

Hunters and Gatherers

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On Bass Pro, bald eagles, journalism jobs, and hunting ducks and humans.

By JOHN BRANSTON

Whether Memphis and Shelby County strike a deal with Bass Pro or a theme-park developer to fill The Pyramid — and neither prospect is close to being a sure thing — they will be buying at the bottom of the market.

Theme parks and hunting and fishing stores are both sensitive to fads and recessions. Last year was a bad one for public companies selling bass boats and roller coasters. Six Flags (stock symbol SIX) has been in business since 1961 and operates 18 amusement parks in the United States, including one in Atlanta. The stock is trading at around \$1.89 a share this week, an all-time low. It peaked at \$40 a share in 1999. Opryland theme park in Nashville, owned by Gaylord Entertainment, ended a 25-year run in 1997. The would-be developer of The Pyramid and Mud Island is a private company with no track record in theme parks.

Over in ammo-and-camo, Cabela's stock (CAB) was down 60 percent last year, and Gander Mountain (GMTN) was down 70 percent. Cabela's closest retail store is near St. Louis. Gander Mountain has a store in Jackson, Tennessee. Bass Pro, a private company, has a store in Memphis and a larger one in Pearl, Mississippi. Sportsman's Warehouse, also privately held, has stores in Memphis and Southaven.

"The ongoing decline in participation in the sports of fishing and hunting suggests that the recent rapid store rollout within the outdoor lifestyle retail sector may not be warranted," according to a recent report by the **Mercanti Group**, an investment bank.

Robert Lipscomb, the point man for the city of Memphis in dealings with Bass Pro, said he had his first conversation with Bass Pro's CEO Johnny Morris this week. He described Morris as "concerned." Lipscomb and members of the City Council and County Commission plan to visit

Bass Pro's headquarters in Branson, Missouri, this week, two days before the January 31st deadline for the company to make a binding commitment to develop The Pyramid.

"They want to feel the love," said City Council chairman Scott McCormick, an outdoorsman who is not among those making the trip to Branson.

The timing is not the best for pitching downtown Memphis as a regional shopping and entertainment destination. After struggling for years, Peabody Place is giving up on retail shops and movie theaters, and attendance for Memphis Grizzlies games at FedExForum is the lowest it has been since the team moved to Memphis.

Bass Pro is one of two proposals for reuse of the The Pyramid. The alternative plan for a theme park would include The Pyramid, Mud Island, and the 90 acres of riverfront land they occupy. Selling parkland would be a radical departure for a city famous for resisting intrusions on The Promenade and Overton Park ever since its founding. More recently, the mere suggestion of leasing a small strip of 4,500-acre Shelby Farms along Germantown Parkway for commercial development was widely derided and went nowhere. Riverfront acreage across from downtown could be a valuable futures play for anyone contemplating a casino. Casino gambling is not legal in Tennessee, but 18 years ago it wasn't legal in Mississippi either.

- The eagles have landed, right here in river city. The bald eagle was "delisted" last summer and is no longer endangered, thanks to a successful hacking program that began in 1980. You might even see one in downtown Memphis if you look carefully. I saw one half a mile north of the bridge a few weeks ago. Granted, I was in a boat. Novice birdwatcher that I am, I excitedly called the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency. An agent told me 187 eagles were counted two weeks ago between the Tennessee River and the Mississippi River, and there are probably more than that. Sightings have been made all along the Mississippi from Memphis to Dyersburg and at Pickwick Lake. Who needs a two-hour drive to Reelfoot Lake? Eagle Lake, on the border of Shelby and Tipton counties, is just 30 minutes away.

On another bird note, Memphis is not the home of Ducks Unlimited for nothing. I am sworn to secrecy on particulars, but I can state with absolute confidence that it is quite possible to shoot a limit of ducks, legally, within the cozy confines of Shelby County. Throw in a little local venison, and this is good news for when the economy goes off a cliff and we become a society of hunters and gatherers, as appears likely.

