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SEP 1 1983

If Tourists Ever Go to the Moon ...

IF SCIENTISTS ever devise a means of transporting tourists to the moon or another planet, chances are tour buses will be waiting, along with hawkers offering T-shirts, bumper stickers and souvenirs.

Almost before Hurricane Alicia had settled down to a beneficial rain in Oklahoma, operators of tourist facilities in Galveston were describing the disaster as "a shot in the arm for business in the long run," expecting the catastrophe to bring more tourists.

Washington's Mount St. Helens was still spewing ashes over the countryside when tourism promoters began lining highways with hastily built structures to harvest cash from curious visitors. Congress created a 110,000-acre national volcanic monument and the state used \$172,000 of a federal grant to hire a firm that had worked for Disneyland to develop a theme park.

Areas without natural or historic features may develop theme parks, often modifying facts to make them more appealing.

Last year, a Wichita professor

proposed selection of seven sites around the world, including Tulsa, to present the history of the world as a celebration of the year 2000 and to entice tourists.

Lions clubs of Claremore, OK, and Barrow, Ark., erected a 27,000-lb. granite monument to attract tourists to the "top of the world," where Will Rogers and Wiley Post died in a crash in 1935.

Because Bedford, Ind., claims to be the "limestone capital of the world," the federal government kicked in \$700,000 to help build a 10-story, one-fifth size replica of the great pyramid at Giza, Egypt.

A few towns try to capitalize on famous faces that have some connection with them, but Van Buren, Ark., is trying to smother the image of bazooka-blowing Bob Burns, once a favorite son.

New Braunfels, Texas, has had a hassle over tourism and weekend invasions of tourists who pile beer and pals into inner-tube rafts for noisy trips down the Guadalupe River.

Oklahoma towns right now are divided over whether potential economic gains of racetrack gambling

will outweigh the problems and evils parimutuel betting and track followers could bring.

Last December, National Geographic magazine published an article on tourism, describing such problems and how some states depend on tourism and "taxes on sin" to pay bills.

About that time, the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce adopted as a major goal voter approval of liquor by the drink. A spokesman said liquor by the drink would increase tourism and revenue.

Historian Alistair Cooke suggested in a book that cultural benefits of tourism may be overrated: "I don't know who said travel broadens the mind, but he could have added the the broader the mind, the thinner it gets," Cooke wrote.

Nevertheless, as long as there is something to do or see, tourists will come bringing money. Economic gains seldom are underestimated: the Chamber of Commerce calculated that 442,130 visitors brought \$130 million to Oklahoma City last year.