Holy Hills of the Ozarks
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In 1999, Wes Neal, of Branson’s Champions of Excellence Ministries, produced the *Branson Stars Booklet*—a forty-page tract of Christian testimony. Its contributors included area entertainers such as Roy Clark, Tony Orlando, and Trinity Broadcasting Network mainstay Dino Kartsonakis, plus local resident and nationally known marriage counselor Gary Smalley and business leaders Jack Herschend (co-owner of Silver Dollar City) and Joe White (owner of Kanakuk Kamps). Meant to be distributed to every tourist as part of the “Reach Out From Branson” project, it highlighted the impact of faith on the lives of these performers and dignitaries and described various religious revelations received and spiritual transformations undergone while in town.

In addition to testimonies from the stars, Neal’s pamphlet included a thumb-nail sketch of Jesus’s life and a mock “reporter’s interview” with the Messiah that outlined major evangelical Protestant themes (the ascendancy of faith over works, Christ’s role as the exclusive mediator between humanity and God, and the importance of rebirth through accepting Jesus as one’s savior). Following this biography and question-and-answer session, readers were asked to offer a “prayer of commitment,” to realize the contemporary relevance of Christianity, and to fill out a decision card attached to the back cover which indicated their newfound devotional steadfastness. Engaging in a bit of spiritual mathematics, the author claimed that 6,855,000 people visited Branson in 1998, and he assumed that 10 percent were already Christians (an incredibly modest hypothesis considering the religious identities of the American people and the religious nature of regional tourism). Neal hoped that his booklet would inspire an additional 10 percent of visitors and that 30 percent of that total number, on departing the
Ozarks with renewed or new faith, would introduce people in their home communities to Christ. If this course of action proved cogent, nearly 1.8 million individuals would be affected by the ministry’s handout.

Although there is no way to confirm the statistical efficacy of this initiative, it does speak to an overarching thread that integrates the diversity of offerings found within Branson’s variety show theaters. The primary impetus of Neal’s “free souvenir” was to give tourists the opportunity to literally “meet Jesus Christ ‘face to face’” and to suggest that they could wage a war against Satan’s work by consuming Branson’s ideological vantages and then sharing them abroad. People who attend one of the region’s theatrical performances will not encounter an explicit missionary presentation, but they will find religiously tinged country music, a plethora of gospel numbers, spiritual and nostalgic renderings of an antimodern past, deference to civil religiosity, and “family values” rhetoric derived from theological perspectives. Despite extolling the merits of virtue-laden entertainers and encouraging experiential consumption of their popular religious wares, the Branson Stars Booklet concluded with a reminder that the Christian underpinnings of the tourist market must never be overlooked. By suggesting in its final pages that Jesus is “the greatest star” in Branson, it forthrightly iterated what all local acts imply—Christ is the fabric of the music and the message.¹

In 2004, more than seven million vacationers went to Branson and spent nearly $1.5 billion. That year, the city hosted forty-seven variety show theaters with more seats than New York City’s Broadway district and more than a hundred different live productions. Prior to 1991, it was primarily a summer destination for midwesterners. However, the contemporary market greets families, seniors, and other sojourners from March through December who seek entertainment that valorizes distinct visions of God, family, and country. Beginning with acts tendered by local families in the late 1960s and 1970s, continuing with the arrival of more recognizable talent such as Roy Clark and Boxcar Willie in the 1980s, and culminating with the advent of entertainment icons like Andy Williams and Wayne Newton in the 1990s, such acts have been the primary catalyst for Branson’s emergence as an international phenomenon. The country standards, wistful pop tunes, and patriotic harmonies proffered by these performers seem to be secular at first inspection. However, a closer look at the shows and the principles that inform their headliners reveals the perpetuation of a popular religious undercurrent that has courséd its way through Branson tourism from the beginning.²
Radio station KWTO (Keep Watching the Ozarks) began operation in Springfield, Missouri, in 1933. Founder Ralph Foster, who was responsible for the live 1936 Easter broadcast from Shepherd of the Hills Farm in Branson, envisioned KWTO as a vehicle for local entertainers who would transmit traditional Ozark music. As the originator of mass-mediated family entertainment in the region, Foster sought musical performers who could don pseudonyms such as “Aunt Martha” Haworth or “Uncle” Carl Haden and thereby draw on kinship networks vital to Ozark community life in the early twentieth century. KWTO prompted its audience to forge a conception of entertainers as proverbial relatives able to enter households via the airwaves. Moreover, according to historian Edgar D. McKinney, when Ozarkers tuned in to hear time-honored regional music on commercial radio, they “opened their homes to the philosophy of the market economy” and readily purchased medicines, detergents, and other advertised wares. Thus, by uniting traditional song with consumer culture, the station forged a formula of family-based amusement that still defines Branson.³

Although KWTO’s offerings were dominated by fiddling and Ozark ballads, they also included gospel. The first gospel group to appear on the station was the Goodwill Family, a quartet that consisted of Clyde “Slim” Wilson, his sister, her son, and fundamentalist minister Guy Smith (who later became famous as the composer of Roy Acuff’s hit “The Great Speckled Bird”). Other groups adopted the approach of Albert E. Brumley—the most popular of all white gospel composers and a longtime Ozark resident. Creator of more than eight hundred songs, Brumley had a style that emphasized visions of a caring, personal savior and a pastoral heaven which were well received by poor, rural southerners during the depression years. His trademark arrangement, and one that epitomizes such themes, was “I’ll Fly Away”—the most recorded gospel song in history. Drawing on Brumley’s work, KWTO performers such as the Matthews Brothers (four evangelist siblings) entertained and inspired listeners during the mid-1940s.⁴

Seeking to expand his undertaking after World War II, Ralph Foster teamed with Springfield businessman Si Siman to create RadiOzark Enterprises. This initiative sold recorded programming to stations outside the Ozarks and achieved its first success with “Sermons in Song”—a program of popular gospel music sponsored by the Springfield-based Assemblies of God and purchased by more
than two hundred stations nationwide. With their radio programs attracting talent from Nashville such as Tennessee Ernie Ford, the pair decided to produce a network TV program in 1954 and lured Red Foley away from his job as master of ceremonies at the Grand Ole Opry to host it. Known as *The Ozark Jubilee* and aired on Springfield’s KYTV, the show blended elements from vaudeville and variety show radio to offer wholesome family programming that accentuated Ozark values of self-sufficiency, working-class pride, patriotism, and religiosity. Described by commentator Dickinson Terry as a production “with a strong leaning toward songs with a spiritual note,” *The Ozark Jubilee* found a wide following among Ozarkers and non-Ozarkers alike. Benign and innocent in presentation, the program also offered a unified social and political stance that appealed to a cross section of post–World War II Americans seeking common, mass-mediated culture.\(^5\)

In the late 1950s, five members of the Mabe Family, which had originally showcased its musical talents at church dinners in Christian and Taney counties, began performing on KWTO as the Blansit Trio (under the sponsorship of Blansit Auction Company). The children of Southern Baptist preacher Donald Mabe, Bill, Jim, Lyle, Bob, and Margie played live music three mornings a week beginning in 1957. Another local group, the Presley Family, also drew on the success of Foster’s enterprises. Springfield-area natives Lloyd and Bessie May Presley, and children Gary and Deanna, originally performed on KWTO as part of the Ozark Playboys. Capitalizing on the popularity of regional caverns, they also became the featured act at a Stone County cave in 1963.\(^6\)

KWTO ceased live performances in 1959 in favor of an all-recorded music format. That year, the Mabe children began performing twice a week at the fifty-seat Branson City Hall Community Building. Beginning in 1960, they secured jobs with Branson’s newest tourist attractions when they were asked to play the intermission square dance at the Shepherd of the Hills drama and to display their talents for guests awaiting the cave tour at Silver Dollar City. Now firmly situated in Branson’s burgeoning tourism industry, the Mabes acquired their own position within the region’s process of historical remaking by adopting the title the Baldknobbers. A far cry from the late nineteenth-century vigilantes who were their namesake, the group presented popular country music and Ozark hillbilly humor. In response to a growing audience in the early 1960s, the Baldknobbers relocated to the 200-seat Sammy Lane Pavilion on Lake Taneycomo and then to an old skating rink that accommodated 500 patrons.\(^7\)

Meanwhile, the Presley Family continued to perform at Herman Mead’s Underground Theatre (now Talking Rocks Cavern) throughout the 1960s. In 1967
the Presleys purchased a 10-acre site on Missouri Highway 76 in Branson. Titled the Ozark Mountain Jubilee, this 363-seat venue, strategically located between downtown Branson, Silver Dollar City, and the Shepherd of the Hills Farm, was the first on the city’s now famous Strip. In 1968, the Mabes purchased a 14-acre plot across the highway from the Presleys and built an 865-seat theater to house the Baldknobbers Hillbilly Jamboree. Both locations remained open from late April through October. Although the city drew nearly one million tourists in 1970, performers all held additional jobs during this early period because Branson largely grew silent at nightfall. Over the past thirty years, however, the theaters have been remodeled and expanded on a number of occasions, and each now seats approximately two thousand people. And although many recent performers have deviated from the combination of country music and Ozark comedy which still epitomizes the Baldknobbers Jamboree and the Presleys’ Country Jubilee, these two acts are recognized as the bedrock of Branson musical entertainment.

A late 1960s brochure for the Baldknobbers Hillbilly Jamboree advertised the show as “Good Clean Family Entertainment,” a credo that still can be applied to all Branson performances. The basic elements of this construct (to be discussed more fully below) include country and gospel tunes, nostalgic and patriotic melodies, and a patent vision of the virtuous nuclear family. While the Mabes and Presleys have in recent years added nonfamily session players, electric instruments, sequined costumes, and sanitized rock-and-roll classics, these accretions have not detracted from the promotion of a well-defined, Christian-informed creed.

