



Britt Festivals 2006



For Britt Festivals, it all started back in 1963

BY CLEVE TWITCHELL

Britt Festival's is now in its fifth decade of existence. This year marks the 44th season for the popular summertime concert and performance series.

Back in 1963, John Trudeau, a conductor from Portland, and several friends were visiting Southern Oregon when they came across the hillside estate that had belonged to Jacksonville pioneer photographer and winemaker Peter Britt.

Since they were musicians, they immediately notice an amazing resonance to the hillside's acoustics, also a gorgeous view of the Rogue Valley in the distance.

So they decided the old Britt estate would be a good site for concerts. The wheels were set in motion. Volunteers erected a makeshift

stage of plywood and strung tin-can lights above. A small chamber orchestra was assembled and an outdoor summer music festival was born.

For about 15 years, Britt was solely a classical musical festival. Then the present pavilion was constructed in 1978 and this new facility helped enable expansion to the current format of jazz, folk, country, rock, blues and dance events along with classical.

Bench seats were added in 1987 so that patrons could buy reserved seats. They go quickly for the more popular events. Handicapped access was improved and more restrooms built in 1993.

The hillside has a capacity of 2,200, big enough so that the Britt management is financially able to afford world-class artists, yet small enough to maintain an intimate atmosphere.

In 2005, Britt made a major expansion move, staging three performances at the new Lithia Motors Amphitheater at the Jackson County Expo Park in Central Point. The venue features 1900 reserved seats and can accommodate another 4000 on the lawn, allowing Britt to bring in attractions that would not be possible at the Jacksonville park.

The list of performers who have come to Britt over the years reads like a who's who of show business: Tony Bennett, Randy Travis, Michael Bolton, Olivia Newton-John, Burt Bacharach, Ringo Starr, the Beach Boys, Ray Charles, Kenny Rogers, Willie Nelson, B.B. King, Anne Murray, Bill Cosby, Mel Torme, John Denver, Helen Reddy, Dionne Warwick and Kenny G.

The Britt park is owned by Jackson County and maintained by its parks department. Each ticket includes a park use fee.

The Britt Festivals Association is a non-profit performing arts organization which utilizes the Britt park under a long-term lease with Jackson County. The festival is supported by thousands of people who buy memberships and make additional contributions. In fact, about 40 percent of Britt's expenses are paid for by donations.

The festival has also helped to make even more famous a name that was already well known in Southern Oregon history.

As noted in an historical account on the Britt Festivals' Web site, Peter Britt (1819-1905) arrived in the Jacksonville, then a small, rowdy mining camp, in 1852 with \$5 in his pocket and a wagon full of photography equipment.

Like thousands before him, the Swiss immigrant came to America, and to the West, to make a new life for himself. By the time he died, half a century later, Britt had become one of Oregon's most celebrated citizens.

Through thousands of photographs, he chronicled 50 years of life and growth in Southern Oregon. Miners, farmers, ranchers, builders, bankers, merchants, clergymen, and families were all captured by Britt's lens.

From Jacksonville's beginnings in the 1850s to Southern Oregon's agricultural prominence at the turn of the century, Britt's photos tell the stories of those who settled and transformed the Southern Oregon region.

But Britt's photography represents only one aspect of his contribution to Oregon history. He was also a winemaker and opened Oregon's first winery. He planted fruit trees. At various times he was also a miner, packer, financier, bee-keeper and meteorologist.

A reconstructed stone foundation outlines Peter Britt's original home site in the lower Britt Garden.

Many of Britt's original trees are still producing fruit, and the Sequoia sapling Britt planted on the day his first child was born in 1874 now stands more than 200 feet tall. Visitors can find it down a path, about 50 yards from the home site.

For more about Britt - the man and the festival, check this Web site at www.brittfest.org

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