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A History of the Shepherd of the Hills Dramatizations: the Branson Productions

Michael Lewis Frizell

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**A HISTORY OF "THE SHEPHERD OF THE HILLS"
DRAMATIZATIONS: THE BRANSON PRODUCTIONS**

A Thesis

Presented to

the Graduate Faculty of the Department of Theatre and Dance

Southwest Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Michael Lewis Frizell

April 1996

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A HISTORY OF "THE SHEPHERD OF THE HILLS" DRAMATIZATIONS:

THE BRANSON PRODUCTIONS

Department of Theatre and Dance

Southwest Missouri State University, April 1996

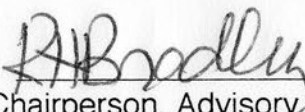
Master of Arts

Michael Lewis Frizell

ABSTRACT

Harold Bell Wright's most successful novel, The Shepherd of the Hills, was, in the 1920's, ranked behind only The Bible, The Koran, and Gone with the Wind in popularity, and has been filmed five times. The story has been dramatized by several different theatrical agencies, including The Federal Theatre Project and the Poli Players of Connecticut. The Branson, Missouri, productions have been staged by Southern Illinois State University, Central Missouri State University at Warrensburg, The Old Mill Players, Inc., and finally The Shepherd of the Hills Historical Society, Inc. This final production was partially responsible for the influx of tourism to southwest Missouri and helped create the tourist Mecca of Branson, Missouri. Though no longer the premiere attraction for the area, "The Shepherd of the Hills" play has succeeded in developing the local identity and establishing the myth of the Ozark hills. This historical report of the Branson productions illustrates the uniqueness of "The Shepherd of the Hills" in relation to the tourism trade in Branson and to Outdoor Drama in America.

This abstract is approved as to form and content.



Chairperson, Advisory Committee
Southwest Missouri State University

Southwest Missouri State University

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by

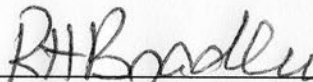
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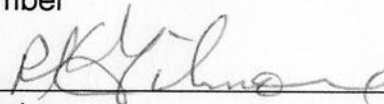
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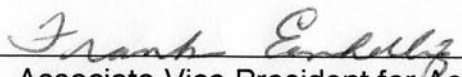
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and Dean of the Graduate College

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have performed at The Shepherd of the Hills Homestead and Outdoor Theatre since 1987, so my involvement in the production has taken up much of my adult life. So second-nature is the play to me, that writing a history of the production seemed almost foolish at first. Several people, however, recognized the significance of this play and the need for a paper tracing its history.

I must first thank Dr. John MacElhaney, for urging me to write an historical thesis, and Dr. Linda Park-Fuller for supplying the tools necessary to do so. I would like to thank Dr. Robert Bradley, thesis chair, and the other members of the committee Dr. Byrne Blackwood and Dr. Robert Gilmore, for their patient and critical reading.

I would like to thank Charlotte McLeod for supplying information on the Southern Illinois Players and about her husband, Dr. Archibald McLeod. The McLeod's had the foresight to see that The Shepherd of the Hills would be successful in Branson. I would also like to thank Jack Gold, the scenic designer for the Central Missouri State productions on the Branson waterfront. His timely response to my request for information on the CMSU productions helped sort out my paper and saved countless hours of work. And, a heartfelt "thank you" to Mark Trimble, who created the outdoor drama still playing in Branson. His phone call was an inspiration.

I thank my son, Tristan, for his patience while I typed furiously, promising to play Star Wars on the landscape of his bedspread with his action figures "as soon as I'm done with this section!"

The one person that must be thanked the most is my wife, Marcine, without whom I would not be attending graduate school. Though she may never recognize it, she has influenced me with her strength and love. I dedicate this paper to our future.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

This study addresses the dramatizations of Harold Bell Wright's novel, The Shepherd of the Hills. The focus will be the various productions of The Shepherd of the Hills, different versions of which coincide with the growth of the Branson area. Harold Bell Wright, a Christian minister from Rome, New York, wrote what was to become the fourth most widely read book in history, behind only The Bible, The Koran, and Gone with the Wind. Wright's book, The Shepherd of the Hills, was an instant success, selling over 4 million copies in 1907.¹ The success of the novel led to several dramatizations for a mass audience.

Theatrical versions of the novel appeared as early as 1915 in Connecticut. In 1935, a branch of the Federal Theatre project, a government subsidized theatre headed by Hallie Flanagan Davis, dramatized and toured the story to rural areas across Illinois as a tent production in repertory with Uncle Tom's Cabin.² The story has been filmed five times.³ Most recently, The Shepherd of the Hills Homestead and Outdoor Theatre, in operation since 1960 in Branson, is the site of an outdoor theatre production, and, for over thirty years, millions of people have seen this interpretation of the novel.⁴ The growth of tourism in the area can be traced back to the publication of Harold Bell Wright's novel and the success of the Branson dramatization of The Shepherd of the Hills during the late 1960's and early 1970's.⁵

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to provide a written account of the history and the development of The Shepherd of the Hills as a drama, specifically focusing on the Branson dramatizations.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The lure of the Ozarks as a tourist destination can be attributed to three separate events, as explained by Linda Myers - Phinney:

First, access to the region was dramatically improved by the coming, in 1905, of the White River Division Railway to Taney and Stone Counties...Second, the area received nation - wide promotion with the publication of The Shepherd of the Hills, a 1907 novel...which depicted the locale as an escape from civilization's cares. Third, the impoundment of Lake Taneycomo in 1913 offered visitors a family recreational setting, which was promoted as inspirational, natural, and wholesome."⁶

As the popularity of Wright's novel drew attention to the Ozarks region, tourists began coming to the area "by the thousands" as a direct result of this popularity.⁷ The initial tourists' interest in the Ozark region did not begin to wane until about the mid-1940's, nearly forty years after publication of the novel.

Dr. Bruce and Mary Trimble, Kentuckians who moved to the Ozarks, purchased the original homestead where the novel was written in June of 1946, a few months after Lizzie McDaniel, the Springfield, Missouri, teacher largely responsible for keeping the homestead open for tourists, passed away.⁸ In 1960, the Trimble family, in joint effort with The Shepherd of the Hills Historical Society and the Old Mill Players, a group interested in keeping the story in the public view, opened The Old Mill Theatre at The Shepherd of the Hills Outdoor Theatre.⁹ That first year, their production drew over 3,000 spectators. By 1973, The Old Mill Theatre attracted 130,000.¹⁰ In 1995 the play in its 35th season had an average of only 800 visitors a night, seven nights a week, from May until the

end of October.¹¹ The 1996 projections indicate a possible slight rise from the 1995 total of approximately 130,000 spectators.¹²

The Branson area, previous to the various dramatizations of the novel, was known first by tourists as an outdoor recreation and sport fishing destination. The various versions of The Shepherd of the Hills played a small part in development of the tourist interest in the late 1960's and early 1970's.. Most of the rush of people to the Ozarks, however, can be attributed to stars such as Roy Clark, who opened his music theatre in 1983, or Mel Tillis, who opened his own theatre in 1991.¹³ It can be said, however, that The Shepherd of the Hills Outdoor Theatre was among the earliest tourism - related attractions in Branson. Interest of this magnitude in the area may never have developed if not for Wright's novel.

No study has been done that traces the various attempts at adapting Wright's story into performance mode. Indeed, even The Shepherd of the Hills Historical Society does not have a complete chronology of its production. Therefore, a study involving these aspects could prove valuable to the future of the production.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the study is to provide a chronology of The Shepherd of the Hills as a drama, focusing mainly on the Branson productions produced by The Shepherd of the Hills Historical Society. The SIU Players of Southern Illinois State University and the theatre department of Central Missouri State University at Warrensburg also presented versions of the novel by the Taneycomo lakefront in Branson. By reviewing their productions, as well as various other productions that toured the United States from about 1915 to 1935, the dramatization's importance to the development of the Branson area is obvious. Also, the various film versions will be discussed.

SOURCES

Contributing studies include sources, both published and unpublished, that address the history of the various productions, particularly those that address the Branson companies. Much of the early history of the Southern Illinois University productions and the Arena productions was obtained from newspaper articles, history books, theatrical programs, and personal interviews with key people involved in the productions. Information supplied by Charolotte McLeod, the author of the SIU production, and Jack Gold, the scenic designer for the Warrensburg dramatization, is included. Also, several unpublished manuscripts written by photographer and journalist Townsend Godsey, founder of the Communications department at The School of the Ozarks (now called The College of the Ozarks) at Point Lookout, Missouri, and frequent contributor to national periodicals and local newspapers, are references. Godsey's interview with former professor of communications and theatre at The College of the Ozarks, Joe Embser, the actor who portrayed Old Matt in the SIU dramatization, provides the insight on the problems that arose while producing an outdoor drama on a lakefront.

Information on The Shepherd of the Hills Historical Society's productions at the Old Mill Theatre was obtained from Keith Thurman, current director, Bud Lynn, a long-time performer, Mark Trimble, former owner of the play, and Doug Sullivan, current General Operations Manager of The Shepherd of the Hills Homestead and Outdoor Theatre. Interviews, taken from various pamphlets, books, newspaper articles, magazine articles, and theatrical programs, with Gary Snadon, current owner of the Shepherd of the Hills Homestead and Outdoor Theatre, are also be utilized.

Wright's novel and the various scripts are studied. Attendance records were obtained from The Shepherd of the Hills Homestead and Outdoor Theatre.

ORGANIZATION

Chapter 1 contains a description of the organization and a clarification of the thesis parameters.

Chapter 2 provides an introduction to the story and Harold Bell Wright. The novel's impact on the Branson area will also be discussed, addressing the subsequent dramatizations of the novel. The novel's popularity promoted an early tourist interest in the Ozarks, which led to several businesses being named after characters in the book. Sections of the chapter include information about the Midwest touring companies that produced the play as early as 1913, as well as the tent production by the Arena theatre project in Springfield, Illinois, and a production by the Poli Players of Connecticut.

Chapter 3 discusses the formation of the Shepherd of the Hills Theatre on the Branson Taneycomo lakefront. The Southern Illinois University and Central Missouri State productions were both performed at the Shepherd of the Hills Theatre during the 1950's to the early part of the 1960's, placing their production in direct competition with the Trimble family's production at the Old Mill Theatre. Interpretations of the novel to movie versions during this time frame will also be examined.

Chapter 4 examines the development of The Shepherd of the Hills Historical Society from 1960. The impact of this interpretation on the Branson area is also discussed. Additionally, the history of the Trimble family's involvement with the production and its association with the Meadows family will be addressed. A movie, also produced by The Society, is addressed.

Chapter 5 describes the purchase of the Homestead by Gary Snadon, rewriting of the script, and the directorship of the current director, Keith Thurman. The new interpretation, the expansion of the Daytime Homestead activities

surrounding the production, and the decline in attendance for the dramatization is discussed.

Chapter 6 talks of the future of The Homestead as foreseen by the general manager of the Shepherd of the Hills Homestead and Outdoor Theatre, as well as summarizing the study.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 The Shepherd of the Hills Program 1994. Branson: The Shepherd of the Hills Historical Society, Inc. 1994. p. 8.
- 2 Flanagan, Hallie. Arena: The History of the Federal Theatre. New York: Benjamin Bloom, Inc. 1940. p. 150.
- 3 Tagg, Lawrence V. Harold Bell Wright: Storyteller to America. Tucson: Westernlore Press. 1986. p. 283.
- 4 Thurman, Keith. Director of the Shepherd of the Hills Outdoor Theatre. Interview. September, 1994.
- 5 Homestead Tour. The Shepherd of the Hills Historical Society. 1987. p. 3.
- 6 Myers - Phinney, Linda. "Arcadia in the Ozarks: the Beginnings of Tourism in Missouri's White River Country." Ozarks Watch. III: 4. Spring, 1990. p. 7.
- 7 Spurlock, Pearl. Over the Ozark Trail in The Shepherd of the Hills Country. Branson: The White River Leader Press. 1939. p. 10.
- 8 The Historical Society, p. 4.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 "Harold Bell Wright: The Shepherd of the Hills Past and Present." Video/Lecture Presentation. Springfield/Greene County Library, Brentwood Branch. 1984.
- 11 Thurman, Interview.

12 Sullivan, Doug. Operations Manager of the Shepherd of the Hills Homestead and Outdoor Theatre. Personal Interview. 12 April 1996.

13 Foley, p. 26A.

CHAPTER 2
HAROLD BELL WRIGHT, THE NOVEL, AND THE EARLY DRAMATIZATIONS
OF "THE SHEPHERD OF THE HILLS"

The Ozark hills have inspired many writers to describe its beauty and grandeur. The most famous writer of Ozark folklore was Harold Bell Wright, whose novel The Shepherd of the Hills defined the native character and shaped the mythos of the area more than he would realize in his lifetime. A descriptive poem written by J.A. Dodge of Bushnell, Illinois, appearing in Ozark Life magazine April - May, 1926, gives a clear picture of the land Harold Bell Wright portrayed in his novel:

God gives us vast prairies with corn, wheat and oats;
He gives us the Ozarks with trees, rocks, and goats,
Where beauties of nature soon uplift the soul,
And spirit of friendship's the ultimate goal.

To us of the city we often forget
That most of the Ozarks are primitive yet;
But this is to me their far greatest appeal,
These landscapes are not artificial but real.

The plateaus and valleys, productive of much,
Have fast-growing cities, but these I won't touch,
For this poem deals with a beautiful spot,
Deep hidden in woods, neither cold nor too hot.

It is Uncle Ike's home, postmaster of fame,
Whom by Harold Bell Wright was given the name;
With forty years record of nary a blotch,
He has faithfully kept the office at Notch.

There are mountains all hollowed and terraced inside,
With hallway and passages sufficiently wide,
That one may go safely from room to room,
From Wright's studio to the great Gulf of Doom.
The matchless cathedral with long rustic stair,
Has a little Pike's Peak right inside it there;
And the Grand Canyon winds down to No Name river,
With sights that will thrill you and make you shiver.

The Egyptian Room has a natural Sphinx,
The Waterfall holds you and leads you to think
of wonders of nature, the goodness of God,
In building these castles down under the sod.

This little description about Marvel Cave,
The underground wonder that makes the tourists rave,
Located at Notch, in the Shepherd's own land,
With a call of the wild surging on every hand.

Where you'll see Sammy's lookout and Mutton Hollow,
And the old trails she and Young Matt did follow,

With the Matthew place so often passed by,
And the graveyard where Old Matt and Aunt Molly lie.

Where from Dewey Bald and the old Signal Tree,
Mile upon mile of grand scenery you may see,
To crystal White River that winds like a snake,
And empties its waters into the big lake.

