

# LEISURE

FEBRUARY 2012

GROUP TRAVEL

## Branson at 100

This Ozarks hotspot  
celebrates its centennial

**Complete  
Religious Market  
Coverage**

Planning & organizing  
faith-based group trips

### **Vintage Texas**

Grapevine clings  
to its colorful past

### **Roanoke, Virginia**

Urban flair, mountain air

### **10 Favorite Factory Tours**

From cars to candy, see it made in America



# LEISURE

GROUP TRAVEL

# contents

Vol. 22, No.1

February 2012

## COVER STORY

### 18 BRANSON AT THE CENTURY MARK

This group-friendly Missouri town celebrates its 100th year in 2012 *by sue arko*

## FEATURES

### 16 10 Top Factory Tours *by karen axelrod & matt simon*

### 22 Orlando Shopping Magnets *by dave bodle*

### 24 New Mexico's Cultural Mosaic *by kari kamin*

### 26 Oklahoma's Cherokee Heritage *by randy mink*

### 30 Grapevine: Vintage Texas *by randy mink*

### 34 Antiquing in Connecticut *by kari kamin*

### 36 Roaming Roanoke *by randy mink*

## COLUMNS

4 **On My Mind**  
*by jeff gayduk*

8 **On Shopping**  
*by carolyn j. feimster*

6 **On Tour**  
*by marty sarbey de soto*

42 **On Marketing**  
*by dave bodle*

## DEPARTMENTS

10 **On the Record**

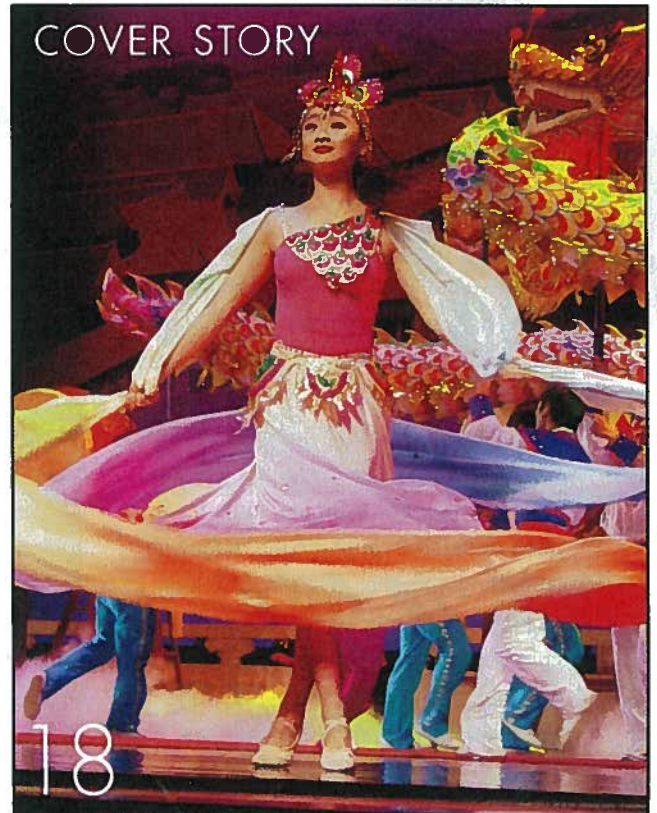
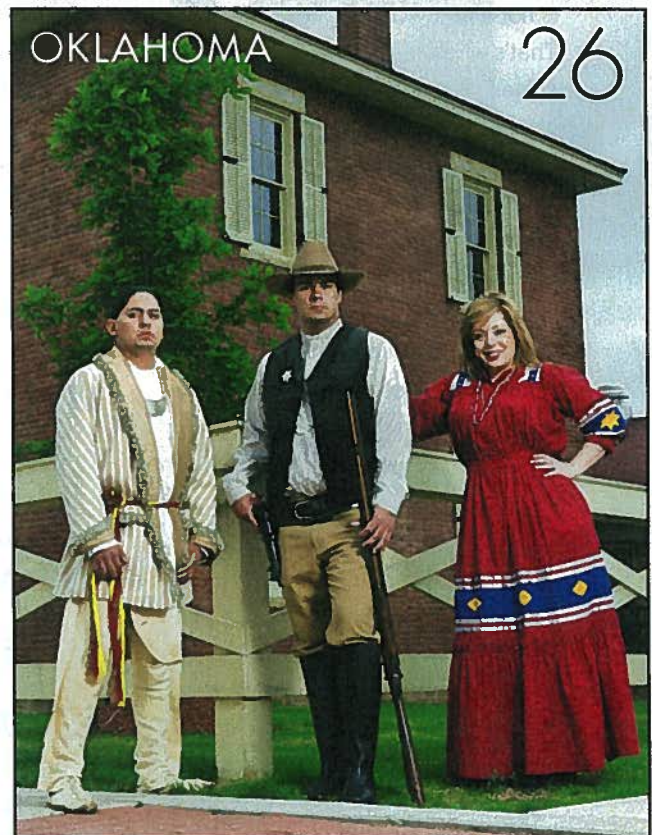


