French Lick and West Baden: A Valley of History
Welcome to a Valley of History. This Wherigo will take you on an historical tour of the towns of French Lick and West Baden. We will start our tour of the Valley, just as many visitors of the past started theirs, at the train depot. Back in the Roaring 20s, seven different railroads ran daily trips to West Baden and French Lick.

The depot stood just south, across the driveway. There you can still see the steps and parts of the rail platform where thousands of people got their first glimpse of the grand hotel.
Welcome to West Baden Springs, the Carlsbad of America. Just like the famous resort city in Europe, West Baden is home to mineral springs, spas, and a luxurious hotel.

In the center of the arch you can see The Sprudel, the mascot of the hotel and the trademarked logo of the bottling company that bottled the local mineral water. Sprudel is a German word meaning sparkling, or soda, that is used to describe mineral water. The little gnome can still be seen in the hotel's atrium on the beautiful Rockwood Pottery facade surrounding the large fireplace.

The old West Baden National Bank is on the list of National Register of Historic Places. The bank used to be located inside the lobby of the West Baden Hotel. It is rumored that the hotel owner's daughter had it moved here so the local "farmers would quit tracking mud through the lobby."
As we approach the West Baden Hotel you can see why it was dubbed the 8th wonder of the world. When the 200' wide dome was built, it was the world's largest.

Originally there was a large wooden hotel here owned by Lee Sinclair. After that structure burnt down in 1901, Sinclair vowed to build the most spectacular hotel in the world. Not only beautiful, he promised that it would be re-built in one year to the day of the fire.

Sinclair had plans for a 200' dome, but none of the prominent architects of the time thought it feasible and refused the job. Finally a relatively unknown, Harrison Allbright, took the job and was so confident in his abilities that he offered to pay Sinclair $100 a day for every day that the project went over the allotted 200. Sinclair moved into his new apartment at the hotel on the one year anniversary of the fire.

Allbright hired bridge builders to help him with the design of the dome. What they came up with was a steel and glass roof weighing in at a massive 65,000 tons (over 3 tons of glass and putty alone) that sits on rollers. This ingenious idea allows for the expansion and contraction of the dome.
From around the 1890s to 1930 the towns of West Baden and French Lick were havens for the rich and famous. The two grand hotels were the Disney World of their time. Guests would come from all over the world to relax, play golf, swim, gamble, enjoy the opera, moving pictures, and of course, experience the curative effects of the mineral waters. One historian said that, “if you could afford to vacation in America, you would go to West Baden. It was that well-known overseas.” In 1916, the hotel charged $3.00 a night, which was more then then the Waldorf-Astoria charged at the time.
In the middle of this intersection is a fountain that originally stood in the middle of the hotel's atrium. It was carved by local artist Ferdinand Cross. The fountain once featured a seal on a coral reef. The seal is long gone but the “coral” is still evident. A few carvings by Ferdinand can still be found around the area. Probably his biggest legacy comes from when Ferdinand and his partner John Rowe entered their rustic carvings of trees in the 1883 World's Fair at Chicago, popularizing that style of carving for tombstones and yard ornaments across the nation. Most cemeteries in the area have markers copying Ferdinand's style.

Ferdinand's brother, Henry H. Cross, is probably more widely known. His portrait paintings and depictions of the west make him one of the most influential chroniclers of the “Wild West.” Henry, knowing that the old West would disappear in his life time, became fanatical about getting portraits of all the pioneers, Indians, and historical figures of the era. He would often travel for weeks just to get a chance for a sitting with an old mountain man, Indian war chief or famous general. His works include the last portrait Lincoln would sit for, Presidents Grant and Teddy Roosevelt, Wild Bill Hickock, Jim Bridger, Jeremiah Johnson, Sitting Bull, Geronimo, Kit Carson, Pat Garrett, Wyatt Earp, Judge Parker, Annie Oakley, Custer, Calamity Jane, and even King Edward VII of Great Britain.
The glory days of the area abruptly ended on October 24, 1929, when the stock market crashed and plunged the country into The Great Depression. With the whole country going broke, tourism in the Valley plummeted and the hotel had to shut down in July 1932. With no potential buyers, the owners donated the hotel to the Jesuits. The Jesuits were a religious order who lived an austere lifestyle. Over the next 32 years they stripped the grand structure of nearly all of its ornamentation. Here on the side of this hill is a small graveyard used by the order.

