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Elvis in the Country: Transforming Place in Rural Australia

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Chapter 11

Elvis in the Country: Transforming Place in Rural Australia

J. CONNELL and C. GIBSON

Like many other small towns in inland Australia, Parkes (in New South Wales) has gone through tough times in the past two decades. Restructuring of agriculture and drought brought economic challenges, the loss of activities such as banks and shops and a slowly falling population. In this century, the pattern of decline in Parkes has been arrested and the establishment of an exceptionally successful festival has played a part in that. Indeed the Parkes Elvis Revival Festival demonstrates how a small, relatively remote place can stage a festival that generates substantial economic benefits, fosters a sense of community, seemingly against the odds, and in doing so has gained nationwide notoriety and publicity without any particular local claim to musical heritage. The festival represents about as narrow a rationale for an event as can be imagined – the legendary performer is long dead, and festival visitors arrive to see mere impersonations of the original. Yet the festival has invigorated the town, attracted loyal, repeat visitors and brought a community together on an otherwise hot and dusty weekend in the tourist off-season, because it is well-organised, slightly weird, in a friendly town and, above all, fun.

This chapter discusses how an unlikely festival overcame adversity and local opposition to become one of the most famous festivals in the country. Not only has it gained national prominence but, along with 14 other Australian festivals, mostly metropolitan, it is listed in Frommer's *300 Unmissable Festivals Around the World* (2009) where it is also distinguished as setting (in 2007) a new record for the most Elvises (though the plural form is usually referred to in Parkes as Elvi) in one place.

The chapter is based on repeated visits between 2002 and 2010 to undertake research in collaboration with the organisers of the Elvis Revival Festival, involving surveys of businesses, residents and visitors and interviews with local tourism promoters, local government representatives,

tourists and families hosting home stay visitors. Across nearly a decade we have tracked how a small place with few economic prospects has created a tourism resource, and subsequently captured national publicity through a festival based around the commemoration of the birthday of Elvis Presley, a performer who had never visited Australia, and certainly not Parkes, and had no links to the town. Indeed, Elvis rarely left America. The Parkes Elvis Revival Festival demonstrates how 'tradition' can be constructed in rural places (rather than being innate), how small places can develop economic activities through festivals, and create new identities, though constantly contested.

Elvis Comes to Parkes

Parkes is a small New South Wales country town of about 9600 people 350 km west of Sydney. Like many other inland country towns, it had lost population (4% between 1996 and 2006), had higher than average unemployment rates and low levels of participation in the labour force (43% of the total population), with a population increasingly dominated by those of retirement age. It has long been a service centre in Australia's wheat-sheep belt, though the North Parkes copper mine provides economic diversity, and it is a significant rail centre. However, other than its historic radio telescope ('The Dish'), a vital link in the 1969 Apollo moon landing (which became, in 2000, the subject of a popular Australian feature film of the same name), Parkes has little in the way of visitor attractions.

The establishment of the Elvis Presley Festival in Parkes was entirely the result of a chance local whim, when a couple of local people devoted to the memory and music of Elvis, proposed the idea to council members, as recalled by committee member, Neville Lennox, who later formally changed his name to Elvis Lennox:

It was Bob and Anne Steel up at Gracelands restaurant. They're big Elvis fans and they own the restaurant. They were just having a bit of a talk to the right people at the right time, at one of their functions. They were councillors and they said, 'Well there's nothing going on, nothing celebrated that time of year. Elvis's birthday's the eighth. Come along to the next council meeting, we'll put it to the board'. It just evolved from there. (Interview, 2004)

Parkes happened to have a club and restaurant called Gracelands, and a small group of committed Elvis fans willing to organise an event. This suited the pragmatic aim of the local council of the time, namely to improve summer tourism, though there was no great excitement about hosting the event. An Elvis Revival committee was subsequently formed and, in 1992,

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of about 9600 people in country towns, it had lost more than average unemployment in the labour force (43% of the population). The town is largely dominated by those who are in Australia's wheat-belt, which provides economic security, other than its historic role in the Apollo moon landing, and the Australian feature film of the 1970s. In Parkes was entirely of local people devoted to the town, who later formally

restaurant. They're big, were just having a bit of a party: one of their functions. There's nothing going on, it's his birthday's the eighth. I put it to the board'. It

called Gracelands, and to organise an event. This time, namely to improve the town about hosting the festival, which was formed and, in 1992,

what was a very small group of local fans decided to stage Australia's first Elvis festival. The first Elvis Revival Festival was held in January 1993, coinciding with Elvis' birthday. It attracted about 500 people from as far as Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney, and set the theme for those that followed, with Elvis and Priscilla (Elvis Presley's wife) look-alike competitions, a street parade with vintage cars, shop window displays of memorabilia, Elvis movies at the cinema (since closed), and concerts, one of which was at the Gracelands Club. Indeed the fortuitous presence of a Gracelands Club had been one factor convincing organisers that Parkes was the appropriate place for the festival though eventually the restaurant no longer had the capacity to hold the crowd, and entertainment and people spread to other pubs and clubs.

