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Vishnu Springs, Illinois

The history of Vishnu Springs goes back to the 1840s when the Ebenezer Hicks family moved to McDonough County from Ohio. Settling in Hire Township, Ebenezer started buying parcels of land, ultimately owning over 5,000 acres of ground in McDonough and Hancock counties.

One of these parcels was Section 7 of Tennessee Township (T5N R4W), and located on the property were natural springs. Ebenezer probably knew the springs were there, but did not try to capitalize off of them. Another man, Dr. J.W. Aiken, from the neighboring town of Tennessee, Illinois, did, however. In order to do so, Aiken rented the land surrounding the springs from Ebenezer and started promoting them for their medicinal qualities.



At the time, the springs were known as the Tennessee Springs, but shortly after Dr. Aiken rented the ground, the area was referred to as Vishnu Springs. One story for the change in the name is that Dr. Aiken wanted the name of the springs to reflect their healing qualities. Vishnu is the second God of the Hindu trinity, the one which is known as the Preserver of living things. Thus, the name Vishnu was taken.

Another story of the origin of the name is that, Ebenezer's son, Darius Hicks had read an 1861 book by Henri Mouhot. His book describes the discovery of the ancient preserved city of Angkor in Cambodia. The water of the city was fed by the river Krishna, which is the incarnation of Vishnu in the Hindu religion. By either story, the association of Vishnu and healing or preservation and the springs in Tennessee Township came to be.



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With the name, Vishnu Medical Springs, Dr. Aiken hoped to sell the medicinal waters and draw the infirmed to the springs to be healed. He claimed that the springs' water would cure a multitude of ailments, from inflammation of the bladder and kidneys to disorders of the stomach to diseases "peculiar to women." The cost of a gallon of spring water was 25 cents and Dr. Aiken sold many gallons of water, but probably not at the rate which he would have liked to.



When Dr. Aiken's association with the Springs ended, we do not know for sure, but we do know that in the 1880s, Darius Hicks' father, Ebenezer, was committed to the insane hospital at Jacksonville, IL, where he died in 1886. When Ebenezer wrote out his will in 1881, he clearly stated how his estate was to be distributed. He left the land in Section 7



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of Township 5 North, Range 4 West, the land where Vishnu Springs is located, to the older of his living sons, Darius Hicks.

Darius Hicks' first wife was Ella D. Smith, whom he married in 1874. Evidently Darius Hicks and his wife may have been having marital problems prior to Ebenezer's death, because in 1885, the father added a codicil to his will stating that everything he had bequeathed to Darius Hicks was to be held by his brother, Franklin, in trust for Darius Hicks if Darius Hicks and Ella were still married when Ebenezer died. He didn't want Darius Hicks to inherit the land and then have it tied up in a divorce settlement, if the marriage did indeed fail. Being the shrewd businessman that he was, Ebenezer wanted to protect his investments. He did state, however, that if Darius Hicks' marriage lasted ten years after Ebenezer's death, the property would be given back to Darius Hicks. Needless to say, Darius Hicks and Ella did divorce, and Darius Hicks inherited his share of his father's estate.



The shady valley, surrounded by rocky bluffs that are filled with caves, was long a place that attracted the early pioneers of the region. They used the quiet spot as a place to picnic and in 1884, one annual gathering was said to have drawn as many as 1500 people from the surrounding area. It was not long after this that many residents of the nearby town of Colchester began to realize that the water in the valley was different from the drinking water that could be found elsewhere. All that is remembered today is that the spring water was said to have a peculiar salt content, seven medicinal properties and an especially appealing taste. People began coming from near and far to sample the water, hauling away jugs of it from the springs. Allegedly, doctors sent their patients here on crutches and they walked away without them.



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By the 1880's, as many as 1500 to 2000 people were gathering here at a time to hold camp meetings and to consume the cold waters of the valley. In an age when effective medicines were rare, the strange tasting water offered hope to a great many people. The owners of the land and the springs claimed that the water would “cure of benefit all kinds of debility, neuralgia, rheumatism, palpitation of the heart, dyspepsia, kidney trouble, worms” and even “female troubles, dislocated limbs, broken backs, deafness, blindness and laziness.” And people believed the claims. They began buying the water for 25 cents a gallon and they carried it home with them.