It's a land of sunshine and millions of smiles,
It's restful and peaceful and void of styles;
It's the place where poured forth with all of its might,
The true soul of the writer, Harold Bell Wright.¹

The love the poet held for the area seems clear. Certainly Harold Bell Wright would have agreed with the feeling the poem is attempting to create: Ozarkers love their land. And, their love for this land spread to Wright himself.

WRITING THE SHEPHERD OF THE HILLS

Harold Bell Wright, the second of four sons, was born May 4, 1872 in Rome, Oneida County, New York.² The Wright family lived in poverty and, as a young man, he seemed to be in a search for self, as a painter, novelist, and evangelist. He attended Hiram College, Ohio, to prepare himself for the ministry at the urging of his church in 1892.³ Health problems which would plague Wright for the rest of his life began to appear, forcing him to stop formal schooling after only two years at Hiram College.

Wright traveled to the southwest Missouri region for rest a few years later and made a living by selling paintings. However, his interest in evangelism continued. He subsequently became a preacher in southwestern Missouri country churches in Pierce City and Lebanon, Missouri, and in southeast Kansas

in Pittsburg, as well as a brief stint in Kansas City, Kansas. In later years, Wright was a novelist, and his novels are rife with characters which could be portraits of the author himself who lived with a series of frustrations as he sought an appropriate outlet for his life after a difficult childhood. Photographer and journalist Townsend Godsey, who established the School of Journalism at the School of the Ozarks at Point Lookout, Missouri, wrote about Wright in several of his articles which appeared in national publications such as Newsweek and local papers in Missouri such as The Branson Beacon and Leader. In his notes, left at the Lyons Memorial Library at the School of the Ozarks, he wrote:

Wright's work does show that somehow, out of a background rough and poverty ridden that not even Charles Dickens or Horatio Alger could have dredged it up, Wright emerged from an unhappy youth with uncommon high idealism...Farmed out to earn his board after his mother's death and later thrown into disreputable places by his father, young Wright was frustrated in nearly everything he liked or wanted to do.⁴

His life as a novelist grew out of his evangelism. His first book, That Printer of Udells, was written and read in installments to keep his Pittsburg, Kansas congregation coming to church on a regular basis. Before the novel was printed as a book, it appeared in a religious paper, "The Christian Century," and was edited to such an extent that Wright would have abandoned it, and perhaps writing as a profession, had not a doctor friend of his from Chicago urged him to see a publisher.⁵ In 1902 at the urging of the First Christian Church elders at his Pittsburg parish and his health failing him, Wright sought publication for the book, which was eventually published in 1903 and met with mild success.⁶ After a year

of rest in Aurora, Missouri, where Wright stayed with friends to recuperate, he accepted a position as preacher at the Forest Avenue Christian Church in Kansas City. His tenure at the church was cut short by ailing health and he rescinded his position there less than a year later.

While in Aurora, Missouri, prior to his pastorate in Kansas City, Wright's friend introduced him to John and Anna Ross who had a homestead in Branson, Missouri near the White River. Wright and the Rosses became fast friends, and he was invited to come back whenever he pleased. To recuperate from fatigue and a chronic cough, Wright returned to the Ozark region and visited the Ross homestead in 1904 and again in 1905, staying the summer months in the home and in a tent on Inspiration Point, a hill that overlooks Mutton Hollow and within sight of Dewey Bald Mountain near the farm. It was during these summer visits that Wright began writing his second book, The Shepherd of the Hills.⁷

There is some disagreement as to how Harold Bell Wright came to meet the Rosses and where the novel was written. Two theories (and there are probably more) have surfaced in literature and in the local Ozark lore. The first theory has Wright meeting the Ross family through a mutual friend. Allegedly, this friend was a childhood companion of Charles Ross, the son of John and Anna Ross. However, The Shepherd of the Hills Historical Society has published a more romantic theory involving the first meeting of Wright and the family that would become the centerpiece for his second and most popular novel. This story is chronicled in almost all local publications and told on tours of the old Ross homestead, which became a tourist attraction after the publication of the novel.

According to The Shepherd of the Hills Historical Society, an organization which produces the only authorized theatrical production of The Shepherd of the Hills, Harold Bell Wright came to the Ozarks to help recover from his illnesses. He was told by a doctor in Pittsburg, Kansas, Dr. William Williams, that his

illnesses were caused by "consumption" which is now known as tuberculosis. So, he decided to return to travel to the Ozarks in 1896, hoping that the pure air would help him recover his strength.⁸ The railroad from Pittsburg, Kansas, only went as far as Marionville, Missouri, in 1896. Wright traveled by wagon and horseback to the area known as the White River, near Branson, Missouri, but was unable to cross the river. There had been a flood that spring, leaving the banks of the White River swollen and impossible to cross.

Tired and racked with coughing spasms, Wright turned back. As the story goes, Wright crossed the ridge now known as Compton Ridge and crossed Fall Creek River into Mutton Hollow. On the ridge overlooking the hollow, a cabin sat. With nowhere else to go, Wright stopped at the cabin, which belonged to the Ross family. Being good-natured and extremely generous, John Ross invited the weary traveler in for a night's sleep. That night's stay soon became eight consecutive summers as the friendship between the Ross family and Wright grew.

What is factual is that the Ozark region Harold Bell Wright was visiting was beset with unusual circumstances involving the area residents. According to The Shepherd of the Hills Historical Society's claims, Wright spent eight summers on the Ross homestead gathering notes and listening to actual conversations and witnessing actual events to give shape to his novel. During that period of time, a drought in 1902 wrought devastation on crops, livestock and people, forcing many to leave their homesteads and seek livelihood elsewhere.⁹ Also, the area of Taney, Christian, and Stone counties were reeling in civil strife caused by the actions of vigilantes known as "Baldknobbers."

The term "Baldknobber" comes from the Ozark hills made of limestone, allowing very little in the way of vegetation to grow on the hill top, hence "bald knob." The Baldknobbers were a large organization formed in the 1880's by a

citizen's league. Large gatherings were held on the bald knobs to frighten people and assure the secrecy of their meetings, since knobs were easy to guard with sentries. After the murder of a local storekeeper and the subsequent acquittal of the killer, some citizens of Taney, Stone, Douglass, and Christian counties believed law and order was breaking down in the area. So, they formed their own protection organization that soon became the judge, jury, and executioner of suspected or alleged felons. After the shooting death of Baldknobber leader Nathaniel Kinney on August 20, 1888 mass beatings, lynchings, murders, and other vigilante behavior led to a threat of martial law by the governor of Missouri. The various Baldknobber organizations fell apart and members began to be convicted, breaking an understood code of silence. By 1912, the Baldknobbers were all dead, arrested, or disbanded.¹⁰

The Shepherd of the Hills novel, started in 1903, the year after the severe drought and right in the middle of the reign of the Baldknobbers, was largely written in the town of Lebanon, Missouri, that winter. The novel was finished in the winter of 1905.¹¹ Without the income generated from That Printer of Udells supporting him, Wright would probably have never been written The Shepherd of the Hills.¹² Two years later, 1907, the novel was published, and the world had a new "blockbuster" writer. Wright's second novel struck a chord with the reading public, to the astonishment of the critics:

Both in the more melodramatic and the more sentimental parts of his tale he is apt to overdo the thing. With all its crudeness, however, the story does appeal to one's admiration of pluck and honesty.¹³

Other criticisms of the book attacked the style of writing, the many fractured plot lines, and the eccentricity of the country characters, going as far to call the book

by Harold Bell Wright "shallow plotted" and "too simple."¹⁴ However, some critics did praise the book:

There are many bits of excellent description, in the course of the story, and an atmosphere as fresh and sweet and free from modern grime as one would breathe on the Ozark trails themselves.¹⁵

The Shepherd of the Hills novel became a bestseller. The novel has sold around 17 million copies to date, though that is an unconfirmed number.¹⁶ The Shepherd of the Hills Historical Society claims that this unconfirmed number places the novel as the fourth most widely read book in publishing history, behind only the Bible, the Koran, and Gone With the Wind. It was reported that by 1974 over 18 million copies of the novel had been sold. This report is printed in a tourist guide book about the Branson attraction Marvel Cave, stressing the cave's importance in the novel.¹⁷ According to another local source, the tourism-related book The History Characters, Towns, and Landmarks of "The Shepherd of the Hills" by Jerry S. Madsen, the book sold well over 1 million copies between 1907 and 1919 of both a regular edition and various reprint editions under the A.L. Burt Company.¹⁸

A confirmed record of actual copies sold was obtained by Branson local writer and scholar Townsend Godsey from Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., publishers of books since 1825 in New York, New York, on May 25, 1951, who obtained the copyright from A. L. Burt Company and began reprints in 1923. According to their tabulations, from 1907 to 1951, the book "sold over 100,000 copies in the regular edition" and "over 1,200,000 copies in various reprint editions."¹⁹ Grossett and Dunlap then issued the book as a reprint in 1937, granting it seven printings in eight years. Though the demand was high, that the

book probably has not sold as many copies as reported by the local tourist related attractions.

Whatever the actual number, it is clear that The Shepherd of the Hills was Wright's biggest success as a writer, making him one of the most read authors of his day. Competition for Wright's bestseller status came from Elinor Glyn's Three Weeks, Kate Douglas Wiggin's Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, and Gene Stratton Porter's Freckles. Despite the competition, the novel was a best seller for many years.²⁰ Wright followed up The Shepherd of the Hills with two sequels: The Calling of Dan Matthews published in 1909 and God and the Groceryman published in 1921. Neither sequel was the success of the original novel about the Matthews' clan.

Wright's books are today described by anthologists as 'sentimental stories with moral purpose,' or as 'biased castigations of the fashionable world of the time.'²¹ Wright's dialogue, written in an Ozarkian dialect, was better than most being written in this style at the time. This readable dialect, in addition to Wright's vivid descriptions of actual locales in the Ozarks, contributed to the literal-minded interpretation that the characters in the novel were real people. Vance Randolph, an author from Eureka Springs and noted writer on Ozark dialect, said that even though Wright "fell into the common error of supposing (the word) 'it' always turned into 'hit' (when spoken by an Ozarkian)...his dialect is superior to that of most modern Ozark novelists."²²

The Shepherd of the Hills was definitely a turning point in Wright's life. The book has been translated into several languages and millions have been sold worldwide.²³ Wright's 40 year career as a writer yielded 19 books, many scripts for stage plays, and a number of magazine articles appearing nationwide. Several films were made based on his books. To date, five films have been

made of The Shepherd of the Hills, and several other books have made the transition from page to screen.

Wright's association with The Shepherd of the Hills was more prophetic than profitable. His book benefited him little financially. Some of his early profits went to buy back the rights of his first novel which Wright had transferred to the friends who assisted him in publishing it. Other rights were transferred to his estranged wife in divorce court while settling property rights and to assist in the care of his two sons in her custody. She later sold the rights to Paramount Pictures.

Wright produced 19 books, several stage plays, and dozens of magazine articles in his 40 years of writing. No other novel brought him the success of The Shepherd of the Hills. The success of the novel was both a blessing and a curse to the residents of what rapidly became known as "The Shepherd of the Hills" country. He died in California in 1944.

THE STORY OF THE SHEPHERD OF THE HILLS

Harold Bell Wright's story explores the emotions of love, hate, revenge, mystery, and spirituality of the inhabitants of the Ozark hills at the turn of the century. The story revolves around the cabin of the Matthews family, the dwelling of Old Matt, Aunt Molly, and their son, Young Matt. The Matthews operated a saw and gristmill to support themselves and were highly regarded as 'good' people by the local populace. Young Matt was handsome and intelligent, an icon of masculinity. Old Matt and Aunt Molly, the most prosperous family financially in the area, harbored pain.

Their only daughter, Maggie, had fallen in love with a wandering artist who had come to the hills to paint and escape the pressures of city life for the idyllic Ozark countryside. This artist, Howard, deserted her under mysterious circumstances, breaking her heart and her will to live. She died while giving birth

to their baby, Pete. Old Matt is haunted by her desire to know why Howard would suddenly desert her without a word and never return. Old Matt and the locals are convinced that her ghost still haunts the woods surrounding Mutton Hollow, searching for her lost love.

A mysterious stranger enters the Ozarks in search of relief for a stricken conscience. The people take the man, a former pastor from Chicago, into their community and accept him as one of their own. He tells the locals that his name is Daniel Howitt. The Matthews family extend their friendship to the stranger and, in need of a shepherd for their sheep, give him a home and hire him to work the farm. Howitt's secret shame is that he is Howard's father and the reason that Howard left Maggie. He was ashamed that his son would want to marry a "backwoods girl" and ordered the boy to stop courting her. His son disappeared after their confrontation, so Howitt left a successful pastorate in the city to search for his son. On hearing the story of the Matthews' daughter he realized the betrayer was his own son. His remorse forced him to spend his life among the hillfolk to atone for the misdeed committed by his son and himself. Howitt ministered to the spiritual needs of the people in the area, soon affectionately becoming known as "Dad" Howitt.

The Lanes, Jim and his daughter Sammy, were friends and neighbors of the Matthews. Jim Lane was a devoted father who had raised Sammy on his own since the death of his wife when Sammy was a child. However, Jim Lane was a former leader and now a reluctant member of a gang known as the "Baldknobbers." The Baldknobbers rode roughshod through the area, threatening strangers to the area under the notion that they were "keeping the peace." The leader of the group, Wash Gibbs, was the local bully. Gibbs was a powerfully built man, not pretty to look at, and lusted for power and Sammy Lane.

Sammy under the tutelage of Dad Howitt was to leave the Ozarks and move to the city with her childhood sweetheart, Ollie Stewart. Sammy's beauty was unsurpassed in the Ozark hills. Sammy had been promised to Ollie Stewart since the two were children, and when Ollie went to Springfield, Missouri, to learn his uncle's business, they drifted apart. Becoming self-centered and egotistical with his wealth making him feel superior to Sammy, Ollie had become a creature of the city. He embodied everything that was unnatural and unsettling about his environment to a person of the country. Thoughts of Young Matt and his simple, heartfelt demeanor in their friendship had slowly brought Sammy to the realization that life in the city with Ollie would be intolerable. She had fallen in love with Young Matt who had always loved her.

When Ollie returns to claim Sammy as his wife, Wash Gibbs, in an effort to humiliate Sammy, attacks and beats the skinny, spineless Ollie. Young Matt comes to her rescue and beats Wash and his henchmen in a fistfight. Wash's actions prompt Jim Lane to call a meeting with the Baldknobbers with the intent to sever his ties to the group. When he learns of the meeting the local sheriff gathers a posse in the hope of finding gold stolen from a bank by a group of masked Baldknobbers. In the ensuing struggle, Jim Lane is killed by Wash in a gunfight. The Baldknobbers are captured by the sheriff and Wash Gibbs is killed while fleeing on horseback. Sammy, heartbroken by her father's death, is compelled to stay in the Ozarks, where she and Matt will marry.

