

***Oral Histories of the West Baden Springs Hotel -
A Resource
By Barbara Truesdell***

“The Grand Hotel...always the same. People come, people go. Nothing ever happens.”

Grand Hotel (Motion Picture, 1932)

Despite the wry observation of Doctor Otternschlag in the film *Grand Hotel*, human drama enlivens every corner of a great hotel, though that drama may not be seen or remembered by any but those involved. The history of the West Baden Springs Hotel is recorded in its splendid architecture and grounds, in photographs and documents, in books, articles, video, and websites. However, that history is incomplete without the oral histories of the people who remember its rise, its changes, and its role in their lives.

Oral history methodology conducts recorded interviews to collect the memories of people who were eyewitnesses to or participants in the history being studied. Interviewing is flexible, practiced by many disciplines and used in many ways. For the purposes of this article, I will identify sources that are oral history interviews with people who worked at the hotel or lived in the Springs Valley area and remembered when it was a hotel, a Jesuit seminary, the Northwood Institute, or a fading landmark in need of restoration. I will also identify published sources that use direct or indirect quotations from oral history interviews and cite those interviews. Within the oral history community, researchers are encouraged to make their interviews available to other researchers by depositing them in libraries, archives, or historical societies. The authors of the published and online sources cited here have not done so, so we have only the information they have given us in their works. I have omitted sources where interviews were attributed but not cited, which is the style of journalists and documentarians rather than oral historians. I have also omitted sources where evidence suggests that interviews might have been done, but no direct evidence exists for them—for example, an author expresses thanks to specific people for their assistance in the history he has written, but there are no direct quotations or citations connecting those people to information in the published work.

O’Malley, John W. “The Story of the West Baden Springs Hotel,” *Indiana Magazine of History*, 54:4 (December 1958), 365-380.

This article was written by a Jesuit stationed at West Baden College. It is a thoroughly researched history of the hotel up to the 1950s. Well researched and thoroughly footnoted, so we can see where his information comes from, O’Malley did oral history interviews to add detail and richness to the documents he researched. For example, he interviewed Elmer Thacker, the manager of the club rooms, and Glenn Marlette, the manager of the hotel taxi stand. All O’Malley’s interviews were conducted in 1955. These interviews add information about the hotel’s most notorious visitor not mentioned in other sources: “Later, in the twenties, one of the hotel’s most faithful visitors would be the chief of the Chicago underworld, ‘Scarface Al’ Capone, who patrolled the grounds in his fabulous Lincoln with its fenders of steel and doors with combination locks” (O’Malley, 374-375). His interviewees were also able to provide interesting details about the closing of the hotel during the Great Depression:

Finally in the fall of 1931, the hotel closed its doors. This was the first time the management had deliberately closed them since 1887, the year before the arrival of Sinclair. The hotel promised, however, to reopen for the spring season of 1932 to care for a few previously scheduled conventions and, thought the die-hards, perhaps make a fresh start. But the spring season of 1932 proved to be no better than had been the two previous ones. In June, therefore, the manager of the hotel called the heads of the various departments to his office, told that the hotel was closing and that no one knew when, if ever, it would open again. All beds and furniture were covered with newspapers, the hotel silverware and dishes carefully stored away, and arrangements made to have the grounds tended for an indefinite period of time.

On June 30, 1932, the last payments were made to the cooks, maids, florists, bell boys—to that immense army of manpower which makes up a hotel—and the hotel auditor left that same day. On July 1, 1932, the executive office closed (O'Malley, 377).

Father O'Malley's article provides an exceptional example of how oral histories can enhance documentary sources, and he produced one of the most readable and thoroughly researched resources on the hotel's history.

An oral history project in the late 1970s at the Center for the Study of History and Memory (then known as the Oral History Research Project at Indiana University) was the "Economic History of Indiana in the Twentieth Century." Three interviews, one of them untranscribed, deal with the West Baden Springs Hotel and its economic impact on the area. All three interviewees were born in the first decade of the twentieth century, so their recollections covered most of the era of the domed hotel's heyday.

