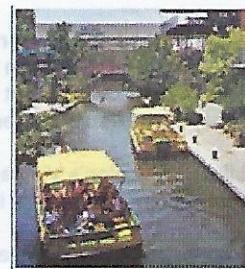
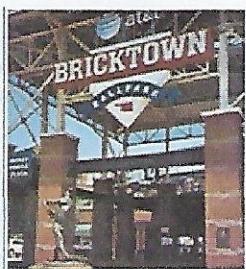


OKLAHOMA CITY CREATES BIG-LEAGUE IMAGE

By Dan Schlossberg

Although Hurricane Katrina was a catastrophe for New Orleans, it proved to be a miracle for Oklahoma City.

The New Orleans Hornets, flooded out of their Louisiana home, played most of their home games in the Oklahoma capital during the 2005-06 and 2006-07 seasons – convincing National Basketball Association commissioner David Stern that Oklahoma City could support its own club.



Now, it has one.

The Seattle SuperSonics, plagued by poor attendance prompted by a creaky arena, will spend the 2008-09 NBA season at the Ford Center, a 20,000-seat arena opened in 2002. They'll have a new nickname and new color scheme, as well as a strong desire to shake off last season's 20-62 record, the worst of their Seattle tenure.

They will also be the first big-league team to make Oklahoma City their permanent home.

The franchise brings a storied history: 20 trips to the NBA playoffs, a player (Lenny Wilkens) who later became the career leader in wins by a coach, and a championship season (1979).

Most of all, the still-unnamed team brings credibility to a city too often considered to be nothing more than a mix of oil wells, cowboys, and rednecks.

Delegates to the three-night June convention of the North American Travel Journalists Association [NATJA] found many reasons to return.

Among other things, they discovered a myriad of world-class museums, western art, and waterways – hardly what they expected in a destination located almost exactly in the nation's center.

The 46th state to join the Union, Oklahoma has more driveable miles of the legendary Route 66 than anyone else. It also has 80 per cent of the world's western art, 77 counties, and a list of famous natives that includes Will Rogers, Walter Cronkite, and the Waners – the only brother combination in the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Statues and plaques outside the AT&T Bricktown Ballpark, home of the Triple-A Oklahoma City RedHawks, honor both Waners, plus fellow Oklahoma natives Mickey Mantle, Johnny Bench, Carl Hubbell – all immortalized in Cooperstown.

The RedHawks, top farm team of the Texas Rangers, play in a brick ballpark that stands directly across the street from Mickey Mantle's, an upscale steakhouse loaded with baseball memorabilia, and symbolizes the revitalization of the once-blighted area.

Construction of a meandering, mile-long canal, coupled with the introduction of yellow water taxis, has made Bricktown "the" place to go in downtown Oklahoma City.

It's within walking distance of the Hotel Skirvin Hilton – another successful midtown

makeover – and a plethora of visitor-friendly attractions, from a movie multi-plex to restaurants and nightspots of every size, description, and taste.

The city's museums also have wide appeal. Oklahoma City actually has three Halls of Fame – for softball, gymnastics, and photography – plus such oddities as a telephone museum, firefighters museum, railroad museum and museum of women pilots.

Its most famous institution is the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, a multi-gallery mix of gardens, paintings, and statues – even including Ronald Reagan, a lover of all things western.

The Oklahoma History Center, across from the governor's mansion, is an 18-acre, 215,000-square feet learning center that explores everything from geology, commerce, and culture to weather, transportation, and famous faces. There's even a section on outlaws like Bonnie & Clyde, who once terrorized the territory.

If there's a piece of hallowed ground in Oklahoma City, it has to be the land formerly occupied by the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. Bombed without warning by Timothy McVeigh on April 19, 1995, it is now marked by a rectangular reflecting pond with arches at both ends – one indicating the time just before the cataclysm (9:02) and the other indicating the beginning of the healing process (9:03).

A grassy embankment on one side bears concrete chairs for each of the 168 victims, many of them children in a day care center. Their child-size chairs, along with all the others, are illuminated at night, making the memorial a must-see both during the day (when its museum is open) and after dark.

Like Washington's Vietnam Wall, there's a fence with artifacts and notes placed by friends and family in memory of those lost.

Native Americans also have long memories. Although Oklahoma still has 39 tribes – about half the original number before the Trail of Tears fiasco – they had no monument before ground was broken on the American Indian Cultural Center & Museum. When it opens in 2012, it is expected to become an international tourist attraction.

The Chesapeake Boathouse already has international ties, as the site of tryouts for the U. S. Olympic crew team. A premier destination for college, professional, and recreational rowing, the Oklahoma River also has banks lined with 13 miles of multi-use, asphalt trails. Vessels of various descriptions, including river cruisers, ply the waters daily.

The home of both spectator and participation sports, Oklahoma City keeps locals happy with arena football (the Yard Dawgs), minor-league hockey (the Blazers), and Big 12 Conference college sports (Oklahoma State and Oklahoma University). The arrival of the erstwhile SuperSonics, plus the continued success of the RedHawks, helps too.

Flushed with the economic and aesthetic success of Bricktown, Oklahoma City anticipates such a bright future that it has ticketed \$1 billion – with a "b" – for various downtown, Bricktown, and riverside projects.

Rest assured, however, that it's legacy is not being overlooked: Oklahoma City still has the world's biggest stocker-feeder cattle market, the historic Cattleman's Restaurant, and an oil well dubbed Petunia II because it rises from a bed of petunias planted by a former First Lady on the grounds of the governor's mansion.

The Hotel Skirvin Hilton, a twin-towered property that first opened in 1911, reopened on Feb. 26, 2007 after a facelift that restored its original elegance. The 225-room hotel, which hosted the NATJA national conference earlier this year, is within walking distance of Bricktown and the Oklahoma City National Memorial & Museum.

Getting in and out of town is easy: there never seems to be much traffic and Southwest Airlines provides service to various domestic destinations from the Will Rogers World Airport.

Going back is a no-brainer – at least for this columnist.