



The Illinois Billiard Club

"The Country Club of Pool and Billiards"

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1973 - 46th Anniversary - 2018*

"Only in America"

By Jim Parker

Some thirteen years ago my wife Bonnie and I decided to move our home and businesses from our Chicago birthplace and fifty-year residence. By its convenient location just thirty minutes southwest of Chicago's loop, further enhanced by the embellishment of its surrounding twenty-thousand acres of wooded forest preserves, we were attracted to the small country town of Willow Springs IL.

While more developed than rural Georgia of 1952, the town's historical district appeared to have been avoided by a society interested in more affluent and upscale communities. The homes, standing side by side, displayed both shabbiness and opulence, like the rear lot of one of Hollywood's movie makers caught between filming the poverty of Henry Fonda's 1940 *Grapes of Wrath*, and the grandeur of the *Xanadu* mansion in Orson Wells 1941 classic, *Citizen Kane*.

While village ordinances prohibited poultry and farm animals to run loose and chickens were no longer seen scratching in back lots, it wasn't unusual to see people still arriving at their destinations on horseback. The commercial side of the town was in shambles. Appearing to be the largest commercial venture since the communities founding in the late 19th century, was a huge, almost totally abandoned shopping center. Located in the center of town and carved into a mountainous hillside towering over its decaying parking lot, what fifteen years earlier represented the town's future, now represented blight and its inability to attract and support new business. The community's food service facilities consisted primarily of a seasonal hot dog stand, pizzas baked in the rear kitchen of a local tavern and a small grocery store selling sandwiches and hot carry out meals.

The local Dairy Queen and community's former summertime gathering spot, was now an abandoned, boarded-up reminder of better times. Still maintaining a small repair service, condemned storage tanks prevented the community's only gas station from any longer selling gasoline. Located on the northeast corner of the town's main cross roads and first traffic light, as if resigned to its destiny and silently awaiting the wrecking ball, stood the blighted remains of the town's historical and once popular *Zenk Hotel and Tavern*. ... Where now only faint flickers from one of its failing neon beer signs still signaled its opening and hopes for business. While over the years their name changed once or twice, entertainment was now sought out by country line dancers, and the sounds of fiddles, guitars, hoop-in and howler-in still echoed from the town's dance hall, that half a century earlier was home to some of the greatest dance bands in the nation.

Bonnie and I then, as today, are not of extreme wealth. Yet whatever our financial wealth might be, combined with Bonnie's love, support and unshakeable confidence, has come as a result of my profound interest in art, engineering, construction, refurbishing and any form of creative endeavor that ultimately would result in the betterment of our subject.

Samuel L. Clemens (Mark Twain) wrote, "The billiard table is better than the doctors. I walk not less than ten miles with a cue in my hand, and the walking is not the whole of the exercise, nor the most health-giving part of it. I think, though the multitude of positions and attitudes, it brings into play every muscle of the body and exercises them all."

Then, in the summer of my life, my active career was a sixteen year licensed electrical contractor, remodeling contractor and construction superintendent for one of Chicago's oldest and most honorable restaurant developers. Thus, all of the towns seemingly negative aspects that might have appeared hopeless and without promise to others, only encouraged our interest to invest in the community.

Our immediate businesses had already been established and we enjoyed the benefits of success. The challenge however, of expanding our private party and banquet concept, while at the same time create a positive influence that could possibly act as a catalyst and help develop the character of an entire town, appeared profoundly attractive.

We began seriously investigating the community in 1988 and made our final decisions the following year. During the year we researched the villages past and present status, sadly, I was reminded of something I first learned as a young man.

Since ancient civilizations there has existed a small subculture of humanity called doomsayers. For uncountable reasons yet more often than not, due to their personal, self-inflicted inadequacies and lifetime failures, they're people that indulge themselves in negative gossip and set out to destroy the success of other people, places and things. These doomsayers have histories of wandering through life never once taking personal financial risk for the betterment of society, yet are the first to fault someone that does.

