



# A Step Back In Time At Wildwood Springs Lodge

Jane Reed

## Good Food, Good Music, And What A Setting!

**T**hey come from Paris, Italy, Germany and all points of the U.S. They come for the food, the music, the history, the Ozarks, and the timeless atmosphere. Today, it is a step back in time.

Wildwood Springs Lodge perches atop a bluff overlooking the Meramec River Valley in the small Missouri town of Steelville, self-proclaimed “floating capital of Missouri.” New and returning guests come to the resort from all over the world and every state to attend the Lodge’s “Living Room Concerts.”

Executive chef Jeannette Freeman’s meals, the ambiance of a 1920s resort, the beauty of an Ozarks’ setting—and some first rate-music—bring many

return visitors to receive what some call their “Wildwood fix.”

Where many resorts and concert venues may work with the premise of “bigger and better,” Wildwood Springs seems to speak to “home-style and intimate.” The mastermind of this vision for Wildwood originates from owner/host Bob Bell. In a thoughtful, creative way, he has renovated the historical Ozark resort and gathered a first-rate staff to see to the guests’ needs. In addition to the concert events, the lodge hosts corporate retreats, reunions, weddings, and other individual and group visits.

## History

The lodge preserves its history in spirit and décor. In 1922, contractor R. H. Hummel planned a two-story frame building that would be a “magnificent, commodious, and strictly modern resort hostelry.” The resort opened on Memorial Day 1922. The



*The exterior of the dining room showcases the windows that still provide the Ozark vistas for diners. (photo: Jane Reed)*



*Families have always enjoyed Wildwood. This old photograph from the late 1920s with the cars of the day shows that the lodge has maintained its vintage atmosphere. (photo: courtesy of Wildwood Springs Lodge)*



*Wildwood's great room transforms into a sea of couches and comfortable chairs during concert weekends when the performers take the "stage" in front of the fireplace. (photo: Jane Reed)*

Wildwood Springs Association that built the lodge made the grand opening a day of celebration with a BBQ, a parade, and contests. Wildwood's own orchestra performed as visitors toured the lodge. In the early days, visitors traveled by train to Cuba,

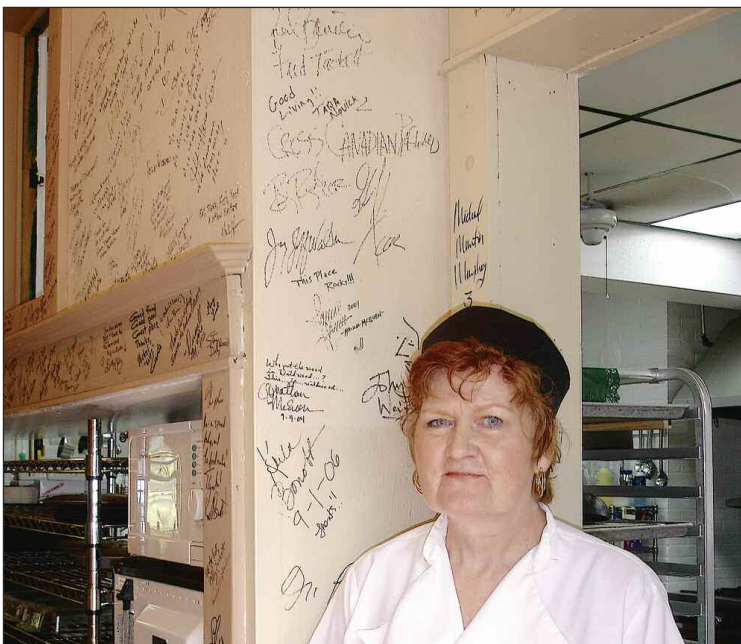
Mo., where they were met by horse and buggy for the final leg of their trip to the lodge.

In 1927, Elizabeth Zahorsky, the daughter of Dr. John Zahorsky, a St. Louis pediatrician and local landowner, married Joseph Cushing. The couple owned and ran Wildwood in the late 1930s and 40s.

In the early days of WW II the lodge was for sale or lease. The War Department rented the lodge, and women rolled bandages there. After the war Wildwood was empty, neglected, and forlorn. Ben and Sonya Finkel bought the lodge in 1948 and restored it. The Finkels had a reputation for cleanliness and good food. But their reign also came to an end, and the lodge was closed for about 10 years until the Bell family bought it in 1993.

