

Micah Stephens

Anthony

ART 499

May 1, 2016

Dollywood or Bust:  
A Theme Park and its Community

Dollywood is a theme-park set in the mountains of East Tennessee. Located in Sevier County, Tennessee, Dollywood is right next door to Smoky Mountain National Park and is one of the most visited attractions in the state of Tennessee. Dollywood has grown an industry of tourism around Sevier County, specifically on the Pigeon Forge strip, that has made a huge impact on the community. While there are differing opinions on what tourism does to a community, the economy that it builds in this particular area allows the community to sustain itself. Dolly Parton, the namesake and figure head of the park, has often said of herself, “It takes a lot of money to look this cheap” (N.p.). Similarly, some say that the tourism on the strip looks cheap, but it takes substantial funding to support a community sustained by tourism.

While Dollywood’s opening season was in 1986, the park has a history dating back to 1961. Dollywood as we know it now has taken many different names through the years, beginning in 1961 as Rebel Railroad. Rebel Railroad, owned and operated by the Robins Brothers opened for its first season in 1961 (“Historic Attractions”). The park focused on local heritage with a coal fired steam train and saloon, but didn’t have many other attractions at this stage in its development. It had a successful opening season and continued with its success until 1970.

The park was bought by then owner of the NFL’s Cleveland Browns, Art Modell, in 1970. It was under Modell that the park was rebranded as Gold Rush Junction. During the first



**Figure 1 Robert F. Thomas Chapel, Dollywood.**  
 Personal Photograph: Micah Stephens. April 2014.

half of the decade, the park expanded a great deal. Modell continued the park's emphasis on preserving local heritage. An excellent example of this is the Robert F. Thomas Chapel in the park; it was built in 1973 and is a replica of many churches found throughout Sevier County.

In 1977, Gold Rush Junction was purchased by what is now known as Hershend Family Entertainment ("Historic Attractions").

Under the operations of HFE the park was renamed Silver Dollar City, the same name of their family friendly park in Branson, Missouri. HFE continued the trend of expansion and preservation. In 1983, the Silver Dollar Grist Mill was constructed; this was the first working grist mill built in Tennessee in over 100 years; and it was built just as it would have been 100 years ago, with hand-cut materials made on-site in the park's Craftsman Valley ("About Dollywood").

It was three years later that Dolly Parton partnered with HFE (the partnership is referred to as The Dollywood Company) and the park opened for the 1986 season as Dollywood. This has been a partnership that has endured now for thirty years and continues to grow and prosper with new additions annually. It is a common misconception that Dolly Parton owns the theme park; local legend states that Dolly owns the land on which the park is set, that she gets paid for every appearance she makes in the park, and for each car parked in the parking lot. While Dolly is a member of the board and has a very active voice concerning the vision and direction of Dollywood, the park is actually owned and operated by HFE and Dolly serves as a type of figure head. In her book *Dream More*, Dolly states, "I do not know much about running Dollywood and Dixie Stampede on a daily basis. I don't even want to know that. I do know our shared vision of bringing family entertainment to the Smokies" (73). By using this method of business, Dolly is

making a profit without the risk of being liable for any accidents that occur within the park and is able to guide the vision of the park.

Another operation born out of the partnership between Dolly and HFE is The Dollywood Foundation; this is the council that manages the different programs and charities that are supported by the park. It was The Dollywood Foundation that donated one million dollars to the building of the LeConte Medical Center in Sevierville, a new hospital desperately needed in the community (Zigmond). The rest of the money was raised by the community itself after receiving a challenge from the Dr. Robert F. Thomas Foundation, a part of Covenant Health (Zigmond). This is the same Robert F. Thomas for whom the chapel in Dollywood is dedicated. Dr. Thomas was a prominent physician in Sevier County, he treated most of the community, and he was the doctor that delivered Dolly Parton. Dolly served on the Robert F. Thomas Foundation as an honorary chairperson for more than thirty years (Parton 82).

Dolly is committed to serving her community and giving back. In her own words, “I knew I could raise more money than most or donate it to help the foundation bring high-quality health care to our area. I want my family, our employees, and all my friends and neighbors to have access to the best medical care around” (Parton 83). It is the tourism, and resulting funds, generated by the park that have given Dolly Parton, HFE, and the Dollywood Foundation an opportunity to meet the needs of their fellow community members and to provide for their employees on yet another level.

