



Then Comes Marriage

BY CANDACE MOONSHOWER

The wedding industry gets its due as a cornerstone of Sevier County tourism

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One of Tennessee's best-kept statistics is the number of wedding ceremonies performed in the state—specifically in Sevier County—each year. “Years ago, people came to Gatlinburg and Sevier County for their honeymoons, but over the years, this area has become

a destination location for weddings,” says Dan Tilley, who owns wedding chapels in the county and represents wedding chapels to the Gatlinburg Chamber of Commerce for the Gatlinburg Wedding Chapel Association.

In the United States, “destination weddings” are up 400% from the previous ten years, and Sevier County is second only to Las Vegas as a wedding destination in the United States.

And couples are not just traveling to Sevier County to elope. Couples can go online and plan their entire ceremonies, including lodging and catering for the entire wedding party, flowers and other décor, an officiant and a photographer. Couples can arrive

with a marriage license and have everything ready. “There’s a lot of trust involved on both ends,” Tilley says. “We’re doing all the work, but the couples are trusting us to have it all ready in time for their ceremonies.”

Chapels in the county are open Mondays through Saturdays, and with a marriage license in hand—which can be obtained anywhere in the state of Tennessee and used the same day as the wedding—couples can drive to their chapel and be married within minutes of their arrival. (Within Sevier County itself, there are three locations open six days a week where couples can purchase a marriage license.)

Like most travel-associated industries, Sevier’s wedding business has taken a hit

from the recent downturn in the economy. Lee Bennett, president of the Gatlinburg Wedding Chapel Association, says that the numbers have been trending down. In 2000, there were over 20,000 weddings in Sevier County, but 2008 saw that number down to 15,000. However, Bennett says, marriage licenses purchased in Sevier County are the numbers that are counted, and about 20% of the weddings at his chapel, Chapel at the Park, are purchased outside the county. "The number of tourist dollars attributable to the wedding business in the county is substantially larger than the Sevier County records show," Bennett says.

There's been some slowdown in mid-priced weddings, Bennett says, but the economic situation around the country has prompted many brides-to-be to consider Sevier County for larger weddings in which more guests need to be lodged and fed. Tilley, who owns Creekside Wedding Chapel and two Smoky Mountain Wedding



Chapels with his wife, agrees, saying that chapel owners in Sevier County can put together a beautiful wedding package for far less than a bride will spend at home—and Tennessee is within eight hours driving distance of most of the country.

The wedding business in Sevier County translates to millions in tax revenue yearly. Olga Wierbicki, owner of Stellar Wedding, represents the Smoky Mountain Wedding Business Alliance at the Sevier County Eco-

nomic Development Council, and she wants people to stop taking the wedding business in Sevier County for granted. "There needs to be a paradigm shift from thinking of weddings as a couples business to thinking of weddings as a groups business," Wierbicki says.

According to the Alliance, approximately \$145 million was injected into the economy in 2006 through the wedding business, and from 1993 to 2006, that number is estimated at over \$2 billion. The average size of a wedding party in the county is 21 guests, and those guests sleep, eat and entertain themselves during the celebration—and most wedding parties stay at least one night and eat several meals. "It's not just the wedding itself," Wierbicki says. "It is all the peripheral money spent—all the add-ons."

The Alliance's push for a growing appreciation of the wedding business's importance to tourism and tax revenue for the county

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and the state has not fallen on deaf ears. After instituting a lodging tax for those staying within the county, the Economic Development Council put a quarter of the monies toward the actual marketing and promotion of tourism. (The rest went to the perennial taxpayer faves of schools and infrastructure improvements.)

And following a December 2008 decision that Sevier County needed a definitive Web presence to promote all that the county has to offer, the wedding industry was grouped with heavyweights Dollywood, Pigeon Forge and Gatlinburg. Allen Newton, executive director of the Sevier County Economic Development Council, says the Web

County ahead of Las Vegas as the top wedding destination, it may well help keep it in second. Officials and leaders seem unworried by challenges such as Georgia's decision a few years ago to shorten the waiting period between the purchase of a marriage license and the actual wedding. "I don't begrudge Georgia the right to open its own wedding chapels, especially near the beach," Newton says. "People who want a beach wedding aren't going to be looking at Gatlinburg anyway, but Georgia doesn't have a Gatlin-

burg." The Reverend Doug Cunha agrees. Cunha, president and founder of the Smoky Mountain Wedding Business Alliance and a force to be reckoned with in the marketing of the wedding business in East Tennessee for a number of years, takes that theme one step further: "There are a lot of beaches around the country, but there is only one Smoky Mountains [National Park]."

And for now, those mountains are hearing wedding bells. **tn**

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**Lee Bennett, president
Gatlinburg Wedding Chapel
Association**

site will be created by USDM.net and up and running by March 2009. "This is a \$1 million project," he says, "to promote all of our attractions, restaurants, shopping, the cabin-rental industry and the wedding business. The site will include a tracking device to see where folks are coming from and how much revenue the site generates."

For the first year, there is a \$600,000 budget in place to drive visitors to the site. "We're doing all we can to generate business during this uncertain economic time," Newton says. "There are so many great things about our county to market, and I believe that being cohesive about it will net a positive outcome."

While such efforts will not push Sevier


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