

# ARCHITECTURE REVIVALS

By Rebecca Patrick

The striking structure offers breathtaking views from the balcony or an inside window – no matter the season. The room where the priest prepares for mass “allows you to see for miles. You can overlook the whole town,” Sister Christine reports.

## Glory Remains for Cherished Structures

History and beauty converged on my trip to Southwest Indiana to tour two of the state’s crown jewels: the Monastery Immaculate Conception, dubbed the “Castle on the Hill” in Ferdinand, and the West Baden Springs Hotel, once called the eighth wonder of the world.

### MONASTERY IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

Admittedly I knew little beyond the basics about the monastery, which is home to the Sisters of St. Benedict. I’m also not Catholic, and I quickly learned my impressions of what I thought I would find were far more steeped in decades old TV shows than reality.

Walking in I felt a smile come across my face as the radio playing in the reception area featured a Tim McGraw song. A few minutes later a cheerful Sister Christine, looking more like anyone’s grandma or favorite aunt sans the traditional habit, came in on her motorized chair to start her storytelling.

A model of the full monastery grounds near the entrance served as the starting point

for the journey and was a good visual for Sister Christine’s tales of the past.

The first Benedictine sisters came to the U.S. in 1852 from Eichstätt, Germany. They settled in Pennsylvania and soon established additional multiple foundations, including one in Covington, Kentucky. In 1867, four sisters made their way from there to Ferdinand to fill a need for teachers to speak German. They started out living in a small three-room cottage. By 1886, they needed a significant expansion. They purchased the current property and erected a quadrangle building that remains the living quarters today; it sits in the center of the complex.

In 1914, Mother Seraphine Kordes realized a far more substantial church was needed. A



"I've been here 60 years and sometimes people point out something or ask me about something I hadn't even noticed before," Sister Christine says of the detailed craftsmanship of the church's interior. Among the most impressive: (top) the oak panels with Biblical scenes that frame the back; (bottom) the plaster stations of the cross and the overall view when you enter.



young architect in St. Louis named Viktor Klutho came up with the stylish plans the sisters loved. The problem was they had no money, but "the sisters had mountains of faith and said God would take care of us," relays Sister Christine.

"They borrowed some money. I'm sure that was pretty scary in 1914. They made many sacrifices and there were many generous people who helped them in the (outside) community. They started building in 1915 and completed the exterior of the building in 14 months."

Unfortunately, that put the sisters up against World War I and an unravelling economy. Though they needed additional money, the women made the decision they wouldn't borrow any more. So they stopped construction and sent the workers home, telling them they would finish the inside when they could afford it.

"They were sitting here with this magnificent building but it was just a shell – nothing finished on the inside," Sister Christine describes. "For the next eight years, they used a big space below called the crypt (but no one was buried down there) for their church."

In 1922, enough money was saved and the interior of the church was finished in 1924. Many decades later, a much-needed restoration, inside and out, occurred from 2001 to 2005. The sisters relied on a capital campaign to fund the project.

### A 'breathtaking' place of worship

Sister Christine's personal touches made the 10-minute storytelling by the miniature and along the way to the main attraction a pure delight.

But now it was time to actually visit the impressive church, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. As I opened the doors, Sister Christine said to "get ready for a breathtaking scene" – and she was right!

There was almost too much to take in at first glance, but the distinctive Romanesque dome certainly is the focal point. It stands 87 feet from the floor and spans more than 32 feet in diameter.

The plaster stations of the cross along the entire length of the walls next caught my eyes. Original to the 1924 construction, they depict various scenes with Jesus and were designed and cast in Germany. The hand-carved wood pews, though approaching 100 years old, still look new.

The marble and granite floor, new with the latest restoration, came from Italy. Sister Christine says the biggest change from that time was the construction of a domed Eucharistic Chapel – comprised of oak and etch glass – installed in the rear of the sanctuary.

Perhaps my favorite aspect of the construction is the intricate, hand-carved oak screen framing the Eucharistic Chapel. There are different symbols on each panel that depict Jesus' suffering, including one with his hands nailed to the cross.

Sister Christine was quick to share how it has remained so pristine since its



The West Baden Springs Hotel was put on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974, but was closed to the public 15 years later due to safety concerns after many years of neglect. In 2007, with a lavish restoration complete, the hotel reopened.



installation in the 1930s.

“When I entered the community in 1955, all of us young sisters and novices climbed all over this thing; we oiled every inch of it each spring with a linseed oil mixture. And that’s what preserved it; it didn’t dry out.”

Throughout the church, there are a total of 89 angels. The ones on the stained glass windows surrounding the dome radiate and make for quite a dramatic scene all over the walking area.

### Today’s campus community

The sisters have three formal prayers each day. People are welcome to come and pray with them. Sister Christine says they generally have at least one person who does just that at each service.

