

Indiana Libraries and the West Baden Springs Hotel

By Rhonda Spencer

Tell me a story. The beginning of many interesting conversations is often these four simple words of request. The need for stories in our lives is strong. They form a part of our history. They inform our curiosity. They add mystery and intrigue.

The role of stories in the lives of libraries is significant. In particular, libraries can provide help in answering questions for people as they explore their own unique stories. Responding to the question of “where do I begin?” is a part of a librarian’s daily work. Thinking about the needs of patrons shapes the mission of a library.

Libraries in Indiana can be proactive to connect to the stories within the state. Why? Stories help to anchor a library within the community where it is established. Stories celebrate achievements. Stories help us remember those who have gone before us.

This issue focuses on a specific historical landmark within the state of Indiana – the West Baden Springs Hotel. Indiana librarians can consider the approaches used here to help patrons discover more about both this structure, and about other structures, people, and events in Indiana. Having a focus can help with the development of exhibits, web content, and news releases. Consider picking a key theme each year to help you build interest in your collections and resources.

Within this issue you will discover topics related to the American Library Association, World War I library service, baseball, archives, oral history, science, geology, architects, Andrew Carnegie, local history research, and more. Each article is intertwined with links to the West Baden Springs Hotel and the nearby geographical region. It is hoped that new ideas about outreach will come to mind as the articles are read. Look around your town, your county, your state and you will discover new approaches to library service.

As mentioned in the *FOCUS* announcements about this issue: the 50th American Library Association Conference was held at the West Baden Springs Hotel in 1928. And, the hotel was used as a hospital for wounded soldiers during World War I – complete with an ALA-supported library. Read more in the articles that follow.

I would like to thank all the contributors to this issue, and the many people who helped to support us as we prepared the issue. I particularly want to thank Dina Kellams – the co-editor of this issue. The process of helping to tell this story has been a pleasure.

Background Story

While working on a personal research project, I came upon a number of interesting library references that helped lead to this issue. I wanted to include here an introduction to my own research project, and to acknowledge some of the librarians and the resources that have helped.

I have long enjoyed library research in the intersecting areas of art, religion, history, and detective mystery. So, when I learned there was a hidden room located above the atrium dome at the West Baden Springs Hotel – I was intrigued. In the room, which is not accessible to the public, are murals of angels and cherubs. I learned of the room from a display on a wall along one of the hotel corridors. This exhibit started me on an interesting research journey -- one that continues. The display noted that no one knew who painted the murals in the hidden room.

Ah, a mystery -- I was delighted. The pursuit of clues has led me on a wonderful art exploration. The research into this puzzle has led me to numerous libraries, historical societies, archives, and online resources. I have not (yet) solved the mystery. Possibly one of the readers of this issue will provide that final important clue. Who did paint the murals in the hidden room and why? The West Baden Springs Hotel was rebuilt after a 1901 fire. It reopened in 1902.

The earliest graffiti on the murals (per email on July 29, 2010 from Sandi Woodward, Indiana Landmarks) is around 1919. So, my research has focused on what happened in the hotel between 1902 and 1919. Who had access to the room? Who had artistic talent? Who had materials? Who had the ability to paint murals? Who had time to paint? Why were they painted?

A helpful timeline of the hotel, complete with supplemental stories, is available on the website of the Linton-Stockton School Corporation. You will notice on their acknowledgments page a thank you to Joan Warwick, “high school librarian, for conducting the Internet Workshop where the initial information was gathered for this project” (Linton-Stockton, 1998-1999).

I want to give a personal thank you to Lou Malcomb, Indiana University Libraries. She was one of the first librarians I consulted about the project. My initial questions were about the period when the hotel was a WWI hospital. Her kindness and generosity has given me a number of clues. She also was the link to the Cook family (who made the hotel restoration possible) – a link that has meant a lot. [I extend here a special and deeply grateful thanks to Gayle Cook.] These human connections make our research so rich. There is a great deal of magic and serendipity that can occur in trying to discover an answer. Librarians are terrific in this realm.

On the second floor of the Herman B Wells Library, Indiana University, I was able to read from issues of *Library Occurrent*. I encourage every librarian in Indiana to learn about this journal. *Library Occurrent* was the name of an early version *Indiana Libraries*. Want to know a bit of Indiana library history? This journal is a great resource. Several issues from the year 1919 provide reference to the army hospital library at the West Baden Springs Hotel. I liked this quote:

“Military Hospital No. 35 at West Baden is growing constantly. At present there are about 500 patients in the big Springs Hotel. The Red Cross has been looking after the recreational needs of the patients but the Library War Service is to have a part as well.

