

Stars immortalized on Country Music Highway

By **LYNNE AUSTIN**
The Herald-Dispatch

Tears swell in Faye Whitley's eyes as she remembers her last conversation with her son, country music superstar Keith Whitley. "I talked to him a couple of hours before he died and he was OK," she said. "But that's a story for another time."

While his untimely death in 1989 still saddens her, she's memorialized his career in a museum along Eastern Kentucky's Country Music Highway at her home in Sandy Hook. The community also remembers its favorite son with a lifelike statue that was erected last summer.

"When the wind blows, I want to take a coat and put it around his shoulders," his mother said. "It looks so much like him."

Keith Whitley's museum is one of many stops along U.S. 23, and just off the beaten path, that takes country music fans on a tour of their favorite stars' homeplaces and offers day trippers a great variety of family activities.

The 150-mile stretch of the four-lane highway meanders from Greenup County, Ky., to the Virginia border taking travelers through the hometowns of 12 well-known entertainers, including Billy Ray Cyrus, Naomi and Wynonna Judd, Ricky Skaggs, sisters Loretta Lynn and Crystal Gayle, Hyle Brown, Dwight Yoakam, Patty Loveless, Gary Stewart, Tom T. Hall and Keith Whitley.

Attractions along the drive give fans a chance to peer into country music's history and the opportunity to take in the scenic beauty of Appalachia in Kentucky. In recognition of the stars who grew up along the route, Kentucky's 1994 General Assembly passed a resolution allowing the roadway from north of Ashland at South Shore to the Virginia line at Letcher County be designated the Country Music Highway.

The famous entertainers are noted along the trail on a rectangular brown highway sign erected in their home counties. While the signs offers travelers easily accessible information about stars' origins, most of the attractions along the route take a little more searching to uncover.

Whitley's museum in Sandy Hook, off U.S. 23 and west on Kentucky 32, gives his fans a glimpse into his private life and a tour of his costumes, records and musical equipment.

His mother once housed the museum in a garage behind her home that she opened to more than 50 people each day. But the constant traffic and demands on her time have pushed Whitley to move her son's memorabilia next door to the Elliott County Extension Office for display.

"So many wanted to come and



Melissa Moore/The Herald-Dispatch

Country music singer Keith Whitley's mother, Faye Whitley, sits in her son's bedroom speaking about tourists who have come to see his home in Sandy Hook, Ky. Whitley's room has been kept as he had it.

see his things," she said. "It's not that I'm being disloyal to Keith — I just needed time."

Still, she welcomes visitors who want to see where her son once lived. His room contains many of the same pictures, artwork and furniture it did when he lived there, including a fan's painting of Keith with his father and dogs surrounded by cabins and the mountains.

His guitar also still lies on his bed along with a small picture.

"A lot of the girls who come to visit want to sit on his bed," his mom said with a mischievous smile.

Another stop along the tour gives travelers the chance to learn about the lives of two of country music's favorite sisters while sifting through the history of coal mining in Eastern Kentucky. The

old coal town of Van Lear, home to Loretta Lynn and Crystal Gayle, takes travelers through winding roads to the stars' homeplace at Butcher Hollow, off U.S. 23 and Kentucky 302.

The town seems similar to its humble beginnings in the 1930s and 1940s, when the large coal companies owned everything — the land, the houses where the miners lived and even the stores where they bought their groceries.

Old coal company houses still line the dirt covered roads of the tiny town. The once-bustling town of 5,000 now offers its few residents peace of mind in a home that is rich with tradition.

Herman Webb, Lynn's and Gale's brother, came home to Van Lear in the 1970s after moving

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Faye Whitley

Keith Whitley's mother about a lifelike statue erected in honor of the late country music superstar

away to chase a job. Now, at 65, he takes visitors on tours of Lynn's homeplace and tends to his Van Lear General Store, the former No. 5 shop for Consolidated Coal Company.

"I was homesick I guess," he said while lounging behind the counter at his store. "This place makes me remember my childhood. It used to be a busy place, larger than Paintsville."

Pictures of his famous sisters and the town of his childhood line the walls of his store, full of staple foods and treats, including homemade apple butter. Of course, fans also can get a picture book full of Lynn's family snapshots or a T-shirt of Butcher Hollow.

"People used to line up for supplies back in the war times. The food was rationed so they wanted to get here early," Webb said.

"People also turned out for church and baseball," he said, pointing to a picture of a community event in the 1940s.

Lynn's homeplace, a short drive from the store on a dead-end gravel road, still stands as it did when she lived there offering fans a sense of how she used to live.

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As Webb guides visitors through the wooden shack and the family's history, he talks about the early days and the eight children. With a soft voice and mannerisms similar to his famous sister's, he explains the memorabilia of the country music legends displayed throughout the home.

Near the head of Butcher Hollow, a small one-room yellow schoolhouse still stands as it did when Lynn was growing up. In fact, her grandfather helped build it, Webb said.

"There's a lot of history here," said Grace Fitzpatrick who lives up the hollow. "People come here from everywhere. I've got all kinds of addresses and write to them."

Her uncle, Hershel Butcher, now owns the schoolhouse and has tried to restore it to its former appearance, she said.

"Somebody made a garage out of it and he had to redo the whole front," she said. "It also once was a church."

Other attractions in the small town include a museum housed in the old coal headquarters, just down the road from Webb's store. Visitors can see the doctor's table where Loretta Lynn found out she was pregnant with her first child, a diorama of Van Lear in its busy days and memorabilia of the town's schools and coal mines.

While Whitley's and Lynn's homes remain intact, other entertainers' names on signs along the highway simply let travelers know these are their childhood stomping grounds. But attractions from the Mountain Home Place at Paintsville to Fred Vinson's birthplace and Jenny Wiley's grave, and markers, mansions and monuments bring to life the people and events that gave the region its unique background.

Live entertainment is offered throughout the summer at the theater at Jenny Wiley State

Resort Park and year-round at the Mountain Arts Center in Prestonsburg and the Paramount Arts Center in Ashland. The Paramount's Highway 23 Jamboree offers family-centered entertainment complete with interaction and insight into the heritage of bluegrass and country music.

Unique stops along the highway also include the L&J Tops 'O Kreem in Flatwoods where Billy Ray Cyrus' favorite booth has memorabilia from his career under a glass table top and the Sunoco station in Louisa, complete with its own funky architecture, houses a display of guitars and clothing that once belonged to the stars.

The Highland Museum and Discovery Center in Ashland also honors the famous entertainers in a permanent \$200,000 country music exhibit called "Country Music Heritage."

The first part of the 2,000 square foot exhibit, featuring the Judds, opened November 1996. Additional exhibits featuring other stars from Eastern Kentucky are being added as memorabilia is collected and funds become available.

Information about the highway and maps to attractions are available at a variety of locations including the Ashland Area Convention and Visitors Bureau. For more information, call (606) 329-1007.



Melissa Moore/The Herald-Dispatch
The brother of Loretta Lynn and Crystal Gale, Herman Webb, shows off family photos in the Van Lear General Store which used to be the former No. 5 shop for Consolidated Coal Co.