

Life in Branson, Mo., keeps comin' up country

By Shirley Jinkins

FT. WORTH STAR-TELEGRAM

BRANSON, Mo.—People use first names here in the family-oriented Ozarks, when they're not calling somebody "honey" or "darlin'." Even a glitzy first-cousin place like Branson is given to diminutives.

Keeping that in mind, here's the big news for '95 from the town of less than 4,000 that welcomed 5.8 million visitors during 1994: Wayne's back, Dolly's comin', Kenny's afloat.

Wayne is Wayne Newton, who reopened this month in the former Five Star Theatre after a year's absence.

Dolly is Dolly Parton, who isn't actually there in person, but her new Dixie Stampede theater opens in June. The Stampede includes a Victorian musical, a main show arena with a meal of roasted chicken and smoked ribs, and a main show of live horse racing and showmanship.

Kenny Rogers christened his Showboat Branson Belle in April on Table Rock Lake, and the 240-foot stern-wheeler houses a 650-seat theater with a resident production show. The dinner menu includes orange chicken breast and pot roast and gravy, topped off with a heavenly turtle sundae. A two-hour dinner cruise costs about \$25 per person.

Live theater seems to be coming to Branson in a big way. Besides the above, the 920-seat Gettysburg

Theatre opened in March with an 18-person musical set in the Civil War.

The Grand Palace has opened the "World Premiere Tribute to Patsy Cline" this spring. And the "Pump Boys and Dinettes" theater is going into its third season.

The best news is, the traffic situation is getting better, though it's still the loblolly of a lifetime around Shoji's place off Shepherd of the Hills Expressway. That'd be Shoji Tabuchi, Japanese-born fiddler. Those red, blue and yellow alternate routes around the congestion of Highway 76, Shepherd of the Hills and Highway 165 are working (at least in early spring traffic), and there are major improvements being made, though some of those projects can create jams of their own.

The two families that started the whole Highway 76 thing, the Presleys and the Mabes (better known as the Baldknobbers), are still there.

The Presleys' Jubilee opened in 1967, the Baldknobbers Jamboree a year later. Gradually, other shows moved in. Roy Clark opened his Celebrity Theatre in 1983. Box Car Willie became the first Nashville star to purchase his own theater, in 1987, and then people like Glen Campbell, Ray Stevens, Moe Bandy, the Mandrells and many others began playing Branson regularly or even moving into Highway 76 theaters. In 1992 the 4,000-seat Grand Palace opened, bringing with it some of country music's biggest touring draws. It's still the biggest theater on the strip.

Branson has a pleasant selection of attractions for those who've tired of constant shows. It helps that there are three lakes in the area (Taneycomo, Table Rock and Bull Shoals), because water makes possible a number of excursions.

Ride the Ducks is Branson's trademark strange ride—land and water tours via amphibious vehicles. The Sammy Lane Pirate Cruise and Lake Queen rides are on Lake Taneycomo downtown. Polynesian Princess dinner cruises on Table Rock Lake are more sophisticated.

Visitors can even combine water and music in a really unusual but soothing production at Waltzing Waters Theatre, off Highway 76 West. The Fountains of Forever show features a pianist backed by 40,000 gallons of choreographed, lighted fountains. Tickets are \$9 for adults, \$4.50 for children.

The Branson Scenic Railway is a nostalgic way to see some awesome Ozark countryside. The 40-mile round trip on the Ozark Zephyr takes nearly two hours,

and winds through tunnels, over high trestles and around mountain passes. Cars are historic ones, including a fancy dome-top double-decker observation lounge and a panoramic parlor car. Rides originate in downtown Branson and fares run from \$8.75 for children to \$18.50 for adults.

Most dining is casual, apart from some of the music theaters that also serve meals.

Naturally, Branson is overrun with touristy shopping spots, offering T-shirts (three for \$10 is an oft-seen sign) and all manner of Ozark crafts that usually have a barnyard motif. But there are a couple of rust-shop places downtown: Dick's Oldtime 5 & 10 at Main and Commercial, and Mountain Man Nut & Fruit Co., 208 E. College.

For details on shows, stars, lodging, dining and entertainment, contact: Branson Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce, Box 220, Branson, Mo. 65616; 417-334-4136. For reservations (tickets or lodging), call 900-884-BRAN; the charge is \$1.50 per minute (average call is three minutes).