



Photo by Danielle Rhéaume/AWB

The healing waters of Soap Lake

by Danielle Rhéaume

The placard in Soap Lake’s modest visitor’s center states, “The future of Soap Lake is what each of us contributes now.” Hanging on the wall near the placard are aged black-and-white photographs of women with pin-curled hair wearing modest, skirted bathing suits. The men standing beside them wear dress suits or bathing trunks as modest as the women’s attire. Nearly everyone is smiling as they stand arm-in-arm upon the mineral-rich shoreline of Soap Lake.

Healing origins

The bathers in the photographs weren’t the first people to gather at Soap Lake. When the nomadic Tsincayuse tribe came upon Soap Lake hundreds of years before, they noticed that the mineral waters healed tribal members and named it Smokiam, their word for “healing waters.”

When white settlers eventually came upon the lake, they noticed suds forming foot-deep ridges along its shores and named it Soap Lake. Like the Tsincayuse, they also noticed that it helped—and sometimes healed—conditions like rheumatism, eczema, arthritis, lumbago and achy joints. Little did they know that the lake’s natural cures were thousands of years in the making.

During the last ice age, a channel of the Columbia River flowed from northeastern to southwestern Washington. Along the channel, near the

present-day site of the Grand Coulee Dam, an enormous ice dam formed and forced the river to take a new course along the Grand Coulee, depositing large amounts of silt and gravel along the way.

Swift currents coming off nearby hills churned away underlying lava and dug holes in the terrain, and cascading waterfalls eventually filled the holes with water. Then the ice dam gave way and the river moved back to its original path, leaving behind a series of small lakes from Dry Falls to Soap Lake.

Seepage from subterranean lava flows poured into Soap Lake. This seepage filled the lake with particularly high concentrations of sodium, bicarbonate, sulfate, carbonate, chloride, and potassium—the minerals that led to its Tsincayuse name.

Healing heyday

Word of the healing waters traveled fast among settlers. By 1905, the Lombardy Hotel and Sanitarium was built on the edge of Soap Lake.

Around the same time, construction started on the Siloam, a nationally advertised social center and health resort. Its name came from the healing springs mentioned in the Old Testament.

Siloam quickly became famous, and Soap Lake was bustling with travelers who mostly arrived on the Northern Pacific Railroad via local towns like Ephrata or Adrian. From their rail stop, they would ride in a stage-



Photo courtesy of the Soap Lake Visitor’s Center

The Lombardy Hotel and Sanitarium at Soap Lake, circa 1905.

coach up the dusty desert road to Soap Lake. This was long before State Route 17 took modern drivers into the heart of the city.

With the steady arrival of travelers, Soap Lake quickly developed an upbeat social scene. Visitors who had recuperated using Soap Lake's waters and mud were ready to socialize, dance and drink. Popular bands from Spokane came to play at Soap Lake's open-air dance hall on the beach. It was a time of good health and celebration as Soap Lake quickly became one of Washington's busiest resort communities.

Many of Soap Lake's most faithful partakers were war veterans suffering from Buerger's disease, a crippling circulatory disease caused by tobacco use and exposure to mustard gas. It causes excruciating pain as gangrenous lesions expose the nerves in sufferer's hands and feet. At the time, quitting tobacco and amputation were the only available therapies.

Soap Lake provided a healthy alternative to traditional therapy. Patients still had to quit using tobacco, but Soap Lake's mineral waters often spared them from amputations.

The lake's effectiveness in treating Buerger's disease moved the American Heart Journal and the American Legion to release reports touting Soap Lake's healing powers. Washington tourism guides went as far as advertising Soap Lake as "The World's Greatest Medical Marvel."

Unfortunately, the Great Depression ended Soap Lake's heyday. By then, three of the city's sanitariums, including the famed Siloam, had burned to the ground and rainfall in the area had dropped by 40 percent. The lake and local agriculture were devastated.

When the construction of Grand Coulee Dam brought workers back into the area in the 1930s and 1940s, Soap Lake locals were optimistic about the dam's effect on the region. They hoped the influx of workers would bring more people into their city.

