# “HERITAGE USA”



Abram (Stern) has put me on to the recent Boing Boing link to photos of the rotting Jesusland built by Jim Bakker.

Illicitohio.com spcializes in urban exploration in and around Ohio, photographing abandoned buildings and structures. They have a gallery devoted to “Heritage USA” and the PTL Club – 2000 acres of a Christian evangelist theme park in South Carolina.

Extraordinary.



Heritage USA – Fort Mill South Carolina

Based first in Charlotte, North Carolina, and then in Fort Mill, South Carolina, the PTL Club was one of the most successful ventures in televangelism for much of the 1970s and 1980s. PTL stood for both “Praise The Lord” and “People That Love.” Jim Bakker (b. January 2, 1940) and his wife, Tammy Faye (b. March 7, 1942), used the popular program as a springboard to develop a Pentecostally-oriented resort, theme park, shopping mall, cable network, and entertainment center called Heritage USA in Fort Mill. The complex drew more than five million visitors annually by the mid-1980s.

Bakker, once affiliated with the Assemblies of God, began his career in religious television in 1966 working with Pat Robertson. After leaving Robertson’s

employ in 1972, Bakker helped form the Trinity Broadcasting System in California. In January 1974, the PTL Club was launched in Charlotte. The Bakkers combined the traditional talk show format with lively religious entertainment, personal testimonies, and frequent pitches for financial support. Personal religious experience, usually of an emotional nature, was touted as the panacea for all problems.



The Bakker empire endured several run-ins with tax authorities, but when a sex scandal involving Bakker erupted in 1986 and 1987, he resigned in disgrace. Bakker turned over the PTL Club and Heritage USA to

Jerry Falwell, who remained at the helm only briefly. Bakker later served a prison term for income tax evasion. His wife divorced him and married one of his associates. Parts of Heritage USA endure, but by the 1990s it had ceased to be a monument to televangelism and evangelical popular culture.

Fore, William F. Television and Religion. Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg, 1987.

Frankl, Razelle. Televangelism: The Marketing of Popular Religion. Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987.

White, Cecile Holmes. “Jim and Tammy Bakker.” In Twentieth-Century Shapers of American Popular Religion, edited by Charles H. Lippy. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1989.

(Charles H. Lippy)

[Link]






The Fort Mill site was over 2000 acres. To give you an idea of the size, you could fit the original Disneyland, UK's Blackpoll Pleasure Beach, Six Flags Great America, and Universal Studio's Florida all inside the grounds together, and still have enough room left over to add Cedar Point, Knott's Berry Farm, and little old Geauga Lake Ohio… In other words, it's big.

The size of Heritage was impressive, but the quality of the park was equally noteworthy. This wasn't a thrown together mess of false facads on cheap little buildings like many parks, but instead, a well built, well planned, well landscaped, and well thought out resort. The quality was Disney like… and this was all done on a very fast paced schedule. The results reflected the time and effort put in to the build, and the attendance

numbers were proving it to be worth while!

At one point during the ‘life’ of Heritage, over 6 million people were visiting the park during the year. If I’m not mistaken, a well known park like Cedar Point here in Ohio gets around 3 million. I think Disney gets more like 12 or 15 million, but obviously 6 million is a huge number for an upstart like Heritage.

While I’m only touching on the park’s history, the PTL was actually much much more. Without getting in to everything, there were TV shows, studios, a church, a theater, basically an entire city …