'Vishnu Springs' given to WIU, becomes Post Wildlife Sanctuary

By Sarah Zeeck

A 140-acre parcel of land that's been a medicinal spring, a tiny village, a country resort, a student commune and even a rural site for small rock concerts has been donated to WIU to be used as a wildlife sanctuary and outdoor learning lab.

Olga Kay Kennedy, a 1946 WIU alumna, donated the property formerly known as "Vishnu Springs," and it's now the Ira and Reatha T. Post Wildlife Sanctuary, named after Kennedy's grandparents.

The Land's Past

In the early 1840s, the land was purchased by Ebenezer Hicks, who eventually discovered springs on the property. In 1885, Hick's son Darius inherited the land, and over the next few years, developed it by building a four-story hotel, restaurant, livery stable, post office and windmill — all to serve what Hicks hoped would be an attraction to draw people interested in the mineral-rich water's "healing properties" and pretty wooded scenery.

Crowds of up to 2,000 people reportedly attended events there in the 19th Century.

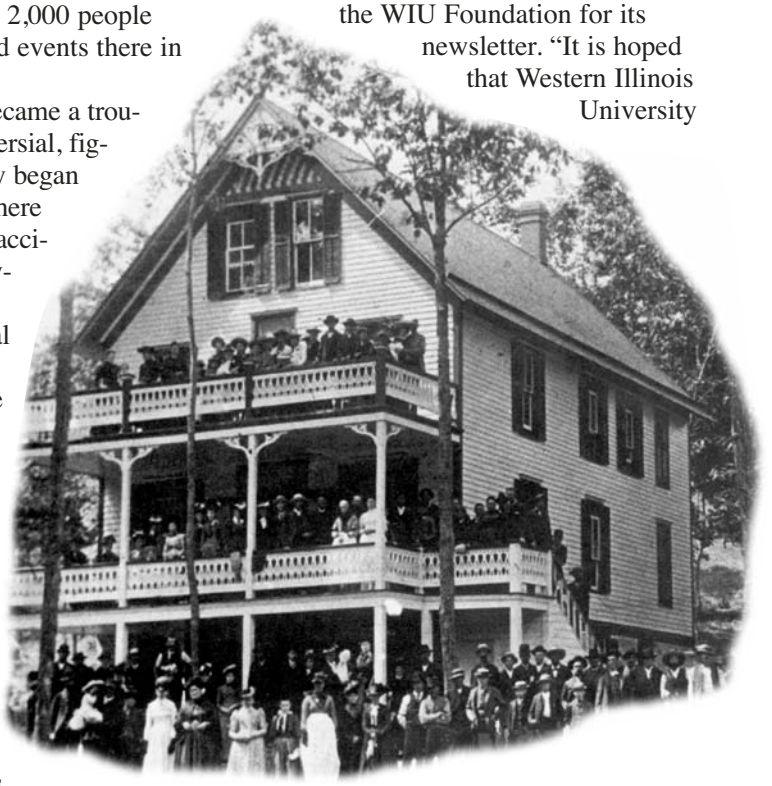
Hicks himself became a troubled, even controversial, figure, and the facility began to lose its luster. There reportedly was an accidental death involving a Ferris wheel, and Hicks' personal life deteriorated. Divorced about the time he took over the property, Hicks married a woman who brought her three children to the marriage but then died of Bright's disease in 1896. Hicks then married a third time — to his step-daughter — causing some locals to shun him. He moved to nearby Colchester, then to rural Blandinsville. There, his third wife died in childbirth in 1903, and a despondent Hicks committed suicide in 1908.

His death — along with the area's shrinking population and inferior roads to the site — resulted in Vishnu Springs being largely unused and dormant until 1935 when Ira Post and Lon Cale bought the land and partially restored the complex, which was used until 1954, three years after Ira Post died.

After Olga Kennedy Post's grandparents passed, she inherited the land and restored the hotel again in the 1960s and used it as housing for students and young adults in the 1970s, when occasional daylight outdoor concerts were produced, drawing hundreds of area youth. It was occupied as rental property until the 1980s, after which it stayed empty for two decades.

Finally, Olga Kennedy Post donated it to Western as a wildlife sanctuary — as her grandfather foresaw it.