Or you could supplement your income by throwing newspapers for *The Commercial Appeal*. Who says there are no jobs and no future in print journalism? This e-mail went out this week to Memphis Publishing Company employees: "Due to the carrier delivery rate revision project we are currently involved with, we are experiencing a significant but not unexpected number

of down routes. WE NEED YOUR HELP! We will accept help from any salaried employee that wants to volunteer to help out by throwing routes (one day, many days, WHATEVER!). Also, we will pay friends or family members a substitute delivery fee of \$10 to deliver the affected routes."

Karl Wurzbach, vice president of circulation, confirmed that the e-mail is genuine, and the delivery problem is "one of those things the industry is going through right now."

Like Wurzbach, I'm a former paperboy myself. I was 12 years old, and sometimes I think it was the happiest I've ever been in journalism, trudging through the snow lugging a bag full of folded copies of *The Grand Rapids Press* with my buddy John Egger after basketball practice. Well, my throwing arm is still strong, my car runs pretty good, I can't sleep anyway, and I don't have a whole lot of confidence in this column-writing gig. Like they say about the guy with the shovel who walks behind the circus elephant, he's still in the show.

- To torture this survivalist theme a little more ... Should homeowners go armed? I've been going to neighborhood meetings in Midtown for 24 years, and the question always comes up at least once a year. Over the years, I've detected a shift in the way cops answer. Last week, our guest speaker was Inspector Mark Collins of the West Precinct. He nailed it when he said that the person who gets robbed wants Dirty Harry, and the person who gets stopped for speeding wants Officer Nicely.

The official recommendation on "CyberWatch" is still to call the police when you see a crime in progress instead of taking matters into your own hands. But Collins said that if you decide to arm yourself, make sure you know how to handle the weapon and are prepared to use it. Otherwise, it could be used against you. He suggested than an aluminum baseball bat might be more suitable and doesn't have to be reloaded. But there was no attempt to persuade anyone to put away their guns because of what might happen later in court or inside your head. Or on your property if you shoot and miss.

Earlier that day, a Midtown man had shot and killed an apparently unarmed burglar who broke into his garage. In less than 24 hours, the shooting was ruled justifiable. It was the third justifiable homicide out of 14 killings so far this year. Meanwhile, Rhodes College students are being warned about muggings near campus, and on Monday a popular Memphis police lieutenant, Ed Vidulich, was found shot to death in his home in Frayser. Homeowners are not going to take it lying down. We are coming perilously close, if we are not there already, to becoming a city where we organize hunting parties to hunt our fellow citizens.

- A cold night in January. Back in the frothy NBA Now days, I remember reading (and writing) that the true test for Memphis and the NBA would come on a cold night in January when the

thrill was gone and the Grizzlies were playing a meaningless game. We're there, and now we know. The proverbial "announced" attendance for the last three home games was 10,212, 11,072, and 11,672. "We played them on the wrong day," said Grizz forward Rudy Gay after a 112-85 loss to Orlando. No kidding. Unfortunately, there will be many more wrong days. It is obviously not helping the Grizzlies that the University of Memphis Tigers are unbeaten and ranked first in the country and selling out FedEx Forum, although it helps the arena, and vice versa.

- Hillary Clinton came to Memphis last weekend and won endorsements from Willie Herenton and his bitter rival Carol Chumney who, between them, got 77 percent of the votes in the last election. Herenton was a no-show at Monday's media event. Shortly afterward, the Clinton campaign announced the formation of "rapid responders, a national group of truth tellers" in Tennessee and other Super Tuesday states. Maybe they'll investigate Herenton's "scheduling conflict" that kept him away from Chumney.

- Reason Number 996 why I don't own a cell phone or pager. For six years, Detroit mayor Kwame Kilpatrick denied rumors about a sexual relationship with his chief of staff. Last summer, they both lied about it under oath in a whistle-blower lawsuit filed by two former cops who knew the score. Kilpatrick 'fessed up last week after the *Detroit Free Press* obtained 14,000 text messages from the chief of staff's city-issued pager. The telltale pagers were SkyWriters, using a dedicated messaging device from SkyTel, which is headquartered in Jackson, Mississippi. Most text messages vanish, but SkyTel touts the "benefits of message archiving" in its system. Some benefit.