Photo Courtesy of Branson/Lake Area CVB



Cherokee Nation Cultural Tourism Department

ON THE COVER:

Branson Landing Fountains in Branson, Mo. (Photo courtesy of Branson/Lakes Area CVB)



## ROAMING



# Roanoke



The Historic Market District in downtown Roanoke is a shopper's paradise, offering outdoor stalls, specialty shops and inviting restaurants.

## Tour groups enjoy Southern hospitality and big-city amenities in the mountains of Virginia

Thinking about the pleasures of Roanoke, I don't know if I'm more intrigued by its railroad heritage or its setting in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Shop-hopping in the historic downtown is another big lure. And, as one who "collects" vintage hotels, the lore of one of the South's grande dames captivates me as well.

At any rate, this city of 100,000 is an enchanting place that makes for a fun stopover on the Blue Ridge Parkway or a hub-and-spoke base for exploring the

Roanoke Valley and other communities in western Virginia. Just the mention of the gently rolling Blue Ridge Mountains has always cast a magic spell on me, and waking up to see them outside the hotel window jump-starts my day.

To start a sightseeing tour of Roanoke, the logical place is the scenic overlook at the foot of the **Roanoke Star** on Mill Mountain. The illuminated steel-and-concrete structure, sort of like the star atop a Christmas tree, has served as a beacon since 1949. Billed

as the world's largest manmade star, the 100-foot-high landmark symbolizes Roanoke's progressive spirit. From the wooden platform you have panoramic views of the city spread out 1,700 feet below and crests of mountains on the Appalachian Trail. Turn around and wave at the webcam mounted on Roanoke's shining star—provided you've notified friends with access to a computer.

Sharing the Star City's skyline are two other monumental beacons that



light up the night. A circular Dr Pepper sign and an H&C Coffee sign—neon nostalgia-invokers from the 1940s—crown downtown buildings a block apart. The red-and-white Dr Pepper logo resembles a bottle cap, while the H&C sign features a stream of coffee flowing from pot to cup.

More visions of yesteryear await groups in the **Historic Market District**, the tourist hub of downtown. It's dominated by the recently renovated City Market building and Virginia's oldest continuous farmers' market (dating to 1882). Under the blue-and-white striped awnings on block-long Market Street and in Market Square, you'll find vendors 363 days a year. They sell everything from artisan soaps to homemade walnut cake.

My favorite Market Street store was indoor-outdoor **Sumdat Farm Market**. With a focus on Virginia-made products, it offers wines, maple syrup and apple butter, plus tins of salted peanuts and bags of snack foods like fried okra. I couldn't resist the jars of banana pudding butter (great on banana bread or as a cheesecake ingredient) and lemon meringue butter. Also tempting was the cinnamon roll walnut jam. Other Market District magnets include the kitchen store **Ladles & Linens** and **Orvis**, the fly-fishing emporium.

The recently renovated **City Market**, a red-brick structure built in 1922 as a meat market, is a bright, airy food court with a variety of eateries. The 96-year-old **Roanoke Weiner Stand**, across the street, serves up outstanding chili dogs. For Southern comfort food, try **Thelma's Chicken and Waffles**, a Market Street favorite. Many downtown restaurants and shops occupy old storefronts with exposed brick walls and pressed-tin ceilings.

**Center in the Square**, the largest building on Market Square, is undergoing a \$28-million renovation and will open in spring 2013 as a cultural center. Moving back into the space will be Mill Mountain Theatre, the History Museum of Western Virginia and Science Museum of Western Virginia. The complex also will be home to aquariums, a butterfly habitat and the Harrison Museum of African American Culture.