The first festivals were largely ignored by the local media as inappropriate for a country town or trivial (despite the dearth of news in mid-summer), and that exclusion has only partly diminished. By contrast, the national media have regularly covered the Festival, invariably because of its curiosity value, but also as a result of what were seen as ludicrous claims by the organising committee that it wanted Parkes to become the 'Elvis capital' of Australia. For Bob Steel, then chair of the organising committee, the lead-up to the first festival hinted at such national publicity:

We have been overwhelmed with the attention this festival is receiving. For example, even the *Melbourne Truth* ran an article on the festival, suggesting that we could become the Elvis capital of Australia. Newspapers, television and radio stations have all been giving the festival plenty of coverage and if nothing else, it has certainly given Parkes publicity. (Quoted in the *Parkes Champion Post*, 8 January 1993: 5)

Ironically, this kind of national coverage, and its celebration of tackiness and kitsch, has probably drawn most visitors, as typified by one picture in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (Figure 11.1). Indeed the coverage of the festival in every year has focused almost exclusively on the multiple, gaudy jump-suited Elvis.

The festival once began on the Friday night of the weekend closest to Elvis' birthday (8 January 1935); although since 2008 it has been drawn out to earlier in the week and longer into the next week. It has usually involved dinner and various forms of Elvis entertainment at Gracelands (although that club recently closed), with all participants encouraged to dress in appropriate annual themes: cowboy, speedway, Hawaiiana; usually linked to Elvis movies. Saturday sees the street parade of vintage cars and motorbikes (and vintage Elvis impersonators), with market stalls (ranging from memorabilia – rarely 'real' – to country handicrafts) in the main park area. The park is the venue for the main sound and look-alike

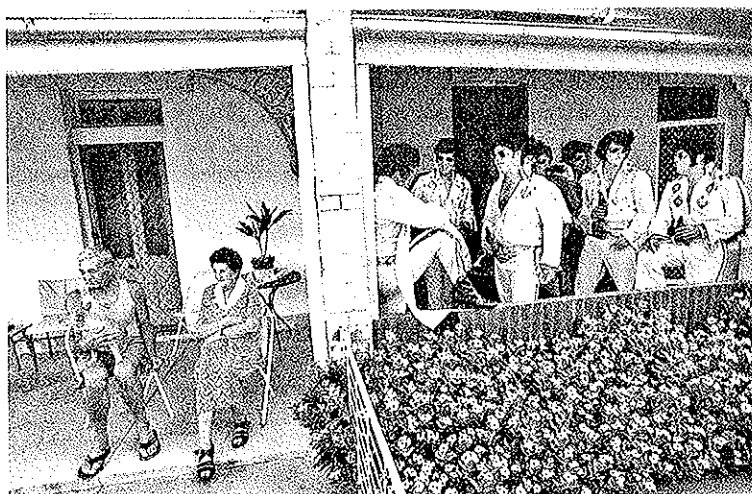


Figure 11.1 Parkes, according to the *Sydney Morning Herald* (January 2003: 8) (Source: Brennan-Horley *et al.*, 2007: 75)

competitions – Elvis, Priscilla, Lisa-Marie (Elvis' daughter) and Junior Elvis – and the day concludes with several feature performances in different local clubs by touring professional Elvis impersonators. The highlights of the Sunday are the highly attended Gospel Church Service, further competitions and performances and the unveiling of a new plaque on the Elvis Wall (at the park where the Festival first began) to commemorate another 'legend' of Australian rock 'n' roll music (often one of the previous night's top-billing performers). The wall itself surrounds gates that are a replica of the gates of Presley's Graceland mansion in Memphis. A talent contest with more diverse themes brings the festival to an end as most visitors return on Sunday night often over considerable distances. A special train (the Elvis Express) runs from Sydney (Figure 11.2), with the support of CountryLink rail which has become the main sponsor of the festival. Many of those who use the train are dressed as Elvis or Priscilla and CountryLink provides its own Elvis impersonator to perform in the carriages. By 2010, the Elvis Express had eight carriages and almost 400 passengers: the physical capacity of the line. A second train from Melbourne has been planned.

