

Nature's Hiding Place

by Andy Cingolani

Sometimes the most amazing experiences can happen in places you might least expect them. Our family vacation to the Lake of the Ozarks was one of those times.

Approaching the mansion ruins along a now-paved path, I can imagine what this small piece of forest must have looked like at night during a party. The surrounding trees would have been illuminated by the light coming from the windows as jazz or ragtime music lingered in the leaves. The clopping of hooves would have announced new guests arriving by carriage. From this distance, the muffled sound of laughter and clinking champagne flutes would have beckoned anyone on this path to come in and join the party.

Instead I am staring at ruins, walls made of large chunks of stone, quarried only a quarter-mile away, overlooking the Lake of the Ozarks at Ha Ha Tonka State Park (12 miles from resort; 573-346-2986; MOStateParks.com/Hahatonka.htm). And it's not the 1920s, when this mansion was in its heyday. There's no music. No clopping. No clinking. Instead, it's the spring of 2009, and where guests once mingled inside these impressive walls, now only tall weeds grow.

My New Favorite Fishing Story

It's a few days earlier and I'm standing on the dock at WorldMark Lake of the Ozarks, holding a hot dog wrapped in a paper towel. Located about three hours' drive from St. Louis, this resort is tucked away — hidden really — at the end of a narrow road. My daughter, Tessa, 12, and my son, Nicky, 6, are seated with brand-new fishing poles, staring at the glassy water. I have cut the hot dog into thin, lengthwise strips, so it's kind of like putting worms on the hook. I discovered that, while real worms hold up pretty well to being hooked, worm-like strips of hot dog tend to fall apart. No matter, though. It's not as though we've seen any fish.

I face the wind; it's cold but it feels good. A couple of days earlier, meteorologists had predicted a late snowfall here, but the snow never came. Only the cold air. Back in our room, my wife Julie is making breakfast. This means we get to experience coming in from the cold to sit down to a hot meal of eggs, pancakes, the works.

"Ooh, Dad. Look." It's Tessa's voice. I walk over to where she's seated and she points out to the water. Her bobber is a good 40 feet away, not that it's bobbing, indicating that a fish might have mistaken her strip of hot dog for a worm. Instead, she just wants me to

see how far she has cast it. Nicky, squatting on the other side of the dock, has abandoned his fishing pole and is tossing bread to a pair of ducks who have apparently come to revere him as some sort of divine provider.

I sit down on a bench on the dock and take it all in. The cold, clean air moving across my face. The sound of tiny waves lapping against the rocks. My kids enjoying themselves in the foreground, while the lake and the rolling hills fill the background. This is one of life's perfect moments.

The Irresistible Aroma of Bacon

Back in our room, the smell of pancakes and bacon and coffee hits us the instant we open the door. One of the most appealing aspects to vacationing with WorldMark is having a kitchen. And, for me, it is at its most appealing when the smell of bacon is coming from it. We enjoy a relaxed, leisurely breakfast, then take about two steps to the living room where we lounge, read, watch TV for a while — and talk. We talk about what we want to do this day, where we want to go.

We decide to check out nearby Bagnell Dam and then take the kids to play putt-putt golf. Not sure when we're going to leave. Whenever. It's vacation.

Julie and I move to the balcony to talk and enjoy the view of the lake, while the kids stay inside to watch movies. We have the conversation we have on every single vacation we ever take together, almost as if it's scripted. "Can't we figure out a way to just live here? It's so peaceful and quiet, and the people are so nice. We could be happy here, right?" Predictably, though, we always end up going home, but not without some reservations.

But first we visit the Bagnell Dam (10 miles from resort), more than 2,500 feet of concrete and steel that, in 1931, turned the Osage River into the Lake of the Ozarks. Driving across it on Business Route 54, we see an enormous lake to the left and a river to the right. ("Awesome!" is Nicky's one-word assessment.) We continue to the Willmore Lodge (9 miles from resort; 800-451-4117; WillmoreLodge.com), which overlooks the lake and dam and is home to the Bagnell Dam History Museum.