Additional groups soon ventured into the Branson area. Joplin, Missouri’s Foggy River Boys organized in 1967, with all members coming from a background of quartet gospel music. Lead singer and Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) minister Bob Hubbard was a founding member of the Jordanaires—an act from Springfield that became one of the most famous of all Nashville groups by recording spirituals for Decca and Capitol Records and backing legendary figures such as Chet Atkins and Elvis Presley. First opening a theater in nearby Kimberling City in 1971 and performing both gospel and country songs, the group relocated to Branson in 1974 and remained in town until 1993. Hailing from southeastern Missouri, Darrell and Rosie Plummer and children Melody and Randy opened a theater on the Strip in 1973. Although the Plummer Family Country Music Show emphasized secular songs over sacred numbers, Randy Plummer has stressed notions of divine providence that brought his family to the area. Feeling that “the Lord plopped them down in a perfect location for their
theater,” he stated in a 2001 interview: “I really believe it’s a Godsend for the tourist, because no other place has the kind of music, variety, and Christian atmosphere that Branson has.” The Plummers’ attraction was sold in 1990. However, Randy continues to perform at various locales and to sanctify the region through recorded songs such as “An Ozark Prayer”—a track from his 2000 album which beseeches listeners to “thank the Lord” for Branson and the Ozarks. Finally, in 1977, Bob Mabe, one of the founders of the Baldknobbers, left that show to build the Bob-O-Links Country Hoe Down. Beginning a trend in guest appearances by nationally known entertainers, Mabe opened his 1,800-seat venue with a performance by Ronnie Milsap. Until 1980, Branson hosted only these five shows.10

In 1980, Paramount Pictures’ Urban Cowboy spurred a western fashion vogue that prompted many nightclubs throughout the nation to replace their disco balls with mechanical bulls and led patrons to trade polyester attire for leather and denim. By showcasing the talents of John Travolta and communicating a clichéd version of roadhouse culture to urbanites in search of alternatives to a 1970s nightclub ethos, Urban Cowboy initiated a nationwide embrace of stylized country music that contributed to a swelling of Branson’s entertainment ranks. With the arrival of Chisai Childs in 1981, the Branson industry assumed this more ostentatious style, which contrasted sharply with the down-home fashion of its founding families. Childs was creator of the Grapevine Opry in Grapevine, Texas—a venue that in the late 1970s hosted the second largest country-and-western stage show in the world. When she opened the Starlite Theatre on Highway 76, it facilitated the merger of religion and recreation in the Ozarks by presenting the first Christmas and Easter specials. Additionally, she introduced several new performative elements to the area such as contemporary dance numbers and elaborate sequined costumes. As stated by Jean Trent, wife of Hee Haw star Buck Trent and Branson theater manager, “She kind of fancied up the town. . . Before, it was the overalls and that type of stuff. She’s kind of responsible for bringing all the glitter in.”11

Since Childs’s creation of “Branson chic” in the early 1980s, all shows have followed suit. Consonant with the mixing of rustic vacationing and Victorian opulence put forth by earlier tourism leaders, contemporary Branson entertainment has been labeled “a mixture of the Grand Ole Opry and Caesars Palace,” or as described by a twenty-three-year-old tourist from Arkansas, “a G-rated, country version of Las Vegas.” By melding the Ozarks with its seeming Nevada antithesis, the city has adopted a truly postmodern aesthetic—a disjointed artistic mode that is evident when one peruses the dizzying array of neon and flashing lights along its Strip. However, this fusion has not disturbed the Branson’s marketed
values, which continue to stress decidedly anti-Vegas wholesomeness. According to local costume designer Jan Rousseaux, “I think you can make the girls cute and even sexy without being seductive. We are the home of the clean-cut, grass-root, American style.”

Although Chisai Childs brought a new fashion to the Branson scene, it was the arrival of Roy Clark that first garnered national attention. Clark was a showman who won national music competitions as a teenager and played Las Vegas in the early 1960s. His career took off when he became cohost of Hee Haw in 1969. Though one may not easily identify a theological intent in this lighthearted and hackneyed program, Clark has testified that “behind all the foolishness” that he did there was “nothing but Jesus.” Well worn from ceaseless recording and concert giving during the 1970s, he opened Roy Clark’s Celebrity Theater in 1983 for “a chance to have a normal lifestyle.” The year before Clark’s arrival, Branson’s Strip hosted thirteen venues perpetuating earlier Ozark themes. This emphasis was soon to be drastically altered, however, for as former communications director at the Branson/Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce, Dawn Erikson, has asserted, “I generally measure the growth of Branson as an entertainment mecca from the arrival of Roy Clark.” Because Clark committed to only one hundred shows a year and maintained his residence in Tulsa, Oklahoma, big-name performers such as Conway Twitty and Mel Tillis began singing at the theater in his stead. Some of his substitutes then decided to open their own venues in Branson, with Boxcar Willie debuting in 1987 and Mickey Gilley and Tillis in 1990. Clark’s theater existed for only five years, but on its closing in 1988, Branson was on the verge of an entertainment explosion.

In the late 1980s, Branson witnessed the arrival of numerous bigger-name stars who either established their own venues or did guest appearances. In 1989, twenty-two theaters and twenty-four shows lined Highway 76. That year, an estimated 3.8 million individuals vacationed in Branson, and an average of 21,740 vehicles traversed the Strip during summer months. Of these visitors, two-thirds saw at least one music show, nearly one-third saw three or more productions, and for the full year, all locales combined took in $32.9 million for tickets, concessions, and merchandise. Though these were impressive numbers for a town with a population of then less than four thousand, 1991 would prove to be the year that saw the creation of a tourism phenomenon.

In March 1991, Mel Tillis announced plans to build a 2,100-seat venue off the Strip on U.S. Highway 65. In April of that year, plans were made for a $30 million theme park centered on Johnny and June Carter Cash to be called “Cash Country.” Deviating from the city’s country theme but remaining within the time-
tested realm of nostalgic entertainment, Andy Williams began publicizing plans for his Moon River Theatre in August. In mid-September, Willie Nelson agreed to assume Tillis’s former location and retitle it the Willie Nelson Ozark Theater. And as the year closed, Merle Haggard revealed that he would perform seventy dates at Nelson’s venue beginning in 1992. In light of this flurry of proclamations, Time ran a feature article on Branson’s theaters and christened the town “Country Music’s New Mecca.” Moreover, 60 Minutes aired a thirteen-minute special about Branson in which correspondent Morley Safer called it “the live music capital of the universe” and Mel Tillis boasted that his enterprise brought in “$6 million in six months.” As a result of this upsurge of notable talent and national press, the number of overnight visitors to Branson increased 116 percent from April 1991 to April 1992.  

All observers of Branson’s tourism history mark 1991–1994 as the city’s “boom years.” During that period, the number of lodging rooms and restaurant seats both increased by nearly 10,000, the number of indoor theater seats swelled from 22,788 to 50,065, and construction values skyrocketed from roughly $20 million to nearly $140 million. In 1994, 5.8 million guests came to the area for its now overwhelming entertainment offerings and were welcomed by a host of new stars that included Tony Orlando, the Osmonds, Kenny Rogers, and Wayne Newton. With the town featured on The Today Show, The Larry King Show, Entertainment Tonight, and numerous other national programs; ranked as the number one destination point by the American Bus Association in 1993; and quickly becoming known as the premier place for senior travel in the United States, it appeared as though Branson was primed for unlimited growth.

Although Branson theater owners and boosters have often expressed reservations about the sustainability of the region’s tourism success, the city has remained a banner destination for seniors, veterans, and families over the past decade. For instance, the number of yearly overnight visitors remained near seven million from 1996 through 2005. Throughout this ten-year period, the area has maintained its primary tourist cohorts—it was ranked as the number one destination by Senior Group Traveler Magazine in 1995; as the number one motorcoach destination by the American Bus Association from 1995 to 2001 (and the number one motorcoach destination of the decade in 2002); and as the top family-friendly tourist town by FamilyFun Magazine in 1999. In the face of legitimate concerns about the pitfalls of unchecked development in the early 1990s, a declining number of visitors from the World War II generation, and disinterest by baby boomers in Branson’s offerings, this city of then still only 6,050 permanent residents remained the number two “drive-to” destination (trailing only Orlando, Florida)
and the sixteenth most popular overnight leisure vacation spot in the United States in 2003.\textsuperscript{17}

Although many factors have contributed to the monumental growth of area tourism, any deeper understanding of this success requires a return to the industry’s long-established ideological structure. Variety show entertainment in Branson was built on and continues to thrive by means of innocent country and gospel music, the promotion of antimodern nostalgia, civil religious patriotism, and a distinct construction of domestic appropriateness expressed through the rhetoric of “family values.” These ethically laden premises, all subsumed under the often nebulous banner of Christianity, form the bedrock of every tourism venue, and the degree to which they are encouraged directly correlates with the success or failure of attractions.

Michael Ediger, a frequent Branson tourist and now a resident, affirmed this multifaceted appeal. Describing the city’s allure, he cited “friendly and helpful stars” who are “just everyday people like us ‘common folk’”; entertainment that offers “something for everyone”; an atmosphere that is “proud of our country’s veterans”; a “crime-free and safe” environment; and, rounding out this list, an ever present promotion of “family and religious values.” It would be in error to claim that the contemporary Branson undertaking has proffered an entirely homogeneous body of vacation options or that the mere inclusion of these themes amounts to assured economic vitality. However, there exists a quite recognizable Ozark entertainment genre founded on a very identifiable set of moral principles and spiritual dictates. As many performers have discovered, if one is not willing to “Bransonize” his or her act, it will most likely be short lived.\textsuperscript{18}

\textbf{COUNTRY, SOUTHERN GOSPEL, AND POP CULTURE EVANGELISM}

What is today known as country music finds many of its roots in southern folk songs of the early nineteenth-century camp meetings and revivals. Predicated on notions of universal salvation for people willing to seek it diligently, the frontier evangelist’s message was conveyed by familiar melodies easily recognizable to the uneducated, rural masses who gathered at revival grounds. As historian Bill C. Malone has claimed, it was these “simple, singable” tunes characterized by “choruses, refrains, and repetitive phrases” which have always been the “obvious characteristics of country music.” Within his discussion of the history of American camp meetings, Dickson Bruce Jr. has argued that revival songs serve as repositories of “plain folk” theology. Offering an alternative to the closed-system
polity and stoic hymnody of early nineteenth-century mainline Protestantism, such harmonies laid the foundations for an emotive, antidogmatic religiosity that still characterizes much of evangelical Christianity. When heaven became the object of desire, revival sounds highlighted a pious pragmatism and mastery of paradisiacal destiny that mimicked promotions of self-guided religious experience—a sentiment that lies at the root of all popular religion. According to Bruce, “The other world which camp-meeting religion propounded was the other world the plain-folk needed.”

As revivalism spread to urban areas in the latter part of the nineteenth century, its melodic repertoire became more firmly allied with popular music of the day. Such revivals coincided with the nostalgic nature of Victorian religiosity, with the Christian savior characterized as a loving shepherd who tended his flock rather than the austere and removed deity of eighteenth-century Puritanism. The musical rhetoric of entrance into heaven became enveloped in optimistic tones that accented individual volition rather than the helplessness of predestination. Evangelist Dwight L. Moody was the great systematizer of the urban revival. According to religious historian Peter Williams, Moody’s theology “could be reduced to the proposition that salvation was available for the asking. . . . Judgment was largely gone, and mercy was everything. Sentimentality—the appeal to the heart . . . had been raised to an ultimate principle.”

This later wave of revivalism spawned the southern gospel tradition—the style of religious music most performed in Branson. The genre arose at the turn of the twentieth century as part of a larger theological and cultural discourse regarding the value of modern change. Offering solace to conservative white Christians who felt alienated by the rapid pace of urbanization and technological ascendancy, it posited family and home as the bases for morality and country life as the bastion of religious virtue. For example, standards such as “This World Is Not My Home” forthrightly expressed displeasure with a purportedly inhospitable world of ceaseless transformation and found solace only in a heaven that resembled the idealized rural domestic sphere. Furthermore, with the dawn of commercial country music, many performers perpetuated the relationship between earlier southern gospel themes and popular piety. Stephen Smith and Jimmie Rogers, for example, have written that the genre is characterized by a lack of faith in institutions—whether political, social, or religious. As Don Williams sang in his 1980 hit “I Believe in You,” country music fans “don’t believe that heaven waits only for those who congregate.” Or as the son of a Southern Baptist minister, Tom T. Hall, declared in his 1972 song “Me and Jesus,” “Me and Jesus got our own thing going / We don’t need anybody to tell us what it’s all about.” Thus,
even the most truncated examination of country music reveals its steadfast connection with a brand of individual theological autonomy that offers a revivalistic, musically motivated, and informal mode of worship.  

