

DOLLYWOOD: PRESENTING REGIONAL CULTURE THROUGH THEMED  
ENVIRONMENTS

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## **ABSTRACT**

Graham Rutledge Hoppe: Dollywood: Presenting Regional Culture Through Themed Environments  
(Under the direction of Marcie Cohen Ferris)

Dolly Parton's "Tennessee Mountain Home" and her hardscrabble rural upbringing are essential to our idea of her as a celebrity. We think we know Dolly Parton because of what we think we know about those mountains, we also think we know those mountains because of what we think we know about Dolly Parton.

Dollywood is an essential southern place, a simultaneously artificial and authentic piece of Americana carved out of the Smokey Mountains by the sheer force of Dolly Parton's personality. After the nearby National Park, it is the largest draw for tourists in the region. The park allows visitors to experience themes from Parton's life, and to experience her idealized vision of the Smoky Mountains. To create, and curate, these environments the park leans heavily on tropes of mountain life, incorporating a carefully crafted blend of stereotype, nostalgia, and anachronism to sell a uniquely personal conception of the mountains.

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## Introduction: Just a Few Old Memories

Roughly at the center of Dolly Parton’s theme park, Dollywood, sits a replica of the two-room cabin where she was born. Both rooms are decorated with antiques and are viewed through floor to ceiling Plexiglas windows. The viewing area is small, no bigger than a narrow hallway. I stood in that replica in December of 2014. It was chilly; the wind whipped the mountain air through wooden walls almost as though they weren’t there. Dolly Parton remembers mountain winters in that cabin—the real version. She once told an interviewer that the wind blew snow through the cracks in the wall into straight lines across the floor, “like lines of coke” with a sly wink.<sup>1</sup> She’s America’s naughty girlfriend.

I was alone, comparing the décor to the walls of Pigeon Forge’s Cracker Barrel, which I’d visited the day before, when a woman in her eighties came into the cabin with her son. They commented on the pages from a Sears and Roebuck catalogue plastered to the kitchen wall for insulation, feed sack curtains, and *just one bed* for so many people—Dolly has eleven brothers and sisters. Finally, neither to her son nor to me, the woman said, in a voice that sounded like mountains themselves, “It was hard for them, it was hard for us too.” The words hung there for a few moments, and then the woman put a hand on her son’s arm and looked him in the eyes, “she’s never forgotten it, never forgotten us. She’s done a lot for her people.” The woman’s son agreed and they made

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<sup>1</sup> “Dollywood or Bust” *60 Minutes* (Australia) Micheal Munro Interview. June 1986.

their way out of the cabin, into the fantastical wonderland that Dolly Parton has presented to her people. I stayed for a few moments more—wanting to feel her words in that space for another instant or two. Then I stepped out of the cabin into the park. The Christmas lights had come on, illuminating the trees around me. It had begun to snow.



## Chapter 1: An Authentic Connection

In *The Themed Space*, a 2007 collection of essays about created tourist environments, Melissa Jane Hardie, an Australian academic who specializes in cultural studies and queer theory writes of Dollywood, “The park’s purpose is to create an affective space where hearts are touched.”<sup>2</sup> That desire for emotion complicates Dollywood. Critics seldom embrace affect and sentimentality, but they are beloved traits in country music. Contemporary cultural aesthetician Richard Shusterman argues that this desire for affect has distanced country culture from the academy: “Extreme emotion or sentimentality is a trade-mark of country music, and a prime reason why intellectuals dismiss it as vulgar kitsch.”<sup>3</sup>

It is easy to dismiss Dollywood as kitsch. It is popular, designed for the masses, and it requires only as much critical engagement as its audience is willing to give. Dollywood’s primary goal is not to challenge or to question, but to comfort and to entertain. Dollywood is calculated to appeal, but it would be a mistake to presume that this makes the park somehow less substantial, or reduces the meaning of the place.

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<sup>2</sup> Hardie, Melissa Jane. "Torque: Dollywood, Pigeon Forge, and Authentic Feeling in the Smoky Mountains." In *The Themed Space*, edited by Scott A. Lukas. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007. Page 23.

<sup>3</sup> Shusterman, Richard. "Moving Truth: Affect and Authenticity in Country Musicals." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57, no. 2 (Spring 1999) Page 226.

This ability to sell a version of the South, even one that chafes at some sensibilities, is precisely why Dollywood matters. Historian Karen Cox states, “For most of the last two centuries, one of the most valuable commodities the South has offered tourists has been its unique place in the history of the United States.” She describes iconic southern historic sites such as Mount Vernon, Monticello, antebellum mansions, Civil War battlefields and steamboats on the Mississippi. She could just as easily include Sevier County, Tennessee, which has the most developed tourism industry of the five counties that host the Smoky Mountain National Park. In large part this is due to its most famous resident—Dolly Parton. Dollywood has so much resonance because of its connection to Parton’s personal history and to a larger history of Appalachian tourism.

This thesis will explore how Dollywood weaves into the history of selling the mountain South. It begins by examining the identity of southern Appalachia, and the myth of pure Anglo-Saxon mountain culture. Next, it examines how the mythic isolation of mountaineers gave rise to the hillbilly stereotype, and how mountain residents began to shape their businesses and culture to profit from that image. It follows that shift into a history of tourism in Sevier County, including the establishment of Smoky Mountain National Park just a few miles from where Dollywood was eventually be built. Next, I consider how these forces shaped Dolly Parton, and in what ways poverty, and then success, informed her conception of the mountains. Dollywood is an idealization of Appalachian life. The next chapter of this work examines the meaning of that idealization, and how it fits into larger patterns of imagined southern realities.

A dramatic example of how southern imaginaries can be used to sell a fantasy of the South can be found on the road that brings tourists to Dollywood and the National

Park, the Pigeon Forge Parkway; this paper examines the tensions found on this road where there has been unchecked commercial development for decades. We then ask why, in the face of all this artifice, people still make a connection with Parton and with her theme park. Selling someone else's fantasy is a complicated venture. This thesis ends by considering how Dollywood can continue to thrive in an increasingly national and global South. I'll look at how the sensibilities of Dollywood's southern fantasy have clashed with twenty-first century values and politics.

These histories, philosophies, and imaginaries combine to create Dollywood. When looking at this background it becomes clear, Dollywood is a singular place, but it is not strangely singular. Instead it makes perfect sense. A place like Dollywood could only exist in the Smoky Mountains, a region long informed by a tradition of selling local identity. How this theme park continues to develop speak volumes about the evolution of mountain tourism in a region defined by marketing home and place.

### **Creating an Imagined Reality: Appalachia**

Appalachia has long existed in the popular imagination as a region of almost desperate isolation. For most of the twentieth century that isolation has been more fiction than reality. Timber and coal, as well as tourism, brought railroads to the region that not only connected it to the wider regional and global networks, but also brought many inhabitants, who came to cut wood, dig coal, and work a variety of other jobs made possible by industrial Appalachia. Additionally, the railroads--among other modes of transportation--made it easier for mountain residents to move out. As folklorist D.K. Wilgus points out, the white and black settlers who made the mountains their home didn't

get 'stuck' there, to be viewed by outsiders like mosquitos in amber, "It would be more accurate to note that the settlers not only went where they did because they wanted to go, but stayed there because they wanted to stay. They could have left. Many of them did, and many of them returned."<sup>4</sup> Those who returned from places like Pittsburgh, Detroit and northern Indiana, brought back an awareness of how the rest of the country viewed the mountains. These ideals shaped the way residents of East Tennessee presented themselves to outsiders and to each other.

The business of tourism, as a form of capital and cultural expression, permeates every aspect of the cultural identity of the mountain South, particularly in east Tennessee and western North Carolina. "Tourist operators recognized the appeal of mountain culture to tourists and developed diverse methods to profit from it," writes Richard Starnes in *Creating the Land of the Sky*.<sup>5</sup> Tourism has existed in the Smokies for more than two hundred years, beginning with wealthy lowland southern planters who retreated to the mountains to "take the cure" in the cooler mountain air and soak in spring waters.<sup>6</sup> It has grown to surpass logging, agriculture, and manufacturing to become the largest industry in the mountains.<sup>7</sup> Starnes argues that despite its ties to fun, pleasure, and leisure, tourism is a deeply expressive realm of American life: "It has pronounced social and cultural implications that, when combined with its economic importance define society in (the

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<sup>4</sup> Wilgus, D.K. "Country-Western Music and the Urban Hillbilly." *The Journal of American Folklore* 83, no. 328 (1970): Page, 158.