Interview with Loren "Toby" Stanfield (CSHM #79-057, September 19, 1979) conducted by Vincent Giroux, Jr.

Mr. Stanfield, born in 1909, moved with his family to French Lick in 1911. His grandfather had moved there in the 1800s, and got Mr. Stanfield's father to move there as well. Mr. Stanfield worked at the French Lick Hotel in various jobs while in high school. He describes Tom Taggart (the French Lick hotel's owner), Lee Sinclair, and Ed Ballard (owners of the West Baden Springs Hotel), the hotels as major employers, gambling (there were seven casinos at its height), and the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus. He describes the construction of the West Baden Springs Hotel after the fire in 1901 and the unique design of the dome with rollers to allow expansion and contraction with temperature changes:

Now that's where they got the idea for the Astrodome in Texas and it's also where Hyatt House got their idea for their atrium system for their new Hyatt Regency Hotels. Because the atrium in the center of that building, it's got 708 rooms and the atrium is 103 feet high and 208 feet in circumference.

And then they have a ceiling light in the center of it that was also used as a bandstand and was on cables and they'd lower the bandstand down and it was just above the fountain in the center of the atrium and that's where they played their dance music from. And they used that atrium for dances and band concerts and sort of like a lobby or gathering place for people—groups and stuff—and they'd also bring three-ring circus acts from the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus over there and put on the circus acts in that atrium (Stanfield, 9-10).

The part of his narrative describing the bandstand lowering from the ceiling is described by Sandi Woodward of Indiana Landmarks as "the most prevalent myth about the hotel." She suggested that the shape of the pendant in the center of the atrium ceiling and the fact that it can be lowered on cables to change the light bulbs may be the source of this prevalent oral tradition (Woodward, email communication, April 20, 2012).

Stanfield also describes the takeover of the hotel by the Jesuits, sharing a story I have not seen elsewhere:

Yes, when he sold it to them in 1934—of course he sold it to them for a dollar—now that was the hotel and 600 acres of land. And the understanding was that the people of French Lick and West Baden would be permitted to go to get the water and use the parks and all of that over there. Well, it wasn't too long after they took over—and why I don't know—but they put gates up at that archway. And also put gates up back there at that brick road coming out of there, and they wouldn't let nobody in there. But they didn't know one thing, that the wells at the West Baden Hotel are not natural wells. That's pumped over there. And the pump house was over at the Homestead Hotel, and that's where the cutoff valve was. So when they done that, why they just went out and cut the water off. So that's when they changed their mind and opened the gates again and let people in there. But anybody coming through French Lick or West Baden was supposed to be permitted to go in there and enjoy the park and everything (Stanfield, 21-22).

Stanfield's interview also addresses the African American employees at the hotel, who experienced "a lot of cross burning and stuff like that" because some of them were dating local white girls (Stanfield, 36). It is a glimpse of the racial tensions of that time and place, invisible when the history of the hotel is seen only through its architecture and its owners' aspirations.

Interview with Holbert "Jake" Grigsby interview (CSHM #79-055, September 18, 1979) conducted by Vincent Giroux, Jr.

Mr. Grigsby was born in West Baden, Indiana in 1902. His mother and father were also natives of the area. He, too, discusses the hotels and the gambling casinos associated with them as major employers in the area. He had worked at the casinos and shared his impressions of the wealthy clientele:

And people used to come from all over the country at Derby time. I remember a lady who used to come here with her husband. She had a Rolls Royce for her personal use and he had a Rolls Royce for his personal use. She was the widow, originally of an oil man, who was worth a tremendous amount of money and she married a hotel clerk. And I remember a lady who used to come here with diamonds in the heels of her shoes, a Mrs. Anthony from Fort Wayne. And at West Baden, I can remember a family that used to come here with their tally-ho and four and the coach dog running underneath. And they had a bugler and a coachman in the back with a great big bugle about three feet long and anytime they'd go out of town or come in to town after taking a drive through the country, they'd blow this horn. They had, from New York, a railroad coach for themselves and a railroad coach for the horses and carriage. It was one of those regular tally-hos where the coachman and driver sat way up nearly to the top of the vehicle. And there was probably more Rolls Royce cars in this town at Derby time than in New York or Chicago because all the people who had Rolls Royces and Cunninghams and fine cars were here. They used to have a special rack at the Brown Club for the ermine capes and coats. Women with diamond bracelets almost to their elbows.

