingly impoverish and divide its citizens.

Lastly, it includes the rhetoric of a welcoming, diverse nation, performed for an audience that is remarkably homogenous, while holding obvious Others at arms-length.

I separated out these themes in order to highlight them, when I could easily have included longer analytical passage for any of the case studies, reading each of the three tropes in them in turn, as demonstrated in the final chapter. These tropes are mutually reinforcing: rurality has overtones of heritage and religion; heritage is often rooted in rural and religious elements; and religion, figured pastorally, is reliant on heritage traditions.

And performance is how it happens. According to Joseph Roach, "performance represents one powerful way in which cultures set about the necessary business of remembering who and what they are. Performance is also one powerful way of making them into who and what they are, and even into who and what they might someday be."[362] This, at least in its most progressive, positive form seems to be what Jill Dolan is getting at in her deeply personal and at times deeply appealing *Utopia in Performance*. She defines a utopian performatives as

> small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluble, generous, and aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense.[363]

Live performance, which Branson has in spades, has particular power to summon this feeling. Dolan sees utopian performatives as a way for us to become reinvigorated

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[362] Joseph R. Roach, "Slave Spectacles and Octoroons: A Cultural Genealogy of Antebellum Performance," *Exceptional Spaces: Essays in Performance and History*, Della Pollock, ed. (Durham, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 49.
[363] Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 5.

and hopeful members of a community, and as practice for citizens participating in a radical democracy. Dolan believes that these moments of utopia are possible regardless of the location, topic, or type of representation, "even the most dystopian theatrical universe."[364] This is certainly an attractive idea, especially to the theatre scholars Dolan is addressing, who may lose the sight of the visceral power of pleasure in their pursuit of critique.

Dolan is interested in "finding hope at the theatre." I understand the impulse: my experiences of seduction by or transcendence through performance are a large part of why I chose to follow the path that ultimately led to this dissertation. However, I take exception to her claim that the subject matter of the performance shouldn't matter, when her examples are drawn exclusively from queer, feminist, progressive-minded performances she is already predisposed to embrace, and for which sympathetic audiences self-select. This is a *formula* for a utopian performative. Branson audiences are also self-selecting. I hope my dissertation illustrates how carefully Branson presents itself in order to draw a particular audience, and how it grooms that audience to receive its messages through performance. How then are these events supposed to allow us to "engage each other's differences"?[365]

Although I have chosen to focus on normative patterns and prescriptive behavior in Branson's performances, there are undoubtedly pockets of dissent or disruption, which open up avenues for future studies.

Slightly more convincing is the brief report of Dolan attending and responding to a performance for which she was not the target audience. She describes seeing *The Chief*,

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[364] Ibid., 8, 17.
[365] Ibid., 31.

a play about Art Rooney, the man behind the Pittsburgh Steelers, and being aware of and excited by the sense of *communitas* that performance summoned for the group.[366] I've felt what Dolan describes, but I've also had the inverse experience, of witnessing a group response that I am decidedly *not* a part of. In Branson, dating back to my very first experiences more than a decade before I began working on this project, feeling outside of the communal experience was more common than not. Often, others appeared to be having a "utopic experience," the frequency of which is possibly what drives so many to visit Branson again and again. (Dolan argues that models of performance that invite interaction and audience participation are more conducive to moments of utopia. If that's all it takes, Branson probably prompts more instances of performative utopia that any other location in the United States.) I was aware of their shared joy and hopefulness, yet I remained outside of the revelry, watching my fellow audience members literally singing and dancing in the aisles at the end of *Dolly Parton's Dixie Stampede* or the *Baldknobbers Jamboree*. I sat agog at the self-congratulatory nature of the display, seeing that it was marked, not by a feeling of inclusion, but by a restriction of the experience to those who identify with a performance that reflects them back at themselves in a flattering, feel-good fashion.

Branson is a *communitas*-building machine par excellence, but could Dolan experience—or even recognize—a utopian performative in Branson? I remain skeptical. She weaves words like democracy, freedom, liberty, and citizenship—words that Branson-goers would be used to hearing in the context of live performance—throughout her text. But I argue that those words don't mean the same things for Branson-goers as

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[366] Ibid., 11-12.

they do for Dolan, and her choice of case studies attests that she is not talking about the types of performance common in Branson. In her introduction, she frowns upon the several things that Branson's performances embrace, including "blind flag-waving…and a virulent war-mongering enforcement of xenophobic definitions of 'America.'"[367] This is further complicated by the conflicting natures of utopia, which is inherently forward-looking, and nostalgia, which looks to the past for inspiration.

Performance in Branson, as I hope I have established, is already far more about "the felt" than "the critiqued," and is very much aimed at finding hope through live performance. But because that hope for the future is based on false or exclusionary claims, can it truly be considered "utopian," in the sense of "ideal"? Even though Dolan prefers to define utopia as "what if," rather than "what should be,"[368] can feelings of connection transcend inherently divisive messages presented within a performances? Do Yakov Smirnoff's and Shoji Tabuchi's inclusion in the Branson Nation prove or disprove the possibility of a utopian performative there? It's true they are included, and it is possible that their inclusion and the good feeling they engender in their audiences could open a space for progressive thought or action. The effect, however, is blunted by the knowledge that those good feelings are possibly primarily because Smirnoff and Tabuchi play the game, and make a show of their exceptionalism-which-proves-the-rule.