On some occasions Elvis movies have been shown and the local lawn bowling club has urged visitors to 'kick off your blue suede shoes' and have a game. An Elvis celebrant is available for couples to marry or renew

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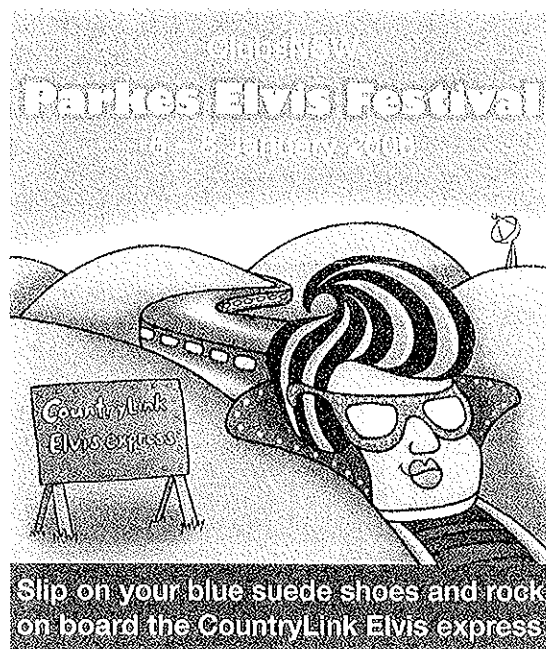


Figure 11.2 The CountryLink Elvis Express (Source: State Rail, promotional material 2005)

marriage vows during the weekend, and that has become extremely popular. Elvis buskers occupy all the street corners (and there is a prize for the best), and the Private Collection of memorabilia of Elvis Lennox – with a pink Cadillac parked in the driveway – is open to visitors. The emergence of Parkes as home of the Elvis Festival played a pivotal role in influencing Neville to take on the icon's name:

I prefer Elvis to Neville, me original first name. After the first two years of competition here in the look-alikes – I won that in 93, 94 – and walking up the street or down the street, whichever the case is and you hear people yell out across the street at ya 'g'day Elvis' and that. And I said, 'ya know, that would be an idea'. So I put it to me mother, asked her permission to do so and she said 'you go ahead and do with it what you want'. And I said, 'thankyou very much'. Paid 75 dollars and had it legally changed. (Interview, 2004)

An avid collector, Lennox amassed a formidable amount of Elvis paraphernalia, some of which comes from a personal trip to Memphis in 1997, the same year as his name change (Brennan-Horley *et al.*, 2007), and he has been a stalwart of the organising committee since the Festival began.

In its second year, the festival brought visitors from further afield, including Western Australia and Queensland, and added a clambake at Gracelands, with sand and surfboards brought in to transform the car park. The Parkes Tourism Promotions Officer heralded it a success, and conceded that it had become an integral part of the annual events calendar.

Although interest grew steadily, the organisation of early festivals was a struggle, and even the elements conspired against success. In two of the first four years, bush fires prevented visitors leaving coastal New South Wales to travel inland and then floods cut off the town. The small number of visitors suggested that the Festival might founder. However the local rugby team decided to support the Festival as a fun event and began what has become a tradition of dressing up as tacky Elvis look-alikes, in jumpsuits from the late Las Vegas years. Since then for the entire period of the Festival the town, and especially the venues, is seemingly awash with Elvis impersonators (Figure 11.3) which for many creates a colour and atmosphere that is the hilarious highlight of the Festival. Local support and this new image first got the Festival through difficult times.

Even so for most of the 1990s the Festival barely survived; leadership was lacking and local event management skills were few. As Kelly Hendry, the Parkes Tourism Manager, explained:

It started off small and started to grow. The word started to get out and the media coverage got out about the festival but I guess the lack of resources and lack of skills among the committee and just a few different things, and lack of support from the community saw numbers start to dwindle and the festival nearly fell over a couple of years ago. That's when the tourism board got back on board again. (Interview, 2004)

For its first decade the Festival struggled to galvanise support amongst people who perceived it as tacky, inappropriate for a respectable country town, with no local relevance and taking place in the hottest month of the year when temperatures were normally above 30 degrees and 'escaping' to the coast was almost essential. Many people saw the 'Dish' as a more appropriate symbol of the town, and an American performer who had probably died of a drug overdose as at best irrelevant and at worse degrading.

