

White Sulphur Springs

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Mr. President, Mr. Secretary/Treasurer, fellow presenters, Athenaeum members, and honored guests, last year at about this same time I discovered that I had drawn the short straw. I was going to have to present a paper at the next open meeting. I then experienced a period of dismay, but later as I had time to think about it, I decided that the open meeting might not be so bad. For one thing, the food is usually better at these events. Also, the average intelligence quotient jumps 20 points at these gatherings. Not to mention that our members behave better; smell better; are dressed better, and fewer members fall asleep. So quite a bit of audience improvement can be attributed to our open meeting and our honored guest.

For those of us who have families whose roots go deeply into the soil of Western Kentucky, our parents and grandparents have told us tales of hot summer days spent at one of the many mineral springs in our area. The waters of these mineral springs were thought to have had strong ^{Healing} medicinal powers that could cure most any medical problem one might have. To name just a few of our area springs, there were Roaring Springs, Dawson Springs, Diamond Springs, Cool Springs, Cerulean Springs, Drifting Springs, and Mill Springs. My own grandparents spent many summers at Diamond Springs in Logan County. There they would bathe in the cooling, refreshing spring, and drink gallons of the health-giving smelly water. Long summer days were spent socializing, playing cards, smoking a little, and drinking a little, and just relaxing. What happened at the springs, stayed at the springs.

My paper for you this evening concerns the oldest and most historic mineral springs in our country. I speak of White Sulphur Springs which had its origins in the Allegheny Mountains of Virginia and has played an integral part in the history of these United States for over 200 years.

The first written record that makes reference to what would become White Sulphur Springs is from the 1740's and chronicles a violent conflict between early colonial settlers, mostly German and Scotch Irish, who were looking for cheap land to settle and Shawnee Indians who hunted game in the area in and around the springs. Both the natives and the settlers saw the value of the spring and did not want to share their resources. Skirmishes ensued for a decade. In the late 1750's, Shawnee Chief Cornstalk was defeated and the Shawnee were forced westward and homesteaders began to feel secure. The general who defeated the Shawnee, Andrew Lewis, organized the first exploration of the region, and first heard of the curative powers of the springs as one "took the waters."

Then in 1770 the Greenbrier Land Company, a consortium of Virginia land speculators, sent a survey party to the springs of begin plans to develop a summer retreat site to be used by wealthy southern families who wished to avail themselves of the curative powers of the mineral spring waters, and escape the oppressive heat, mosquitoes, and malaria of deep south summers. This land company named the region "Greenbrier" after the profusion of tangled and clinging vines growing around the ~~hot~~ springs.

The first visitors to the White Sulphur Springs retreat were offered only log cabins or canvas tents for lodging, but soon after, the springs was able to offer much better lodging

to their customers. Families wishing to return regularly each summer could have their own cottage built for 200 dollars.

By the early 1800's the springs had evolved into a real resort, with a nice-sized hotel, several dozen cottages, a Greek-styled spring house, a dining hall, a dance pavilion, and stables for visitors' horses.

A typical day at the White Sulphur began early with a trip to the springhouse where a crowd gathered under the dome to dip sulfur water from the spring into individual cups. The accepted routine was to drink three glasses of the water before each meal. Some drank five or even seven glasses, especially the European visitors. As the glasses were consumed, varieties of theories about the causes and cures of rheumatism were exchanged, as well as discussing the most effective mode of application of the healing waters. Then everyone walked to the dining room for breakfast. This was all before eight o'clock to take advantage of the cool of the day.

A hearty breakfast was followed by walks, horseback rides, carriage rides for the ladies, hunting and fishing for the men or horse shows and sales. Later there would be conversations on the lawn with tales of the Revolution, politics, elections, and discussions concerning the price of goods.

Women would play flutes or guitars and children shrieked, chased each other, and played quoit.

Then came the midday dinner with plenty of water. Afterward the cake man arrived with trays of sweets, accompanied by a little boy in a straw hat who brought buckets of maple syrup from the mountains. Late in the afternoon the stage coach arrived, bringing new guests and long awaited letters from home.

