

By Ken Horn

Silver Dollars & Simple Prayers

A shiny silver dollar sailed into the heavy Missouri air.
“Heads!” a voice called, and two young men stared intently as the coin nestled gently into the dust at their feet.

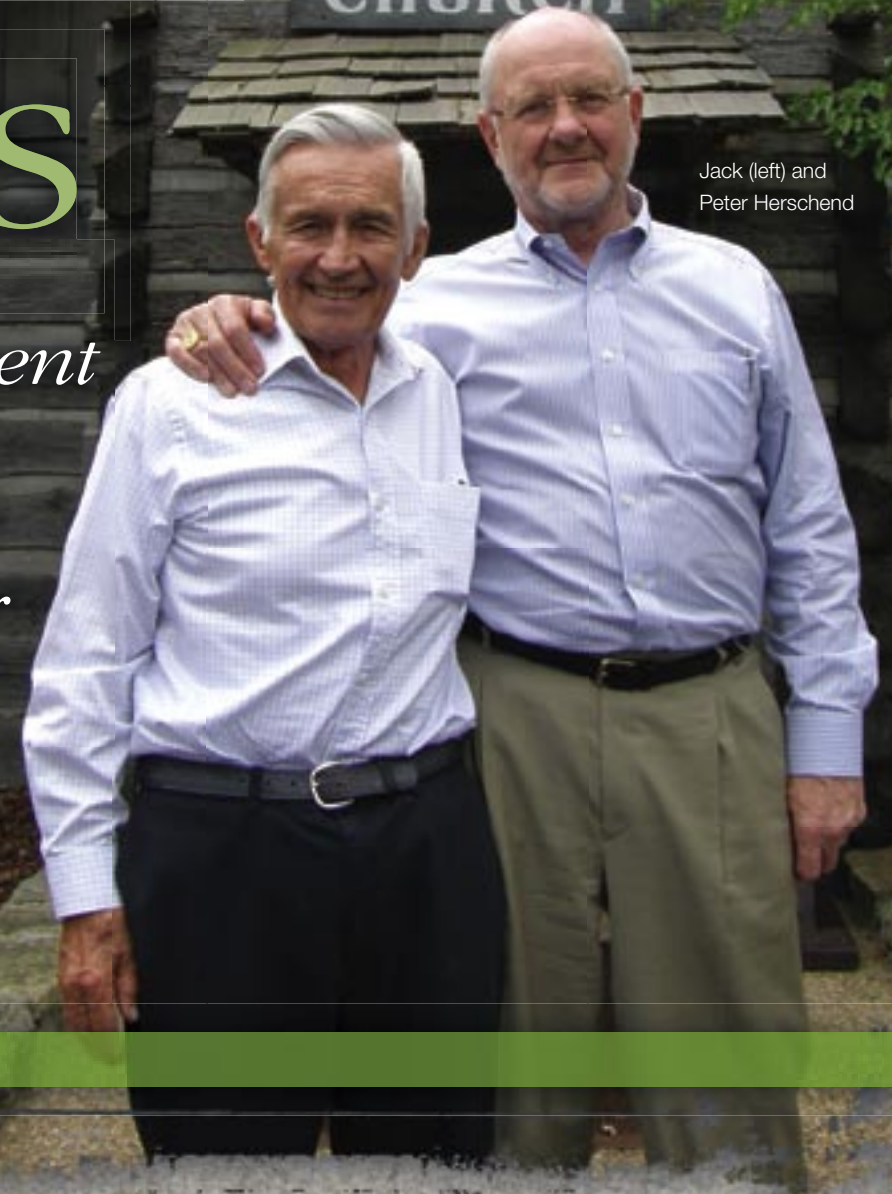
“I win!” Jack cried. “You preach.”

Jack Herschend and his brother, Peter, conducted their business behind the rough-hewn, rustic log building that served as a house of worship called the Wilderness Church.

