

Smoking Waters

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Introduction to the forthcoming book

Christmas Day, 1997. I awake at dawn, the morning after my 27th birthday, in a nest of afghans in the back of a vintage white 1973 Volkswagen van, parked at a turnout on the edge of the primitive Deer Creek Road, just before it disappears around a bend into the thick conifer forest of Oregon's Cascade Mountains. Beneath the blankets, the simple bed is warm with body heat. Outside, the temperature is well below freezing. The sun slowly rises over a snow-and-ice-sheeted dirt road that crosses a bridge over the McKenzie River and ascends a gradual slope to the edge of Highway 126, which parallels the river from its genesis in the lava flows beneath Mt. Washington to its confluence with the Willamette River. Even behind the closed windows, I could hear the steady rush of the river and see the white alders bent under the weight of the cold.

I get out of the vehicle wearing long underwear, a thick wool sweater, corduroy pants, a scarf, and a jean jacket lined with fleece. I look around, absorbing the full spectrum of this place. Douglas-fir and Western red-cedar tower above the road, climbing the steep mountains above the river. The sky is a clear, pale blue, where the last-quarter moon resembles a scythe slicing through the sky, or a sail without a mast. The McKenzie River Trail, a 27-mile National Recreation Trail and one of the finest in Oregon, crosses the Deer Creek Road near the parking area, and parallels the river past a series of waterfalls and springs, canyons and lava fields, from its source at Clear Lake to the ranger station near the town of McKenzie Bridge. I carry a towel toward this trail.

At the foot of the bridge a small user trail, what the locals call a fisherman's path, slips along the bridgehead toward the river, following it downstream along the bank. There is a ring of stones, a fire pit, on the shore; of course, this would be an excellent place to camp if this area wasn't designated by the U.S. Forest Service as "day-use only," meaning the time from dawn to dusk. The reason anyone would want to camp here is at the end of this trail, where the shore narrows and finally disappears in the shadow of the cliff: a maidenhair fern-draped grotto where Bigelow Hot Springs, also called Deer Creek after the nearby stream, emerges from a shallow cave and pools behind a low wall of mud and river rock that people build and maintain to hold the hot water back from the perpetually-cold river. This morning, I undress quickly and slide in, determined to live out this simple dream: to lie in a steaming pool of water in the midst of a Cascade Mountains winter.

The water comes as a shock: on a winter day, the pool is not exactly a hot spring, but rather a warm spring; that is, my "soak" is not going to rise above a tepid bath, just enough warmth to maintain an uneasy comfort. According to the guide books, the geothermally-heated water emerges from the back of this small cave at 130° F and maintains a temperature in the six-foot wide pool averaging 103°. But hot springs fluctuate, and the sheer density of the cold hanging over the canyon chills the grotto. I stretch out, as best I can, to immerse myself and absorb as much heat as possible. I wait for the bursts of hot water that flow sometimes from a hidden place beneath and behind me. I do my best to make the best of it.



If asked about my favorite things in Oregon, I often reduce them to three H's: hiking, huckleberries, and hot springs. The last of these I have loved since my first visit to Cougar Hot Springs, also known as Terwilliger, which is further downstream on the South Fork of the Mckenzie, the river dammed into a reservoir. Living in Eugene, Oregon at the time, friends and I—or I alone—visited these springs frequently. The first time I went, I had no idea what to expect. It was the summer of 1995, and only a week earlier I had moved west from upstate New York. My friend Kelly, from my hometown and living here a year already, drove us east into the mountains on the McKenzie Highway, turning on the Aufderheide scenic highway and continuing seven miles down a twisting road blasted into the basalt cliffs high above the reservoir built by the Army Corps of Engineers. We parked at a turnout at Rider Creek, designated by a sign which the hippies—Cougar's most common visitors—had dubbed "I know you Rider Creek" after the Woody Guthrie song. I knew I would be, at least, among familiar people.

But when I got to the end of the trail and came down a rise, I looked down into a narrow gorge carved out by a cold creek and was shocked to see a series of descending pools filled with naked people. "They're all naked *together*," I thought. It was odd, momentarily untenable, but somehow exciting. I came from a small town where the idea of skinny-dipping elicited crude giggling, where nudity was generally forsaken. I knew I had to make a choice, and I did. I took off my clothes, hung them on the wooden pegs provided for that purpose, and slipped into the hottest pool, fed by a continuous stream pouring out from a hole in the rock big enough to crawl into. I have never turned back, never felt ashamed of my own body, and I have never stopped going to hot springs.



Which brought me to Bigelow, years later, alone in the pool just downstream from the confluence of the McKenzie and Deer Creek, lying prone, partially obscured by steam. I knew, of course, that I would eventually have to get out. Even the condensed droplets of steam that dripped from the tips of the melting ferns demonstrated how cold it would be. When I stood, the air pricked me like a thousand pins as the water beaded on my skin and began to freeze. I dried off as fast as I could and got dressed, glad for the wool and thermals. I was equally glad for the experience, and the body to feel it with. So it goes with experience: sometimes you do it for merely the story afterward.