The nearby **Taubman Museum of Art** has mixed things up, architecturally speaking, since opening in 2008 in a stunningly contemporary building accented by soaring walls of glass and stainless steel roof forms that pay homage to the surrounding mountains. Its collection of American art includes works by Norman Rockwell, Thomas Hart Benton and John Singer Sargent. Temporary exhibitions draw from around the globe.

For tour groups passing through Roanoke, the compact district is a perfect lunch or shopping stop. The Roanoke Valley Convention & Visitors Bureau makes it easy for groups short on time by providing a free orientation and discount shopping card. Catherine Fox, the CVB's tourism and communications director, said it can arrange for each tour member to receive a free truffle at **chocolatepaper**, a shop with gourmet chocolates from around the world and an eclectic mix of greeting cards. (For a fee, the CVB can provide a step-on guide for an area tour that includes a stretch of the Blue Ridge Parkway. Roanoke has four entrances/exits on the fabled road.)

Steps away from the City Market is the **Railwalk**, a trackside interpretive trail that celebrates Roanoke's ties to the railroad industry. Signs and artifacts showcase the city's heyday as a company town, recalling the days when the Norfolk & Western Railway manu-

factured locomotives and freight cars in its Roanoke shops. Push-button displays let visitors ring a bell, sound a whistle and activate a crossing signal.

The **Virginia Museum of Transportation**, anchoring the western end of the Railwalk, boasts an impressive collection of steam and diesel locomotives.