After a light supper and more water, everyone would go to their rooms to rest and change into their finest suits and gowns for the evening dance. The young people would gather at the dance hall to dance “the German.” Now I am not exactly sure what “the German” looks like, but I do know it was a very staid and proper dance with quite strict rules. Rule # 1 - No flesh shall touch flesh; everyone must wear white gloves. Rule #2 - No one shall dance any closer than 12 inches to his or her partner, and Rule #3 - all underage participants must have an adult chaperone in the building. This dance must have been quite erotic. I get excited just talking about it.

If you were to drop in on the White Sulphur Springs in the 1830’s, you might rub elbows with Dolly Madison, Daniel Webster, Davy Crockett, Frances Scott Key, John C. Calhoun, or even fellow Kentuckian, Henry Clay. In fact, Henry Clay was a longstanding patron of the Old White, having spent time there at least once a year for 30 years. He would usually stop for a number of weeks on his way to the national capital. “Henry Clay’s presence was galvanizing to the social life at the Springs,” one historian wrote, He had the gift of winning friends and influencing people by his wonderful oratory. He was fond of drinking Kentucky whisky, playing cards, dancing, and being the life of the party. He loved the Springs, and they loved him. For those three decades, he was a sort of unofficial host.”

Before the Civil War, the Springs played host to a number of our presidents - Martin Van Buren, John Tyler, Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce, and James Buchanan all passed some restful days there. Over its 200 plus-year history, 30 of our Presidents have visited the Springs.

In 1858 a very large hotel building was constructed on the property, but six years later with the coming of the Civil War, the Springs could no longer function as a southern resort. Greenbrier County was very divided as to where their sympathies lay, but White Sulphur Springs stood strongly with the South. In 1862 Greenbrier County experienced their first battle of the war, the Battle of Lewisburg. The Southern army was beaten badly and the Springs new hotel was converted into a hospital for the Confederate troops. The Battle of White Sulphur Springs and Dry Creek happened in August of 1863. Both sides took heavy casualties before both ran out of ammunition and withdrew with no victory. Later the Springs would fall to the North and the Union troops made use of the hotel as a regional headquarters. Orders came down through the Union ranks that the White Sulphur Springs resort would be abandoned and burned to the ground. Luckily, these orders were countermanded at the very last moment, and the Springs lived to see another day.

Much of this mountain area of Virginia had been opposed to leaving the Union and joining the Confederacy, and in 1861, many of these counties, including Greenbrier, voted to break off from Virginia and form a new state. Therefore, by declaration of President Lincoln, the new state of West Virginia was formed. The White Sulphur Springs had just moved north, but their heart was still in the South.

Following the Civil War, the resort set about making major repairs to its hotel and cottages, and soon they were able to reopen. The resort was to go on to become a center of regional post-war society, especially after the arrival of the railroad in 1869 with direct service to the resort's gates. The railroad now made the North, the Midwest, and the deep

South easily accessible to the Springs. What used to be a three-day tiresome trip by dirt road from Washington to the resort now only took fifteen hours by rail. Before the railroad service, families would only bring with them two steamer trunks to last the summer. After the railroad arrived, the average number of steamer trunks was twelve. Resort wear no doubt improved.

During the post-Civil-War years, Robert E. Lee was appointed to the presidency of Washington ^{College} University, later to be named Washington and Lee University. During Lee's summers months, he would hurry off to his cottage at White Sulphur Springs to relax. Many of Lee's wartime colleagues would also convene at the Springs to spend some time with General Lee. This gathering became a long time tradition until Lee's health would no longer allow him to travel.

Hundreds of well-to-do southern families flocked to the Springs to rub shoulders with their much loved hero, and they continued to return to the resort, but with much less money in their pockets.

In 1880 the resort was sold to William Stuart, brother of Jeb Stuart, and three of his associates, for \$340,000. They formed a new company, The Greenbrier White Sulphur Springs Company. This was the first time the word "Greenbrier" was officially used in the resort's name.

In 1910 the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad purchased the resort for 3.3 million dollars. Shortly after the property changed hands, the C and O began making improvements which included the construction of a large, six-story, 250 room hotel building, which now forms the central wing of today's hotel. The resort was converted to a year-round resort and the name was officially changed to "The Greenbrier," having taken the name of the

surrounding county. The neighboring hamlet, The Village of Dry Creek, was renamed White Sulphur Springs.