In 1981, Branson’s Highway 76 was given the new promotional moniker “76 Country Music Boulevard.” Although this name highlighted the brand of music that was bringing the town to national prominence, the choice also solidified Branson’s standing as a place that melded recreation and popular religious sentiment. As a locale that turned theaters into sanctuaries for the propagation of Christian faith and values, it was put forth as unique among leisure destinations. This fusion is exemplified by the Braschler Quartet, one of Branson’s longest-lived acts, which came to town in 1985. On arrival in Branson, Cliff Braschler, the patriarch of the quartet, had been a Church of God pastor for twenty-eight years, and lead singer Johnny Walters had co-pastored with him since the early 1980s. Planning to perform for only one year, the members of the quartet realized that the entertainment market would allow them (albeit nontraditionally) to advance their religious calling, and they have remained in Branson ever since. As Cliff Braschler avowed, “I’ve never felt any withdrawal from the ministry because I feel like I’ve been a minister ever since I’ve been here.” Just as members of the group have always treated their performance as a sacred vocation, their fans have frequently embraced a similar juxtaposition. As Braschler detailed in a recent interview: “When we first started we had business men and women in town who would make their reservations for the same night every week because they worked on Sunday and they counted it as their worship for the week. We didn’t get up and read the Bible and pound the pulpit but we’ve always tried to maintain a level of discipline in the group that would reflect what we say we are.” Thus, like the popular religiosity from which country music draws inspiration, this show has always offered the opportunity for Christian worship outside formal church parameters. And like the camp meetings that first inspired the genre, it continues to do so within a context of regimented leisure.

Like all Branson acts, the Braschler Family Music Show integrates some non-religious numbers into its set. This fusion of sacred and secular prompted one critic to write, “The show is not ‘religious’ or preachy . . . but the spiritual influence is obvious.” During a 2002 performance I attended, the program featured songs such as “The Tennessee Waltz” and “Blue Moon of Kentucky” and was occasionally punctuated by appearances of hillbilly comic Homer Lee. However, gospel music was its defining feature. The crowd seemed most captivated by “Have a Little Talk with Jesus,” “Please Let Me Sing in the Choir,” and a rousing rendition of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” that served as the finale. The
group’s ministerial background and its long-standing, all-gospel performance on Thursdays provide further accentuation to the plethora of gospel songs. Patrons who do not fully appreciate the Braschler Quartet’s emphasis on religious recreation might be further inspired by a poem by Carol Wimmer, entitled “When I Say I Am a Christian,” which hangs prominently at the theater’s entrance. Proclaiming “When I say . . . ‘I am a Christian’ / I am not trying to be strong. / I am
professing that I am weak / and pray for strength to carry on,” this verse emphasizes age-old evangelical themes that are presented more lightheartedly by the theater’s performers. As confirmed by members of Topeka, Kansas’s Eastside Baptist Church who visited the theater in 2003, such premises are not overlooked by guests. Asked how they liked the show, congregants simply responded in unison, “Amen.”

Although the Braschlers’ show has been in Branson for nearly twenty years, other predominantly gospel acts have been less successful. The Collins Family offered an all-religious music set that lasted only four years in the 1980s, and the Blackwood Singers presented a gospel show that drew only modest crowds throughout the 1990s. In 1992, the 2,000-seat Celebration Theater opened featuring contemporary gospel artist Bill Gaither—publisher of more than 500 hymnal standards and host of the Gaither Gospel Hour (a program with more than 75 million viewers worldwide). In light of Branson entertainment’s penchant for religious music, one would think that Gaither would have met with an exceptionally warm reception. However, this venue closed its doors after less than two months. Although the city’s style of leisure harks back to Christian liturgical elements and often intends to inspire as much as entertain, its tourism history has demonstrated that patrons want their mix of religion and ostensibly secular entertainment finely mingled—a desire that may account for the failure of many explicitly gospel acts. Thus, to find the true stories of accomplishment one must look to those performers such as Barbara Fairchild who have put forth a more well-rounded package of value-laden amusement that, while holding Christianity paramount, opts to evangelize in a more unassuming fashion.

Fairchild is best known for her child-themed hits of the early 1970s, including “The Teddy Bear Song.” Raised in rural Arkansas, she got her start singing with two aunts in a gospel trio. A series of sugary sweet odes to the innocence of youth then made her a two-time Grammy nominee and secured a number of appearances on The Tonight Show and Hee Haw. By the late 1980s she had found God with the help of born-again country star Ricky Skaggs and established a new career in country-gospel. Fairchild began doing guest appearances in Branson during the late 1980s. In 1991, a number of people told her that God was crafting a distinctive mission for her in the Ozarks. As she recounted, “They said, ‘God wants to do something special in this area and He wants you to be part of it.’ . . . I said, ‘I belong to the Lord and he can do whatever He wants to with me.’” Fairchild performed at Mel Tillis’s theater in 1992 and then at the venues of Glen Campbell, Charlie Pride, and others. In addition to offering shows that mix gospel numbers with older pop hits, she and husband Roy operate Barbara Fairchild...
Ministries and travel the United States singing and preaching at churches, fairs, and theaters. Their ministry blends evangelical Christianity with a patriotic, pro-life agenda that also advocates prayer in public schools, and the ministry’s aims find their way into her Branson performances. Unapologetically explaining her station within the local tourism industry, she stated, “If they come see me they are going to get to hear about Him.” And in a fashion that reflects the mind-set of many performers who couch their future in Branson in terms of godly providence, she maintained that predicting the play of divine will on her career is folly: “I don’t know what the future holds, but I know who holds the future.”

Branson commentator Bruce Cook has written that “there isn’t a show in town that doesn’t include a few gospel numbers.” He also could have added that most shows contain elements of Christian testimony. Singer Doug Gabriel could not get a job with any theater when he first came to the Ozarks. However, after he learned to “relax in God,” auditions became available, and he began to “know the reality of Psalm 37:4” (“Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart” [NRSV]). On stage, Gabriel is never hesitant to praise God for his Branson show and invites audience members to exude similar tribute.

Moreover, his father, Don, who is past president of the National Travel Agent Alliance and in 2005 founded BransonFunTrip (a team of travel specialists “dedicated to helping others experience the blessings of Branson”), has even more boldly proclaimed the evangelistic intentions of the city’s entertainment industry:

> I believe God has raised up this community at this point of history for a ministry or a mission. . . . Maybe there is a couple praying for friends that need to know the Lord. They could bring them to Branson and take them to a number of shows. It would make wonderful opportunities to talk about the things of God in a very unthreatening way. In Branson they would have an opportunity to know Jesus. Many will not hear it in church but they will hear it in Branson up and down 76 Country Blvd. They’ll hear it in song. They’ll see it in deeds.

Thus, for many a visit to one of Branson’s musical venues involves much more than just enjoying variety acts heavily laced with pious song. The medium and the message are intricately bound together there and intend not only to reinforce the values and beliefs of people who are already Christians but also to recruit the nonbelievers by offering the possibility of conversion mediated by experiences of leisure. Warren Harmon, a member of Parkview Baptist Church in Decatur, Alabama, intoned this approach after bringing a group to Branson in 2004: “I’ll recommend that our pastor talk to other pastors and ministers. . . . I’d tell them what a great atmosphere it would be and what a great evangelism effort
it would be. With us, I’ve got people on my bus that are not churched, they just wanted to go on our trip to Branson. . . . So we’re reaching out. It’s like a mission effort.”

Well-known country-gospel stars such as the Gatlin Brothers have actualized Don Gabriel’s call for Christian-infused Branson entertainment and recognized the curative effects of participation in this industry. As Larry Gatlin stated about the group’s life prior to arrival in 1991, “We were emotionally and physically bankrupt.” But once established in town, their theater proved to be a “miracle of God” that brought about sweeping personal change. Other marquee acts, however, have either failed to buy into the “Branson style” or offered performances in defiance of this template—actions that have led to their swift departure.

In his discussion of Branson popular culture, anthropologist Damien Francaviglia suggested that a process of “local editing” administered by boosters and patrons safeguards the brand of entertainment and etiquette that must be followed by all performers. Citing a de facto ban placed on John Denver because he used profanity while on stage, the author intimated that this “family values” orientation is stringently enforced by a palpable yet uncodified set of rules that comply with conservative Christian dictates. For instance, many might have predicted the poor reception received by Merle Haggard when he became a Branson regular in 1992. A teenage runaway, frequenter of reform schools, and convicted felon who spent two and a half years in prison in the late 1950s, Haggard has built his career on an outlaw image. Although never known for gospel music, he was embraced by conservative political circles after he released his antihippy anthem “Okie from Muskogee” in 1969 and developed a relationship with Richard Nixon. These traditionalist credentials, however, were not enough to win him permanent support in Branson. Haggard lasted less than two years in town primarily because he refused to comply with the promotion of evangelical sentiment. As he alleged a few years after his departure: “Branson and me just don’t mix. If you’re not a born-again Christian, ready to stand up and tell them that, they won’t even loan you money to build a place. If you don’t believe as they do, then you’re just out.”

Other Haggardesque performers have met with a similar fate in Branson. Willie Nelson, who originated country’s “outlaw movement” in the 1970s as a means of recording outside the rules of the Nashville establishment, came to Branson in 1992 with IRS troubles and a history of illegal substance use. Although he was a good friend of local mainstay Mel Tillis, Nelson’s stint at the Ozarks Theater lasted less than a year. By failing to augment his musicianship with glitzy stylings and sentimental tunes, and denying patrons the chance to symbolically absorb
him into their own family because he performed infrequent dates, Nelson refused to “Bransonize” and thus had an aborted run in town.31

Johnny Cash, country music’s legendary “Man in Black,” came to Branson with a known affinity for prison culture and addictive drugs. However, by the late 1960s he had overcome his drug problems, made a public commitment to Christ, and even written a novel about the apostle Paul entitled *Man in White*—actions that would seem to have guaranteed him an audience in Branson. Ground was broken for his Cash Country amusement complex in October 1991. With the development 85 percent complete, primary investor David Green filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy—a move that resulted in Cash receiving a $1.6 million settlement in 1993 for use of his name and shows contracted but not performed. From that point until his ultimate departure in November 1994, he occasionally sang at Wayne Newton’s theater but was able (on average) to fill that venue only to 10 percent capacity. When he left Branson, Cash was coming off an incredibly successful year—one that saw the release of his critically acclaimed “American Recordings,” an album that garnered him sellout crowds at Carnegie Hall and the Montreux Jazz Festival. Yet in spite of (and perhaps because of) this embrace by younger, more fashionable adults and those who had not trafficked in the country-and-western genre, he never was well received in Branson. Discussing his stay and implying that the Ozark audience was not a core body of admirers, he claimed, “I don’t think I’m doing myself or my fans a favor by being here.”32

Mel Tillis, a performer never associated with these renegade elements, sparked Branson’s leap to nationwide prominence when he opened a theater in 1990. A composer of more than a thousand songs who first debuted on *Ozark Jubilee*, Tillis was on the road for thirty years before settling in Branson—a place he has described as a “miracle.” His repertoire of traditional country and southern gospel made him a fan favorite prior to the conversion of his theater into an Assemblies of God church in 2002. Although this change is seemingly an odd transition, Tillis had for many years featured a morning show at his venue entitled “Smoke on the Mountain”—a musical story set in the 1930s which takes place at Mt. Pleasant Baptist Church in Mt. Pleasant, North Carolina, and one that showcased familiar hymns such as “Power in the Blood” and “Church in the Wildwood.” Unlike Haggard, Nelson, and Cash, he readily embraced the religious climate and homey feel of Branson entertainment. As he stated about his decision to drop anchor in town, “You can go to church every Sunday and put your underwear in the same drawer every night.” As Branson’s entertainment history has demonstrated, the mere offering of country tunes laced with sacred numbers is not
an assured recipe for success. An exhaustive embrace of hearth and pulpit must accompany these genres if one is to achieve longevity.  