<sup>5</sup> Starnes, Richard D. *Creating the Land of the Sky Tourism and Society in Western North Carolina*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Martin, C. Brenden. *Tourism in the Mountain South: A Double-edged Sword*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007. Page 2.

<sup>7</sup> Starnes, Page 146.

mountains).”<sup>8</sup> Historian Jane Becker tells us that this evolution had a duality, “The course of change in the southern mountains was complicated by the fact that some of the very forces that sought to modernize Appalachia also hoped to recreate the regions as a crucible of the nation’s past.”<sup>9</sup>

While those impulses may seem to be at odds, industrialists understood that their extractive industries were more valuable if the general population perceived Appalachia as a region of significance. “Local color fiction writers convinced urban Americans that the mountaineers were sturdy Anglo-Saxon peoples maintaining noble values and traditions—in music, language, dance, and domestic arts—that had disappeared with the onslaught of industry elsewhere in the country.”<sup>10</sup>

The notion of “purity” celebrated by the local colorists--as well as early folklorists like Horace Kephart--was a fantasy even before it was created. Of course, the white mountaineers were not native to the mountains, that distinction belonged to the Creek and the Yuchi—and later the Cherokee.<sup>11</sup> Nor were the Anglo-Saxon residents alone in finding a home in the mountains. They shared mountain life with African-Americans, other European immigrants, and the tri-racial Melungeons—among others. The diversity of southern Appalachia continues with more recent influxes of immigrants from India, South-East Asia, and Latin America.

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<sup>8</sup> Starnes, Page 184.

<sup>9</sup> Becker, Page 42.

<sup>10</sup> Becker, Page 42.

<sup>11</sup> Jones, Page 6.

### **Feuding and Fussing: Hillbilly Posturing**

It didn't take long for the imagined romantic mountains to slip into stereotyped portrayals. C. Brenden Martin writes that, the image of poor mountaineers who loved moonshine and were quick to feud was a popular trope by the early years of the twentieth century, "As Americans increasingly regarded the southern highlands as a backward region inhabited by a poverty-stricken and depraved people, a new derogatory term was coined to describe mountain residents—hillbilly."<sup>12</sup>

Hillbillies were specifically white. Usually bearded and barefoot, the twentieth century mountain stereotype vacillated between dim-witted and lazy, but harmless—too stupid to damage anyone but himself, and violent, drunken louts, who were incapable of controlling their sexual urges. Fueled by moonshine the hillbilly was likely to fire a blunderbuss at strangers before bedding anything that moved (including blood relatives and livestock). Hillbilly women were not only the target of derision, but also lust. Buxom, and usually blonde, the hillbilly women are usually depicted as man-crazy, loose, and just as dim as their male counterparts. A favorite trope of hillbilly comics was a voluptuous bride, or her father, marching a hapless boyfriend down to the church at gunpoint—the birth of the shotgun wedding.

Historian Patrick Huber, who examines the socio-historic implications of "Horny Hillbilly" figurines in *Dixie Emporium*, argues that the upheaval of racial norms during the 1960s civil rights movement left those who had previously relied on racial stereotypes

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<sup>12</sup> Martin, Page 53.

to market and define the South looking for more innocuous alternatives.<sup>13</sup> The hillbilly gave a recognizable icon to southern supremacy that was less confrontational to post-1960s sensibilities than the African American “mammies” and “pickaninnies” that dominated southern tourist souvenirs in the first half of the twentieth century and before.

Hillbilly imagery has proved to be remarkably resilient. The hillbilly clings on even into the twenty-first century as a figure on which Americans can project feelings of regional and class superiority. The rise of white “redneck” reality TV, like *Hollywood Hillbillies*, *Moonshiners*, and *Hillbilly Hand Fishing*—reflects commercial media’s continued tolerance for the trope. Similarly, hillbilly-themed parties remain persistently popular on college campuses where co-eds don overalls, blacken teeth, and go barefoot—men wear long fake beards or straw hats and the women stuff pillows in their tops to look pregnant, while darkening an eye to suggest spousal abuse.

These cultural displays create expectations in outsiders who associate the southern mountains with hillbilly life. The popularity of cartoons like *Li'l Abner* and *Snuffy Smith* in the 1930s and 1940s led to a hillbilly boom after World War II.<sup>14</sup> Americans eagerly consumed post-war situation comedies filled with southern ‘home-grown hijinks’ and innocent spectacle, such as the *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962), *Petticoat Junction* (1963) and *Hee Haw* (1969). This cultural saturation led to a desire to see the “real” thing, and entrepreneurs in the mountains were more than happy to oblige. Attractions like hillbilly miniature golf, souvenir stores and country dinner shows appeared near the entrance to

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<sup>13</sup> Patrick, Huber. "The Riddle of the Horny Hillbilly." In *Dixie Emporium*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008. Page 78.

<sup>14</sup> *Barney Google and Snuffy Smith*, by Chicagoan Billy DeBeck, was set in Western North Carolina and debuted in 1919 it still runs today. *Li'l Abner* by Connecticut native Al Capp was set in Kentucky and first appeared in 1934 and ran until 1977.

the Smoky Mountain National Park. Tourists were delighted with the displays they found in Sevier County, which were largely constructed not out of local custom or necessity, but to meet the expectation of outsiders. Tourism had become the authentic local tradition.

### **Where the Smoky Mountains Begin: Sevier County**

Prior to the great depression, Sevier County was what could be considered a typical southern mountain county. The county relied heavily on agriculture until well into the twentieth century. There were sporadic forays into industry, but few long lived. Railroad service came to the county in 1905 and it, along with steamship service on the Little Pigeon River, provided shipping for the timber industry.<sup>15</sup> Several other small factories opened around Sevierville in the first decades of the twentieth century, including a cheese factory cooperatively owned by a group of local farmers, but none had a lasting economic impact. Sevier County's most significant early factory, the Stokeley Canning Factory was built in 1926. By the thirties, timber was dwindling due to deforestation, and in some part to pressure of preservationists.<sup>16</sup>

A desire to preserve the mountains came about, somewhat perversely, thanks to the introduction of the automobile. Cars brought people into the mountains on short excursions. These early motoring tourists had a desire to maintain the scenic land that they enjoyed. Historian Anne Whisnant tells us that the growth of the national park

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<sup>15</sup> Jones, Page 71.

<sup>16</sup> Jones, Page 87.



system, "...was inextricably tied to the spread of cars and the growth of tourism."<sup>17</sup>

Though the parks were created to preserve natural landscapes, underneath this agenda was an unmistakable desire to create attractions. Stephen Mather, the first director of the National Park Service, believed it was essential that park be, "Accessible and popular."<sup>18</sup>

Like Dolly Parton, who wanted to create a version of the Smoky Mountains that tourists could immerse themselves in, National Park administrators wanted to create a real space out of an imaginary. Historian Richard D. Starnes writes that the National Park has created its own mountain fantasy by privileging landscape over history, "In creating an idealized landscape that minimized the historical realities of settlement, logging, mining and other activities, park leaders created a visitor experience in which the park became a place where land could be viewed and enjoyed without the complications of human experience."<sup>19</sup>

The National Park, like Dollywood, is a created landscape. The park is typically seen as a pristine wilderness, when, in fact, it is a created wilderness. A piece of the wild that is allowed to remain wild while surrounded by developed and utilized land is, in fact, a creation—and not one without controversy. In *Super-Scenic Motorway*, a history of the Blue Ridge Parkway, Anne Whisnant describes the often-contentious creation of the public preserves: "Severe controversy arose...over the Park Service's policy of removing

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<sup>17</sup> Whisnant, Anne Mitchell. *Super-Scenic Motorway*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. Page 14.