I started the van, heating it up for a while, then let it roll onto the bridge. I looked down along the bank; the spring nowhere to be seen. It vanishes into the trees, so that if you were hiking the main trail, you would quickly pass above them without even noticing. Such is the nature of many unique places: you simply have to know. Which is why an entire subculture, of which I consider myself a part, has grown up around them. As I looked, I smiled. The springs are still a secret, if only for today. I was in the club, a "soaker," a "hot springer." I drove out and, despite the ruts of ice sloping precariously upward toward the highway, made it to the pavement to continue east over the Santiam Pass toward the high desert.



This particular morning stays in my mind, as do many other mornings at many hot springs across the state: springs in the Alvord Desert as well as the Calapooya Mountains, along state highways and half-ruined roads, from rustic bathhouses to heated swimming pools. Some are exceedingly popular, some virtually unknown. All have their distinct characteristics, their concurrent landscapes, their individual personality, and their unique clientele of hippies and hunters, mountain bikers and fishermen, students and soldiers, depending on what part of the state you happen to be traversing.

It is this morning, for me, that serves as a starting point. From that point on, I vowed that someday I would visit every hot spring in the state of Oregon. Later the idea congealed further: I would visit them all in one trip. I would find places I'd never been and revisit places I loved. I would take notes. I would write a book.



Oregon is volcanic country, its landscape a rugged reminder of the forces that have shaped it. Across vast stretches of the state, lava flows released from massive fissures in the earth's crust built up plateaus of cooled magma thousands of feet thick. Some flowed hundreds of miles to the ocean, leaving the capes like great creatures crawling into the sea. The cones and plugs of extinct volcanoes dominate the skyline, casting long shadows over moonscapes of lesser vents and craters, over jumbles of cinder and rivers of black, jagged lava known as aa. Lava tubes, the drained subterranean veins that poured molten rock from the flanks of shield volcanoes, snake beneath the sagebrush deserts.

In the Badlands east of the city of Bend, a fine yellow ash coats the bed of a long-dead river. In such an unforgiving landscape as Dry River Canyon, little can survive but a few stray Ponderosa pines, sagebrush, and clumps of mountain mahogany. The canyon carved a notch into the flank of Horse Ridge in prehistoric times, draining what was once an enormous inland lake. Only a few Indian pictographs remain on a stretch of smoothed stone wall, signatures of a vanished people who once waited for the fish to come upstream, before the water dwindled to nothing. Wind is the only current now.

In western Oregon, where mountains and valleys facing the Pacific Ocean bathe winter long in copious rainfall, scars remain hidden beneath a dense conifer forest, thick with ferns and vine maples, buried in thousands of years of duff and fallen trees. Yet even here in the deep paradisiacal green that most people associate with Oregon, a few vestiges of a violent past survive: a waterfall on the Umpqua River pouring over oddly-geometric columnar basalt, the McKenzie River diving beneath a lava flow for three miles, a few towers of welded tuff in Castle Canyon, spires of heavily compressed ash. And scattered throughout the

state, a web of steaming hot springs.

Along the horseshoe-shaped volcanic belt known as the Ring of Fire, no fewer than 452 volcanoes either smoke or sleep. Earthquakes threaten, however subtly. Nearly circling the edges of the Pacific Ocean, the belt is a long chain of ocean trenches, volcanic arcs, and the boundary of 60-mile thick colliding plates. Beneath the surface of America's Pacific Northwest, located squarely on The Ring, is a simmering inner landscape of superheated igneous rock and magma. The West Coast's positioning on this vast continental margin has warped its landforms through the folding, sliding, and crumpling of plate tectonics.

As heavy plates are carried down and subducted beneath other plates, the sinking rock is literally recycled through melting. Some mountains, like the Oregon Coast Range, rise like curling mud over a sliding spatula. Other ranges form when melted rock rises to emerge on the surface, forcing the upper crust to swell and explode, releasing tension sometimes powerful enough to incinerate everything around it, as nearby Mt. St. Helens demonstrated on May 18, 1980. That eruption, exploding with the force of a 10-megaton hydrogen bomb and powered by 1200° F steam so hot it glowed in the dark, spewed ash 12 miles into the sky and was heard as far away as Montana.

In the constant restlessness of the earth's shifting plates, Oregon lies at a crucial junction along what is referred to as a "leading edge" of the North American plate, where collision and subduction happens. Beneath us, a great slab of cold Pacific seafloor—first the prehistoric Farallon plate, then the more recent Juan de Fuca and Pacific plates—has been sinking and sliding beneath the continental plate for at least 50 million years. This seafloor heats as it slips toward the deeper earth, eventually melting its bedrock crust of dark-hued igneous basalt. This fine-grained rock, when it becomes molten, actually becomes lighter than the ancient rocks in the earth's crust, and because of its characteristic fluidity it floats upward to erupt in the volcanic fountains known as the Cascades, of which St. Helens is but one.