Like thieves in the night, their gossiping whispers would steal the reputation of their neighbor battling the demon of alcoholism, while they themselves wallow in the drunkenness of self-pity, jealousy and hatred. Their pretence of purity and social integrity brings them to church on Sunday, where they give the appearance of worshipping a once homeless man ... yet on Monday, will be the first to ignore one.

Thousands of years ago, while sitting around flickering campfires, our earliest ancestors traded stories. They spoke of their visions of triumph and dreams of betterment. They bonded by the greatness of brotherhood, and shared one another's grief, while also rejoicing in each other's achievements. Their visions and power of positive thought, combined with faith and encouragement from their fellow man, is what turned clans into civilizations, not the idle rumors of scoundrels and doomsayers.

Not long after Bonnie and I began our research, we received countless stories and negative doomsayer reports portraying the town and its politics as a 20th century Sodom and Gomorrah. Newspapers featured stories regarding everything from crooked cops, corrupt politicians, murders, collapsing economy, arson, bar brawls and unbelievable alcohol abuse. When learning of our interest in moving to the town, one retired police official, appearing to have enough negative material for a two-year series of crime movies ... with sequels, strongly discouraged our plans. After describing some of his haunting job related memories from what he referred to as; "a town that was an ongoing Wild West show," he repeatedly suggested we avoid ... "that town," for our new home and businesses.

A middle age resident, after the sale of her home in Willow Springs and headed for a more affluent community, when asked why she and her family were moving, freely stated; "Willow Springs, as far back as I can remember has been the armpit of the southwest suburbs, and I simply want to move up."

Television newscasters implied relationships between Willow Springs and murdered bodies found somewhere within the 20,000 acres of forest preserves surrounding the village; "Earlier today, the body of a murdered middle-age man was found in the forest preserves near Willow Springs IL."... We later concluded, by the mention of Willow Springs, to some tabloid TV commentators, pouring kerosene on smoldering ashes was their style of reporting the news. ... A accurate account would have stated; "was found in one of Cook Counties Southwest forest preserves earlier today."

The motion picture industry was never one to miss an opportunity to capitalize on crime, and proved it in they're made for TV production, reenacting their depiction of the towns corrupt political officials, murders, the mob and

an unscrupulous police department. The areas demographics, including its updated population, income, age, ect. ... all proved negative for enterprising entrepreneurs seeking upscale storefront locations.

Based on our findings, Bonnie and I had to choose from what was clearly a dichotomy. On one side, the village's obvious disenchanting business related demographics and rustic appearance, combined with its horrendous doomsayer reports. While on the other side, to the fashionable and well-informed side of society, was our *Illinois Billiard Club's* long list of positive achievements and affluent style. ...Qualities that provided the IBC the opportunity to be welcomed as an asset to any of the finest communities in the land.

After months of research and indecision, which also included attractive offers from far more affluent and appealingly promising locations, we decided to choose Willow Springs as our new home and place of business. While outwardly, it would have appeared difficult for anyone interested in establishing an upscale business to find a more unsuitable location, Bon and I agreed on three positive issues supporting our decision.

First ... Demographics ... In addition to maintaining our members-only private club and its obvious labor of love existence, the financially solvent trend-setting concept of our business was hosting a unique style of upscale private parties and banquets. ... Which included the optional use of our private club. Therefore, by this one of a kind feature, when providing society both elegant dining and charm of the IBC's refined historical entertainment, our marketplace was enormous and extended far beyond the limited borders and demographics of Willow Springs.