In the aftermath of the battle, Little Pete, Howard's son, lures Dad Howitt to a cave near Dewey Bald mountain a short distance from the Matthew's cabin. In the cave, Howitt finds his son, Howard, not dead, but seriously injured by gunfire. It was he who guided the posse to Wash Gibbs, but he was shot in the ensuing gunfight. Howard tells Dad that he had returned after their disagreement to the hills to defy his father's wishes and marry his sweetheart, only to learn she

had died. He lived secretly in the cave to be near his son, Pete, who wandered the hills unable to stay locked in a house due to a wild nature caused by mental retardation. He was the "ghost" which "haunted" Mutton Hollow. After being forgiven by Old Matt and Aunt Molly for his sin against their daughter, he dies.

Dad Howitt, absolved and at peace with himself, God, and the Matthews, spends the rest of his life in Mutton Hollow as teacher, preacher, and confidante to the locals.

NATIONAL RECOGNITION FOR THE OZARKS

The Shepherd of the Hills novel contains a variety of appealing, colorful characters and lush descriptions of Ozark countryside, friendly people, and exciting new experiences. The novel's popularity entices vacationers and the curious to visit the land Harold Bell Wright describes in his novel and see for themselves the grandeur he described. The Missouri Pacific Railroad had completed the track of the White River Line through Roark Valley in 1906, making the area open for the tourist trade. Tourists began to arrive in the Ozarks shortly after the book's publication. Wright's most popular novel did not arrive in the Ozarks until 1908, where it was distributed by John K. Ross himself at the Garber post office, where he had become postmaster. In 1909, the tourists began disembarking from the new rail line at Reeds Spring, Branson, Hollister, and other stops, asking to see "Old Matt's Cabin" as the Ross homestead was so named in the novel.

As was custom when visitors arrived, hospitality was essential, so the Ross family, known as the "Matthews" in The Shepherd of the Hills novel, invited any visitors to stay with them.²⁴ John and Anna Ross and their son, Charles, soon became hosts to dozens of people daily arriving in the Ozarks by the newly finished railroad and were literally overwhelmed with visitors. At times, the houseguests would sleep not only in the house, but the yard as well.²⁵ The cabin

the Ross family inhabited soon became too popular a tourist attraction to be comfortable for the polite family, and they moved from the homestead. Tourists began taking "memorabilia" from the homestead a bit at a time until John Ross found some renters to occupy it. Built in 1890, the homestead is one of the few pioneer homesteads still intact in Missouri and is on the National Record of Historic Places. The Ross grist mill in Mutton Hollow, another location made popular by the novel, suffered the onslaught of tourists and was soon stripped of its siding and most of its equipment.²⁶

In 1911, John Ross sold the cabin to M.R. Driver, a physical education instructor from Wichita, Kansas, who used the cabin as an inn for travelers.²⁷ (Various local publications have reported Driver to be from Shawnee Mission, Kansas, and that his occupation was that of a 'speculator.' Allegedly, he purchased the property from Ross for \$700).²⁸ By the early 1920's, Driver lost interest in the property and let it fall into disrepair. The initial tourism trade in what had become known as "The Shepherd of the Hills Country" slowed as interest in the novel waned in the early 1920's, despite several businesses taking their names from characters in the book and points of interest capitalizing on their inclusion in the novel.

THE CHARACTERS OF THE SHEPHERD OF THE HILLS

Stories about how Harold Bell Wright invented some of the characters in The Shepherd of the Hills story are numerous. Many Branson residents have claimed at one time to be the prototypes of the characters. Several tourist trade publications indicate that Wright did not entirely invent all of the characters, but extrapolated his fictional story by basing it on actual events and people in the area. In the past, the fostering of this belief was of interest to the local economy because if the characters of the book really exist, then tourists would want to visit

them and their land and spend money on souvenirs, overnight stays, and copies of the novel.

The myth of actual Ozarkians depicted in the novel started soon after the novel's publication. In some instances, certain Branson residents felt they were the prototypes of the characters of the story; in other cases, they speculated on which of their kinfolk were the original.²⁹ Some locals wrote books or pamphlets about themselves and their suspicions and sold them to tourists who came to the Ozarks looking for the characters. Except for a letter or two, Wright was non-committal about any real people being fictionalized in his book except in his autobiography To My Sons, which states that Levi Morrill, the postmaster at Notch, Missouri, is really "Uncle Ike" from the novel.³⁰ This fact is also corroborated by Wright in a letter to Hollister, Missouri, resident W. Gibbons Lacy on September 1, 1932. Wright received a letter from Mr. Lacy regarding the characters of the novel, hoping Wright could settle the controversy once and for all. Mr Wright responded:

Your interesting letter relative to The Shepherd of the Hills finally caught up with me here in Benbow (California) ...I am very glad for this opportunity to settle some of the many conflicting legends as to the characters..."Uncle Ike," the old postmaster in the story is the only character which could be definitely placed as an actual portrait of a living person. "Old Matt" and "Aunt Molly" were near portraits - - I mean that Mr. and Mrs. Ross inspired these characters but...I idealized and created characters which their lives suggested, rather than actually personified. "The Shepherd," "Sammy Lane," "Wash Gibbs," "Jim Lane," "Ollie Stewart," "Young Matt," and all the others

were creations of my imagination and never so far as I know existed as living human beings. Not one of these characters is even near a portrait. If those who know the Ozark people are able to point out the alleged originals of these characters it can only be because I was able to make them true to the types I attempted to create and not because I used living individuals as models.³¹

Regardless, the residents of Branson and those that stood to profit from the novel's popularity chose to fashion a fiction of their own based on misconceptions and half-truths. Some tourist publications and local residents state that Wright recanted statements claiming that the characters were inventions, but this is an allegation and there is no written, substantiated proof. However, by studying some of the correlations made by the Branson residents who claimed to be actual characters in the book, it is easy to see that Wright was heavily influenced by the area and may indeed have subconsciously incorporated local personalities into his story.

Some of the major characters, namely "Sammy Lane," "Young Matt," "Wash Gibbs," "Ollie Stewart," "Old Matt," "Aunt Molly," and "Dad Howitt," have real-life counterparts, or at least there are claims that they existed. The claims have helped some local residents build businesses while other claims were simply a matter of pride. The central character of the book, in which all plotlines intertwine, is the character of "Dad Howitt," the shepherd for which the book gets its title.

The novel has an autobiographical tone. Wright was also a preacher and a jack of all trades who fled from the city for the pure air and simple life in the country. Perhaps the character of Dad Howitt represented Wright's ideal, a popular preacher, a consummate humanitarian, and close friend to all of those in

which he came in contact. The backstory of why Dad Howitt traveled to the Ozarks, to find his boy who he thought may be dead and to flee the terrible choice he had made, just added to the drama of the character.

Most Ozark historians, however, attribute the character of the shepherd to Truman Powell, an Illinois native and son of a Baptist minister from Chicago.³² Powell founded the Marble Cave Mining and Manufacturing Company in 1884 after convincing himself that present day Marvel Cave, located in the Silver Dollar City theme park in Branson, Missouri, would be profitable for mining. However, in 1889, the bat guano he was mining ran down. He was an educated man who founded the Cove School teaching basic reading, writing, and arithmetic, published a newspaper in the Ozarks for nearly 14 years, and became Stone County Representative in the 50th General Assembly of Missouri. Historian Jerry S. Madsen describes Powell thus:

The character of "The Old Shepherd" fit Truman Powell in most every respect: a religious man of good moral character, an educated man from the North, a teacher, and at times, speaker at the church. He loved his fellow man and God's green earth.³³

Harold Bell Wright, however, claimed in his letter to W. Gibbons Lacy that at the time he was writing the story, Truman Powell "was seldom at his home in the Ozarks" and that he had "scarcely more than met him." Further, write states in this letter that he "certainly did not derive from him [Powell] any inspiration" for the novel.³⁴

In an unspoken way, John and Anna Ross came to be regarded as "Old Matt" and "Aunt Molly" because Wright had spent a lot of time at their cabin. His chance encounter with the Ross family, as depicted in popular lore, has parallels to what Wright chronicled for the story of Dad Howitt. The fictional Old Matt in

the novel stands 6 feet, 4 inches and is well muscled, whereas the "real" John Ross was tall, but with a slight build.³⁵ "Aunt Molly" from the novel is identical to the real life Anna Ross in physical stature, being much smaller than John Ross yet a strong hill woman.

As for the other characters, there is much dispute. The honor of being labeled as the original inspiration for "Sammy Lane," the beautiful and willful epitome of woman around which the love story in the novel circles, has been claimed by several women. The Shepherd of the Hills Historical Society claims, as do several Ozark historians, that "Sammy Lane" is a compilation of two women, Delia Grace Shearer and Susie B. (Morrill) Johnston.³⁶ Other women, however, claimed the title as "prettiest girl in the hills" and locals took sides backing their choice for "Sammy Lane" prototype. The Stone Country Republican reported that at one time there were as many as three women claiming to be the one true "Sammy Lane."³⁷ A young lady named Emma Isaacs, who lived in the same neighborhood as Delia Grace Shearer, claimed to be the real "Sammy Lane" because her pony, Brownie, was the one used in the story by the fictitious Sammy Lane.³⁸

Wright attempted to dispel the myth that he had "borrowed" the character from a real life source in the letter to Hollister resident W. Gibbons Lacy on September 1, 1932:

I have been sometimes amused and often embarrassed by the stories told by various people who persist in the mis - statement that I used my Ozark friends as models for the characters in my novel. In this connection an incident might interest you...it was the year 1918...I was standing on the verandah of a hotel in Branson...when a gentleman sitting near said: "I reckon you have read

that book The Shepherd of the Hills." "Yes, I have read the story," I answered. The gentleman then indicated a young woman passing on the other side of the street... "That is Sammy Lane." "Indeed," said I, "but as I remember it the book was written several years ago...I should think that in real life she would be by now a much older woman than that young lady." The other answered: "I live here and I reckon I know."³⁹

The character of "Young Matt" has been attributed to the son of John and Anna Ross, Charles. However, Charles Ross was only an acquaintance of the two women usually connected to the character of "Sammy Lane" and certainly had no romantic involvement with either woman. Charles married his childhood sweetheart, Ellen Faulkner of Ava, Missouri, and moved from the Ozarks to Paradise, California where he became an engineer.⁴⁰ Charles died as a result of injuries sustained in a motorcycle accident in 1934.⁴¹ Physically, Charles was not the "perfect specimen of manhood" that Harold Bell Wright grants "Young Matt." Charles was rather small, as historian Jerry S. Madsen points out, but he was "an honorable lad, a thinker, a mechanic, a farmer, a backwoods man, and a lover of life."⁴²

The villainous "Wash Gibbs" has two supposed prototypes, Gibbs May and Wash Middleton, two locals considered the mean-spirited type. "Wash Gibbs," the leader of Wright's band of Baldknobbers who rob the local bank, burn down the shepherd's cabin, fight young Matt, beat up Ollie Stewart, and attempt to woo Sammy Lane in the story, is entirely fictitious, as is the exploits of his gang. As Wright explains in his letter to Lacy, "I heard many stories of 'Bald Knobbers'...but the incidents in the story were all inventions of my own without foundation."⁴³

SUSTAINING THE LEGEND

As mentioned earlier, tourism grew rapidly with the popularity of The Shepherd of the Hills. Businesses in the Branson area capitalized on its popularity to expand the tourism trade. Businesses were named for characters in the novel, such as the Sammy Lane Resort, or the Sammy Lane Boat Line, Wash Gibbs Museum, and Little Pete's Restaurant. There is evidence that the novel was adapted into a play as early as 1915, eight years after the novel's publication, and the novel was even adapted into a silent movie in 1919.

The Poli Players of Poli Playhouse in Hartford, Connecticut, performed a version of The Shepherd of the Hills on August 2, 1915.⁴⁴ Credit for writing the play is given to Harold Bell Wright and E. W. Reynolds. There is no evidence to suggest that Harold Bell Wright actually wrote a stage production of the novel in any of the biographies about him, but Elsbury W. Reynolds is given credit in the publishing byline of the novel as publisher through arrangement with Appleton-Century-Crofts, Incorporated.⁴⁵ The production was staged under the direction of Hal Briggs, but no other information is supplied. Assumption must be made that the production was from a script for a touring company or local writer using an unpublished manuscript, for other sources discuss theatrical productions under the same name with little information supplied.

Local Branson journalist and photographer Townsend Godsey stated that in Maryville, Missouri, The Shepherd of the Hills was presented at the Empire Theatre by stock company players "in earlier days."⁴⁶ How early is not known. He does state that he was an usher for the production when he was a youth, putting the date somewhere before the 1920's. By February 4, 1919, there was sufficient interest in the story for the Story Picture Corporation to release a silent film version of The Shepherd of the Hills. Godsey attempted to discover who wrote, directed, and starred in the production by writing to Paramount Pictures,

who held the copyright to Wright's story in 1957, but Paramount was unsuccessful in finding any information regarding past productions of the story.⁴⁷

During the last part of the decade following 1910, the cabin featured by Harold Bell Wright formerly owned by John and Anna Ross, now owned by M. R. Driver, began to fall into disrepair. Seeing some potential in the property, Lizzie McDaniel, a school teacher and daughter of a Springfield, Missouri, banker, purchased the homestead in 1926.⁴⁸ The McDaniels were wealthy bankers, owning the majority of the Union National Bank of Springfield, Missouri, and numerous other holdings.⁴⁹ Lizzie McDaniel, or Elizabeth P. McDaniel, was a board member of the Y.W.C.A. of Springfield and was heavily involved in social and civic issues in the area. She liquidated all of her business holdings in 1925 to purchase the homestead, to which she would devote the rest of her life.⁵⁰

Lizzie McDaniel restored the cabin as much as possible, riding sidesaddle from Springfield to the cabin to do repairs. Her intention was to reopen the cabin as a museum to keep the story that she read to her students alive in the minds of the tourists. Many of the original furnishings had been sold to locals after the cabin was purchased by Driver, so McDaniel spent several years traveling around the area locating those items to return the cabin to its original state. In an effort to restore the original feel of the homestead, McDaniel also dramatized The Shepherd of the Hills in the yard surrounding the cabin.⁵¹ The audience stood in the yard and watched the production, written and directed by Lizzie McDaniel herself, starring local people in the roles. No script for these productions, or dates, exist to verify that the productions actually took place.