Now that may sound foolish but I've seen it (Grigsby, 17).

Interview with Ernest Beaty (CSHM #79-058, September 19, 1979) conducted by Vincent Giroux, Jr.

Mr. Beaty, whose interview is not transcribed, was born in Orange County in 1903. He remembered watching baseball games inside the West Baden Springs Hotel bicycle track as a child and also worked around the circus stock with his father. He refused to say anything about Ed Ballard making his money in the gambling industry in town, perhaps feeling that this information was gossip he did not want to share on the record, although it was common knowledge. He worked outside and inside the hotel in cleaning and maintenance from 1922 to 1932 when it closed. He also recalled the Jesuits' tenure using the hotel as a college and worked about three years for them, then he went to work for Crane. He then worked for Northwood Institute, which took over the site after the Jesuits. He recalled that major league baseball teams trained at the hotel in its heyday. This interview was shorter than the other two in this set. Few details were volunteered by Beaty, who either did not remember or chose not to share more than he did.

Gatsos, Gregory S. *History of the West Baden Springs Hotel*. Indiana?: G. S. Gatsos, 1985. Reprinted: *History of the West Baden Springs Hotel, Including Interviews with Those Who Were There and Restoration Pictures*. Back in Business Edition. Bedford, IN: Rainbow Printing, 2008.

For this book, Greg Gatsos draws on newspapers, photographs, and other primary documents for his history of the hotel. He also does oral history interviews with "old-timers" who worked at the hotel or lived in the community. He also has a family connection to the West Baden Springs Hotel. On page 64 there is a photo of Magdalena P. Griesbaum, the mother of the author's mother-in-law, who was employed as a maid at the hotel between 1908 and 1911. In the afterword, he explains his research on the hotel began as a term paper for his sophomore art appreciation class. "From that time to this date he has interviewed numerous former hotel employees and local residents who worked for the hotel or lived in the surrounding community during the hotel's heyday" (Gatsos, 113).

On pages 75-96, Gatsos provides edited transcripts from his interviews. The questions are removed, and the choppiness of the statements suggests that Gatsos edited them down only to statements relevant to the hotel. His interviews with Lois A. Doane, Theodore “Doc” Jones, A. K. Nicholson, Edwin Southern, Gardner Flick, Charles Daugherty, Anna Farnith, Helen Roberson, Charles E. Ballard, and Charlie Barrett provided many years of memories about the hotel. Here are examples of the reminiscences they shared with him:

[A. K. Nicholson] I remember well when the first hotel there burned. I was up on the farm when it burned. I could see the light, it lit up the sky, it burned a good while. ...I was over there I don't know how many times to see them building the new West Baden Springs Hotel. I had some relatives who worked on building it. I had a cousin that was a carpenter there, and watched him finish a window. I had a brother-in-law who worked there. He worked on the dome, covering the dome. There were lots of people who had doubts that Sinclair could do it. He got the idea from Germany, or somewhere's. It was a wonderful thing a-going up (Gatsos, 83).

[Gardner Flick] When the Depression hit we had seven to eight hundred guests at the hotel the night before. Before the day the Crash hit was over we didn't have only forty, fifty people and those were people who had anything left. A lot of people went off and left their storage trunks with everything they had still in them. I remember that morning very well. I was at Number Seven Spring and there wasn't anybody coming down to drink the water. Later, as the day went on I found out that two or three people jumped from the fifth floor into the atrium and committed suicide (Gatsos, 87).

[Charles E. Ballard] Paul Dresser, the famous song writer wrote 'On the Banks of the Wabash' down there at the West Baden Springs Hotel. He wrote that song while he was there. He used to come there a lot and stay for three or four weeks at a time. ...Al Capone never spent much time there. People just say he did because it sounds exciting (Gatsos, 93-94).

