



12-15-1988

The Wilds: Past, Present, and Future

Delenna Williams

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview>

Recommended Citation

Williams, Delenna (1988) "The Wilds: Past, Present, and Future," *Westview*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 2 , Article 10.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol8/iss2/10>

This Nonfiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Westview by an authorized administrator of SWOSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.



The Wilds: Past, Present, And Future



By Delenna Williams

If you are looking for:

A delicious meal for the entire family,

A lovely, shaded area for fishing,

A quaint farmyard with petting zoo,

A moving experience in history,

Or a fun-filled holiday activity,

I suggest THE WILDS.....Fish Farm, Restaurant, and Recreation Area.

What I expected from my first trip to THE WILDS was a good, reasonably priced fish dinner in a crowded restaurant. What I found in addition to the ranch-grown fish was a large selection of beef and pork dinners in an 1800's setting with musical entertainment and computerized seating.

What I expected from THE WILDS was a tedious search for an obscure road out of El Reno leading to a restaurant located in "the wilds," an undeveloped area with little landscaping. but what I found after a pleasant country drive was a family-oriented recreation area in a beautifully planned "natural" farm setting owned and operated by an El Reno family, the Wilds.

I expected on my first trip to THE WILDS to take a brief walk after dinner to see the lake and to feed the ducks. What I discovered was 240 acres: a 10-acre lake with fishing and paddle boats; a "petting" area with ducks, goats, rabbits, a bobcat, a coyote, a miniature burro, a herd of buffalo, and horses; and a grist mill with water wheel.

What I found at THE WILDS was a good family restaurant, a beautiful, quaint setting, and a historical recreation area for individuals and groups. According to Steve Wilds, his land is an ideal location for attracting tourists.



There are a million people within an hour's drive. Visitors from at least five states are at the restaurant each evening, and many countries have been represented at least once for an individual dinner or group activity. From the I-40 El Reno Exit, the drive is 10 miles to THE WILDS, and if one drives from Oklahoma City, Britton Road is a quick route from the N. W. Expressway.

The land has been in the Wilds' family since 1938, and the first step toward a recreational facility was the construction of the dam in 1946. In 1970 the lake was stocked with fish from the Wilds' hatcheries, and in 1983 the restaurant opened. The most recent acquisition is an authentic, antique steam-powered 2-6-2 narrow gauge train. Plans include the construction of a depot, 2¾ miles of track, shuttle buggies and hand cars. From the train, the rider will be able to see the buffalo herd as well as antelope, bobcat, and perhaps a bear. I'm sure once the train project is completed, there will be new ideas on the drawing board. Although Steve Wilds and family always have plans for development and improvements, some features will remain unchanged — the consistency in architecture, the music selection (Country-Western and Gospel), and the absence of alcoholic beverages. No alcohol in any form is allowed on the grounds or served in the restaurant. The family atmosphere will be maintained.

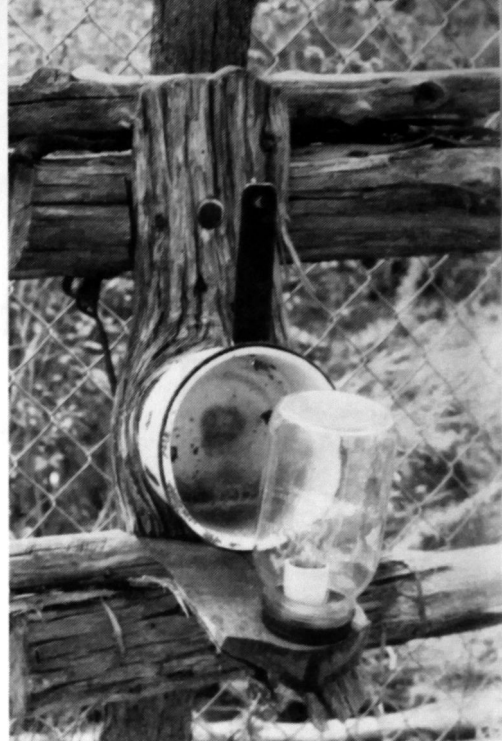
In its sixth year, the restaurant at THE WILDS is unique with its rustic look of the 1800's which was created from barns in the area; the oversized doors were brought in from an Oklahoma barn and cut to provide a grand entrance into the waiting area.

Handmade items and antiques that decorate the hand-polished aromatic cedar walls suggest the Oklahoma Frontier, as well as do the costumes of the staff. The atmosphere for the 1800's setting

is best created by Arlie Clayton at the player piano. Waiting in line until the computer prints their names, customers can make requests and sing along with Arlie as he plays the piano or uses the player piano rolls he created for the entertainment of his listeners with songs of the past.

The 4,000 square-foot dining area seats over 250 people, so the wait for a table is not a long one. On Fridays and Saturdays, one can eat from a buffet or order from the menu. The buffet offers three meat choices and many vegetables. The diner selects two meats and as many vegetables as he wishes and gets rolls, a soup or salad, and a dessert. One of the choices is the house specialty, fresh farm-raised channel catfish fillets, hand-breaded and deep-fried; barbecued ribs and smoked brisket are the other two choices. In the vegetable area are the traditional potato varieties, green beans, squash, peas, broccoli, cauliflower, and something new with deep-fried corn. The menu offers individual dinners of the channel catfish and smoked beef, as well as a variety of Western steaks, soups, salads, and desserts. Prices range from \$4.00 - \$13.00. The restaurant is open from 5:00 - 9:00 p.m., Tuesday through Thursday, and Friday and Saturday from 5:00 - 10:00 p.m., and is open for selected holidays.