In Don Cusic’s history of gospel music, frequent Branson guest performer Barbara Mandrell offered an assessment of the relationship between the country sound and an evangelistic outlook which can be applied to all the city’s performances: “Introducing a gospel song into a secular show has a larger strategy. . . . When I sing the gospel songs, they see something in my eyes that lets them know I mean what I’m singing about. . . . I’ve had kids who have gone back to church, that have gotten over family problems. Do you think they would have tuned into me had I been on a ‘gospel’ music show?” Over the past decade, numerous commentators have claimed that Branson has supplanted Nashville as the country music capital of the world. Although Nashville was built on a mix of country and gospel, that city has always been better known for its recording studios than its live music venues. As suggested by Mandrell’s statement, Branson can be viewed as distinct from Nashville because it offers not only a style of musical entertainment that combines sacred and secular but also myriad “theater churches” that facilitate the distribution of a Christian message through anti-institutional liturgies, celebrity clergy, and pop culture evangelism.

NOSTALGIA AND THE SELLING OF SANCTUARY

Since the publication of The Shepherd of the Hills, tourists have traveled to the Ozarks in search of values deemed vanishing within the bewilderments of modernity. Vacationers have reaffirmed “lost” moral elements at sites such as the Shepherd of the Hills Homestead, Silver Dollar City, and the multitude of variety show theaters that continue to invoke home, rurality, and Christianity. National commentators on the Branson scene often have negatively appraised this embrace of nostalgia. For instance, in 1993, a writer for the Village Voice opined that area performers “cater to the phobia-driven inner life of the audience” through their presentations of “family, God, and country.” A journalist for the St. Petersburg (FL) Times wrote in 1994 that people come to Branson because “they have found a place that looks, sounds, and acts like the America of their dreams, the one that they sense is eroding from the coasts inward.” A writer for Gentlemen’s Quarterly claimed that the town is a haven for Americans “feeling forsaken by the machinery of popular culture” who want to counterbalance the excesses of a contemporary milieu with entertainment that is “extremely anti-extreme.” And finally, tour guide author Arthur Frommer wrote that Branson theaters are
“a type of make believe, of denial, a fervent wish—if nothing else—a respite from the truths we otherwise face each day on our streets and on TV.” Although meant as scathing commentaries, these urbane critiques are not totally accepted by most Branson visitors. Conservative syndicated columnist Cal Thomas has argued, “Some might laugh at Branson, but the town stands as a rebuke to much of the rest of the nation. . . . ‘Sophisticates’ who deride such things as unrealistic and not reflective of the times in which we live must give an account of the ‘reality’ they have imposed on the country. . . . This is a town that slime forgot.”

As Thomas’s comments suggest, Branson’s promotion of nostalgia entails a touristic retreat from modern or postmodern constructs of morality to a supposed sanctuary of wholesomeness devoid of the “slime” of gambling, alcohol, blue humor, lascivious presentations of the body, or secular philosophies. This citywide paradigm and its material manifestations led TV Guide columnist and New York Times book reviewer Joe Queenan to label Branson a “cultural penal colony” and a “Hades-by-the-Ozarks” that is “as close to Hell” as anything that he has ever seen. Alternately, Jay Scribner, who pastored Branson’s First Baptist Church for twenty-five years and was the foremost ethical “policeman” of tourism offerings, addressed the uprightness of that industry when he stated, “My favorite phrase about Branson, and I’ve said it for years, is, ‘Branson, Missouri is America the way it ought to be.’ I’m convinced that if every community in America was like Branson, the United States of America would be like Branson, a wonderful place to be.” Both comments clearly revolve around the infusion of religious sentiment into the city’s leisure opportunities and the perceived sociocultural repercussions of this mixture. Both obviously also demonstrate a liberal/conservative tension within American culture related to the merits of historical remembrance and reenactment. As with all presentations of wistfulness, the Ozark industry has chosen to accentuate a created past while bedeviling a created present. By examining both, one deemed decent but waning and the other decadent but waxing, one becomes aware of the moral anxieties supposedly rebuffed by Branson entertainment.

Within a tourism industry predicated on the accentuation of bifurcations, the divide between city and country originally emphasized by local marketers even prior to the arrival of Harold Bell Wright still fuels Branson’s version of nostalgia. In 1987, Lecil Travis Martin (a.k.a. Boxcar Willie) became the first nationally acclaimed star to own his own theater in Branson. Known for an embrace of train songs and the hobo lifestyle, Boxcar achieved great success prior to his death in 1999 and opened a motel and museum next to his popular venue. Although he grew up in a three-room tool shed adjacent to the railroad tracks
in Sterratt, Texas, his definition of poverty speaks to the various ways that rural experiences are given an air of ethical purity and urban lifestyles are in part demonized within Ozark tourism.

In a 1989 interview, Boxcar Willie recounted a visit to New York City with his wife, Lloene. Initially overwhelmed by the traffic from the airport into the heart of Manhattan, the couple later found the city’s human composition no better than its swarm of automobiles. As he recounted, “When we got out, I bet we stepped over a hundred drunks. There was some gang on a street corner. . . . Lloene was wearing her diamond rings, and I told her to turn those rocks around and we hightailed it.” Although many might not posit a distinction between the homeless who so repulsed the singing star and his own stage identity, he described this differentiation as unwavering: “Let me tell you, there’s a big difference between hoboes and bums. Those folks I saw on the sidewalks of New York are bums. Hoboes were just transient workers. . . . Bums make me mad, there’s so many of them strangling up this country. There are plenty of jobs out there if people just want to work, but they’d rather be on welfare.” Thus, while the itinerant, rural, and good-natured railroad traveler is wrapped in rhetoric of freedom and virtue, his ominous city-dwelling counterpart is depicted as inherently malevolent and content to be on the government dole—sentiments that speak to geographic, ideological, and political divides highlighted within Bran-
son tourism. Reiterating this dichotomy and the ineffable and increasingly rare character of the locale, one tourist commented, “Word’s can’t really describe it. . . . [There are] not many places like that, that are left to go see.” As the town’s self-proclaimed “unofficial morality cop,” Boxcar Willie presented a brand of nostalgia that made even the vagabonds of rural America into exemplars of a principled life. Eight decades after Harold Bell Wright’s place-defining novel, he continued to conceive of Branson as an uncompromising site for the valorization of rustic righteousness and to “thank the good Lord” for his success.38

Despite such pastoral attitudes, visitors to Branson for the past hundred years have wanted their bucolic vacation experience accompanied by the contemporary comforts of home. As an Oklahoma tourist asserted, “It’s an old fashioned, yet modern place.” Addressing this amalgamation, a writer for the Economist claimed that the contemporary Ozark vacationer is seeking “the American ideal of urbs in rurus, city glamour in mountain quiet,” or “something very close to ideal and eternal life.” Various branded “Mayberry meets Las Vegas” or “Las Vegas without the sin,” Branson continues to extol country life. But amid aesthetic flamboyance, it also seeks to offer a vision of shackled urbanity—an image of metropolis perhaps as contradictory as the city’s most recent chamber of commerce slogan that proclaims Branson as the perfect combination of “neon and nature.”39

The primary purveyors of such nostalgia within contemporary Branson entertainment are the bevy of aging pop stars who have arrived over the past fifteen years. Andy Williams initiated this turn when he opened his 2,000-seat Moon River Theatre in 1992. Built into the side of a limestone formation, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright devotee Warren Bates, and eclectically decorated with modern sculptures by Willem de Kooning and Henry Moore, this $11 million project is a far cry from the tobacco barns that dominated the Strip prior to the 1990s. The design of Williams’s venue, however, was consciously meant as a diversion from traditional Branson architecture, just as his presentation of popular rather than country music was meant to depart from previous entertainment offerings. As his manager, Tennyson Flowers, explained, “The idea, you see, was to take these natural cliffs and have an urban building rising out of it. Using the natural thing, this is the concept—that we’re combining the urban with country.”40

Although Williams’s theater acquiesced to a partial rural aesthetic, his sometimes coarse demeanor—gleaned from many years on the Las Vegas nightclub circuit—almost spelled his theatrical demise even prior to his arrival. In January 1992, he stated in the Nashville Tennessean that he was surprised at the success of many local acts and that he had deliberated deeply before deciding on his move:
“I had never heard of Branson—I wasn’t interested in having some theater in f-cking Branson. . . . I think that the acts in Branson have been having a joy ride because there are all those people over there, and the shows, a lot of them, are just crap.” Entertainers and tourists alike interpreted these comments as a re-buke of Branson’s folksy and wholesome offerings, and comedian and musician Jim Stafford defended the “authentic” nature of area entertainment when he asserted, “People pick on country music all the time. Of course, you’re not going to walk into a Branson theater and see ‘Equus.’ But you’re going to see good family entertainment. The players are good, the singers are good. It’s real people playing real music.” To make amends and to display his allegiance to local mind-sets and ethical vantages, Williams’s opening-night performance was a benefit for the conservative College of the Ozarks’ Camp Lookout (a Christian summer camp for needy Taney County children). Raising $40,000 and winning front-page coverage in the *Springfield News-Leader*, the event resituated a performer deemed out of the Ozark fold within the local entertainment prototype, thereby demonstrating Williams’s ability to “Bransonize.”

Currently, tickets to the Moon River Theatre are among the most sought after in town because Williams has mostly consented to the Branson archetype and infuses his act with requisite religious and patriotic numbers. Although he still does not do country songs because he “does not want to intrude on what’s established here,” trademark pieces such as “Moon River” and “September Song” similarly evoke a more innocent age and may even spawn propitious visions that quiet the tumult of modern life. As a Japanese fan hoping to visit the Ozarks avowed, “Branson is something special place. I feel I may be able to find my dreamland. . . . Andy’s warm voice makes me a woman with a gentle heart.” Despite his complicity with local standards, Williams’s approach to entertainment is still sometimes tinged with controversy. For instance, in 2003, he even briefly bucked the city’s unwritten rule of theater temperance by offering beer and wine to his guests—a move that produced much consternation among visiting church groups. Notwithstanding such glitches, he has become Branson’s most successful vendor of nostalgia and opened the door for many performers outside the country or gospel scene.