However, external media coverage never flagged and each year new visitors arrived for the Festival. As the Parkes Tourism Board gradually

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Figure 11.3 Elvis impersonators busk outside the Royal Hotel, Parkes, 2010 (Photo: John Connell)

warmed to it publicity increased and numbers too gradually increased. As Kelly Hendry observed, 'it's got that uniqueness and no one else is doing it' (Interview, 2004). By the early years of this century the street parade was drawing a crowd of around 2500, with one or two hundred at most of the commercial events, and more than 500 estimated to have come from outside the town. In 2006, organisers estimated that over 5000 people participated in the festival. Since then it has grown and estimates for 2010 suggest that as many as 10,000 had come into Parkes at the peak time on Saturday morning.

For the first time in 2002, media coverage became international, with Japanese film crews setting up noodle tents to feed hungry Elvises. The kitsch element of the festival was growing too. While the Parkes Shire Council eventually provided financial support, and it is now partly locally funded and sponsored, it is run largely voluntarily by a committee of locals, tourism promoters and Elvis fans, with all profits going to local

charities. In recent years, further financial support has come from the New South Wales State government and major sponsors. By 2010, there were ten of these, including the regional Rex Airlines, Country Energy and North Parkes Mine, and a host of minor sponsors. In 2004, it was officially supported for the first time by the New South Wales State government, under the Regional Flagship Events Programme, with the Minister for Tourism observing that

What the Parkes Elvis Revival Festival does for regional New South Wales is act as a flagship by attracting more tourists. The Festival is always the highlight of the New Year in central New South Wales. (Quoted in *Parkes Champion Post*, 17 January 2005: 3)

By the 18th festival in 2010, which coincided with what would have been Elvis's 75th birthday, there were some 140 distinct events spread over five days (ranging from Bingo with Elvis and Hunka Hunka Breakfast with Elvis through dozens of musical events to the Elvis Golf Challenge), approximately 400 or 500 Elvis impersonators (not all of whom, fortunately, sung), and 10,000 visitors, half of whom were from the nearby region. By then the Sunday morning Gospel Service had become the single largest event with more than 2000 people. What had begun in the local Baptist church now took place in the giant Woolworth's car park, the only 'venue' in town that was large enough. Five years earlier, the key parts of the Festival – the main open air stage and markets – had moved from a peripheral location to the very centre of the town, where they were more accessible to shops. Elvis had come to town.

Visitors: Who, Where from and Why Elvis?

Tourist numbers have become considerable, and now larger than the population of Parkes. Festival visitors were first surveyed in 2003 (125 respondents) and have been since every year, providing data on their demography, expenditure patterns, transport arrangements, accommodation type, motivations to visit and their experiences in Parkes.

The age of visitors to the festival has always been somewhat older than that at other music festivals, although intriguingly it is almost identical to that at the very different Opera in The Paddock (an annual event in a field several kilometres outside Inverell, northern NSW), at which we have also conducted research. The Elvis Festival is dominated by people from the 45 to 65-year-old cohort, who made up over 60 percent of all visitors in every year since we started surveying visitors. In 2010, some 84% of respondents were aged over 45. This distribution was unsurprising,

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port has come from the New South Wales government. By 2010, there were 15 airlines, Country Energy and 10 sponsors. In 2004, it was officially recognised by the New South Wales State government, with the Minister for

responsible for regional New South Wales. The Festival is a major tourist attraction in central New South Wales. (New South Wales Government 2005: 3)

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140 distinct events spread across the region (including the Hunka Hunka Breakfast and the Elvis Golf Challenge), and visitors (not all of whom, fortunately, were from the nearby Parkes. What had begun in the town of Parkes, at Woolworth's car park, the

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has been somewhat older. Interestingly it is almost identical to the Hunka Hunka Breakfast (an annual event in the central-western NSW), at which the festival is dominated by people aged over 60 percent of all visitors. In 2010, some 84% of the distribution was unsurprising,

reflecting the considerable popularity of Elvis with people who experienced their youth when Elvis was alive and active as a performer. That there was some 'aging' between 2003 and 2010 may have partly reflected return visiting. Younger people were fewer, and those who were present tended to see the event as a fun 'kitsch' or 'retro' event, rather than about nostalgia or reminiscence.

Festival visitors came from a range of occupational backgrounds. In 2003 and 2004, the largest group were professionals, a group well known for their propensity to travel and for their high levels of attendance at festivals, followed by tradespersons, retirees, and managers and administrators. By 2010, the largest group was now retirees, again suggesting return visits, but professionals and trades people were well represented.

In 2003, as many as 80% had not attended an Elvis Revival Festival before, but respondents enthusiastically said that they were likely to return to the festival. Of those who had attended previously, most had visited in several consecutive years – a measure of the presence of 'devotees' at the festival, for whom the Elvis festival was much more than mere entertainment. By 2010, some 53% had not attended before; return visits had become much more important. Of those who had been before a dozen had been more than 10 times. A couple had been to every one.

