

Escapes

In Elkins, W.Va., Stage Is Set for a Revival

By MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN
Special to The Washington Post

When you watch Kenny Sexton on-stage singing a song that's three-quarters staccato laughter, it's hard not to laugh with him. It's also hard to imagine a time when he earned his living as an accountant.

But it's true. Sexton once worked as a CPA in Springdale, Ark. Today, he's one of the headliners (and the president) of the American Mountain Theater in Elkins, W.Va. And through the theater's G-rated, Branson-style variety show, Sexton is helping put this quiet, gritty little place on the map.

"We're seeing a huge increase in tourism," says Ellen Spears, the executive director of the Elkins-Randolph County Chamber of Commerce.

A city of 8,000, Elkins began as a railroad hub to transport the region's rich timber and mineral resources, and it has long attracted outdoors enthusiasts for hunting, fishing, mountain biking and skiing. But it's the 527-seat theater, which opened last summer on the site of the old Western Maryland Railroad yard, that's likely to change the feel of the hamlet. The yard has been turned into a town square, bordered by the theater, the Durbin & Greenbrier Valley Scenic Railroad, the renovated Elkins depot (celebrating its centennial this year), a railroad-themed restaurant (opening this summer) and the future site of the West Virginia Railroad Museum.

Sexton, 53, started playing the piano in gospel quartets when he was 12 and always wanted to



PHOTOS BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

Kenny Sexton plays a short-legged Sonny Bono to Susie Heckel's Cher in a skit at American Mountain Theater.

make a living in the music business. After years in accounting, Sexton bought the Ozark Mountain Hoe-Down Music Theater in Eureka Springs, Ark. When sister-in-law Susie Heckel, an Elkins native who had performed at Nashville's Grand Ole Opry, asked him to help with a theater in her home town, Sexton and his wife, Beverly (also a performer), took the plunge.

Thus, a star was born. The American Mountain Theater, the only one of its type in the state, opened in 2003 a few miles outside town; last July, it moved into its new \$1.7 million downtown home. The stark brick structure

houses a gift shop, the performance space and, boasts Sexton, "the finest sound system money can buy and more lights than we know what to do with."

The folksy show changes every year but always includes singing, dancing, comedy and impersonations. On a recent night, the theater was three-quarters full, with a couple of church groups and many families with children. Candy is a buck, you can eat in the theater, and jeans are always in vogue. (Mountaineers belt buckles are even better.)

Most of the 11-member cast is related in some way. There are three generations, including Pee

everyone for coming and wishing y'all a good night.

Since the theater is part of a bigger city revitalization project, Sexton has worked closely with the owners of the Durbin & Greenbrier Valley Scenic Railroad to market the neighboring attractions to out-of-towners. When former truck drivers John and Kathy Smith opened the railroad in 1997, it traversed two miles of track; today, the venture offers four scenic trips in historic cars that roll across 150 miles.

So far, both the theater and the train have been a hit with tourists. (License plates in the parking lot indicate lots of out-of-state visitors.) According to Sexton, last year the theater attracted groups from 27 states and became the state's top motor coach destination. Then again, he says the attractions have been a tough sell to locals.

"I would have never guessed that the hardest thing is that most individuals in West Virginia do not understand what we are," Sexton says, "and they are not sure if they want to try it or not." He said many locals don't realize how much the boost in tourism helps the local economy, when visitors drop money on lodging, dining and attractions.

That said, word is spreading, and performances for guests such as the governor and state tourism officials have helped shift the attitude of the home team. Spears said merchants are starting to see an increase in business, which affects the city's outlook as well.

"It's a trickle-down effect," she says. "People will wander from the theater to downtown, and then shops will have to extend hours and hire more employees. Those are all good things."

Spears notes that aside from the economic impact, she's a big fan of American Mountain Theater.

"You really go out of there," she says, "tapping your toes."

■ Shows at the American Mountain Theater (49 Martin St.) begin at 7:30 p.m. and run Thursday-Saturday in May; Wednesday-Saturday from June through September; and Monday-Saturday in October. Tickets are \$22. Info: 800-943-3670, www.americanmountaintheater.com.

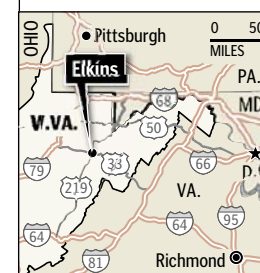
ESCAPE KEYS

GETTING THERE: Elkins is just under 4½ hours from the Capital Beltway. Take Interstate 66 west to I-81 south to Route 55, toward Strasburg. Follow Route 55 into West Virginia and take Route 28/55 to Elkins.

WHAT TO DO: **Davis & Elkins College** (100 Campus Dr., 800-624-3157, www.davisandelkins.edu) overlooks the city and is home to the former summer estates of early-20th-century senators Henry Davis and Stephen Elkins. The college hosts the **Augusta Heritage Center** (304-637-1209, www.augustaheritage.com), which helps preserve Appalachian heritage and traditions and holds week-long workshops such as those dedicated

to swing (July 13-18) and bluegrass (July 27-Aug. 1). The free **Augusta Festival** — featuring dance, music and crafts — is Aug. 8-10.

STAYING THERE: The **Lodge at Kelly Mountain** (Route 33, four miles east of Elkins, 304-635-



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0300, www.lodgeatkellymtn.com) is pet-friendly and has lodge rooms for \$95.

All the rooms have a water view at the **Cheat River Lodge** (Route 33, five miles east of Elkins, 304-636-2301, www.cheatriverlodge.com; from \$88 double), while the **Graceland Inn** (on the Davis & Elkins campus, 304-637-1600; from \$130) features 11 Victorian-era guest rooms. The new **Holiday Inn Express** (50 Martin St., 304-630-2266, www.hiexpress.com/elkinswv; from \$95) is near the depot and the American Mountain Theater.

EATING THERE: Several lodging options offer fine dining, including the **Lodge at Kelly Mountain**, where you can dig into rack of wild boar and duck; entrees from \$21.

El Gran Sabor (413 Kerens Ave.) serves Venezuelan food and has live music Wednesdays and Fridays; entrees from \$9. **C.J. Maggie's** (309 Davis Ave.) is a local chain that has Tex-Mex, pastas, salads and pizzas. Stop at **Beander's** (314 Davis Ave.) for the \$2 draft beer and the smorgasbord of dead animals on the walls. The hippest spot for morning coffee and WiFi is **Kissel Stop** (23 Third St.), which also has great smoothies and wraps.

INFO: **Elkins-Randolph County Chamber of Commerce**, 304-636-2717, www.elkinsrandolphcountywv.com.



COMING SUNDAY | A short flight to Orlando, in Travel; a tour of Philadelphia murals, in Sunday Source.



See a Show, Then Hit the Rails

Feel like getting into training during a visit to Elkins, W.Va.? The **Durbin & Greenbrier Valley Railroad** (877-MTN-RAIL, www.mountainrail.com) has scenic excursions through the Monongahela National Forest, including four-hour trips on the New Tygart Flyer (\$40 including buffet lunch) and the Mountain Explorer Dinner Train (\$65 including four-course dinner), which is pictured at left.

Both depart from the restored Elkins depot, which marks its 100th anniversary this year; a Depot Centennial and Railroad Days celebration is July 10-13.