One pop showman who tried to follow in Williams’s footsteps was Wayne Newton. In May 1993, he launched a 3,000-seat theater in Branson. Though known for his Las Vegas panache, Newton was raised in Roanoke, Virginia, and toured with the Grand Ole Opry road show at the age of ten—facts that at least provided a bit of country currency on his arrival. However, his abbreviated stay in Branson had less to do with style and more to do with what might
be termed personal substance. Like Williams, Newton put on a benefit when he first came to town, a show that raised several thousand dollars for the College of the Ozarks. Despite this gesture, however, the presence of curse words and other “racy” elements in his show led the college to refuse his money. More problems quickly followed. At the close of his first season, in which his leased theater filled to only 50 percent capacity, its owners put it up for sale. One month later, Newton sued the company for $5 million, claiming that the show was mismanaged and his reputation tarnished. In April 1994, the singer was officially fired and left Branson to tend to a pending personal bankruptcy case in Nevada.43

Beginning in 1995, Newton returned to Branson for occasional performances. In 1998, he teamed with Tony Orlando for an act at the Talk of the T.O.W.N. (an acronym for Tony Orlando Wayne Newton) Theatre. Following that season, this collaboration went sour, and the duo split. Subsequently, Orlando sued Newton for $15 million, contending that his partner violated terms of their agreement. Newton countersued for $20 million, claiming that Orlando had disseminated false statements while perhaps hoping to win over Ozark vacationers by stating that he would keep his former partner “in [his] prayers.” Newton is known for his incredibly loyal and sometimes maniacal admirers. Echoing the sentiments of many, enthusiast Sue Baker claimed, “The thing that keeps me coming back is the man, the way he relates to you. It’s like spending an evening with a relative and an old friend.” Creating a sense of familiarity has always been vital to the success of Branson entertainment. Because Newton’s controversies denied his ardent fans this ability to situate him within a psychic domestic sphere, he fulfilled the premonitions of many who doubted that he could comply with the “just folks” attitude on which Ozark entertainment was built. Though he could croon nostalgic numbers such as “Danke Scheon,” he could not avoid being labeled “too Vegas” for Branson. In October 1999, Newton signed a ten-year contract with that Nevada city’s Stardust Casino and thus returned to a place where ethical circumstances are lesser determinants for success. Applauding this departure and citing Newton’s poor fit in the region, vacationer Peg Adams stated, “He’s not Branson. We went home for the winter and he did too. But he never came back.”44

Both Andy Williams’s and Wayne Newton’s productions have always included the mandatory gospel numbers that characterize all Branson shows, but neither explicitly emphasized Christian themes. However, other pop icons have mimicked the area’s long-established fusion of religion and leisure nearly perfectly. Alan, Jay, and Merrill Osmond (siblings of Donny and Marie) opened the Osmond Family Theatre in 1992, and it remained in operation for a decade. These
brothers and more than thirty other family members were brought to Branson by Andy Williams, who had launched their career on his television show in the 1960s. Reliving their adolescent successes of the 1970s, the performers offered tunes that reflected their decades-long promotion of clean-cut values. In 1994, they described the impulse that prompted their move from Utah to the Ozarks: “Branson is an oasis. America is going down the toilet.” Claiming that God’s work is in the process of being systematically undone by secularized politics and liberal media, Merrill Osmond cited the evangelistic capabilities of Branson entertainment in the face of a less than virtuous nation when he asserted, “The problem is, we don’t have enough role models that have the basics figured out that can preach to the masses the correct way.”

Since its debut, the Osmond Brothers Show, which now performs limited engagements in Branson, has been filled with all the patented elements of reminisce. Including in their show musical styles ranging from barbershop quartet, to big band, to country hoedown, to pop, these poster boys of a more innocuous era are conceivably the prime example of marketed nostalgia. As tour guide authors Kate Klise and Crystal Payton have written, “If Branson didn’t exist, the Osmonds would’ve had to invent it.” Seemingly out of context, the brothers frequently end their act with religious melodies such as “‘Till We Meet at Jesus’ Feet” backed by giant watercolor portraits of Christ beamed on the stage. The Osmonds were the first of an ever growing contingent of Mormon performers in Branson which now includes the Hughes, Dutton, and Lowe families. All of them take advantage of a well-known Latter-day Saints missionary impulse coupled with a theological vantage that posits things spiritual as refined essences of the material world. Moreover, because the Book of Mormon describes the United States as “a land which is choice above all other lands,” the church’s promotion of American exceptionalism nicely meshes with similar Ozark fusions of God and nation. The ability to theatrically enact these religious perspectives within a tourism climate that prizes extended families, heralds procreative inclinations, and values temperance has thus made Branson a site ripe for Mormon-operated entertainment.

Jimmy Osmond, who operates the American Jukebox Theater, is also frequently a guest star at Branson’s many special Christmas productions. Over the past decade, Christmastime tourism has become incredibly popular, making the city one of America’s most renowned holiday destinations and exemplifying its Christian-themed nostalgia. Since 1949, the city’s Adoration Parade has kicked off the season on the first Sunday of December with purposely noncommercial floats and the lighting of a 40-foot-high Nativity scene. Lauding this approach
while attending a 2003 event that drew twenty-five thousand onlookers, Rex Jensen stated, “It’s the way things ought to be. It tends to put the real purpose of Christmas into perspective.” Although the aim of “Ozark Mountain Christmas” seems to be the castigation of the materiality of the modern holiday, it reaps huge profits from an avowedly nonconsumptive fete. As religious historian Leigh Eric Schmidt has observed, the twentieth century was wrought with Christian protests against a mounting “consumer gospel” that seemed to overtake heartfelt and meaningful memorializing of Christ’s birth. Branson boosters, fully aware of this tension and seeking to assure their visitors that they stress the devotional aspects of the season, chose an unambiguously Christian moniker for their citywide celebration.47

This negotiation of seasonal title was described by Claudia Vecchio, former vice president for communications at the Branson/Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce and Convention and Visitor’s Bureau, in a September 2002 interview:

The interesting juggling act is as Branson grows, the goal is to attract more visitors. Calling ourselves a Christian destination does limit us. For some people here that’s a very good limitation and they prefer that that be our target market. . . . We’re Ozark Mountain Christmas not Ozark Mountain Holiday Season. There’s absolutely no escaping and nobody really wants to, the Christian overtones of Branson.48

Central to clarifying an appropriate holiday designation is the conscious subsuming of the secular to the sacred within variety show Christmas pageants. For example, Tony Orlando has offered his “Santa & Me” for more than a decade. The crescendo of the production is a moment in which Santa hands a Nativity scene to the performer. According to Orlando, in doing so the figure who symbolizes the worldly aspects of the holiday becomes “a soldier of Christ.” The singer, who is well known for thoroughly melding Branson’s triptych of God, family, and country, admits that such sentiments might not be welcomed in other parts of the nation, but they are guaranteed a warm reception in a “a place that stands for all that makes America great.”49

The popular Christmas show offered by Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN) mainstays Dino and Cheryl Kartsonakis is a prime illustration of wistful Christmas renderings that assure tourists that the “real” reason for the season is not forgotten in Branson. Dino, a flamboyant pianist sometimes labeled the “ Liberace of the gospel set,” claims that the turning point in his career came when he played a solo show at an Assemblies of God convention in Springfield, Missouri. He recorded his first of forty albums in 1963, received a Grammy nomination
Dino’s Christmas Extravaganza brochure, 2000. From the author’s collection
for his “Chariots of Fire,” and spent many years traveling with the healing and miracle ministry of Kathryn Kuhlman. As the host of a weekly TBN program entitled The Dino Show, Kartsonakis has for many years been the foremost Ozark booster among Pentecostal and charismatic Christians.³⁰

Dino first performed his Christmas show in 1991 at the Mel Tillis Theater. Although this act has relocated from venue to venue in Branson, it continues to draw large crowds. At a 2002 performance I attended alongside more than a thousand other patrons, Kartsonakis and his wife prefaced their holiday spectacular by reminding attendees that they were there to “celebrate the Birthday of Jesus,” to observe “the true meaning of Christmas,” and to witness a presentation “based on the word of God.” The entire first act was filled with similar homage, as sequined singers offered rousing versions of sacred Christmas music and Dino accompanied in an emblazoned tuxedo. Somewhat surprisingly, the second act opened with an appearance by Santa and the performance of large-scale secular numbers. These arrangements extolled the virtues of gift giving and merriment in a setting of nuclear families apparently unaffected by the anxieties of the contemporary holiday. Although deference to modern (although nostalgically presented) Christmas seemed to diverge from the production’s earlier focus on sanctity, the show’s finale more than reaffirmed the basic message. After a solemn rendition of “Silent Night,” peculiar cherubim appeared on stage, a Nativity scene was lowered from above, and Dino and Cheryl dropped to their knees in prayer. Following a few moments of divine entreaty, Dino displayed three balls skewered onto a metal rod: one gold (representing God), one black (representing evil), and one blue (representing humanity). Dino claimed that, like the aligned balls, human beings are separated from God by sin. He then dramatically removed the black sphere with a crucifix, declaring that Jesus can similarly eliminate such moral tarnishes from our lives. He also noted that, even with the evil ball gone, humanity is still estranged from the supernatural. Many in the crowd vocally concurred and departed from what had been a predominantly jovial celebration with a somber reminder of their own iniquity.

For more than a decade, Kartsonakis has offered nostalgically motivated entertainment and promoted the Ozarks as a place where leisure is accompanied by divine sanction. As he has stated:

This town was founded on Christianity. . . . Churches throughout the US are becoming more aware of what’s happening in Branson. They’re wanting to come here not only for the entertainment, but to feel the presence of God. When they come to Branson they feel protected because the town is covered with the blessings
of God. I am an entertainer, and I love to entertain, but I’m first a Christian. When people come to any of our shows, yes, they will see the glitz and the glamour of the costumes, the dancers, the lavish sets, all the entertainment part, but just before I do my finale I take five minutes and present the gospel of Jesus Christ. We have thousands of people coming to our shows, but not one of them can ever say they never heard the gospel.  

Within this quotation, one can locate many complexities that accompany the mixture of longing and religiosity in Branson. According to Kartsonakis, the city can function as a location for popular religious missionary work not only because of “the presence of God” but also because vacationers can emerge from their recreational experiences “nourished and refreshed.” Affirming this sentiment, a fan from Georgia asserted after attending a show, “What a blessing I received. . . . The joy of the Lord spills out all over you. Thanks for blessing me and thanks for lifting Jesus high.” Moreover, claims of miraculous healing have even arisen from the Kartsonakises’ Branson productions. Cheryl recounted about their 2002 Easter Show, “A gentleman up in the nose-bleed section of The Grand Palace received a healing on his knees. He had been a carpet layer and his knees were damaged. He had a hard time walking. It’s just awesome to see what God does for people.”  

Certainly not all Branson shows that engage in remembrances and re-creations of the past have Dino Kartsonakis’s overt Christian tones. However, lack of explicit religiosity does not preclude a forthright codification of appropriate ideals. In recent years, for example, Branson has witnessed a number of productions that take various decades of American history as their subject. In one such production, “Lost in the Fifties,” a series of poodle skirts, greasers, and doo-wop hits may at first seem devoid of any overarching value structure. A review by the Branson Church Getaway Planner, a periodical distributed at the rate of eighty thousand copies a year to church groups throughout the country, suggested otherwise:  

Mike Meece [the show’s producer and director who also functioned in a similar capacity for the gospel-based musicals The Promise and Two from Galilee] finds a different and unique way to communicate eternal truths. He captures an era, then uses great music, festive dancing, and even comedy to once again probe every nook and cranny of our hearts. But something else happens. If we look for it, we will note a deft and subtle hand at work, once again underscoring those precious core values that bring blessings to our lives, and as history has proven, have brought blessings to our nation.
Thus, at least in this reviewer’s opinion, “eternal truths” must not necessarily possess a divine referent. Within the Branson milieu, they can even be located at the most understated and glib of locales.