In early years, word-of-mouth and newspaper advertisements were the most common ways that visitors found out about the festival, with a modest rise in visits to the festival website in 2004, perhaps a reflection of increases in the numbers of younger people attending. By 2010, word of mouth was again most important but over a third of visitors claimed 'prior knowledge': the Festival was now well known. Direct advertisement was less crucial.

Much like other festivals, most visitors came from nearby. Many participants were from Parkes itself and more than half were from regional New South Wales, especially the central-west region that includes Parkes. Of the 30% who were from further afield most came from Sydney and fewer from other states. However, it was these more distant visitors who were more likely to stay several nights, to spend substantial sums of money especially on evening club performances, to be 'serious' Elvis enthusiasts (often members of Elvis fan clubs, and rock 'n' roll clubs, such as Lithgow Workers Rebel Rockers Dance Club) and more likely to come repeatedly. By 2010, the Elvis Express had become a reunion of old friends, singing, dancing and reminiscing, and eating Elvis Cupcakes and Love me Tender Chicken, throughout the journey.

Most people attending the Festival not surprisingly came for fun, relaxation and a sense of community. When prompted on their experiences, well over 90% had enjoyed the entertainment, country hospitality and music. Between 2003 and 2010, that never changed. A little less important as a general rationale was 'Because I'm an Elvis fan', so that the Festival involved many people who were there because it was a fun weekend, for whom a generalised nostalgia was sometimes of significance, but the actual theme was not necessarily the key to participation. There was also a large minority for whom being an Elvis fan constituted the main reason for participation, and who eagerly anticipated the festival year after year.

Many saw the festival as an opportunity to let their hair down: 'I put all my Elvis things on this morning. I can't wear it around Warwick [Queensland] because people would think we were a bit queer, but here we can express ourselves' (Interview, 2007). For others nostalgia dominated: 'It brings back your youth. And it's just the joy you experience now. I play Elvis music every day. Not many days go by that I don't actually sing Elvis music. I spend about five hours a week doing Elvis things' (Interview, 2010). For such people, travelling to Parkes was something of a pilgrimage.

Return visitors were more likely than others to be Elvis fans, enjoy the music and enjoy spending time with friends and family. Such testimonies indicate the manner in which festivals – even the most seemingly esoteric or incidental – transcend daily life and bring a range of meanings to individual lives. For a handful of fans, the visit to Parkes was akin to pilgrimage (cf. King, 1994), albeit a pale reflection of the trip to Graceland in Memphis, but the closest that Australia can offer. Some visitors suggest the presence of 'postmodern' tourists (or post-tourists), visiting Parkes for the humorous and kitsch ('everything was sensational, baby! uh huh huh!'; 'eating at Gracelands – wow – I've been to Gracelands!') (Figure 11.4). For particularly committed fans of Elvis, there is essentially no other means of expressing such devotion, without lengthy and expensive travel to America.

The Town Becomes Full

On our first visit to the Festival in 2002, it was possible to arrive in Parkes on the Saturday morning in time for the parade and book into a motel for Saturday night. Hotels and motels still had some spare capacity. That quickly ended as numbers grew. Parkes had succeeded so well from the Festival that, by 2006, it effectively reached the limits of local

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Figure 11.4 'Eldest Presley', Parkes Elvis Revival Festival, 2010 (Photo: John Connell)

accommodation, and Parkes has 13 motels with about 1000 bed spaces. Not only had Parkes become full, but towns such as Forbes, some 35 km away, were also full. Dubbo, even further away, was almost booked out by the end of the decade. Routinely by the end of one festival signs have gone up outside all the motels that Parkes is already booked for the following year, a further indication of the strength of return visiting.

In 2004, Parkes made the decision to establish a 'tent city' on the edge of the town where visitors could hire tents and have access to basic facilities, and where caravans could also be parked. That was modelled on the experience of the Tamworth Country Music Festival where a tent city had long been successful. The same company that established the Tamworth tent city developed the Parkes tent city, and revenue mainly accrued to the operator.

Two years later, Parkes decided to establish home hosting modelled on similar schemes in the larger NSW towns of Gunnedah and Bathurst, in

association with festivals in those places. The intention was to meet continually expanding demand, ensure that more revenue from accommodation remained in Parkes and provide a friendly and homely experience. Other NSW towns, including Moree and Tamworth have subsequently adopted the scheme.