Second ... Negative rumors and doomsayer reports regarding the town's reputation ... In 1861, Wilbur F. Storey bought *The Chicago Times* for \$13,000. He got his moneys worth. One hanging carried the headline: "JERKED TO JESUS." Storey gave bad reviews to plays if they didn't buy ads and good ones if he received an invitation. When his *Times* described members of a burlesque troupe as "beefy specimens of the barmaid class," one of the women tackles and horsewhips Storey. During the civil war, he attacked Abraham Lincoln and ignored government censorship. In 1864, Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside ordered *The Chicago Times* seized and suspended for sedition. The president rescinds the order three days later. Storey then sums up his attitude in his instructions to a correspondent in the field: "Telegraph fully all news ... and when there is no news, send rumors."

Nearly one hundred and fifty years later, decedents of Wilbur F. Storey appear to still roam the earth. While many have maintained their ancestral heritage by still reporting the news, others of assorted careers have obviously settled in and around the village of Willow Springs itself.

As Bonnie and I saw it, if your interested in a community, truly interested, you walk its streets, meet its residents, attend their town meetings, study the communities transportation, educational, water, power and sewerage systems. ... But never, ever, ever, listen to doomsayers and their rumors! Base your decisions on your findings, your knowledge, your personal experiences ... and by the visions of your eyes and the feelings of your heart. Never on the opinions or visions of others.

When ignoring and looking beyond the negative doomsayer reports and their horrendous rumors, Bonnie and I formed our own opinions about the community. Opinions obvious to us, yet apparently invisible to most other potential investors.

Since the firing of the first cannon on April 19, 1775 marking the beginning of our ancestors battle for independence ... to our nations last sea-launched cruise missiles to protect it in the 1991 Persian Gulf war ... we have been a nation founded on the basic principles of equality and liberty for all. When those principles have been threatened and endangered, as on September 11, 2001, our government has called out, and Americans have come forward to defend and protect those precious gifts. These patriots have come from backgrounds of wealth, middle class, and poverty. Their ethnic heritage has been as diverse as their educational and religious beliefs themselves. They've come, from the hills of Kentucky, to the valleys of California ... from the southern plains of Texas, to the mountains of Oregon.

These children of our nation have come from every city, town and village in the land, and that fact was never more obvious than in what Bonnie and I saw within the village of Willow Springs itself. Even today, in the center of the small town, on the corner of Archer Ave. and Willow Springs Rd., stands a well-maintained memorial. ... A memorial honoring the boys, men, fathers and sons, that after their call to arms and leaving their homes and loved ones in Willow Springs, paid the ultimate price when defending our shores and the very values our forefathers fought and died for. They did battle, and opposed the tyranny of those that would violate and attempt to eliminate the very principles that have for centuries made our nation strong.

These patriots of Willow Springs died in the trenches of a war-torn Europe in World War I ... and fell to the bullets of war mongering nations when defeating Hitler's Nazi Germany in World War II. They gave military support to South Korea in the 1950's, and crawled through the marshes and jungles of Vietnam in the 1960's.

How then, could a village so rich in patriotism, and a history of doing so much to protect humanity, now be accused of abusing and destroying it? The answer was obvious, they couldn't. What problems that might have fallen upon the little town were problems created by its local government, not its citizens. While in this case it could be said, and I'm certain it has, that in a democratic society as ours, government is established by the people themselves. True, but occasional poor judgment is an experience we can all relate to. ... With politics and our boosting the popularity of some of its elected officials (we later learn to be nothing less than scoundrels,) as no exception.

Even today, for the price of a vote and their own personal gain, upon occasion we've all seen self-indulging politicians abuse their elected office. ... Most commonly when setting out to destroy the reputation of others. None of this is new to politics. In reference to this style of cancerous rumors and their demeaning carriers, some 150 years ago Abraham Lincoln said it best; "You can never, ever, make a little man look big," Lincoln said; "by trying to make a big man look little."

Third ... The town's history and true character ... Stagnation is the first step to deterioration. By the lack of a progressive administration and captive by its own silence, due primarily to the absence of its own newspaper and mass media communications (that would effectively broadcast the voice of good journalism by those capable and sensitive to the community itself,) has for generations choked the town's growth and its interest to an outside, ever developing society.