Whether standing in the grass fields of the central Willamette River Valley or in the Badlands of central Oregon, the Cascade Mountains are the state's most obvious landmark. Extending along a series of faultlines running north and south from northern California through Oregon and Washington into British Columbia, these conspicuous relics of the region's cataclysms mark a history extending at least as far as the Eocene, a period of time between 60 and 40 million years ago.

Following the stretch of the Willamette Valley in western Oregon, you easily see the terminal mounds of the range ending abruptly against the valley floor like so much rubble from an eroding pile of stones. In the remote past, when the Pacific Ocean covered half of Oregon, the tides beat against these buttes and hills, what is now some of the oldest rock in Oregon—the foothills of the range known as the Old Cascades, the heavily-glaciated ravines and knife-ridges left from oozing basalt and searing ash bled from earth's sometimes fragile skin. Extinct for millions of years, these early flows left volcanic rock blended with sedimentary rock in deposits along the primeval seashore. Both rocks contain invertebrate, barnacle, and mollusk fossils from that era.

What followed these early eruptions was a long period of geologic quiet, until earth welled up again between 30 and 20 million years ago in the late Oligocene and early Miocene. What is now the desert landscape of eastern Oregon began to change dramatically during this time, from a jungle-like tropical terrain to more temperate climate with open, wooded grasslands as the ocean receded west. As the plates stretched the land taut, the brittle crust cracked along faults, releasing successive massive deluges of basalt flows that formed the high Columbia Plateau. As the earth twisted and pulled, the crust below this landscape thinned and exploded in what must have been a frightening array of pyrotechnics. Lava slouched over the land, and ash mixed with water formed massive mudflows that instantaneously buried and preserved the fossils of ancient oreodonts, horses, rhinoceroses, saber-toothed cats, land tortoises, and crocodiles, as well as the rich plant life, its leaves, seeds, and fruits, including the dawn redwood.

The last major activity crackled along the length of the Cascades about 15 to 10 million years ago, near the end of the Miocene, spilling basalt near the Blue Mountains that flowed over what is now three states, while eruptions of andesite piled up peaks in a line along the length of Oregon's Cascades, straightening the coastline to a north-south shore and pushing the ocean further west. These eruptions left the ash deposits known as the John Day Formation, which were likely carried eastward on the hot wind, burying much of the prehistoric life in a series of fantastic forms: the striated mounds of the Painted Hills, the towering Clarno cliffs, teeming with fossils. The mountains left the former prairies in a rainshadow, and the redwoods and large browsing animals forever disappeared, replaced by oaks and cottonwood, shrews and squirrels.

The Ice Ages of the Pleistocene ground down the Cascades with deep glaciers that melted and flooded Oregon almost 2 million years ago. Boulders lay strewn in valleys, and long moraines fanned out like loose sheets to the valley floors. In western Oregon, Ice Age mammals were prolific in the dense forests and abundant rainfalls. About 11,000 years ago these animals began disappearing rapidly, about the time a corridor opened in the ice from the Bering Strait through Canada, when humans migrated to North America armed with spears and group hunting techniques.

Today the Cascade Range rises like a spine through Oregon, separating the broad Willamette Valley from the high deserts, brushing up against the Klamath Mountains in the south. The range is divided into two epochs: the long extinct western, or Old Cascades, folded and folded again like kneaded dough and continually worn down by mist, rainfall, and the cracking of its foundations by Douglas-fir roots; and the High Cascades, notably taller and composed of either recently extinct or active volcanoes. It is in this region where some of the more recent eruptions, many within the last 10,000 years, have occurred. The eastern plateaus and plains, forever cast in a climatic shadow, remain a dry forest of pine and a sprawling community of sagebrush and juniper.

Despite their covering of snow, the last fingerprint of the glaciers, the High Cascades resemble any other volcanic seam from Hawaii to Italy. Some mountains, Oregon's Mt. Hood or Washington's Mt. Rainier in particular, still have active fumaroles which

vent the hot gases simmering below the earth's surface, staining the snow yellow. Mt. St. Helens occasionally spurts steam and smoke into the sky to this day, building its inner lava dome to new heights—thus the Indian name, “Old Smoker.”



Deep underground, below the volcanic underpinnings, there is water. Some of it rainfall seeped through the porous basalt, through open cracks and fractures, and some of it what scientists believe is “Virgin Water,” that which has never touched the surface. Across the state, water from these wells emerges through springs, and it is not unusual to be fairly high in the mountains—say, 4000 feet above sea level—and hear water gurgling from a hole in the rock, or from beneath a stump, or bubbling from mud. Oregon is rich with cold water springs, where a traveler can drink from cupped hands. What is more peculiar, but in abundance in the Pacific Northwest, is the hot spring.

