



The Empty Cross™
.....At Entry to College of the Ozarks

THE IDLE AMERICAN

Routes Old and New....

Commentary by Dr. Don Newbury

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The song has been a staple in Christian hymnals for more than a century, underscoring deeply held beliefs. “The Way of the Cross Leads Home”--written in 1906--might be in the running for Christians’ national anthem if it ever came to a vote.

Until here lately, the “way” to Branson, MO, has not been quite so clear. Though highway routes to this Christian entertainment mecca are many--some of them picturesque--they can easily eat up the better part of a day for Texans driving there.

Eureka! Southern Airways Express now offers twice-daily flights from Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport to Harrison, AR, just a half-hour from Branson. Round-trip airfare is around \$150, parking is free and the two-hour flight a few thousand feet aloft provides welcome “look-sees” at the colorful foliage below. (The aircraft has eight seats, with some safety requirements that may be unfamiliar, such as use of scales to determine weight of both passengers and luggage. Rent a car, use an Uber app or lean on a friend for pick-up in Harrison and the short final “leg” to Branson. Remember to pack light and arrive early for check-in.)....

En route to this one-of-a-kind entertainment center that emphasizes God and country, one sees an exit for College of the Ozarks in Point Lookout, MO. It’s a stop worth taking, a scant half-dozen miles

from Branson, this college of some 1,500 students. The Lord is honored and patriotism is the hallmark of the appropriately nicknamed “Hard Work University.”

Students earn their way to four-year degrees by working at numerous campus sites. They graduate free of debt, unlike many college graduates who face heavy pay-back commitments for several years.

Named C of O president in 2022, Dr. Brad Johnson envisioned an additional symbol to enhance the institution’s spiritual and patriotic values. It already had The Missouri Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Now, the giant cross erected last year reminds students and visitors of Christ upon entering or leaving the campus. Artist/designer Max Greiner, Jr., was commissioned for the project-- The Empty Cross™ --made of steel--is 40 feet tall and weighs 28,000 pounds....

I have written about Branson many times, but somehow was never previously present for the much-heralded “Christmas in Branson.” Though “late to the party,” I recently was “wowed” by a community emblazoned by lights and Christmas décor, and a bevy of shows “glitized up” with festive costumes, Christmas music and creative dancers. (The season starts in November and runs through the first week of January.)

During a whirlwind 46-hour visit, I attended seven shows, including the Sight and Sound Theater’s “Miracle of Christmas.” This is Branson’s “crown jewel” where all 2,200 seats often are taken for productions that dazzle with Broadway quality and are always Christ-centered. “David” opens March 8, 2025.

Other shows included The Duttons, The Hughes Brothers, Pierce Arrow (featuring a world-class baritone and a Guinness Book of Records holder for the lowest bass voice), Doug Gabriel, A Tribute to ABBA and “Hot Rods and High Heels.” They, too, sparkled....

Branson is a “family place” on both sides of the flood lights. Central to its “warp and woof” are shows dominated by multiple family members, including three generations of Duttons and their across-the-street neighbors, the Hughes Brothers. They even “borrow” each other’s grandbabies for manger scenes. This year, the Hughes Brothers family has two of their four infants “on loan” to the Duttons! The Clay Coopers have to be proud of son Colton, star of the “Hot Rods” show, a high energy production featuring 1950s music.

Doug Gabriel has been “at it” for decades, playing a stringed instrument his dad made from a car muffler. He calls it a “muff-tar.”

This account barely touches the garment’s hem of Branson. Experiencing it--coupled with a visit to C of O--never grows old, at Christmas and throughout the year....

Dr. Newbury, longtime university president, continues to speak and write. The Idle American, begun in 2003, is one of the nation's longest-running syndicated humor columns. Contact: 817-447-3872. Email: newbury@speakerdoc.com. Website: www.speakerdoc.com.