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Trout Talk

**Blowing the whistle at
Bennett Spring**

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by Laura L. Valenti

March 2023

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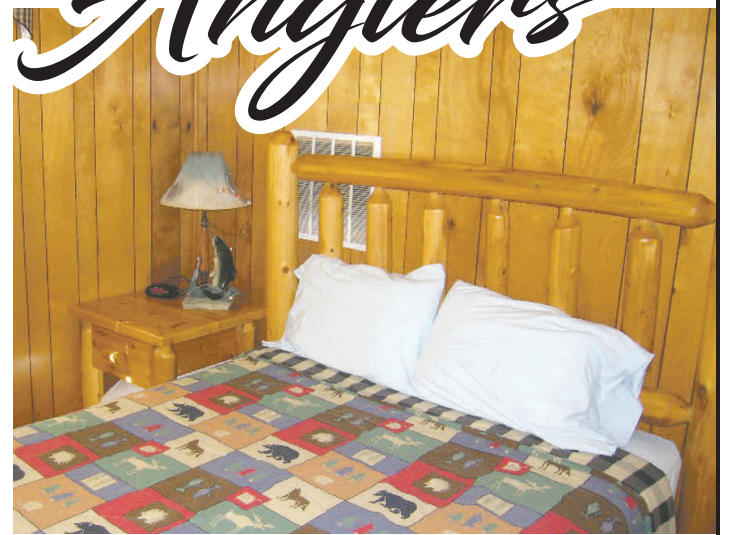
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Blowing the whistle at Bennett Spring

LAURA L. VALENTI

“Blowing the Opening Day whistle at Bennett Spring is a long-held honor and tradition,” Ben Havens, Bennett Spring Trout Hatchery manager for more than seven years explained recently. “I think it means different things to different people, depending on their own fishing traditions at the park. It’s been a practice in our trout parks now for nearly 100 years so it involves lots of tradition as well as the honor involved.”

Until recent years, the whistle as it is most often called by residents and park visitors alike, has been a siren triggered by a button inside the tiny vestibule at the front of the main hatchery building. In recent years, however, the tradition of that first day’s kick off has been changed to the use of a starter pistol, in other words, the firing of the Opening Day gun.

“That has been the way Opening Day has been marked at the other trout parks over the years,” Ben explained, “so we changed it a few years ago to bring Bennett Spring in line with the other parks. Covid was also part of the reasoning too. Crowding a number of people, including the governor and other state officials who may come to witness the event, into that little room did not seem like such a good idea anymore.”

Regardless of how Opening Day is now heralded in at 6:30 on a chilly March morning, in recent years, the ones who do so are folks who have

contributed to the long and storied history of Bennett Spring trout fishing.

Charlie Reading who was raised in Lebanon and graduated from Lebanon High School fired the starting pistol just last year in March 2022. He grew up, spending summers fishing in the creeks and pond on his grandparents’ farm and also on the Osage Fork of the Gasconade River. And then in the ninth grade, he was introduced to fly fishing and the rest, as the old saying goes, is history.

After attending College of the Ozarks, Charlie says he stumbled into a job at the original Springview Tackle Shop, a lovely unique venue that actually overlooked the spring at Bennett and was run by Tony and Shirley Pack, originally from the Kansas City area. Charlie, already a fly fishing devotee, spent the next 4 ½ years, honing his skills in the working world of fly fishing and was ready to go out on his own afterwards. He has been operating Reading’s Fly Shop in its current location on Highway 64, just east of the park since 1986, literally making his living at the sport he loves.

“After 44 years here at Bennett Spring, I was really surprised when I was invited to blow the whistle on Opening Day last year,” he shared. “It was a nice thing, in that it makes you feel connected to something bigger and demonstrates that there are a lot of people with an emotional connection to this place.”



Trout Talk Photo/Laura Valenti

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Wayne Simpson and his wife Lynn of Bolivar.