This home stay system involves local residents with spare bedrooms offering their homes as accommodation, and in return they receive \$40 dollars per guest per night. The majority of the money made from home hosting goes either to the hosts or to the festival itself, helping the income remain in the town. Hosts provide a continental breakfast and a ride to and from the train station as guests arrive and depart. In 2006, the first year, just four homes and 15 guests stayed. By 2010, there were 125 homes and 547 guests (and 1561 bed nights; most visitors stayed for three nights). In other words, home hosting provided a third of the formal beds in Parkes. The cost to the guest was \$66 per bed per night, of which \$50 goes to the host, \$10 to the Elvis Festival committee and the remaining six dollars used to partially cover the expenses of the home hosting programme coordinator. Both hosts and guests were enthusiastic about the programme and many guests returned to the same host in subsequent years. Almost all the hosts joined the programme to support the local committee and the town; just a couple were in it 'for the money'. While most hosts were genuinely altruistic and enjoyed meeting people the income generated was valuable at a time of economic stress. As one host said: 'it's been the savior of the town with the drought' (Interview, 2010). Revenue went directly into the hands (and pockets) of local residents, increased interest in hosting and widened local support for the Festival.

The Economic Impact of Elvis

Like many small festivals the Elvis Festival made no money in its early years, and that in itself meant that local support was subdued or non-existent. But by the 2000s, that was changing rapidly. Visitor surveys in 2004 indicated that economic impact of the festival had already become considerable. Visitors then spent an average of A\$440 per person over the festival weekend, translating to an injection of over A\$1.1 million into the local economy. Accommodation (averaging A\$142 per person), food and drink (A\$134) and entertainment (A\$51) were the most common forms of expenditure, with smaller amounts spent on souvenirs (A\$43) and other services such as fuel (A\$28). For a town of its size, that expenditure was considerable; both because there were

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Some of that local expenditure went to the local market stalls. In its earliest years, there was virtually no commercial presence, and even in 2002 there were merely a dozen stalls doing a desultory business selling local goods. By 2008, the number of market stalls had passed a hundred and the main park was so crowded that numbers had to be cut back to 70 in 2009 to allow crowd movement. Stalls now sold local rural goods – honey, jams, soaps and handicrafts – while some stallholders came from inter-state as part of a national circuit (Figure 11.5). Only a handful sold Elvis memorabilia. Local businesses – the Rotary Club, the Lions Club, schools, the fire

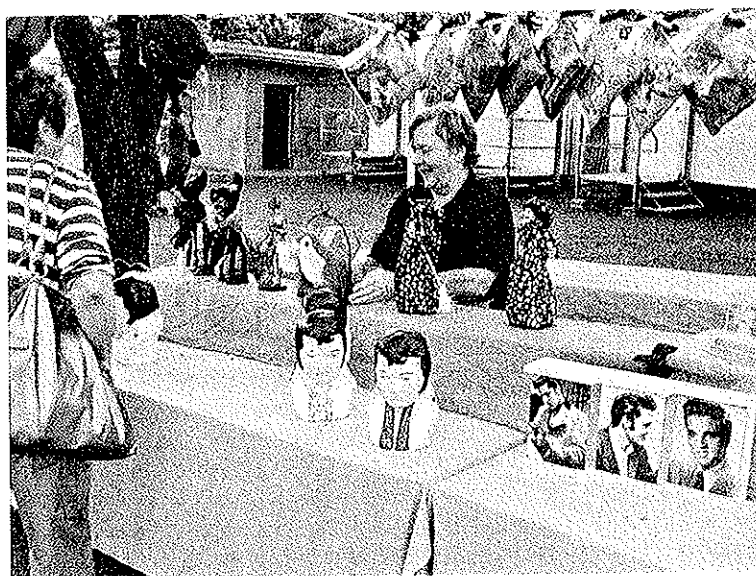


Figure 11.5 Stallholder, Parkes Elvis Presley Revival Festival 2010 (Photo: John Connell)

brigade and so on – had their own stalls and barbeques that did good business. Indeed, most things sold well. As one visitor observed:

You've got Elvis wine, Elvis beer, Elvis tooth brushes, there's heaps of stuff – it's really tacky ... the tackier it is the better it is ... I mean people are buying 45 foot Elvis rugs ... which is classic behaviour at a festival ... the details are irrelevant. People consume all this memorabilia because people are in the spirit of it and that's what a festival does, it changes your behaviour. (Interview, 2007)

The majority of formal Parkes businesses recognise that trade increases during the Festival, to the measurable extent that across years we surveyed businesses (2004–2008) a quarter of businesses put on extra staff over the weekend, adding a total of between 30 and 50 jobs to the town. Predictably, restaurants, cafes, clubs and accommodation facilities accounted for the bulk of new shifts created. These businesses were also those with the highest dependency on local suppliers and labour. The festival improved employment multiplier impacts by generating extra work in those activities that, in turn, are most closely embedded in the local economy rather than others that rely on goods and services (such as books and clothes) imported from state capitals and beyond. Over time, the businesses that benefited most from the influx of visitors stayed open much longer; Saturday afternoons and even Sundays were much less 'dead' than in earlier years or on other weekends, and further multiplier effects ensued. Elvis had been taken on board.

