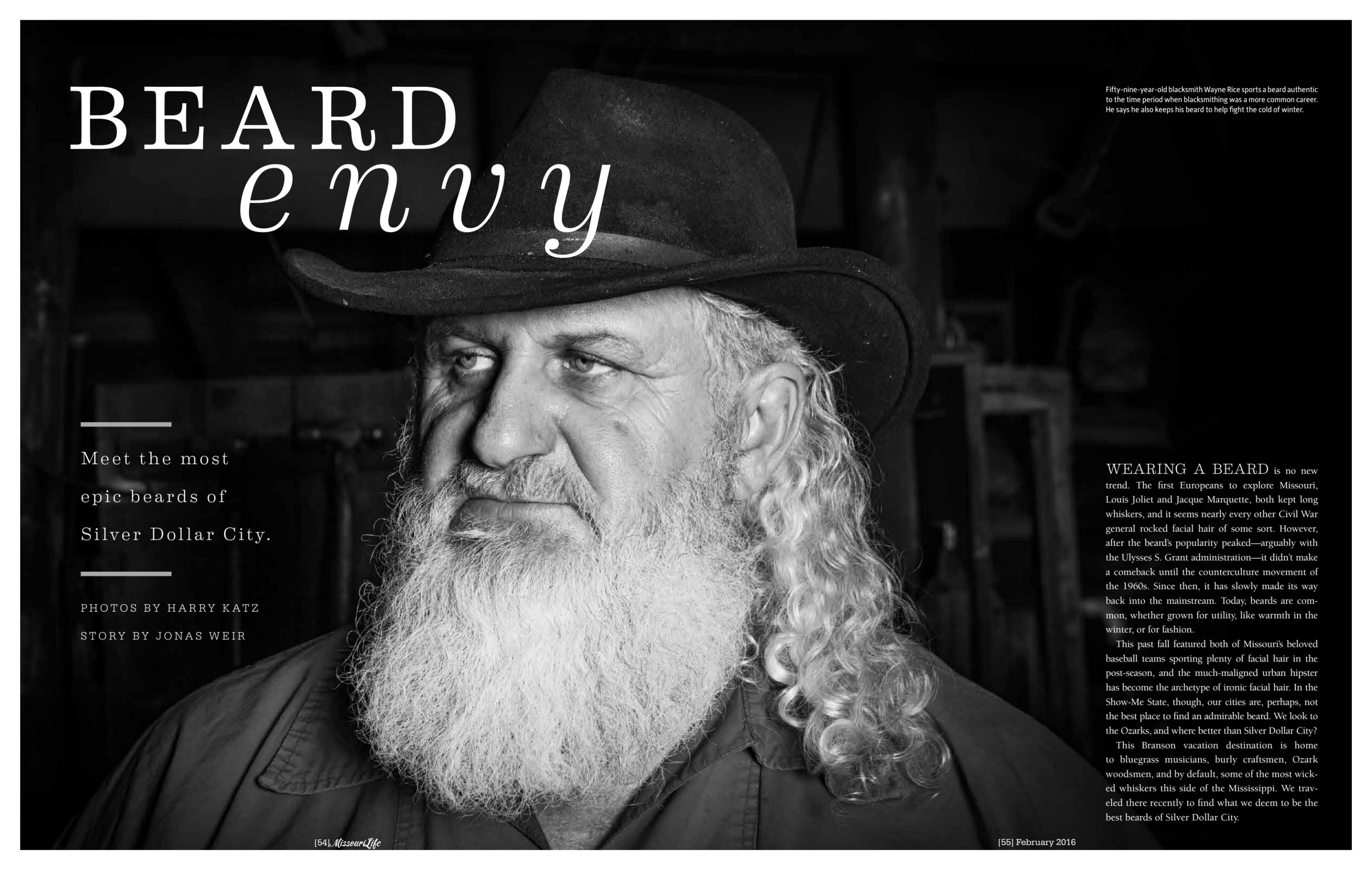


BEARD *envy*



Fifty-nine-year-old blacksmith Wayne Rice sports a beard authentic to the time period when blacksmithing was a more common career. He says he also keeps his beard to help fight the cold of winter.

Meet the most
epic beards of
Silver Dollar City.