An unforeseeable problem arose when the dam's waters leaked through the aquifer and drained into Soap Lake, diluting its mineral content. By the late 1940s, Soap Lake's sodium levels were half of what they'd been just ten years earlier. Though the dam revitalized local agriculture, the dilution compromised Soap Lake's healing waters.

Engineers solved the dilution problem in the early 1950s and returned the lake to its mineral-rich state. By then, interest in natural cures and spas had significantly declined as people turned to prescription antibiotics and other cures for ailments. In no time, Soap Lake became a ghost town disintegrating in the shadow of its former glory.

Healing future

In 2001, through generous donations and community efforts, planning and construction of the new state-of-the-art Masquers Theater began on donated land in downtown Soap Lake. Masquers Theater is one of the oldest rural community theaters in the state of Washington and offers a diverse roster of musicals, dramas, and comedies throughout the year.

Residents campaigned the following year to acquire a giant Time's Square lava lamp and set it up near downtown. The 65-foot-tall fixture was donated and shipped to the city by Target Corp. in December 2004. The city is currently accepting donations that will help them refurbish and reassemble the lamp on donated property. Residents hope that the attraction will draw a great deal of attention and increase tourism for Soap Lake.

Earlier this summer, after 13 years of planning and fundraising, a new attraction arrived in Soap Lake. Entitled "Calling the Healing Waters," the 6-ton, 15-foot-tall bronze sculpture by Keith Powell and David Govedare honors Soap Lake's healing legacy and cultural heritage. According to the Columbia Basin Herald (Moses Lake, Wash.), it features a Native American man with a woman sitting on a rock. The woman holds a bowl with water draining through the bottom. Wings spread across the man's back and his hand is extended toward the sky. The artwork cost \$150,000 and will be installed at Soap Lake's East Beach Park, where it will serve as a sundial facing the waters that inspired its creation.

Soap Lake's most ambitious and potentially lucrative plan is to revitalize its reputation as a resort community by building a new Soap Lake Spa and Wellness Center. City leaders envision the \$3-million center as a place for urbanites and health-seekers to take the waters, relax, and reinvigorate in a refuge far from the modern, busy world.

Photo by Daniel Brunell/AWB

Massage therapist Bridgett Oie works at the Healing Water Spa on Main Street, where visitors can get a massage or soak in Soap Lake mud.





Photo by Danielle Rheanore/AWB

Soap Lake restaurateur Marina Romary serves up some barbecue hot off the grill.

With the recent arrival of Yahoo and Microsoft server facilities in nearby Quincy, as well as a revived interest in natural medicine, Soap Lake's citizens feel that there is no time like the present to make their vision a reality.

"We looked to some of the finest spas in the world to draw our plans," said Frederick Slough, former president of the Soap Lake Chamber of Commerce and longtime resident.

Blueprints for the Soap Lake Spa and Wellness Center include ambient, warm, and

hot mineral water pools, multiple treatment rooms for massage therapy, private mineral and mud-soaking tubs, patios for sunbathing, and hotel accommodations. From the pools and patios, guests will have panoramic views of Soap Lake and the bordering hills.

Last year, the state Community Economic Revitalization Board awarded a \$1-million grant for construction of the 12,000-square-foot center. Soap Lake will get these funds as long as the city secures private financing to pay the other \$2 million.

While Soap Lake hasn't yet acquired all the needed funds, the city is hopeful that investors will step forward as the city vies to be the premiere healing and wellness destination in America.

"The lake is nice in the summer, but it doesn't attract anyone in the winter. If we have a nice, European-style spa, then we can keep business up year-round," said Slough.

Even though it might compete with her own businesses, Marina Romary, former mayor of Soap Lake and owner of the Notara's Lodge and Businessmen's Club and Don's Restaurant, looks forward to the spa. "Competition is good for business," she said. "It makes people better business owners and benefits the customers."

Whether their contribution takes the form of Romary's entrepreneurial spirit or Slough's drive to revitalize the healing arts, it's true that what Soap Lake's citizens contribute now will shape their future. This is true for most cities. What makes Soap Lake different is that, as its citizens work towards a prosperous future for their humble city, they are constantly reminded of a time when the lake's unique natural history mixed with collective enthusiasm to form an economic and social cocktail almost as potent as the lake's legendary healing waters.

No wonder the bathers in the photographs were smiling. ■

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