

Clinton Anniversary – Wrap

DM/MEH 12/3 (Friday – 6:45 & 8:45)

One of Arkansas' top tourist attractions will mark its 20th anniversary on Sunday. KUAR's David Monteith has details on the impact of two decades of the Clinton Presidential Center.

News23 4:46 SOC

[Pomp nat sound] December 5th, 2001 was a windy but sunny winter day. Former President Bill Clinton was in town for the ceremonial groundbreaking on the site that would become his presidential library, and the home for the Clinton Foundation and Clinton School of Public Service. CSPAN's archival footage of the event shows an enthusiastic crowd that included city leaders like then-Little Rock Mayor Jim Daly and the future Dean of the Clinton School, Skip Rutherford.

Clinton Archive 4 0:30 “The mission of this library and foundation indeed will be largely devoted to the future. The spirit behind the whole project is not only to help people understand what was going on in America over the eight years I served as president, but mostly to help them understand what kind of country we are becoming, what are responsibilities at home and abroad are, and what kinds of choices we should make.”

Clinton spoke for half an hour, referencing other presidential libraries and joking about the number of records that would be unsealed and housed at his library. A little less than three years later, on Nov. 18, 2004, President Clinton was in town again, this time to celebrate the grand opening of the ceremony. KUAR's general manager at the time, Ron Breeding, was there on rainy day. Former presidents George W. Bush and Jimmy Carter, as well as George H. W. Bush spoke at the event.

Archive clip 2: “Bill Clinton was one of the most gifted American political figures in modern times. Trust me, I learned this the hard way. Here in Arkansas, you might say he grew to become the Sam Walton of national retail politics.”

In the 20 years since the groundbreaking, and 17 years since the grand opening, the Clinton Center has become one of the most visited tourism sites in the state, according to Clinton Center spokesman Ben Thielemeier.

Ben 2 “I don’t know if we expected that we would become the number one tourist destination in Little Rock, and perhaps the state, but since November 2004, over those 17 years, more than 4.9 million people have visited the Clinton Center.”

Ann Kamps, manager of volunteer and visitor services, has been with the presidential center since before it opened in 2004. She says the center is one of the primary reasons some visitors come to the Little Rock.

Ann 3: It’s not like we’re Dallas, or New York, or Los Angeles, or Boston. We are Little Rock, Arkansas. People come here expressly to come to the Presidential Center.”

Kamps says the days President Clinton is on site are still highlights for visitors and volunteers. According to records from the center, which allows visitors to voluntarily identify where they’re visiting from, roughly 2-percent, or nearly 100,000 visitors have come from abroad since 2004.

Ann 2: “One of the first groups that I can remember touring was the Elvis Presley fan club from Paris.”

Libby Lloyd, communications director for the Little Rock Convention and Visitors Bureau, says the Clinton Presidential Center and Little Rock Central High School National Historic Site could revive tourism that has dropped since the onset of the pandemic.

Libby quote 1 “President Clinton still draws a lot of interest with international visitors, of course. So we do look forward to, now that their doors are reopened and now that our borders doors are reopened, we’re hoping that will continue to drive international visitation, as it has in the past.”

Clinton Center reopened its doors to in-person visitors early last month after being closed since March of last year, when the COVID-19 outbreak began. U.S. borders reopened to international travel last month, though some travelers from some countries have been barred again recently out of precaution against the Omicron variant of the virus that causes COVID-19.

David Monteith, KUAR News
In Little Rock, I’m David Monteith David,