<sup>18</sup> Whisnant, Page 23.

<sup>19</sup> Starnes, Richard. "Tourism, Landscape, and History in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park." In *Destination Dixie Tourism and Southern History*. Florida: University Press of Florida, 2012. Page 268.

all residents from parklands to re-create the image of pristine wilderness.”<sup>20</sup> The politics of removal become acts of creation. In fact, the park is curated—just as Dollywood is—with an eye for authenticity. Non-native species are removed and restrictions are placed on visitors and commercial behavior in the park. The very substance of the park, its wildness, only exists because it has been allowed to exist and to flourish. As the original residents of the park lands were forced out, careful decisions were made about what structures, what signs of human life, would be left behind.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, “The (National) Park” Starnes argues, “is an artificial creation of space, landscape, and history defined by those charged with its care and those who visit.”<sup>22</sup>

By the early sixties Interstate 40 had made it’s connection with US 441 in Knoxville, a pivotal crossroads: I-40 brought people from the east and west and 441 connected those travelers with Florida, but first they had to pass through Sevier County. The increase in car traffic resulted in a commensurate interest in developing the tourist trade. Gatlinburg, the community that directly borders the National Park, was a natural choice. Sightseers had stayed there since the founding of the Park in the 1930s. Gatlinburg maintained a high degree of local ownership up until the eighties.<sup>23</sup> Seeking an inroad, outside investors turned to Pigeon Forge--an unincorporated community in between Gatlinburg and the county seat of Sevierville. The rush of tourist development

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<sup>20</sup> Whisnant, Anne Mitchell. *Super-Scenic Motorway*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. Page 32.

<sup>21</sup> Whisnant, David E. *All That Is Native & Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983.

<sup>22</sup> Starnes, *Destination Dixie*, 280.

<sup>23</sup> Martin, Page 128.

led to the incorporation of the town in 1961.<sup>24</sup> This, in turn, inflated property values and pushed out rooted, multi-generational farming families in Pigeon Forge in a matter of a few years.<sup>25</sup> By the 1980s outsider-owned tourism had almost completely overtaken Sevier County's economy. The local hospitality industry was bolstered by the World's Fair in nearby Knoxville in 1982. The opening of Dollywood in 1987 sent the tourist-related growth into the stratosphere.<sup>26</sup>

The first park to occupy the land that is now Dollywood was built by the Robbins brothers, founders of Tweetsie Railroad, western North Carolina's longest lived theme park. The Robbins opened another train park, Rebel Railroad in 1961, which featured a ride through the mountains, including a staged assault on the train by "Yankee raiders." After the faux Union troops were repelled, the ride ended in a Confederate village featuring a blacksmith, a restaurant, and a handful of other attractions. According to historian C. Brendan Martin, "Rebel Railroad was ahistorical, contradicting the area's strong Union sentiment during the Civil War."<sup>27</sup> The contradiction became more extreme when Art Modell and the Cleveland Browns Football team purchased Rebel Railroad and morphed the park into a town of the "wild West." The Yankees became Indians and the Confederate village's location was reimagined a thousand miles west in the rechristened "Goldrush Junction."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Jones, Page 153.

<sup>25</sup> Martin, Page 131.

<sup>26</sup> Jones, Page 153.

<sup>27</sup> Martin, Page 116.

<sup>28</sup> Martin, Page 159.

## Chapter 2: Dolly Parton's Mountains

A few miles away from where Rebel Railroad was recreating a Civil War conflict that never took place, Dolly Parton was a young girl growing up among her family. Her story is deeply linked to the poverty of her youth, the Smoky Mountains, and her rise to stardom. Bill Malone describes her as a member of, "...the last generation of performers who really had direct working-class roots or who could recall rural experiences." He continues, "(successive generations) have been increasingly region-less, classless, and suburban in residence and values."<sup>29</sup> Parton is a link to a kind of country music that barely exists anymore. What separates Parton from the other members of this 'last generation' is that unlike Loretta Lynn, Merle Haggard, Buck Owens or Willie Nelson, she was born after World War II. Her Appalachian roots carry a legacy of depression-era ethos associated with country artists a generation older than Parton.

The Great Depression was in no hurry to leave East Tennessee, and in much of Appalachia it remains locked in place. In her autobiography, *Dolly*, Parton describes struggling with the reality of her family's poverty. In one anecdote, she recalls her fellow students being asked what they had eaten for breakfast, "I became more and more embarrassed about the fact that all we ever ate for breakfast was biscuits and gravy. Other kids were recalling glorious breakfasts of eggs, sausage, bacon, orange juice, and all

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<sup>29</sup> Malone, Bill. *Don't Get Above Your Raisin'*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002. Page 86.

kinds of things that seemed wonderful and luxurious. I hated my biscuits and gravy. I wanted to gag them up and poverty along with them.”<sup>30</sup>

Parton recounts many such instances of leaving a home without electricity or running water and going to school where she and her siblings were subjected to the taunts and jibes of classmates. It makes sense that these hard moments—the youthful realizations of difference—are the root of Parton’s famous sense of humor. In reading interviews with Dolly you quickly begin to realize how masterful she can be at directing the conversation. Many of the one-liners are well honed and are repeated on many different talk shows and in interviews. Dolly Parton, the comedienne, reveals quite a bit about herself in these comedic bits, but she never reveals more than intended. Parton’s one-liners give just enough information about her hardscrabble upbringing, “We didn’t have any electricity except for the lightening bugs. If fireflies were out, we’d catch them in a mason jar and put them in our bedroom! We did have running water ... we would *run* and get it. [*laughs*] Most people have four rooms and a bath; we had one room and a *path*. We had the little outdoor shack out back. It was a good life, and I loved growing up in the mountains. We were really just people, and God and family meant everything to us.”<sup>31</sup>

The most famous example of the pain of childhood poverty is immortalized in one of Parton’s most famous songs, “Coat of Many Colors.” Parton tells of a coat her mother made for her, sewn of “rags of many colors.” She sings how her mother made the coat

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<sup>30</sup> Parton, Dolly. *Dolly: My Life and Other Unfinished Business*. New York: HarperCollins, 1994. Page 42.

<sup>31</sup> Parton, Dolly. Interview. *The Nate Berkus Show*. Syndication. September 15, 2010. Television.

with love, telling a young Dolly the biblical story of Joseph and his coat of many colors. Parton was thrilled with the care her mother took to make the coat, and couldn't wait to show it off. She was shocked when she got to school and the other children began to sneer at her, "Soon it turned into a whole room full of mocking faces; laughing, pointing, jeering at me...me and my coat. I wanted to tell them the story Mama had told about Joseph and make them understand how special, how singular, how beautiful...but they would not hear it."<sup>32</sup>

Parton told *Rolling Stone's* Chet Flippo that the cruelty was scarring, "a very sad and cutting memory that I long kept deep within myself...I didn't have a blouse on under (the coat) because I had done *well* just to have a jacket to wear. So when the kids kept sayin' I didn't have shirt on under it, I said I *did* because I was embarrassed. So they broke the buttons off my coat. They locked me in the coat closet that day and held the door closed and it was black dark in there and I just went into a screaming fit. I remembered that and I was ashamed to even mention it, and for *years* I held it in my mind."<sup>33</sup> In the song, Parton finds this memory, as if by accident, "Back through the years I go wanderin' once again/ Back to the seasons of my youth..." it is wistful, melancholy, sad and warm all at once. Parton considers it her finest work as a songwriter.<sup>34</sup> That coat is on display at Dollywood now, in a small glass case. It is shown on a mannequin made of fallen autumn leaves, next to the lyrics to the song from a notebook, written in Parton's

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<sup>32</sup> Parton 1994, Page 38.

<sup>33</sup> James, Otis. *Dolly Parton*. New York: Jove Publications, 1978. Page 50.

<sup>34</sup> Cardwell, Nancy. *The Words and Music of Dolly Parton*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011. Page 9.

hand. On the wall behind the case is an enlarged photo of a group of children, who sneer, point, and laugh at the viewer.

