



Open again as a working hotel for the first time in 75 years.



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PUTTING THE  
“WOW”  
BACK IN THE  
WEST BADEN  
SPRINGS HOTEL

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By **Jeremy Shere**

Photography by **Steve Raymer**

When guests first enter the atrium of the newly restored West Baden Springs Hotel 55 miles south of Bloomington, they all have the same reaction. “They stop, look up, and just stare,” says a hotel employee. “Their jaws drop and all they can say is, ‘Wow!’”



The atrium's domed ceiling—a massive structure 110 feet high and 200 feet in diameter—was the world's largest free-span dome until the Houston Astrodome was built in the 1960s.





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What stops people cold is the atrium’s domed ceiling—a massive structure 110 feet high and 200 feet in diameter that until the Houston Astrodome was built in the 1960s was the world’s largest free-span dome. Several long, trapezoidal skylights bathe the atrium’s six circular stories, towering Corinthian columns, and Pompeian-style tile frescoes in soft, natural light. The effect is at once overwhelming and calming.

Standing in the atrium today, it’s easy to understand why the rich and famous of the 1920s—including movie stars, politicians, and gangsters—flocked to southern Indiana’s so-called 8th Wonder of the World, and why the building’s rebirth as a working hotel for the first time in 75 years has attracted national attention.

But what’s most remarkable is that only ten years ago, West Baden Springs was little more than a weed-filled relic. Many of the windows were broken. Three-foot-high grass and weeds obscured the building’s façade. Part of the exterior wall had collapsed, threatening to bring down the entire structure.

“We approached a preservationist about doing something to save the building,” says Sandi Woodward, manager of the French Lick-West Baden Springs Program for the Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana (HFLI). “He took one look and said, ‘Call it a ruin, let people crawl all over it.’”

Fortunately, HFLI ignored that advice. Instead, with the help of noted preservationists Bill and Gayle Cook and a small army of volunteers, they’ve succeeded in resurrecting the hotel to its former glory.

**The Golden Age.** West Baden Springs and its sister hotel—the nearby French Lick Springs Resort—first gained fame in the early 1900s because of their natural mineral springs. Advertisements from the period describe French Lick’s “Pluto Water” and West Baden’s “Sprudel Water” in almost mystical terms as potions able to cure everything from alcoholism to kidney disease.

“The water was actually a powerful laxative,” says Dyan Welsh, public relations manager for the French Lick Resort Casino. “So you had people getting their insides cleaned out and getting plenty of rest or exercise, and it seemed like the water had magical healing powers.”

Arriving by train from Chicago, St. Louis, Detroit, and other Midwest cities and beyond, the upper crust of early 20th-century American



(top and bottom) The West Baden Springs Hotel during its heyday in the 1920s.  
(middle) The hotel today.

society would stay at West Baden Springs and French Lick Springs for weeks and sometimes months at a time. They came to relax and, especially, to partake of the mineral cure. Hotel doctors devised individual diet, exercise, and mineral water regimens for each guest, advising them to sample each of the hotels' several springs. Between treatments, guests played the hotels' golf courses, went to the opera, or took a ride on the double-decker pony-and-bicycle track. In the spring, baseball teams including the Chicago Cubs, Chicago White Sox, and Cincinnati Reds held spring training at West Baden Springs, practicing on the hotel's baseball diamond.

"There are reports from the period of regular townspeople coming to just look at the ladies in their elegant dresses," says Woodward. "It was a badge of honor to come to West Baden Springs to see and be seen by people."

By the mid-1920s, West Baden and French Lick Springs had become two of the nation's most famous and exclusive celebrity resorts. The legendary mineral waters, astonishing architecture, and luxury accommodations attracted the famous—Cole Porter, Hopalong Cassidy, the Marx Brothers, Louis Armstrong, and Howard Hughes, to name a few—and the infamous, including Al Capone and John Dillinger.

By the end of the "Roaring '20s," West Baden Springs was at the height of its glamour and success. Nobody could have predicted the hotel's sudden and nearly total demise.

**The Crash.** Like many luxury hotels of the stock market-crazed '20s, West Baden Springs featured an in-house brokerage office. So when the market crashed in late October 1929, word spread quickly through the mineral water pavilions, gardens, and guests rooms.

"There are rumors that when the news hit, ruined millionaires jumped to their deaths from the 6th floor," Woodward says.

Most guests, no longer able to afford the rates, simply packed up and left. Within days, the hotels were virtually empty. Although West Baden Springs remained open until 1932, there were few who could afford to stay there.

Over the next 62 years the hotel and its outlying buildings changed hands several times. In 1934 West Baden Springs was sold for one dollar to the Jesuits, who promptly stripped the atrium of many of its opulent features and, for the next 30 years, ran the property as a seminary college. In the mid-60s the Jesuits closed the seminary and sold the property to private investors who then donated the grounds to the Northwood Institute, a private business school.

When Northwood closed its West Baden campus in 1983, the formerly celebrated hotel entered its darkest period. Aside from its occasional use as summer lodging for high school band camps, the property lay abandoned for nearly a decade. And although West Baden Springs earned recognition as a National Historic Landmark by the U.S. Department of the Interior in 1987, that honor did little to keep the building from deteriorating. When part of an exterior wall collapsed in 1991, the great hotel seemed on its way to total ruin.

