

## Missouri's Healing Springs

*By: Loring Bullard*

A visitor today to Pertle Springs in Warrensburg, Missouri would probably not be impressed with the old mineral spring found there. Gurgling out into a concrete basin, the spring water is somewhat repulsive—smelling of rotten eggs and imparting orange stains to leaves and rocks in its path. If someone suggested the visitor taste the water, she might hesitate. There is a heightened awareness of water pollution these days, and besides, her instincts might tell her not to put anything that looks or smells that way into her mouth. And yet, at one time, thousands of people came here to do just that. They were led to believe, and many *did* believe, that these waters could heal.

Standing in the quiet valley of the Pertle Spring, it is hard to imagine the hubbub that once surrounded this place. In its heyday, the Pertle Springs resort catered to thousands of health and pleasure seekers. There were amusements of all sorts and huge gatherings—Fourth of July picnics, Chatauquas, temperance rallies, free-silver conventions, camp meetings. So heavy was visitation on summer weekends that several times a day, a special train hauled patrons from the nearby town of Warrensburg.

Pertle Springs was one of the better known and more successful mineral water resorts in Missouri. But during the height of the medicinal water craze, from about 1880 to 1920, nearly eighty mineral water health resorts were sprinkled around the state. These businesses were prominent landmarks, drawing clients from all over the Midwest and beyond. Most offered mineral waters for both drinking and bathing “cures,” healing patients from both the inside and the outside.

Promoters of the era made highly exaggerated claims for the healing powers of mineral waters. But these claims fell within the commonly accepted practices of the day, such as advertisements for the hundreds of patent medicines on the market at the time, servicing nearly every ailment known to mankind. And despite the prevalent medicine-show like aura of advertising, belief in the medical virtues of mineral waters was not confined to the uneducated. During the heyday, respected doctors prescribed mineral waters and prominent scientists advanced theories supporting their use.

Missouri's mineral water craze was not a unique or isolated occurrence. Citizens in every state, at some point in history, “took to the waters.” It began early, with several Colonial spas opening their doors in the seventeenth century. This tradition, in turn, arrived from Europe, where interest in mineral waters extended back to the ancient Greeks and Romans; and where resorts such as Bath, in England (a former Roman bath) claimed international reputations by the early 1700s.

In the 1830s, people living in the low-lying cities of America's East Coast adopted the summertime rage of spa touring, making long pilgrimages to Appalachian resorts above and away from tidewater malaria. By the 1840s, Hot Springs in Arkansas, New Baden in Indiana and Drennon Springs in Kentucky were nationally famous, attracting notable personalities like Sam Houston and Andrew Jackson. It is not surprising that some of

Missouri's early citizens, upon whiffing and tasting the sulphur and iron-rich waters bubbling up at their feet, wondered if these, too, might harbor special healing powers.

Missouri's boom, however, had to wait for a large enough clientele base to support the resort business, a condition that did not occur until the 1820s. Loutre Lick, fifty miles west of St. Louis, was probably the first mineral spring in the state that hosted a resort. Here, Daniel Boone and Thomas Hart Benton sought relief for their ailments and Isaac Van Bibber, Boone's adopted son, built a rambling tavern and boarding house that in the 1820s became a famous landmark on the Boonslick Road. William Sublette, mountain man, fur trapper and Oregon Trail pioneer, built another early resort on the River des Peres near St. Louis in the 1830s. This Sulphur Spring Resort enjoyed a long and colorful history, including a visit by naturalist John Bradbury and ownership by a Utopian Society, before being engulfed by the encroaching city of St. Louis.

By the 1850s, several of Missouri's mineral water resorts attracted at least regional clienteles, including Monegaw Springs in St. Clair County, Sweet Springs in Saline County, White Sulphur Springs in Benton County, Elk Lick Springs in Pike County and Choteau Springs in Cooper County. The resort business suffered in the troubled decades immediately before and after the Civil War, but an upturn occurred in the late 1870s and by the 1880s, the number of operating resorts had reached a peak. In the period of 1881 to 1890 alone, twenty-eight new resorts opened their doors.