It would have been easy for Parton to strike out for Nashville and never look back. Many performers who find early stardom leave their childhoods behind. Think of Michael Jackson and Gary, Indiana or Bob Dylan and Duluth, Minnesota. Buck Owens was eager to escape his Dust Bowl Texas youth—when he got to Bakersfield, California he was never associated with anyplace else. But Dolly has never been able to—or never wanted—to leave her mountain past. She continually returns to the mountains to wander the “seasons of her youth.” In the title track of her most recent release, *Blue Smoke* (2014), Parton returns once more to her mountain home.<sup>35</sup>

Parton declines to speak with biographers.<sup>36</sup> She published an autobiography in 1994, and plans to publish a second volume in the near future.<sup>37</sup> While some might position Parton’s lack of interest in biographic journalism as somehow contrary to her open and honest public persona, it also stands to reason: the Dolly Parton persona is undoubtedly different from Dolly Parton, the person. This is not to say the persona is fraudulent or dishonest—just that it is a creation. Parton’s public face is a creative work just like her songs and the theme park. Her biography, background and demeanor are all part of her creative self, and incredibly important to understanding her contributions. Parton understands, as Mark Twain, Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan understood that self-presentation is a critical piece of performance. The persona is the thing; it is what she

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<sup>35</sup> Parton, Dolly. *Blue Smoke* (Album). Sony Masterworks, 2014.

<sup>36</sup> Miller, Page ix, and Cardwell, Page 4.

<sup>37</sup> Parton, Dolly. *Dolly: My Life and Other Unfinished Business*. New York: HarperCollins, 1994.

gives to us. Anything else is hers—we don't need it, and perhaps, we don't even want it. The persona is what matters; it's what makes her matter to us.

Parton has earned tremendous success: two television shows, Hollywood films, not to mention the thousands of songs she has written. Parton has earned more accolades and awards than any other female country performer. Her forty-six Grammy nominations is a record for a female artist. Parton continues to be the Smoky Mountains' favorite daughter, "This is my home—they have to be proud of me because I'm proud of them," Parton told Irish TV Presenter Graham Norton in his 2001 special, *Graham Goes to Dollywood* for Britain's Channel 4.<sup>38</sup>

During every phase of Parton's career she brought listeners back home in songs like "Coat of Many Colors," "In My Tennessee Mountain Home," "Hungry Again," and "Home." It seems natural she would eventually bring people to her physical home. Dolly Parton had a vision for this place. She wanted to create a permanent mountain theme park that captured the magic of the country fairs she had experienced as a girl, "You always got a day out of school to go to the fair. And, boy, that was the greatest day of my life. I was fascinated with the freak shows. We'd crawl under the fence to look until somebody would kick us in the face to get us out. There was the spider woman who was supposed to have been found in the Amazon. Things like the fat lady. I patterned myself after her."<sup>39</sup> This carnivalesque personal construction raised the veil of kitsch over Parton's public

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<sup>38</sup> *Graham Goes to Dollywood*. Presented by Graham Norton. Channel 4 (UK), 2001. Television Special.

<sup>39</sup> Haller, Scot. "Dolly Parton: Come on Down to Dollywood." *PEOPLE Magazine*, May 5, 1986.



identity, while simultaneously endearing her to countless fans who felt like misfits or freaks in their home communities.

While there are no freak shows at Parton's park, there is a permanent fair, complete with a year-round midway with the familiar rides and games. Parton hoped the park would draw people into the mountains she loved. In the early 1980s Dolly made her county fair-inspired vision a reality when she recast the local theme park as Dollywood.

### **Dream More: Building Dollywood**

In the early fifties, the Herschend family moved to Branson, Missouri from Chicago. The family enjoyed vacationing in the Ozarks and the patriarch, Hugo Herschend secured a lease on the local attraction, Marvel Cave. Before Hugo could enjoy his new purchase, he died suddenly of a heart attack in 1955, leaving his wife Mary, and son, Jack, who was fresh out of the Marines, to manage the cave. As part of a series of renovations Jack opened an aboveground attraction, Silver Dollar City, in 1960.<sup>40</sup>

Jack's brother Pete moved down a year later and began marketing the mountain theme park with TV tie-ins, "He invited the stars of the hit comedy *Car 54, Where Are You?* to manage opening-day crowds in 1963 and introduced a craft fair in the fall, typically a slow time. Shooting five episodes of *The Beverly Hillbillies* on location in 1967 sealed Silver Dollar City's popularity: Attendance rose sixteen percent the next year to 900,000 visitors."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Brown, Abram. "The Wild Ride Of The Herschends: When Amusement Parks Are The Family Business." *Forbes*, May 7, 2014.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid

Having cornered the market in Branson, the Herschend's looked to expand. They found Goldrush Junction, which was attracting tourists, but losing money.<sup>42</sup> In 1976 the brothers purchased the ailing park and rebuilt it as a twin of their Branson theme park. Many of the attractions from this period remain in some form to this day, most notably the craftsmen.

In the early eighties Dolly Parton made it known that she was interested in establishing a theme park near her hometown. Jack Herschend saw an opportunity and rather than compete with Parton the Herschends offered her a piece of their park. That deal made Parton part owner, changed the name to Dollywood, and gave Parton creative control. "They are great Christian people and the best theme park operators in the industry," she says about her partners.<sup>43</sup> The success of this partnership has made both Parton and the Herschends a great deal of money. While Parton remains the sole visible owner of Dollywood, (many incorrectly assume that she built the park and owns it outright) the Herschends continue to be nearly silent partners.

Parton wanted an attraction unlike any that had ever been, a Disneyland for the Mountain South. "I've always joked that I want to be a female Walt Disney," Parton has said, "In my early days, I thought if I do get successful, I want to come back here and build something special to honor my parents and my people."<sup>44</sup> She did not want the park to be just roller coasters and generic stereotypes, "I've always been aggravated about how

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<sup>42</sup> Martin, Page 131.

<sup>43</sup> Brown, Abram. "The Wild Ride Of The Herschends: When Amusement Parks Are The Family Business." *Forbes*, May 7, 2014.

<sup>44</sup> Bly, Laura, "Hooray for Dollywood: Tennessee Theme Park Celebrates 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary", *USA Today*, May 25, 2010.

they portray mountain people in Hollywood and in the movies, like we are all these dumb barefoot hillbillies...personally, I think country people are the smartest people in the world, and I've been everywhere."<sup>45</sup> Parton wanted mountain tourists to see what mountain life was all about; and celebrate instrument-makers, blacksmiths, weavers, glassblowers, woodcarvers, and leatherworkers. Valley Carriage Works, a full service horse-drawn carriage shop, is "one of the last in the country."<sup>46</sup> Stephen Miller describes the folkloric work done by Dollywood's crafts people, "Dollywood has subsequently pursued a policy of research, sometimes with the use of scouts, to find people who still possess these traditional skills and find a place for them. In this way the park has helped to maintain and preserve crafts which might otherwise have died out."<sup>47</sup>

Dolly Parton did not just negotiate a minority share in a theme park or lend her likeness for advertising. She *shaped* the park and molded it into her image. To walk through Dollywood's thoroughfares is to wander through a public persona. A park museum celebrates the timeline of Parton's career, but the influence of her life and her narrative is felt more viscerally as one moves throughout the park. You turn a corner and stumble upon Cas Walker's store, a fifties nostalgia shop—all pink Cadillacs and Coca-Cola. It is named for the Knoxville television personality who gave a ten-year old Dolly Parton a spot on his show. Next-door is Red's Diner, named for the Sevierville cafe where a young Parton ate her first hamburger. Just past a restaurant named for Parton's best friend's grandmother, is a replica of the Parton family church, named for the country

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<sup>45</sup> Miller, Page 225.

<sup>46</sup> Dollywood.com, "Handmade Wagons," <http://www.dollywood.com/themepark/Handmade-Wagons>.

<sup>47</sup> Miller, Page 224.

doctor who delivered Dolly Rebecca Parton. The crown jewel is the replica two-room cabin where Parton was raised. A hand-painted sign by the entrance states; “This cabin is a replica of the Parton homeplace where Lee and Avie Lee Parton raised Dolly and her 10 brothers and sisters. Dolly’s brother Bobby constructed the replica cabin and her mother Avie Lee reproduced the interior, most of the items on display are original family treasures. The original cabin still stands at its location in Locust Ridge.”