It was time for the Sunday morning staff worship service at Silver Dollar City, and, as happened from time to time, the visiting preacher didn't show. So Jack and Pete hastily called a meeting to decide the small congregation's fate. The loser would preach; the winner got to ring the bell.

continued on page 16

*An
entertainment
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room for
Jesus*



Jack (left) and Peter Herschend

Silver Dollars & Simple prayers

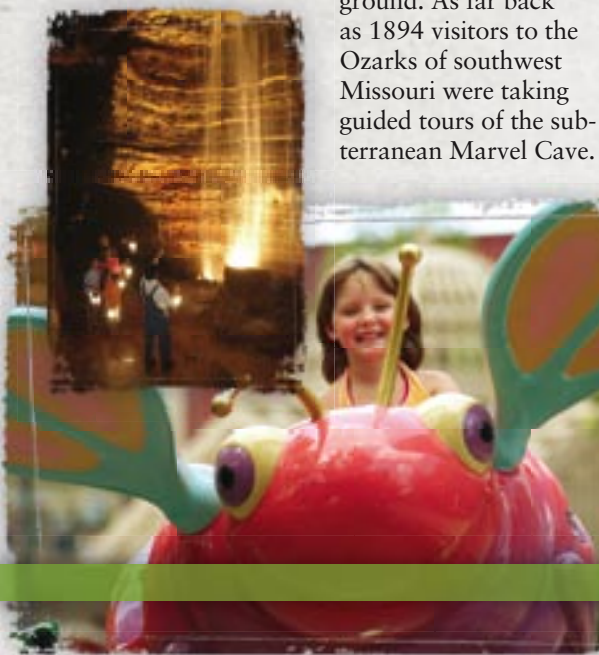
"I think Jack had a two-headed coin," Peter opines, "because I remember doing a lot more sermons than he did."

The bell would bring the entire staff. And if the scheduled guest preacher didn't make it, the workers heard an extemporaneous message from a Herschend.

"When we first started," Peter says, "everything was so small; we were doing services for staff — well staff was only 20 people then. Everybody would come to church for 30 minutes and then we would all go back and the guests would come in."

Hole in the ground

It had started with a hole in the ground. As far back as 1894 visitors to the Ozarks of southwest Missouri were taking guided tours of the subterranean Marvel Cave.



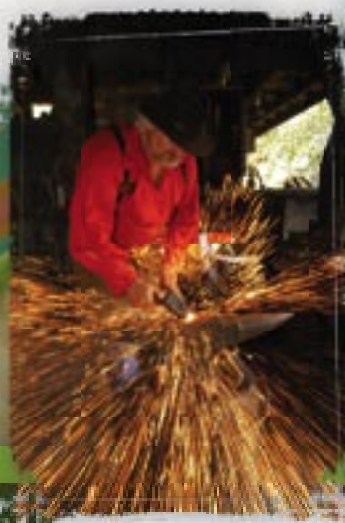
Herschend Family Entertainment photos

Dollar City is the flagship of an entertainment empire.

Herschend Family Entertainment Corporation numbers 17 properties in seven states. A second Silver Dollar City, in Pigeon Forge, Tenn., became Dollywood when Dolly Parton became a partner there. Other HFE attractions include the Showboat Branson Belle, Branson's Celebration City, and Stone Mountain Park in Atlanta.

"In a manner consistent with Christian values and ethics"

Visit the Herschends' Web site and you will find a page listing the "Core Values" for all of the HFE properties. At the end of the section is the family's undergirding principle:



Ken Horn



Peter Herschend chats with a Silver Dollar City employee.

The owners are with a Christian group that will be using the theme park for an upcoming convention. The pace seldom slackens here, and Christian organizations love to avail themselves of Silver Dollar City's Christian- and family-friendly atmosphere.

We sit chatting on the Spartan benches that serve as pews. Behind the pulpit, a large picture window spills the green of the Ozarks into the bucolic sanctuary.

"We want to be a Christ-centered company," Peter Herschend says bluntly. Every other part of the interview will revolve around that statement.

Peter, who puts you instantly at ease, explains that a sentiment attributed to St. Francis says it well:

In 1950, the Herschend family moved from Chicago and took over the attraction. When Hugo Herschend died suddenly in 1955, Mary and her two sons, Jack and Peter, had a decision to make.

They decided to stay.

By 1960 a small theme park was situated atop the cave. Silver Dollar City, the attraction that helped jumpstart the incredible Branson boom, was in operation, giving silver dollars in change.