Off to the side of the cemetery, there is also a marker for one of the greatest race horses of all time, Peter the Great. Peter broke track records all over the country before coming up lame and ending his short racing career. Peter then sired hundreds of championship horses. His blood still flows in the veins of the majority of champion trotting horses today. In 1916, Tom Taggart (then owner of the French Lick Hotel) and business partner Stoughton Fletcher bought the horse for an unprecedented $50,000. (adjusted for inflation, that's over one million dollars today)
Over to the east, across the creek, stood another unique building, a 1/3 mile long double-decker bicycle and pony track with a full size baseball diamond in the middle. Guests could rent pony carts to ride around the lower track, or bicycles to ride on the banked track above. The track was built in the 1890s and was destroyed by a tornado in 1925.
The West Baden Stadium, as the ball diamond in the middle of the bicycle/pony track was called, was home to the West Baden Sprudels. Comprised mainly of hotel employees, the team was one of the forerunners of the Negro League. The team's manager, C.I. Taylor, and his three all-star brothers, would later start the Indianapolis ABC's, the premiere team in the new Negro League.

West Baden was also the home to many Major League teams' spring training. The Cincinnati Reds, Chicago White Sox, Pittsburgh Pirates, St. Louis Cardinals, and Chicago Cubs have all held spring training here. One reason teams came here, was for “the water cure.” After a winter of drinking and sloth, the out of shape players would benefit from the cleansing waters. There might actually be something to the water cure. The 1902 Browns finished in second place and lost the fewest games in Brown's history. In 1911 the Cardinals pulled themselves over .500 for the first time since the American League roster raid of 1901. The World Series champion 1907 and 1908 Cubs trained here, as well as the last time they won the pennant in 1945.
This spot was home to another important landmark in the history of Springs Valley, the Waddy Hotel. The Waddy hotel was where boxing legend Joe Louis stayed while training in the area. Joe Louis is considered to be one of the greatest boxers of all time. He held the heavyweight title for almost 12 years and defended his title 25 times, more than anyone in boxing history. One of Joe Louis' trainers, Artie “Smitty” Smith, loved the place so much that he stayed on in town and bought the Waddy. The Waddy was destroyed by fire in 1951, but Smitty's home still stands to your left. Sadly, the reason Louis, one of the most famous and beloved sports figures of the time, stayed at the Waddy was because it was one of the only places in the area to allow people of color.
Our next historical landmark is the Beechwood Mansion. This 21 room Georgian style mansion was built in 1915 by one of the area's most famous entrepreneurs, Ed Ballard. It's thought to be the first private home in the valley to have electricity.

Ballard grew up poor, here in Orange County, but by the time he died in 1936 he was estimated to be worth over 100 million dollars. He started working as a child at the West Baden Hotel bowling alley as a pin-setter, and eventually worked his way up to running the hotel's casino. Eventually he would own most of the hotels and casinos in town. In the early 1920s when the West Baden Hotel owners wanted to do some remodeling, Ballard loaned them $500,000. When they defaulted, Ed bought that hotel as well.

Ballard also owned a nearby hunting lodge, Wilstem Ranch, where he would entertain his rich and famous friends, including President Franklin Roosevelt and Al Capone. It's rumored that Capone even got married at Ballard's ranch.
Not only did Ed Ballard own most of the hotels and casinos in town, he also owned one of the largest circuses on the planet. The Hagenbeck-Wallace circus employed over 1100 people, at a cost of $110,000 a day, adjusted for inflation. The circus traveled with more than 800 animals, and its 22 tents would cover 14 acres of ground. It would take 3 trains pulling 100 cars each to move the circus from town to town.