We see in these interview excerpts several interesting characteristics of oral history. First, Nicholson's excerpt demonstrates that a feeling of personal connection to the hotel can extend beyond its owners. Having a family connection to the workers gave Mr. Nicholson privileged access and particular interest in the rebuilding of the hotel. In Mr. Flick's excerpt, we glimpse what I suspect is a local legend—that people committed suicide by jumping into the atrium following the stock market crash of 1929—which I have seen in another oral history but not in any documentary history of the hotel. I would expect such information to be included in any historian's recounting of the crash as it was experienced at the West Baden Springs Hotel, if it could be substantiated by documentary sources. It makes sense that the story would emerge in the local community's oral tradition: the dramatic height of the atrium and the stories of bankrupted people jumping from skyscrapers in New York City would suggest the same fate for the hotel's wealthy patrons. Lastly, we see Mr. Ballard, of the same Ballard family that owned the hotel, sharing that Paul Dresser wrote the Indiana state song at the hotel, but downplaying the hotel's association with the less savory (but more famous) Al Capone. In oral tradition, just as there are narrators who embellish dramatic events, there are narrators who challenge the stories told by their neighbors. It is the historian's task to weigh oral evidence alongside documentary evidence, and to see in all historical sources their incompleteness, their biases, and their agendas.

In the oral history archive of the Center for the Study of History and Memory, there are two oral history interviews from the “History of Paoli, Indiana” project that talk about the West Baden Springs Hotel. They are both transcribed and indexed.

Interview with Ethel Hollen and Mabel Fultz (CSHM #88-078, July 13, 1988) conducted by Catherine A. Jones.

Ms. Hollen shared that she was a waitress at a boarding house at West Baden run by her uncle. The two women noted that the gambling at West Baden did not extend to Paoli, and they recalled that they would “go up town” to see the wealthy people's limousines pass by on their way to the Kentucky Derby:

Fultz: Yes, if you were anybody at all in the world, you stayed at the French Lick Hotel and drove to Louisville in your limousine.

Hollen: And there'd be limousine after limousine, even around the square.

Fultz: A steady stream of traffic for hours. People leaving the hotel and going to Louisville.

Hollen: Big times. (laughs) ...And that West Baden hotel; the dome on that...there's one in the world bigger than it. ...They have two rooms redecorated.... Yes, it's open every day; you can go in (Fultz and Hollen, 40-41).

The women go on to discuss the prospect of the restoration and reopening of the hotel. They share their interest and excitement at the prospect of the restoration of the West Baden Springs Hotel and its potential to raise Orange County economically, but also the prospect of being able to stay in the beautiful hotel that was once the resort of only the wealthy folk in the limousines.

Interview with Cora Brown (CSHM #88-96, May 25, 1989) conducted by Chrystyna Huk.

Ms. Brown noted that the West Baden Springs Hotel was still a landmark in the area, and described her memories of the site and her experience in visiting it:

Used to be a hotel and it was, at one time, the 'seventh wonder of the world.' A lot of people go from here down there, and they finally made that place into a college. And right now, I don't know what they're doing with it. ...This, this big dome down at the West Baden. It's one big dome and the rooms that was the hotel goes around this dome and it's several stories high and this dome is self-supporting that sets up on top of this.... And Al Capone, so they said, used to have special trains that would come in down there. [The hotel] was noted for gambling. ... Well now, I have been in there. In fact, one time, we had a flea market under this big dome. And there's a huge fireplace in there—I guess it's still there. Of course, they've worked on it a lot since then (Brown, 48-50).

Linton-Stockton High School West Baden Springs Project. Linton-Stockton High School, 1999.