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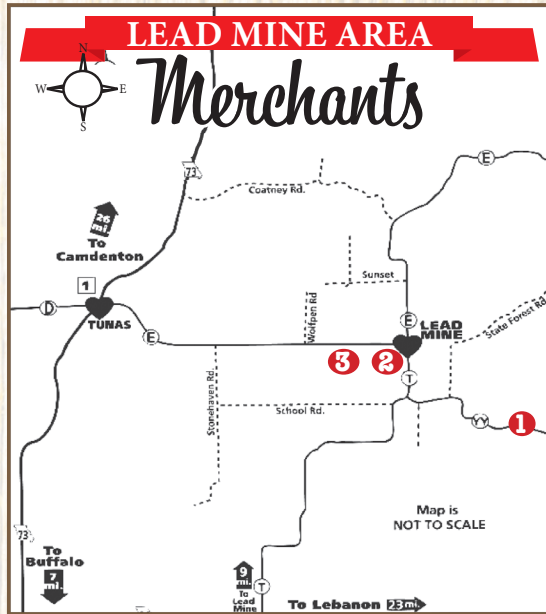
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Whistle

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He laughed. "I'm doing a lot better than I was this time last year. Several days after Opening Day, I ended up in the hospital with Covid and lost 40 pounds. I'm feeling a lot better this year."

Charlie has made a living of not only fly fishing and building exquisite custom fly rods, but of also traveling to the ends of the earth as a world class fly fisherman, in pursuit of that perfect fishing experience. Those travels have included trips from the Amazon to New Zealand and he recently returned from another exotic adventure.

"I just got back from a fly fishing trip to Argentina," he concluded. "I was at the south end of the south end of things. I had a great guide and it was a great trip. I was after a brown sea run trout and I got a 20 pound one. Using some of the fishing variations actually developed by this guide, I was using a little bitty fly to catch a great big fish in Argentina's Rio Grande! It was definitely one of the things on my bucket list."

Gary Madole who retired to the Ben-

nett Spring area in 2007, grew up on his family's farm near Windsor, in east central Missouri, just north of St. Louis. He first came to Bennett as a teen when his family would go on long Sunday drives and he would go fishing wherever they happened to stop.

"When we first came to Bennett, my dad was not a fisherman so I didn't know anything about the rules. I got acquainted with the hatchery manager, Clarence Holland real quick at that time. He crooked his finger at me to say 'come this way'," he laughed heartily at the memory. "And that's when I began to learn there were a few important rules about how to fish at Bennett Spring!"

A few years later, Gary and his wife, Ellie drove 160 miles a day round trip, four days a week to work 10 hour days at the munitions plant in Independence, outside the Kansas City area. Even so, Gary started finding different ways to come to Bennett Spring and soon became a regular on Opening Day.

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Gary and Ellie Madole at their home.

Trout Talk Photo/Laura Valenti



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Whistle

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Trout Talk Photo/Laura Valenti

Gary Madole in his 'Fishing Study' at his home near Bennett Spring with his 14 lb plus trout.

"He'd catch a ride or drive down the night before," his wife, Ellie giggled. "Whenever he didn't check into the plant on March 1, they knew, where he was—Bennett Spring!"

Gary blew the Opening Day whistle at Bennett on March 1, 2017, before anyone had heard of Covid-19 and so many things began to change as a result.

"The governor was here that day." He smiled as he looked over some of his personal pictures, triggering a flood of memories. "We actually blew the whistle together that day."

Gary's memories of Bennett Spring reflect a lifetime of fly fishing and include days of camping on the far side of the Whistle Bridge, time spent at the original park store built in 1937 by the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps), and names that will long be a part of Bennett Spring history like Clarence Holland, Tony and Shirley

Pack and Chuck and Virginia Vogel, well-known local resort owners. Today, he also works as a fishing guide for the park store concessionaire, Jim Rogers.

His wife, Ellie laughed. "Gary would work at the munitions plant and get off at midnight but the kids and I would have the camper all packed and ready. When he'd get home, we'd hook up and go. Back then, the upper campground where we stayed was first come, first served and you couldn't reserve spaces. So, we'd park in the swimming pool parking lot in the early morning hours when we would get here and just get into our bunks in the camper and wait. Once a space opened up, for that little short distance, Gary would just pull the camper up there with us still in our beds!"