An example of the way this tourism has generated a higher level of specialized medical care is the Fresenius Dialysis Center in Sevierville, where Mr. Truman Weeks’ wife is a patient. In talking with some of the staff, it became clear that this location was set up as a clinic to serve traveling patients who were vacationing in the area. However, many of the patients receiving

their treatments at this location are Sevierville residents. Before this clinic opened it would have been necessary for locals to find specialized treatment like that offered at the Fresenius clinic out of town. Mr. Weeks, who has been a family friend of the Parton's since Dolly was a child, counts Dollywood and the tourism it has created as "a great success" to the community. He even went as far as saying, "the park probably wouldn't be here today if it weren't for Dolly becoming a success" (Weeks).

It is important to note that the Dollywood Foundation is not the only philanthropic limb of this multimillion dollar business. There are several groups that partner with and sponsor HFE, not only at its Dollywood park but nationally through its other business venues as well. For example, Samaritan's Purse Christmas Child program has been working with HFE for several years. Samaritan's Purse is a Christian organization that provides basic needs and gifts to children all over the world living in impoverished areas. A main concern for the Dollywood Foundation is helping and educating children, especially children living in poverty, not just locally but globally.

Out of a desire to inspire a love of reading in children and to encourage education in rural areas, Dolly founded The Imagination Library in 1996. The Imagination Library is a program that gives a book to a child every month until they are five years old ("Our Vision"). This program originated in Dolly's hometown of Sevierville and is now set up to be replicated in any community that wants to support it. This is another fine example of partnership being created between companies and communities in order to meet the needs of the community members. It is Dolly's model. The communities are expected to financially support the project themselves. This leads to a type of individual and specific care, as local communities work to meet their own needs. This also further serves to assist the community in preserving its own identity and

heritage, instead of having an outside group come in and impose their own traditions and ideas. This type of model also points to a community's responsibility to take care of its own people. The Imagination Library has grown from serving one community to serving over 1600 communities in four countries: the United States, Canada, Great Britain, and Australia ("Making a Difference"). Since the beginning of the Dollywood Company, education has been a main tenant of operations. In the beginning this took the form of offering scholarships to local graduating seniors in Sevier County, especially those pursuing the study of music or the environment (Parton 35). The scholarship program has taken many forms through the years but remains a constant way that Dollywood promotes education within the community.

Another organization that Dollywood often partners with is Keep Sevier Beautiful which is a local affiliate of Keep America Beautiful. Keep Sevier Beautiful is dedicated to educating citizens about how to care for their environment. KSB's website states its mission as, "Motivating and educating Sevier County residents and guests to take greater responsibility for improving our community's environment" ([www.keepsevierbeautiful.org](http://www.keepsevierbeautiful.org)). KSB hosts many events throughout the year in order to reach out to the community. For example, KSB hosted a fall festival in Wears Valley in October of 2015, with local musicians and craftsman as well as several booths to educate visitors on recycling, planting flowers, and reducing waste. While most people might assume that theme parks are not environmentally friendly, Dollywood is making great strides to preserve the natural landscape that it calls home. This was something that was important to the original operators of HFE who deeply believed that being good stewards of the land was important to honest business. Because of that legacy, HFE has a program called, "Gift of Green," where for every one tree that is cut down – two are planted. As a part of the program,

there is also a goal to plant 1,000,000 trees. As of 2010, two-hundred thousand trees had already been planted (“Gift of Green”).

Not only is the Dollywood Company dedicated to taking care of the land, but it is also dedicated to using the land in a way that preserves the wild life. Dollywood is home to the American Eagle Foundation’s headquarters. The park hosts the country’s largest number of un-releasable bald and golden eagles, as well as a myriad of other birds of prey. This area is also managed by AEF employees who are trained to work with these animals and specialize in their care. There is a nesting sanctuary for the birds, which can be viewed from an area of the park. Next to the sanctuary there is the Wings of America Theatre featuring shows that highlight these birds of prey throughout a typical operating day in the park. In the AEF Sanctuary, the birds can be observed by park visitors during the open season which is another way that Dollywood’s intent is bent toward promoting education. These birds have been successfully bred and their offspring have been released into the wild so that the nation’s eagle population does not disappear. There is an AEF gift shop located in this area of the park where all the profits from the merchandise go straight to the organization, Dollywood does not profit from the charities that it supports; through partnership, the park allows the organizations to support themselves. Dolly is dedicated to taking care of her favorite organizations, just as she is dedicated to her friends and employees, and often the three groups overlap.