Nearly half a century later Silver

Everything is done "in a manner consistent with Christian values and ethics."

Tough goal ... even in a church. But in a business? An entertainment business?

"How do you do that?" I wanted to ask the owners.

It's a gray, spring afternoon as I wait for Jack and Peter Herschend and their wives, Sherry and JoDee, to join me in the spiritual hub of Silver Dollar City's 52-acre throwback to the Ozarks of the 1880s.

"Preach the gospel always, using words when necessary. We strive to do that."

Both brothers confess this doesn't always happen. After all, people are human. But Jack finds encouragement even in the times when it doesn't happen.

"Occasionally a member of the corporate family will come up to me and say, 'Let me tell you what just happened' ... and it's not con-

sistent with Christian values and ethics. Then you know it's working," says Jack, "because people remember it and they hold themselves and everyone else to that high standard."

More often it does work. And there is lots of evidence.

One day as Jack ambled through the park, he spied one of the groundskeepers, Luke Standlee, kneeling on the ground in front of a developmentally disabled child in a stroller. Her parents stood by with tear-moistened eyes.

Later, Luke explained to Jack: "Whenever I see youngsters who have had a hard road, I try to get them to smile. Then I ask them to do things to make their mom and dad happy, and to please the Lord." He ended each encounter by giving the child a bright silver dollar — from his own pocket. Turns out he had been doing this several times

brain, logical thinker" and himself as the "right brain visionary."

The two things that brought them closer together? Silver Dollar City and a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Jack had married Sherry Nickel, a Christian raised in the Assemblies of God. He came to the Lord at 28 through the persistent witness of a traveling hardware salesman named John Shanahan.

"As soon as I accepted Jesus into my life, it was like a dam bursting," says Jack. "I felt like a new man."

Peter was a believer when he met JoDee Remien in a Silver Dollar City skit in 1963. He played a Hatfield; she was a McCoy. Three years later the family feud was over when Peter and JoDee married.

The pair found their lives changed when they both received the baptism in the Holy Spirit through the ministry of Spirit-filled Episcopal priest Dennis Bennett. "It was like going from black and white to Technicolor," JoDee says. "It was the most amazing change."

Christians appreciate the Christian-friendly atmosphere. "Here folks are totally left free to express their faith in tasteful ways."

Jack Herschend

cluded — and they will tell you it is one of the warmest, friendliest places on earth. Christians appreciate the Christian-friendly atmosphere.

"Here folks are totally left free to express their faith in tasteful ways," says Jack. "People pray with guests when it's appropriate and they witness."

Christmastime visitors find a powerful presentation of the gospel tucked into the middle of a Silver Dollar City train ride — right where mock robbers hold up the train during the rest of the year.

"It wasn't our idea," explains Jack. "It comes from a climate that says this is a place where you are free to share your faith in ways that are tasteful."

But the witnessing-in-good-taste approach is not without its risks. The Herschends have been sued twice. "We have had a few

negative letters,"

Peter says, "but for every negative letter we get hundreds of positive letters. People want to believe there are still folks who believe in Jesus Christ. The servant-leadership program is simply the leadership style Jesus Christ gave us."

"You take a stand for something or you stand for nothing — pure and simple," adds Jack. "We stand for Christ."

The attitude extends to the other properties as well.

Peter agrees. "It changed my life forever," he says.

Serving others

One of the Herschends' core values is: "We serve others ... by being patient, kind, humble, respectful, selfless, forgiving, honest and committed." The statement is part and parcel of the servant-leadership emphasis at the park.