In that same year, the Greenbrier opened the first of three golf courses. They were one of the first resorts in the nation to offer golf to their patrons. Two Scotsmen traveled to the Greenbrier that year to play on the new course. While going through customs in New York, they were stopped and accused to ^{of} bringing "Implements of Murder" into the country. It was just their golf clubs, of course, as golf was very new to the United States at that time.

The C and O also provided an on campus railroad station for their wealthy clients with connections to Atlanta, New York, Chicago, and Washington.

After all the bills were paid, the railroad had spent 2.5 million dollars on improvements. These expenses proved to be worth it, as some very wealthy families began to flock to the resort. In 1914 Joseph Kennedy spent his honeymoon there. Woodrow Wilson, a frequent guest, spent his honeymoon to his second wife at the resort. Cornelius Vanderbilt came rolling in with his family in his private train cars and checked into 12 suites at the hotel. General John Pershing stayed the summer in 1916, writing his memoirs. The Duke and Duchess of Windsor spent time there on their extended honeymoon in 1936. The list of big money guests goes on and on - Walter Chrysler, The Duponts, Charles Schwab, J. P. Morgan, The Fords, Conde Nast, Noel Coward, and General Billy Mitchell all visited during this long prosperous period at the resort.

In December of 1941, shortly after the United States entered the Second World War, the U. S. State Department asked the Greenbrier if they would rent out the entire resort to house all of the Axis diplomats, their families, and their respective staff until they could

be transported back to their home countries.

Within 48 hours, the Greenbrier was transformed from a private luxury resort into a focal point of international wartime diplomacy. On December 19th, the first contingent of 159 German and Hungarian diplomats arrived on a secretly scheduled eleven-car Pullman train.

For the most part the Axis diplomats behaved themselves and had an enjoyable time while at the Greenbrier. There was one incident however that did not go well. The Germans approached the FBI agents who were in charge of the resort and requested permission to have a party in the grand ballroom. Permission was given, and everyone had a wonderful time dancing and drinking. But late into the night, the party got out of control and the ballroom suffered quite a bit of damage before the festivities were halted. The party, Oh, yes, it was a birthday party for Adolph Hitler.

During their stay, the diplomats were informed that they would not be allowed to take any of their U. S. currency home with them when they left for their respective homelands. Consequently, the Germans, Italians, and Japanese left a total of \$65,000 in gratuities to the Greenbrier staff for excellent services rendered. They also visited the Greenbrier's pricy shops and purchased everything in these shops back to the bare wells. Two additional freight cars had to be added to their train to accommodate all of the purchases.

On July 8, 1942, the last group of the 1697 diplomats left the hotel after 201 days of emergency government services.

Two months after the last of the Axis diplomats had left, Washington called the president of the C and O Railroad to thank him for taking good care of the diplomats and to inform

him that the Greenbrier was being condemned under the War Powers Act, and its new owners, the U. S. Army, would be using it as a 2000 bed military hospital and as a prisoner of war camp to house 1,000 captured enemy soldiers.

The elaborate furnishings were auctioned off and the hospital conversion was completed within a year, with the dedication of the new "Ashford General Hospital". During the four years of the hospital's operation, 24,000 patients were admitted and 11,000 surgeries performed there. Among those treated were Omar Bradley, Mark Clark, Matthew Ridgeway, Jonathan Wainwright, George Marshall, and General Eisenhower.

With the end of World War II, the Army decided to close the hospital and put it up for sale. In December of 1946, The C and O Railroad bought back the Greenbrier Resort for 3.5 million dollars. The war-worn resort had been stripped of all furnishings and was in need of extensive renovation throughout, as the army had left it battered, beat up, and devoid of furnishings.

The railroad hired the noted New York interior decorator, Dorothy Draper to completely refurbish the Greenbrier. At the time this was the largest redecoration project ever attempted in the history of the American hotel industry. The job included the hotel with its 700 guest rooms, the 60 guest cottages, one hunting lodge, the golf clubhouse, and the other structures on the property. In sixteen months Mrs. Draper went through 45,000 yards of fabric, 15,000 rolls of wallpaper, 40,000 gallons of paint, and 30 miles of custom-designed carpet. In terms of furnishings, she either purchased or had made 45,000 individual decorative and furniture items. The sumptuously remodeled resort was reopened on April 15th 1948 after expenditures of some \$12, 400,000 dollars.

