

HISTORICAL SPINKS STILL DOMINATES THE SHORELINE

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THEN



NOW

If the walls of the Spink could only talk... Al Capone, the Queen of Siam, Abbot & Costello, Hollywood stars, sports figures, entertainers, the rich and famous and the not so famous. They were all attracted to a world-class resort in Northern Indiana like it was magnetic north on a compass of indulgencies.

As you might imagine, the many, many stories and accounts uncovered while digging through the written and unwritten history of the Spink Wawasee (today known as the Wawasee Spink) could fill a book, or better yet, script a TV mini-series... High-stakes gambling, Prohibition booze, the transition to a Catholic seminary and prep school, and today, the Spink's renaissance as a luxury condominium complex.

The land now occupied by the Wawasee Spink was included in a Miami Indian reservation presided over by the legendary Chief Flat Belly, who lived near the east end of the lake. In 1834, the land was returned to the government, and after a series of new ownerships, was purchased by the North Lake & River Association in 1879. The lake, Indiana's largest natural lake, was called Turkey Lake at this time, having been named by early surveyors.

A two-story clubhouse, with 50 sleeping rooms and a dining room which could seat 125 members, was built in 1890 by the association. The building was later sold at a sheriff's sale to the Cedar Beach Association, whose membership list included Col. Eli Lilly (founder of the pharmaceutical firm bearing his name) and other prominent families. At this time, Col Lilly changed the name to the lake to Wawasee, reportedly "borrowing" the name from a nearby lake (now call Dewart Lake) named for another Miami Chief—wau-wa-aus-see, who lived on a reservation south of Wawasee.

The club was the first place on the lake to have a seawall built of logs. This caused a yearly hazard, as the logs would come loose with the melting of the ice during spring thaws, and would float dangerously out into the lake, partially submerged. Used primarily by fishing enthusiasts, it was a tradition for members to trace the outline of every large fish they caught on an outside wall of the large clubhouse. Reviewing old photos of the clubhouse didn't reveal any outlines of fish, but did show the structure to be quite impressive, with its tall, windowed tower, used no doubt, to check on the progress of members on the lake fishing

Wawasee Inn

When the building fell victim to a mysterious fire in 1891, the Wawasee Inn was erected on the site. The Inn was a spacious and handsome, two-story structure featuring broad veranda, large dining room and dance hall.

During the next few years, patrons of the Inn, which served as a focal point for lake social activities, included Judge Fishback, a law partner of President Benjamin Harrison; Judge Smith of Rushville, grandfather of presidential candidate Wendell Wilkie's wife; and an eccentric gentleman from

Wabash (the first electrically lighted city in the world) who always went fishing attired in a Prince Albert jacket and a top hat.

Following yet another sheriff's sale, Col Lilly obtained ownership of the facility and operated it until his death in 1899. The late Eli Lilly, grandson of Col. Lilly, whose beautiful summer home became a Wawasee landmark, describes a trip from Indianapolis to the Wawasee Inn in 1895, in his book "Wawasee Days" from which I've paraphrased.

"Moving to the lake for the summer was major undertaking. A number of huge, steamer-type trunks were packed and delivered to Indianapolis' Union Station (which underwent quite a noble restoration in 1896, and celebrated its 100th anniversary in 1988) in horse-drawn wagons. They had already purchased their round-trip tickets at \$4.25 each. The family drove themselves to the station in a surrey with fringe on the top. Two trains made the trip to Milford Junction, a few miles west of Lake Wawasee, each day except Sunday. The passengers tolerated twenty stops between Indiana's capital city and Milford Junction.

"Following what seemed to be an interminable wait at Milford Junction, passengers transferred to a Baltimore & Ohio train dubbed the "milk shake" because of the bumpy ride and large volume of milk collected at numerous way stations. Lilly described the stiff, red plush seats of "shake"; eating from box lunches, while smoke and cinders poured in from the coal-burning locomotives; and finally, much to the delight of all lake bound passengers, the arrival of "shake" at the open front, shed depot near the Sargent Hotel, just down the road from the Wawasee Inn. Once at the inn, members enjoyed fishing, swimming, sailing, and in the evenings, delicious dining and festive dancing to the two-step, waltz and lancer." Following Col. Lilly's death, the Wawasee Inn was sold to Clinton Wiggins and his attractive wife Emma. In 1914, the Inn was sold to the Ballou brothers from Chicago. The building was destroyed by fire in the winter of 1918, believed started by an unknown arsonist, ending grandiose plans of the brothers.

