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Calistoga Hot Springs

by
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The practice of "taking the waters" for therapeutic purposes reached its heyday in the 19th century, but springs have been considered places of healing at many times and in all parts of the world. Roman colonists developed a considerable spa at Bath, England, and also at Buxton, Derbyshire, for example. In the early 18th century some Roman baths were rebuilt, many new "watering places" were established, and spas became fashionable resort centers for the upper class at the most seasonable times of the year. For the ill and infirm, many spas provided year-round treatment under varying degrees of medical supervision.



Spa therapy is based on both the drinking of and the bathing in certain waters containing properties believed to be of medicinal value. Mineral springs usually contain noticeable quantities of salts in solution. Magnesia and many trace minerals, notably lithium, also constitute medicinal waters. In addition to solid constituents, gas is present in many waters in considerable quantities. The quantity of hydrosulfuric acid, even in strong sulfuric waters, is small, but the volume of carbonic acid present is often large, giving a noticeable effervescence. Thermal springs are derived from two sources: meteoric waters that rise from considerable depths along fissures; and volcanic waters, which reach the surface in the form of either geysers or hot springs. Most thermal water contains mineral substance in solution.

The spas of Europe and the United States with the greatest popularity were those with thermal springs. Bathing in warm water has an undoubted therapeutic effect as an aid to relaxation, although the skin does not absorb any of the salts or gases. Sulfurated waters such as those at Aachen, Ger., Baden, Austria, and White

Sulphur Springs, W.Va., are used for some skin conditions. Drinking mineral waters may, at the least, provide a general washing out of the digestive system, and the alkaline waters of Vichy, Fr., Ischia, Italy, and Mariánské Lázně, Czech Republic, may act as purgative agents. The highly carbonated salt springs at Saratoga Springs, N.Y., and at Wiesbaden and Baden-Baden, Ger., have long been used for rheumatic and neuralgic conditions. Drinking mineral water, carbonated or not, has become so popular that a considerable business of bottling and exporting has grown up on both sides of the Atlantic. It is likely, however, that most of the medicinal effects of spa therapy result from the environmental factors of the location and facilities of the spa.

Right here in California, Calistoga was a healing place long before the first spa was ever built. Blessed with geothermal waters rich in magnesium and calcium that burst from the earth in powerful geysers or bubbled up gently into steaming pools and rivers, the Native Americans gathered here for detoxification and purification. An ancient volcano contributed huge deposits of volcanic ash found helpful for sore injured muscles and stiff joints. By 1831, white settlers had begun to move into the valley.

It was 1852 when Samuel Brannan first visited the Napa Valley. Drawn by the stories of the healing hot springs and the natural beauty of the oven place, he would transform the small agricultural community into the spa resort town we now know as Calistoga. Brannan was an entrepreneur and schemer who was not adverse to a little shady dealing, if necessary. He profited from religion, gambling, newspapers, sugar plantations in Hawaii, real estate in San Joaquin and Sacramento, gold prospecting and merchandising. When he saw the Indian hot springs, he envisioned a great spa, a health resort that would rival Saratoga Hot Springs of New York and the famed resorts of Europe. He would create the finest spa resort in the world right here in California, and he knew he had the money and the connections to do it.

The resort opened in 1862, with its lavish centerpiece the Hot Springs Hotel, twenty-five five room cottages, elaborately landscaped parks, bathing pavilions, a bathhouse, a huge skating rink, a dance pavilion, and a tent-shaped observatory atop Mt. Lincoln. The resort also included a large store, an express office, a swimming pool, goldfish pond and a forty acre complex with a mile long race track and stables. Sam had mapped out the town he needed to supply the resort and worked feverishly to attract people to build homes and start businesses here. He gave away more than eighty plots and donated land to build the Methodist-Episcopal church.

The wealthy, elite San Franciscans were very interested in the hot springs north of the city, but the journey to Calistoga was long and often times uncomfortable. Also of concern were the spa resorts being developed down valley in Napa. Sam and a group of prominent business and civic leaders decided that the best solution was to build a railroad. They incorporated the Napa Valley Railroad Company on March 26, 1864, to spearhead the financing and building of the railroad from the bay area to Calistoga. The railroad met strong opposition from taxpayers, but the Napa Valley Railroad Co. pushed through a bond issue and by August 1868 the new railroad reached Calistoga.

The success of the railroad project marked a turning point in Sam's life. Now it seemed that all he could do was lose. A manager from the resort made off with a huge amount of cash and other valuables. His marriage, always troubled, ended taking one-half of all his property. To meet the settlement, Sam had to liquidate nearly everything he had. By 1878, he knew his dream to own the best spa in the world was over, but Calistoga was a vibrant growing town. Sam's resort changed hands many times and is known today as Indian Springs Resort. Calistoga is home to more than a dozen such spas and resorts. Millions of visitors from around the world come to enjoy the healthful benefits of the Native American Coo-lay-no-maock, "the oven place". [<http://www.calistogaspas.com/resources/history.htm>]