"My grandfather had a love and a vision for maintaining this naturally beautiful piece of land," Kennedy told the WIU Foundation for its newsletter. "It is hoped that Western Illinois University



Archive Photo

In its heyday, Vishnu Springs attracted big crowds to its rural setting.

will continue the stewardship role with the primary purpose to preserve the habitat for wildlife.

"It is rewarding for me to know that others will have an opportunity to enjoy and benefit from this gift while ensuring that my grandparents' wishes will be honored," she added.

Ira Post — an employee of Western Illinois State Teachers College in the 1920 — had left a sign on the property proclaiming his wishes. It read, "The spring water and the wonderful world of Nature are to enjoy. Vishnu Springs should be left as Nature provided it. Leave the flowers, ferns, rocks, trees, birds and wildlife just as they are. That means do not dig or harm anything of any description. No hunting, trapping or killing. Take care of it all and then all will be benefited in the years to come."

The main structure at Vishnu Springs fell into disrepair after being vacant for years.

The Present

After the donation, Western wanted to use the acreage as Post had intended. Various professors have used the land as a learning experience, especially in the natural sciences. Roger Viadero, Director of the Institute of Environmental Studies, said that measures are being taken to research the land and its flora and fauna.

"Right now, we are working to figure out what's there," Viadero said. "Before anybody goes running around doing anything, we need to establish the biological and environmental conditions."

Geography Professor Chris Sutton has worked with some students and the Archives Department of WIU's Leslie F. Malpass Library to create a map of the Post property and three-dimensional reconstructions of major buildings on the property using global positioning system equipment, Viadero said.

"[The map] is helpful in and of itself because that can be used to locate all of our different sampling sites and things of that nature, but, also, [Dr. Sutton] rendered a three-dimensional reconstruction of the major buildings on the property," Viadero added.

Another study on the property involves insects. Biology Professor Ken McCravy is researching robber flies (predatory, long-beaked insects).

"This is our first study out there, so basically what we're trying to do is get a handle on just what robber flies are out there," McCravy said. "Hopefully, that will lead to more detailed studies of the different habitats out there and what kind of robber fly diversity they support."

McCravy has a couple of students working with him to determine the extent and makeup of the area's robber flies.

"Our trappings are almost over because of the cool weather," McCravy said in October, "so we're hoping by the end of the semester to have everything identified and then maybe by early next semester, we'll have our analyses done."

Thus far, the robber flies have only been collected and will soon be identified to determine diversity, he said, adding that he hoped this would mean they would have reportable findings that would say something about the environment at Post property.

"We've done previous robber fly studies in our field station (the Alice L. Kibbe Life Science Station on the Mississippi River in Hancock County)," he said, noting that the two environments differ so the results should be interesting.

Viadero has an ongoing study involving the water at the Post property, which could show fascinating findings considering the site's history as Vishnu Springs. A third study concerns the land's ground and surface water. Viadero said that Geology Professor Steven Bennett drilled three groundwater wells there.

"What this allows us to do is determine the way water is distributed underground," Viadero said. "The only way we can know that is by actually going underground and to access those waters, and take samples."

Water chemistry data should be interesting, too, he said.

"Something that is really cool and really weird is the fact that we have water chemistry data for the spring dating back to 1889," Viadero said. "Believe it or not, things actually look pretty similar.

"It could mean a number of things, and it also might not mean a whole lot of anything," he added.

More professors and more students from more departments are currently researching biological, geographical, environmental, and other aspects of Post property, including Susan Romano, Biology professor, who is studying plant ecology, and Chris Sutton, Geography professor, who is researching the current and historical makeup of the property.

The Future

Works are in progress on many fronts. Most data thus far are inconclusive, since all researchers are in the data-collecting stage of their researching processes.

"We're all trying to make sense of what it means, what it could mean, and where to go next," Viadero said. "We want to make sure we're super well-informed on the front end so we make good management decisions in the future."

It'll be better to have a good feel for the area being studied before jumping into the process and making a mess out of the area, he warned.

Additional plans for further studies on the site include McCravy studying ground beetles, which he says are a good indicator species.

The Post property may have once fallen into the condition of a ghost town, but thanks to the Post family's generosity, its promising to be full of life.

*Some of the material was previously reported in **Western News** by University Archivist Marla Vizdal.*