For a spring to exist, all that is required is a fissure where the water can emerge into daylight. A spring, as opposed to a seep, is a fixed point where water emerges in a flow; it may be from a spot on the ground or even, in many cases, from the bottom of a lake. A spring is “thermal” if it is at least fourteen degrees hotter than the average temperature of the air. Temperatures of springs can, and do, rise to a skin-threatening simmer. They occur in volcanic areas, however dormant, where temperatures one mile below the surface can be hotter than 85° F, and at two miles can be hot enough to boil water. Twenty-five miles down rock is molten, a liquid mass at 2500° F.

Below the surface, groundwater simmers: water filtered down from rainfall—this happens especially in the porous basalt landscape of Oregon—and virgin water thought to come from the compression of subterranean rock with water trapped inside. Magma produces heat which conducts through a layer of solid rock—igneous rock, solidified from magma—up into the porous rock. The water is heated deep below and rises as any other spring: sometimes at the bottom of a lake, sometimes in marshes, sometimes through silt, and sometimes right out of a gaping hole in a cliff. What is needed, in any case, is a conduit along a fault zone in the rock for the water to travel. The same phenomenon produces both geysers and fumaroles. As the plates shift about, magma comes closer to the surface, thus making it easier for rainwater to find its way to the heat source. As the water rises from the dark earth, it accumulates different minerals and chemicals like iron or sulfur. A spring can be alkaline, saline, chalybeate, sulphurous, acidulous, and arsenical. Each has properties that humans throughout time believed is not only beneficial, but outright healing.



Human history of using hot springs extends back at least to the Bronze Age, some 5000 years ago, and more than likely beyond half a million years. In North America, human use of hot springs is extensive. Native American tribes had known about the springs, of course, for at least hundreds, if not thousands of years. They considered the springs a gift from their Creator, the Great Spirit, who warmed them with his breath. In many places, it was customary for springs to be a designated neutral zone where any tribe could rest and heal, even during times of war. The Pacific Northwest was no exception.

Archeological evidence reveals that as early as 500 B.C.E., the Mayans made use of thermal springs near Lake Amatitlán near Guatemala City. The Aztecs believed springs were the abodes of gods and goddesses, and hot springs in central Mexico were pilgrimage destinations for priests. The now famous hot springs site in Arkansas was called the Valley of the Vapours, where in 1541 Spanish explorer Hernando DeSoto found warring tribes bathing together.

A common name for Hot Springs across North America was some variant of “Medicine Springs,” which was the name the Mohawks gave Saratoga Springs, and the Iroquois, Shawnee, and Tuscarora gave to the springs near Bedford, Pennsylvania.

The Lake and Coast Miwok used Harbin Springs in northern California as a seasonal camp. Ellen Klazer, in a pamphlet for Harbin Hot Springs resort, writes that to a shaman “the waters of a hot springs were an entrance way to the underworld. In a trance state, induced by meditating on such a point of entrance—a natural tunnel, rock crevasse or spring—a shaman could travel from the material world to the spirit realm. There he could talk to the spirits and do healing work which, when returning to a non-trance state, he brought back to the people of his tribe. Since these natural openings to the spirit world are rare, the springs were considered to be a very special and sacred point in the already sacred material world.”

Many of the “smoking waters” in Oregon—springs such as Bagby, Breitenbush, Umpqua, and Hot Lake—were used by Native Americans who came up with ingenious and elaborate ways of damming the springs and covering them to hold the heat. Like the traditional sweat lodge of many Native American tribes, the springs could afford a ritual of cleansing and purification.



By the time Lewis and Clark's Expedition came stumbling, weak and starved, out of the Bitterroot Mountains of Idaho, the Northwestern Native Americans were a well-established people who welcomed the Corps of Discovery into their homeland. Who the Corps found was the Nez Perce, which by the time of their visit had a population estimated between 4,000 and 6,000 people.

The origins of the tribe would have been shrouded in time to the Nez Perce. Their legend told them that when the world was new, populated solely by animals, the father of the tribe was born from the heart of a monster that lived in a valley on the Clearwater River. Other stories tell of Coyote tearing a monster apart, scattering its pieces which bloomed up into the various tribes.

The Nez Perce, who shared a land, culture, and language with the Cayuse, Yakimas, Palouse, and Wallawallas among others, are supposed to have arrived in migration from Alaska 10,000 or more years ago. One theory has them following the west side of the Rockies south and fanning out west into the Great Basin, running perhaps into earlier immigrants. Another theory holds that the Nez Perce are descended from a people who arrived 12,000 to 13,000 years ago, first establishing themselves along the Cascades, spreading east into northeastern Oregon and the panhandle of Idaho. The ancestral arrivals, though they dispersed in a loose arrangement of bands, maintained a more or less similar tongue, allowing them to trade and intermarry. Evidence suggests they were, by and large, a peaceful people.