After completing the task of refurbishing the cabin and living in it for ten years, McDaniel built and moved into a house located on the homestead and opened the entire cabin to the public in 1936.⁵² The corn field which served as Wright's campsite on his visits to write the novel was named Inspiration Point and

leased to the state of Missouri as a park. McDaniel conducted tours of the cabin and lived on the property until her death in February 1946. In accordance with her wishes, the entire homestead was left to the Branson Civic League, a woman's organization that worked for the betterment of the Ozarks community.⁵³

Dramatic versions of the novel made their rounds through the United States. The most influential organization to produce The Shepherd of the Hills was the Federal Theatre Project. Created during the Depression, the Federal Theatre Project, headed by Hallie Flannagan Davis (1890 - 1969) and founded in 1935, mounted about 1,000 productions, 65 percent of them free, to help combat unemployment.⁵⁴ A subsidiary of the Federal Theatre Project in Illinois, the Peoria Federal Theatre, organized by Thomas Wood Stevens in December, 1935, toured Illinois with productions. Tent shows that year included both Uncle Tom's Cabin and The Shepherd of the Hills.⁵⁵

In addition to the various dramatic presentations and the 1919 film from Sony Pictures of The Shepherd of the Hills, two other film versions were released in 1927 and 1941. The 1927 production, presented by Richard A Rowland and produced by Charles R. Rogers, was released by First National Pictures, Inc. on December 23. The production was adapted by Marion Judeson and directed by Albert Rogell.⁵⁶ Of the two productions, the 1941 film version met with the most success, and the most negative reaction from Branson residents.

THE SHEPHERD OF THE HILLS AND JOHN WAYNE

Paramount Pictures released its version of The Shepherd of the Hills in 1941. Directed by Henry Hathaway and starring Betty Field as Sammy Lane, this film has the distinction of being John Wayne's first Technicolor film.⁵⁷ John Wayne portrayed the role of Young Matt in the film. The Shepherd of the Hills had its premiere during its wide release in Springfield, Missouri, 45 miles north of Branson, on July 4, 1941. The Branson premiere occurred on Inspiration Point,

the area where Harold Bell Wright pitched his tent while writing the novel. A makeshift screen was erected using a sheet and folding chairs were set up for the audience. The film was not well-liked by the Branson locals.

Paramount was hoping The Shepherd of the Hills, filmed for the first time in color, would be a success. Henry Hathaway, the director, had just scored a hit with Paramount's first outdoor color film The Trail of the Lonesome Pine. Paramount claimed that "exhibitors were clamoring" for another grandiose outdoor movie, and Harold Bell Wright's story seemed to be the answer.⁵⁸ Press releases about the film even mentioned John Wayne as the "second Gary Cooper" due to his credible impersonation of Young Matt Matthews.

Response from the locals was negative. Jim Owen, the owner of the Branson movie theatre, the Hillbilly Theatre (now called the Owen Theatre, now home to various musical variety acts), said, "We (the locals) don't like (the movie) but here it is." Pearl Spurlock, a native of the Ozarks who ran a popular taxi service in Branson that toured the places Harold Bell Wright wrote about in his story, said, "I'm ashamed of it. It isn't like the book. Not a fair picture of our hills." About 200 people saw the preview, and it seemed that no local enjoyed how the movie took liberties with their beloved story.

The Paramount film took many liberties in depicting Wright's characters. Aunt Molly, the loving, warm woman that was ever the voice of reason in the novel and viewed as a model for Sammy Lane to follow in her growing womanhood, was a moonshiner in the film. Young Matt, the hero, and the villainous Wash Gibbs are depicted as half brothers. Sammy Lane, the quintessential woman in the novel, is shown wearing blue jeans and seems more like a tomboy than a beauty. Even Mutton Hollow, a location which figures prominently in the novel, is renamed "Moanin Meadow" to add to the ghost-like

figure of the Shepherd's son, Howard, as he roams the hills trying to seek atonement for not marrying Old Matt's daughter.

Newsweek reviewed the film July 21, 1941, and tried to make sense of the negative reaction by Branson residents:

This is probably a minority opinion, (and is) easily explained. Some descendants of the Ozarks clan are willing to admit that no Ozarker could embody half the virtues, intelligence, and energy that Wright gave them in his novel. The majority, however, have come to believe that they themselves, their neighbors, and kinfolk are the actual prototypes of the novelists characters. So, when Hollywood has the temerity to veer from the romanticized original and present a more realistic picture, the Ozarks don't take kindly to the idea...⁵⁹

In response to the Newsweek article, Townsend Godsey wrote:

Few Ozarkians would be so braggy as to think their living kinfolks could embody the virtue, wisdom, and strength that Wright gave the hillfolk of his novel. But their ancestors might have been such folk. That's what makes them legendary.⁶⁰

By calling the ancestors of the local people 'legendary,' Godsey touched upon the importance of the story to the area. With the local economy of Branson from the early 1900's to the late 1940's dependent upon the tourist's recognition of the characters of the novel, it was important to keep the legend of The Shepherd of the Hills alive.

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CHAPTER 3

THE SHEPHERD OF THE HILLS THEATRE

Long after Paramount Pictures release of The Shepherd of the Hills in 1941 the anger at the liberties the screenwriter and director took with Harold Bell Wright's story continued in Branson. Even as late as the 1950's, ten years after the movie had been released, the anger still seethed. The novelty of the book had begun to wear off, and Branson came to be known for its outdoor recreational possibilities. With the the White River flowing through the area, fishing was a popular reason to come to Branson.

A central Missouri resident, Jim Owen, and his son, Jim Owen Jr. moved to Branson in the late 1920's. Owen Jr. recognized that there was some possibility of bolstering Branson's tourism trade. He realized that most visitors to the area saw the locals as hillbillies, a reputation that was underscored by Harold Bell Wright's story and other folklore. In the early 1930's, Owen Jr. built The Hillbilly Theatre (now the Owen Theatre) in downtown Branson and created a variety show which consisted of tales, jokes, and songs all geared to the hillbilly theme. He also employed Steve Miller, a booking agent for top bands in the United States who also had connections with radio executives. Their plan was to promote Branson on a national scale by bringing in top names like Gene Autry. Owen Jr. convinced national publications such as Life, Sports Afield, and Outdoor Life to write stories on the growing tourist destination.¹ The magazine articles featured stories about fishing on the White River using the various float companies from Branson.

Branson civic leaders were still looking for a way to increase the tourism trade and to shake off their disdain for the Paramount movie. They wanted to find a way to present the real story of The Shepherd of the Hills and continue the

legends of the larger than life characters, which in turn would help those businesses named after the characters and grant instant recognition to the area by readers of the novel. The civic leaders found the answer to their problems through Southern Illinois State University.

THE SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY PLAYERS

The Southern Players acting company of Southern Illinois University was founded in 1914 on the campus in Carbondale, Illinois. Simply called "The Dramatic Club," the organization's goals were to instruct students in the theatre arts and to stage dramatic works for the university audience. The popularity of the Dramatic Club caused it to be adopted into the Speech Department, which was formed in 1946 under the direction of Dr. P. Merville Larson. Larson became the director of the Little Theatre on the Southern Illinois University campus, and the Club remained active.

In 1948, Dr. Archibald McLeod assumed the leadership of the Little Theatre. McLeod had been the director of technical theatre at Kansas State College (now Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas) and assistant professor and associate director of the University Theatre, Louisiana State University. He specialized in scene design and stage lighting for operas. Under his guidance, the Southern Illinois State University theatre expanded to include children's theatre, which toured throughout Illinois in 1953. In 1954, the Southern Playhouse was opened on the university grounds, and the troupe once known as The Dramatic Club was renamed the Southern Players.²

It was in the context of Dr. McLeod's interest in touring companies that prompted him to contact the Branson city leaders in the early 1950's, after a suggestion made to him by Dr. Howard R. Long, director of the Southern Illinois journalism department. Long, a former Crane, Missouri, newspaper publisher, suggested Branson as a location for a summer theatre to McLeod in 1955.³

Charlotte McLeod, his wife, was working on a script based on Wright's The Shepherd of the Hills, and McLeod was interested in touring the play, among other stock productions, to Branson. The city leaders were interested in the touring company and the script Mrs. McLeod was writing, so they invited the couple to Branson to discuss the project.

Charlotte McLeod describes the meeting between them and the Branson civic leaders:

We received a very friendly reception from the people whom we met in Branson. They happily showed us some of the buildings described in the story (built as a consequence of the story?) They also told us with ever-fresh anger of the movie that Paramount had made a few years earlier using the title and characters of the Wright work, but taking great liberties with the plot and even some of the characters. In addition to the chagrin which the Bransonites felt regarding the Hollywood production of The Shepherd of the Hills, there was also the question of copyright. Did Paramount have a copyright to the book? Nobody seemed to know...Consequently, when we left Branson, I still didn't know whether I'd be writing the play or not. But I left with one firm conviction: If I were to write the play, I should follow the book as closely as possible.⁴

Following the meeting with the Branson civic leaders, Charlotte McLeod wrote to Paramount Pictures to discuss the problem with the copyright to the story. Paramount answered in a noncommittal fashion, never stating whether the company did or did not hold the rights to the story. However, their answer was "phrased in such a way that [the McLeods] felt free to go ahead" with the adaptation for the stage.⁵ Following her belief that the script should match

closely the story from the novel and not the Paramount Pictures version or any other dramatic liberties, Charlotte McLeod wrote the adaptation using lines of dialogue directly from Wright's novel.

In Branson, the plans for a Summer Theatre Playhouse were implemented by the Branson Chamber of Commerce and interested businessmen. The Branson Park Board allocated a section of property near Lake Taneycomo where a small roofed theatre stage would be erected, as would proper seating for the audience members. The Park Board also provided \$1,226 towards labor to build the facility. Thirty-five interested businessmen contributed \$100 each to guarantee ticket sales for the theatre to underwrite the first season's operation. Various lumber, appliance, plumbing, and road grading companies supplied the building materials, and area residents supplied the Southern Players company with costumes and properties ranging from bonnets to cap and ball pistols common in the area 50 years earlier.⁶ Maintenance and repair costs were provided for by the various Branson civic groups interested in keeping the story alive.

There was an agreement between Southern Illinois University and the Branson Chamber of Commerce that any profit not used in the care and maintenance of the theatre or any other expenses meant to perpetuate the project at the end of the season be allocated to further construction or maintenance costs for future projects. The theatre itself, named The Shepherd of the Hills Theatre, was to remain the property of the Branson Park Board and was located on the property that is now the City Campground west of U.S. Business Highway 65 bridge going into Hollister, Missouri.

The building known as the Shepherd of the Hills theatre was two stories high and of a skeletal frame construction. It had a plain proscenium arch and a stage curtain. The acting area was shallow, with dressing rooms located on each

side of the stage and offices at the rear of the stage. When the stage was not in use it was closed off from the outside by two large barn doors. The seating area was outside under a natural roof, with nearby trees serving as placements for some of the lights. Lighting was sparse and limited for the productions.

All publicity for the theatre was produced by journalism students at Southern Illinois State University. Dr. Howard R. Long, in 1955, and then Dr. Donald R. Grubb in 1956, oversaw the journalism students arrange personal appearances for the players on radio, television, and civic meetings, prepare press releases and publicity photographs. The journalism department also oversaw all sales for advertising space in the programs and any other related promotional pieces that might generate revenue for the theatre. The students in the journalism department worked closely with the Branson White River Leader, the local newspaper, to generate stories about the productions.⁷

The first season for the Shepherd of the Hills Theatre consisted of six plays, performed in repertory style with The Shepherd of the Hills by Charlotte McLeod. During July and August of 1955, the theatre, which held about 200 people, was sold to capacity with tickets selling for \$1.00 per person. The curtain time was 8:00 p.m., and tickets could be reserved either at the theatre or the Branson Chamber of Commerce.

The second season for the Southern Players at the Shepherd of the Hills Theatre was July and August, 1956. During this short period, six full-length productions were staged in the theatre, one of which was Charlotte McLeod's The Shepherd of the Hills. Playing in repertory, The Shepherd of the Hills was performed on July 4 - 8, 14, 15, 21, 22, 28, 29, and August 4, 5, 11, and 12. Other plays performed were The Tender Trap July 11 - 13, The Glass Menagerie July 18 - 20, The Taming of the Shrew July 25 - 27, Papa is All August 1 - 3, and

Ah, Wilderness August 8 - 10. Performances started as close to 8:00 p.m. as possible, with all seats selling for \$1.00.⁸

During both seasons, the casts for the plays consisted of theatre students from Southern Illinois University. Roles were granted by audition, with housing and food allowances paid partially by grants, scholarships, the theatre budget, and the students themselves. Included in the cast were Joe Embser, who later became the founder and manager of the School of the Ozarks radio station and the Beacon Hill Summer Theatre at the School of the Ozarks. His expertise in lighting and stage managing helped found the School of the Ozarks theatre department at Point Lookout, Missouri in 1960. Embser performed the role of "Old Matt" both years in the Southern Illinois State University productions in the Shepherd of the Hills Theatre. Mr. Embser recalls the theatre well:

The theatre would be beset with flies during the performances, and then, at dusk, a fog would generate from the lake and make it difficult to see the stage from the audience.⁹

During the second year at the lakefront, some minor roles were granted to local Branson residents. Why this was done is not clear; however, it is easy to speculate that cost could be offset if some minor characters could be filled by locals. Also, having locals perform in the story that brought Branson its fame might generate interest in the performances. The performances themselves were a "work in progress" recalls Charlotte McLeod.¹⁰ "Some of the things I cut out (in early drafts of the play) were restored later by others" she recalls, "I (am not) at all sure who wrote what."

After the 1956 season, the Southern Players did not return for a third season in the Shepherd of the Hills Theatre. The funding for the project did not exist for Southern Illinois University due to cuts from the Illinois State Legislature, who refused to fund an out of state project. Also, it was decided by "some

authority in Missouri...that if a university should be responsible for a summer program in Missouri, it should be a Missouri university."¹¹ Dr. McLeod then opened a summer theatre in Illinois as New Salem State Park located close to Springfield, Illinois. The Shepherd of the Hills was performed at this new theatre, but no record seems to exist as to how many times it was performed, or for how long. Charlotte McLeod writes: "(The troupe at New Salem) did (the show) every time they were running short of money. It was a real money maker."¹²

THE CENTRAL MISSOURI STATE COLLEGE PLAYERS

In 1957, Central Missouri State College, now Central Missouri State University, negotiated with Branson civic leaders to occupy the summer theatre vacated by the Southern Illinois State University Players. The intention was to perform The Shepherd of the Hills and other shows in repertory much as the Southern Players had done the previous two years. However, Charlotte McLeod refused to release the script she had written to another theatrical company. At the time, she planned to write a musical version of The Shepherd of the Hills based on her playscript. Central Missouri State College would have to write a new version.