The March 1889 Colchester Independent reported that a hotel was to be built at Vishnu "to accommodate those who wish to try the healing qualities of the mineral water at that place." The paper also reported that a 26 X 40 ft. hotel would have first class conveniences, and would be built at a cost of \$2,500. The road from the springs to the main road to the north was already in place and the stonework for the hotel would commence soon. W.E. Way was foreman of the Vishnu rock quarry, which was owned by Darius Hicks and John Mourning, a man to whom Darius Hicks had sold 1/2 interest in Vishnu. It was later reported that the stone in the quarry was of such a fine quality that men would like to use it when they built their new homes at Vishnu.

A June 1889 newspaper article announced that the stonework for the hotel was done and the frame was being put up. Tom Walters and his wife would run the hotel, once completed. The roof was then put on, and Enoch Way had contracted to do the plaster work at a rate of 10 cents/yard. Four hundred visitors had recently been out to the Springs.

In 1889, Darius Hicks met and married his second wife, Hattie Rush, a widower from Missouri and mother of three young children, Robert, Benjamin, and Maud. Hattie was not a very healthy woman and probably came to the springs for their curative powers. In August 1890, the Colchester Independent reported that: "Mrs. Hicks, wife of Darius Hicks, proprietor of Vishnu hotel, is lying very low, but hopes of her recovery are entertained by her many friends." Hattie died in 1896 from an illness of several months from a complication of diseases, one of which was reported to be Bright's disease, an older name for a form of kidney disease.



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In August, 1889 a Holiness Camp Meeting, held at Vishnu, drew 2000-3000 visitors. The event was led by Rev. Sherman & Rev. Thompson of Colchester, and Taylor Murray, Hire township. They obviously came to share in the experiences of their religious beliefs, but probably many also came to see the new hotel which was nearing completion. Others probably came to partake of the medicinal qualities of the springs, the central focus of the site.

That same month, at the request of Darius Hicks and John Mourning, Surveyor Cephus Holmes drew the plat of Vishnu Springs. The plat shows a town which consisted of three blocks, one main street and three alleys. Thirty lots were drawn into the plat with lot sizes averaging 50 X 120 feet. Each lot was to be sold for thirty dollars.

In October of 1889, Andy Ruddell is reported to have been the first settler at Vishnu, with the Colchester Independent, reporting two houses built and two more soon to be erected. Ed Sammons was planning on opening a restaurant, and Dave Reece was reported as a home owner. C. K. Way was surveying his addition to Vishnu.

The following February, the paper reported that Dr. Luce, the Indian doctor, was visiting the springs, probably with the intention of settling there. Deed records show that he did indeed buy some property in North Vishnu Springs, which was sometimes referred to as "Loose City."

Also, around this time, a man by the name of C. K. Way was considering the potential of the land adjacent to the platted town of Vishnu. He also had a section of land to the south of Darius Hicks' platted, and named it Way's addition. Because of a strife between Darius Hicks and Way, a reporter to the Independent suggested that a toll booth might be put up between the two properties, so visitors from "the south" would have to pay a toll to get to the springs. Way's addition never prospered.

In 1890, the Independent reported talk of a post office at the springs. However, due to lack of interest, the post office was not established until June 15, 1895. It was located in the hotel itself. On March 31, 1908, the post office was discontinued and the postal services were transferred to Colchester.



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Trade was on the increase in 1890. Mr. Reece was filling up stock at the store and there was talk of a barbershop. Prices for goods at Vishnu were competitive with Tennessee and Colchester.

The hotel officially opened in May of 1890. The Capitol Hotel was three stories and cost \$2,500.

