“The Wallet” – Castle Knoll Farms, Paoli

In September, 2016, it was my wife’s turn to pick a surprise destination for our annual anniversary trip. She chose French Lick, Indiana – about three hours from home. Before we arrived at our hotel in French Lick, we went on an “elephant encounter” at Wilstem Ranch, a few miles south of town. Laura had scheduled an ATV ride for us, which took us through acres of rolling hills, up and down rocky ravines, and past this old dairy barn, one of several on the adjacent Castle Knoll Farm.

The scene, a green-roofed barn set against a field of yellow hay, high on a hill, with several other lesser barns in the distance, caught my attention. I asked the guide to stop so that I could take a photo with my phone, which I kept safe in my shorts pocket, zipped shut. It turned out so well that I considered painting it.

After we finished our tour of the farm, its African elephants, zebras, and other exotic animals, we drove into town, still too early to check into the hotel. So we went to a gift shop. When I thought about buying something for my grandkids, I reached for my wallet in my rear pants pocket but, alas, there was no wallet there. I rushed out to the car, hoping that it might have fallen out in the car seat. No luck. So then I called the folks at Wilstem, asking them to look around for it in case it had fallen out during the ATV ride, which was rocky and bumpy. They said they would.

I had never lost my wallet before and I hope I never lose it again. What an empty feeling! Thoughts of cancelling credit cards and getting new insurance cards and a new driver’s license flashed through my mind. Laura and I drove back there right away.

A staff member and I looked it several ATVs for the wallet. No luck, again. Maybe it fell out on the route. Lord, there were so many places it could have landed. Would we ever find it? Just then another staff asked if he could help and he left. A few minutes later he returned with my wallet, having found it in the ATV we rode in, which was in a different location. Hooray! Talk about euphoria. From the depths of despair to the pinnacle of happiness. All in one half-hour.

So I decided to paint a small study painting of the barn scene as a token of my appreciation for the kindess these Hoosiers showed me. I also wanted to learn a little bit about these barns and the interesting tall silo with the cap that looks like a tiny barn.

The staff told me that Edward Ballard owned the farm back in the 1920s. Mr. Ballard was a story in himself. But, even before Ballard, these sulfur hot springs attracted animals, buffaloes, and Indians. By the mid-1800s people began to flock here to soak in and drink the mineral water, in hopes of curing a disease or preventing one. By 1880 fourteen thousand visitors came here each year. By 1900, owners rebuilt the West Baden hotel, topping it with a magnificent metal dome, guaranteed not to burn down as its predecessor had.

In the early 1900s, the resort attracted the rich and famous for not only the water but also for horseback riding, golf, and swimming. Joe Louis trained in the hotel. And Ed Ballard set pins in the bowling alley.

Born in 1874 to poor parents, Ballard reportedly left school after the fourth grade and became “street smart,” working in Sinclair’s West Baden Hotel. By 1895, the 21-year-old took over as casino boss of the resort’s gaming. He had the Midas touch. Everything he tried worked. And it worked well.

By 1915 he owned the Brown, the largest gambling place in town, across from the French Lick Hotel, and his fortune allowed him, at 31, to build a 21-room Georgian mansion. Two years later he bought a circus and gradually bought every other circus in the states, except Ringling. The Roaring Twenties fueled Ballard’s empire. A dozen or more trainloads of thrill-seekers, gamblers, and vacationers arrived daily. In 1923 Ballard acquired the West Baden Hotel. Pluto Water – from the famous mineral springs – and gambling, even though illegal, brought thousands into this little town. The 30 hotels and 15 gambling clubs obliged. Al Capone and his cronies visited, as did presidents and influential politicians. Boxer Joe Louis trained at the hotel.

In 1928 Ballard built the string of barns on this 2100-acre farm, portrayed in this painting, according to Marlena Bolin, whose great grandparents, Goldie and William Bolin, owned the farm. Her father grew up on the farm, along with his parents and grandparents. The large barn at the top of the hill housed mules and hay. Others kept Ballard’s cattle. Later when the Bolins took over they raised crops and dairy cows.

Then the crash of 1929 hit. The Roaring Twenties came to a screeching halt and money belts tightened. With tourism down, Ballard felt the pinch and in 1933 he closed the West Baden Hotel and sold the property to the Jesuits for a dollar. They converted it into a seminary, training priests – ironically to teach values the opposite of what had previously been in the hotel.

Now at 60, Ballard presumably was still well off, entertaining the rich and famous in his mansion, but apparently he had enemies. A former business associate shot him to death in Hot Springs, Arkansas, in 1936. Dead at 63, Ballard’s days had ended, though his farm – with barns galore – still continues, though under different ownership.