


HISTORIC STORY INN

Disconnect in Order to Reconnect

By Charlee Beasor





The official Story Inn slogan is “One inconvenient location since 1851,” an accurate saying for a town tucked into the hills of Brown County State Park in a blink-and-you’ll-miss-it bend off of State Road 135.

You won't find a television or radio at Story Inn. Good luck getting a phone signal.

What you will find is people who are relaxed, happy and full of delicious food from the farm-to-table restaurant.

You might also locate horses around the corner of the Old Mill Loft and motorcycles parked in the driveway.

What else will you see in Story, Indiana? Families of all ages, girlfriends on a weekend getaway, visitors in town for a barn wedding, locals popping in for a drink at the tavern, guests celebrating their wedding anniversaries.

In fact, other than the modern utility conveniences, stepping into Story is like going back to 1851.

I can attest to this as I stayed at Story Inn with my husband in September. Every person we encountered was friendly, easygoing and raved about their meal or the beautiful setting. I'm born and raised in Indiana, so I'm used to a certain level of Midwestern good-naturedness.

But this was on another level.

Is there a correlation between the ability to disconnect from the outside world and the content nature of every person in the inn, which doubles as a town? Owner Rick Hofstetter says that was the goal all along.

"Story has taught me there are very few true emergencies in life that require you to be constantly plugged in," he mentions over the phone as he drives from Greenwood (where he now resides) to Story.

Hofstetter doesn't own a smartphone ("I haven't owned a television since Reagan," he quips) and gives me a several-minute rundown of the difference between restoration and renovation – both types of construction have taken place in the various buildings in Story. It's an important distinction for someone who cares for buildings from the early days of Indiana statehood.

What comes through in Hofstetter's voice is love and pride in caring for a small piece of Hoosier history. Together, with young partners Jacob and Kate Ebel, Hofstetter knows Story Inn will continue to be a place for people to make memories.

"It's much bigger than I am, and it will go on a long time after I go back into the dirt," he emphasizes. "It means a whole lot of things to a whole lot of people. Nobody owns an old place like that. You're a caretaker for awhile and you move on."

Sit and stay awhile

My trip to Story Inn involves staying overnight on a weekend,

eating in the fine dining restaurant and walking around the property nestled into the hills of Brown County State Park.

The drive to the inn is half the adventure. With rolling hills and spots along the way to view the scenery, Story is about 15 minutes outside of Nashville.

Words like "quaint" and "cozy" come to mind as we pull onto the main road and walk up to the restaurant, which was originally a general store. The Story Still Tavern is below and some guest rooms are above it.

The history of the inn dates to the early days of Indiana. Dr. George Story founded the town in 1851, receiving a grant of land from President Millard Fillmore (the original land patent is on display in the restaurant). Like many other small towns, the Great Depression overwhelmed the area and once Lake Monroe was created in the 1960s and access to Bloomington was cut off, it could have been Story's end.

But Benjamin and Cynthia Schultz bought the property and started Story Inn in 1982. The property changed hands throughout the years and was in receivership in 1998 when Hofstetter and his friend Frank Mueller purchased it.

Mueller went into the partnership knowing he wanted out in a few years, Hofstetter notes. Then Jacob Ebel, who had worked for Hofstetter when he was fresh out of culinary school 15 years prior, sent him an email about coming back home.

"I was sole owner until December 31 of 2015. I brought in Jacob and Kate and they've been my partners since 2016. The young blood, they bring exactly what I don't have, which is energy and experience in the kitchen," he states.

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Wedding whimsy

The Ebels live in Story (just two of three residents) and manage the day-to-day business. They both come from a culinary background and brought a focus on sustainability to the kitchen, adding new gardens on the property. Another vital piece of the Story Inn business: weddings.

Behind the general store, a barn has been renovated to include restrooms, electricity and heat.