Imagine all those children crowding those rooms and bursting onto the porch. Imagine Avie Lee. What can it possibly have been like to decorate that house, to tell the world of all that you lacked—how far you’d come—in the center of your daughter’s multi-million dollar dreamland? Avie Lee is gone now. Her husband is, too. But members of the Parton family still perform at Dollywood. Parton relatives have been featured at Dollywood as long as Dolly has been associated with the park. Today you can see younger siblings Cassie and Randy Parton who lead a troupe of nieces and cousins through their sisters’ songbook. In the show, Dolly is ever present; projected on a movie theater-sized screen. During the performance the Parton family interact with the twenty foot virtual Dolly as though she were on stage with them: they laugh together, banter, she sings along, and even laughs at the performers carefully scripted jokes.

### **Dollywood as Social Imaginary**

Because of their unabashed artificiality, theme parks are helpful places to examine social imaginaries. British sociologist John Thompson finds that social imaginaries are the creative methods through which, “human beings create their ways of living together

and their ways of representing their collective life.”<sup>48</sup> At theme parks these creative acts become reifications of goals, aspirations and ideals of those who wish to be removed from reality. Theme parks provide a wholly manufactured immersive environment that offers the chance to experience the desires, nostalgias and imaginations of the creators, and—when successful—the audience. Hyper-reality, as Umberto Eco sees it, is the result of an audiences desire for the “authentic” reproduction. “The American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake.”<sup>49</sup> In Disneyland, one can walk through a proxy of New Orleans’ French Quarter without having to worry about the surprises, insecurity, danger, and contradictions of the real thing. A themed space is, after all, meticulously designed to be exactly what its creator thinks it should be, or more accurately, what the creator thinks the visitor thinks it ought to be.

Dollywood presents a more complex example than Disneyland because it sits in the heart of the landscape that it represents. When one enters Dollywood, you leave Appalachia—a real landscape racked by the beauty, pain, ugliness, boredom and extraordinary ordinariness of a place lived in by real people. Entering the park you leave the real and enter what Eco would call the hyper-real. The park is another Appalachia, as Dolly Parton and countless others imagine, remember, and wish it to be. It is more Appalachian than Appalachia could ever hope to be.

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<sup>48</sup> Thompson, John B. *Studies in the Theory of Ideology*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984. Page 6.

<sup>49</sup> Eco, Umberto. "Travels in Hyperreality." *In Travels In Hyperreality: Essays*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986. Page 8.

Nostalgia, as Susan Stewart and David Lowenthal state is, “a longing for an imagined past.”<sup>50</sup> This longing lies at the heart of Dollywood, where visitors can ride a log through a sawmill and eat pizza at a lumber camp. Here the dangerous workplaces of mines and mills are depicted as exciting and noble. In this imaginary Appalachian poverty doesn’t pull you down, it builds you up. The abrasive history of the region’s poverty has been sanded down and made safe. When visitors to Dollywood are allowed to imagine the hardship of Parton’s childhood, it helps them understand her success and happiness even more acutely. We learn that Dolly, too, was touched by Appalachian poverty. In 1969 she recorded “In the Good Old Days (When Times Were Bad).” In it she grapples with nostalgia for the difficult history of the mountains, “No amount of money could buy from me/ The memories that I have of then/ No amount of money could pay me/ To go back and live through it again.”<sup>51</sup>

This sense of longing at Dollywood is tied to a uniquely southern imaginary. In their discussion of southern film, scholars Deborah Barker and Kathryn McKee describe the southern imaginary as, “an amorphous and sometimes conflicting collection of images, ideas, attitudes, practices, linguistic accents, histories, and fantasies about a shifting geographic region and time.”<sup>52</sup> With time, these imaginaries can become a very real part of how people define themselves. Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor

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<sup>50</sup> Herman, Bernard. “Couture and Light” *Visual Culture American Studies* 484. University of North Carolina. October 8, 2013. Lecture.

<sup>51</sup> Parton, Dolly. “In the Good Old Days(When Times Were Bad)” *In the Good Old Days(When Times Were Bad)*. RCA Nashville, 1969.

<sup>52</sup> Barker, Deborah, and Kathryn McKee. "Introduction." In *American Cinema and the Southern Imaginary*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011. Page 2.

describes social embedding as “the way we together imagine our social existence.”<sup>53</sup> It is an inability to imagine ourselves outside of a certain social matrix like, Appalachian, mountain folk, or southern. These once arbitrary distinctions become the essential building blocks of how a place is seen, and how it sees itself.

If Dollywood is a grand act of autobiography as I have argued, then the park is an act of self-assertion. What does experiencing Dollywood do to a person’s idea of who they are and where they fit in the world? Tourists visiting Disneyland enter a physical manifestation of Walt Disney’s imagination, but this fantasyland has different implications from an assertion of self.

Tim Berry, a Vice President of the park, told me, “When you go to Disneyworld it’s about dreams that are fantasy, but when you come to Dollywood it’s all about making your dreams a reality—when she says, ‘dream big’ she’s talking about, ‘Hey I came from nothing...and I had this dream that I wanted to do this, and I did it—you can too.’”<sup>54</sup> Parton, Berry says, has an authority that comes from lived experience that extends out from fantasy into the very real lives of her fans, “When Disney talks about dreams they’re talking about be a princess, or a pirate, or a spaceman—or whatever it is you want to be...the difference is that we provide something that is touchable, down-to-earth.”<sup>55</sup>

Scholar Melissa Hardie argues that the park stretches between two poles, one of imaginative projection and another of authentic representation of mountain life. “One

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<sup>53</sup> Taylor, Charles. *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004. Page 55.

<sup>54</sup> Berry, Tim Interview with the author. Pigeon Forge, TN, July 31, 2014.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

way to understand Dollywood is as a spatial resolution of these two distinct aims.”<sup>56</sup> She says: “Dollywood becomes a venue where fantasy is collapsed with documentary, and located somewhere between the memories the park represents and those it creates.”<sup>57</sup>

Dollywood is not just Dolly Parton’s imagined South made real. It is the reification of myriad southern imaginaries. It reflects, confirms and establishes countless dreams for its guests. It is also informed by countless images of Appalachia from people who have never set foot in the park, or even the mountains that surround it. From the outside looking in, they conceptualize the region creating an amalgam of park landscapes, Parton, and the myriad cultural signifiers of mountain life.

Cultural observers are increasingly engaged in the critique of kitsch culture, yet its study remains problematic. The fundamental problem with kitsch is that it is, by its nature, distancing. Kitsch requires very little buy-in. As art critic Clement Greenberg wrote in *Mass Culture*: “Kitsch pretends to demand nothing from its consumers except their money—not even their time.”<sup>58</sup> This lack of connection means that kitsch is largely encountered as something other people do, which is either observed or participated in with some degree of ironic detachment.

Like its cousin kitsch, “camp” also builds walls between potential connections. Though, unlike kitsch, camp is often self-imposed. Defined by theorist Susan Sontag as,

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<sup>56</sup> Hardie, Page 25.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Greenberg, Clement, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, ed. Rosenberg and David Manning White (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1957) Pg.102.



“the love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration,”<sup>59</sup> It is an intentional distancing from reality, a mask. That mask protects performers and audience members alike. Camp allows unspoken things to be said, because camp disguises itself as frivolous, unimportant and gauche. Camp creates a barrier, or a safe zone, between persona and self. This gulf between artifice and identity is what allows for the vulnerability of performance.

