



The Illinois Billiard Club

"The Country Club of Pool and Carom Billiards"

8446 Archer Avenue - Willow Springs, IL 60480 - 708-839-1331 - www.IllinoisBilliardClub.com

Lessons - Leagues - Tournaments - Memberships - Private Functions

1975 - 29th Anniversary - 2004

"Thirty Years and Millions of Precious Memories"

Chapter four: "Only in America"

by Jim Parker

With November's national celebrations of Veteran's Day and Thanksgiving, followed with December's Christmas and New Years I've appropriately written and published the following chapter, "Only in America," out of the IBC's past 32-year chronological order. Chapters two and three, "The Three-cushion Years" and "Championship Pocket Billiards, a New Beginning" shall be featured at a future date.

The relationship between the following chapter and national celebrations shall become clear as the following story unfolds. The story explains the positive influence that the game of billiards, when combined with fine dining and banquets had on building the upscale popularity of and entire town in the Chicagoland area. Equally, the story proves that we all have within us the ability to change, in abundant measure, the course of history. And that you, one of humankind alone, in fact, are of no exception. A fact proven to the fullest by the son of a carpenter over two thousand years ago and, whose birthday we'll be celebrating this December 25, 2004.

Some sixteen 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.

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 abandon shopping center. Located in the

ties 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 towns 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 towns 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

profound interest in art, engineering, construction, refurbishing and any form of creative endeavor that ultimately would result in the betterment of our subject.

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 town's 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 that year we researched the villages history and I was reminded of a sad situation 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



center of town and carved into a mountainous hillside towering over its decaying parking lot, what fifteen years earlier represented the towns future, now represented blight and its inability to attract and support new business. The communities 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 communi-

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

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 more 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 their made for TV production reenacting their depiction of the towns corrupt political officials, murders, the mob and an unscrupulous police department. Demographics, including its updated population, income, age, etc., all proved negative for enterprising entrepreneurs seeking upscale store-



front 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 private Illinois Billiard Club's long fifteen-year 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 appeared difficult for anyone interested in establishing an upscale business to find a

more unsuitable location, Bonnie 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 billiard 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

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 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 gov-

ernment 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 (Fig. 1). A memorial honoring the boys, men, fathers and sons,

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

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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 and supported 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 lack of a progressive administration and captive by its own silence, primarily due to the absence of its own newspaper and mass media communications that could effectively broadcast the voice of good journalism, for generations has choked the town's growth and interest to an outside, ever developing society.

Today more than ever we live within a global society. Whether we want to except 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 a financial commitment well in excess of \$2 million dollars.

If accurate historical records were to be written regarding the communities upscale commercial development and its 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 Chicago's 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 (Chicago) home offers pool at its best. It's 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 (Fig. 2). Shortly after the IBC's 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 & Banquets facility.

To be continued

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