

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, April 25, 2016

French Lick Springs, Indiana: Spas became famous in Europe in the 18th century if not before. Most were based on special medicinal waters that came from the ground in the form of springs. Customers would drink the water and in some cases bathe in it. Although originally thought to have special medicinal qualities, these places became great social resorts with elaborate hotels to accommodate those who came for long stays during the season.

In western Germany were Wiesbaden and Baden Baden, both in existence today. The AACA European tour in 1960 stayed in luxury at Wiesbaden, and Ruth and I stayed overnight at a hotel just outside Baden Baden on the edge of the Black Forest in 1987. There was also Karlsbad in the Carpathians, now in the Czech Republic, and Vichy in south central France.

Shortly after 1800, the craze spread to this country. Our own Brandywine Springs dates from before 1820 and featured water from a chalybeate spring that was claimed to cure gout and other maladies of the time. Like at most American spas, an elaborate summer hotel was built near the spring, which became socially popular during the season. Better known American spas developed at Saratoga Springs, New York; Hot Springs, Virginia; and White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia. Great hotels were built at these locations to house, feed, and entertain their affluent guests. Hot Springs, Arkansas, developed into a resort with several Victorian-era bath houses along the main street in the European style, and several large resort hotels were built nearby.

Soon after the end of the Civil War, Hiram Ricker began hauling spring water in a horse-pulled wagon from his farm at South Poland, Maine, to Portland, 30 miles away, where it was sold as being far superior to the local water supply. From these meager profits, three large resort-type hotels were built that became Poland Spring. The Poland Spring House was a huge deluxe summer hotel with turrets on each front corner connected by a long front porch. Less expensive and ostentatious was the Mansion House, with a third hotel being of the economy grade. Just after 1900, Hiram Ricker's sons were running the operation, and my grandfather Israel Marshall spent several weeks in 1910 at the Mansion House, drinking Poland Water for his persistent kidney disease. When my father paid a brief visit to his father there, he got off the Maine Central Railroad at Danville Junction and was met by a 1909 Stanley Mountain Wagon for the six-mile trip to Poland Spring. We have photos of F. E. and Flora Stanley leaving the Mansion House in a brand new 1913 Stanley Model 78. I stayed once with my parents at the Poland Spring House in 1938, but it was on its last legs, and very few guests were evident. In a passing visit in 1955, the big hotel was boarded up, as was the Mansion House. The next time, probably in the 1980s, the famous old hotels had been razed. At White Sulphur Springs and at Hot Springs (Virginia), the Greenbrier and the Homestead are going strong, and at least one of the big hotels operates at Hot Springs, Arkansas. Two huge hotels on the main street of Saratoga Springs were demolished in the 1940s.

A lesser-known spa to those in this area was at French Lick in southwestern Indiana. Here Dr. William Bowles discovered several springs in 1845, and thought the water, although very difficult to swallow, was beneficial to good health. Bad as it tasted, people came to French Lick to test it, and Bowles built the first large hotel near the main spring. Holding its own through the 19th century, the resort was falling out of favor when Tom Taggart, retiring mayor of Indianapolis and head of the Democratic machine in Indiana, bought the property in 1907, when the game of golf was coming into popularity among the well-to-do. In addition to a new golf course, he restored and greatly enlarged the 19th-century building, naming it the French Lick Springs Hotel. One day in 1917, the chef discovered he did not have oranges to squeeze orange juice for breakfast in the large dining room. He squeezed tomatoes instead, which is believed to be the first time tomato juice was ever served..

Like at Poland Spring, much of the income to keep the resort going came from the water that was sold worldwide. At French Lick, this water was called Pluto Water, and the label on the bottles showed the devil with an arrow through his head (or something like that). It was a strong cathartic, easily as distasteful as Castor Oil. The Hay Diet, to which my parents subscribed in the early 1930s, recommended that you drink a glass of

Pluto Water at least once a month to “clean you out” and then not eat a full meal for at least 12 hours. When I was young, I had to do this on a regular basis (my father usually kept me company). Like Castor Oil, I can still taste Pluto Water.

In the late 1930s, the big hotel had a trapshooting range in addition to its several golf courses. A man named Phil Miller, originally from Texas and one of the top shooters in the country, was hired to teach trapshooting at French Lick. He attended his first Yorklyn tournament in 1937, brought us a lot of literature from his employer, and won the Marshall Marathon with 498 out of 500. My father wanted to visit French Lick, so he and Pete Guest stayed there in 1939 when they attended a Jenkins Brothers tournament at Orleans, Indiana, about 15 miles away. Tom Taggart Jr. sold the property in 1946.

In the late 1950s, two of the early “hub” Glidden Tours for antique cars took place at French Lick. I didn't go, but like my father, I had a desire to see the place. In 1984, the Veteran Motor Car Club of America sponsored another Glidden Tour there. Joined by Howard and Judy Henry in their 1929 Packard touring car, I drove our '37 Packard to French Lick and back, in addition to the mileage of the five-day tour itself. The hotel may have seen better days, but they treated us very well, and the meals were excellent. In 2005, the Cook Group, a medical service organization from Bloomington, Indiana, bought the property, along with that of a smaller spa at West Baden nearby, and completed a major renovation of both hotels, which opened to the public again in 2007.