With the goal of renewing the reputation of the lodge, Wildwood Springs was reopened on Memorial Day 1993, exactly 71 years after the grand opening in 1922. Manager Bob Bell actually grew up across the street from the resort and spent a lot of time there with the Finkels when they operated it. The Bell family worked to keep the original atmosphere of the resort as they renovated. Bell is well-versed in local history and someday hopes to write a book about the history of the area.

Much of the furniture in the 53 rooms is original, and some adjoining rooms share a bath in a more "European style" of hostelry. Both spring and fall concerts draw crowds to sold out evenings, which can be purchased with lodging and meals as a pack-



*Executive chef Jeannette Freeman poses outside the kitchen where many famous performers have penned their comments and drawings on the wall. (photo: Jane Reed)*



*Bob and Michelle McClain carve during one of the weekend's delicious meals prepared by executive chef Jeannette Freeman and her staff. (photo: Jane Reed)*

age. Besides the main historic lodge, other resort-style guest houses are nearby for house guests.

### **Dining in an Ozark Setting**

Today the resort offers a swimming pool, float trips, and other activities throughout the day. Cuba Lakes Golf is nearby as well as other local attractions. But one of the favorite activities is still sitting in a rocker on the screened porch, gazing over the river valley. In 1974, the Cushings donated Zahorsky Woods to the Nature Conservancy. The 56-acre woodland provides a variety of ridges, ravines, bluffs, and bottomlands characteristic of the Upper Ozark Region. Walking trails provide many vistas of beauty and give visitors a chance to work up an appetite for Wildwood's signature fine dining.

Coupled with the history of the building and a beautiful setting, a visitor gets some fine eating in

the lodge's large, airy dining room. White tablecloths, hardwood floors, and beautifully prepared and presented meals are a draw for guests.

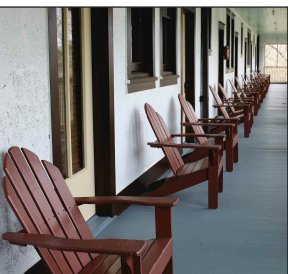
"Jeanette has no budget limitations for her meals. That's what makes it work. She does a great job," states Bell, speaking of Executive Chef Freeman.

Freeman, in return, remarks, "I couldn't work for anyone else. He wants the best quality, the finest ingredients we can serve, with no short cuts."

Freeman and Chef Marsha Asher prepare traditional comfort foods with seasonal ingredients and a few surprises thrown in to satisfy the palettes of those Freeman says have "eaten in the finest restaurants." Freeman says that they can't keep enough of their good tasting, simple foods like corn muffins because the diners enjoy the food so much. Visiting band members also enjoy the meals, and there is a tradition of them signing the wall outside the kitchen



*Wildwood guests love having photos taken with the iron chicken, a recent purchase by host Bob Bell. (photo: Jane Reed)*



*Rooms open onto the screened in porch with Adirondack chairs offering a spot for visiting or quiet reflection of the Ozark views. (photo: Jane Reed)*



*The Wildwood orchestra played at its opening ceremonies. The early Wildwood Orchestra began a musical culture that the lodge still fosters. (photo: courtesy of Wildwood Springs Lodge)*

with their well-known signatures, often touting the fine food they have eaten.

Freeman may start the day by cooking a honey and brown sugar ham, pecan chicken breasts, and a dozen brownie pies that will later be drizzled with chocolate ganache and a creamy topping. Other days, equally tempting dishes are created. A sampling of meals served at the lodge is on the website. Freeman and Bell received so many comments about Freeman's signature Poppyseed and House Dressings that they now sell them in grocery stores and on the resort's website.

## The Concerts

The "Living Room Concerts" are actually what the name implies. After a meal in a dining room that

looks like a scene from a 1920s movie, the crowd gravitates to the lodge's living room where concertgoers relax on rows of couches and an assortment of chairs. A long bar runs along one side of the room so concertgoers can enjoy a drink while visiting and waiting for the concert to begin. Drums and keyboards in front of the fireplace await the evening's performers. Chef Freeman's husband Bill, who is in charge of the pool, helps work the concerts and is a veritable fountain of local history and a great storyteller.

As guests settle in, the lights dim, and the music fills the room, something happens that seems to erase wrinkles, ease worries, and magic settles over the room. The audience responds when an old favorite is played and laugh at some of the self-deprecating remarks of the bands.