Dollywood has made a definite impact on the community of Sevier County, made up mostly of Sevierville, Gatlinburg, and Pigeon Forge. This area lies right next to Smoky Mountain National Park, the most visited national park in the United States, bringing in up to ten million visitors a year (“A Wondrous Diversity of Life”). This community is rich in Appalachian heritage and Dollywood is dedicated to preserving and educating younger generations about that

heritage. Dolly Parton herself was born and raised in Sevierville (Parton 3), which is why she is committed to seeing the community continue to grow and be enriched by the tourism created by the park; this includes the restaurants, shopping centers, and hotels that have sprung up in the last thirty years to support the ever increasing tourist traffic.

Critics question whether the tourism is worth the financial cost and the cost to the quality of life for the residents. There is a higher cost of general city services in areas driven by tourism. Often the roads require increased maintenance; traffic patterns must be redesigned to accommodate the physical traffic, because the community is servicing a higher number of people than non-tourist communities with similar residential populations (“State Sharing Taxes...” 15). This can lead to the need for higher taxes, but as Sevierville resident Mr. Truman Weeks says, “Tourists spend a lot of money.” The reason the high cost of tourism is worth it, is because in many ways it pays for itself. The increased financial burden does not fall on the residents of these tourist communities. In fact because these communities are bringing in more sales tax revenue from tourists than other, non-tourist communities in the state, they qualify as “premier type tourist resort cities.” In the state of Tennessee, there are only two cities that qualify in this category; Gatlinburg as of 1979 and Pigeon Forge as of 1986 (“State Sharing Taxes...” 7). This distinction qualifies them to receive certain tax breaks which ease the financial burden of the residents. The residents of these cities usually enjoy taxes well below the state average (“State Sharing Taxes...” 19).

Directly outside of the park lies the famous Pigeon Forge strip. On the strip there are hundreds of restaurants, hotels, and various forms of entertainment. This type of commercialization could not be sustained without the tourism that Dollywood and the Smoky Mountain National Park bring in annually. The question is whether the tourism on the strip is

more harmful to the local identity than it is helpful in sustaining it. There are some critics of the strip that feel it is a misrepresentation of the area's rich culture and is instead a "spectacle" (Fletcher 103). This overly commercialized area relies heavily on regional stereotypes in its theatrical productions, gaudy building designs such as the Titanic Museum, and other tourist attractions comprising what is sometimes referred to as a "tourist trap" (Fletcher 105). It draws people in with flash, but some consider it to have little substance. Shows like "The Hatfield's and McCoy's" and "Lumberjack Feud" are based entirely on stereotypes of Southern or Appalachian culture. However, this tourism is responsible for many of the jobs available to community members and is a vital part of sustaining the local economy.

In her article "Making Sense of the Strip: The Postmodern Pastiche of Pigeon Forge, Tennessee," Dr. Ann Fletcher explores similarities in signage and building design between the Pigeon Forge strip and the Las Vegas strip (104). There is not only traditional entertainment and food in Pigeon Forge, but there is also a large shopping community comprised of outlet malls such as the Tanger Outlet shops. The majority of businesses on this strip have very little to do with the area's cultural past, but because the locals are working, shopping, and living their lives in the midst of this so called "trap," it would be unfair to state that it didn't affect or make up part of the local identity. Dr. Fletcher discussed the idea of "hyper-reality" and offers that one of the attributes of the strip and the surrounding area that charms people and keeps them coming back is this idealized form of life. There is a "fake-ness" that is accepted because it does not pretend to be otherwise. In embracing the absurdity and commercialization, it has become "a realer-than-real environment" (Fletcher 104). Dolly has said a similar thing about her own appearance. "The thing that's always worked for me is the fact that I look so totally artificial, but am so totally real. It gives me something to work against. I have to overcome myself. I have to prove how good I



am” (Parton 57). The juxtaposition between appearance of artificiality and a “real” substance can only be appreciated when we are honest about the artificial. The Pigeon Forge strip does not claim to be anything but a tourist community, this honesty gives its inhabitants something to “work against.” It lets the people in the community prove how good they are, through the admittance of the fake, the true identity is seen and that is why people keep coming back. Dr. Ann Fletchall and Dolly would agree that there is a deeper reality inside the commercialized “hyper-reality.”