Ron Layher, the owner of the Starlite Theatre (where “Lost in the Fifties” is staged), approaches this endeavor from a decidedly business-oriented perspective but has phrased its popularity in terms of marketing re-created values. Claiming that the show is “selling a memory,” Layher candidly expressed the workings of nostalgia in a fashion that could apply to most Branson productions: “The truth of the matter is the fifties music, if you just look at the music itself, wasn’t that good. We remember it as that good because we want to. It was pretty thin. . . . But we sell the time. We do the old music done like they want to hear it today and they think that’s the way it was.” Further commenting on “Lost in the Seventies,” a similar jaunt down memory lane that opened during the 2003 season, Layher added, “Now the seventies was totally different. The seventies is a time that people don’t necessarily have positive memories about the era. But the music was wonderful. . . . When we produce the seventies we will emphasize the music and not the era.” Layher’s collective observations express what all other Branson entertainment implies—that tourists are not looking for documentary renderings of historical turmoil or even accurate presentations of musical genre or style. Instead, they want gentle reminders and placid memories, all enveloped in a staging of “eternal truths” that evade the stings and arrows of the past rather than trying to heal them.

In a 2002 interview with Dan Lennon, director of marketing at Branson’s Welk Theatre and Resort and performer in that venue’s swing music morning show, he discussed an act entitled “Century of American Music,” which was staged the previous year. Describing this production, which featured hit songs from the 1960s, he portrayed that decade as “serious and dark” and held that “the cultural shifts that happened at that time have mixed feelings for the senior audience.” As this age group is the Welk Theatre’s primary draw, an era of strife and protest was represented by the music of Burt Bacharach and other “non-threatening” crooners. Defending this interpretation and claiming that one of the hallmarks of the Branson industry is its lack of “cynicism,” Lennon asserted, “We’re not obliged to put on a definitive history of the music. We’re obliged to put on an entertainment product that pleases a lot of people.”

Although essayist Jerry Rodnitzky claimed that he “inadvertently found Harding’s 1920s in Branson” during his visit, it seems clear that the millions of annual tourists to Branson do not come in search of accurate portrayals of the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, or any other time period. However, they often do arrive believing
that the place offers opportunities to glimpse at and perhaps internalize systems of morality and religious dictates from a very distant past. This, of course, is the myth first described by Harold Bell Wright and still glorified within the contemporary tourism market. Describing this dynamic, a vacationer from Arkansas stated in the late 1990s, “I feel at peace, harmonious, tranquil. In the middle of the busiest place I feel comfortable. . . . The Ozarks offer a simple way for most people. Look to the history of the Ozarks, the people who settled, and what they are about.” Thus, it is not a specific sociocultural context that is desired but rather a set of virtues or truths that continue to be associated with this regional past and which are given the promise of return through vacationary implication. Reflecting on time spent away from town, Dan Lennon claimed, “Branson feels like it’s far away from the world.” By fostering this sense of otherworldliness, the city becomes a sanctuary for pilgrims fleeing the present and a site for nostalgic reminiscence about a time that never was.56

**GOD AND COUNTRY**

In an influential 1966 essay, sociologist Robert Bellah introduced the concept of “civil religion.” Citing the possibility of ideological consensus forged around notions of religious nationalism rather than official Christianity, he dated the emergence of such functionalist spirituality to the dawn of the nation. As he wrote, “What we have then, from the earliest years of the republic is a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals, with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity,” attitudes thus capable of creating a nationally bound “church.” Despite intoning the ability of America’s foundational political documents and religiously motivated archetypes (Exodus, Chosen People, Promised Land, and so on) to bind individuals within an ever differentiating society, Bellah’s essay is primarily a lamentation. In the face of mounting conflict in Vietnam, he expressed trepidation about nationalism left untempered by the ethical motifs of conventional religion. Addressing a demise of shared values in *The Broken Covenant* (1975), he pleaded for a “common set of moral understandings necessary for both cultural legitimation and a standard of critique for society.” With “concerns over virtue” trumped by the “success ideal,” a reinvention of overarching symbolic structures able to bind disparate individuals was now described as lost within the “nightmare” of modernity.57

Since publication of *The Broken Covenant*, few sociologists have commented on civil religiosity. However, in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, expressions of religious nationalism reemerged in a variety of contexts.
Although intensified patriotism and a stronger alliance between nation and godly mission are viewed by many Americans as recent phenomena, civil religiosity is not a new subject in Branson. As Richard Freihofer, publisher of the Branson Church Getaway Planner, stated in an interview a little over one year after September 11, 2001:

We get criticized by Arthur Frommer or whoever for jamming religion down people’s throats or being really schlocky with waiving the flag in everybody’s face. It’s in fashion now because of the events of September 11th. . . . So suddenly we’re waking up to who we are. We represent something, and the flag represents something. Maybe Branson isn’t so corny after all. That’s part of what Branson is and this is what people can’t orchestrate. We’re speaking to something in people’s hearts.  

Further substantiating links between devotion to country and devotion to God within Branson tourism, Raeanne Presley (of the Presleys’ Country Jubilee) acknowledged, “Almost all of us tend to have some type of a gospel segment that’s very godly. . . . It’s also very patriotic. [We did this] long before September 11th, when this seemed more popular and the thing to do.”

In fact, following the tragedies of 2001, a debate raged in Branson concerning the sectarian nature of the town’s civil religious presentations. The Chamber of Commerce and Convention and Visitor’s Bureau decided to respond to the events by means of a series of public service announcements broadcast on area television stations. Then vice president of communications, Claudia Vecchio, sent out an invitation to local entertainers soliciting their participation and encouraging them to make their message “faith-based” rather than “Christian-based” (as she felt that these stations would not air a message connected with a specific religious tradition). In her words, “By the end of the week I was the Antichrist. . . . Paul Harvey without calling said that the Chamber of Commerce was not letting its entertainers talk about faith in their commercial messages. . . . Very definitely this is a Christian-based community.” Thus, unlike Bellah’s notion of civil religion—one that suggested an ecumenical understanding of nation as object of veneration—Branson’s version of the concept has always imagined the United States as safeguarded by a distinct formulation of the Christian deity. This message is fortified by the rousing patriotic finales and mandatory tributes to veterans found at each and every theatrical venue. In embracing this mode of civil religion, the city has become a model for American identity rather than the aberration criticized by a bevy of journalists. This transformation was highlighted by local entertainer Bucky Heard: “After September 11, the way people looked at Branson changed. People used to make fun of us—that we dropped the flag at
every show, that we were hokey. To me, the rest of America could take a lesson from Branson.”

Branson hosted its first Veterans Day parade in 1934 and has continued the tradition ever since. It was 1993, however, that marked the beginning of a more forthright association between the city and civic worship. That year, Tony Orlando was the grand marshal of the Veterans Day parade and afterward exceed the “First Annual Yellow Ribbon Salute to Veterans.” This tribute marked the earliest conscious targeting of veterans as a niche market. In 2000, more than one-third of Branson’s seven million visitors were veterans and their family members. A 1999 economic impact study revealed that this demographic spent more than $109 million in November alone. Currently, the city sponsors the nation’s largest Veterans Day celebration—a week-long festival titled “Veteran’s Homecoming.” The commemoration annually attracts approximately 150,000 former soldiers and their relatives, and its events are frequently punctuated with reference to John 15:13 (“No one has greater love than this, than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” [NRSV]).

Spearheading the patriotic veneration is the Branson Veterans Task Force—a nonprofit organization founded in 1997 which advances the motto “Honoring America’s Veterans Every Day.” Intent on making Branson a “mecca of veteran-dom,” the group sponsors the city’s yearly celebration, which currently includes more than sixty special events for former soldiers and garners participation from the Osmonds, the Gatlin Brothers, the Oak Ridge Boys, and many other Branson regulars. Because of these efforts and the ever present nationalistic sentiment at local theaters, Branson was given a “Stewards of Freedom Award” in 2000 by the National Flag Foundation for being the most patriotic city in America.

Patriotic feelings are further enshrined at Branson’s Veterans Memorial Museum, a venue that sits enveloped by flags on the town’s Strip. The museum contains 18,000 square feet of exhibits and artifacts, along with personal pictures and emotional stories shared by families that lost loved ones in major battles. Composed of five sections, the museum covers World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and Desert Storm. Branson’s first “Veteran’s Homecoming” focused on World War II, and afterward some people felt that the city favored this age cohort (a group that was at the forefront of a senior tourism explosion of the early 1990s). As a result, since 1995 greater emphasis has been placed on veterans of more recent wars.

At the museum, a placard for the Vietnam War claims that the truth about this conflict “remains elusive,” that what most people know about it was “generated by fragmentary and incomplete reporting,” and that, however the war is
judged, “the Vietnam veteran got a raw deal.” Fred Smith, who fought in South-
east Asia, visited Branson in 2001. Attesting to the ways that the city intentionally
caters to soldiers of “unpopular” wars, Smith stated, “One of the best parts of
Branson was that every show we went to always recognized veterans. They had
them stand up to pay honor to them. . . . There are a lot of veterans, especially
from Vietnam, who haven’t been appreciated. No one’s ever said thank you.”
The purpose of all veteran-oriented events is to offer visitors a sense of respite
that mimics the town’s more general orientation toward nostalgia. By giving
museum space to more recent and less valorized wars or singling out individu-
als who fought in these conflicts, the events are moved from the world of active
debate into the realm of history—a bastion that within the tourism industry is
not open to interpretation.

In a room at the museum dedicated to captured artifacts from Nazi Germany
and imperial Japan, a disclaimer reads, “Their display should in no way be taken
as an endorsement of the beliefs or ideologies of our enemies. Far from it; the
Veterans Memorial Museum has no sympathy for the beliefs of America’s en-
emies.” Further described as “tangible symbols of our triumph over evil,” such
objects (and the civil religiosity they represent) are implicated in the staunch
production of dualisms that pervade Branson entertainment. Patriotism, like
Christianity, is a put forth as a given for visitors. In a Manichaean world of abso-
lute right and unconditional wrong—one that draws thick lines of ethical sepa-
ration between religious and nonreligious, country and city, and old-fashioned
and modern—debating the merits of military conflict (like arguing the intrinsic
worth of other heralded categories of meaning) is not encouraged.

As mentioned, Branson’s civil religiosity finds a home not only at veteran-foc-
cused events but also at each and every entertainment venue. Mike Radford, a
motivational speaker, author, and performer billed as “America’s Ambassador of
Patriotism,” stages the long-running “Remember When” show. Although this is
primarily a patriotic set, Radford has described its dawn in a manner that is re-
plete with signifiers of both nation and the divine:

The “Remember When Show” was born on a lonely stretch of Wisconsin highway
when an “angel” appeared to me in 1993. The evening sun was beginning to set, and
I watched in awe as great American bald eagles soared high above the valley. Sud-
denly I noticed a van in the slow lane ahead of me. I could see the words painted
on the spare tire cover, “The Men and Women Who Died for Our Country Must
Never Be Forgotten!” An elderly man sat behind the wheel. As I pulled alongside, I
smiled and gave him a “thumbs-up.” He rolled down the window, pointed upward,
then covered his heart and pointed to me. I knew then I had to create a show that would honor his generation, the generation that literally saved the world. “Is this what you want me to do, Lord?” I prayed. “Is this my destiny?” God answered me by flooding my heart with indescribable joy. And the “Remember When” show was born!  

Moreover, echoing the sentiments of most, if not all, Branson entertainers and brusquely pronouncing his religious nationalism in now familiar dichotomous terms, he stated, “You’re either a believer in this nation and its tenets of God, family, and country, or you’re not. I was taught there’s only right and wrong. There’s no gray area.”  