Classic rockers such as Poco, Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, Ozark Mountain Daredevils, Brewer and Shipley, Pure Prairie League, and Leon Russell entertain crowds that number from 200-300. It is similar to having some of these greats sitting in your living room as they play, sing, and reminisce with the crowd. Performers such as Erin Bode, Arlo Guthrie, and Michael Murphy have also enjoyed this venue. Every season offers old favorites as well as something new.

The history, the Ozark setting, the food, the hospitality, the music on a beautiful evening, the local stories: they all combine to provide a singular Ozark experience that can't be replicated. It's timeless. ☼

—Jane Reed, *Cuba, Mo.*, is a retired English teacher who now does public relations work and free lance writing.



*Pure Prairie League's performance in front of a sold out crowd in one of the "Living Room Concerts" showcases the intimate atmosphere between performers and audience. (photo: Jane Reed)*

## Two Wildwood Salad Recipes

### Wildwood Strawberry Salad

In a salad bowl place

1 bunch romaine lettuce, torn  
1/2 cup sliced fresh strawberries  
1/4 cup pecan halves, toasted

2 slices bacon, fried crisp, drained and crumbled

Toss with Wildwood Springs Lodge Poppy Seed Dressing. Serve immediately. Yield: 4 Servings

### Wildwood House Salad

In a salad bowl place

1 bunch romaine lettuce, torn  
1 small can Mandarin oranges, drained  
1/2 medium red onion, thin sliced  
1/3 cup dried cranberries

Toss with Wildwood Springs Lodge House Salad Dressing. Serve immediately. Yield: 4 servings



(photo: Jane Reed)

## Area Information

Cuba, Mo. "Route 66 Mural City"

Toll Free: 1-877-212-8429

[www.cubamochamber.com](http://www.cubamochamber.com)

Steelville, Mo.

Phone: 573-775-5533

E-mail: [chamber@misn.com](mailto:chamber@misn.com)

<http://www.steelville.com>

Missouri Tourism

[www.visitmo.com](http://www.visitmo.com)

## 2009 Wildwood Concert Lineup

Shows sell out quickly so don't procrastinate. Go to the website [www.wildwoodspringslodge.com](http://www.wildwoodspringslodge.com) for complete details on the groups and combination packages for meals, lodging, and concerts. Sign up for the newsletter for concert updates.

**May 8-9:** Poco with Richie Furay

Fans love this country/rock group, and this is their 9th year returning to Wildwood.

**September 4-6:** "Bluegrass is Back"

This Family Bluegrass Festival offers three nights of bluegrass, family fun, and food at a "bargain price." All 3 nights for only \$185 a head, including 3 nights lodging, 3 dinners, and 3 breakfasts, plus 3 bands a night. Hot young bluegrass bands serve up a blast of good music, and Wildwood serves up the home cookin'. Throw the kids on the floor for only \$40 more.

**September 25-26:** Guy Clark

This Texas songwriter wrote hit songs for all the greats, but nobody sings them better than Clark himself.

**October 2-3:** Poco

One gig a season is not enough for this Wildwood favorite.

**October 9-10:** Christopher Cross

The hits "Sailing," "All Right," and "Ride Like the Wind" evoke memories of great times.

**October 16-17:** Dave Mason

Mason penned the Rock and Roll anthem "Feelin' Alright" while playing with Traffic. Mason has lived the history of Rock and Roll since the age of 18 and is ready to share it with concertgoers.

**October 23-24:** America

The rock anthem "A Horse With No Name" initiated a string of hits for this classic group.

**October 30-31:** An Acoustic Evening with Al Stewart and Erin Bode  
Stewart's 40 year musical career provides a rich backdrop for his performances, and Bode's melodic tunes will enrich the evening even more.

*Some guests of today travel in vintage style!  
(photo: courtesy of Wildwood Springs Lodge)*

For information on the lodge, Wildwood guest houses, rates, packages, activities, calendar of events, 2009 Concerts, and directions visit Wildwood's website. Sign up for their newsletter for concert updates. The lodge closes for the winter the 1st or 2nd week of November, depending on concert dates. It opens in May for special events and "officially" opens on Memorial Day.

Wildwood Springs Resort  
P.O. Box 919, Grand Drive  
Steelville, Mo. 65565  
Phone: 1-800-554-3746 or 573-775-2400  
Fax: 573-775-5093  
[www.wildwoodspringslodge.com](http://www.wildwoodspringslodge.com)