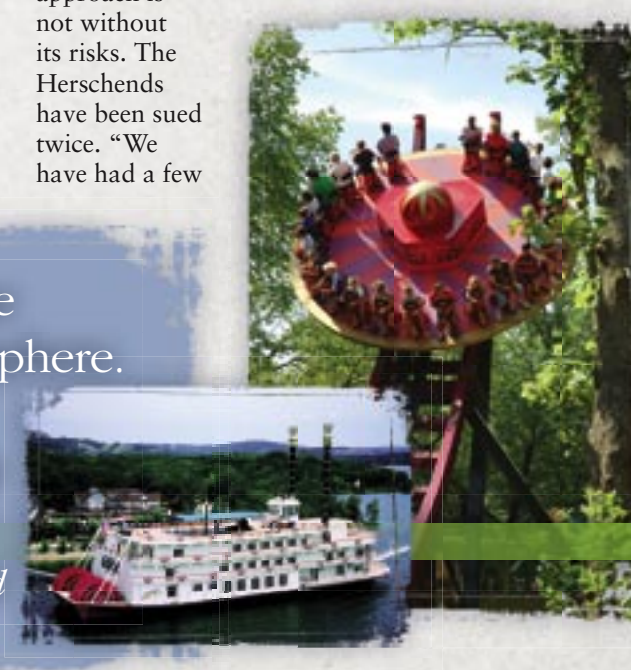
Talk to anyone who has visited Silver Dollar City — this writer in-

day. "We provided the silver dollars after that," Jack says.

Best friends

As youngsters, Jack and Peter didn't really pal around much. They had their own interests and their own friends. But two things would unite them, and the brothers would become best friends, each utilizing his own particular giftings.

Peter describes Jack as the "left



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(L. to R.) Jack, Sherry, Peter and JoDee Herschend



Take my starter

It's 10 o'clock at night and a maintenance mechanic is cutting across the parking lot of Dollywood on his way home when he encounters four people standing around a car with its hood up, staring into the engine.

Climbing into the driver's seat, he cranks the engine. "Defective starter for sure," he tells the distressed tourists. "I'll be right back."

Five minutes later he returns with some tools, removes the starter from his own car (same make as theirs), and replaces the faulty one on theirs. It starts right up and the grateful group drives off.

A few weeks later the management received a letter of thanks for the selfless act. They wouldn't have known if they hadn't received the letter.

Sometimes people receive the ultimate gift. For more than 30 years, Christian counselors-to-be have worked at Silver Dollar City alongside about 300 other young men and women who hold summer jobs.

"The surprise of their life," Peter says with delight, "is many of those young people will go home born-again Christians."

Ride ... and pray

Some of the Silver Dollar City rides have a tendency to encourage prayer — like WildFire, a looping roller coaster that plummets 15 stories; and the new-in-'07 Giant Swing, which launches riders through a barn door at 45 mph, tossing them seven stories



in the air, swinging them from one side of the barn to the other.

Every precaution is taken to keep everyone — staff and guests — safe. In 1969, JoDee and Sherry Herschend prayed over every inch of the property. "We gave Jesus ownership over every building," JoDee says. "We went building by building."

Other ministries

God has blessed the Herschends, and they have responded to the blessing by giving back. All four are very involved in ministry.

Jack characteristically downplays his own involvement. "I just love the way God guides us. My brother's been involved in big ministries and so have JoDee and Sherry. I'm called to little ministries."

Jack enjoys touching young lives with hands-on ministries. He weeps easily as he talks about lives that have been changed. He also chairs a ministry called National Institute of Marriage, which rescues marriages that are in deep trouble.

Sherry is heavily involved in Nazareth Village in Israel, which was recently featured in the movie *The Nativity*. Prior to that, all of her ministries were family, marriage and small groups. Nazareth Village is a first-century farm and village that recreates the life and times and teachings of Jesus, right

in Nazareth where He actually stood.

Peter spends a lot of time on public education, focusing on the implementation of the statewide "Character Counts" program. He also is involved with JoDee's ministry, The Caring People, that trains and encourages Christians to minister in significant ways to single mothers.

Still preaching

The interview over, Peter walks with me to my car. Silver Dollar City is closed today. Workers are scattered throughout the acreage getting the park ready for tomorrow's inevitable crowds. I have been here many times, but have never seen it so empty.

Tomorrow, the turnstiles will reverberate with the sounds of guests entering, looking for good, wholesome fun. They will find the fun ... and they will find something else. They will find the love of Jesus.

Jack and Peter no longer flip a coin behind the Wilderness Church to see who will preach on Sunday. There are three services each Sunday now, and no Herschend sermons.

But Jack and Peter still preach. And when necessary, they use words. **tpe**

KEN HORN is the editor of *Today's Pentecostal Evangel*.

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