Survival was a struggle on the rugged plateau. Hunting was difficult in the terrain of deep canyons and brushy ravines, and game hard to come by without guns or horses, as other tribes on the Great Plains had secured by the 18th century. The tribes subsisted on roots and bulbs—especially the sweet bulb of the camas lily—as well as berries and dried fish, all of which were mashed into cakes to carry them through winter. Sometimes it didn't last, and waiting for the first run of salmon to arrive was naturally a sacred and eagerly-awaited event. But overall, the people survived and traded with the many tribes along the Columbia River and, later, with whites.

In the Grande Ronde Valley in northeastern Oregon, a haven for hot springs, small bands of Nez Perce set villages along a trail to the settlements of the Cayuse in the southern valley. Near a large butte along the edge of this valley, a particularly large steaming lake welled up. On New Year's Day in 1812, some 32 members of the William Price Hunt expedition, employed by John Jacob Astor to establish the fur-trading post at the mouth of the Columbia River, what became Astoria, apparently passed by this area without notice. On August 7th party member Robert Stuart "discovered" the steaming lake as the party returned east to St. Louis to relay news of increasingly hostile natives and burgeoning British competition. Hot Lake, in the Grande Ronde Valley, was probably the first hot springs seen in the Pacific Northwest by Europeans.

Washington Irving, in his 1836 book titled *Astoria: or, Anecdotes of an Enterprise Beyond the Rocky Mountains*, recounted the observations by expedition member Robert Stuart who came out of "the chain of Blue Mountains" down to "a vast plain" and saw "a great pool of water, three hundred yards in circumference, fed by a sulphur spring, about ten feet in diameter, boiling up in one corner. The vapor from this pool was extremely noisome, and tainted the air for a considerable distance." The shores, he recounted, were littered with elk antlers, or as he called them, "horns."

Later, West Point graduate Captain Benjamin Louis Eulalie de Bonneville—on leave from the Army—visited, though no one can be sure if he was trying his hand at fur trading or conducting secret observations for the Army. By the 1840's thousands of Oregon Trail pioneers stopped there to rest, bathe, and wash clothes, since Hot Lake was located directly on the wagon route. Gold miners in the 1850's paused at Hot Lake, situated along a well-known trail leading to the mountain mining towns. The Nez Perce and Cayuse, whose territory the Hot Lake fell in, reportedly called it "Ea-Kesh-Pa." They considered it sacred ground, naturally, and it is said that Chief Joseph was married on its shore. By 1877 the Nez Perce would be forcibly removed from the land, chased across the wintry passes, and installed on a reservation in Idaho.

And in 1900, when the Indian Bureau sent Inspector General James McLaughlin to visit Chief Joseph, the two men journeyed to the Wallowa country to investigate a return of his people to their native country. Joseph visited his father's grave there, weeping. The two men drove to Wallowa Lake and were met there by white citizen's living in the valley. They flatly told McLaughlin they did not ever want the Indians back.

On September 21, 1904, a Colville agency physician reported that Chief Joseph had died of a broken heart.



Hot springs in America also have an illustrious history with the whites. Thomas Jefferson designed a pool at Hot Springs, Virginia in 1761, and George Washington visited Saratoga Springs in 1783. Many U.S. Presidents bathed in West Virginia's White Sulphur Springs, including Van Buren, Tyler, Pierce, Fillmore, and Buchanan, not to mention Davy Crockett, Daniel Webster, and Francis Scott Key. Among the most famous American spas, aside from New York's Saratoga Springs, was Hot Springs, Arkansas, which visitors reached initially by a grueling 52-mile stagecoach ride that took half a day's travel; today, the 47 springs of Hot Springs are folded into the protection of the National Park system. In the Old West, Buffalo Bill visited what is now Hot Springs State Park in Wyoming, which lies outside the appropriately-named town of Thermopolis. In fact, it didn't take long for white settlers in the American West to discover the potential for hot springs.

Early European settlers to the Oregon Territory carried ideas about hot springs ingrained in their culture since the Greeks and Romans: thermal springs meant healing, meant cure. It didn't take long for early entrepreneurs to establish the European model of "Bathhouses," "Sanitariums," and "Resorts." Europeans, too, have depended on "taking the waters," or the medicinal use of hot springs, for a long time, and they continue to do so today. It is the Europeans who created the spa, the healing resort, that Americans brought to bear on the new continent, making use of the therapeutic salve of hot springs and mineral waters for curing and preventing diseases known as balneology.

The word spa harkens back to the Old World, to the name of a mountain town in southeastern Belgium, where a health resort called *Espa* was founded on an iron-laden spring in the fourteenth century. The word, which in the Walloon language means "fountain," is now synonymous with the centers founded on the properties of springs and mineral-laden waters. This practice descends, in part, from the Romans, whose public baths were the epitome of leisure.

The Roman baths were public facilities; hence bathing was a communal activity open to all men, regardless of class, and many women. Most Roman cities had at least one, if not numerous, baths, important sites for socialization, exercise, and cleansing. Though many wealthy citizens had private baths for their villas, and though soldiers commonly had them in their forts, public

baths were utilized extensively. By the Fifth Century A.D. there were nearly 900 baths in the city of Rome alone. The elaborate public baths, built as public monuments, spread across Europe.