Comedian Yakov Smirnoff first began performing in Branson in 1993 and opened his own theater in 1997. Through basing his act on a personal journey from Communist to American nationalist, he presents himself as a living example of Mike Radford’s contention: “We [Branson entertainers] don’t ‘promote’ patriotism—We are patriotism.” In 1977, Smirnoff and his family immigrated to the United States from the Soviet Union with little money and no knowledge of English. In 1993, while performing his comedy act at a Farm Aid concert, he was told about Branson by Willie Nelson and decided to try his hand in that market. Smirnoff’s success in town has been predicated on the debasing of a Communist government that had collapsed well before his arrival. Merging a barrage of patriotic hymns with clean humor that often belittles his former home country, Smirnoff exalts the United States. In addition, within a rousing finale he dances with the Statue of Liberty, explodes fireworks, and describes working in Branson as living the American dream. Immediately before coming to town he referred to his new location as “the land of opportunity” and has since stated that “God guides us to the place where we can really do the most service.” Thus, in this rendering Branson becomes the hub of patriotic inculcation and the prime national example of a place where the opportunities and blessings of citizenship can come to fruition. Confirming the efficacy of these methods, a New York tourist stated, “He is more american than alot of americans I know. Thank god for having him in the U.S.A.”  

In 2004, a production entitled “Celebrate America” opened at Branson’s Mansion America theater. No area spectacle better demonstrates how the promotion of patriotism becomes wrapped in other key industry themes. “Celebrate America” was the brainchild of Gene Bicknell. Bicknell was born into a mining family, eventually rose to prominence in the business world (he owns five hundred Pizza Huts), and has showcased his theatrical talents in dozens of film, television,
and stage roles. Set in the midwestern town of Promise, the show begins with a heart-to-heart discussion between a grandpa (Bicknell) and a granddaughter who is grieving over her father going off to war. Recounting the greatness of the nation from colonial times to the present, the production takes onlookers on a whirlwind singing and dancing tour through various archetypal periods and events within U.S. history (the founding fathers, the opening of the West, the construction of railroads, the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair, World War II, and so on). As one might expect based on prior discussions of nostalgia, every epoch and episode is offered in a manner that resists tumultuous circumstances, cultural strife, and other inconvenient historical details that might convolute a clear
vision of American exceptionalism. Moreover, prominent in the mythical town square and nearly every scene of this nationalistic melodrama is the Church of Promise. The centrality of that sanctuary and Christianity at large is made evident within the finale when performers present a rousing rendition of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” By way of this hasty tour through the nation’s “past,” “Celebrate America” thus hopes to demonstrate a generational continuity of excellence and achievement underscored by divine mandate. Although this show is the city’s most forthright staging of such themes, all venues replicate its intentions. Reflecting this pervasiveness and its intended affect on future generations, a seventy-two-year-old Arizona tourist wrote, “The shows we saw are uplifting, patriotic and clean! Think of the world we are creating for our grandchildren!”

On September 11, 2002, the “American Highrise” mural was unveiled on an exterior wall of the Grand Palace theater in Branson and serves as a mammoth reminder of the city’s civil religiosity. This painting, a quarter of an acre in size, offers a view of downtown New York set upon an American flag background and bordered by the sayings “One Nation Under God” and “We the People, United We Stand.” The image was created by Richard Daniel Clark, an Australian native who now resides in Branson. In 1989, it was chosen by George Bush as his presidential inaugural artwork. Since then, it has been displayed at the National Archives and the Statue of Liberty, on board most U.S. aircraft carriers, and at roughly 250 military bases around the world. In addition, it has been accepted as a gift by more than seventy world leaders, including the Reverend Billy Graham and Pope John Paul II (making it the first piece of art featuring the Stars and Stripes to be admitted into the Vatican Archives). According to a Web site that discusses the painting’s history, such worldwide dissemination will soon make “American Highrise” “the most personally viewed piece of art in modern times” and, by association, situates Branson as a vital site for the propagation of its premises.

The emergence of the Christian Right as a viable political force in 1980s is well documented and thus prompts one to consider the connections between the rise of this movement and the development of Branson as a tourist region catering to a similar brand of religious nationalism. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Ronald Reagan’s conversion to Christianity was facilitated by Harold Bell Wright’s vision of applied faith. During Reagan’s first term in office, Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority exerted considerable influence over his administration. Introducing the notion of “family values” into common parlance (terminology employed by every booster of the Branson industry), evangelicals such as Falwell, Pat Robertson,
and Tim LaHaye fiercely lobbied throughout the 1980s to revitalize America’s ethical underpinnings. Meanwhile, the ever mounting number of theaters in Branson echoed such sentiments, albeit within a more muted recreational context. The city’s emergence as a national destination in the 1980s coincided with other expressions of evangelical popular culture (e.g., Christian music, literature, and film). Reflecting on the growth of this subculture in a manner that keenly resonates with Ozark entertainment, Erling Jorstad commented that once insular evangelicals began during the Reagan era to emphasize more greatly how “God works in all activities of their everyday lives” and therefore created popular culture geared toward expressing that faith.⁶⁹

Throughout Branson’s rise to national prominence in the 1990s, numerous conservative Christian political leaders recognized the correspondence between the city’s principles and their policy initiatives. Realizing the importance of evangelicals for his campaign and locating Branson as that constituency’s leisure hub, President George Bush in 1992 chose Silver Dollar City as the place to emphasize his “family values” message and celebrate his nomination to a second term of office. In 1996, Ralph Reed, executive director of the Christian Coalition, spoke to a crowd of more than a thousand people at a local theater, where he attacked the evils of gambling, homosexuality, the liberal media, and “environmental wackos.” Similarly, former presidential candidate and televangelist Pat Robertson addressed a large assembly of tourists in 1998. During his speech, he chided “politi-
cal correctness” that discouraged talking about God in public arenas, reiterated his stance that the United States was founded by Christians, and suggested that Branson was crucial for the promotion of such sentiments because it was “the heartland of America.” Finally, John Ashcroft, whose political involvement in the area was outlined in Chapter 3, blurred the lines between politics and show business when he, Senate majority leader Trent Lott, and a number of other conservative congressmen sang for a throng of onlookers at a local theater in 1997.

According to American studies scholar Robert Schmuhl, “Branson is a metaphor for red state America. . . . The town represents what many conservative people in the Midwest see as America, the America they want, the America they hold in their heads from yesterday. Maybe it is part mythical—but it’s the America they want to cling to.” Central to this utopian and fabled construct is an unabashed melding of God and country. This union underscores a belief by the tourism industry and vacationers alike that the vitality of the nation depends on regular beseeching of divine sanction and a perpetual acknowledgment of America’s providential status. With such civil religiosity gaining traction in the 1980s and fully emerging amid post–September 11 rhetoric of American exceptionalism, Branson has become the national point of emanation for spiritually tinged patriotism.

CONSTRUCTING “FAMILY”

In a 1994 article in Gentlemen’s Quarterly, Jeanne Marie Laskas wrote that, in Branson, “family values are talked about as objects. It is never said where these things are available or how you get them. Everybody just seems to know.” Since the second decade of the twentieth century, Branson boosters have employed “family” rhetoric to attract visitors. Any contemporary marketer would assuredly reiterate this idiom by claiming that the city’s entertainment possesses a wholesomeness that makes it accessible and acceptable to grandparents, grandchildren, and everyone in between. Moreover, tourist comments almost invariably cite this dynamic as a primary draw and ally it with other place-defining themes. As a visitor from Oklahoma asserted, “Branson is a place that honors God, family, and the things that hold America together.” The city’s definition of family is more than just benign presentations of ostensibly unobjectionable material, however. Deconstruction of its variety show entertainment industry reveals numerous ways that domestic identities are intertwined with and fortified by distinct, Christian-informed ideologies.

Nationally known relationship counselor, author, and conference speaker
Gary Smalley resides in Branson. There, he heads the Smalley Relationship Center—his organizational center that focuses on allaying divorce rates, fostering accord between husbands and wives, and promoting a specific vision of child rearing. Today's Family is the nonprofit, Christian-based arm of this undertaking. Since Smalley's arrival in Branson, his organization has interfaced with the tourism industry in a number of ways. For instance, in 2000 he initiated a radio talk show broadcast from Silver Dollar City's Wilderness Chapel—a program lauded by the park's administrators as able to entertain and lead people to a relationship with Christ. Examination of Smalley's initiatives reveals a number of essential principles that course through Branson's presentation of “proper” family dynamics.  

Smalley’s counseling-cum-ministry is predicated on scriptural precedents. He claims that God created us to need relationships by quoting Genesis 2:18 (“Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will give him a helper as his partner’” [NRSV]). Understanding that men and women are programmed by the divine in naturally different manners, he frequently includes in his advice the idea that men are emotionally guarded, sometimes inattentive to the needs of their mates, and often negligent in the realm of child care. Alternately, he portrays women as overly sensitive, prone to being nagging marital partners, and exceedingly neurotic about their parental duties. Although he admits that claims such as “Women Are from the Classroom; Men Are from the Playground” are “generalities,” these dictates lie at the root of his counseling approach—one that seeks not to overturn such divine imprints but to assist couples in better understanding and managing an innate, preordained dichotomy.

In God’s Daughters (1997), an ethnographic study of the evangelical Women’s Aglow Fellowship, scholar of religion R. Marie Griffith detailed the many healings and transformations brought on marital relationships through wifely submission. Although Smalley’s suggestions evade the rhetoric of obedience, he has harked back to Griffith’s thesis by recommending “gentle persistence” to wives—an approach that avoids direct confrontation in favor of the more tender discourse “inherent” in female personalities. Such counsel, coupled with his reliance on scripture, understanding of gender as a naturalized identity category, expressed definition of marriage as a union between a man and a woman, and admonitions concerning premarital sex, has bestowed him with much credence among American evangelicals. His honors include endorsements from Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson’s Christian Broadcasting Network, and the Trinity Broadcasting Network.  

Although Smalley has sold more than 5 million books and spoken to more
than 2 million people at conferences during his thirty-year career, James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family and syndicated radio and newspaper commentator, is assuredly the leading spokesman for conservative, Christian, family values. Like Today's Family, Dobson's organization situates church, family, and government as three basic institutions ordained by God and thereby seeks to combat the contemporary pervasiveness of “humanistic notions.” Focus on the Family is based in Colorado Springs, Colorado, rather than Branson, but on a number of occasions Dobson has invoked the importance of an Ozark brand of family values. As he stated during a national radio broadcast, “Branson is the alternative Christians have been looking for.” Thus, to understand the idealized family unit put forth by the town’s multitude of entertainment venues, one must assess not only what the industry says family is but also what it claims it is not.  

Christian approaches to child rearing and family systems are also codified at Branson’s Kanakuk Kamps. Founded in 1926, Kanakuk is the largest Christian athletic camp in the United States. Composed of eight different sites (seven in the Ozarks and one in Colorado), it welcomes seventeen thousand children every summer from elementary through high school age for “Excitement, Adventure, and Christian Athletics.” Kanakuk campers can participate in a gamut of recreational offerings—from team sports, to mountaineering, to water slides. Although children primarily come for these activities, Ward Wiebe, the director of the junior high camp, has stated that “the pie plate that holds the pie is the biblical foundation or the whole Christian message.” Kanakuk is officially a non-denominational enterprise, but its religious impetus is evidenced by owner Joe White’s frequent appearances on Focus on the Family programs. To further its religious mission, committed Christian counselors offer a morning Bible reading that is supposed to underscore the remainder of the day’s frivolity. Classes open and close with a prayer, and scriptural study supplements athletic offerings.