The Spink

Within the next decade, this lakeside site which had seen so much history was about to become world famous. This newspaper article from *The Milford Mail*, January 7, 1926 edition, kicked off the era of the Spink:

"Ground for the \$350,000 hotel to be built on the site of the old Wawasee Inn, north shore of Lake Wawasee, has been broken by the E.G. Spink Co. of Indianapolis general contractor. Breed, Elliot, Harrison and Gavin L. Payne Co., Indianapolis bankers have contracted to purchase a \$170,000 issue of preferred stock, bearing 6.5 percent. The Baltimore & Ohio Railroad has agreed to buy \$50,000 of second preferred stock."

Much of the stock purchased by the bankers was resold to investors, including a number from the Wawasee area. Edgar G. Spink of Indianapolis, builder of the complex, retained a portion of the stock. The B&O Railroad continued to be a stockholder until the hotel was sold several decades later. As one might imagine, \$350,000 built quite a facility in 1926

The hotel debuted in 1926 with 300 guests attending a \$5 per plate, opening night, dinner-dance gala. The event was hosted by the Spink family. Following the death of Mr. Spink in 1927, daughters Dr. Urbana Spink and Mrs. Bernard (Bonaventura) Cunniff became actively involved in the operation of the hotel.

A full page advertisement in the 1928 edition of the *The Wawasee Directory* contained a photograph of the new building, long with the following copy:

"The Wawasee Hotel & Country Club – On Lake Wawasee, Wawasee, Indiana – Management Walter L. Gregory and Leonard Hick. One of the most luxuriously furnished hotels in America. Situated in an exclusive environment overlooking the beautiful Lake Wawasee. Every recreational feature, including golf, bathing, fishing, motoring, yachting, horseback riding. The best in service and table that money can produce. Accommodation for 300. Fireproof building, every room with private bath."

At about this point the hotel became known as the Spink Wawasee. The Spink sisters, with their excellent management and administration, dedicated and professional staff, and a flair for showmanship were responsible for the world professional staff, and a flair for showmanship were responsible for the world famous success of the Spink. The family also owned and managed the Spink Arms, a luxury apartment/hotel located on North Meridian Street in Indianapolis.

A Dream Project

The resort must have been an architect's and landscape designer's dream project. The warm, buff-colored stucco walls were capped with a red, ceramic tile roof. The execution of detailing was carried out to perfection. Viewing the Spink from the lake created an image of a Spanish Mediterranean castle, with its regal magnitude, carefully positioned turrets and towers, and the long rows of arched windows and doors. One calm day, the lake made a romantic and beautiful double reflection, enjoyed in the quiet solitude of canoes and sailboats tiptoeing by.

While recently viewing several promotional films, silent reels with captions, compiled in the late 1920s and early 1930s, used to publicize the Spink, I sat in complete awe, watching the films over and over. What a place this was, what incredible times the 20's and 30's must have been... and the Spink Wawasee was the focal point of the hottest action.

Lush lawns with artistically arranged formal gardens abounded the grounds, accented by heavy-laden beds of colorful and fragrant flowers, especially planted to provide continuing beauty throughout spring, summer and early autumn, the typical seasons of operation for the Spink.

The 130 guest room complex was built with exceptionally thick concrete walls, with the purpose of making the hotel fireproof. Considering the fiery fates of its predecessors, the relative absence of rural fire protection, and the fact that most of the competitors were frame construction, the "fireproofing" of the Spink was widely promoted.

Each room contained a private bath, another selling point. Red awnings, matching the color of the roof tile, privately shaded the windows of the Spink, and the activities.

Guests arrived by rail (earlier the B&O had constructed a new station near the Spink and Sargent hotels); by plane (the Spink operated an airport several hundred yards back of the hotel); by bus or by automobile. The resort vehicle, a wood bodied station wagon, was on call to pick up those arriving by rail or air. Resort service personnel were "on alert" at all times to be of immediate assistance to guests. Maybe that's why many employees preferred to live at boarding houses away from the Spink. When the entire staff paraded by the promo film camera, their great number and professional appearance were quite impressive. It seemed like there must have been a staff member for each guest.

Across the road was a challenging 18 hole golf course (built by the Remy family of Delco-Remy automotive electrical parts fame) which was very popular with Spink visitors. The course is now enjoyed by area golfers, including Wawasee Spink Condominium owners. The Spink heavily promoted the excellent and varied aquatic activities available at the "lake of 1000 springs," – sailing, fishing, rowing, motorboating (gas-powered engines rapidly replaced the steam engines of yesteryear), swimming (the film pointed out in footage and captions the resort's muscular and handsome lifeguards and instructors), and ice sailing in the winter, when the large lake would completely freeze over, sometimes to a thickness of more than 12' to 18'. In fact, ice was cut from Syracuse Lake and Wawasee and sold, as far away as Chicago, for many years. A number of challenge matches were held between the ice sailors from the area and their contemporaries from Chicago. In 1941, national championship yacht races were held on Lake Wawasee, and based at the Spink.