Just prior to the opening of the hotel, John Mourning decided to sell his interest in Vishnu back to Darius Hicks. A barn was built on site, as well as a livery stable. A windmill was being built to pump water from the springs to a water system that would be used to provide running water to the hotel. A "Driving park" or race track was being made. "John Oakman has bought a new horse and cart. Wonder if he will train him when the driving park is finished." (Independent, May 8, 1890)

In July 1890, while remodeling the windmill, Frank Williams fell 16 feet headfirst to the solid rock below. A rope which was being used to raise up part of the windmill broke and Williams was hit, knocking him off. The initial report of the accident which reached Colchester indicated that his injuries were fatal. In actuality, Drs. Aiken and Horrel were called and they found he had broken some ribs, was cut up and was badly bruised.

Ever since its earliest years, there were reports of crowds going to the Springs. Many visitors came out for a weekend gathering or a picnic, others came to partake of the spring waters. After the hotel was built, more people were coming to Vishnu, so to capitalize on getting the visitors from Colchester, the location of the nearest depot, brothers John and Milton Mourning started The Vishnu Transfer Line. For 75 cents one could ride to and from the springs in a spring wagon, meal included. If a better ride was preferred, say in a carriage or canopy-topped three seated two horse buckboard, the cost was \$1.00.

The hotel had come under the management of a first class hotel keeper, Mr. Thornton Maddox. He had added several amenities to the grounds; croquet was set up in the yard, hammocks were added, and a fountain was planned. A dumb waiter was installed inside the hotel for transport of food from one level to another.



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Also in July 1890, the Independent gave a weather report: "It's hot." A new organ was put in the hotel parlor. Visitors were plentiful and among them were musicians. Miss Ollie Hankins, of Tennessee, "an accomplished musician and a good singer" was in residence. Bert Oakman and Prof. H.D. Jackson, of Bardolph were guests. And as the paper reported, "Prof. Jackson as a teacher of music, was an expert."

Misters Gaites and Powell opened a photograph gallery on Main Street, and were doing quite the business. Steps were built in the side of the hill to make the path from the upper ground down to the Hotel an easier walk.

Religious events and visiting preachers were reported in the early years of Vishnu. One such event was the Camp Holiness Day of the previous year. In August 1890, the preacher Rev. Alexander Smith, son of the "Mormon Prophet," presented the religious doctrine of the Latter Day Saints as interpreted by him and his following at a gathering. It was reported by the paper that Alexander Smith and his followers did not recognize polygamy, like the Utah saints did.

A couple weeks later Elder Salisbury, a nephew of Joseph Smith, spoke to a crowd. Some of the attendees had come from California and Colorado to hear Elder Salisbury speak. He, like Alexander Smith, told his listeners that no members of his family practiced polygamy either. He also told of a "blissful land that one could enjoy if they would forsake their evil ways and become obedient to his teachings and wait 1000 years after death."

By December 1890, Darius Hicks had finished a large artificial lake, sometimes referred to as Lake Vishnu. During that first summer, Hicks continued to publicize the springs and once the land in the valley went up for sale, it was quickly purchased. The lots were snatched up and by October, Vishnu Springs had its first real occupant. His name was Andrew Ruddle and he constructed a small house near the hotel. That winter, David Reece opened the town's first store.

By the following spring, Vishnu had two more stores, a restaurant, a livery stable and blacksmith and a photo gallery. Darius Hicks organized the "Vishnu Transfer Line" that made trips from Colchester to the new resort. For the cost of 75 cents, a passenger could be transported to Vishnu, have dinner and then be transported back. For an



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additional fee, a passenger could bypass the normally used spring wagon and be taken to the resort in a carriage or a canopied buckboard instead.

Darius Hicks evidently did not get along well with his developer, Charles K. Way, and there was talk of dividing the community into two parts. Way eventually developed land southeast of the hotel. Also, the resort became known for the sale and consumption of illegal alcohol (Colchester and the county were both “dry” at that time). The drinking on the grounds of the resort led to occasional fighting.

Things were not always good at the springs. In 1890, a stabbing occurred at Vishnu. Andrew Ruddle and John Mourning had an altercation. Ruddle had contracted with Mourning to do some stripping at the quarry. He did some of the work and received some of the pay. When Ruddle confronted Mourning about the rest of the pay, he was told, like for most jobs, when the job was done, he would be paid in full. Ruddle continued to ask for his pay and Mourning continued to refuse to pay him until the job was done. When Mourning refused one too many times for Ruddle's liking, he attacked Mourning, cutting him with a knife, opening a long and painful gash in his shoulder. Ruddle fled the scene and remained at large for several weeks. He was apprehended in Missouri and brought back for a court appearance.