Dr. Fletchall also sets up Dollywood as a model for tourism in the Southeast (120). However, I would argue that Dollywood’s model reaches far beyond the southeast, and even beyond the nation. In 2010, Dollywood won an Applause Award, which is the most prestigious award presented to a park in the tourism industry. The award is given by the Liseberg Park in Sweden; and it celebrates originality, impact, and sustainable business of theme parks all around the world. It is the highest honor in the theme park industry. Dollywood was a finalist under consideration for the award in 2006, before it was awarded the honor in 2010 (“General Fact Sheet”). Dollywood’s mission statement outlines the virtues that helped it win this prestigious award, and declares that the park is a business dedicated to Christian ethics. It states that Dollywood is committed to their customers, to service, and to helping create memories (“Mission and Core Values”). Their commitment to excellence doesn’t have to be stated and is not only proven through external awards, such as the Applause Award, but is also proven by its various programs and the actions of the workers in the park as well.

It is this commitment to excellence and hospitality displayed by the park employees that keep people coming



**Figure 2 Jane and Ralph at Dollywood.**  
**Personal Photograph: Micah Stephens.**  
**March 2014.**

back. Jane and Ralph, a couple from Indiana, said that even in their sixties they keep coming back to the park every year because they feel that Dollywood is a place they can be kids again. Another couple who are long time season pass holders are Mary Ruth and Wayne Livingston from Johnson City, Tennessee. The Livingstons have been season pass holders for more than twenty years. For the Livingstons, Dollywood is a place they have built family traditions and memories. “It’s a place we can go with the whole family,” said Mary Ruth. The Livingstons, their daughter, and their grandchildren all have season passes and make several trips a year. Mary Ruth and Wayne said they like to get the most out of their season passes and usually visit the park more than ten times in a season. They especially enjoy the shows and the music in the park, with the Kingdom Heirs gospel show being Wayne’s favorite Dollywood attraction.

It is the people who visit Dollywood and the people who work in the park that continue to make Dollywood an unforgettable place. Some of the employees who have quite literally made Dollywood are the talented men and women of Craftsman Valley. Dollywood’s Craftsman Valley is an area of the park that is dedicated to maintaining and demonstrating the way that goods would have been created at the turn of the century. There are skilled craftsman set up in shops and in booths working on their craft so that visitors to the park can observe the craftsmen in action and learn about times gone by. Another really important aspect of the craftsmen’s job is that they are making period-appropriate pieces to go around the park or to be sold in the park. They are creating and building on site. Stone Penland Pottery is the newest addition to Dollywood’s Craftsman Valley. Becky and Kyle Shelton, owners of Stone Penland, joined



Figure 3 Craftsman in Craftsman Valley, Dollywood.  
Personal Photograph: Micah Stephens. April 2014

Dollywood in 2015. Even though they are new to the park, they are not new to pottery, in fact Becky can trace her family's pottery business back more than 150 years (Farley).



**Figure 4 Dollywood Express Steam Engine and Conductor. Personal Photograph: Micah Stephens. Nov. 2014.**

Dollywood also employs an entire crew of steam train engineers and mechanics. The original steam train, from the very first season as Rebel Railroads in 1961, is still running today. Every hour there is a five mile train ride that overlooks most of the park and takes visitors up into the mountains. There are actually two engines, Klondike Katie (the park's original engine, No. 192, pictured in Fig. 4) and Cinderella. They are both World War Two veterans; the engines were built by the army and moved personnel and supplies in Alaska during the war ("Historic Attractions").

There are many different reactions to Dollywood and the effect that it has on its community. It seems that most people in the community are appreciative of the way the park sustains the economy and the good work that Dolly Parton herself does for the area. A conversation at the Wears Valley Fall Festival shows two different reactions to Dollywood. One of the musical groups at this festival was Booger Town Gap. Booger Town Gap was founded by husband and wife duo, Keith Watson and Ruth Barber. Booger Town Gap is named after an area of Sevier county by the same name, where Watson's family originates (Wildsmith). Their musical style is Old-time Appalachian music. When asked how the park affected their



**Figure 5 Keith Watson of Booger Town Gap. Personal Photograph: Micah Stephens. Oct. 2015.**

lives as musicians in the Sevier County area Watson and Barber had two different responses. Barber quickly said, “Like Dolly Parton’s own brother said, ‘She done ruint this county.’” After pausing a minute, Watson explained that he thought ultimately the park was good for the community and for them as musicians. He elaborated by stating that while the park does not usually hire musicians like themselves, who perform truly authentic mountain music, because the park hires the type of musicians it does, that opens up opportunities for Booger Town Gap outside of the park.

Watson’s words seemed familiar, in that, while most people recognized the occasional draw backs of a community driven by tourism, namely traffic and commercialization, the financial stability it afforded the area was something for which to be thankful. This season there are antique cars set up throughout the park to celebrate Dollywood’s newest ride, the Lightning Rod. One of these cars has a trailer attached that is painted, “Dollywood or Bust.” While an amusing and festive catch phrase, it seems that there is more than a bit of truth in this for Sevier County. If not for Dollywood, the tourism and economy that it creates, the area might be in financial ruin with no means of supporting itself. Dollywood is a significant and central part of its community.