Democrats Met There

To capitalize on the lucrative convention and meeting trade, the facility built a 400 person capacity convention hall in the early 1930's. This was the site of the 1932 Democratic state convention and a popular location for many organizations and business functions over the years.

The beautiful and busy front (lakeside) lawn of the resort was alive with colorful umbrellas, canopied swings and gliders, interesting people, dark sunbathers and as the promotional film mentioned – 'cool, cool drinks' (nothing has changed in half a century). Evenings brought out most guests to enjoy the spectacular sunsets, which have, no doubt, started many romances over the years. Before dinner music began in the dining room and the orchestra took the nod of the baton in the ballroom, about a half dozen musicians would make a nightly tour around the lakeshore, serenading guests and lake residents from a speedboat or cruiser. No quick trip, I might add.

Almost as enjoyable as the film footage from the Spink promo reels were the captions and the language of the times. One film refers to the "commodious lounges and capacious dining room with exquisite cuisine, truly a vacationer's paradise..." and area churches were described as "quaint little parishes nestle close by for Sunday worshipping." What happened to all these (and other) great words?

Lake Wawasee was known for top notch music and dancing. In addition to the Spink, you could travel across the lake to the great Waco Dance Pavilion, built in 1923. Over the years the Waco regularly

featured in person, Cab Calloway, Glen Miller, Hoky Carmichael, Ted Weems, Guy Lombardo, Woody Herman and other big band names: Many of these groups stayed at the Spink, some playing the Spink ballroom too, from time to time. During the war years, the Spink musicians were all women, with the men involved in war activities and manufacturing needed items for defense.

During the heyday of the Spink, a number of other hotels and recreational activities dotted the shoreline, including the tall Ideal Beach water toboggan, and the awesome beauty of the Japanese Gardens (promptly renamed the Chinese Gardens following the Bombing of Pearl Harbor). Chicago inventor, William E. Long developed the exotic gardens around a Japanese teahouse purchased following the Century of Progress Exposition in 1933-34, with Oriental landscaped islands, lagoons, bridges and other buildings. Peacocks, swans and other unusual birds and animals added added ambience to the gardens as shutterbugs from all over clicked a memorable view for the folks back home.

Personal interviews and correspondence with a number of people who were associated with the Spink (employees, guests, visitors, neighbors) have provided an extremely enjoyable insight into my research. I hope you'll find the excerpts as interesting as I did...

"I spent several summers at the Spink, employed by the Western Union Telegraph Company, to manage and operate their summer office, located in the lobby of the hotel. The B&O Railroad opened their station at Lake Wawasee for the summer months to accommodate vacationers who came from west and east, families complete with maids to care for their children. Many food items were shipped daily from Chicago."

"Water fun on the lake was exciting, with huge and handsome lifeguards... Friendly golf pro and a good course. Good food in a lovely dining room ---everyone dressed for dinner---no one was admitted without a coat and tie--- this was before the hippie days in 1935 and '36."

"The privacy of the celebrity guests was well respected by the staff and other guests, so it was no wonder that the Spink was the in-place for these people to vacation relax. Of course, we didn't have TV and other media to bring the stars whereabouts to the public as quick as now days."

"We knew gambling existed but saw nothing to substantiate it – everything was very quiet and orderly. Some slot machines downstairs disappeared quickly on some days, followed by a visit from some officers who were treated with friendly respect, invited to lunch, and urged to return again. After their departure, the slot machines made an appearance again, and everything was as before. Saturday was keno night."

"Gamblers held continuous sessions at the Spink during the summer season. Closed and guarded doors prevented any Kosciusko County resident from entering the gaming rooms. The equipment and operators were of the highest quality. Massive tables were kept busy by players of blackjack, chuckaluck, roulette, craps and high-stakes poker. Bookmakers were available on premises for placing horse racing bets. Many of the big gamblers were from Chicago and Al Capone and his henchmen frequented the tables. Many stories were told of fortunes won and lost by visitors from all over the U.S."

"It was quite an exciting place the summer the Detroit Lions football team held pre-season training at the Spink. Those in charge made a big fuss over the head coach. Boxers training for fights and other sports figures were a common sight at the Spink. Heavyweight champion Joe Louis trained at the Spink for a while."