The balneum was a small bathhouse that could be privately owned but was open to the public for a fee. The large baths, known as thermae, were state-run facilities; the largest, the Baths of Diocletian, held up to 3,000 people. The wealthy could parade their slaves into the baths—a sign of prestige, but also a necessity since thievery was as common at the baths then as it would be now, and someone to guard belongings couldn't hurt. Though bathing may have been segregated by gender at first, by the First Century A.D. the sexes began to mix. It is important to consider that the Romans viewed the body as utterly natural, thus not only bathing but using the toilet was a public affair. Toilets, for example, were typically close together without partitions.

Europeans inherited this pastime not just in style, but in the very monumental buildings themselves. Though many of the baths lie in ruins across the continent, many—the elaborate structures at Bath, England for one—remain functional. The great baths also accommodated gymnasiums, and visitors could read, drink, eat, get massages, and talk politics as well. The Romans were health-conscious, using the baths for exercise, good diet, and bathing in both hot and cold plunges.

Though the fantastic 27-acre Baths of Caracalla of ancient Rome, which were in use for at least 200 years, now lay in ruins, the idea of “taking the waters” persists today. In many European countries—France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Hungary, Portugal, Austria, Russia, Luxembourg, Poland, Romania, and the Czech Republic among others—it is common for a two to three week stay to be prescribed by physicians and paid for by social security, or private and national health insurance.

Balneotherapy, the use of hot springs as therapy, is practiced not only at major European spas but also backwoods Oregon hot springs. Hot water, inhalation of gases, mud baths, steam, and drinking mineral water all played their roles in Oregon, too. The benefits of hot springs and heating the body, at least from a medical perspective, involve the killing of germs and viruses, increasing blood circulation, eliminating toxins, increasing metabolism, stimulation of the immune system, healing skin, and of course, relaxation and a feeling of well-being.

Balneotherapy is recognized in helping with rheumatism, gastrointestinal problems, respiratory and circulatory diseases, and preventative medicine. The mineral springs are used in three typical ways: bathing, drinking, and inhalation. Spas will treat all these issues and more from Europe to North and South America. As far back as the Greeks, and certainly the Romans, who did much to develop springs, people have been “taking the cure.” Many of those Roman baths are in use today throughout Europe. In Germany, Baden-Baden resembles a temple more than anything else, the most elaborate hot bath therapy conceivable.



Of course, this idea was no different from Native American tribes who were already using the springs around the West, including Hot Lake. During the Bannock Indian Wars, battles were often fought over land that nurtured hot springs—ironic in that the cultures of many tribes, the Nez Perce of northeastern Oregon among them, considered the springs sacred ground, a place where weapons were set down and disagreements put aside.

Both peoples had similar ideas of the value of what Europeans called “taking the waters,” but it was the American settlers who set about claiming the land using laws of the day to establish private property and develop the springs—meaning in many cases building elaborate structures—in order to benefit from both supposed healing properties of the water and economically from sometimes outrageous medical claims. After a number of battles involving both guns and courts, the new residents secured their titles and began charging admission.

Most American springs were discovered by whites by the 1880's, the height of the Victorian era. The prim and proper attitudes of that era's customers led to the institution of bathhouses, where people could soak in private. Although they impatiently dismissed the Indian's notion of healing waters, or of “lightening fish” living as gods below the ground, they knew that there was at least some benefit to the body. And so, in the tradition of the European spas early entrepreneurs eagerly marketed the springs in the Victorian values of the day: as sanitary, comfortable, and beneficial to one's health.

The height of popularity for the hot spring resort peaked in the early decades of the twentieth century. After the Great Depression and World War II, their popularity sharply declined. Many hotels burned down. Many were simply abandoned. Some survived, remaining almost as secrets in the mountains and deserts. Many others remain as they were: rustic, primitive, natural, and wild.

One of the first white men to take advantage of the hot springs of Oregon was Dunham Wright, born in Des Moines county, Iowa on March 13, 1842. His mother, Celia, died when the child was two years old. His father John, a civil engineer who was several times elected to the legislature of territorial Iowa, moved the family to the frontier of Union County, Iowa when Dunham was twelve. The boy had little formal education—only three six-month terms in a subscription school—and what he else he knew he received from his stepmother Evaline, learning to write on a pine board slate with a bullet sharpened to a pencil point.

Wright, a relative to Abraham Lincoln (and who himself was originally offered the governorship of the Oregon Territory), grew up to be “a well built man,” according to authors Frank E. Hodgkin and J.J. Galvin, “of ordinary height, auburn hair and whiskers, broad and expansive forehead and a pleasant eye.” Striking out on his own, he went west to work the mines. On the wagon train, somewhere in the Platte River country, the immigrants came upon an Indian woman carrying a baby in a papoose. The wagons came to a stop, and people could see how poor the woman was. She drew a dead coyote from a bag and hung it on a post over a fire. Though this disgusted many of the men, some of whom wanted to drive her away or even kill her, the young Dunham came out of the wagon with biscuits and meat for the woman. They met with no troubles from other Indians. As

a young man Wright had played with Indian boys in western Iowa, and apparently acquired knowledge of the traits these Indians held: kindness, honesty. He was reported as attributing their safe passage to his saying, What one Indian knows they all know.