Meanwhile, despite the drinking and the fighting, Darius Hicks continued to develop the resort as a place of peace and healing. The hotel boasted a number of improvements, like running water and an elevator to reach the third floor ball room. Amusements were added for the resort travelers, like a real horse-powered carousel and the lawn around the hotel was fitted with swings, hammocks, a croquet grounds, a picnic area and a large pond that was dubbed “Lake Vishnu” and stocked with goldfish. A small stream flowed away from the lake and vanished into the mouth of a large, unexplored cave. Darius Hicks also built a racetrack and established a park, both of which were not in the valley but on a nearby hill. A set of 108 wooden steps had been constructed to reach the part of the town located on the hill. He also promoted and arranged for cultural activities like dances, band concerts and holiday celebrations. He also organized a literary society and opened a schoolhouse for the children who had settled in Vishnu with their parents.



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Although it sounds as though the town was rapidly growing, in truth, it wasn't. Most of Darius Hicks' efforts were being spent on a small number of full-time residents and the travelers who came to take in the waters. There were never more than about 30 homes in the valley and the hotel was not active in cold weather months. The road to the hotel was barely passable, making access nearly impossible. The hotel was also now under bad management.

For these reasons, the village never really gained an economic base, even as a popular resort, for there was no railroad connection to it and it was far from any sizable town of the era. The residents managed to persevere through and gained a post office in 1896. Darius Hicks eventually moved from his nearby farm to the town itself and served as the local postmaster for several years.

In 1896, Darius Hicks' wife, Hattie, died from Bright's disease.

The following year, Darius Hicks remarried for what would be the last time. This last marriage caused quite a stir in the community as Darius Hicks married his own step-daughter, Maud Rush. She was only 20 years-old at the time. After they were married, Darius Hicks and Maud moved to a farm north of Blandinsville. Darius and Maud had two children, a boy and a girl.

In 1903, two events would take place that would lead to the decline of Vishnu. On one warm summer day, the carousel was filled with children, carefully watched over by the owner, who supervised their play and made sure that the horse that turned the gears continued to walk. It is unclear what happened, but somehow, the supervisor's shirt sleeve became tangled in the gears of the carousel and he was pulled into them. The children's cries of delight and laughter turned to screams of terror as the man was crushed to death. The carousel ground to a halt and it never ran again.

Later on that same year, Maud Hicks gave birth to another daughter but both mother and child died during the delivery. Legend has it that the event occurred in one of the rooms of the Capitol Hotel and that the event left such an impression behind that it is still being heard and experienced there today! Regardless of any questions of lingering ghosts though, Maud's death was a tremendous shock to Darius Hicks. He certainly never dreamed that his wife, who was 27 years younger than he was, would precede



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him to the grave. On the day following Maud's funeral, he took his young son and he turned his back on Vishnu - never to return. But his troubles were not yet over...

After leaving Vishnu, Hicks bought a farm a short distance north near Blandinsville and took up residence there. He soon hired a housekeeper named Nellie Darrah, a widow, who was needed to help care for Hicks' two young children. In the years that followed, Nellie became a mother figure to the children and became romantically involved with Hicks. By the winter of 1908, Nellie had become pregnant and confronted Hicks, demanding that he finally marry her. He refused and she subsequently gained an abortion. Not surprisingly, thanks to the time period, the procedure did not go well and she had to be hospitalized.

While in the hospital, Nellie contacted Hicks and threatened to publicize their entire affair. Hicks met the threats with silence and quietly removed his .32 caliber rifle from his closet. After writing a letter that explained his entire situation, he shot himself in the head. Hicks died from the wound at the age of only 58.

The death of Darius Hicks sounded a death knell for the community of Vishnu Springs. He had been the main builder and promoter of the town and had literally given the place a spirit. He had remained involved in the business of the town and his hotel, even after moving to Blandinsville. There was no one who was as invested, both financially and personally, in the village. Hicks' death sent the community into a decline that it never came out of.