**Figure 6 Dollywood or Bust.**  
Personal Photograph: Micah  
Stephens. Dec. 2015.

## Bibliography

“A Wondrous Diversity of Life” *The Great Smoky Mountains*. National Parks Services, 2014.

Web. 20 Mar. 2014

“About Dollywood” *Dollywood*. The Dollywood Company, 2014. Web. 26 Mar, 2014

Craftsman in Craftsman Valley, Dollywood. Personal Photograph: Micah Stephens. April 2014

Dollywood Express Steam Engine and Conductor. Personal Photograph: Micah Stephens. Nov.

2014

Dollywood or Bust. Personal Photograph: Micah Stephens. Dec. 2015

Farley, Kristin. "Old Traditions, New Pottery Business Thriving at Dollywood." *WATE 6 On*

*Your Side*. Young Broadcasting of Knoxville, Inc., 26 June 2015. Web. 02 Nov. 2015.

Fletcher, Ann "Making Sense of the Strip: The Postmodern Pastiche of Pigeon Forge,

Tennessee." *Southeastern Geographer* 53.1 (2013): 102-122. *Project MUSE*. Web. 20

Feb. 2014.

Hall, Colin Michael, and Stephen Page. *The Geography of Tourism and Recreation:*

*Environment, Place and Space*. London: Routledge, 2002. *eBook Collection*

(*EBSCOhost*). Web. 9 Mar. 2014.

Jane and Ralph at Dollywood. Personal Photograph: Micah Stephens. March 2014.

Jane and Ralph. "Opening Day." Personal interview. Mar. 2014.

Keith Watson of Booger Town Gap. Personal Photograph: Micah Stephens. Oct.2015.

Livingston, Mary Ruth, and Wayne Livingston. "Dollywood: A Family Tradition." Personal

interview. Mar. 2016.

Parton, Dolly. "CEO and Cinderella: AN INTERVIEW WITH DOLLY PARTON." *Cinéaste*

17.4 (1990): 16-19. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 Mar. 2014.

Parton, Dolly. *Dolly: My Life and Other Unfinished Business*. New York: HarperCollins, 1994.

Print.

Parton, Dolly. *Dream More*. New York: Penguin Group, 2012. Print.

“General Facts” *Dollywood*. *Dollywood*. The Dollywood Company, 2014. Web. 26 Mar, 2014

“Gift of Green” *HFE Corp*. Hershend Family Entertainment, 2014. Web. 27 Mar. 2014

“Historic Attractions” *Dollywood*. The Dollywood Company, 2014. Web. 26 Mar, 2014

“Mission and Core Values” *Dollywood*. The Dollywood Company, 2014. Web. 26 Mar, 2014

“Our Tennessee Mountain Home” *Eagles*. American Eagle Foundation. Web. 26 Mar. 2014

“Our Vision” *Imagination Library*. Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library, 2014. Web. 27 Mar.

2014.

“Robert F. Thomas Chapel” *Dollywood*. The Dollywood Company, 2014. Web. 26 Mar, 2014

Robert F. Thomas Chapel, *Dollywood*. Personal Photograph: Micah Stephens. April 2014.

“Southern Gospel Music Association History” *Dollywood*. The Dollywood Company, 2014.

Web. 26 Mar, 2014

“State Tax Sharing With Cities: Premier Type Tourist Resorts as Models.” *Tennessee Gov.*

Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations. Staff Report. Sept. 2004. Web.

18 Apr. 2014

“The Difference is People” *Dollywood*. The Dollywood Company, 2014. Web. 26 Mar, 2014

Watson, Keith, and Ruth Barber. "Booger Town Gap." Personal interview. 17 Oct. 2015.

Weeks, Truman. Personal Interview. 21 Apr. 2014.

Wildsmith, Steve. "Boogertown Gap Founders Honor Musical Legacy of an Obscure Tennessee

Hamlet." *The Daily Times*. The Daily Times, 6 July 2011. Web. Nov. 2015.

Zigmond, J. "Community Service: Local Fundraising---Including A Gift To The Tune Of \$1 Million From Dolly Parton---As Well As A Large Investment From The Parent Health System Help Build A New Hospital In Rural Tennessee Town." *Modern Healthcare* 40.20 (2010): 22-24. CINAHL Complete. Web. 29 Jan. 2014.