Ruth Kline, associate director of the Shepherd of the Hills Theatre under CMSC, wrote the first script for the Central Missouri State College Players. A playwright who completed one year of graduate studies in theatre at Yale University, Ruth Kline was also the wife of Charles Kline, director of the CMSC Players and the Shepherd of the Hills Theatre. Her first play, Old Drum, a courtroom drama based on a true story from Johnson County, Missouri in Warrensburg, was also performed by the CMSC Players in their second year at the Shepherd of the Hills Theatre.¹³

The agreement between the Branson Chamber of Commerce and Central Missouri State College Players was identical to the agreement the Chamber had

with the Southern Players of Southern Missouri State University: any surplus money was to be placed into a fund for further renovations and maintenance on the facility. The company consisted of 20 people from six Missouri colleges. Since this was Central Missouri State College's first foray into an off campus playhouse, the expenses of such a facility could be offset by other college personnel and personal money from troupe members. Those students who were enrolled in the drama or journalism workshops offered by CMSC in conjunction with the summer theatre operation could earn up to ten hours of college credit during the season.¹⁴

The director for the first two years CMSU produced plays at the Shepherd of the Hills Theatre, Charles Kline, was an M.F.A. from Yale University whose specialty was in direction and production. For his graduate thesis, Kline had worked with Robert Penn Warren in producing an original script. His talents were used at the college as both the summer theatre director and an instructor of speech, where he was the varsity debate coach.¹⁵ Twelve different plays, six each summer, were directed by Kline in 1957 and 1958 at the theatre.

In 1957, Kline directed his wife's version of The Shepherd of the Hills, which was performed on July 4, 5, 6, 13, 20, 27, and August 3, 10, 17, 24, 31, and September 1. The other seven productions he directed that season and their performance dates are: The Fourposter, July 9 - 12, Springtime for Henry, July 16 - 19, The Late Christopher Bean, July 23 - 26, See How They Run, July 30, 31, and August 1, 2, Bell, Book and Candle, August 6 - 9, The Rainmaker, August 13 - 16, and a vaudeville-style show called An Evening of Comedy and Old-Fashioned Melodrama, August 27 - 30. The most popular of all the stock shows, The Shepherd of the Hills, was repeated on August 20 - 23.¹⁶

The 1958 season had Kline directing The Shepherd of the Hills and five other productions. The shows and their performance dates were: The Shepherd

of the Hills, July 3 - 6, 12, 13, 19, 20, 26, 27, and August 2, 3, 9, 10, 16, 17, 23, 24, 26 - 31, Old Drum, July 9 - 11 (on tour to CMSC, Warrensburg, July 14, 15), Hills of Home, July 16 - 18, The Matchmaker, July 23 - 25 and again August 13 - 15, Peter Pan, July 30, 31, August 1, and again August 20 - 22.¹⁷

Ruth Kline's script varied a bit from Charlotte McLeod's approach to adapting the novel. Her version moved a bit away from the 'realism' of a novel, which McLeod tried to preserve, to a 'heightened realism' of the theatre. Her characters seemed larger than life, yet still faithful to the archetypes Harold Bell Wright portrayed in his novel. This seemed to sit well with the Branson locals, who were still convinced that the characters were their kinfolk. Due to the burgeoning tourist business, a mural was commissioned by the Chamber of Commerce as part of the "Branson Adoration Scene." The series of murals, developed by the publicist and artist Steve Miller and furniture store owner Joe Todd, was started in 1948 and completed in 1956.¹⁸ The murals adorned several downtown Branson businesses with pictures of the various points of interest in the Ozarks. The mural in the Security Bank of Branson depicted the character of Young Matt easily lifting a steam engine from the ground. It is interesting to note that, in Wright's novel and in the lakefront dramatizations, Young Matt lifts a small wood burning stove in a demonstration of his strength. Depictions like the mural's only increased the legend the locals were hoping to perpetuate.

After the 1957 season, Charles Kline resigned as director of the Shepherd of the Hills Theatre to pursue his Doctor of Philosophy degree at Denver University.¹⁹ He was replaced as director in 1959 by Dr. Michael F. Kelly, who had just completed his doctorate at the State University of Iowa.²⁰ Kelly was an Ozark region native. His grandparents lived in Galena, Missouri, and his uncle was former congressman Dewey Short, for whom the Branson Corps of

Engineers Visitor Center at Table Rock Lake is named. Kelly's expertise in theatre were production and acting.

Also in 1959, the Branson Chamber of Commerce created the Theatre Committee, headed by Branson local Al Cummings. Along with other committee members Sam Weaver, Ben Parnell, Fred Wilson, Othel Summers, John Davidson, Bud Brown, Clay Cantwell, Malcom Sherwood, and Harold Epps, Al Cummings spearheaded expansion and remodeling plans and the recruiting of local talent for the Shepherd of the Hills Theatre. A graduate of Southwest Missouri State College (now Southwest Missouri State University in Springfield, Missouri), Cummings was then the head of the speech and drama department at the School of the Ozarks at Point Lookout, Missouri, just minutes away from the lakefront theatre.²¹

In keeping with the tradition started in the 1957 production, locals were cast in some parts to round out the theatre company, which now numbered almost 30 members. Fourteen Branson residents were in the cast, and not all of them were playing minor roles, as in the 1957 production. Of the cast, a few had ties to the original story of The Shepherd of the Hills. Alfred R. Morrill, a lifetime resident of The Shepherd of the Hills Country, portrayed his grandfather, Uncle Ike, a role he performed a year earlier. As mentioned earlier, the character of "Uncle Ike" is the only character Harold Bell Wright names as having been a real person. Layne Morrill, the great grandson of Uncle Ike, portrayed Ollie Stewart in his third season in the production on the lakefront. During the day, Layne worked at the family business, the museum that was once Uncle Ike's Post Office, as a tour guide.²² Lloyd Heller, in his first year in the production, portrayed "the Shepherd, Dad Howitt" during the month of July. Lloyd, a salesman for the Acme Chemical Company in Branson, had also worked for Ringling Brothers Circus, the Smoki People Pageant at Prescott, Arizona, and the Little Theatre of Coffeyville,

Kansas. Heller's contribution to The Shepherd of the Hills as a drama was just beginning.

Under the direction of Kelly, five productions were staged at the Shepherd of the Hills Theatre in 1959, one of which was the signature piece. Ruth Kline allowed the company to retain her original script for the 1959 season, and The Shepherd of the Hills was performed on July 11, 12, 18, 19, 25, 26, and August 1, 2, 8, 9, 15, 16, 22, 23, 29, 30 and September 5, 6. Other shows and dates performed that season were: Bell, Book, and Candle, July 8 - 10, August 5 - 6 and September 2 - 4, Angel Street, July 15 - 17 and August 12 -14, Charley's Aunt, July 22 - 24 and August 19 - 21, and Light Up the Sky, July 29 - 31 and August 26 - 28.²³ Ticket prices remained at \$1.00 for adults, but went down for children under twelve to \$0.50.

During the 1959 season, KYTV of Springfield, Missouri, filmed the production in a documentary fashion on location at the Shepherd of the Hills Theatre.²⁴ The documentary featured the cast of the CMSC Players performing scenes from the play and behind the scenes footage detailing the process of bringing 13 students from 6 different colleges together with 20 local actors to produce the famous story. In March of 1960, TV Radio Mirror, a national magazine highlighting programs made especially for television and radio, designated the documentary as "The Most Original TV Program from the Midwestern States for the Year 1959 - 1960."²⁵

Some major changes were made to the theatre and script the CMSC Players used in performing The Shepherd of the Hills for the 1960 season. The Shepherd of the Hills Theatre was expanded, adding housing units which adjoined the theatre for the staff and players. The additions included dormitory style units and two summer cottages for staff members. The addition of the space was intended to make it more convenient for the cast and crew and

provide storage space for props and equipment. In keeping with the new look of the theatre, the script written by Ruth Kline was retired, and a new script, written by Kelly, the director, was implemented.

Kelly wrote the script in what he called "an attempt to follow more closely the original novel with the purpose of concentration on the Shepherd and his effect on the people with whom he comes in contact."²⁶ A new set was designed by fourth year company member Jack Gold, a designer and actor who portrayed "Old Matt" for the KYTV movie. The set complemented and promoted directorial choices in the form of new devices for playing to the audience. Scenes of the play were moved onto the grass in front of the stage to be closer to the audience and capitalize on the atmosphere of the lakefront property.

Five productions were staged in the 1960 season, one of which was, of course, The Shepherd of the Hills, which played on July 9, 10, 16, 17, 23, 24, 30, 31, and August 6, 7, 13, 14, 20, 21, 27, 28, and September 3 and 4. The other productions and their playdates were: My Three Angels, July 2 - 4, August 3 - 5, and 31, and September 1, Janus, July 13 - 15 and August 10 - 12, Come Back Little Sheba, July 20 - 22 and August 17 - 19, and King of Hearts, July 27 - 29 and August 24 - 26. Ticket prices were \$1.00 for adults and \$0.50 for children 12 and under, with a curtain time of 8:00 p.m.²⁷

THE END OF THE SHEPHERD OF THE HILLS THEATRE

In 1960, Central Missouri State College administrators felt that some of the problems in maintaining a theatre in that location were sufficient reason to end their association with Branson. The flies that emerged in swarms on the warm, summer nights near the lake made playing unbearable, and even driving on the nearby Branson - Hollister Taneycomo Bridge became hazardous. The insects would swarm in thick clouds and descend upon the theatre's lights, causing a visual obstruction at times for motorists on the bridge.²⁸ The water in Lake

Taneycomo is cold due to the flow from Table Rock Lake since water to turn the turbines for the dam is drawn from the lake's bottom, so evening fogs would settle on the theatre, sometimes setting up a barrier between the audience and the stage. Administrators also felt that Branson was not yet enough of a tourist town to condone the midnight wanderings of the college crowd.²⁹ As the rigors of an acting schedule had become less attractive to the local players, fewer locals were involved. These factors, combined with the declining support of the Chamber of Commerce, led to the project being abandoned.

The major reason the Chamber of Commerce had lost interest in the project was professional competition and the lure of bigger money. In 1960 The Old Mill Theatre opened its doors with a different version of The Shepherd of the Hills. This version showcased a stage almost 100 yards long, featured a cast of 50 with live horses and sheep, horse-drawn wagons, and a log cabin that caught fire during the production. The seating capacity of The Old Mill Theatre in 1960 was double that of the Shepherd of the Hills Theatre. Another aspect of The Old Mill Theatre was that it was located on the same homestead where Harold Bell Wright wrote The Shepherd of the Hills. The Shepherd of the Hills Theatre held its own against the new professional theatre in 1960, drawing about 5,000 spectators, but it made sense to terminate the project.

The nearby School of the Ozarks had been interested in doing a version of The Shepherd of the Hills since 1959. Lloyd Heller, known as "Shad" to area residents, the local actor and salesman who appeared as "Old Matt" during the month of July 1959 at the Shepherd of the Hills Theatre, James Collie, a writer and college professor from Coffeyville, Kansas, and officials at the School of the Ozarks, thought The Shepherd of the Hills should be produced by private businessmen, not the city.³⁰ Financial backing from Dixon and Baker, an advertising agency from Springfield, Missouri, spearheaded the attempt to

transfer rights to perform the story. "It was a very bitter dispute" recalls Dr. Bruce Trimble's son, Mark, who, in 1960, owned the Ross homestead. "Discussions became very heavy, the Chamber of Commerce didn't like the idea."³¹

The School of the Ozarks had two reasons in wanting to perform the production. The foremost reason was that a college with a similar mission, Berea in Kentucky, had an historical outdoor drama that had brought the college national recognition. The School of the Ozarks felt they could repeat Berea's success. The second reason was that there was some promise that the locals supported the idea. So, in June, 1961, the School of the Ozarks assumed occupancy of The Shepherd of the Hills Theatre.³² The school purchased the theatre, the seating, and paid off all outstanding debts for \$10,000.

The 1961 and 1962 seasons were successful for the School of the Ozarks. The Shepherd of the Hills Theatre was under the direction of former Southern Illinois University Players company member Joe Embser, who, in 1956, originated the role of "Old Matt" in the theatre. The seasons were similar to both Southern Illinois University and Central Missouri State College's format. It is unclear as to whether a version of The Shepherd of the Hills was presented under the School of the Ozarks. In his notes, Townsend Godsey, photographer and journalist, states in one place that "Mrs. Charlotte McLeod, wife of the director of the SIU Players, graciously allowed the S of O Players to use her script for The Shepherd of the Hills." However, in his notes, he also incorrectly marks the date the School of the Ozarks assumed occupancy of the lakefront theatre as 1960, then states the season opened "without The Shepherd of the Hills on the playbill."³³ Mark Trimble, the former owner of what would have been the School of the Ozarks competition, The Shepherd of the Hills Homestead and Outdoor Theatre, states that "they never performed the story to my knowledge."³⁴

Experiencing many of the same problems Southern Illinois University and Central Missouri State College endured in performing along the Taneycomo Lakefront, the School of the Ozarks decided to move the theatre closer to the school. The Shepherd of the Hills theatre was moved to Taney County Highway V across from the entrance to the School of the Ozarks prior to the 1963 season.³⁵ Renaming the theatre first "The Hill Theatre," then "Beacon Hill Theatre," the School of the Ozarks began running summer workshops for actors, directors, and designers in the drama department. the theatre obtained its name from a World War II signal light, a carbon - arc anti - aircraft beacon used to attract attention to the theatre. Closing in 1982, the Beacon Hill Theatre structure burned in 1986, totally destroying the stage and building.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Simon, Jordan. p. 6.
- 2 Shepherd of the Hills Theatre: Summer 1956. Theatrical Program. The Southern Players of Southern Illinois University. Summer, 1956. 3.
- 3 Godsey, Townsed. p. 10.
- 4 Charlotte McLeod letter to author. November 4, 1995. p. 1.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Godsey, Townsed. p. 10.
- 7 Southern Players Theatrical Program 1956. p. 13.
- 8 Ibid. p. 7.
- 9 Godsey, Townsed. p. 1.

- 10 Charlotte McLeod letter. p. 1.
- 11 Ibid. p. 2.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Shepherd of the Hills Summer Theatre 1958. Theatrical Program. The Central Missouri State College Players. 1958. p. 4.
- 14 Ibid. p. 3.
- 15 Ibid. p.4.
- 16 The Shepherd of the Hills Theatre 1957. Theatrical Program. The Central Missouri State College Players. 1957. p. 8.
- 17 CMSC Theatrical Program 1958. p. 9.
- 18 Ozark Scenic Tours, Inc. Tour Guide Information Branson Region Time-Line. Ozark Scenic Tours, Inc., Branson, MO. 1996. p. 4.
- 19 CMSC Theatrical Program 1958. p. 3.
- 20 The Shepherd of the Hills Theatre 1959. Theatrical Program. The Central Missouri State College Players. 1959. p. 3.
- 21 Ibid. p. 4.
- 22 Ibid. p. 5.
- 23 Ibid. p. 10.
- 24 "Shepherd of the Hills TV Film Completed." Branson Beacon. August 13, 1959.
- 25 The Shepherd of the Hills Summer Theatre 1960. Theatrical Program. The Central Missouri State College Players. 1960. p. 3.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Ibid. p. 9.
- 28 Godsey, Townsend. p. 2.
- 29 Ibid.