The hotel and the town, now under indifferent management, began to attract gamblers, thieves and criminals. On one occasion, a huge quantity of counterfeit half-dollars, which looked like the real thing but were made from pewter, were seized here. The maker of them had been passing them off in illegal poker games at the hotel and someone had eventually alerted the authorities. There were other stories of law breakers captured at Vishnu as well and legends that much of their loot was hidden away in the caves around the settlement. If there is any element of truth to such stories, the money still remains lost today.

Dr. Isaac Luce, who had settled in the village during its time of greatest prosperity, tried to develop the land that he owned on the north side of the village but with no success. a



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man named Campbell also tried to stem the flow of people moving out of the now declining homes and businesses but his enterprise was also doomed to fail.

Eventually, the property was sold and left to decay. By the 1920's, Vishnu was nothing more than a legend-haunted ghost town, abandoned and nearly forgotten in the secluded valley. Vandals stole valuable hotel furnishings and broke out the windows of the buildings and the old hotel. Other visitors found their way to the spot and the inside of the hotel filled with their signatures. The earliest names scrawled on the walls are those of Marie Feris and Lil Baker, who came to the Capitol in 1893, when it was still in business. The owners encouraged the now historic graffiti but the marks and scrawls that still appear today have lost the charm and the innocence of the signatures of the past.

By the 1930's, the hotel had decayed into little more than a shell and the owner, a local banker, lost all of his property during the Depression. It seemed that the "curse" that plagued Vishnu was continuing to wreak havoc.

In 1935, a restoration effort was started by Ira Post. He bought the hotel and 220 acres around it. He restored the building and hired Lon Cale as the caretaker. They opened the former resort up as a picnic grounds and while it met with a limited amount of success, Vishnu would never be a community again. He and his family lived at the hotel for weeks at a time, overseeing the work that was being done. As with Darius Hicks, the magic of the little valley had worked its charm on Ira Post and he longed to open the place back up to the public again.

Post died in 1951 and while the hotel was occasionally rented in the years after, the grounds became overgrown and unkempt. His children had all moved away and soon even the caretaker was no longer needed to watch over an area that had once again faded into memory. Soon, it was completely abandoned once more.

In April 1968, Alfred White and Albert Simmons talked Ira Post's niece into letting them try to revitalize the place once again. Their plan was to open the hotel and offer food and country music to the public. The venture soon folded and Vishnu was abandoned once again.



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In the early 1970's, Vishnu Springs saw life again as a sort of commune for a group of Western Illinois University graduates and their friends. They turned the hotel into their home and sacrificed their professional careers to live with nature. Earning enough money to pay the rent and the expensive winter heating bills, the group gardened and raised livestock to make ends meet, occasionally hosting music festivals that featured groups with names such as "Morning, Morning" and "Catfish & Crystal". Eventually, they too were gone and Vishnu was once again deserted.



As the years have passed, the old hotel has continued to deteriorate and today it is little more than a crumbling shadow of its former self. Despite the interest of local societies and historic groups, the valley remained private property until the death of the last member of the Post family. Since that time, the status of the land has remained in limbo and the ultimate fate of Vishnu remains a mystery.

And perhaps it is this very mystery, as well as its isolation, that has been the source of the legends that have come to be told here. As the town fell into ruin and the houses collapsed and were covered with weeds and brush, those who ventured into Vishnu came away with strange and perplexing tales. The accounts spoke of a woman in black who roamed through the

abandoned streets. Who this woman may have been is unknown, but she was said to vanish without a trace when approached. Visitors also told of sounds from Vishnu's past, echoing into the present. They were the sounds of voices, laughter and music, as if glory days of Vishnu were still being lived out - in a world just beyond our own.



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In 2003, the Western Illinois University Foundation was gifted 140 acres of land in McDonough County, which included Vishnu Springs. The donor, Ira Post's granddaughter, is a 1946 graduate of Western. The site has been named the Ira and Reatha T. Post Wildlife Sanctuary.