There is a detachment with camp, and like kitsch, that detachment can stand as an obstacle for those who wish to be closer to the object of their affections. Earnestness and sincerity may be passé impulses in some circles, but they can provide fans with meaningful points of connection that are harder to find if the performer’s persona exists behind a wall of campiness. Compounding this problem is the fact that observing kitsch and camp, and commenting on their strangeness is relatively easy work. As philosopher Theodor Adorno explains, “People want to have fun. A fully concentrated and conscious experience of art is possible only to those whose lives do not put such a strain on them that in their spare time they want relief from both boredom and effort simultaneously.”<sup>60</sup>

In fact, the easiest thing to relay about Dollywood, and Dolly Parton, too, is camp. *New York Times* journalist Kim Severson’s recent article on the park begins: “At Dollywood, the place on a Venn diagram where gay camp and Southern camp overlap,

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<sup>59</sup> Sontag, Susan, “Notes on Camp” 1964.  
(<http://www.book.tubefun4.com/downloads/Sontag.pdf>) Page 1

<sup>60</sup> Adorno, Theodor. "On Popular Music." *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* (1941) Pg. 38.

cinnamon rolls might be the great equalizer.”<sup>61</sup> Similarly the cover of Helen Morales’ 2014 account of her journey across Tennessee to the park features the book title bedazzled in rhinestones, stretched like a t-shirt across disembodied breasts.<sup>62</sup> Both Severson and Morales observe Dollywood through the lens of kitsch and camp, reporting to their audience (who presumably has not visited the park) accounts of surprise and wonder that such a place should exist.

### **Each Attraction Bigger than the Next: The Pigeon Forge Parkway**

If Dollywood carefully dances along the edge of over-simplification, the Pigeon Forge parkway leaps into the crevasse of stereotype without a second thought. To drive down the parkway today is to be immersed in the neon smear of transient consumer culture that rolls out at the gates of the National Park. Freak shows, wax museums, year round Christmas outlets and countless go-kart tracks line what has become at points an eight lane thoroughfare. Traffic, particularly in the summer, or around holidays, is often at a standstill—the cars creep along their occupants rubbernecking the replica of the Titanic or the upside down house, Wonderworks. Hillbilly-themed dinner shows still abound, such as the Hatfield and McCoys, or The Comedy Barn. A few throwbacks to the original waves of development of Pigeon Forge remain, such as The Smoky Mountain Pancake House or the Hillbilly Village, where visitors can still buy “mammy” figurines and rebel flag doormats before visiting a moonshine still in the back of the attraction.

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<sup>61</sup> Severson, Kim. "Dollywood: A Little Bit Country, a Little Bit Gay." *New York Times*, August 22, 2014.

<sup>62</sup> Morales, Helen. *Pilgrimage to Dollywood: A Country Music Road Trip Through Tennessee*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014.

Though these old school venues are quickly becoming relics, national and international brands are moving onto the parkway, each one with a larger sign and a “fancier” building than the next.

In the last year, a Hard Rock Café and a Jimmy Buffet’s Margaritaville Hotel opened. Paula Deen’s Family Kitchen restaurant is the next attraction on Pigeon Forge Parkway.<sup>63</sup> It’s worth noting that Paula Deen’s forthcoming restaurant represents something of a comeback for this popular, yet controversial, culinary celebrity. In 2010 complaints of a pattern of racist abuse from former employees<sup>64</sup> led to a heavily publicized lawsuit, which was ultimately dismissed.<sup>65</sup> The fallout however was dramatic. Outrage over Deen’s practices—particularly her admission in court that she used racial epithets when describing African Americans—led to her being dismissed by the Food Network and a loss of prominent sponsorships.<sup>66</sup> Of equal significance was the subsequent collapse of Deen’s restaurant empire including restaurants in Georgia and many locations in Harrah’s casinos across the country. Paula Deen’s Family Kitchen

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<sup>63</sup> "Hard Rock Cafe Pigeon Forge Is Now Open." WBIR. Accessed February 19, 2015. <http://www.wbir.com/story/news/local/sevierville-sevier/2014/05/14/hard-rock-cafe-pigeon-forge-to-open-next-week/9096443/>.

<sup>64</sup> Severson, Kim. “Paula Deen’s Cook Tells of Sights, Steeped in History” *New York Times*, June 24, 2013.

<sup>65</sup> Blinder, Alan. "Racial Bias Claim Dismissed for Paula Deen." *New York Times*, August 12, 2013.

<sup>66</sup> Severson, Kim. “Paula Deen Loses Major Endorsement Deal.” *New York Times*, June 24, 2013.

represents Deen's first new restaurant since the scandal. It is a massive venture: at over 20,000 square feet and a budget of "nearly 20 million dollars."<sup>67</sup>

It probably says something about what Pigeon Forge has become that Deen and backers feel it is a safe place for a divisive figure like Deen to attempt to resurrect her restaurant career. I reached out to Deen's organization because I wanted to know what drew them to Pigeon Forge. After all, Deen's association with Savannah and the lowcountry seems at odds with the traditional ethos of the mountains. Deen's staff declined to comment as the opening of the restaurant is a year behind its scheduled opening date.

Leon Downey, the director of Pigeon Forge's department of tourism, has also noticed the change, "You have outside businesses who want to take advantage of that traffic, that's why you have Jimmy Buffet and Paula Deen interested." He says the industry is fluid, and fast paced--contrary to any conception of a quiet mountain town, "It is never static, in the twenty-six years that I've been here it's been constant development and redevelopment."<sup>68</sup>

While the flux and sheen of the parkway stands in clear contrast to the National Park it also stands in contrast to Dollywood. "To me, we're not the Parkway...it's not good versus bad, but people who don't have an affinity for that think we are more of that—that becomes a challenge." Park vice president, Tim Berry, sees Dollywood as a mediator between the two poles of the National Park and the Parkway, "A lot of people

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<sup>67</sup> Dixler, Hillary. "Paula Deen Is Opening a New Restaurant in Tennessee." *Eater*, February 26, 2014. <http://www.eater.com/2014/2/26/6273137/paula-deen-is-opening-a-new-restaurant-in-tennessee>.

<sup>68</sup> Leon Downey Interview, July 31, 2014.

come to the Smoky Mountains and don't have the ability to hike very far or don't have the stamina to do a full blown trail. What we provide is that sense of adventure in a controlled environment." Berry explains that Dollywood gives people, who are not interested in nature, the *sense* of being in the National Park. This sense of experiences allows people to convince themselves that they have experienced something that they have not. A visitor to Dollywood might get an idea of rafting in a mountain stream by riding waterpark Splash County's River Rush. Rather than having to hike through Cade's Cove to see the Baptist church, they can experience a reasonable facsimile on the grounds of the theme park. Perhaps—like tourists so often do, they would prefer the recreation to the real thing. That people actually believe that by riding a themed attraction they are having a "mountain" experience is hard to believe, but some undoubtedly enjoy being told that after seeing the theme park they can skip the mountain hike.

Dolly and the Herschend's are not exactly *off* the parkway either. Dollywood operates a welcome center and information booth on the parkway and Parton is omnipresent on billboards throughout the region. Parton also has a substantial second venture in Pigeon Forge that owes more to the parkway aesthetic than the theme park's mountain dreamscape—her dinner theatre, The Dixie Stampede. Opened in 1988, this venue aimed to capitalize on Dollywood's then-recent success. The Stampede was also an attempt by Parton and the Herschend group build on the growth of entertainment businesses on the parkway. The attraction is a modern Wild West show with buffalo, horses, riding tricks and stunts set to a vaguely Civil War-themed extravaganza—the North versus the South.

The show begins in a saloon with a three-piece bluegrass comedy act called Mountain Ruckus. Waitresses, referred to as “Dixie Belles” in the promotional materials, bring guests popcorn and soft drinks. Like Dollywood, and most of Pigeon Forge, The Dixie Stampede is completely dry. When Mountain Ruckus has finished warming up the crowd, the audience is escorted into the main arena. The room is lit to look like twilight, and the sounds of crickets and frogs are piped in through speakers. The vast, two-thousand seat venue surrounds a dirt performance area.<sup>69</sup> At the head of the room is a two-story façade of a white Georgian plantation manor. The décor is literally moonlight and magnolias.

At one point in the show an aerial acrobat dressed as a thunderbird-like creature performs a routine that purports to honor the Cherokee, “who first inhabited these mountains.” Later, after the Native Americans vanish in favor of pioneers and covered wagons, we’re told about the differences between our two halves. The North, we are told is a land of industry, big cities, and the Statue of Liberty. The South, on the other hand is a place of dreams.

