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# A sojourn in temperance country

## Tiny Indiana town was home to famous evangelist Billy Sunday

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A woman enjoys arun on Canal st. next the canal in The Village at Winona Lake IN., Wednesday July 6, 2011. (Abel Uribe, Chicago Tribune / October 14, 2011)

By Jay Jones, Special to Tribune Newspapers

*1:11 p.m. CDT, October 14, 2011*

WINONA LAKE, Ind. — With its pastoral setting, the BoatHouse Restaurant makes the perfect place to enjoy lunch or dinner while swans drift by on Winona Lake.

The menu suggests ice tea, lemonade or milk for

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beverages. Though there's no mention of alcohol, beer and wine are available. However — in a throwback to the small town's Bible-thumping, teetotaling days — visitors still have to go to neighboring Warsaw to find hard liquor.

"Whiskey and beer are all right in their place," the most famous resident, **Billy Sunday**, once said. "At their place is in hell."

Though the famous evangelist's campaign against alcohol goes back more than a century, there are still those in Winona Lake who subscribe to strict temperance testaments.

— after a hard night of drinking with his teammates from the Chicago White Stockings — he found his way to a Windy City mission, where he returned to work again. In 1891, he quit baseball to devote himself to preaching. He became a Presbyterian minister in 1903.

He and his wife built their home in 1911. Winona Lake was already a center for revivalist Christianity. Each summer the Winona Lake Summer School was drawing hundreds of converts to revivals and conferences. The church's board of directors included such prominent Americans as lawyer and politician William Bryan and ketchup king H.J. Heinz.

The Assembly's money that built much of what is today the village visitors experience in Winona Lake. But with the departure of a number of religious leaders in the 1970s and '80s, the cottages and cottages were abandoned; the tranquil town became a slum.

Now, though, Winona Lake is again a charming community that invites guests to come for a day or a weekend to learn about its history, explore the shops and eateries, and enjoy the many summertime festivals.

The town has one man — and his graduate thesis — to thank for its rebirth.

In 1991, Brent Wilcoxson was working on his master's degree in business administration when he decided to focus on transforming the derelict village into a tourist attraction.


"We're not on the main drag," he said of the town 50 miles southeast of South Bend. "I knew we had to be a destination."

In his thesis, Wilcoxson suggested that the renaissance be based on a European model, with renovated cottages along a quaint canal being transformed into boutiques as well as residences for the shopkeepers.


Using money from his investment business, along with that of co-founder Dane Miller, Wilcoxson began the renovations in 1994. His first project was to convert run-down boardinghouses into single-family homes.



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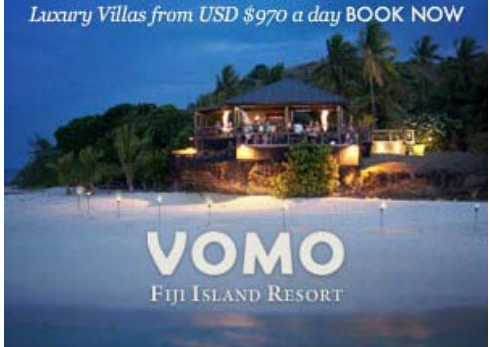
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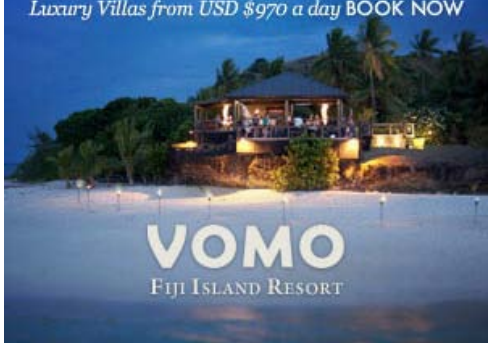
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"It was a quality-of-life move, not an investment," Wilcoxson said of the venture, known as The Village at Winona. He is its managing director and biggest advocate.

"Probably 80 percent of what you see in Winona Lake now was in my original business plan," he added.

Footpaths and bicycle trails wind through the community. Bike rentals are available from Trailhouse Village Outdoor Store. In season, folks wishing to explore the waterways can rent canoes and kayaks at the public park and beach.

By land or water, visitors can access the inviting, canal-side offerings. They include art galleries, gift shops, a spa and an upscale restaurant.

Whetstone Woodenware is one of two shops along East Canal Street featuring handcrafted wood items. The owner, John Whetstone, has been making kitchen utensils for 27 years.

"I asked the Lord for something to do," he said. "He laid (woodworking) in my hands."

For the first few years, Whetstone made everything from spatulas and spoons to measuring cups all by himself. But as business grew, he found himself having to hire a team of workers. He now sells more than 100 products, all made from locally harvested maple.

"What I've tried to do is to marry the form and functionality and make it affordable enough for people to use," he noted.

Where the northern end of the canal meets the lake, BoatHouse Restaurant sits on the foundation of the original building erected by the Winona Assembly. As the alcohol-free menu states, "The original boat house was used to store the nearly three-hundred watercraft the Assembly had available for rent."

Dinners here are a la carte; the most expensive item is an 8-ounce filet mignon for \$23.99. A bowl of homemade soup (\$2.99) or a baked sweet potato (\$3.49) won't break the bank.

Even modern-day churchgoers who don't abide by Billy Sunday's condemnation of drinking, card-playing and moviegoing will enjoy a visit to his former residence on a hill overlooking the shopping district.

The Billy Sunday Home looks much as it did when it was built 100 years ago. It still contains the Sundays' original furniture, and guided tours provide glimpses of the evangelist's preaching across America.

Without the aid of loudspeakers or radio, Sunday's fire-and-brimstone sermons captivated audiences from coast to coast.

As Sunday's popularity soared, so, too, did his once-meager income. In 1935, despite the Depression, he died a wealthy man.

**If you go**

The Village at Winona (574-268-9888, [villageatwinona.com](http://villageatwinona.com)) provides a Visitors' Guide — available locally and online — detailing the town's offerings, including shops and eateries. The website also lists a calendar of special events.

Tours of the Billy Sunday home are offered at 2 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday May



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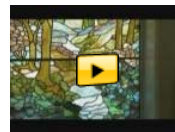


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through September. For more information, contact the Reneker Museum at 574-372-5193. The museum, on the campus of neighboring Grace College, curates a collection of Sunday artifacts and is open year-round.

[ctc-travel@tribune.com](mailto:ctc-travel@tribune.com)

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