A room off the Atrium has been set aside for the library and 1,500 volumes have been ordered shipped from Indianapolis and Fort Wayne. Magazine subscriptions have been placed, and it is hoped that Burseson magazines will come in in numbers. Miss Lura Slaughter of the Spencer Public Library is to organize the library service in the West Baden hospital. Her board has released her for the organization period” (Library Occurrent, January 1919, p. 110).

There are a variety of theories about the person(s) who painted the murals – an interesting discussion for another day. I am going to offer the possibility that they were painted in December 1918 by a circus banner painter with the help of recuperating soldiers – and, with paint from the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus paint shop. The intersection of these groups for a brief period of time is something that I will be researching in the months ahead.

That Christmas, the circus, even after a serious train wreck earlier in the year, performed for the soldiers recuperating at the hospital. *The great circus train wreck of 1918* by Richard Lytle of the Hammond Public Library gives background information. Both groups - the circus members and the army soldiers, nurses, and doctors - likely had time and access to the room above the dome. Lillian Sinclair Rexford, daughter of Lee Wiley Sinclair, owned the hotel with her then estranged spouse. She fell in love with and later married one of the soldiers, Lt. Harold P. Cooper, who was recuperating there.

Thanks to circus historians Tom Dunwoody and John Fugate of the International Circus Hall of Fame Museum in Peru, Indiana. They helped me learn more about the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus, circus winter-quarters, and circus paint shops. Mr. Dunwoody introduced me to an article by Joseph T. Bradbury titled, *The circus winter-quarters in West Baden, Indiana*. Reference to circus paint shops in West Baden can also be found in the book *Charles Edward “Ed” Ballard*. Ballard, owner of the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus, had long ties with the Sinclair family. There are other resources on circus banner painters that provide clues and insights. This article is only an introduction.

Resources about Fred Johnson, circus banner painter with the U.S. Tent and Awning Company of Chicago, are important.

A book by his grandson Randy J. Johnson gives details about this art form in *Freaks, geeks and strange girls: Sideshow banners of the great American midway*.

The U.S. Army Office of Medical History website has information about the West Baden hospital during the WWI years. It was called General Hospital No. 35. Use the search terms “West Baden” [<http://history.amedd.army.mil>] to find resources. This website also includes a photo of Raymond W. Bliss who, at the age of 30, was named Commander of General Hospital No. 35 at West Baden. He went on to become the Surgeon General of the Army later in his career.

Dr. Sanders Marble, Senior Historian, Office of Medical History, U.S. Army Command, Fort Sam Houston, Texas, responded to my questions about the recuperating soldiers – and projects they might have done on-site -- with encouragement. One affirmation he gave via e-mail on August 30, 2010 was that, “yes, decorative projects fell under ‘reconstruction’ and ‘occupational therapy’ in those days – the occupation of not being totally bored was therapy itself.”

The photo included here is from October 1918 (see the lower right side of the photo). Access this photo through the website of the Indiana Historical Society, and you will be able to zoom in on individual faces [<http://images.indianahistory.org/u/?dc013,156>]. The center photo (middle row) is of the hospital Commander Raymond W. Bliss.



There are many avenues to pursue for further research into the puzzle of the murals, and into the history of the West Baden Springs Hotel.

Indiana Libraries, Vol. 31, Number 2

There is rich history here, and I look forward to enjoyable hours ahead exploring the stories.

Librarians may want to contact Indiana Landmarks [<http://www.indianalandmarks.org/>] about issues of historic preservation in their community. Sandi Woodward with Indiana Landmarks has been a wonderful contact for my research.

I want to close with a quote that acknowledges the role of the American Library Association at the WWI Hospital - from the final issue of the U.S. General Hospital No. 35, West Baden, Indiana publication titled *Under the Dome*. There appears to have been only three issues published. It would be great to have them all brought together some day for a reprinting. Many of the soldiers, doctors, nurses, and other hospital staff are listed in the publications. Maybe one of those listed has left a diary filled with clues.

Excerpts from *Under the Dome (1919, March 3) 1(1)* are in the book *West Baden Springs: Legacy of Dreams* by Chris Bundy. A complete scanned copy of *Under the Dome (1919, March 15) 1(2)* is available on a website by Rich Everman. In an e-mail (September 2011) he noted that his 83 year old mother found it in the Veterans Section of the museum in Washington, Indiana where she does volunteer work.