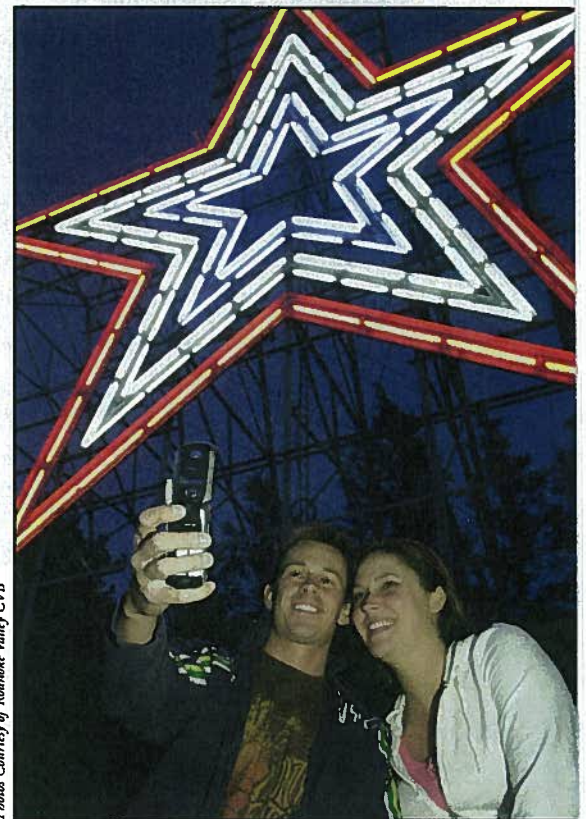


Photo Courtesy of Roanoke Valley CVB

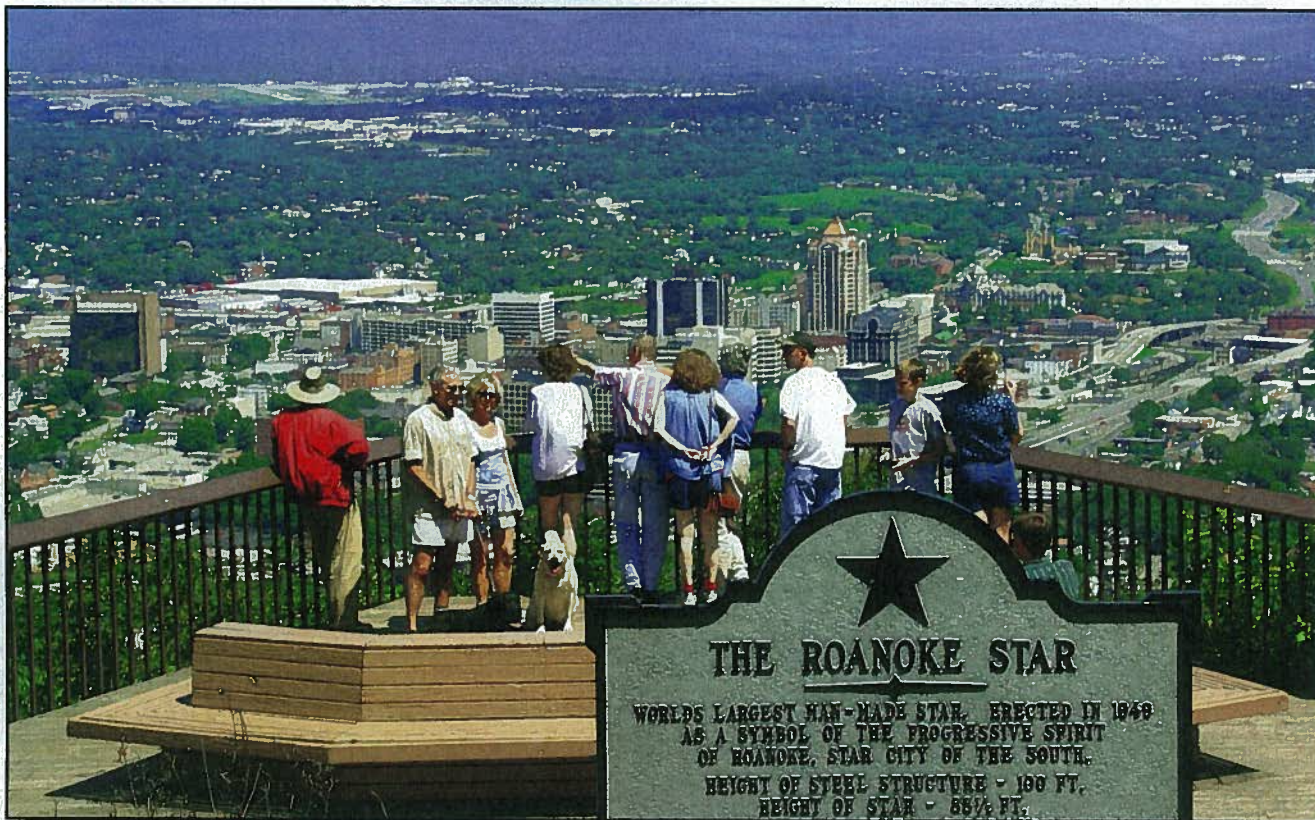
The Roanoke Star, a mighty beacon since 1949, stands above an overlook on Mill Mountain.

I was fascinated by the oral history videos of African-American men who worked on the N&W during segregation. Housed in N&W's former freight station, the museum also has a model train layout, antique cars and a Greyhound/Trailways bus exhibit. Tour groups can have a fried chicken/ham biscuit lunch catered by the Roanoker restaurant and eat on picnic tables in the railyard.

The romance of railroading really comes alive in the **O. Winston Link Museum**, perhaps my favorite downtown attraction. Link was a New York photographer who captured the end of the







The scenic overlook at the foot of the Roanoke Star on Mill Mountain affords panoramic views of the city and crests of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

steam locomotive era in the 1950s with poignant photos of life along the tracks in western Virginia and North Carolina. After a 30-minute film on his five-year project and how he was recognized by the art world decades later, you can tour several galleries of his work. Most of his photos were taken at night. The museum is lo-

cated in the Roanoke Valley Visitor Information Center, which occupies the former N&W passenger station.

Across the street looms the hilltop **Hotel Roanoke**, a rambling Tudor-style landmark built as a railroad hotel in 1882. It closed in 1989 after a change in ownership and reopened in 1995

after a major makeover. Groups can combine a hotel tour with a buffet lunch in the elegant Regency Room, where peanut soup and spoonbread are signature items.

During my stay at the hotel, I enjoyed soaking in the atmosphere. The elegant, black walnut-paneled lobby has murals depicting Virginia historical events and full-length portraits of Virginia heroes George Washington and Robert E. Lee.

My visit to the Roanoke Valley was confined to the city, so next time I'd like to get out into the mountains. My wish list includes Natural Bridge, Smith Mountain Lake, the National D-Day Memorial in Bedford and Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest retreat. The Blue Ridge are calling me, just as they beckon groups seeking heady doses of history and nature.

For information, contact the Roanoke Valley CVB, 800-635-5535; [visitroanokeva.com](http://visitroanokeva.com). **LGT**



Exhibits along the Railwalk in downtown Roanoke chronicle the city's colorful railroad history.