Approximately 150 sisters presently call the monastery home; the youngest sister is in her late 20s and the oldest is 99.

The sisters are also entrepreneurs. The Simply Divine bakery features their homemade cookies, which are available at the on-site gift shop and through online orders. You can choose from nine varieties; among them is the Hildegard cookie, which is from the recipe St. Hildegard made in the 12th century.

Sister Christine’s favorite is the buttermint cookie with chocolate; it includes real mint that is grown on the monastery grounds. In a surprising show of restraint, I didn’t purchase any cookies that day. But by the time you read this, odds are I will have ordered some!

The sisters are also putting sections of their campus to use for the Ferdinand community. One of the buildings was recently leased to two men who have opened up a brewery. And a much larger structure is now

in the process of being converted into 15 two-bedroom apartments, which will be available as affordable housing for senior citizens.

As for Sister Christine, she began conducting these tours in 1998 upon her retirement from being a teacher and principal for 40 years: “I was worried I would get lonesome; I love people. But I didn’t have to worry.”

No, she didn’t. And it was her storytelling and enthusiasm that helped make the trip to the monastery quite the revelation.

### WEST BADEN SPRINGS HOTEL

I already knew a great deal about the celebrated hotel (and the French Lick Springs Hotel just down the road) despite having never visited in person. So I was eager to finally be there and see what the Indiana Landmarks tour had in store.

I overheard one person visiting say that all he really knew about French Lick was that it was Larry Bird’s hometown. I’m sure that happens a lot. But it is hard to wrap your head around that these grand hotels – which once catered to President Franklin Roosevelt, infamous gangsters and the elite of the nation’s society – are located in rural Indiana.

When you turn onto the West Baden Springs Hotel’s long brick drive – original and worn – your imagination can easily envision a bustling place some 100 years ago, when trains conveniently stopped at the edge of the property. And, of course, your eyes go to that impressive red dome and the overall shape of the façade.

The tour, led on this November day by Margaret, did not disappoint on the promise to “visit the gardens as well as the hotel’s lavish interiors.” But I was a little surprised that the majority of the tour – easily 75% – was outside on the grounds; good thing I had brought a reasonable coat! On the other hand, I guess there is only so much that can be shown on the inside because it’s a functioning hotel.

The original facility opened in 1855 and was modeled after a European spa resort. The hotel traded on the perceived and promoted medicinal benefits of the local mineral springs and lavishly pampered its guests.

When Lee W. Sinclair purchased the property, he wanted to give it an appealing destination feel. “He was a smart man who knew he needed a gimmick to attract the rich and famous. He came up with the ‘Carlsbad of America’ slogan (which is still listed on the archway at the property entrance),” Margaret explains. “Carlsbad was a well-known mineral springs area in what’s now the Czech Republic; people had gone there

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since the 13th century.”

The claims were that this Hoosier spring water could cure just about anything, but geologists later studied the water and said they couldn't prove it cured anything, Margaret reports. However, in addition to noting it was a good laxative, the geologists made a startling discovery.

“The water had so much lithium (the mood stabilizer) in it that you needed a prescription to just drink the water,” Margaret shares. “So with people coming out to the springs a minimum of four times a day and drinking multiple glasses for 12 weeks (a typical stay during the spring or fall water season), I'm sure they did feel better when they left!”

The actual springs (four overall) are long since gone. The Jesuits, who were the first owners after the hotel days ended in 1932, filled them up and put concrete over the tops because they didn't use them and they frequently flooded.

Walking the grounds around the springs and other buildings does afford a wonderful view of the hotel and the dome itself, which Margaret relays was the result of Sinclair wanting to rebuild a grander version after a fire destroyed the original structure in 1901. He also wanted to outdo his counterpart at the French Lick Springs Hotel.



The story goes that the entire town came out for the unveiling of the rebuilt hotel in 1902. Residents were in disbelief over the new vast dome – courtesy architect Harrison Albright – and expected it to collapse after the supports were removed.

When the stock market crashed in 1929, the hotel emptied of guests almost overnight: It marked the beginning of what looked like the end for a very long time. But approximately 75 years after the hotel was shuttered, it was thriving again with its 2007 rebirth made possible in large part due to Bill and Gayle Cook of Cook Group in Bloomington.

As the tour moved inside and I stood in

the giant lobby under the dome, I saw so many details all around – yet my eyes kept going skyward. That would be an impressive accomplishment to erect today, let alone more than 110 years ago. It's a testament to vision, drive and engineering. Any Hoosier who appreciates the past and architecture should put this National Historic Landmark on their bucket list and make sure to check it off!

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**RESOURCES:** Monastery Immaculate Conception at [www.thedome.org](http://www.thedome.org) | West Baden Springs Hotel at [www.frenchlick.com/hotels/westbaden](http://www.frenchlick.com/hotels/westbaden)