Do her arguments hold up for a place that even she would see as coercive and disciplining? Or is a utopian performative only possible when messages agree with Dolan's politics? I don't mean to chastise her personally, and I largely share her values. But I question the usefulness of the utopian performative if it is restricted to promoting a

[367] Ibid., 3.
[368] Ibid., 13.

specific social or political perspective, however sympathetic to that perspective I might be.

That performances in Branson create a strong sense of community is beyond argument, but it is a community based on pretense and significant exclusion. Miranda Joseph, in *Against the Romance of Community*, contends that community is *always* coercive and conservative, aimed at legitimating extant social hierarchies.[369] Like Dolan, Joseph is coming from a queer, feminist perspective, and they both couch their claims in at least nominally progressive performances. Dolan seems to recognize that ideas of utopia can be coercive, but by limiting her definition to a fleeting feeling that is only and ever partial, Dolan believes it escapes a risk of fascism. She is interested in reclaiming the value of sentiment in scholarship, while Joseph is concerned with how community functions to discipline groups, even those based on supposedly liberatory politics.

I am sensitive to the importance of sentiment, but the question remains: who gets to define what makes a feeling "utopic"? There is an authority in declaring transcendence or utopia. Someone gets to say, "*This* feels like utopia; *these people and these representations* conjure utopia." Who is that person? And does not that person most likely make that choice depending on their identification with the group? Who is erased by these declarations, what is ignored? Although Dolan is mindful of certain marginalized groups (women, queers, Jews), she complete ignores the role of class as a meaningful identity marker in her utopian community. "Community" is a construction that, like universality, naturalizes and hides the fact of its constructedness. I love the idea

[369] Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), viii. Dolan includes a record of Joseph's work in her endnotes, but does not directly engage with her arguments.

of the utopian performative, but in practice it seems to be more of the same: some people are part of it and some are not. As Joseph notes at the very beginning of her study, "to invoke community is immediately to raise questions of belonging and of power."[370]

"Utopia" literally means "no place," but Branson is a very specific place, with a great deal of appeal for a specific group. Who belongs to that group, and who has the power to determine what "the Branson Nation" will look like in the future, is in flux. Despite regularly scheduled doom-saying that dates back to a 1994 *Economist* article—ironically entitled "Utopia, Missouri"[371]—and written barely two years after its popularity began to skyrocket, Branson continues to grow. But with growth comes change. Branson is seeing some of the same changes as the United States as a whole: lower overall growth, but an increase for those at the top end of the economic scale. In 2005, the *Washington Post* noted that new businesses were courting an "upscale" clientele.[372] The following year, Branson Landing, a new, 420-million-dollar retail and hotel development opened, targeting a younger and wealthier demographic: those 32 to 54 years old, with an average income of at least $75,000.[373] 2009 saw the opening of a privately-managed regional airport, with direct flights from Minneapolis, Dallas/Ft. Worth, and Atlanta. Although its business on the whole suffered during the 2008 and

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[370] Ibid., xxiii.
[371] "Utopia, Missouri," *The Economist* 333, no 7985 (December 24, 1994): 25-28.
[372] Lois Romano, "Branson, Mo., Looks Beyond RVs and Buffets; Prosperous Conservative Movement Has Blue-Collar Retreat Aiming to Go Upscale," *The Washington Post*, August 8, 2001, A 1.
[373] Kitty Bean Yancey, "Branson's new hip tune; $420M Landing opens June 16," *USA Today*, June 9, 2006, D3.

2009 seasons, it began to climb again in 2010, and market researchers are predicting another modest rise in the coming season.[374]

The flexibility of the American nation, itself "a symbolic *field*, continually influenced by extrinsic forces…but characteristically absorbing and adapting them to it own distinctive patterns,"[375] will likely allow the themes of rurality, heritage, and evangelicalism to hang on, even if this demographic divide continues to increase.

Producers have shifted away from "real" as a descriptor and towards an acknowledgment of the power and ubiquity of performance for all members of Branson's community, because "realness" doesn't matter anymore. This *isn't* Real American Entertainment, but profound cultural work. Whether conceived of as a kind of wishful thinking, or a disciplining practice, Branson's select number of performance archetypes, multiplied across numerous spectacles, encourage people to believe and behave in ways that trumpet inclusivity while in reality marginalizing, ignoring, or excluding the existence of those who don't perform up to the Branson Nation's very particular standards of belonging.

Exclusion is very American, after all. "The open-ended inclusiveness of the United States has always been directly proportionate to [the nation]'s capacity to incorporate *and exclude*, and more precisely to incorporate by exclusion."[376] Its ways of inclusion and exclusion, facilitated through performance are probably what make

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[374] Branson/Lakes Area CC/CVB, "Year-End 2010 Marketing Report To the City of Branson," February 22, 2011, accessed February 28, 2011, http://www.bransonmo.gov /reports/chamber/Presentation_Chamber_Year_End_2010_Report.pdf.
[375] Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 20.
[376] Bercovitch, *Rites of Assent*, 14.

Branson's shows "real American entertainment," and worth watching carefully, to see "who is playing in Branson," both onstage and off.

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Butterfly Palace and Rainforest Adventure
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Dolly Parton's Dixie Stampede
Hamner Barber Variety Show
The Haygoods
Presleys' Country Jubilee
The Jim Bakker Show
Jim Stafford
The New Shanghai Circus
Noah, The Musical
The Osmond Brothers
Ralph Foster Museum
The Shepherd of the Hills Pageant
The Shoji Tabuchi Show
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