Curator Joan Stack describes the difference in a review of the show. While the “traditions” of the North are described in a few sentences, southern traditions are performed for the audience, “Southern belles in hooped skirts twirl on a floating gazebo, their dresses lighting up as they spin. Beneath them, a Southern ‘gentleman’ rides in, wearing a white suit illuminated with fairy lights. His horse begins walking sideways in

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<sup>69</sup> Morales, 112.

an elegant ‘dressage’ performance that ends with the animal ‘bowing’ to the audience. Slaves are excluded from this idealized vision of southern bliss.”<sup>70</sup>

Like Rebel Railroad, this performance of history contradicts the actual history of the county. Most of East Tennessee was staunchly pro-Union and Sevier County was no exception. Less than four percent of the county’s residents voted in favor of secession, and the long-time abolitionist sentiments of the population led to a significant free Black population.<sup>71</sup> The continued erasure of this history is reminiscent of what historian and author Timothy Tyson describes in North Carolina, “There's no memory that white people opposed the Civil War... That the kind of self congratulatory history that passes for heritage keeps us from seeing ourselves and doing better.”<sup>72</sup> For some of Parton’s fans this kind of historicism is troubling. Bothered by the show’s “dishonest history,” Helen Morales, a Briton, writes of her trip to Dixie Stampede, “I had not reckoned on being confronted so directly with America, American history, American values... nor had I anticipated feeling less close, an aversion even to Dolly Parton as a result.”<sup>73</sup>

In the last couple of years some Civil War aspects of The Dixie Stampede have been toned down slightly. The first flag of the Confederacy was removed from the signage and the server’s uniforms have shifted from the stylized Union and Confederate costumes they once wore to more generic blue and grey “old-timey” ensembles. In many

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<sup>70</sup> Stack, Joan. "Whitewashing American History: A Review Of Dolly Parton’s Dixie Stampede." *Yesterday...and Today*. August 7, 2013. <http://www.yandtblog.com/?p=1143>.

<sup>71</sup> Jones, *Historic Architecture of Sevier County* Pgs. 27-33.

<sup>72</sup> Tyson, Tim. *This American Life*, Episode 479 “Little War on the Prairie” National Public Radio. November 23, 2012.

<sup>73</sup> Morales, 117.

ways these changes fail to ameliorate controversy. The hard reality of a show like Dixie Stampede is that the obfuscation of the history is the problem, further measures to obscure that history only serve to highlight the question: why choose this for the subject of a dinner show at all? In January of 2015 it was announced that The Dixie Stampede would undergo an overhaul. Parton said, "My team is hard at work creating a new set, powerful new music, lots of amazing special effects and a few other surprises."<sup>74</sup> It will be interesting to see if the future spectacle will continue to be weighed down by a Confederate fantasy, or if Parton and her team will move in a less contentious direction.

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<sup>74</sup> WATE 6 Knoxville. "Dolly Parton's Dixie Stampede in Pigeon Forge Gets New Look." January 28, 2015.



### Chapter 3: Memories Worth Repeating

While many people come to the park to ride roller coasters and to enjoy a family-friendly outing, a dedicated number of guests at Dollywood feel a profound connection to Parton and what she represents. Rebecca Parker is a performance artist, who works out of Chicago now, but she grew up in east Tennessee, and her work is informed by her upbringing. As a child she learned to clog and performed with a group called the Electric Stompers at local festivals, and even at Dollywood. “Our performances were always presented in a way that encouraged the sharing of tradition,” Parker told me, “The audiences at the park were always very appreciative of our performances and respectful of the craft.”<sup>75</sup> Parker thinks that Dolly is a defining figure in east Tennessee, but also a typical one, “Dolly is the classic example of the duality of the southern woman.”<sup>76</sup> Parton is all false eyelashes and wigs, but that veneer belies the substance of her persona. Parton, Parker says, empowers women, but not to the point that it threatens anyone, “The image of high-heel wearing classic southern babe that you would swear might be a feminist.”<sup>77</sup> Parker sees Parton gently pushing against old southern ideas about womanhood with her ambition and independence.

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<sup>75</sup> Parker, Rebecca. Interview with the author, Internet correspondence, August 17, 2014.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid

<sup>77</sup> Ibid

Ultimately like many in east Tennessee, and throughout the world, Parker recognizes in Parton something familiar, a kinship. It is what Parton would say makes her so real, “How Dolly has chosen to navigate the complexities of these social constructs is something I understand. She, like many women of the past, has found a clever way to garner power—manipulate societal norms—and leverage her influence to usher in change. Women have quietly been doing this all along, Dolly just does it in a much more public way.”<sup>78</sup>

Joe Skelly lives in northwest England. His home in rural Cumbria was the birthplace of William Wordsworth, who, like Dolly Parton, found formative inspiration in the scenic beauty of his childhood home. Joe is a manager for a health retailer by day, but on his own time he manages *Dolly Partners UK*, a leading source for Parton’s international fans. “I started the site on paper as *Dolly Partners UK* back in 1997 - back then it was a free newsletter to fans about all things Dolly. We evolved into a website some years later after being thanked personally by Don Warden (Dolly’s former Manager) for the support we drummed up in the UK - bringing Dolly back after 10 years in 2002.”<sup>79</sup> I spoke with Skelly shortly after Parton’s triumphant headlining appearance and the British music festival, Glastonbury. Parton performed before 200,000 Britons and according to *The Guardian*, “Inspired sheer joy,” with her “sublimely preposterous” antics coupled with, “moments of incredible beauty.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Parker, Rebecca. Interview with the author, Internet correspondence, August 17, 2014.

<sup>79</sup> Skelly, Joe. Interview with the author, Internet correspondence August 27, 2014.

<sup>80</sup> Nicholson, Rebecca. "Dolly Parton at Glastonbury 2014 Review – Ridiculous, Yet Sublime." *The Guardian*, June 29, 2014.

I was curious as to what drew people in the UK, or elsewhere to Parton. Ostensibly fans in the British Isles might find a kind of kinship with Parton's mountain past, but if the link between Appalachia and "pure" Anglo-Saxon culture is rather thin—then the link between Parton's work and that culture must be even thinner. It turns out, perhaps predictably, that what draws foreign fans to Parton isn't Anglo-Saxon roots, but the same traits Americans find appealing about her, "I heard 'Here You Come Again' on the radio—bought a cassette and was hooked. The lyrics, melody and meaning of the songs were so strong and I could identify with the country storytelling style."<sup>81</sup> Skelly's fascination has turned him into something of a celebrity himself, he has been featured on a number of television programs about Parton. In 2015, an article for Britain's *Daily Mail*, profiled Skelly and his "£10,000 Dolly Parton collection."<sup>82</sup>

Like Skelly, Chris Walls also manages one of Parton's largest Internet fan websites. I asked him why he thought Parton mattered so much to fans like him, "Not many artists can draw the country fans, pop fans, gay fans, kids, teenagers, elderly and everyone in-between. She has mass appeal to a wide cross section of fans that is rare...I love seeing how she has everyone in the palm of her hand when she's in a room. She's one of the few 'greats' we have left."<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Skelly, Joe. Interview with the author, Internet correspondence August 27, 2014.

<sup>82</sup> Peppers, Margot. "Dolly Parton Super-fan Obsessed with the Curvy Country Singer Spends £10,000 on Memorabilia... but Insists His CDs and Life-size Cutouts Are 'priceless'" *The Daily Mail*, February 15, 2015.

<sup>83</sup> Walls, Chris. Interview with the author, Internet correspondence August 4, 2014.

## **In the Real World: The Politics of Dollywood**

The first time I visited Dollywood, a woman wearing a t-shirt in support of gay marriage was asked to turn the shirt inside out before entering the water park operated by Dollywood. After protesting this action the story gained national attention. Parton stepped in to apologize for the incident, "I am truly sorry for the hurt or embarrassment regarding the gay and lesbian T-shirt incident at Dollywood's Splash Country recently. Everyone knows of my personal support of the gay and lesbian community. Dollywood is a family park and all families are welcome."<sup>84</sup> Many commentators argued guests had never been turned away for wearing t-shirts displaying the Confederate flag.

