Sunshine’s gospel show will keep you singing

A hot item these days on the dinner theater circuit is the gospel musical comedy.

It all started in 1990 with “Smoke on the Mountain.” Conceived by Alan Bailey and written by Connie Ray, it took audiences to the Depression-era Saturday night sing at the Baptist church in rural North Carolina, where an itinerant family performed traditional revival hymns and Bible songs, interspersed with spiritual homilies.

The Sunshine Dinner Playhouse in Champaign staged it in 1994, and it was such a smash hit that they did it again the following year. Then two years ago the Sunshine staged a clone of “Smoke” titled “I Shall Not Be Moved.” Written by Ted J. Morris and Bill Johnson, it focused on a family on a gospel-sing tour — Orval and Opal Hatfield, their three grown children, Mary Ellen, Kimberly Sue and Jimmy Ray, and Orval’s black-sheep brother Zeke.

It was set in 1942 at a Baptist church in Oklahoma, where Mary Ellen’s husband was the preacher and Jimmy Ray was giving his farewell performance before shipping out to serve as military chaplain.

Right now, for its spring production, the Sunshine is presenting “He Keeps Me Singing,” a sequel to “Moved,” also by Morris and Johnson. It’s August, 1952, and the Singing Hatfields are presenting Singspiration ‘52 in a tent outside Hooker, Oklahoma.

There are now eight family members. Orval and Opal have two granddaughters — Sarah, daughter of Virgil and Mary Ellen and Roberta, daughter of Kimberly Sue.

They follow the basic “Moved” formula, singing hymns and Bible songs like “We Are Going Down the Valley,” “The Old Rugged Cross,” and the title number, and accompanying themselves on the piano, bass, mandolin, guitar, banjo, fiddle, flute, washboard and harmonica.

In between, the grown-ups each do monologues about themselves. Jimmy Ray, for example, tells about his wartime experiences, including an encounter with Audie Murphy. Kimberly Sue, who in “Moved” told about her unsuccessful attempts to break into the movies in Hollywood, lost her husband in the war and now teaches and does radio and TV commercials.

The Sunshine’s director, John Eby, takes a straightforward approach and doesn’t try to camp it up. He gets good work from his cast.

James Dobbs is pleasantly laid-back as Orval, and Debra Caruso displays a rich, broad singing range as Opal.

Mike Cornell, alternating with Ken Carpenter as Jimmy Ray, has a sweet clear singing voice. Stephanie Crist does a touching “Love Lifted Me” as Mary Ellen, and Bill Kephart gives a spirited performance as Virgil. Debby LeVeck makes an appealing Kimberly Sue.

Alicia Corso, alternating with Meghan Hanrahan as Sarah, and Bridget Krouse, alternating with Paige Martin as Roberta, are adorable in “I’ll Be a Sunbeam” and “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.”

And Rodney Woodworth, who was Orval in the Sunshine’s “Moved,” now plays Zeke, giving a polished, relaxed performance and coming through loud and clear in his songs.

Highlights include a rousing medley of spirituals, with a bit of nifty trumpet work by Kephart, and the hand-clapping, sing-along finale, “Will the Circle Be Unbroken?”

Shirley Blankenship is the musical director. The tent set and lighting are by Dobbs, and the costumes by Jeri Corso.

This is an evening of friendly, old-time religion that will keep you singing all the way home.

There are performances daily except Monday and Tuesday through May 30 at the Clarion Hotel, 1501 S. Neil. Call 359-4503.

What’s Cookin’