

The Ashland-Area Mineral Springs **By Dennis Powers**

During the late 1800s and early 1900s, the mineral springs percolating around the Ashland area were hailed for their medicinal and healing values. The bubbling carbon dioxide (“CO₂”) and presence of lithium salts (lithium carbonate and/or lithium chloride) were valued dating back to the native Indians. They soaked in the waters to ease sore muscles or skin rashes and believed in the healing properties. The natives called the mineral spring vapors “Hi-u-Skookum” medicine, or the breath of the Great Spirit. Lying on pine boughs within a circle of stones, they breathed the CO₂ gases; then they would go to a skins-and-boughs enclosure for reviving, followed by chanting in a sweat lodge with a shaman.

Referring to the five mineral-springs-fed, public swimming pools, large colorful railroad posters in the early 1900s described Ashland as “The Venice of the West.” These five pools were the Helman Baths, off Otis Street in Ashland; Twin Plunges at First and A Streets; Buckhorn Springs, off Dead Indian Road; Colestine Springs, south of Ashland; and Jackson Hot Springs (now Jackson WellSprings) on Old Highway 99 North. Only Jackson WellSprings reconstructed pool and drastically remodeled facilities remains open today to the public, although Buckhorn Springs is in use as a destination resort with cabins, dining, lodging, and other facilities.

Thronges of tourists would get off at the Southern Pacific Railroad station at “A” Street. A 1915 Southern Pacific Railroad flyer heralded Ashland’s being a resort city on the Shasta route, midway between Portland and San Francisco, with eight trains arriving and departing daily between these major cities. It read: “Ashland is noted for three things: beautiful environment, matchless climate, and wonderful mineral springs. There are over forty known mineral springs in and about the city.”

The tourists apparently choose the Colestine Baths, whereas local families preferred the Helman Baths in town. The springs formed a marsh in the field in front of the Helman building, and waters flowed between the rocks that formed one end of the indoor pool. As with the native Indians, older people soaked their aching joints and muscles in the heated spring waters to the front of the building, as the water flowed through a pipe from a holding tank.

Even the City of Ashland tried to get into the act. The owner and editor of the *Ashland Tidings*, Bert Greer, strongly supported the creation of a health spa centered on the beneficial aspects of the lithium-concentrated water. Although this never came into being due to acrimonious political and financial controversies, the publicity greatly helped the passage by voters in 1914 of a \$175,000 bond issue, \$65,000 of which was earmarked to develop Lithia Park.

Meanwhile, the mineral-spring pools continued to maintain their draw. During the Chautauqua series (summer-time, public lectures) in Lithia Park, exposition visitors camped in the maple and evergreen groves near the Helman Baths. Trains carried people

to Colestin Springs, which was off Mt. Ashland Ski Road in the Siskiyou Mountains, for its medicinal properties. Passengers, baggage, and tents were offloaded onto a wooden platform. Since the small hotel could only house 25 guests, the rest (and as many as 100 families at a time) would pitch their tents underneath the conifers and stars.

The Buckhorn Mineral Springs was another prime destination point, and this resort was adjacent to the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument and Pacific Crest Trail. A lodge with fir floors, high ceilings, and single-pane windows was built on 120 acres deep in a canyon by Emigrant Creek. Health-seeking visitors flocked to its artesian well and drank the “sweet-tasting, bubbly waters rich in carbon dioxide.” Among other facilities, a terracotta block hut housed six vapor-bath closets. With the water vapors containing carbon dioxide (valued for their effects on the body), users sat in the chamber with their heads sticking out the top. (It’s now widely understood that breathing CO2 in quantities is very dangerous.)

Over time, the attraction to these mineral springs wore out, especially with the financial dislocations and hardships of the Great Depression. The public baths headed into disrepair and disuse. In 1989, the National Register of Historic Places placed the Buckhorn on its register. After extensive refurbishment, it has operated since as a resort, but not as a public pool. The Colestin Resort gradually disappeared. The “beautiful wood frame building” around the Helman pool burned down and was replaced by a plain metal structure with a private pool inside. Where the spring-fed Twin Plunges once operated, the Ashland Food Cooperative now stands.

Little remains of the time when mineral springs were considered to be more beneficial than good exercise, healthy foods, and vitamins. But those were heady times.

Sources: Phyllis Reynolds, “Oregon Encyclopedia: Lithia Park,” at [Lithia Park](#); John Darling, “Ashland housing project targets Helman area,” *Mail Tribune*, July 26, 2011, at [Helman Springs Discussed](#); Joe Cowley, “Bathing Ghosts,” *Mail Tribune*, April 29, 1979, at [On Public Mineral Spring Pools](#); John Darling, “Restorative property: Buckhorn Mineral Springs,” *Mail Tribune*, June 19, 2005, at [Buckhorn Springs](#); Marjorie O’Harra, “The Colestin Resort,” Jefferson Public Radio: As It Was, March 24, 2005, at [Colestin Resort](#); “City of Ashland: Lithia Springs Historic Photos,” at [Images \(Including 1915 Railroad Flyer\)](#).