The railroad planned a grand reopening celebration. \$65,000 was set aside to throw what

Life Magazine called the most lavish house party of the century with a guest list including the most prominent names in American industry, government, entertainment, and society circles.

Interestingly enough, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor brought with them some 120 travel bags for this outing, but to be fair to them, only 14 of these bags were for the weekend reopening celebration. The other 106 were for their upcoming two-month stay.

Then came the 1950's and the Cold War. Many of us remember fall-out shelters and the real fear of nuclear attack . President Eisenhower, the United States Congress, and most everyone else in Washington were concerned regarding the Soviet nuclear arsenal. In March of 1956 President Eisenhower traveled to the Greenbrier to attend the North American Summit Conference. More importantly, he was there to meet with C. and O. railroad officials to ask them for a great favor. Eisenhower wanted to build a secret bunker that would house the U. S. Congress in the aftermath of a nuclear holocaust. The Greenbrier agreed to build such a bunker and also agreed that in the event of an international crisis, the entire resort would be turned over to the U. S. Legislative branch. This bunker project would be classified top secret and would be given the code name. "Project Greek Island."

In order to construct a two-level, 100,000 square-foot bunker at a depth of 40 feet that would be large enough to accommodate the entire Congress, along with support staff, and to this in complete secrecy would present a major challenge. The construction plan called for a new six-floor wing for the hotel to be erected with the giant bunker to be

partially underneath the new hotel wing. Both structures would be completed together as one gigantic project.

After six years, the project was completed. The bunker with its five-foot-thick reinforced concrete walls and its four 25 ton blast doors was ready for occupancy. The new wing of the hotel was directly connected to the bunker by a 423 foot descending tunnel. The blast door leading to the tunnel was concealed by a fold-away false wall. The wallpaper covering the false wall was purposely made to look drab and boring so as to draw the eye away to view Mrs. Draper's beautiful floral print paper across the hallway.

Inside the bunker there were 18 dormitories on two different levels, each sleeping 60 people. Both the House and the Senate had their own meeting chambers. The cafeteria could feed 400 people in one seating. The medical clinic and operating room took up eight thousand square feet. There was a jail and a crematorium.

The bunker was maintained in a constant state of readiness by a small cadre of very loyal government employees for over 30 years. The bunker was never pressed into service, but stood ready if needed.

The secrecy of the bunker was maintained until May of 1992, when a disgruntled employee leaked his top secret to the *Washington Post Newspaper* who published a story about the bunker. Immediately after the story came out, the government decommissioned the bunker, and it is now open to the public for tours.

By 1970 the golden years of passenger trains had long passed. The creation of interstate highway systems and exploding plane service had taken the lion share of traveling customers from the railroads. The C and O, The Baltimore and Ohio, and several other lines found it necessary to merge in an attempt to stay afloat. The merged companies by

2009 could no longer underwrite the struggling Greenbrier, and the resort was forced to file for bankruptcy with debts of 500 million dollars and assets of about 100 million. The resort was purchased by the Jim Justice family. He is a native West Virginia billionaire who made his money in milling, farming, and coal mining. He is listed by Forbes as the wealthiest person in West Virginia and in January of this year was elected Governor of West Virginia.

In 1974 the Greenbrier was recognized for its historical significance and listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The history of the place is remarkable when we look at it. Revolutionary officers met there and thrashed out their differences and helped to form a government for this land. Southern plantation owners and northeastern industrialists gathered there and argued states' rights vs. national interests leading up to the Civil War.

Split families, friends, and leaders returned after the war to come back together at the still-standing old resort.

It was a holding center for diplomats, twice a federal hospital, a prisoner of war camp, and a fall-out shelter for Congress. Feeling the part the Greenbrier has played in the history of our country is palpable as one visits the resort even today. As late as June of 2016 the old hotel was again called upon to house 700 families who were forced out of their homes after the devastating floods in the area. They were housed and fed there until they could return to their homes. This was done at no cost to the flood victims.

And as the saying goes, "Everything old is new again." The newest addition to the resort is a luxurious, elegant, up-scale spa where one can once again go to "take the waters."

Long Live the Greenbrier