As the train crossed the Snake River and Lost River and the miles of desert beyond, the remnants of past Indian slaughters became more and more apparent: skulls and bones, and the iron remnants, still in formation, of the wagons the emigrants had circled. The men, terrified, organized night watches, but nothing came of it.

Wright went to Colorado in 1862, spending two years in the mines, then to the Idaho Territory to prospect gold and run pack trains between the Boise mines and the Umatilla Landing. In 1865 he settled in the Grande Ronde Valley, about 20 miles from the Victorian-styled town of Union. Following up on a rancher's advice to survey some unclaimed property southeast of town, he ran a pack train to Sanger and discovered a creek whose water his horses refused to drink. What he found were hot springs in a willow grove used by local Indians for bathing, what were called Medical Springs. Elk hides were staked and stretched over the dammed waters to hold the steam. The men—probably Cayuse or Nez Perce, or both—would soak a bit and leap into a dammed three-foot deep cold creek, then wrap themselves in blankets, retiring to tipis.

In December of 1868, at the urging of his bride, Artemisia "Mishy" Duncan, he staked a claim, built a cabin and log bathhouse. He built his own resort, housing 40 rooms, a ballroom, and a 50-foot concrete pool, then a sanitarium, livery stable, and general store. There were separate parlors for men and women, equipped with a pool table and piano, respectively. The second-floor ballroom had a maple floor.

In 1872 he was elected to the Oregon House of Representatives for the first of three terms, and went on to be elected to the state Senate in 1880. A post office was established at the resort on August 9, 1887 and Wright became known as the "Sage of Medical Springs." By this time, nearby Hot Lake Hotel was running, catering to a well-to-do urban crowd. Wright's hotel attracted a much different clientele: miners, gamblers, cowboys. At one point he held rodeos, but ceased when he found it was impossible to control drunken gun-toting cowboys.

In the summer of 1918, fire took the hotel, and he didn't have sufficient insurance to recover completely. He rebuilt a smaller hotel within a year, and a pool in 1929, struggling to maintain some sort of business there. He lived there until he died at the age of one hundred on December 3, 1942. He was buried in a private cemetery at Medical Springs, and the springs themselves went unused. When a nearby lumber mill, a seat of economy for the area, closed in the 50's, most of the residents disappeared.

In the early 1800's when Lewis and Clark followed the Columbia River to its mouth, the Nez Perce had not seen a white man. It would be years before the first trappers arrived and the bitterness and betrayal began in earnest, and more years after that before the Oregon Trail skirted the lakeshore, and decades before a resort was built by pioneers in the first commercial exploit to sincerely exploit the geothermal energy and the healing powers of the hot springs.



There are, according to Bill Kaysing, author of *Great Hot Springs of the West*, "well over a thousand hot springs in Western America." This was a man who knew his way around springs, and he was the primary author to devote books to the subject, mostly informative guidebooks. Though most springs are indicated on U.S. Geological Survey maps of the region, Kaysing, a former rocket scientist and motorcycle aficionado, claims to have discovered many springs that were not recorded on the maps.

When the whites first arrived they participated in the sharing of springs with Native Americans, until the commercial value of the land, as always, was calculated and exploited. What began as free access to all became the charging of admission in the grand tradition of the European spas. But with the debunking, and eventual outlawing, of outrageous medical claims due to lobbying pressure from the American Medical Association, people stopped visiting the old resorts, especially during and after the Depression. As with Medical Springs, many fell into dilapidation and disrepair. For decades, hot springs in the West were a forgotten pleasure.

In the 1970's, due to the back-to-the-land movement (at least according to Bill Kaysing, who along with soakers-cum-authors like Jayson Loam, Jeff Birkby, Evie Litton, and Marjorie Gersh-Young, are among the champions of hot spring recreation), many people began returning to the springs, especially the undeveloped ones. Guidebooks began to appear, and today you can have your choice of books sold by such publishers as Falcon or Aqua Thermal Access. There are websites devoted to finding springs, complete with blogs reporting their conditions at any time of year. Such has been the renaissance of the pools.

Visiting these springs are a unique subculture of outdoor-enthusiasts, the "Soakers." They are as likely to be hippies as hunters, students as loggers, hikers as fishermen. Of all the Soakers I have met, those wonderful subversives who frequent hot springs regularly and are often wellsprings of information, most tend to be a quaint, rustic, and rugged type. I am one of these people. Thus, the bathhouse in the Alvord Desert made of corrugated metal and concrete flooring, in which upside-down washing machine tubs serve as seats, is perfectly comfortable to me. At the same time, the geothermally-heated cabins and vegan breakfasts at Breitenbush, their springs bottomed with smooth concrete encrusted with river stones and crystals, are just as comfortable.

