

SANDERSVILLE — As the Jones County Bok Homa Casino opened its doors Monday, hundreds packed into the new 27,000-square-foot gaming facility.

Joyce Wheeler, 51, was at the head of the line outside the doors. The Taylorsville native said she waited outside the

casino near Sandersville since 11 p.m. Sunday - a full 12 hours early. She camped out to make sure she got first dibs on the new slot machines.

The property is operated by the Mississippi Band of Choctaws, which also operates a casino resort near Philadelphia. Miko Beasley Denson said 400 of the games at the Bok Homa were new to Mississippi.

"Maybe we could get a machine, but I just don't know," Wheeler said as she gazed at the line behind her, noting that she was the first patron to show up. "We haven't even gotten a free T-shirt yet."

But many gave up their spots in line to hear Denson and singer Wayne Newton.

"When we opened the Silver Star Casino 16 years ago, the facility looked much like the building you see here today," Denson said. "As was said in the classic baseball movie Field of Dreams, 'if you build it, they will come.' That has certainly been true of the Pearl River Resort, and it will be true here at Bok Homa."

Newton's speech was filled with tongue-in-cheek humor, producing constant laughter from the crowd.

"I cannot tell you what a great thrill and surprise it was to wake up in Heidelberg," Newton said. Newton barely finished his sentence as the crowd turned their attention to five Santas who parachuted into a section of the parking lot.

Once on the ground, the Santas delivered pairs of scissors to officials and the stampede began as patrons entered the casino.

Laurel resident Darlene Blanchard, 64, said she planned to return to Bok Homa. A regular patron of Biloxi's Imperial Palace, Blanchard said she found Bok Homa's employees to be friendly and helpful.

"I'm impressed," she said. "I'm really impressed."

But bliss from many visitors was cut short when traffic slowed to a standstill on the rural roads serving the casino.

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