Excerpts from the final issue *Under the Dome (1919, April) 1(3)* can be found in “*The Jewel of the Valley*”: *West Baden Springs Hotel* by J. Robert Shigley - page 98:

“This is our farewell appearance. ‘Under the Dome’ has just gotten a fair start when orders came to abandon the hospital. It may be well here to briefly review the activities of General Hospital 35 during its short existence. This large resort was taken over by the government on October 16, 1918... Our first patients were admitted on Nov. 17th. Practically, all cases have been wounded men from overseas... The Red Cross, Knights of Columbus and American Library Association have been represented from the start at the hospital, and we can all have nothing but the kindness thoughts of their works so well done.”

In my job as the Director of Admissions and Placement at the Indiana University School of Library and Information Science, we have used a recruiting statement developed for our school: "Graduate Degrees for the Strongly Curious." Being "strongly curious" is a great attribute for librarians. I hope this issue helps to spark your own curiosity about puzzles and mysteries in Indiana. May Indiana librarians help encourage people in the realm of discovery, history --- and, fun.

A note for further study:

The possibility that the Jesuits painted the murals has been proposed, but it is not likely given the dates of the graffiti on the murals. However, there is much history to be learned from this research area. The hotel was owned by the Jesuits from 1934-1964, and was used as a college. Records from this time are currently housed at the Midwest Jesuit Archives in Saint Louis, Missouri. E-mails with David P. Miros, Archivist, in October 2011 were helpful. He was familiar with records from this era. But, he had not seen reference to the murals.

The story of the West Baden Springs Hotel was the title of the 1957 M.A. Thesis by John W. O'Malley for Loyola University, Chicago, Illinois. I read his thesis, a terrific resource, but it does not mention the murals. A few weeks after reading the thesis, I was fortunate (one of those moments of serendipity) to receive a brochure in the mail for a lecture by the Reverend John W. O'Malley, S.J., University Professor in the Department of Theology, Georgetown University. I e-mailed him (October 2010), and he kindly wrote back. He was the thesis author, and had attended college at West Baden – but, he did not know about the murals.

Resources:

Ballard, C.E. (1984). *Charles Edward "Ed" Ballard*. Indianapolis, IN: C.E. Ballard Literary Trust.

Bradbury, J.T. (1972, September-October). The circus winter quarters in West Baden, Indiana. *Circus Bandwagon*, 5(13), 4-13.

Bundy, C. (1990). *Visions of Pompeii: The legacy of the West Baden Springs Hotel*. Salem, IN: Chris Bundy.

Bundy, C. (1996). *West Baden Springs – Legacy of Dreams*. Salem, IN: Chris Bundy.

Everman, R. (2011, September). *West Baden Springs Photo Gallery*. Retrieved from <http://www.richevermann.com/wbs/index.html>.

Fried, F. and Fried, M. (1978). *America's forgotten folk arts*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.

Gatsos, G.S. (1970, 1997). *History of the West Baden Springs Hotel*. Printed by the *Bedford Times Mail* - Bedford, IN.

Hammer, C. and Booker, G. (1996). *Freak show: Sideshow banner art*. San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books.

Johnson, R.J., Secreto, J., Varndell, T. and Davies, G.C. (1996). *Freaks, geeks and strange girls: Sideshow banners of the great American midway*. Honolulu, HI: Hardy Marks Publications.

Library Occurrent. Indianapolis, IN: Indiana State Library and the Public Library Commission of Indiana. [The issues from January 1919, 5(5) and April 1919, 5(6) were especially helpful for this article.]

Linton-Stockton High School, Indiana. (2012, January). *West Baden Springs Project* (1998-1999). Retrieved from <http://www.lssc.k12.in.us/highschool/projects/west/timeline.php>

Lytle, R.M. (2010). *The great circus train wreck of 1918: Tragedy on the Indiana lakeshore*. Charleston, SC: History Press.

O'Malley, John W., S.J. (1956). *The story of the West Baden Springs Hotel*. M.A. Thesis. Chicago, IL: Loyola University.

Reeder, Jr., W.A. (1972). *No performances today: June 22, 1918, Ivanhoe, Indiana*. Hammond, IN: North State Press.

Shigley, J.R. (1991). *“The Jewel of the Valley” – West Baden Springs Hotel*. French Lick, IN: J. Robert Shigley. Printed by the *Springs Valley Herald* – French Lick, IN.

U.S. Army Medical Department – Office of Medical History (2012, January). Search terms: West Baden. Retrieved from <http://history.amedd.army.mil>.

Bio

Rhonda E.L. Spencer is the Director of Admissions and Placement for the Indiana University School of Library and Information Science, Bloomington, Indiana (spencerr@indiana.edu).