Of course, this access—enhanced by paved roads, wide trails, and abundant signs—has led to the degradation, overcrowding, and overuse of many sites. Some springs have become receptacles of trash. Cougar, after a killing in a nearby campground, is now heavily monitored by the Forest Service, who began charging parking fees to visit, and are administered by a contract with a private corporation. Nonprofit groups have sprung up around certain hot springs, like Bagby; even the Nature Conservancy has gotten involved, buying and protecting the land around the hot spots of Borax Lake in Eastern Oregon.

Some private landowners no longer allow people on their land, thus removing some of the best springs—such as the ones on Wind River in Washington, or the Suplee spring at the base of the Ochoco Mountains in Oregon—from the public. Perhaps this is best. The clientele changes with the years. Many are good people, but there is a fair share of criminal activity. Car clouting in parking areas—which often leaves broken windows—has increased. Despite this, hot spring recreation has positively increased. Pools have been added at many sites, and trails have been resurfaced and improved—though even these improvements have their share of critics.

Today, hot springs are found in a variety of conditions. The least among them, but the greatest to many, are the primitive. These springs are either completely natural or minimally developed, i.e., perhaps a few carefully placed stones packed with mud to hold warm water in, as at Deer Creek. There are no services, no rest rooms, and certainly no buildings. The developed springs vary widely: they may have elaborate earthen structures, log weirs, stone walls, or they may have outhouses, wooden roofs, ladders, even full-on bathhouses. The commercial hot springs are the epitome of development: hotels, bed and breakfasts, yoga classes, campgrounds with RV hookups. These are the resorts, and many are among the great resorts of the West. They vary wildly in quality, of course, but then taste is always a matter of individuality.

To each his own, I say; for in the culture of hot springs, the springs themselves are uniquely individual, and often stubbornly so. Just watch what happens when crowds begin to appear at a long-unknown spot, or when fees are imposed for parking, as they were at Cougar, or when additional developments are made, as they have been at many throughout the state. The new generation of hot spring-users grows restless, and the old-time soakers get anxious, suspicious, and sometimes hostile.

Considering the long history of Native American use, it is ironic that the only hot springs in Oregon left under the control of Native Americans are mostly channeled into a pool at Kah-Nee-Ta on the Warm Springs Reservation in Central Oregon. Nestled in the hills above the Deschutes River, the Olympic-sized pool can be filled with kids on any given summer day, or any time of the year, hurtling down the 140-foot water slide. The 130° F water is cooled by the time it reaches the pool, to a comfortable 86° in summer, and 92° in winter.

Its history is equally ironic. With the loss of the tribal fishing grounds at Celilo Falls, after the Columbia River was flooded behind The Dalles Dam (Dalles is French for “falls”), the tribes were paid \$4 million by the federal government. For the price of \$100,000 Oregon State University, in an economic development study the tribes paid for, concluded that their best option was a resort on the hot springs. The federal money paid for Kah-Nee-Ta, and also the Indian Head Casino. The village was finished in 1964, the lodge in 1972. Despite a 1996 flood on the Warm Springs River that wrecked the facilities, the resort was rebuilt in a year, with dikes on the banks to control further outbursts. Today, the resort is the main source of revenue for the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, which includes the Warm Springs, Wasco, and Paiute bands.

It is comforting to know that the hot springs contained in the cement cistern behind the spa, enclosed in an iron fence, are not the only ones on the reservation. There are more along the banks of the Warm Springs River, for tribal members only. That there is a place for them to be while visitors play golf on the 18-hole course, or rent inflatable kayaks or horses, or eat Cornish game hens in the Juniper Room. It is good to know that the old ways, if you can call them that, are preserved.



Over 200 commercial springs operate in the United States and Canada. When the Twentieth Century brought the power of the American Medical Association, the AMA, into full bloom, their lobbying efforts resulted in government regulations prohibiting extravagant medical claims. What was once a booming economy quickly disintegrated into near oblivion, at least in North America. In countries such as Japan and Russia, balneology is indeed part of practical medicine, entirely mainstream. It is an ongoing, culturally-acceptable practice.

Some of the minerals in springs have surely been considered good for us, and since ancient times people considered soaking in the springs to be medicinal and healing. We still do, though there may be more to it than bodily healing; what about the spirit? The soul? There are other benefits as well: geothermal energy can be used, as it is in many places in Oregon, Iceland, and New Zealand, as energy for heating homes and other structures. Is there something more to hot springs than just a soak?

By the time I begin my journey, I've not visited a hot spring in two years, the last being Bagby in the Cascade Mountains with my wife. We had a large cedar tub to ourselves early on a weekday morning, outside of the weekend times of drunken crowds that reputedly make a mess of the place each week. I wonder now, are things any different? What has changed, if anything? What is the condition of the landscape, and what has become of the culture of soakers?

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