Mineral spring resorts were not evenly spaced around the state. Rather, there is a geologic context to their distribution. Many were located near the fresh water/ saline water interface, a zone separating water types that snakes diagonally across the state from southwest to northeast. North and west of this line, rocks contain highly mineralized groundwater. To the south and east are limestones and dolomites producing fresh water. Between the two, freshwater recharge sweeps the underlying, mineralized groundwater toward the surface at springs. Mirroring the location of these springs, many of the state's mineral water resorts were clustered in a broad arc from Vernon and Cedar Counties on the state's western border, north through Johnson County, then bending eastward through Saline and Howard Counties toward Pike and Ralls Counties on the Mississippi. Local geologic factors such as fault zones gave rise to unique situations, as in Saline County, where heavily mineralized springs occurred in close proximity to "sweet" springs, a phenomenon that amazed and baffled the early settlers.

The state's early resorts were, of necessity, founded near mineral springs. But when spa developers learned that healthful waters could also be obtained by drilling wells into mineralized groundwater, resort locations were no longer tied to the sites of natural springs. At resorts in Clinton and Nevada, patrons could hold their cups right under spouting artesian wells, hydrologic curiosities which provided promotional appeal, if not enhanced medicinal value. On the other hand, promoters claimed that the "magnetic" artesian well water at Lebanon conferred additional healing powers. Belcher's Bathhouse in St. Louis piped in the pungent, sulpho-saline waters of an artesian well originally drilled to supply a sugar refinery. This well, drilled from 1849 to 1854, was an

engineering marvel for its time. Bottoming at 2200 feet, it remained the deepest well in the state until 1966.

Bottling plants were built at many of the state's medicinal springs and wells. Missouri's bottled mineral waters, natural or artificially produced and sold carbonated or "still," compared favorably with national brands. Two of Excelsior Springs' waters won blue ribbons at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair and Bokert Springs water, bottled in De Soto (the self-proclaimed "Fountain City"), was hauled in by the train-car load to supply the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair.

In spite of the early focus on healing, many resorts eventually catered more to leisure pursuits, becoming essentially tourist camps and amusement parks. Prominent examples were found at Montesano Park, south of St. Louis, where patrons could ride an exciting switchback railway, and Pertle Springs, which offered camping, lodging, bike riding and boating. Although still mentioned in promotional literature, the mineral waters often shrank into the shadows behind a panoply of more exciting attractions.

The resort and mineral water boom began to fade in the twentieth century. There was a resurrection of hope early in the century after Madame Curie discovered radioactivity emanating from radium. In the following few decades, this mysterious property was detected in many natural mineral waters and hot springs. Not surprisingly, promoters quickly pounced upon this revelation, asserting that with radioactivity, the magic bullet, accounting for the hitherto unexplainable medicinal powers of mineral waters, had finally been revealed. Thus, there were at least two "radium" springs in Missouri as well as "radio" springs at Nevada.

But the renewed excitement proved to be short-lived. The mainstream medical profession, with the promise of new drug cures, eventually turned a cold shoulder on the use of mineral water in prescribed therapeutics. The boisterous and tireless promoters, especially with their exaggerated claims for radioactive and lithium waters, unwittingly aided passage of Pure Food and Drug Laws in 1906 that severely curtailed false advertising. After this, many newspaper and magazine writers delighted in exposing mineral water frauds and "quacks." With the widespread adoption of filtration and disinfection of public water supplies in the first decades of the twentieth century, sales of bottled waters, including mineral waters, slumped. The pre-modern peak of bottled water sales in the state occurred just before WWI. By that time, most of the resorts were already gone.

Whatever we may think today about mineral waters, or of the people who used and believed in them, we must concede that they played significant roles in the cultural development of our state. Mineral water resorts could be considered the founding impulse for modern institutions such as public swimming pools, tourist camps and amusement parks. In spite of this legacy, their unique contributions to our state's history are largely forgotten today.

There are few sites in the state where historic mineral waters can be seen flowing in a natural, or nearly natural, state. One place is the Blue Licks Conservation Area near Marshall, representing a unique cluster of varied types of mineral springs. At Spalding Springs, Choteau Springs, McAllister Springs and Randolph Springs, one can still see significant structural remains of that bygone era when mineral water resorts constituted high points on the cultural landscape. These sites are perhaps worthy of attempts at preservation and interpretation.

One spa in Missouri was able to weather the ups and downs of public perception and cycles of mineral water popularity. At Excelsior Springs, America's self-proclaimed "Haven of Health," one can still take a hot, relaxing mineral water bath or sip a wide variety of mineral waters at the "world's longest water bar." But even here, the mineral waters have become a relatively minor part of the city's attraction—despite the fact that its medicinal springs gave rise to the ornate and impressive "Hall of Waters," a monolithic structure and a lasting tribute to the belief that natural waters could heal us.

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