"It was a beautiful place – the Spink. Mr. Eli Lilly of Lilly Laboratories also had a beautiful place nearby. Occasionally, some hotel guests would drift onto his beach – they were not welcome there – nor were the hotel employees who would slip onto his raft late at night with their liquid refreshments. On occasion, Mr. Lilly would appear in the hotel lobby with a basket of debris which the late intruders had left behind, rightfully resentful. The desk clerk was perfect in his role. He knew the proper things to say and do in all situations. He never appeared upset. He knew everything that was going on, it was his job to know."

\$8 To \$14 Rate

"During the late '20's, it could cost from \$8 to \$14 per person, each day to stay at the Spink. A tidy amount considering that you could stay at some other very nice hotels on the lake for \$4 a day, room and all meals included. It was the ideal place for area residents to take their out-of-town guests for lunch. It would keep them talking, back home, for months."

"Bud Abbott and Lou Costello were frequent guests at the Spink. I remember when they were here in the summer of '42, while on a War Bond drive."

The two decades and a year that the Spink doors were open as a hotel covered quite a cross-section of U.S. and world history. The span included the presidencies of Coolidge, Hoover, Roosevelt and Truman. It saw the great stock market boom, the crash, Prohibition and its repeal, the depression, the St. Valentine's day massacre and WW II, to mention a few. Stars, celebrities, has-beens, could have-beens, the rich and famous and the not so famous, dreamers and those living a dream... They were all part of the life and time of the Spink Wawasee. Was life simpler then?

On a cold wintery day in 1947, a tragic accident befell the two Spink sisters. Dr. Urbana Spink and Mrs. Bonnie Cunniff were returning from a trip to Florida when they encountered a sudden and very severe snowstorm, while driving through the mountains of Tennessee. A gate had been left open inadvertently and they mistakenly drove into the Smoky Mountain National Park. In the worst winter storm recorded at that time, they were blinded by the blizzard and lost as their car became stranded in a drift. They left the vehicle and began walking in search of help. The next morning, rescue workers found Bonnie frozen to death and Dr. Spink barely alive. She had struggled seven long miles through a record winter storm. She luckily survived, recovering in a local hospital. But her spirit had faltered and she closed the hotel permanently at the close of the '47 season.

A Seminary

In spite of the hotel's sins of the past, confession was served, and the facility was in store for a dramatic turnabout. In 1948, with the assistance of William Noll and Our Sunday Visitor Foundation, the Spink property was purchased by the Fort Wayne/South Bend Catholic Diocese as part of an educational expansion program. During that year, the old hotel was christened Our Lady of the Lake Seminary, operated by the Crosier Fathers. The hotel rooms were turned into dorms and classrooms, with the old Spink ballroom breathing new life as an auditorium. A chapel was constructed with classroom space beneath, and a gymnasium was added.

The school included a junior college department with its four-year secondary school, until subsequent changes in diocesan educational policy, influenced by the Second Vatican Council, led to the shift from strict seminary program to a college preparatory program. In 1967, the facility became known as Wawasee Preparatory School, also under direction of the Crosier Fathers. An independent school with a decidedly ecumenical spirit, Wawasee Prep was open to qualified students of any race, creed or color. The school, with its fine reputation, drew students internationally, and not all were Catholics.

Wawasee Prep was accredited by the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools. Approximately one-half of the faculty were priests. Two-thirds of the faculty members held masters degrees or higher. At this time, the student-to-teacher ratio was 12 to 1. The school was also known for its strong physical education and athletic programs. Throughout the summers, the complex was kept busy with CYO and sports camps, Scouts, college football summer conditioning and other activities. Additional remodeling and structures were completed throughout the years.

Condominiums

A number of reasons, including reallocating resources brought about a decision to close the school in 1976. The property remained vacant, although the subject of some grandiose rumors until 1979, when it was purchased by the Miller family, known for their 30+ Miller's Merry Manor health care facilities in Indiana. Due to adverse economic conditions, plans did not develop until 1984. The Miller family have now completed those plans and the Spink is now the home of luxury condominiums.

There's nothing like plain old relaxing at the lake. Just ask the seasonal residents who have been passing lake homes along through generations like they were Kentucky Derby boxes. Tradition is an important part of lake living at Wawasee. It has been since the days of the North Lake & River Association, and should continue to be well into the 21st century. And built around that tradition is the landmark of the lake, the Wawasee Spink and its proud heritage... If only the walls could talk!