Whose Town?

Until quite recently, Parkes rarely mentioned the Festival in any of its standard tourist publications, preferring to advertise itself as the town with 'The Dish', and as a prominent regional commercial centre. Its long-standing tourism brochure simply ignored the Festival. Only since 2007, has it been officially mentioned.

In the 2004 survey, local businesses were questioned about the appropriateness of the festival as a marker of place identity, as opposed to other options such as 'The Dish'. Opinions were divided. The majority (62%) were strongly supportive, most of the remainder were 'mildly supportive' while some 5% expressed no support at all for the festival. Over 80% of businesses agreed that the festival had a positive impact on publicising Parkes as a tourist destination, yet over 65% either mildly or strongly favoured 'The Dish' as a source of more appropriate imagery.

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Business reaction to the Festival was mirrored in broader community sentiments. But as the Festival grew these too became more positive. Interviews with some thirty local residents immediately after the 2009 Festival found either substantial support, or mere indifference, with little significant hostility. For some it was 'the best thing that has ever happened here'; an 81-year-old noted 'it's great for the town and the people'. Another woman argued: 'Those who only think of the Dish live in the past and we have to be more creative now'. While some preferred to stay away from the crowds or Elvis was 'not my thing', just one 61-year-old woman was bitterly opposed: 'I hate it; it closes off the main street, there's no access to businesses. Since the first one, really rude people came from Sydney. Prices go up. We should promote the dish and our good restaurants, but we're under the thumb of the council'. By contrast, perhaps most convincing of all was the woman who explained

I hated it when it first started. It was ridiculous and stupid and wasn't the image that was at all appropriate to our town. But over the years I watched and could see that it was making money and wasn't so bad. Last year I took in homestays and had six more visitors this year - lovely people and I made over \$600. (Interview, 2009)

Winning over the majority of local people was eventually possible. A year later, a more detailed survey (Jetty Research & UTS 2010) found even more overwhelming support, recognising the short-term economic benefits at festival time and the longer-term benefits from tourism, while, significantly, at least 20% stated that their views had changed over the years, and they were now more positive about the festival. Many had participated and become involved as volunteers or additional paid staff.

Even the successful film *The Dish* (2000) had first provided something of a setback to Parkes since some saw it as making Parkes look backward by being based around the first moon landing (Brennan-Horley *et al.*, 2007). However, its commercial success brought some new interest in Parkes and greater enthusiasm for the film. Similarly the growing success of the Elvis Festival helped to change local perceptions of the event and garner further support and interest from local businesses and the wider community. The majority of local people not just came to terms with festival, but decidedly embraced it. As one homestay host said: 'If it's good for Parkes I'll be in it'. One local man, dressed in a jumpsuit with guitar, stated:

I've gone all out; there's no half measures in this town. I've got the wig and the suit, the rings and don't forget these awesome sunnies ... it's

tackalicious! I think if we were anywhere else we'd get bashed but around here you just get bought beers; it's fucking fantastic. (Interview, 2009)

By the mid-2000s, the mayors, and councillors, routinely dressed up and accompanied the train on the large stage to Parkes, crowds of several hundred welcomed the train, and draped visitors in leis (not only in the Hawaii years). The Festival had become part of Parkes life.

Parkes has succeeded despite the scepticism and downright opposition of some of the townsfolk, concerned about the image and status of the town. Some prefer the link to an Australian icon – 'The Dish' – as the appropriate image for a town named after the founder of Australian Federation, while others still object to what they see as a tawdry celebration of popular culture. Nonetheless, enough are well aware of the economic benefits: most stores on the main street have increasingly decorated their windows and entered into the Festival spirit, and what was once a more divided community has benefited substantially and come to terms with its strange musical identity.