It's a busy place on a Saturday afternoon, with wedding setup in full force. Kate Ebel carries a hammer; event manager and marketing director Britani Ham helps with finishing touches for the 4:30 p.m. wedding that will take place.

About 25 employees – seasonal and part time – come from around the area to work. The inconvenient location is part of the challenge.

"It's the same drive for everyone," Ham offers with a chuckle. "There's not a shorter staff drive. That's the pro and the con. The pro is that it's all the way back here, but you have to get here."

"It's just a magical spot," Kate Ebel asserts. "When we moved here, I thought, 'I'm moving to Indiana; it's just going to be cornfields and what did I get myself into?' But we took a walk around the gardens and there were lightning bugs and it was just gorgeous."

Megan Noe of Evansville and her mom, Kelly, were eating dinner and staying overnight after a last walkthrough for her wedding at the end of October. She filled me in on the details of her "Harry Potter" wedding theme, including owls, a wand maker, floating candles and a tent that resembles a castle.

She fell in love with Story Inn the moment she drove up for a work-related trip.

"This place is unique and different and immediately I had this place in my heart. I thought, 'If I ever get engaged, this is where it's going to happen,'" she recalls.

And it did happen a few years later, when her fiancé proposed at a nearby campgrounds.

"He already knew I was in love with this place. He was all for it," she explains. "There's nothing like this in Indiana, at all. It's what stood out to me."

Eat up

The Story Inn restaurant menu changes frequently, depending on what's in season and available.

Executive Chef Eric Swanson serves an amuse-bouche prior to the meal and dishes such as pork chops, arancini, beef du jour, duck breast and a changing variety of seafood grace the selections.

The dinner ambiance is dark and romantic, with tables lit by oil lanterns. There are



Weddings are a big draw for Story Inn. Owners renovated a barn on the property a few years ago to accommodate electricity, restrooms and heat – extending the wedding season.



abundant antique knick-knacks, bottles, tools and historic photos.

I'm a sucker for a caprese salad with fresh tomatoes and basil, so that was my appetizer choice. My husband opted for a black bean soup with scallops and he was blessed with a creamy pumpkin curry soup instead (the other soup had run out and we were given a charcuterie plate on the house).

We each selected a different cut of beef, served over mashed potatoes, and split a maple

caramel bread pudding and profiteroles with chocolate sauce and braised pears for dessert.

We were stuffed. If you leave the restaurant hungry – that's on you.

Breakfast options include farm-fresh eggs, sausage gravy over homemade biscuits, pancakes with orange butter, and French toast with blueberry compote and crème fraiche. Choose from classic breaded tenderloins and cheeseburgers, soups and salads for lunch.



Ann, the Story Still Tavern bartender, says of her concoctions: "I make 'em like I drink 'em." An engraved wooden sign on the back wall of the bar backs up that sentiment.

A summer grill and outdoor patio space offer live music and another dining option in addition to the farm-to-table restaurant inside, where patrons can enjoy a romantic dinner by oil lamplight. Food served throughout the day is created with ingredients grown on the property or locally sourced.



Spooky or just old?

Sipping on the neon-blue colored “Blue Lady Bubbler” champagne drink at dinner is the closest I come to the infamous Blue Lady that supposedly haunts the inn. She’s so famous, she has her own room above the restaurant (it was booked when we were there, phew).

There are tales of other spirits that hang around as well, including at least one presence that is thought to be a male spirit. Our dinner waitress tells us a few of her own encounters with the otherworldly aspects of the place. But most stories are along the lines of “Yes, this happened to another person I know.” Or, “Something fell off the wall and no one touched it.”

Hofstetter, a self-proclaimed skeptic, chalks it up to the place being 167 years old. But anything is possible, he says.

“I don’t believe in ghosts. However, I’ve seen things I can’t explain,” he allows, before telling a story about a photo behind the front desk moving by itself when a young man insulted the “not particularly attractive woman” portrayed in the picture.