- 30 Trimble, Mark. Former Owner of The Shepherd of the Hills Homestead and Outdoor Theatre. Telephone Interview. February 1, 1996.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 "Fire Destroys Beacon Hill Theatre." Branson Beacon and Leader. November 20, 1986. The Ozarkania Collection, Lyons Memorial Library. The School of the Ozarks.
- 33 Godsey, Townsed. p. 3.
- 34 Trimble, Mark. Interview.
- 35 "Fire Destroys Beacon Hill Theatre."

CHAPTER 4

THE TRIMBLE FAMILY AND THE OLD MILL THEATRE

During the late 1940's, the tourism destination of Branson, Missouri, suffered from the loss of readership of Harold Bell Wright's novel The Shepherd of the Hills that had generated interest in the area since 1907. The Branson Civic League now controlled the Ross homestead featured prominently in Wright's novel, and they were interested in reasserting the cabin as a tourist destination, but lacked the funds for an advertising campaign. Dr. Bruce Trimble, head of the political science department at the University of Kansas City, and his wife, Mary, were co - owners, editor, and publisher of The Jackson County Times. Their newspaper was active politically in the Kansas City area, and was in constant conflict with officials. In 1946, Dr. and Mrs. Trimble and son, Mark, sold the newspaper; he resigned from his teaching position at the university where he had worked since 1934, and they traveled to the Ozarks with the intention of buying The Shepherd of the Hills farm.¹

The Trimbles wanted to buy the 160 acres of land, the cabin now known as "Old Matt's Cabin," and the house built by Lizzie McDaniel, but learned that the Branson Civic League had taken an option on the property. The Civic League was primarily interested in the revenue generated by Old Matt's Cabin and intended to continue to conduct tours. Also, several years prior to her death, McDaniel had leased the area where Harold Bell Wright pitched a tent while writing the notes for The Shepherd of the Hills to the state of Missouri. The area, known as Inspiration Point, commanded a view overlooking Mutton Hollow and was popular as a lookout for tourists. So, the Trimbles at first purchased 151 acres and the McDaniel household in 1946 and entered in to an agreement to operate Old Matt's cabin for the Civic League.²

The house McDaniel had constructed on the Ross homestead was elaborate. The living room was paneled in sycamore and the kitchen wood was wild cherry, with the library in walnut. The fireplace in the kitchen was built of hand - made brick. The main staircase in the living room and the fireplace mantel were solid mahogany. Beams which supported the living room's structure were made of oak, and polished oak logs were used for a decorative look. McDaniel had spent a great deal of time during her life gathering works of art that appeal to tourists interested in the Ozarks and had been planning to build a museum, which she called a "tower" to display the artwork. This "tower" was in the planning stages when she died, and blueprints for a five - story structure were still in McDaniel's desk when the Trimbles purchased the house.³ The Trimbles shared McDaniel's passion for Ozark art, and went about collecting artwork to complement the McDaniel collection. Since the "tower" McDaniel had planned would have cost around \$50,000, the Trimbles decided to turn the lower portion of the McDaniel home into a museum which eventually housed an extensive Kewpie doll collection by Ozark artist Rose O'Neill.

Running a tourist attraction was an altogether different career for the Trimbles. Bruce Trimble received his associate of business degree at Berea College in Berea, Kentucky, in 1925. He then went on to be the superintendent of various schools until 1930 as he studied during the summer months at both Yale and Harvard. In 1930, he began attending Cornell University to obtain his P.h.D. In 1934, he became head of the political science department at the University of Kansas City, where he remained until he and his wife purchased the Shepherd of the Hills Farm in 1946. Mary Trimble was born in Thorpe, West Virginia, in 1906 and eventually became an elementary school teacher in Thorpe. It was in this little mining town that she met Bruce Trimble, who was her boss in

one of his superintendency positions. It was about that time that Mary was offered a chance to study art in Paris, but she opted to marry Bruce instead.⁴

During the late 1940's, Bruce, Mary, and their son, Mark worked restoring the Ross cabin and gathering collectibles for their museum, all the while generating income by allowing tourists to visit the locations made famous by Wright's novel. The Trimbles discovered during their reconstruction of the homestead that The Shepherd of the Hills novel had fallen out of print during the late thirties and early forties, and that no other materials could be found to explain to tourists the relationship of the Shepherd of the Hills Farm to the book. The original publisher of Wright's novel, the A.L. Burt Company, was long out of business, complicating matters. The Trimbles were able to persuade Grossett and Dunlap to publish a new edition in 1951.

In March of 1957, Bruce Trimble died, leaving his widow, Mary, to operate the Shepherd of the Hills Farm.⁵ Mary Trimble was experiencing some problems with her health during this time, requiring their son Mark to leave the Air Force to come home. He returned intent on cleaning up the work his late father had started and selling the homestead. To make the farm more attractive to buyers, he built a gift shop and a restaurant, called "Aunt Molly's Cupboard." As he was improving the homestead, Mark Trimble grew fond of the property, and decided to keep the homestead as the family business.

The tourism business was also a very different profession for Mark Trimble. Attending the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, and studying civil engineering. Mark joined the United States Air Force and attended Penn State University to receive a master's degree in meteorology so that he could be a weatherman for the U.S. Air Force. During the years the Taneycomo lakefront Shepherd of the Hills Theatre was performing various versions of the story, Mark thought the play could be done by private businesses better than the city. Also,

he believed The Shepherd of the Hills Farm was the perfect location for an outdoor dramatization.

Mark Trimble then began a crusade to perform a version of The Shepherd of the Hills on a large scale, run by a private business to boost tourism and expand the family business.

THE SHEPHERD OF THE HILLS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

When Shad Heller and James Collie approached the Branson Chamber of Commerce in 1959, their intention was to produce a version of The Shepherd of the Hills through a private business. Their contention was that the city should not be running a tourist trade but should allow a privately owned firm to handle the famous story. Mark Trimble approached Shad Heller to discuss the problems the lakefront productions had experienced. As related by James A. Thompson in Springfield! Magazine:

Mark Trimble had always thought it possible to dramatize The Shepherd of the Hills story in a big way. He started asking questions and formulating plans to do just that. He found out that when the college students were doing the play on the waterfront, it was necessary to draw some of the cast from the community. For example, it was difficult for a college student to play a 60 year old shepherd. For that he employed Lloyd Heller, later called Shad Heller. Mark Trimble talked to Shad Heller and other characters about the play and the way they did it. Finally he put together the idea of a drama to be performed at the homestead.⁶

With the help of Shad Heller and his friend, writer and college professor James Collie, and the advertising agency Dixon and Baker of Springfield, Missouri, a

production company was formed, with Mark and Mary Trimble controlling 33 percent of the stock and the shareholders each controlling 22 percent. The newly formed company was called "The Shepherd of the Hills Historical Society."

The script, written by James Collie for the Society, was completely different in style of presentation from the college productions and any productions of the story that had been produced. Even though about 85 percent of the dialogue was lifted directly from Harold Bell Wright's novel, the script attempted to dramatize the melodramatic story by condensing the storyline to one day in the Ozarks instead of spanning through several months like Charlotte McLeod's script. Also, the script was written for a true outdoor drama, unlike the lakefront scripts. Though the college productions were performed outdoors, most of the action of McLeod and Ruth Kline's scripts confined the actors to a makeshift proscenium style method of staging. Michael F. Kelly's script in the final year of the Central Missouri State College's occupation of the Shepherd of the Hills Theatre attempted to break the fourth wall by having the actors perform in front of the stage, but he was still confined to placing most of the action inside the picture frame of a proscenium arch. All of the lakefront scripts followed the source material of the novel closely by placing some of the major dramatic scenes indoors. James Collie's script would not be so restricted. As a consequence, a larger scale method of staging the production had to be formulated, and locations for scenes in the novel were changed to an outdoor setting.

A theatre was built to accommodate the vision of the Shepherd of the Hills Historical Society. The Old Mill Theatre was built on the homestead near where an old Indian and hunting trail was located, known in The Shepherd of the Hills novel and to Ozark folklore as "The Trail That Is Nobody Knows How Old." The theatre used the natural setting of trees as a backdrop to a "stage" that was really a mixture of sawdust and dirt. A platform was added at center stage to the area

for a square dance scene, and a grist mill, complete with a working steam engine and the actual limestone slabs John Ross had brought with him to the Ozarks, was erected stage right of the dance platform. The audience at first sat on bales of hay, then folding chairs, in a seating area that was on the same level as the stage. A large tree stood by itself in the middle of the seating area. To the extreme stage right was erected a cabin which was the Shepherd's cabin. The cabin could be set on fire by the Baldknobbers. Lights were hung from trees and pipes to light the stage after the sun had set.

The Old Mill Players, under the direction of Shad Heller, was made up of locals and college students. Shad wanted to keep the tradition of using college actors in some roles to promote a learning environment for young actors.⁷ However, many roles were filled by locals. James Collie's script had 25 speaking roles and room for dozens of extras portraying townspeople, square dancers, and Baldknobbers. Actors were required to fire six - shooters and shotguns (loaded with blanks) and ride horses. Real horses, sheep, and horse - drawn wagons would be utilized to add to the realism of the setting and the local actors.

The Old Mill Theatre opened in 1960 and was an "artistic" if not "financial" success.⁸ Mark Trimble was the first actor to speak a line in the first production in The Old Mill Theatre. He portrayed an unscripted role called "The Stranger." The purpose of the character was to act as a bridge between the past and the present, the actors and the audience. The character was to enter the stage dressed as a modern day businessman who seemed lost and just wandered onto the stage. The character was to address the audience and discuss how he had heard the play was good and that there were a lot of lessons which could be learned by watching it; then he would slip into the audience and man the light board to operate the lights and start the production. Mark was almost late on opening night due to a fire on the lightboard. "I put the fire out with my suit coat,

then realized that something was supposed to be happening on stage. I was supposed to be addressing the audience."⁹

In 1960, the small 385 seat theatre drew over 3,000 visitors. The show opened on Memorial Day weekend and closed on Labor Day weekend to capitalize on holidays. The major competition for tourist dollars in Branson in 1960 was the Presley's Music Theatre, The Plummer Family Theatre, The Baldknobbers Music and Variety Show, and the Foggy River Boys Music Theatre. Silver Dollar City had just opened, offering a craft market and a tour of Marvel Cave. In 1963, seating in the Old Mill Theatre was increased to 500 and drew 36,000 visitors. In 1964 the numbers dropped to only 32,000.¹⁰ The attendance for the production at the Old Mill Theatre was not enough to keep the business financially sound. In 1963, the Old Mill Players even produced a movie version based on their production. The movie, shot with very little budget on the set of the Old Mill Theatre, was directed by Harold "Hal" Meadows, who also starred as "Young Matt" in the production both on screen and in the play. Though the movie did generate some interest, it failed to make a nationwide release and brought little in the way of tourism dollars to the Farm.

With the Trimble family controlling the majority of the stock in the company and their ownership of the property upon which the theatre was built, they were forced either to bail out the company or sell out, as Mark related, "We are going to be all the way in or all the way out of this business."¹¹ Financial problems were not the only problems affecting the production. There was a conflict of philosophy as well.

As a businessman, Mark Trimble wanted to run the theatre like any other business and eliminate the things that were not working in the production and replace those things with things that would work. Problems arose in conflict with Shad Heller and his philosophy behind the formation of the Old Mill Players. The

Old Mill Players consisted of many college - age actors, and Heller saw this troupe as a training ground for inexperienced actors and experienced actors alike. Following an educational theatre belief that actors do not necessarily have to "look" the part they are playing to portray the character, he was flexible in casting actors in training. With the Old Mill Players, who held the lease for the Old Mill Theatre, running up a debt as Trimble relates "equivalent to about \$200,000 by today's standards," something had to change in the mission of the theatre.¹²

Mark Trimble bought out the Old Mill Players by taking over and paying off the debts the theatre had accrued and disbanding the company after the 1965 season. By then, many of the original actors playing principal characters had left the production as the theatre sank into deep debt and the quality of production declined. The Old Mill Players went into bankruptcy and turned all of their holding over to The Shepherd of the Hills Historical Society, Inc. run by the Trimble family. Mark Trimble then devised a new plan to relaunch The Shepherd of the Hills for the 1966 season.

Mark Trimble's new philosophy was to do away with some of the trappings of theatre as "art for art's sake" and take a business like approach to the theatre. Mark Trimble stated:

- I took the approach that we were selling a re - enactment of the most significant historical event in this community. We were trying to re - enact something the way it happened as if members of the audience had been there in 1903 and sat on the hillside watching it. We tried to type cast the show. In other words, a bad guy was a bad guy and a good guy was a good guy. I had to bail some of those guys out of jail a time or two before we got them squared away, but - by golly, they were believable. We weren't concerned with

conventional theatre practices in any way. We were just trying to do something the way it happened originally."¹³

This restructuring of the cast dynamics meant that the actors in the show were not necessarily trained actors. Instead, Trimble hired mechanics, shopkeepers, bankers, and anyone else who fit the parts. "If the person applying for the job looked the part," explained Mark Trimble, "we hired them. We were typecasting."¹⁴ Trimble's gambit paid off financially almost immediately. The 1966 season's attendance by Labor Day had better than doubled the best year under the Old Mill Players.¹⁵

The production's success had caught many industry professionals by surprise, including Paul Greene, a playwright regarded as the Dean of outdoor drama. Paul Greene is responsible for classifying the genre in which he worked, staging plays outdoors, as "symphonic outdoor drama." He has written several outdoor dramas, such as Cross and Sword performed in St. Augustine, Florida, and The Lost Colony, performed in Manteo, North Carolina. Greene founded the Institute of Outdoor Drama at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, to support the new and growing genre of theatre in America. Currently, the Institute has 96 members, each performing an outdoor production based on the history of the area in which they are located. When Mark Trimble joined The Institute, Paul Greene was amazed at the phenomenal number of visitors patronizing the Shepherd of the Hills Farm. On many occasions, Greene inquired, "How can inexperienced people, who have no inclination to act, outperform the other professional outdoor dramas and keep the Farm in business?"¹⁶ Mark cited pride in their work, good morale, and a sense of importance motivated his non-actors to perform as professionals.