Website: <http://www.lssc.k12.in.us/highschool/projects/west/index.php>

In the 1998-1999 school year, the Computer Applications and Advanced Art classes did a special project on the hotel. Their field trip included a tour of the site led by J. R. Baldwin and Floyd Nicholson, who provided information that the students cited as "interviews" describing the features of the hotel's architecture and grounds. A teacher guiding the project, Linda Long, conducted an interview with Mrs. Betty Hendrix Rowe, a former resident of West Baden who talked about the days when the hotel was in operation. A summary of the interview is presented under the title "Growing up in West Baden" at <http://www.lssc.k12.in.us/highschool/projects/west/growing.php>. Her grandfather had earned a living entertaining guests at the hotel with his concertina. Her mother had washed and ironed white shirts for the people working in the gambling clubs. She remembered the stock market crash in 1929—"the stories, people crying, and others killing themselves at the hotel." She also remembered seeing the famous prizefighter Joe Louis training in the hotel park, though he had had to stay at the Waddy Hotel, the hotel for African Americans close to the bicycle track, because the West Baden Springs Hotel was segregated, as were all such accommodations in Indiana at that time. She noted the arrival of the Jesuits was not initially welcomed by the community, because they did not like the changes they made to the hotel, but they became accepted over time. For a one-page summary, Mrs. Rowe's interview provided interesting information, and obliquely touched on racial segregation at the hotel, something overlooked or glossed over in most of the published sources.

K'Meyer, Tracy E., and Crothers, A. Glenn. "If I see Some of This in Writing, I'm Going to Shoot You': Reluctant Narrators, Taboo Topics, and the Ethical Dilemmas of the Oral Historian," *The Oral History Review*, 34:1 (2007), 71-93.

In this article, K'Meyer and Crothers discuss their life history work with Marguerite Davis Stewart, a light-skinned African American woman who crossed back and forth across the color line from her childhood in Louisville.

One of the stories she told them involved staying at the hotel, which the authors summarized in this article:

She attended black schools, used the black branch of the public library, and associated socially with other black girls. Yet unlike her classmates and friends, she was able to go to the local amusement park, Fontaine Ferry, which remained segregated until 1964. Similarly, Stewart accompanied her mother to upscale shops, theaters, and restaurants on Fourth Street. They also crossed the river and enjoyed the white-only public accommodations in southern Indiana. Stewart and her mother stayed at the segregated West Baden Springs Hotel, where her mother was being put up by a white man with whom she was having an affair. The move across the river was not motivated by a desire to bypass southern restrictions on interracial relationships; like Kentucky, Indiana prohibited marriage between black and white. But at a remove from Louisville there was less chance their relationship would be discovered (K'Meyer and Crothers, 76).

In this brief summary, we see segregation from the African American side by one who could move easily across those racial barriers. We also glimpse just one of the innumerable human dramas that were played out in the “eighth wonder of the world,” the West Baden Springs Hotel. The oral history resources listed in this article can only provide a small sample of the lives that touched the hotel over its long, varied history. People with memories of the hotel’s past are fast disappearing; many are already gone. We are fortunate to have these sources to remind us that the hotel’s walls keep many more secrets than they reveal, and its history is more varied and more interesting than we can ever hope to know.

About the Author

Barbara Truesdell is the assistant director of the Center for the Study of History and Memory at Indiana University, formerly the Oral History Research Center. The Center studies the myriad ways that people remember, represent, and use the past. Dr. Truesdell administers all aspects of the Center's research projects and oversees the Center's extensive archive of oral history interviews dating back to its founding in 1968.

She received her Ph.D. from IU in folklore and American Studies in 1996. She has been doing fieldwork since 1985, and since 1992 has been conducting oral history training workshops for students, researchers, and community groups, including workshops in St. Petersburg, Russia, and Cluj, Romania. She is currently developing an online oral history training workshop in collaboration with scholars in the Instructional Systems Technology Department of the School of Education at IU-Bloomington. She teaches a class on oral history theory and technique for the School of Library and Information Science.

She is a co-coordinator of the IU Bicentennial Oral History Project. She has been a site visitor for the Association for the Accreditation of Human Research Protection Programs since 2002, and was a member of the AAHRP Accreditation Standards Revision Committee in 2009. She has been a member of the Indiana University Bloomington Human Subjects Committee since 2008.