

Book celebrates lake landmark

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Camdenton, Mo. —

Lee Mace left a musical legacy. The Ozark Opry stage may be quiet but the music lives.

Long before Lake of the Ozarks became one of the Midwest's premiere vacation destinations, the area was known for its quiet waters, mom-and-pop resorts and one of the country's first and finest country music shows, Lee Mace's Ozark Opry.

More than 50 years have passed since the show first opened. The show, its performers and the owners stood the test of time. For more years than most can remember, the Opry was the most well-known and popular attraction at the lake. It drew thousands of country music lovers each season to the theater on Highway 54. It wasn't uncommon on weekends to find the owners, Lee and Joyce Mace, handling the parking or selling tickets. In later years, after Lee Mace died in a plane crash, Joyce continued to oversee operations.

The two had been sweethearts. He was from Brumley, she from Linn Creek. They started out square dancing together and ended up forging a marriage and a

business partnership that lasted until Mace's death in June 1985.

The 2006 season marked the first time the Opry's doors were closed for the summer since 1953. The tradition for the show with its down-home country appeal was finally over.

Well-known for his showmanship, bass fiddle and passion for flying, Lee Mace is considered by many to be something of a legend in the lake area. He was a mentor to performers and, along with Joyce, a trailblazer in the entertainment and tourism industry here.

The Maces' stage performances combined music and comedy into a hand-clapping, foot-stomping show that brought standing-room-only crowds to the theater. As the show's popularity grew, they branched out into radio, TV and roadshows that brought the spotlight to Lake of the Ozarks.

It wasn't uncommon to find local kids who grew up "pickin' and singing" getting their stage debut at the Opry. Some of those kids are well-known lake area musicians who got their start working the crowds at the Opry.

The history and the legacy of the Ozark Opry is enjoying a rekindling of interest through the efforts of Dan Peek, who grew up in Versailles and found himself captivated as a young man with Lee Mace's enthusiasm for music and Lake of the Ozarks.

Peek has written "Live at the Ozark Opry." Peek will be at Stonecrest Mall Bookstore on Saturday Dec. 4 from 1 to 3 p.m. for a book signing. Along with him will be Joyce Mace and some of the Ozark Opry cast members will be there.

About the author

Dan William Peek lives with his wife, Joy, in Columbia, Mo., five minutes from their grandchildren, Grace and Spencer. He has authored a number of articles, essays and reviews on a variety of subjects and a book on the social history of the sport of darts, *To The Point: The Story of Darts in America*. Dan is co-founder and president of Grandparents and Others on Watch Inc., a nonprofit child advocacy organization.

Introduction

"In 1962, when I was a junior in high school in Versailles, Mo., two schoolmates, Ken Peoples and Jerome Wheeler, and I formed a musical group, patterned on the popular folk singers the Kingston Trio. Because Ken could play guitar and Jerome the mandolin, I was assigned the task of learning to play banjo. I purchased a banjo — an old, open-back frailing banjo — for \$5, rescued from the attic of someone in town, and set about learning the instrument," he writes in the forward of the book.

This casual foray into music would lead him to meet and spend a fair amount of time with Lee Mace

between the fall of 1963 and the fall of 1964 — his 18th year on the planet.

"Lee hired the three of us, the New Morning Singers, to perform in Lee Mace's Hillbilly Hootenanny. He sent us home from the talent show with instructions to make a microphone and stand from a broom handle, a wooden Christmas tree stand and a Cracker Jack box," Peek said. "We were to practice moving in and out of the microphone as we played and sang. This was our introduction to professional entertainment. There would be much more tutoring to come. We appeared numerous times on the Ozark Opry television show, and Lee booked several performances for us at fairs and events that year.

But for the most part, their duties were to perform at the hootenanny in the evening and then rush up the street to do one number on the Ozark Opry stage to promote the hootenanny show. That number was usually the campaign song of old-time Missouri politician Champ Clark: "Every Time I Go to Town, the Boys Keep Kicking My Dog Around." Lee liked that tune.

In 2003, he met with Joyce Mace to ask for her blessing for this book. Based on a lengthy interview with Joyce, he began preliminary research.

"As I linked the names and dates of the story to the lives and careers of Lee and Joyce, the broader context and importance of the Ozark Opry emerged,"

he said. "Lee and Joyce Mace not only succeeded in Nashville as country music artists, but also in the process they decoded the country music industry formula and then created an alternative business model, which is now generally termed "Branson-style" entertainment."

From the book

"I am sometimes asked how Lee and I put together a country show that ran continually for 53 years. I think Lee had a good answer to that question. He said it in an interview many years ago:

"Our intent has always been good. The music can vary, the style can vary, the songs can vary. But our intent has always been that when they walk in here and give their time or spend their money to come here our intent is that they must have a good time... That has always been our intent — always."

— Joyce Mace