“I think there are way too many other explanations that are more plausible than saying that was the Blue Lady and she was mad. Quite a few,” he claims. “But I’m not going to question somebody else’s belief. If they’ve seen a ghost, how can I dispute that?”

Ghost-seekers do rent space at the inn from time to time – quite a few, actually. Hofstetter and the Ebels say they happily rent to anyone seeking a connection with the supernatural.

Room at the inn

EDITOR’S NOTE: Story Inn provided a room free of charge for BizVoice®.

There are 14 rooms or cottages at Story Inn, each with a different history. Some accommodations have been restored, such as the Treaty House.

“That house was occupied (originally in the town) and we don’t want to change it and turn it into something that it is not. That’s where the furniture needs to be appropriate,” Hofstetter offers. “The Doc Story House Lower, that’s a 150-year-old building. It has wallpaper from that era.”

Others have been renovated, such as our home for the evening, the Old Mill Loft. What was once a grain mill (complete with a collection of antique milling machinery on the first floor) was converted into a loft.

Admittedly, seeing old farm equipment when we opened the door was a little more rustic than I was expecting. But we were delighted to reach the top of the stairs and



The Story Inn gardener takes care of three areas on the property. The restaurant’s menu changes frequently to reflect the harvest.

find a bright and beautiful wood-covered bedroom, living area with couches and a breakfast nook.

Rough-sawn wood beams adorn the floors, ceilings and walls. And we were shocked to find a horse trough – yes, a 300-gallon horse trough – turned into a bathtub. (There was plenty of hot water to fill it!)

On a shelf in the bathroom was a collection of Shakespeare poetry. Tucked away was a note from a guest in May, leaving a sweet greeting of good wishes for someone else to find.

It’s a common refrain for people to return to Story Inn to celebrate a wedding or an anniversary. That was the case for Kristy and Tim Goodwin of Batavia, Ohio. They were married in Nashville, stayed at Story Inn 17 years ago and return often.

“We’ve probably been here 12 times since then,” Kristy estimates. “We always stay in different (rooms). Probably my favorite one is the Loft. The tub is amazing!”

The couple is heading to Nashville for shopping and then over to an antique mall in nearby Columbus. Other times they’ll just walk around the wooded areas and take in the scenery.

“There’s no distractions. ... It’s a nice way to disconnect from all that other stuff and reconnect with what matters,” Kristy finishes.

Mark your calendar

Fall is a popular time to be in Brown County, but some events provide excellent reasons to venture to Story in the spring, including the 17th Annual Indiana Wine Fair in May.

Hofstetter started the wine fair in his early days. It grew quickly and consistently over the last 16 years. A record 6,000 people

showed up one year. Today, the event is capped at 3,000 tickets. Multiple shuttles run non-stop from Nashville and Hofstetter notes that every hotel room in the county is booked for the fair.

Also in the spring: the Village Idiot contest. Framed news clippings pay homage to previous “idiots” in the Story Still Tavern.

Hofstetter himself won the vote in 2006, when he did a series of “really dumb things,” he says.

“I started that on April 1 of ’99. Somebody who was the son of somebody that worked for us did something incredibly stupid. ... He bought a new truck and, on the way back from the dealership, totaled it. Didn’t even get it to his driveway. It was friendly ribbing and we decided to crown him Village Idiot. He was our very first. It became an annual thing and we’ve done it consistently since then.”

It’s always held – appropriately – on April Fool’s Day.

Road trip tips

Be sure to make reservations for dinner in the restaurant.

Check out the Story Inn web site for room photos. If you fancy a chance encounter with a supposedly friendly ghost, ask for the Blue Lady Room and turn on the provided blue light in the corner.

While you could spend your whole weekend tucked away inside the town, downtown Nashville is just 15 minutes away. Come prepared with a map or list of nearby attractions you want to visit because cell phone service is limited at the Inn. WiFi is available, but if you’d rather not be tempted to plug in, do a little preparation in advance.