The 1966 production was written and directed by the Old Mill Players director Harold "Hal" Meadows who had stayed on even after the bankruptcy of

the troupe. Meadows, a Branson native who was a musician, actor, director and jack - of - all - trades, wrote the script with the intention of expanding on the feel of James Collie's version. The dialogue and format of Collie's script remained; however, some scenes were expanded or entirely left out, and more characters were added to the scenes. Seventy actors were now employed, and the new show, playing every night except Sunday from Memorial Day weekend to Labor Day weekend, ran capacity crowds for each performance.¹⁷

The success of The Shepherd of the Hills prompted Mark Trimble to pursue aggressively marketing the Farm. In 1971, Trimble suggested to the Herschend family who owned Silver Dollar City (an 1800's theme park that was becoming a tourist attraction in its own right) that the two companies not compete against each other for tourist money. Trimble's proposal was to market the entire area to draw new visitors by advertising the attractions together. In this way, the two largest draws in the area could work as an asset to each other and not a liability. Trimble discussed the proposal with Pat Jones, who owned Exotic Animal Paradise north of Springfield, Missouri, a drive - through animal park that featured exotic animals such as jungle cats, zebra, and elephants. Mark Trimble, Pat Jones, and Jack Herschend then pooled advertising money to promote the attractions as one draw. Each wrote a check for \$25,000 dollars and funneled the money into an advertising agency. Their combined venture was successful.¹⁸

The demand for seats at the Old Mill Theatre was so great that Trimble again expanded the seating for the production. This time, a fully raked seating area was added that would accommodate 1,500 seats. The attendance for the show in 1973 was 130,000. The performance now had a cast of almost 100, and audience members were invited onto the set to square dance with the cast during the intermission between Act I and Act II, called the "party scene." The audience was also allowed to come down to the set during the intermission between Act II

and Act III, called "the fire scene," to help put out the cabin set afire by the Baldknobbers. The audience and several cast members formed a bucket brigade to extinguish the fire.¹⁹ Also, a preshow was added to the production to give audience members something to do as they waited for the production to start. The set was expanded to include a working saw mill that was powered by the steam engine. Frog races were conducted for the children.

In 1976, Harold Meadows again revised the script to tighten some scenes and update some of the language so that it was more accessible to modern audiences. The seating area was again expanded to accommodate 1,700 spectators. With the expanded seating capacity came new problems for the theatre. A capacity crowd watching a show performed on a set the size of a football field and with the wind, insects, tree frogs, and other noises one might hear on any given Ozark night, the problem of sound became an immediate one. Trimble purchased a sound system in 1976 that was regarded as the largest wireless microphone system in the United States. Speakers were hidden in the grist mill and the water tower on the set. Each of the people performing the 30 speaking roles in the show wore a wireless microphone with a remote battery pack somewhere under the clothing. The technical crew then followed the dialogue closely and controlled all of the remote microphones on individual sliders, which were turned up when it was the character's turn to speak and down when they were finished. The sound system allowed for new directorial choices, for scenes could now be heard even if the characters were whispering. Attendance blossomed to over 162,000 spectators.

Around 1976, Trimble conducted a survey of tourists visiting the production at the Shepherd of the Hills Farm. The Branson Area Chamber of Commerce was also conducting tourist surveys for marketing reasons, but Mark Trimble wanted a survey more specific to the needs of the Farm, rather than the area.

The marketing budget for the Farm was about \$400,000 annually, and he wanted to be sure marketing dollars were being spent wisely. When tourists purchased tickets for the drama, they were asked, "Did you decide to see The Shepherd of the Hills before or after you left home?" Trimble estimated that about 95%, or 19 out of 20 people said that they planned to see the show prior to leaving their homes. Trimble cut local advertising to zero.²⁰ The entire marketing budget was funneled into out of state advertising accounts to create a market for the production before the vacationer left home. Over 1100 tour busses were patrons of the drama due in part to this marketing scheme.

With the production a success, Trimble decided to purchase the remaining property that was still leased to other organizations. The Ross cabin, now known as "Old Matt's Cabin," was in the possession of the Branson Civic League as per the wishes of Lizzie McDaniel. Trimble purchased the property for \$50,000 which was deposited into a legal note, which accrues interest, in \$5,000 a year disbursements to the Taneyhills Public Library in Branson, run by the Civic League.²¹ Inspiration Point was also purchased from the state for an undisclosed amount.

In 1978, the Old Mill Theatre was again expanded, this time to accommodate 2,880 seats. The script went through some slight revisions to expand the role of "Buck Thompson," a relatively minor character. The additions to the script made the character of Buck a liaison for the audience, with the actor portraying Buck can directly addressing the audience. Buck was used to introduce the many tour bus groups that were attending the production to the audience to give the groups special recognition. Attendance rose to about 249,000 people.²²

In 1979, the attendance to The Shepherd of the Hills dropped sharply. About 40,000 people less, only 209,000 people, attended the production.²³ Next,

the recession hit, forcing interest rates to rise as high as 21%, which affected Mark Trimble's financial standing:

I owed four million dollars when the interest rates went to 21 percent. We had built the parking lot and tunnel under the (U.S. 76) highway at the Shepherd of the Hills Farm. We had also bought some property between Highways 248 and 76 to build The Shepherd of the Hills Expressway. I also owned Fantastic Caverns cave near Springfield and had just built a new visitor's center there and 3,000 seat theatre here. I remember I was paying \$800,000 a year in interest. Now imagine, imagine, nearly \$3,000 a day in interest, holidays and weekends, too. You don't need a cup of coffee to get your eyes open when you wake up in the morning with that kind of interest bill. But, we skated through it.²⁴

In 1982, Keith Thurman, a member of the cast since 1969, was named as the play's director. When Thurman originally auditioned for The Shepherd of the Hills, he wanted to play the part of Ollie Stewart, the city - slicker from Springfield, betrothed of Sammy Lane, who is part villain, part comic relief in the production. However, his height, over 6 feet tall, made him too large to play the skinny, weak - spined Ollie. So, Thurman was used as a Baldknobber in the production for a few years until Mark Trimble granted him the role of "Young Matt." Eventually, Thurman would alternate playing "Young Matt" and "Wash Gibbs" every other night. After thirteen years as a cast member, Trimble hired Thurman to replace Hal Meadows, who left the theatre to become manager of the Cynergy gas company in Branson.²⁵

Thurman added another dimension to the production by enhancing the character that had drawn him into acting, Ollie Stewart. In the play, the character

of Ollie returns to the Ozarks to marry Sammy Lane and bring her with him to Springfield, where he is running his uncle's unnamed business. In an effort to impress her, Ollie has described fanciful clothes, beautiful houses, servants, and inventions not yet seen in the Ozarks. Thurman extrapolated that Ollie had enough money to purchase a relatively new invention at the turn of the century, an automobile. Mark Trimble was a collector of vintage autos. So, Thurman and Trimble selected a 1902 Olds for Ollie to make his grand entrance in at the party scene to impress his love. The car is retired after a few productions because of its unreliability in starting and replaced with a 1906 Buick, then with a replica of a 1908 DeWitt.²⁶

In 1982 Mary Trimble died at the age of 76 due to complications related to a stroke she had suffered a few years earlier.²⁷ The time seemed right for Mark Trimble to sell the property and move on to other projects. "When I came home from the Air Force to clean up the farm to sell it," Trimble said, "I didn't know it would take me 30 years to do so."²⁸

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Thompson, James A. p. 27.
- 2 Trimble, Mark. Phone Interview.
- 3 Bass, Eddie. "A Place to Show Ozarks Culture." Springfield News and Leader. August 13, 1950. p. D3.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Thompson, James A. p. 27.
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- 7 Trimble, Mark. Telephone Interview.
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- 9 Trimble, Mark. Telephone Interview.
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- 13 Thompson, James A. p. 56.
- 14 Trimble, Mark. Telephone Interview.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Thompson, James A. p. 58.
- 19 Thurman, Keith. Personal Interview.
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- 27 Pound, Kate. "Branson's Tourism Pioneer Dies at 76." Springfield Daily
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CHAPTER 5

THE SNADON FAMILY AND THE SHEPHERD OF THE HILLS HOMESTEAD AND OUTDOOR THEATRE

Due to the death of the driving force behind the Shepherd of the Hills Farm, Mary Trimble, his mother, Mark finally set out to clean up the Farm and sell it. With the recession affecting the United States in the mid 1980's, and the expansion of the Trimbles businesses, including the Farm, Fantastic Caverns, and various other real estate holdings, he was paying somewhere around \$800,000 a year in interest payments.

Sometime in the late 1970's, "I cannot recall the actual date," claims Mark Trimble, he devised the idea to build a hookup or expressway from Missouri Highway 248 to U.S. Highway 76, known locally as "the strip" and called "76 Country Music Boulevard" by the Chamber of Commerce in Branson.¹ He designed a road that would enable his almost 100 cast members to bypass "the strip," which was becoming crowded with bumper - to - bumper tourist traffic, not to be late for opening curtain. Through his designs, The Shepherd of the Hills Expressway was conceived. Trimble then set about buying all the property he could between 248 and 76 to construct the road, but there was no possible way he could purchase all of the land required to finish the expressway. Mark called Gary Snadon, who was also a real estate developer, to assist him. Together, they purchased enough property to build the road. The two men faced stiff opposition from businesses on the 76 strip, who were afraid that potential customers would be routed away from their establishments straight out of town to the Shepherd of the Hills Farm.² Mark dissuaded the fears of the business owners by explaining a logical reason for the expressway's existence:

I had one businessman say bitterly, that he was opposed to that road because I was trying to steal all their business on 76. I said, "I'll tell you what, I'll put a weight limit on the bridge, I'll let you keep all the cement trucks, charcoal trucks, gravel trucks, bear trucks, all the traffic that wants to go through to Kimberling City that doesn't even want on your road." He said, "Oh, no, you can't do that." I said, "Yes, I can, if that's the traffic you want. If you don't want it, then let us build this road and they'll go around you." The man was big enough sometime later to tell me, "You were absolutely right, that road really saved us."³

When the new road was almost complete, Trimble's partner in the expressway offered to purchase the entire road. Trimble agreed, letting his business partner complete the construction. "The deal took only 15 minutes," stated Trimble.⁴ It was this business partner who also purchased the Shepherd of the Hills Farm a few years later in 1985.

Gary Snadon, the real estate developer and investor who came to Branson in the 1960's, was no stranger to The Shepherd of the Hills play when he purchased the property from Mark Trimble. Snadon performed the role of the villainous "Wash Gibbs" in the 1966, 1967, and 1968 seasons at the Farm under the direction of Hal Meadows while teaching and serving as Head Football coach and Track Team coach at Branson High School. Snadon was definitely suited to the role, the most physically demanding of all of the roles in the play. At over 6 feet tall and weighing over 200 pounds, Gary was a four year letterman on the varsity football team at Kansas State College of Pittsburg (now Pittsburg State University in Pittsburg, Kansas). In 1961, Gary was named to the Associated Press Little All - American Football Team for his athletic ability and honored with

inclusion in Who's Who Among Students in American Universities and Colleges: 1961 - 1962 Edition.⁵

Snadon, born and raised in Lockwood, Missouri, married Patsy Webb his first year of college. After college, Snadon coached football in Carthage, Missouri for one year, then moved to Rich Hill, Missouri and taught for two years. He applied for an opening in Branson High School, and was hired in 1966. In Branson, Snadon met the contacts that would begin his real estate investment career:

The people who are responsible for (my) being here and for whatever degree of success I have attained are Ben Parnell and Dr. Roy Gillispie. Ben Parnell was president of the People's State bank here in Branson at the time. Ben helped me to become the agent of Farm and Home Savings and Loan. Dr. Gillispie and I started the amphibious duck tours here in Branson. We also purchased some properties which turned out to be excellent investments. You know, Gary Snadon as a football coach making \$4,800 a year and \$18.50 a night playing 'Wash Gibbs,' wasn't hardly in a position to be investing much money in property or anything else. Dr. Gillispie was willing to take a chance (on me), and Ben Parnell was willing to lend us some money. I look back on it and am very grateful those two fellows took a liking to Gary Snadon and helped me get where I am today.⁶

Other Branson investments for the Snadon family included developing the properties for Arby's, McDonalds, and Burger King franchises, the Roark Motel and condominiums, a health club, and a restaurant.

When Snadon purchased the Farm, he felt that a new name needed to be given to the business to reflect a change in direction for the company, and give it a new corporate identity to visiting tourists while still maintaining the "feel" of the original company. Thus, in 1985, the Shepherd of the Hills Farm was renamed The Shepherd of the Hills Homestead and Outdoor Theatre. Gary retained the business of the Shepherd of the Hills Historical Society, Incorporated, when publishing any historical pamphlets or copyrighting the script and various changes made to it. The Homestead and Outdoor Theatre was turned into a family business, with Gary Snadon's younger daughter, Sharena, holding the title of Ticket Office Manager and his older daughter, Shawna, working in the marketing department when the two women were old enough for the positions.⁷ Later, Shawna's husband, Doug Sullivan, would be in charge of marketing and General Manager of the property. Gary's wife, Patsy, was even placed in charge of decorating the property.

The script for the play was given major revision as well. Keith Thurman, director of the production since 1982, rewrote the script, eliminating characters, shortening scenes, and cutting the second intermission, giving the play a two-act structure.⁸ The only intermission in the script came in the party scene, the first intermission in both the Collie and Meadows scripts. Snadon and Thurman felt that the production, running almost three hours, was too long for most people to sit in an outdoor production. The second intermission in the Collie and Meadows scripts came during the fire scene, where the Baldknobbers burn the shepherd's cabin in retribution for Wash's defeat in a fight with Young Matt. During this intermission, audience members came down to assist the townspeople in the play in forming a bucket brigade to extinguish the fire. Without the intermission, the running time of the production was shortened by 15 - 20 minutes.⁹

In 1986 a new ending was given to the script. At the end of the previous scripts, Howard, the lost son of Dad Howitt, dies being forgiven by Old Matt for the death of Matt's daughter. A narrator then described that Howard's young son, Pete, also died to join his father in heaven, and Old Matt, Aunt Molly, and Dad Howitt exit the stage in tears, mourning their loss. The ending, though effective, seemed unfinished to Thurman and the technical director for the production, Ross Trimble. Assisted by Frank Stewart, owner of Associated Theatrical Contractors of Springfield, a company which supplies theatrical equipment and technical expertise in the theatre arts, created a more "complete" ending.¹⁰ The new ending depicted the ghosts of the never seen Maggie and Howard, illuminated by black lights and surrounded by fog generated by a fog machine, emerging from the darkness and clasping hands, then disappearing together into blackness.¹¹

The new ending showing the reuniting of Howard and Maggie also continued the Christian theme of the production, which was also given a boost in 1986. Profanity in the script was completely eliminated. In the Collie and Meadows scripts, profanity was limited to only an occasional "hell" or "damn" from the villainous characters such as Wash Gibbs or the Baldknobbers, but complaints from church groups attending the performance had begun to write letters, claiming a conflict between the Christian messages extolled by the shepherd, Dad Howitt, and the language used in the production.¹² With dropping attendance figures and pressure from the expanding highway 76 attractions, audience feedback was closely monitored and influenced changes in the production.