See 'WHISTLE' / page 9

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Whistle

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Trout Talk Photo/Laura Valenti
Newspaper article and photos of 2017
when Gary Madole blew the Opening
Day whistle at Bennett.

Wayne Simpson of Bolivar, Mo., retired to Bennett Spring in 2003 from the Richmond, Mo., area. He worked as a government superintendent for a heavy construction company out of Kansas City before retiring. He stayed in the area until a few years ago, when his younger son, Morgan who works as a director of a sports clinic for Bolivar's CMH Hospital health care convinced him and his wife, Lynn, they needed to move closer to family. His older son, Chris lives in Tampa Florida and his daughter, Melissa is in Phoenix.

"I've been fishing at Bennett for over 40 years now," he added. "My dad, Marshal actually took me trout fishing at Roaring River where I caught my first fish but I've been coming to Bennett Spring ever since."

Wayne helps with the local Bennett Spring Fly Tying Club that meets Wednesday mornings, 9 to 11 at the Bennett Spring Church of God annex.

"We are always ready to welcome newcomers," he concluded.

"Wayne is a nationally known fly tyer, but you'd never know it to be around him," Ben Havens continued. "He is always ready to help out with any of the events we have here, the May Fly Project, school trips, anything to encourage kids and others who are just starting out and learning to tie flies. He always wants to know, what do you need? Hooks? What kind of flies are you tying today?"

"In helping others like this, I don't think these guys have any idea the impact they are having on the future and the perpetuation of the sport. I can't thank them enough. Choosing someone to fire the Opening Day gun is one way we can honor one of them each year. Folks can nominate a person to blow the Opening Day whistle as it is still called here. They can write me a letter or send me an email. Sometimes

we have eight or nine nominations and other years, there may be just a couple. If I have a hard time deciding, I'll go to the rest of my hatchery staff and ask for their input."

Ben Havens concluded. "Opening Day may be the closest thing Missouri has as the unofficial start of spring. It's a time to get back to fishing, to shake off a long winter. It's a tradition wrapped in memories and nostalgia that means a lot to each person in a different way."

Danny Goldsmith of Lebanon, longtime fly fisherman and fly tyer has been chosen to open this year's Trout Fishing season at Bennett Spring on March 1, 2023.

A previous tradition in past years at Bennett Spring included that Opening Day whistle being blown by the governor, lieutenant governor, state senator or other head of state. In recent years, however, the honor has gone to those with a more personal connection.

