

Mississippi Band of Choctaws open new \$18M casino - Bloomberg

Written by Administrator

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SANDERSVILLE, Miss. (AP) — Las Vegas entertainer Wayne Newton flashed his blindingly perfect smile and five men dressed as Santa Claus parachuted from the sky Monday to help open a new casino in rural Mississippi.

The Bok Homa (BOHK HO-MUH) Casino is owned and operated by the

Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians. The gambling hall is on tribal land in the woods of Jones County, in the south central part of the state.

"I, too, am a very proud Native American," the tuxedoed Newton said. "And it's with great honor that I join my brothers and sisters from the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians in saying welcome to the newest star on the horizon. A big round of applause, ladies and gentlemen: Bok Homa."

Traffic backed up for more than an hour on two-lane roads leading to the 27,000-square-foot casino, which is about the size of a large suburban grocery store and does not have glitzy lights outside.

With sunny skies and temperatures in the low 50s, about 400 people stood in a brisk breeze and waited to get in. Several women screamed "Waaaayne! Waaaayne!" when Newton first appeared on an outdoor stage.

As the Santas drifted down from the sky on red, white and blue parachutes, four Choctaw youngsters, ages 3 through 5, jumped and squealed: "Santa! Santa!"

Once the doors opened, seats at hundreds of slot machines filled quickly as people dropped money into the flashing, clanging contraptions. Grady Payne, a resident of nearby Laurel, played a \$1 slot. He said he gambles every weekend at the Choctaws' other casino, the Silver Star, which is about 90 miles north of Bok Homa, outside Philadelphia, Miss.

"I actually think they should've built this casino bigger," said Payne, 58, who helps manufacture portable buildings. "I think it's a good thing for Sandersville, even though a lot of people were

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against it."

Religious groups and several politicians, including Republican Gov. Haley Barbour and Republican U.S. Rep. Gregg Harper, opposed the casino. Some local residents said they were worried that roads and water systems will be stressed by the development.

Addie Chinn, who teaches for the Laurel school system, waited in line to gamble Monday.

"I think of the job opportunities in this economy. It's good," Chinn said. "But I hope the casino doesn't just draw from the community. I hope it gives back to the community — to the local schools."

The Choctaws' miko (MEE-koh), or chief, Beasley Denson, said the \$18 million casino employs about 300 people, and he expects it to grow.

"We're coming in as a good neighbor," Denson said during a news conference before the opening.

The tribe is converting another of its casinos, the Golden Moon, into a concert venue. The Golden Moon is near the Silver Star, and its business slowed down as the economy sputtered in the past few years. Newton has appeared on Silver Star commercials since the casino opened in 1994.

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