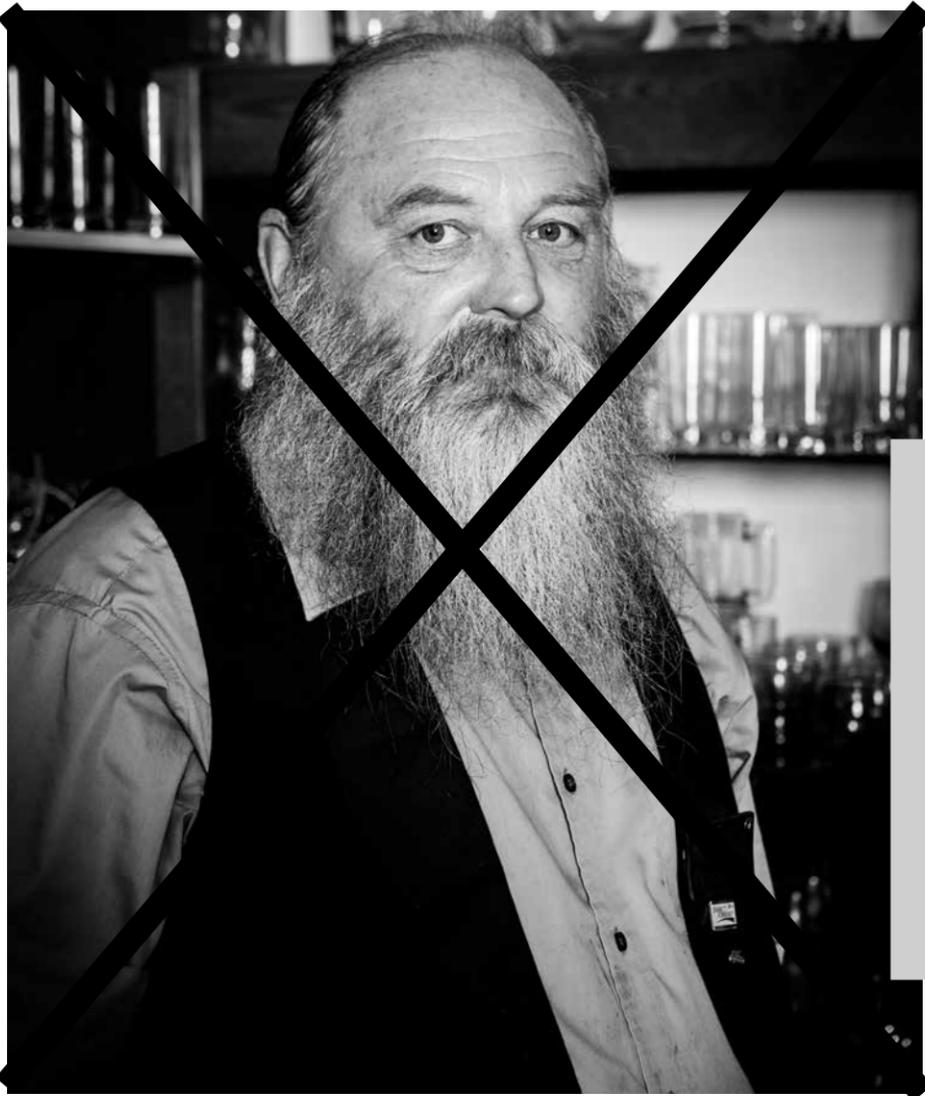
PHOTOS BY HARRY KATZ

STORY BY JONAS WEIR

WEARING A BEARD is no new trend. The first Europeans to explore Missouri, Louis Joliet and Jacque Marquette, both kept long whiskers, and it seems nearly every other Civil War general rocked facial hair of some sort. However, after the beard's popularity peaked—arguably with the Ulysses S. Grant administration—it didn't make a comeback until the counterculture movement of the 1960s. Since then, it has slowly made its way back into the mainstream. Today, beards are common, whether grown for utility, like warmth in the winter, or for fashion.

This past fall featured both of Missouri's beloved baseball teams sporting plenty of facial hair in the post-season, and the much-maligned urban hipster has become the archetype of ironic facial hair. In the Show-Me State, though, our cities are, perhaps, not the best place to find an admirable beard. We look to the Ozarks, and where better than Silver Dollar City?

This Branson vacation destination is home to bluegrass musicians, burly craftsmen, Ozark woodsmen, and by default, some of the most wicked whiskers this side of the Mississippi. We traveled there recently to find what we deem to be the best beards of Silver Dollar City.



A twenty-eight-year veteran of Silver Dollar City, glass-cutter George Stiverson has put a little more time into growing his beard than he has etching designs into glasses at the amusement park.

“The last day I shaved was the day I got married,” says the sixty-one-year-old. “That was thirty-eight years ago.”

In fact, his children, who are as old as thirty-seven, have never seen him clean-shaven.

The red-turned-gray, chest-length beard is surely impressive, but George doesn't glorify it, or beards at all for that matter.

“It's just a bunch of hair on your face,” he says. “You don't want to style them; just let them grow.”



When Gene Bortner decided he was going to retire and move to the Ozarks after working in Kansas City for twenty-five years, he decided he needed a style change.

“I wanted to become a hillbilly like everyone else, so I just let my beard grow,” the eighty-nine year-old says.

That was 1978, and he hasn't looked back. Now Gene and his beard greet visitors as they enter the park, where he's worked for twenty-five years.



A member of Sons of the Silver Dollar, Tom Johnson first grew his beard to portray a disciple of Jesus in a Branson show called *The Promise* and was encouraged to keep it for a Civil War show at Silver Dollar City. He's maintained the unshaven look, though, to match his style while he performs everything from gospel to bluegrass.

“Being sixty-years old, I do resort to chemicals to maintain a more youthful look,” he says.



With a direct family lineage to Scotland, performer David Wallace sports European-style facial hair, with a sloped mustache and a coarse, tightly trimmed beard. Although he admits that his wife's penchant for his fuzzy face is a major factor in his decision to wear a beard, it also serves a much more practical purpose.

“When I shave, I still get carded,” says the baby-faced thirty-five-year-old. “Having the beard helps distinguish my age.”

The beard no doubt adds to his stage persona, too. Stop by the Saloon during the day to catch David in some Vaudevillian antics, or venture to Echo Hollow Amphitheater at night to see him perform in a country revue.

To see these beards and many others, visit Silver Dollar City during its 2016 season, which runs from March 12 to December 30. Visit silverdollarcity.com for more information.