The set underwent cosmetic changes in 1987. A roof was added to the square dance platform to allow better lighting for the area and to create a bandstand for a new development on the Homestead. Snadon, in an attempt to generate interest in the Homestead and Outdoor Theatre, began adding

attractions to the daytime activities to create a sort of theme park based on the play. Tours of Inspiration Point and the Ross Cabin had been going on since Mark Trimble started the play in 1960, so Snadon enhanced the existing tour by adding Clydesdale horses and wagon rides, street entertainers performing in character skits and Vaudeville - style variety shows, and country music singers performing in outdoor and indoor bandstands around the facility. Also, a 1901 Morgan Country Church was relocated to the Homestead in 1990 to signify the churches Wright used to preach in as an itinerant pastor. Another change in the scenic elements of the play was the elimination of the sawmill. The sawmill had broken down several times during the previous seasons, and parts were more and more difficult to acquire to maintain a turn - of - the - century look needed for the visual continuity of the set. Also, time was saved by eliminating the running sawmill at the beginning of the production. The largest daytime change, however, was Inspiration Tower.

The Shepherd of the Hills Inspiration Tower was erected in 1989 on a site not far from where Harold Bell Wright pitched his tent while compiling the notes for his novel. The Tower, a 230 foot observation point built on the highest point in southwest Missouri, cost about \$1,500,000. "We built Inspiration Tower," explains Snadon, "in memory of Harold Bell Wright. We are concerned with history being preserved and want people to have the opportunity to come and see how it all started."¹³ The Tower has 34 1/2 tons of rebar which stretched end - to - end would be about 5 miles long. It took 43 concrete trucks in convoys to fill the 13 foot, 6 inch deep by 51 foot, 6 inch diameter foundation for the Tower. The foundation holds the 3,000,000 pound tower in place during high winds, storms, and other natural phenomenon. With no other concrete Tower like the Inspiration Tower in the world, it offers an impressive landmark for the drama.

Despite major changes, attendance to the production declined. In 1990, the average attendance to the drama dropped to about 1,000 patrons a night, with some surges on holiday weekends to about 1,500 to 1,700, leaving the 2,880 - seat theatre only half full. The seating area was pared down to 2,000, and larger bucket seats with armrests replaced the small, black, metal - legged chairs that the Trimbles had installed. The new seats occupied the same amount of space, giving the illusion that there were just as many seats as before without leaving large gaps in the audience.

The most significant change in the production itself was implemented in the 1990 and 1991 seasons. Music was added to scenes to underscore the emotional impact and depth as well as assisting the pace of the scenes. Since Act I is mostly exposition involving the backgrounds of the principal players, more music was added in this act than in Act II. The music, selected by Keith Thurman, is played over the theatre's sound system during scenes involving the Baldknobbers burning of the cabin, Sammy Lane's coming of age and decision to choose Young Matt or Ollie Stewart, Dad Howitt's confession to God on his personal guilt, Ollie's choice to leave the Ozarks forever, and comic bits involving a drunk Lem Wheeler and Buck Thompson. Thurman's ongoing plans are to select music to underscore the entire story, making the play sound much like a movie.¹⁴

THE DECLINE IN ATTENDANCE

By 1994, attendance had declined for The Shepherd of the Hills drama to an average of 700 - 800 patrons a night. The competition from indoor Branson theatres had increased dramatically over the years. By 1994 Branson had 32 separate country music shows, not including live daily performances at Silver Dollar City and Mutton Hollow theme parks and eighteen other separate attractions, all competing for a projected 5.5 million visitors annually. In 1982,

there were only 13,829 theatre seats in Branson. By 1993 the number of theatre seats available to tourists each night had risen 226 percent to 45,019. Supply had begun to outdistance demand, and as the tourism dollars were divided by more and more businesses, The Shepherd of the Hills Homestead and Outdoor Theatre lost clientele.

The Branson identity began a slow change in 1984. Roy Clark, country music singer, fiddle player, and star of television's long running variety show "Hee Haw," opened the Roy Clark Celebrity Theatre on the Highway 76 strip. Clark had recognized the potential the small tourist town of 3,700 offered. Before Clark, only local groups had erected theatres, and they played to capacity crowds. Even though Clark played only a few times that year in his theatre, it attracted other stars to follow his success. In 1986, Boxcar Willie opened his own venue in Branson, singing his own brand of country music. Silver Dollar City no longer felt compelled to follow a long standing agreement with Mark Trimble when they forged their marketing partnership with the Farm in the mid - 1960's, beginning their own nighttime entertainment in their Echo Hollow amphitheatre. Guests that visited the Silver Dollar City theme park during the daytime could also stay free for the evening music show. The area, once known and marketed as "The Shepherd of the Hills Country," was now called "Ozark Mountain Country" to include the entire area, not just one aspect offered to tourists.

The catalyst for the explosive growth came in 1991. The popular news program "60 Minutes" aired a report on the growing interest in country music performers in Branson, Missouri. The report discussed the country music shows in the area and named Silver Dollar City as the business that built the tourism trade in Branson. The Shepherd of the Hills Homestead and Outdoor Theatre was not mentioned in the broadcast, and Branson was dubbed "Country Music U.S.A." by the program.

In 1996, The Shepherd of the Hills, however, is preparing to open for the 37th year in a row with performances running seven nights a week from the end of April until the end of October. Attendance for the performance has leveled to about an average of 700 -800 a night, which is well above the estimated number of about 100 patrons a night needed to make payroll and continue the productions.

FOOTNOTES

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- 6 Thompson, James A. p. 43 - 44.
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CHAPTER 6
THE FUTURE OF THE SHEPHERD OF THE HILLS HOMESTEAD
AND OUTDOOR THEATRE

On April 27, 1996, The Shepherd of the Hills Homestead and Outdoor Theatre will open for its 37th season. To prepare for the coming season, the management team has implemented some changes to the production and the marketing strategy to attract new visitors to the Homestead and Outdoor Theatre. These changes, minor in some areas and major in others, are designed to create name recognition for the Homestead as well as promote the story of The Shepherd of the Hills that helped Branson, Missouri, become a tourist destination.

Since 1979, attendance to the production has been on a steady decline. At the production's peak, in 1978, attendance was approximately 249,000 people. In 1979, attendance dropped to 209,00 people. This loss of patrons was attributed to a nationwide recession. By 1990, attendance to the drama had dropped to about 130,000 patrons, or about 1,000 people a night, forcing a paring down of the seating area, which at one time was 2,880 seats, to 2,000 seats. By 1994, attendance had dropped to about 700 - 800 people a night. Frequently, the production was performed for only 100 people per night on weekdays due to less visitors to the Branson area in the middle of the week. The decline in attendance to the production in the 80's and 90's can be attributed to the competition from the 32 other theatres hosting music and variety shows with famous country singers as well as the changing identity of the Homestead and Outdoor Theatre as a business.

Two marketing strategies implemented by the management team of The Shepherd of the Hills Homestead and Outdoor Theatre may have indirectly caused some confusion about the production staged in the Old Mill Theatre and

the daytime activities of the Homestead. This confusion has caused the production to lose some identity with tourists. Preconceptions about the production have been perpetuated by the marketing strategy that created a distinctive logo for the theatre and homestead. Doug Sullivan, operations manager of The Shepherd of the Hills Homestead and Outdoor Theatre since 1991, relates:

The logo for the production features a portrait of the Shepherd in an oval. The Shepherd's face, bearded, smiling, resembles Jesus. People who have no preconceived notion as to what The Shepherd of the Hills is about think it is some kind of hillbilly passion play.¹

Consideration was made to change the logo by removing the shepherd's face, but this met with some resistance from tour group receptives and local ticket booking agents. When new brochures and print ads were distributed earlier this year without the shepherd's face on the logo, the companies receiving the advertisements had a negative reaction because they thought that the production was changing. The face in the logo was restored, but the font style for the lettering was changed for a more contemporary look.²

The marketing tactic meant to clear confusion and add to name recognition for the production was implemented early this year. In 1985, Gary Snadon, owner of the facility, named the former Shepherd of the Hills Farm to the Shepherd of the Hills Homestead and Outdoor Theatre. It was Snadon's hope that the popularity of the theatrical production in the Old Mill Theatre would translate into increased awareness of the daytime activities centered around a tour of the Ross homestead. By promoting the Homestead and Outdoor Theatre as one day - long experience, Snadon attempted to bring more money to the business by selling combination tickets for all of the activities in the homestead

and the nightly production. Unfortunately, this marketing strategy resulted in a mixed message being sent to tourists. "People didn't know whether we were a Homestead or a play," remarks Doug Sullivan, "so we need to change that and make our product more definite."³

In 1996 the Homestead and the Outdoor Theatre will be marketed separately to reduce the confusion as to what exactly each has to offer. The emphasis in marketing will be placed on the production. Despite changes in the scenic elements and the script, the nighttime production is still the same story with the same characters and situations resulting in the same outcome. Recognizing the production's emotional impact is the key to selling tickets, marketing the production first would generate interest in what the daytime Homestead has to offer. Sullivan recognizes that selling a product that features no extravagant dance numbers or hot showstopper songs that change every season is difficult, "but," he states, "this story is what started Branson. People need to see the other shows Branson has to offer, but they need to see what started it all."⁴

Snadon Enterprises has formed The Shepherd of the Hills Entertainment Group to add a more universal appeal to the other entertainment facilities Gary Snadon operates in Branson. Snadon Enterprises operates The Shepherd of the Hills Homestead and Outdoor Theatre; the magic and comedy production of VanBurch and Wellford at the Magic Mansion Theatre located near the junction of The Shepherd of the Hills Expressway and highway 248, which is also home to the \$25,000 Game Show; and the Polynesian Princess, a dining cruise on Table Rock Lake. By marketing this wide variety of entertainments together, Snadon Enterprises hopes to inform guests of one entertainment about the other things available in the Shepherd of the Hills Entertainment Group. In 1996 all of these

entertainments will offer combination tickets that will enable a guest to see all of the events at a discounted rate.

The Shepherd of the Hills Homestead will also be undergoing some changes in format in 1996. Formally, an admission fee was charged to guests to enter the Homestead to see the Ross cabin, Inspiration Tower, and the tour of the property conducted in a jeep and trailer with a trained tour guide. After the tour, the patron was escorted to a stable where the guest could ride a horse on a trail around the facility. Free access will now be granted to anyone wishing to walk around the Homestead, with a modest fee charged for a tour, the Tower, or a pony ride. By opening the park gates, the Homestead hopes to generate interest in its various activities and stimulate interest in the production.

Though The Shepherd of the Hills production has dropped in attendance, none of the new marketing strategies should be viewed as an act of desperation on the part of the management of the park. Doug Sullivan explains:

There is a tendency to want to blame someone for the drop in attendance. I know that if I were a cast member, I would be pointing fingers at the managers of the park. However, I am certain that numbers will turn around for us. Our attendance figures are not a sign of negativity; rather, they are a vindication. With all of the stars in Branson who have instant name recognition, we should have been out of business a long time ago. Yet, we still have a strong market share. We just need to cut a little fat and develop a marketing push where the future and the past of Branson should be viewed. Take in the new, take in the old, should be

a motto for the area. What is it that attracts people to Branson? We have to be in the middle of the answer.⁵

The production itself will undergo little changes in 1996. Some dialogue between Little Pete and Dad Howitt has been eliminated in their first scene since the same words are repeated later in the production. More emphasis on audience participation in the party scene, which features square dancing, will be another change in the production. By involving the audience more in the character interaction, The Shepherd of the Hills Outdoor Drama will be a unique experience for the tourist, who actually will become part of the community established in the production.

THE SHEPHERD OF THE HILLS AND THE BRANSON COMMUNITY

The majority of the actors who perform in The Shepherd of the Hills are Branson locals or college students. Some of the actors have performed in the production every season for the larger part of their lives. Bud Lynn has performed the roles of Howard, Dad Howitt, and Jim Lane for 28 years. Lloyd Durre performed the role of Dad Howitt from 1961 until his retirement in 1990. Keith Thurman performed the roles of Young Matt and Wash Gibbs on alternating nights from 1969 to 1982, when he became the director of the production. Mendy Stuart has performed the role of Sammy Lane since 1988. The longevity of these actors performing the same roles night after night for several years indicates a common thread, explains Doug Sullivan:

The actors are like addicts. Ask any actor who has quit the play and they will tell you that they miss it. They establish a circle of friends here and look forward to performing, something that a lot of people never get a chance to do in their lives. This social circle is the heart of the production."⁶

The community feeling generated by the production stems from a "throwback to old, familiar values" evident in the production.⁷ Some stereotypes are perpetuated by the production. The masculine element is prevalent with the fighting, the drinking, and the hard work of men who lived off the land and supported their families. The feminine element is also strong, especially surrounding Sammy Lane, who is idolized by the townspeople as the "prettiest girl in the hills." The characters in the production are from a simpler time, more natural in their dealings with each other and nature. This romantic theme adds some excitement to the interaction of the characters. By utilizing local talent, this romantic theme is carried into the community, establishing a reputation for the production. These locals are usually typecast into their roles. These "real people" enacting the romantic story can add to the enjoyment of the production for the audience. This community feeling is important in maintaining a solid patronage of the production. Sullivan explains: "If you can get the locals to talk about your product, then your business will succeed. If the business speaks to them, they will refer guests to that business."⁸

CONCLUSION

In 1995, a little under 150,000 people attended The Shepherd of the Hills production at the Old Mill Theatre. This figure includes the production of The Newborn King, a Christmas story written by Keith Thurman and Sherry Greene, a local actress. The Newborn King is performed on the Old Mill Theatre stage, which is dressed to resemble Herod's throne room, Mary's house and well, and the inn and stable where Jesus was born. The story is narrated by Dad Howitt as he relates the Christmas story to Little Pete shortly after the death of Howard. With this production, the Old Mill Theatre is open from late April to the middle of December, taking only two weeks at the first of November for rehearsal and set changes from The Shepherd of the Hills to The Newborn King. The Christmas

play, in its ninth year in 1996, enhances the product offered at the Homestead and Outdoor Theatre and generates interest in the summer show.

In 1996, attendance at The Shepherd of the Hills is expected to be between 150,000 to 175,000 people. This number, though lower than the 1978 high of 249,000 people, is still significant. With competition from indoor, air conditioned theatres in Branson featuring name performers and extravagant, state - of - the - art special effects, the Shepherd of the Hills Homestead and Outdoor Theatre is holding its own in the marketplace. In 1907, when Harold Bell Wright's novel of love, revenge, redemption, and salvation was published, the author set in motion a tourist industry that changed southwest Missouri in the 1990's into one of the most popular tourist destinations in America, second only to Orlando, Florida. It is important that The Shepherd of the Hills story remain in the public eye to remember the character of the area.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Sullivan, Doug. Operations Manager of The Shepherd of the Hills Homestead and Outdoor Theatre. Personal Interview. April 12, 1996.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

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