In Kim Severson's piece about Dollywood in the *New York Times* she observes this tension, "That Dolly Parton, 68, is also a gay icon would probably be news to many of the guests in cargo shorts and tennis shoes who wait patiently in line each day until 'The Star Spangled Banner' is sung and the park opens. But for the rest of us, it is not."<sup>85</sup> It is hard to imagine that Parton's very public relationship to the gay community has gone unnoticed by her more conservative Christian fans. As Severson's piece points out, gay and lesbian attendance accounts for some of the park's business, and also a significant percentage of Parton's overall acclaim. This is certainly not a secret in east Tennessee. The park's director of public relations told me that Parton had written an as-yet unreleased pro-gay song a few weeks before Severson's story was published. Severson's assertion that Parton's right-leaning fans would be surprised by their icon's

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<sup>84</sup> Bledsoe, Wayne. "Dolly Parton Responds to Dollywood Splash Country T-shirt Controversy" *Knoxville News Sentinel*, August 2, 2011.

<sup>85</sup> Severson, Kim. "Dollywood: A Little Bit Country, a Little Bit Gay." *New York Times*, August 22, 2014.

relationship with the gay community speaks to the sense of ownership experienced by Parton's fans. Somehow, Parton sings hymns, sponsors evangelical gospel festivals and supports gay rights without alienating either fan base.

Officially, the park doesn't seek to exclude groups of people—not intentionally—but it does offer an experience that speaks more profoundly to some and makes some groups feel far safer than others. Attempting to create an environment free from controversy and free from offense is a fraught proposition, one that reinforces the status quo. Reducing any culture into a saleable commodity is a complex exchange. Selling the South as a popular brand is particularly complicated. Historian Charles Wilson Reagan explains that, "In the South, pop culture is negotiated between tradition and modernity. It often draws from folklore, from folk symbols and rituals. But it is not so much concerned with authenticity as it is with reproducing these symbols for broad audiences."<sup>86</sup>

As Dollywood expands, so will its audience. A 300 million dollar expansion is planned for the coming years, including Dolly's Dream More Resort.<sup>87</sup> The addition will offer, for the first time in Dollywood history, amenities and services in line with resort life. The facilities will host business meetings, weddings, offer full service dining, and salon and spa services. The new resort will have high-end rooms, including Dolly

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<sup>86</sup> Reagan, Charles Wilson. "A Helping of Gravy: Southern Food and Pop Culture." Southern Foodways Alliance. February 10, 2015. Accessed February 11, 2015. <http://www.southernfoodways.org/a-helping-of-gravy-southern-food-and-pop-culture/>.

<sup>87</sup> "New Resort at Dollywood on Track to Open This Summer." *New York Times*, February 12, 2015.

Parton's Suite Dream, a 2,200 square foot suite situated on the resort's top floor with décor, "inspired by Dolly."<sup>88</sup>

These additions introduce a sort of class distinction that has largely been absent, at least visibly, from the park in the past. Those who are able to afford entrance to the park all have essentially the same experience. The rides are the same for everyone; the same goes for the buffets, or the shows. Theme parks can actually be seen as a rather egalitarian form of entertainment. This expansion reflects the park's desire to reach a broader audience. "We've behaved, from a business perspective, as a regional park. We've catered to that customer within a 300 mile range of our facility, and our philosophy is now that we're a destination—not just the backyard park," says Vice President Tim Berry, "We've been the state football championship team for several decades and now we're going to go play college ball... we have to practice harder, and learn new plays, and perform at a higher level."<sup>89</sup> So far the widening of the market has been represented by an increased effort to attract visitors from Atlanta, Cincinnati, Indianapolis and Chicago. "Those are big markets for the Smokies and for folks that stay overnight in this area" says Public Relations Director Pete Owens.

While walking through the craft area in the park I noticed that one of the souvenir stands was selling National Rifle Association t-shirts. I wondered if the park was really as open as it professed to be. I was struck by the idea of someone coming down from Chicago and seeing the southern theme park with the NRA shirts and the Jesus license plates. I wondered if that newer more resort-minded guest might find a whole new level

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<sup>88</sup> Dollywood's DreamMore Resort (2015) Media Release. <http://dreammoresort.com/mediarelease.html>.

<sup>89</sup> Berry, Tim. Interview with the author. Pigeon Forge, TN, July 31, 2014.

of kitsch. I also wondered if someone who might be turned off by a political action organization dedicated to protecting America's gun industry was really as welcome a guest as I had been told.

I asked Tim Berry how the park approached these kinds of questions, "We're open to everybody everyday, we won't walk away from our core values, but we do want to protect the park from controversy. So this is a place where you're supposed to kind of check out of your everyday worries and cares and so if there's something that's bringing that back into person's day and causing them unrest...then we would probably control that."<sup>90</sup>

A new audience provides new challenges for the park. If Dollywood speaks well to a regional audience, can they communicate as effectively on a national scale? I asked Pete Owens who is the marketing director for the park, "Historically we've been very affordable, but once we become a destination market...the cost goes up." Owens sees that price shift as a potential catalyst for a change in the relationship the park has to its region, "Some folks who have historically been our customers, who live in eastern Kentucky and western West Virginia and western Virginia probably struggle a little more with the ability to afford season passes." Owens is hopeful that those guests will still choose Dollywood even if it means they may only come once a year. "There's going to be a mindset that has to change there." Even though Dollywood is, and is likely to remain more affordable (at fifty-nine dollars for a single day admission) than other destination parks like Disney (\$105 for a single day to Magic Kingdom in Orlando) Owens understands that this is still a powerful shift, "Its all about perception, so I think re-

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid

teaching the folks who have been our customers about who we are and where we going, and educating people who might have a misconception about who are... We're not a 150 acre Graceland.”<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Owens, Pete. Interview with the author. Pigeon Forge, TN, July 31, 2014.



## Conclusion

Dollywood is, like so many forms of popular entertainment, a business venture. It *sells* a mountain imaginary to locals and visitors alike. It is a venue for performance, and the park itself is a creative act of self-definition. Dollywood is a unique exercise in place making and biography. To understand it as a mere corporate establishment disregards both the fundamental mission of the place and our powerful relationship and fascination with celebrity, aspiration and myth.

For me, Dollywood's most important attraction is not a ride or an activity or a show. It is the Dolly Parton museum, Chasing Rainbows. The museum displays Parton's wigs and costumes, awards and honors and photographs from her public and private life, including some from very, very early in her career when she made the move to Nashville. One photograph captures a moment in Parton's senior class trip to the World's Fair in New York in 1964. On the way back to Tennessee they stopped in Washington and took a photograph of the students on the National Mall. Dolly is in the center of the group, but somehow apart. Her hair, or maybe her wig, has already found its shade of platinum blonde and she's almost got the Dolly Parton makeup down. She's creating herself, as all high school seniors do. But even in one snapshot, one instant, early on in what would be a very public life, there's something special there. I guess it is what people mean when they refer to star power. If you take a walk through the towns of Sevier County it is fun to imagine a teenage Dolly Parton soldiering through, knowing she was meant for greatness,

and maybe distracting herself from that inexorable pull of stardom by just being a teenager driving around with her cousin: “We used to cruise Gatlinburg or Sevierville, circling the Tastee-Freez, flirting with the boys, and singing.”<sup>92</sup> Dolly Parton has done more than just leave a mark on the place she is from—she has changed its character.

Like its namesake, Dollywood is a singular place. It is a remarkable place, but it is also a place that makes sense. It is woven into the fabric of Sevier County. The park is a natural extension of the history of natural and cultural tourism. What Parton has created is both an extension and a counter to the history of exoticizing mountain culture. By drawing the line between the southern imaginary and physical reality, Parton’s park illuminates the complex process of being represented and representing oneself. The evolution of Dollywood mirrors the southern global marketplace. The park hopes to continue to grow and prosper, and as it does, it will remain a fascinating study in the evolution of the mountain South.

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<sup>92</sup> Parton 1994, Page 133.

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