In the early 1900s circuses were the main form of entertainment and information for most small towns in America. The circus provided rural America's first view of new inventions, exotic animals and exotic people, and popular entertainments. Ed Ballard wanted to give his hotel guests something they wouldn't get at any other resort town, so he moved the circus' winter headquarters to the Valley. The barn you see here is all that is left of the circus' sprawling complex that once occupied the grounds.
Our next stop is the French Lick train depot built in 1908, now home to the Indiana Railway Museum. The trains first came to town in 1887. In the early days there was only light traffic, mainly a few passengers and some freight. Soon, the popularity of the town would rise and 14 trains would stop here every day, bringing hundreds of guests to the front door of one of the world's finest hotels. At first people came for the “water treatment” of the Pluto water, but by the 1920s, illegal gambling was the Valley's major tourist attraction. The really affluent had their own richly appointed rail cars that they stayed in while visiting the area. The busiest time of year for the station was during the Kentucky Derby. During Derby week, the Monon had to run extra trains between the Valley and Louisville just to keep up with the demand of the revelers wanting to watch the races at Churchill.
No trip to the area would be complete without mentioning our own home grown sports legend Larry Bird. Larry was born and raised right here in French Lick / West Baden and attended Springs Valley High School. Bird excelled at basketball at an early age and practiced every chance he could get. All of his hard work paid off and by the time he graduated high school he was the school's all time leading scorer and earned himself a college scholarship.

At Indiana State University Bird excelled, earning many awards, including the USBWA College Player of the Year, the Naismith Award, and the Wooden Award. He left college as the fifth-highest scorer in NCAA history, despite playing only three years at ISU, and finished his collegiate career with a 30.3 points-per-game average. His senior year, Larry Bird led the Sycamores to the NCAA Championship game against Michigan State. It would be the first of many games Bird would play against his long time rival and friend, Ervin “Magic” Johnson.

After college, Larry was drafted by the Boston Celtics and quickly became a star. In his 13 years as a player Bird was named to the NBA all star team 12 times, won three NBA championships, was named MVP of the league 3 times, and even won a gold medal in the 1992 Olympic games.

After retiring, Bird turned his talents to coaching and coached the 1997-98 Pacers to a record best 58–24 season, which earned him a Coach of the Year Award. Larry stepped down as head coach after a few years, and became the Pacer’s President of Basketball Operations where he just recently was name NBA Executive of the Year. Making Larry “the Legend” Bird the only person to win an MVP, Coach of the Year, and Executive of the Year.
Our next stop is the home of the Pluto Cooperation, the bottlers of the infamous Pluto Water.

When George Rogers Clark came through the area in 1778 he noted large populations of deer and bison congregating around the “licks”. Where the springs bubbled up, they left mineral deposits on the ground that attracted wildlife. The wildlife attracted French fur traders, and the minerals eventually interested the U.S. Government. After the government figured out it wasn't cost effective to mine the minerals they sold the land to Dr. William Bowles who built the first hotel in the Valley in 1832. Bowles soon began marketing the water as a cure-all and dubbed it Pluto Water after the Roman god Pluto who ruled the underworld from where the water sprang. With a healthy dose of advertising, the whole country eventually knew of French Lick and its Pluto Water. It was said that a bottle of Pluto Water was “worth its weight in advertising gold”. In the early 1900s the hotels hired “doctors” who would meet with guests and perscribe different water treatment cures for their ills. At its peak Pluto water sales were over $1.2 million a year.

Pluto Water actually did contain ingredients that might be deemed benificial to a modern doctor. The sodium and magnesium sulfate are a good laxative, hence the slogan above. It was also found to contain trace amounts of lithium. The government declared lithium a controlled substance in 1971, which put an end to the bottling of Pluto Water
Now we arrive at the French Lick Springs Hotel. There have been a few different buildings located here. The French Lick Fort, which was built “to help defend the area from Indians” was here until 1815. Then Dr. Bowles built his hotel here in 1832. Bowles' hotel was mainly a summertime resort so wasn't open during the winter months. It was destroyed by fire in 1897. In 1901, the mayor of Indianapolis, Tom Taggart, bought the property and started building most of the structure we see now. While Taggart was owner the Valley really started to prosper. He modernized the mineral springs. He built a spa so the guests could bathe in the waters. Taggart built a new bottling plant for the Pluto water and had a trolley line ran through town. One of his greatest additions was to bring the newly popular sport of golf to the town. In 1924 the new Donald Ross-created course hosted the PGA Championship. Mayor Taggart was also the head of the Democratic National Party, and French Lick became the defacto home town of the Democratic Party. In 1931, Franklin Roosevelt rounded up enough support at a Democratic governor's conference held here to gain the presidential nomination. The hotel has also been credited as the birthplace of tomato juice, when chef Louis Perrin decided to serve tomato juice to the guests when he ran out of orange juice.
Now head to the final location. Hours are Tuesday-Saturday 10am to 4pm.