**Restoration.** The first glimmer of hope for West Baden Springs' resurrection came in 1992 when the Historical Landmarks Foundation of Indiana raised \$140,000 to stabilize the crumbling wall. Later, with the help of an anonymous donor, HLCFI bought the property in 1996. Sandi Woodward, who began volunteering with HLCFI in 1997 to help restore



(top) Concierge Pamela Clark at her post in the hotel lobby. (middle) A "Standard King" room with balcony overlooking the atrium. (bottom) The spa hot tub and indoor pool.

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When the Historical Landmark Foundation of Indiana approached Bill Cook (top) for financial help, he told them, “You’re not asking for enough.” (bottom) The decorative pistil-like centerpiece of the dome.

the grounds, recalls that even in its derelict state the hotel still had a special aura.

“We’d been watching the property since the mid-80s and knew that it still mattered to people and that something had to be done to save it,” she says. “People would make yearly pilgrimages to the hotel, wading through the weeds and taking their chances with falling debris just to get a look.”

By the mid-90s HLF had approached the only two people with the influence, financial clout, and preservation track record to save the property: Bloomington billionaire Bill Cook and his wife Gayle.

“When we first made a pitch to the Cooks their response was, ‘You’re not asking for enough,’” Woodward says. “Bill and Gayle stepped up and did what it took and did it right.”

What the Cooks did was pour over \$90 million into overhauling the property. The project was immense, including structural stabilization, restoring the exteriors of the hotel and other buildings on the property, and restoring the interiors of the atrium, lobby, dining room, and barber-shop. By 1998, what had begun for the Cooks as merely another restoration project grew into something more.

“We started with the intent of merely preserving the existing structure,” says Bill Cook, whose other restoration projects in Bloomington alone include the James Cochran House, Fountain Square Mall, Grant Street Inn, and the Showers Complex. “But as we got into it more and more, the beauty of the facility and its fascinating history just drew us in. It became a passion for all of us.”

While Cook and his architect, George Ridgway, aimed to restore West Baden Springs as closely as possible to its original design, they incorporated the improvements required of a modern four-star hotel. Ridgway updated the electricity and plumbing, installed air conditioning, enlarged the guest rooms and added suites. In the atrium, lobbies, gardens, and other common areas, the restoration team made every effort to recapture a gilded, 1920s ambience.

“We didn’t want a watered-down experience,” Cook says. “We felt it was essential that our guests feel as though they’ve gone back in time a hundred years to experience the elegance and extravagance of that era in American history.”

The Cooks felt just as strongly about not merely preserving West Baden Springs as a museum or historical landmark. The idea from the beginning was to resurrect the hotel as a profitable business.

“Gayle and I have always felt that beyond the moral purpose, historic preservation makes good business sense,” Cook says. “If you don’t return a property to a profitable operating basis, it can just as easily be lost again through neglect and mismanagement. If a restored property is making money, there’s an incentive to keep it properly maintained.”

After several failed attempts to find a buyer, CFC Incorporated—a Cook Group company—bought both the West Baden Springs Hotel and the French Lick Springs Resort in 2005, with plans to build a new casino attached to the Resort (which although severely dilapidated had remained in operation). As restoration work on West Baden Springs neared completion in 2006, the Cooks brought in longtime hotel management veteran Jerry Gleason to hire and train a staff of over 1,600 workers.

“The biggest challenge was to get the staff ready to provide the kind of service guests expect at a four-star hotel,” says Gleason, formerly vice president of operations for Hilton Hotels. “A hotel doesn’t function unless the staff—from desk clerks to dishwashers—is up to speed. The

biggest thrill for me has been watching them improve every day. Now we're blossoming and ready for business."

**Rebirth.** The resurgence of West Baden Springs has sparked national interest, receiving coverage in *The New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *National Geographic*, *The Washington Post* and on *Good Morning America*. According to Gleason, in the few months since the hotel reopened guests have come from all over the world, some drawn by curiosity and some, like Debbie and Terry Garoutte of Newburgh, Indiana, for a special occasion.

"We came for our 30th wedding anniversary," says Terry, a professional pilot. "We've stayed in resorts all over the country and this definitely measures up with the best."

That sentiment pleases no one more than the Cooks, who from the start had envisioned West Baden Springs in its new incarnation as appealing to a broad clientele. No longer an exclusive mineral water palace for the super wealthy (most of the springs have been capped for several decades), the hotel has been reinvented as a luxury resort for the middle class.

"With the new [Pete Dye-designed] golf course coming next year as well as new horseback riding and tennis facilities, we feel we have a family-oriented resort that can compete with anything anywhere," Cook says. "Of course, if Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie want to come with their kids, we'd love to have them."

West Baden Springs' renovation stands to benefit not only the area's hotels and new casino, says Gleason, but also the communities of West Baden and French Lick as a whole. Local business owners and city officials have welcomed the restoration projects and are excited about the opportunity to recapture some of the towns' former glory.

No one is more excited than French Lick native Betty Oakley, who grew up in a house on the hotel grounds where her father was chief gardener for over 60 years. When West Baden Springs officially reopened on May 23, 2007, Oakley was the first guest to check in.

"As far as I'm concerned it's every bit as beautiful now as it was then," says Oakley, now 80, who volunteers twice a week in the Historic Landmarks gift shop located in the hotel. "It's wonderful having the hotel back—I can't get enough of it." ✨



(top) The approach to the hotel. (bottom) The living is easy on the front porch.