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Friday, September 23, Malvern will welcome the legendary Grand Ole Opry performer Jean Shepard to the Malvern Senior Activity Center for a free concert. Proceeds from the event's concession sales will benefit local Hurricane Katrina recovery efforts.

According to Senator Steve Faris (D-Malvern), the benefit's organizer, Shepard was originally scheduled to play in Malvern for an appreciation event for State Senate District 27 and fans of a radio country music show Faris hosts.

The purpose of the program was cast in a different light, however, in the wake of the storm.

"This is a great opportunity to see a Grand Ole Opry performer and, if you wish, make a donation that will aid a good local cause," Faris said Monday.

Raised in Visalia, California as one of 10 musically-inclined children, Shepard took an early interest in what would be her life's work. While still in her early teens, she formed and fronted a group called The Melody Ranch Girls.

It was during one of the groups' early performances that Shepard crossed paths with another legendary performer, Hank Thompson.

Thompson, conceivably the most popular Western swing musician of the 50's and 60's, opened doors at Capitol Records for young Shepard; during her 21 year run with the label, she recorded such hits as The Dear John Letter (a duet with Ferlin Husky), Beautiful Lies, Many Happy Hangovers, Seven Lonely Days, Then He Touched Me, Satisfied Mindand, Second Fiddle (To an Old Guitar).

She was also afforded the opportunity to perform in Red Foley's Ozark Jubilee, where, along with Porter Wagoner, she was featured as one of the early stars of the show.

Shepard moved to United Artist Records during the early 70's, where her

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string of hits continued with Slippin' Away, Poor Sweet Baby, At the Time and Tips of My Fingers.

Now in her 50th year of Opry membership, the Grand Lady of the Grand Ole Opry is the first female country singer ever to celebrate her golden anniversary with the "mother church of country music".

She remains an avid performer, maintaining a hectic road schedule with her band, The Second Fiddles.

In numerous venues all across the country, Shepard and her band continue to delight audiences with both the traditional and modern sounds of country music, as well as a touch of what she calls "good ole down home gospel".

With an extensive body of work spanning 45 albums, Shepard has made a lifelong career of thrilling audiences with a voice that, according to the late Jim Reeves, "hits [the] notes, holds them and wraps them around an audience like nobody else's can."

Shepard and her band will take the stage at 6 p.m. on Friday.

Hot dogs, popcorn, nachos, soda and candy will be sold during the show. All proceeds will go to the Hot Spring County Red Cross and the local chapter of the Salvation Army.

"This may be an historic event for Malvern and Hot Spring County," Faris mentioned. "As far as I know, this is the first time ever a Grand Ole Opry star has performed in our area. People should come and take part in the event with that in mind."

Heather Bennett, of the Malvern Daily Record, and Bro. Chris Garner of Pleasant Valley Missionary Baptist Church, will also appear on the Senior Center stage that evening to perform a brief set during intermission.

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