Within all its activities, Kanakuk accentuates family situations and problems that echo those addressed within Branson’s entertainment industry. Reminders of the evils of drugs, alcohol, and premarital sex pervade its endeavors. Children are counseled on issues of separation, divorce, and lack of parental involvement. Through a leisure vehicle, campers are introduced to the religious underpinnings of these tribulations, with their dynamics situated within a good-versus-evil dualism assuaged through the redemptive sacrifice of Christ—theological vantages that imitate the larger regional epistemology. As Ward Wiebe declared:

We can introduce kids to the morality of the truth of what happens on the cross and I think that opens up their eyes to how life is meant to be lived. . . . The thief
comes to kill, steal, and destroy. Jesus came so that you could have life and have it more abundantly. . . . The Bible teaches that if you confess with your mouth “Jesus is Lord” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you’ll be saved. I think what we try to do is put in front of each kid, “According to the message of the cross, why did Jesus Christ have to die on the cross? What was accomplished there? And what does it mean?”

Most broadly construed, Kanakuk’s religious perspective revolves around the promotion of an “I Am Third” lifestyle—an ontology that emphasizes putting God first, others second, and oneself third. Such an ethic again imitates the self-sacrificial notions of family that are invoked within local entertainment. Like the myriad theaters adjacent to Kanakuk’s Branson camp, recreation is posited as a ready medium for evangelism. During a child’s stay, he or she can indicate a public profession to Christ by ringing a centrally located bell, and hundreds of such experiences occur over the course of a summer. As Wiebe has asserted, these rebirths entail more than an intellectual reunderstanding: “It’s more than just saying I have religion. It’s more than saying that I know there was a man named Jesus Christ. It’s confessing with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believing in your heart that God did raise him from the dead. Then you’ll be saved.” Thus, an active, embodied experience of Christian awakening is at the root of Kanakuk’s endeavor—a mode of religiosity that reproduces the evangelical theology buttressing Ozark religion and recreation.

In a 1992 essay on rural gender identity, anthropologist H. Jane Parker held that, in the Ozarks, “the social/symbolic representation of gender is a public sign system that dialectically reflects and produces a local epistemology, a system of ideas, of and about gender.” Although she did not broach representations of maleness or femaleness within regional tourism, Parker did document various ways that cultural forms assist in the construction and negotiation of those categories. Furthermore, oral accounts from her subjects frequently posited Christian scripture as the basis for such understandings. As one interviewee (Laverne) attested, “I just feel like that a man should be the head of the house and head of the government. That’s what the Bible teaches.” Rhonda, from Rock County, Arkansas, furthered this claim when she stated, “Men excel at being out-going and dynamic, they exert their personality more. Being subjective is what I think the Lord created us for . . . to be the helpmate.” Within Branson’s entertainment, this perception of gender is corroborated, as such identities are put forth not as shifting matrices of meaning but rather as time-honored and God-ordained essences. Parker additionally claimed that storytelling is a primary vehicle for the convey-
ance of gender “models.” Each and every Branson musical venue tells these stories through on-stage performance, thereby proffering a leisure-oriented channel for such indoctrination. Though the majority of Branson’s headline performers are men, their spouses almost always play a significant role in the production. They sing and dance with their mates, work the theaters’ gift shops selling homemade wares and glossy photos of their nuclear families, and, of supreme importance, are presented as matrons imparted with the most vital of domestic duties—the raising of sometimes stunningly large celebrity families.

In the Branson entertainment industry, sizable families function as status symbols. Much is made of the fact that the Osmonds and Lennons now have thirty-plus members living in the area. The Presleys’ Country Jubilee and the Baldknobbers Hillbilly Jamboree (the progenitors of family-based, family-operated amusement in the Ozarks) tender a parade of related stars, with grandparents and grandchildren at times sharing the stage. Space does not allow for an all-inclusive exposition of the various intermingling of entertainment and extended family in Branson, but suffice it to say that procreation is given paramount importance and that this reproductive impulse is subtly put forth as a godly mandate. In addition, the unbridled acquisition of offspring in Branson is not solely limited to biological breeding. Some musical families have augmented their ranks through the channels of KidSave International, a Christian nonprofit group founded in 1999 which helps children from orphanages in Russia and central Asia find homes in the United States. In 2002, the Dutton family (of the Dutton Family Theater) added five members to its ranks through this program—two siblings from Russia and four from Kazakhstan. Following suit, the Hughes family (of the Hughes Brothers Celebrity Theatre), whose matriarch hopes that “the Spirit comes across” in the way it represents family within its show, also adopted four children. Considering the religiously motivated importance placed on extended kinship networks in Branson and the fact that the Dutton and Hughes families are committed Mormons, their participation in the program seems fitting.

Although leisure opportunities in Branson implicitly address female bodies and female sexuality through their procreative and child-raising emphases, corporeal display has no place within the industry. On-stage costuming is intentionally modest, and when the bounds of “appropriate” dress are overstepped, tourists frequently vocalize their discontent. The Legends Family Theatre is a venue that showcases celebrity impersonators imitating the likes of Elvis Presley, Judy Garland, Marilyn Monroe, and Little Richard. All in this list are connected with bodily expression to varying degrees—the gyrating king of rock and roll, the
gay culture icon, the busty starlet, and the sexually ambivalent pianist. Surprisingly, these look-alikes have not been cause for consternation, perhaps because impersonators merely copy and are therefore exempt from critiques that question personal artistic creation. Female singers and dancers who accompany them on stage have been deemed too “Vegas” (read provocative) for Branson at times, however. A frequent vacationer in the region objected to a visit in the late 1990s as follows:

We wanted to see the Blues Brothers and Elvis mostly. We didn’t see Elvis at all and the Blues Brothers didn’t perform long. What we mostly saw were showgirls in sexy costumes flaunting their bodies in our faces!! All consisted of low-cut, mid-riff bare tops, and high-cut or short short bottoms. I will never go back there and I have told everyone I know not to go unless they want to hear and see a bunch of naked women and husbands and boyfriends drooling and acting stupid. This show should be driven out of town or cleaned up.82

Such a comment demonstrates once again that many tourists envision Branson as the ideological opposite of Las Vegas. Although local performers have donned glitzy, sequined attire since the early 1980s, this garb is meant to present female bodies in a manner that reflects the “tasteful” flamboyance of “country chic” rather than lust-arousing scantiness found on America’s other famous Strip.

This being said, not all female performers in Branson have limited their on-stage persona to that of mother or caregiver. From 1993 to 2001, singer Jennifer Wilson portrayed a self-styled, late twentieth-century Betty Grable. (She even sold photos of herself striking Grable’s back-turned, hand-on-hip pose so widely disseminated during World War II.) However, according to Springfield News-Leader journalist Mark Marymount, this appeal was tempered by a tourist vantage that viewed her as a “sexy granddaughter” rather than as a harlot. Another means by which the performer dispelled criticism of her ostensibly provocative numbers was “having a lot of Jesus around me.” Throughout her stay in town, she was never reticent about the evangelistic intentions of her act: “Of course I witness on stage and give brief testimony. I’m proud to say I’m a born-again Christian. When I moved to Branson, it was just like coming home.” Through these measures, Wilson enveloped what was assuredly the sexiest Branson act within the safety of domestically oriented Christian rhetoric and “comforted” guests by putting herself forth as a titillating relative rather than a true competitor for the affections of male guests.83

Since 1994, the leggy and scantily clad Rockettes have been performing a “Christmas Spectacular” in Branson. One might think that this presentation
of Broadway-style glamour would not resonate well with Ozark tourists, but the show has always produced large, contented crowds. Unlike Jennifer Wilson, the Rockettes’ sexuality is elided not through situating them as extended family members but by making overt references to the dancers’ industriousness. Audiences are reminded that the performers devote eight hours a day to rehearsal, that they are versed in multiple forms of dance, and that they pay the utmost attention to even the smallest detail. This appeal to a Protestant work ethic is bolstered by the religious Christmas themes central to their show. The Rockettes climax their presentation with a living Nativity scene, and alongside references to the merits of hard work, this spiritual sentiment functions as an effective anodyne for what might be construed by some as a New York infusion of bodily inappropriateness into the local tourism scene.84

In 1999, Branson hosted the Miss USA Pageant. Boosters hoped that the event would increase national exposure and attract a younger tourist audience, but in its wake, numerous objections concerning the production’s bawdiness surfaced. Local journalist Lauren Squires wrote, for example, “As wholesome and family-oriented as Branson claims its appeal to be, it is a shame that it chose such a sex-doused show to gain exposure. . . . Branson’s ‘heartland values’ reputation is a bit tarnished.” Many more Ozark aficionados reacted to the exploits of the Miss USA emcee, Young and the Restless star Shemar Moore, feeling he had engaged in overly sexual banter with contestants and proffered a too “racy rendition” of the song “Pussycat.” Immediately following the event, retired newspaperman Ben Kinel drafted a petition stating that Moore “presented the Branson values, which we all cherish, in a very unfavorable light.” After his text was circulated at churches and other civic organizations, within ten days more than a thousand residents and tourists signed it. Although the pageant had included a worship service coordinated by Branson pastors and business leaders and attended by most contestants, this infusion of Christianity was not enough to salvage the production. As Kinel proclaimed, such presentations might be suitable for Las Vegas or New York, “But when you’re in the Ozarks, do as the Ozark people do, and tone it a little more to our fitting.” Of paramount importance for such a fit is the promotion of a value structure that cherishes the procreative impulse, sanctions male authority, locates femaleness within the realm of child bearing and nurture, and stamps these dictates with a divine imprimatur that bestows them with a sense of naturalness rather than social construction.85

Since big-name stars began performing in Branson, boosters have made much of the fact that many of these famous people have decided to reside in this tiny southwestern Missouri city. Tourists thus arrive with the expectation that they
might bump into Tony Orlando at Wal-Mart or see Andy Williams raking leaves in his front yard. As Mel Tillis quipped, “You go to Nashville, you see the stars’ homes. You come to Branson, you see the stars.” Though such happenings are, in fact, rare, even the possibility of their occurrence furthers Branson’s status as “America’s Hometown.” By means of these marketing claims and the constant reminders that sojourners can be symbolically incorporated into already sizable celebrity families through their mere attendance of performances, the town functions as a second (and in many ways more desirable) domestic dwelling for visitors. According to one tourist, “it’s like going home, where you don’t meet a stranger.” Through affirmation of all the “family values” discussed above, entertainment venues indeed offer images of unproblematic household units fortified by biblically grounded morality, and through participation in and consumption of these vantages, tourists thus acquire an arsenal of beliefs to be enacted outside the vacation context. Acknowledging this ability to apply Branson’s sociocultural template to other arenas of lived existence, a St. Louis visitor stated, “Have dessert first! Visit Branson before you see the world.”

When Christianity finds a home within and buttresses country-and-western arrangements, nostalgic renderings of an antimodern past, rousing tributes to veterans and national government, or visions of domestic tranquility, it then is given the popular religious constitution necessary to thrive in Branson. Like any other tourist, the Christian one wants to be entertained. Ozark theaters may contain loosely knit liturgical elements such as sacred music or homiletics, but they are still primarily leisure venues. Jesus is certainly “the greatest star” within all shows, but like the camp meetings and other historical arenas for religious tourism from which Branson theaters draw inspiration, they must clothe this overarching premise in a recreational form that allows visitors to apprehend the infusion of Christian theology and ethics into all lived realms.