Today more than ever, we live within a global society. Whether we want to accept that fact or not, entrepreneurs, ranging from mom-and-pop storefront businesses to corporate giants, lacking the use of today's business principles, tools of modern technology and state of the art communications, are fast becoming a vestige of Americana.

Bonnie and I were convinced this was a community with a history as rich as any town in the land, and a future as promising as those that would believe in it ... and help build it. We made our final decision to invest in Willow Springs in 1989, and purchased two parcels of real estate, along with drafting plans for both our new home and businesses alike. All of which included our financial commitment well in excess of \$2 million dollars.

If accurate historical records were to be written regarding the communities upscale commercial development and it's largest pioneering investors in the future of Willow Springs IL, most certainly, the names of *The Illinois Billiard Club* and *Bonnie's Country Cafe* would be the first to appear on page one.

On December 26, 1989, bold front page headlines of the *Southwest Courier News* read: "ILLINOIS BILLIARD CLUB PLANS "PALACE" FOR WILLOW SPRINGS." Reporter Roy Koz began his two page story by writing: "The north side of Willow Springs is envied by many for its pool, but starting in March, the other half of town will boast about its pool ... Billiards that is."

Koz went on to say: "The clubs current home offers pool at its best. Its a stylish operation, tastefully decorated, comfortably furnished and well lighted. On the walls are billiards greats; Willie Hoppe, Jimmie Caras, Willie Mosconi, and the undisputed 9-ball champ of the literary world, Mark Twain."

After several months of remodeling and the west side of our commercial building completed, Bonnie and I hosted the club's formal grand opening and ribbon cutting by the Honorable Mayor James Rizzi. Also in attendance were a body of visionary village officials and some one-hundred *IBC* members, family and friends. Shortly after our opening, a letter to a friend written by a long time community resident stated: "The Village of Willow Springs is finally coming of age, I've recently seen the opening of our first upscale business, certainly the classiest business in town. ... And believe it or not ... it's a private billiard club!"

The following year, along with remodeling the buildings two apartments, we began the extensive remodeling of the east half of the same building. ... Which today is *Bonnie's Dining & Banquet* facility.

After the cafes completion and opening the following summer of 1991, bold headlines in the *Daily Southtown Economist* read: "CAFE SERVES UP BILLIARDS WITH COUNTRY CHARM" ... staff writer Kathy Orr went on to write: WILLOW SPRINGS - "For most people, breakfast is an everyday affair. Unless you happen to grab the day's most important meal at *Bonnie's Country Cafe & Deli*, a turn-of-the-century restaurant where visitors dine on eggs while sitting in restored mahogany opera chairs and help themselves to a breakfast buffet atop a pool table once owned by former Cubs pitcher Milt Pappas."

Kathy Orr, a prolific and very perceptive writer went on to say: "Its not every place you can mix eggs benedict with one of the nation's most unique billiard clubs. But Jim and Bonnie Parker, proprietors of *The Illinois Billiard Club* and cafe, rarely gravitate to the ordinary."

Now, with its new upscale Lincoln Park design and elegance of its huge dark green facade ... a sixty-foot, backlit canopy, inscribed with the names, *The Illinois Billiard Club* on the west half and *Bonnie's Country Cafe & Deli* on the east ... Archer Ave took on a new and appealing look. This fresh and inviting look began encouraging not only customer traffic but the interest of both potential homebuyers and business investors alike.

Willow Springs now had established two roll-model businesses that by example of development acted as a catalyst for others to follow. The following months brought legions of well-wishers along with their profoundly appreciated expressions of gratitude. I'll never forget the heartfelt words spoken by a then local resident and fire fighter; "You know Parker," he said: "I just stopped in to say thanks, thanks for being the one to finally show a little faith in this town ... all of what you and your wife have done here, is just what the town needed to get it started in the right direction."

