

'Jesus' Leaves Arkansas, Bibles Go With Him

For decades, visitors from around the world descended on the small Ozark mountain hamlet of Eureka Springs, Ark., to see *The Great Passion Play*, the tale of **Jesus Christ's** last week on earth.

The flashy play with a cast of hundreds, including live animals, was performed for 45 seasons in the shadow of the seven-story Christ of the Ozarks statue on Magnetic Mountain.

But no more. The lights are out on the statue, and it and a 700-acre campus are up for sale.

The Elna M. Smith Foundation, which owns the site, has announced it is unable to continue producing the play, which ran from May to October each year. The foundation has also shut the doors on exhibits including its famous **Bible** collection.

"Our hope and prayer is that *The Great Passion Play* will continue in some way to tell 'The Greatest Story Ever Told,'" Keith Butler, chairman of the foundation's board of directors, said in a statement.

But for Eureka Springs, a Victorian tourist town of 2,074 people, the closure is a major blow.

"There's no question the loss of *The Great Passion Play* will hurt businesses in Eureka Springs," said Joe David Rice, director of the Arkansas Department of Parks and Tourism.

"Although the play's visitation has dropped significantly over the years, its visitors bought meals, rented rooms and made important contributions to the local economy," Rice said.

The Elna M. Smith Foundation was founded in the 1960s by Elna

and Gerald L.K. Smith, a 1944 presidential candidate for the America First Party. He was known for his anti-Semitic views and pushed an anti-United Nations agenda.

In the 1960s, the couple retired to Eureka Springs and bought a historic house and 167 acres on Magnetic Mountain.

'Powerful Presentation'

The Smiths raised \$1 million to build the Christ statue, constructed with 320 tons of reinforced concrete. It is one of the largest statues of Jesus in the world and can be seen from 20 miles away.

The couple then created The Great Passion Play in a natural amphitheater on Magnetic Mountain. The play featured 200 cast members and live animals on a 500-foot-wide stage.

It was one of Arkansas' leading tourist attractions for decades. The production, at the height of its popularity, drew 250,000 to 300,000 visitors a year, according to the Arkansas Department of Parks and Tourism. It is estimated that more than 7 million people have seen the production.

Former Arkansas Gov. **Mike Huckabee** said he and his wife, Janet, honeymooned in Eureka Springs and have fond memories of the site. Huckabee told Reuters he first saw the play when he was about 10.

"It was a very powerful presentation," said Huckabee, a former Southern Baptist minister. "I have seen it many times through the years and always appreciated it. It was a wonderful attraction for tourism in Arkansas for many years and I'm saddened by its closure."

This year, attendance dwindled to 46,578 visitors.

In September, the foundation attempted to save itself with a fundraising effort, which failed.

Now the gate to the Christ of the Ozarks statue is locked.

That defies the wishes of the Smiths, who are both now dead and buried adjacent to the statue. They wanted the statue accessible 24 hours a day.

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