

September 2012

Much of Bella Vista's history is attributed to the Linebargers starting in the early 1900s and to the Coopers starting in the early 1960's, but in between them, there was a lesser known but also important contributor to our area, by the name of E.L. Keith.

The Arkansas story of Mr. Keith, however, starts not in Bella Vista, but in Cave Springs. Like the Linebargers thirty years before him, Keith came to Arkansas from Texas, looking for an attractive location to develop. He found what he decided was ideal...Cave Springs, so named because of the big cave with two springs flowing out of it into a lake, right in the middle of town. Elijah Allen was the first recorded owner of the cave property, having arrived around 1878. He operated a gristmill and built an earthen dam to form a lake. W.M. Bartlett was the next owner in the early 1900's, and named the lake Loch Lono after his granddaughter. In the 1930-1940 timeframe, a Mrs. Young owned the lake, by then called Cave Springs Lake.

When Keith bought the property in 1947, he enlarged the lake, built a new dam, now part of Highway 112, and named it Lake Keith. He wrote in his 1982 autobiography that he purchased WW II barracks from Camp Crowder in Neosho, Missouri, and built a hotel and apartments on the south side of the lake, with a swimming pool and cabins on the north side. Most of his amenities were ones he repeated later in Bella Vista, including a trout farm, restaurant, skating rink and miniature golf course. Keith moved his family to Arkansas and officially opened Lake Keith in 1950, then helped build the Lake View Baptist Church on property that he donated across the street from the lake.

When Keith found out that the Linebargers wanted to sell the Lake Bella Vista resort, he bought it in 1952. He sold Lake Keith in 1956 but the lake and the springs that feed it continue to impact our area. Ground water moves toward or "discharges" to the surface, as it does at the springs at Lake Keith, so the area where the water is collected, through rainfall or underground sources, is called the "recharge" area. The defined recharge area for the springs at Lake Keith is so large east of Cave Springs that they changed the planned route for what is now I-540 between Bentonville and Fayetteville, and put in a large curve to the east between exits 76 and 82 to avoid contaminating that area.

E. L. Keith lived in Bella Vista until his death at 92 in 1993. His son Gene and daughter-in-law Josephine still live in Bella Vista, and the Keith name is again in the news due to an exciting new proposal centered on Lake Keith. The Illinois River Watershed Partnership wants to buy Lake Keith and the surrounding thirty acres, then lease it to the Arkansas Game & Fish Commission, joining forces to create a Watershed Sanctuary that would feature endangered species protection (the cave has the largest known population of Ozark Blind Cavefish and one of the largest populations of Gray Bats), a watershed education center for children and adults, nature and water educational experiences, and other amenities. The Partnership hopes to complete their fundraising drive in the near future.

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**Attachments:**

*Picture 1 In his autobiography, Keith wrote, "We poured six foot concrete letters on top of the concrete wall next to the road. The day after we finished the letters, a big rain came that night and pushed the letters all over into the lake bed. Those concrete letters are still laying there in the lake. Next day, we started the job all over, and we poured plenty of concrete braces this time, so this would never happen again!" (Postcard courtesy of Bella Vista Historical Museum)*

*Picture 2 Keith was showing his plans for finishing Lake Keith to Hobbs Bright, then Mayor of Cave Springs. (Photo courtesy of Josephine Keith)*

*Picture 3 Aerial view of Lake Keith, 1950's. (Photo courtesy of Judy Shook)*