Over the next several years others did follow. While at first their investments were modest, they were significant nonetheless. As time passed and the confidence of other investors began growing, so did the size of their investments.

On November 4, 1994, the front page of the *Daily Southtown's* Real Estate section reported: "WILLOW SPRINGS ATTRACTS NEW BATCH OF DEVELOPMENT." The page featured five colored photographs ... one photo is a railroad yard with the caption; "The Santa Fe Railway Co. opened a new \$73 million 269-acre intermodal terminal in August." The second picture is a newly remodeled Village hall, with the caption; "The village spent \$350,000 renovating a former United Auto Workers union hall" ... The center photo is of a residential construction site of new town homes, along with the caption; "Several luxury town home developments, including *Cliffside Town homes* at Rust Street and Archer Road, are under construction in Willow Springs."

The two remaining photos, located on the top portion of the page are of *The Illinois Billiard Club* and *Bonnie's Country Cafe*. Their caption reads; "Willow Springs' business community has had a recent growth spurt, with

new openings and expansions. *Bonnie's Cafe* (above) and *The Illinois Billiard Club* (left) were among the first businesses to relocate on Archer Road.”

By this time the lines of progress had been drawn and the initial blueprint completed. It was obvious the community was beginning to move forward. Investors that a few years earlier shunned the area, now, with reduced risk and the towns more positive appearance, began to view Willow Springs as a more viable location for their related interests.

Potential home buyers suddenly began considering the area for their new place of residence, while entrepreneurs began mapping out plans that included new businesses ranging from modest to upscale restaurants, office buildings, professional and dental care facilities, environmental agencies, convenient mart service stations, banks, banquet facilities, to little coffee shops and a host of various new and much needed enterprise.

While still in an infancy stage of development, more than ever the town needed an honorable, dedicated and progressive administration it clearly had been denied in earlier years. An administration, that through God's benevolence it received beginning in the late 1980's, with it's Mayor James Rizzi.

Since our arrival to Willow Springs there's been four elected mayors and their respective administrations, all representing the same party, the Village Independent Party (VIP). Mr. James Rizzi, Mr. Edward Formento, the late and endeared Mr. James Quas and the present acting Mayor, Mr. Terrance M. Carr.

Under the leadership of these four men and their respective administrations, both the Willow Springs Police and Fire Departments have risen to become ranked among some of the finest in the land. New streets, curbing, upgraded sewerage systems and traffic control all became a reality along with a consistent series of profoundly needed improvements throughout the entire community.

Each of the village presidents have leveraged off their predecessor's progressive efforts, while at the same time complemented them with their own ideas and ambitions. Based on the changing times in which they each served it would be unfair for anyone to judge, if any, has been more responsible for the current overall progress of the community. Yet there exists within the community a profound heartfelt memory (with none greater than mine,) of the late Mayor James Quas, to whom the town of Willow Springs will remember eternally, for his genuine sensitivity and obvious dedication to the betterment of the town in which he lived, loved ... and died.

On Monday, April 30, 2001, the *Daily Southtown* news reported the towns current progress: “Tom Walsh, president of Heritage Renaissance Partners, has more than \$150 million in residential, commercial and retail development under way with the \$100 million Santa Fe project and the \$50 million town center project. Three upscale housing developments - The Knolls, The Reserve and The Windings - with homes selling for between \$600,000 and \$1.25 million are under construction on or near the site of the former Santa Fe speedway at 91st Street and Wolf Road.” Walsh said: “Willow Springs will be the fastest growing community within the next few years in terms of increased property values in the western and southwestern suburbs.”

He (Walsh) pointed to a recent survey that indicated housing values in the village were up nearly 20 percent from a year earlier. And the median price for a home in Willow Springs was \$309,000, up significantly from \$193,000 the previous year. Walsh said the key has been the village's location. <

The hub of Walsh's \$150 million dollar development is referred to as “The Town Center Project.” A development comprised of both commercial and residential structures including 131 town homes, 45 condo's, retail structures, a bank with offices on the 2nd and 3rd floors, restaurant, senior housing for 130 units along with additional space for retail and senior housing, a *Big Box* retail store, plus another 24 unit condo building and a new village hall.

