

Two Landmark Hotels Saved, Two Others Need Saving

- French Lick Springs Resort, French Lick, Indiana
- West Baden Springs Hotel, French Lick, Indiana
- Belleview Biltmore Resort and Spa, Belleair, Florida
- Fenway Hotel, Dunedin, Florida

By Stanley Turkel, MHS, ISHC

The French Lick Springs Resort reopened last fall after a 2-year historic renovation of its 443 guestrooms, restaurants, casino, spa and golf course. The first hotel built on this site opened in 1845 to take advantage of the natural sulphur springs and Pluto mineral water. The original hotel burned down in 1897 but was rebuilt on a grander scale by Thomas Taggart, the mayor of Indianapolis (and later a U.S. Senator). The Monon Railroad built a spur directly to the hotel grounds with daily passenger service to Chicago. Casino gambling, although illegal, flourished at the resort. In its heyday in the Roaring Twenties, the surrounding Spring Valley had 30 hotels and 15 clubs. At the time, it was a lawless community for gamblers, politicians, sports figures, entertainers and gangsters. The town got its name from the French traders who founded it and the salty mineral deposits that attracted wildlife.

The French Lick Resort's casino is apparently as luxurious and as big as the original. The 84,000 square-foot casino features 1,200 slot machines and dozens of blackjack, roulette, craps and poker tables. The Resort has eight new restaurants, six-lane bowling, indoor tennis, riding stables and promenade shops. The casino is built in the shape of a riverboat and is surrounded by a moat (in accordance with a 1993 state law which permits gambling only on riverboats). French Lickers call it the Boat in the Moat.

During the Prohibition years, French Lick had 13 casinos, all of them illegal. Famous guests who visited French Lick included Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, Adlai E. Stevenson, the Marx Brothers, Joe Louis, Bob Hope and Bing Crosby.

The Donald Ross golf course at the French Lick Resort reopened in September, 2006 unveiling at \$4.6 million restoration of the famed course where Walter Hagen won the PGA championship in 1924. Hagen closed out Englishman James Barnes on the 36th and final hole of the two-round match-play championship. Similarly, Betsey Rawls walked off the 72nd hole in 1959 with an

LPGA Championship defeating Patty Berg. Mickey Wright won the tournament there a year later.

The golf course restoration is an impact project for the resort, said Steve Ferguson, chairman of the Cook Group, part-owner. Coupled with the construction of a Pete Dye- designed course near the West Baden property and a 9-hole, almost-forgotten course designed by the legendary Tom Bendelow nearly a century ago, the three courses could make French Lick one of the Midwest's premier resort, casino and golf destinations.

The 246-room West Baden Springs Hotel reopened in May, 2007. Once known as the "Eighth Wonder of the World", West Baden's six-story atrium had the world's largest free-span dome until the Houston Astrodome opened in 1965. West Baden offers a unique natatorium/spa featuring a 12,000 square foot indoor pool and an 8,000 square foot spa including treatment rooms, relaxation rooms and a state-of-the-art fitness center. The recent renovation of the two famous Beaux-Arts hotels, has just been completed. They first opened a few months apart in 1901 and 1902. The restorations evoke the memories of French Lick's long lost past. More recently French Lick has been known mainly as the hometown of Larry Bird, the legendary Boston Celtic basketball player.

The old casino trolley that connected the two resorts is just a memory now, as are the rail lines that once delivered Pullman-loads of gamblers and guests from Louisville, Ky. 55 miles east, and Indianapolis, about 100 miles north. But the French Lick, West Baden & Southern Railway still operates a short sightseeing run from the historic depot which houses the Indiana Railway Museum.

Colorfully-named towns abound throughout this part of southern Indiana- places like Beanblossom, Pumpkin Center, Santa Claus, Hindustan, Buddha and Gnaw Bone. But none has a history as colorful as French Lick's, or a future as bright.

The Belleview Biltmore Hotel in Bellaire, Florida was built in 1897 by Henry Bradley Plant, the prominent railroad, steamboat, express mail and hotel developer (the FedEx/UPS man of his time). Designed by Michael J. Miller and Francis J. Kinnard, the Belleview Hotel at Bellaire opened with 145 rooms, Georgia-pine construction, swiss-style design, golf course and race

track. The Belleview became a retreat for the wealthy whose private railroad cars were often parked at the railroad siding built to the south of the hotel. Guests at the Belleview enjoyed the amenities of regal rustic living; yachting and sailing on Clearwater Bay; horseback riding, golfing, tennis, skeet shoot and bicycling. It is called “The White Queen of the Gulf” and is the largest wood-frame building in Florida.

In 1920, the hotel was acquired by John McEntee Bowman, international sportsman and owner of the Biltmore chain of hotels (Los Angeles, New York, Atlanta, Delaware, Santa Barbara, Havana, Providence). This national treasure has enriched the lives of guests for 110 years. Despite being listed on the National Registry of Historic Places, it has been under threat of demolition by its current owners. But now two local newspapers, the St. Petersburg Times and the Belleair Bee have reported that there is a contract to purchase the Biltmore with Legg Mason Real Estate Investors Inc. Los Angeles, California.

“Executives with Legg Mason Real Estate Investors would not disclose the proposed purchase price or the closing date, but said in a written statement they had a contract to buy the resort and intend to preserve the 110-year-old hotel,” St. Petersburg Times writer Rita Farlow wrote on March 9, 2007. How great it would be to hear from Legg Mason that they will definitely preserve and restore The Belleview Biltmore Hotel.

Fenway on the Bay was built in 1924 when citizens of Dunedin contributed \$100 each so that the developer Grant & Skinne could construct a new hotel. The Dunedin Times issue of July 10, 1924 announced that “the hotel will be one that the townspeople will be proud to point out to their friends... It means a new era for Dunedin” and asked each resident to “dig down in your jeans and fish out the necessary coin for a share in both.” On August 6, 1925 the Dunedin Times reported that a Clearwater developer named George H. Bowles had paid \$250,000 for a controlling interest in the hotel but the Fenway was still unfinished and funds were still short. Bowles was also an enthusiastic promoter of that newfangled invention called ‘radio’, which in 1925 had only a five-year history of commercial broadcasting. Bowles finally finished the hotel and installed transmission towers used for the first radio broadcast from Pinellas County on station WGHB (The call letters were George H. Bowles initials, of course).

After the crash of 1929, the Fenway was acquired by James McGill whose son-in-law Tommy Scanlon managed through the '30's, '40's and '50's. The Independent, a St. Petersburg newspaper, stated in an article of January 20, 1941 that 15% of the guests who stayed at the Fenway bought and built homes in Dunedin. From 1956 to 1961 the building sat vacant until the Fenway became home to Trinity College, also known as Florida Bible Institute. In 1991, Schiller International University moved into the building and used the Fenway as its United States campus until August, 2006.

A St. Petersburg attorney, George Rahdert just received approval from the Dunedin City Commission for a 150-room restoration of the historic Fenway Hotel. Rahdert has been a prolific historic preservationists for the past 25 years who has restored over 20 buildings in Pinella County, with four buildings nominated for the National Historic Registry.

My book-in-progress "Great American Hoteliers: Pioneers of the Hotel Industry" will be published at the end of 2007 by McFarland & Company, Publishers, Jefferson, N.C. You can reserve an autographed copy by sending me an email at stanturkel@aol.com

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