I have to confess that, to the frustration of my family, I am drawn to read every historical marker that crosses my field of vision. I pass through museums as if I were walking through molasses against a stiff wind. The history of this area fascinates me, starting with its natural and geological record and continuing to the construction of the Bagnell Dam. This museum at Willmore Lodge contains exhibits that cover all these areas.

After my kids finally tear me away from the museum's exhibits, where I learn that site work began in 1929 and more than 20,000 people were employed to construct the dam during the height of the Great Depression, our next stop is Sugar Creek Mini Golf (6 miles from resort; 573-365-2226), just a short drive away. Walking from the car up to the first hole, we see that the two 18-hole courses are carved into the Ozark terrain and that the courses are interwoven with Main Street in the recreated Old West — a general store, a saloon, a church and so on. (Again, Nicky's one-word assessment: "Awesome!") We play 36 holes without keeping score. Heading back to the resort, though, we all felt like winners.

It's Show Time

It's now Thursday evening, and we decide to hold a family movie night in the recreation building at the center of the resort. At check-in, we received a voucher for a complimentary movie rental (normally \$3, plus tax) at the resort office. Earlier that afternoon, we rented "Igor," an animated flick about an evil scientist's assistant who longs to be an evil scientist himself.

We grab our movie, popcorn and sodas and walk over to the recreation building, fingers crossed that no one has anything planned for the large-screen TV already. When we get there, the room is empty and only a few guests are in the game room downstairs. I pop the DVD in and we all relax and enjoy a free movie, courtesy of WorldMark!

Hiking Through History

But it's here, in Ha Ha Tonka State Park where our family vacation begins to wind down as we walk around the ruins on a beautiful, cool day. The path from the parking lot runs along the side where the porte cochere once stood, providing cover to the carriages and automobiles that arrived there. Further down the path, at the corner of the structure, I come across a hold at ground level. It appears to be an entrance into a cellar. By its position, I wonder if it's next to the kitchen and if it was intended to hold food.

The ruins seem eerie and empty, which is appropriate given its troubled history.

In 1904 Frank Snyder, a wealthy Kansas City businessman, acquired 2,500 acres with a vision of turning this piece of forest into a European-style retreat. Plans were drawn up and construction began the following year. Tragically, in 1906, Snyder was killed in a traffic accident in Kansas City and the project stalled.

Construction of a less extravagant mansion was finally completed in 1922 by Snyder's sons. Robert Snyder Jr., suffering from health problems, made the mansion his permanent home upon its completion. In 1937 when Robert Jr. died, the family decided to lease the mansion so it could be used as a hotel. This agreement continued until 1942, when a fire gutted the structure and reduced it to the walls I am standing before. Other than the improvements made by the Missouri Department of Natural Resources to allow for visitors, the ruins remain largely unchanged since then. Empty and eerie.

Near the ruins, a platform has been built overlooking a natural spring that feeds into the Lake of the Ozarks. It is a spectacular view of the gorge below us and the lake off in the distance. We hike along a trail to a wooden boardwalk that takes us to the bottom of the gorge near the spring, 250 feet below the ruins. Throughout the park, deep ravines, sinkholes, caves and natural bridges have been sculpted over time, the result of a network of underground caves that collapsed thousands of years ago.

It's a sunny day but the deeper we go into the gorge, the darker it gets, until we are finally surrounded by shade. Every so often, we step aside for people coming in the other direction, climbing up the stairs. Most of these folks are breathing heavy and straining against their own weight. It occurs to me that soon we'll reach the bottom and I will be faced with the same daunting climb. But I want to see the spring that's coming out of the cave below, so we press on.

When we get to the bottom, the trail flattens out and the walk is leisurely along the stream. The spring, which gushes 48 million gallons of water a day into the lake from inside a cave, seems calm for something so productive. We decide that Julie and Nicky will walk over to the parking lot at the end of the trail and wait, while I retrieve the van. I give Tessa the option of coming with me or waiting in the parking lot.

"Come on, Dad," she says. "We can make it." And with that, we start back up the stairs toward the top of the bluff.