

Title:

Indian Legends and Victorian Bath Houses: The History of Eureka Springs

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522

Summary:

How do a few natural springs in Arkansas' Ozarks result in over 150 years of all American tourism? How, indeed?

Keywords:

Eureka Springs, Bath House, American Civil War, Healing Waters

Article Body:

Today the Arkansas resort town of Eureka Springs is a quaint, faux-Victorian tourist trap with an abundance of Bible-themed attractions. But the knickknack shops and family-friendly dinner theaters are really a natural outgrowth of a long history as a "vacation" destination reaching back to the Native Americans.

Eureka Springs has, unsurprisingly, several naturally occurring, mineral-rich springs, which have long been thought to be possessed of healing powers. In 1856 European settler called Dr. Alvah Jackson took the Indian legends at their word and used some of the water from Eureka's springs to "treat" an unspecified eye ailment suffered by his son. The ailment healed and his son's recovery was duly attributed to the spring-water. This led to the founding of Dr. Jackson's Cave Hospital, where many young men were "treated" with Eureka's spring water during the American Civil War, and the subsequent Dr. Jackson's Eye Water business post-bellum.

In 1879 Judge J.B. Saunders, a friend of Dr. Jackson's, visited the Basin Spring in Eureka, where he was allegedly cured of some type of degenerative ailment. Thrilled by the upturn in his failing health, the influential judge began promoting Eureka Springs nationwide. Before the end of the year the town of Eureka Springs was home to 10,000 people, and by 1881 it was the 4th largest city in Arkansas.

Eureka Springs soon became famous for its luxuriant Bath Houses. In 1889 The Basin Spring Bath House was built on Main Street; it was 4 stories high, with a bridge to the upper 2 stories arching over the street and providing housing for the water pipes. The 1901 Palace Hotel's baths used water from the Harding Spring, and featured an electric elevator, electric lights and steam-heating in

every room, making it the turn of the century equivalent of a 5 star hotel. At these and other Bath Houses visitors could slip out of their union suits for a hot or cold or shower, a massage or various kinds of baths: hot air, electric, medicated, radiant, vapor and more. The Palace and the Basin house are still standing today.

As the 20th century began to get its big, bloody, iron wheels turning up to speed, interest in mysticism began to wane, and this included the belief in "healing waters". The springs began to be more a sideshow than the main event, and most of the Bath Houses closed.

But Eureka Springs hung in there, adapting with the times, to remain one of Arkansas' premier tourist destinations. Sure, no one comes to be healed, but now they come to get hitched. Eureka Springs has become the Las Vegas of the Ozarks when it comes to quickie marriages (no blood test required), with over 4,000 weddings taking place there every year. Also, there are a lot of shopping opportunities for people who shop on vacation to enjoy. For the faithful it's worth the trip to Eureka Springs to gaze upon the 70-foot tall statue of Jesus, called Christ of the Ozarks that soars above the town. Eureka Springs has been packing them in for more that 150 years, now. Who can say why people will be visiting in 150 more?