Elvis has Not Left the Building

Over time, the residents of Parkes have adopted Elvis. He was never their choice as a symbol but in the end they have adapted to life with Elvis, just as the wider world has come to see Parkes as the Elvis town. For the first time in 2009, an English newspaper, *The Independent*, featured Parkes and Elvis in its travel section. In Parkes, its growing Elvis reputation led former Wiggles member Greg Page (the yellow Wiggle in the world's most popular children's television band) to choose the town to locate his collection of Elvis memorabilia (the fourth largest such collection in the world) – forming the basis of a new permanent museum. The collection was housed in its own building, next to a rather dowdy 'traditional' museum of no great interest. Parkes is now home to, amongst many other things, the gold lamé suit (worn by Elvis on the cover of *50,000,000 Elvis Fans Can't Be Wrong*); as well as Elvis and Priscilla's marriage certificate, and the last Cadillac Elvis owned. The tourism potential of such a museum collection in what was previously a fairly anonymous rural Australian town cannot be overstated. Just as importantly the new museum has given Parkes a year-long Elvis presence and, in a place with no other distinct tourist attractions, provides a rationale for visiting and remaining a little longer, remembering the experience and cementing the connection between Parkes and Elvis.

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adopted Elvis. He was never able to adapt to life with Elvis, as much as the Elvis town. For the *Independent*, featured Parkes growing Elvis reputation led fellow Wiggles in the world to choose the town to locate his largest such collection in the recent museum. The collection is a rather dowdy 'traditional' town home to, amongst many things, is on the cover of 50,000,000 Elvis and Priscilla's marriage. The tourism potential of Parkes is obviously a fairly anonymous town. Just as importantly the new presence and, in a place with a rationale for visiting and experience and cementing the

Small, struggling towns in rural Australia have promoted festivals of all sorts, both as community-building exercises and because they can attract visitors. Few have been anywhere near as successful as Parkes, despite an unpromising theme and an inauspicious beginning. The Parkes Elvis Festival demonstrates how a small place can stage a festival in a relatively remote location, on a theme of no local relevance, and succeed despite itself. Indeed Parkes succeeded against long odds: droughts and floods, early local hostility and a festival site on the fringes of town, an incredulous national press and an oppressive climate. Most other festivals linked to individual musical performers try to generate a link to that performer – whether birth place, place of death or place of famous recordings (Gibson & Connell, 2005). This is not so in Parkes. Although it has now become known throughout Australia as a location associated with Elvis, Parkes has wholly invented this association.

Myth and tradition are not always tied to authenticity and credibility where tourism and festivals are concerned. Like Bundanoon (see Chapter 16), Parkes has become the site of an 'invented tradition', where a particular image has been grafted on to a place, linked to a particular imagined historic past, but assumed to have been ever present (Hobsbawm, 1983). However, unlike 'traditions' now widely if incorrectly accepted as innate (such as tartan kilts in Scotland), it is quite clear to all that there is no Elvis tradition in Parkes. The town has succeeded in spite of itself and created a celebration of kitsch, fantasy and popular culture that is as 'real' as any celebration of Elvis in Australia could be. Its many supporters derive a variety of sensory experiences and pleasures from the Festival, none more so than the serious Elvis fans for whom it is an annual ritual (Mackellar, 2009). The town has effectively, if belatedly, deployed what can be seen as 'strategic inauthenticity' (Taylor, 1997), placing the town on the tourist map, thus creating a form of 'invented geography'. Parkes' identity is no longer just as a wheat town, the home of the 'Dish' or the 'crossroads of a nation', but is also a place that resonates nostalgically of an American legend (Figure 11.6).

Parkes thus mirrors somewhat similar tourist destinations in the United States, notably Roswell (New Mexico) and Metropolis (Illinois), of which the former became the 'UFO capital of the world' (Paradis, 2002) and the latter the home of Superman, the comic book superhero who is based in the fictional city of Metropolis. In both places, festivals celebrate such invented spatial relationships. Such towns have been able to gain significant economic and social benefits by developing and trading on unlikely, improbable, even wholly fictitious and sometimes 'unworthy' events and associations. Perhaps ironically, in 2010, Parkes, anxious to develop



Figure 11.6 Parkes railway station, Elvis Revival Festival 2010 (Photo: John Connell)

Festivals at other times of the year, were contemplating a Tedfest festival for the fictitious Father Ted, the star of the cult comedy television series, simply because there was not one in Australia.

Both locals and tourists have questioned the longevity and sustainability of the Elvis Revival Festival but, so far, it has grown each year and many visitors keep coming back. By 2010, the apparent joke had become an institution supported by the local council, the state and the nation. It had also seen off competition – including competition from nearby Forbes which once mounted a jazz festival on the same weekend. In 2001, the small South Australian seaside town of Victor Harbor launched the Festival of the King, this time marking the date of Presley's death. For the first time, Parkes had a form of direct competition for the 'Elvis market', though that too proved to be short lived. Elvis had come to just one town.

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Festival 2010 (Photo: John)

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