For my first meal at THE WILDS RESTAURANT, I was lucky to be seated by the window for the beautiful view of the lake and farm area, so I was anxious to start the walk after dinner. I did feel as though I was walking back in time as I crossed the lake on a rustic, covered bridge. The electric light bulbs along the path were a reminder of the late Twentieth Century, but the rusted metal pan used as reflector and the Mason jar kept the 1800's atmosphere in tact. Rabbits ran on the path, and goats and sheep awaited my arrival,



knowing that I would place a coin in their food machine and feed them. A coyote paced frantically in his pen, a variety of birds slept in their smaller pens, and for a small fee, horseback riding was available. I preferred to walk so I could take all the time I wanted to feed the animals and the ducks and to take the winding path through the trees, past the picnic area and to the mill. I was amazed at the number of trees; I found later that they had been transplanted from various areas of Oklahoma.

With several lakes on the property, there is no problem in finding a quiet fishing area. Steve Wilds calls the 10-acre lake a place for "put and take" fishing; the Wilds "put" in the fish, and the fishermen "take" them out by paying \$1.80 a pound. In the bait house, both tackle and bait are available, as well as facilities for dressing and filleting the fish. The lake is stocked with channel catfish, bass, and various species of pan fish.

Past the fishing areas, hidden among the trees, is a water-powered grist mill which stone-grinds corn and other grains under the power of an 18-foot water wheel that was used during the Civil War. The Wilds rebuilt the wheel and the

building. The stone is all that is left from the original structure; it was shipped from either France or Italy for the mill's completion in 1854. The mill provides a beautiful setting for art shows and for romantic moonlight walks.

THE WILDS provides a lovely, peaceful atmosphere for family entertainment and is an Oklahoma show-place for out-of-state visitors. A variety of "old-time" activities are available as group packages for company picnics, clubs, school and church functions, or class reunions. Groups may choose from activities in tug-o-war, greased-pole climb, water games, horse shoes, volleyball, rolling pin toss, milk can toss, and sack races. There is an outdoor stage complete with electricity, and THE WILDS will arrange and book Country and Western, Bluegrass, Gospel or Folk music for entertainment. Also available are horseback riding, paddle boats, fee fishing, and bonfires with hot-dog poles.

Food for the group packages range from hot-dog suppers to catered meals of ribs, brisket, and/or chicken, served with potato salad, baked beans, rolls, choice of two drinks, and homemade fruit cobbler. Groups may select the outdoor picnic or dine indoors; anniversaries and birthdays seem typical celebrations at the restaurant. The evening I was there, THE WILDS fed one thousand people; there was a group of five hundred outdoors and another five hundred patrons in the restaurant with one birthday and two anniversaries.

On selected holidays, THE WILDS offers additional activities in the spirit of the Oklahoma Frontier. The most elaborate holiday activity is over the Labor Day weekend...I attended one day of the three-day "Hootenanny." All ages enjoy the festivities, particularly the children. There is an admission fee, but there are many animals to pet and feed, hay wagons, games

and crafts, and historical demonstrations and displays to educate and entertain any age. There are three choices for eating: one can take a picnic and enjoy the facilities near the lake; eat buffalo burgers or hot dogs at the concession booths on the grounds; or have an indoor meal at the restaurant.

A church service is provided Sunday morning and each evening there are music concerts; an Arts and Crafts show, antique cars, steam-powered threshing, gun-fights, Civil War campsites, and many other activities are included. I enjoyed particularly the demonstrations of sorghum making, spinning and the rope making; there was a corn sheller in which I placed an ear of corn, cranked a non-electric grinder, and in a few seconds had enough kernels to feed the animals.



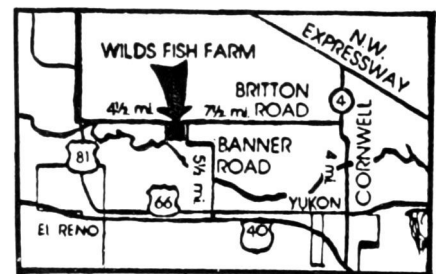
The small art show in the mill and the crafts for sale on the grounds are in keeping with the 1800's theme, with woodcarving, handmade clothing and country crafts. Demonstrations included woodcarvers and a sculptor who was carving Indian figures from alabaster.

In the late afternoon before the

music concerts began, I hopped the tractor-drawn hay wagon that toured the grounds and saw the buffalo herd. Two high-school students from El Reno, Larry Chadwick and David Litler, were assisting parents in the weekend activities and served as unofficial guides for the tour. They enthusiastically explained THE WILDS' history and future plans. We tried counting the buffalo, but we were distracted by the buffalo babies that were new to the herd. By the end of the hayride, the sun was down and the music proved to be a pleasant ending to a very active, warm day.

After talking with Steve Wilds about his involvement in the dam project to the future train plans, I felt he had fulfilled a childhood dream. He was quick to say that he was not a "dreamer," but a "realist, one who has a plan and gets busy." At present, he is busy making the railroad a reality and laying the groundwork for more entertainment facilities in the Nineteenth Century motif.

Watching the Wilds family working in the restaurant on a Saturday evening to accommodate one thousand patrons, I knew there was no time for dreaming. And one wonders how they have found the time and energy for the planning and construction of the authentic and beautiful WILDS' FISH FARM, RESTAURANT and RECREATION AREA. ■



DELENNA WILLIAMS, SOSU Assistant Professor of Speech-Theater, has, through her productions, entertained local audiences for twenty years. She now adds writing to her accomplishments.