The town center project is located just off the northeast corner of Willow Springs Road and Archer Avenue ... the very site of the communities original 19th century business district. Ironically the same crossroads traveled

by the towns earliest settlers that in 1836, first came to the area to begin construction of the historic *Illinois & Michigan Canal*.

On October 24, 2001, the front page of the *Daily Southtown* read: DEVELOPER DESCRIBES PLAN AS "CROWN JEWEL." The papers staff reporter, Jim Hook, went on to explain plans for another one of Tom Walsh's developments in Willow Springs. This proposed plan is so huge it dwarfs Walsh's current ongoing and profoundly successful development.

For an estimated \$300 million dollars, Walsh now plans that in addition to building another new housing development for some 2,500 residents, he also introduced the concept of a 250 slip marina and yacht club linking Willow Springs, via the sanitary ship canal, to downtown Chicago. Also included in this visionaries already proven abilities, is a tourist destination including a 9-hole golf course, a 42,000-sq-foot conference center, 40,000 sq-feet of retail space, a 350 room hotel with an adjacent indoor water park and recreation center. To enhance the cultural side of the development, Walsh also proposes for music lovers, a Ravinia-like venue having retractable walls allowing performances even in the most inclement weather.

Also, somewhere amongst all of this, in my opinion, based on the sheer wonderment of his near miracle-like progress, there should be erected, a huge marble statue of Mr. Tom Walsh himself!

Unrelated to financial growth. ... Just off the adjacent southwest corner of Archer Ave. and Willow Springs Road, is another community pearl that reflects both the charm and integrity of the entire community.

In 1933, in an effort to create work and financial support for some of the millions of unemployed Americans affected by the great depression of 1929, President Franklin D. Roosevelt implemented a national program referred to as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC.) Due to its location and rural nature of its surrounding forests, the village of Willow Springs and its *Camp Chicago-Lemont # 612* played a significant role in the programs design.

While disbanded over 60 years ago, the integrity of this program with its positive effect on the struggling families of our nation, by community affiliation, left an indelible impression on the proud citizens of Willow Springs. Thus, a garden memorial had been established and maintained for over the past half-century. Today, this memorial site, through the energy and sensitivity of village patriotism, has now realized an addition.

"Iron Mike," a statue symbolizing the CCC and the communities camp #612, through community efforts can now be seen standing on a foothill located within the borders of the very land that at one time was vigilantly patrolled and cared for by the men and their organization this statue now represents. The efforts of both the village administration and the town's historical society with its dedicated citizens has been rewarded. By their display of sensitivity to both their community and our nations history, Willow Springs has been presented Illinois's *2001 Governors Hometown Award*.

Ironically, on the same southwest corner of Willow Springs Road and Archer Ave, less than 1500 yards southwest of the new town-center, and 500 yards east of the *CCC Memorial*, still stands the communities *Historic Veterans Memorial*.

The same memorial that some 13 years earlier, by its display of patriotism and like a stone revealer of character, signaled to Bonnie and I, the communities true integrity. While for a time, concealed by a cloak of antipathy, integrity so deeply imbedded within the heart of this little village that in our minds, along with its ideal location, would eventually lead it to prosperity. This inner-core of community integrity, through Gods benevolence and mans determination for progress with social harmony, has today, enabled this one-time almost invisible town, to rise-up and begin fulfilling our nations constitutional opportunities.

By its profound economic and growing social progress, Willow Springs Illinois has proven to be an inspiring example of our nation's never compromising promise. Its constitutional promise insuring all of its children, the

God given and our nations protected rights of all humanity, to endlessly pursue a more perfect existence ...
spiritually, intellectually and physically. A promise made, honored and preserved ...“Only in America.”