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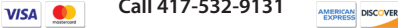
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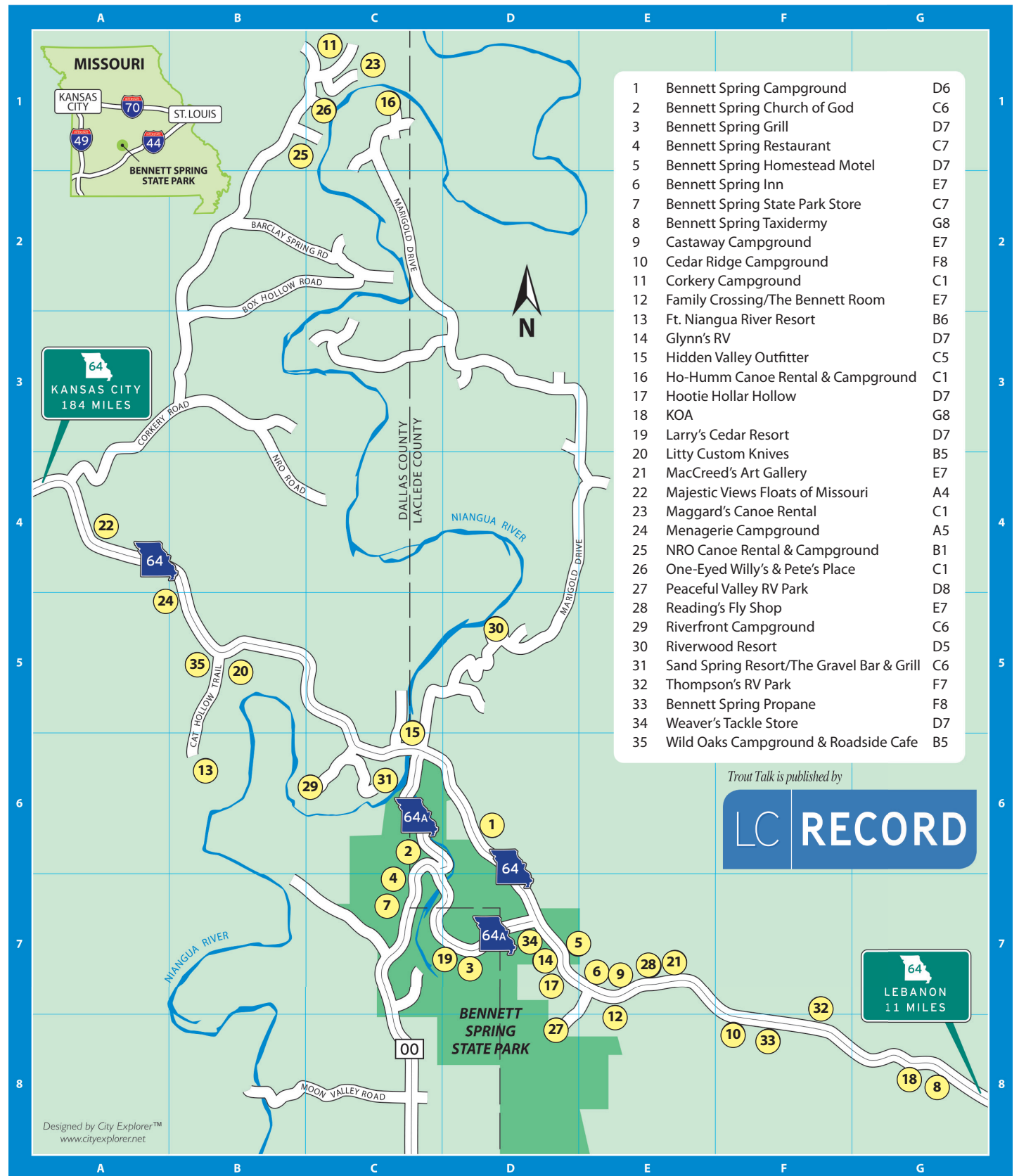
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Trout Talk

BENNETT SPRING STATE PARK AND SURROUNDING AREA



Take a hike at Bennett Spring



LAURA L. VALENTI

After fishing, hiking is no doubt the most popular activity at Bennett Spring State Park.

A number of different hiking trails are free and open to the public, ranging in length from less than half a mile to the 7.5 mile long Natural Tunnel trail that begins south of the spring. With such a variety in length, hiking trails are available to beginners and the very young to more experienced hikers who are ready for more of a challenge. Those trails include:

- The Old Hickory Trail, a .3 mile loop and the Bride Trail, a .7 mile hike, both of which are located behind the Bennett Spring Nature Center.

- The Whistle Trail, a mile long trail that runs along the spring and up the bluff and begins at the Wooden Bridge near the Niangua River is also a popular trail.

- The Trail Head offers two trails, the Savannah Trail is 2.5 miles and runs behind the cabins in the spring area and takes approximately 1.5 hours



Top, A pair of hikers takes a walk down the Oak Hickory Trail at Bennett Spring State Park in July. The trail is located behind the Bennett Spring Nature Center. Above, Old Hickory Trail features a wooden bridge. The trail is located behind the Bennett Spring Nature Center.

to complete. And finally, the Natural Tunnel Trail is the park's longest and takes an estimated four hours and twenty minutes to complete. This last

one features several small caves, bluffs and a water crossing before reaching the Natural Tunnel, the trail's main feature.

Trout Talk Photos/Laura Valenti

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