

Hopes of success spring eternal in Suisun

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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Growing up in Germany, my childhood memories include summer vacations to various spas in the southern part of the country.

These places were complete with huge public swimming pools full of warm, bubbly mineral waters, downtowns filled with elegant shops and coffeehouses, and at the center, a lovely park where public concerts delighted audiences in the afternoon.

To this day, "taking the cure" is an accepted part of the German health-care system, where patients are sent to different spas to treat a variety of illnesses. Many of the types of bottled mineral waters sold throughout Germany carry an analysis of their mineral content. Doctors often recommend a specific brand to patients as part of their daily diet.

With these pleasant memories, I always think it a pity that no comparable health industry has grown up around the many mineral springs in California. Since the 1850s, efforts have certainly been made, but as private enterprises most never became very successful, let alone create a whole industry around them.

One such private effort took place right here in Solano County, near Fairfield, west of what now is Interstate 80 at Lyons Road. Local residents knew about the springs on the Armijo land grant, which they alternatively called Tolenas Springs, Suisun Soda Springs or Solano Mineral Springs.

In 1855, the discovery of a quarry of high-quality marble nearby drew much attention, leading to the formation of the Suisun Marble and Quarry Company.

The marble was exported to San Francisco and from there to the other end of the country. In 1857, the local newspaper reported "About four miles from town (Suisun City) in the hills between the Suisun and Laguna valleys is a lime and stone quarry. The stone that cannot be used for building or ornamental purposes is turned into lime. The company employs some 10 or 15 men, mostly Chinese, in the quarry.

"The day we were there, a stone was removed measuring 800 cubic feet and weighing seven tons. It was brought into the town and placed on a San Francisco schooner. From there is to be shipped to New York, where the value is about \$800 for ornamental purposes such as table tops, sideboards and mantles, giving them a variegated

appearance.”

Another journalist, this time from the Sacramento Daily Union, described the natural beauty of the stone in 1860: “We saw the Suisun marble quarry. The marble is of a superior quality, extremely beautiful and is very valuable. It bears every shade of the darker colors, from purple to mahogany, and from a wine color to olive brown.” Polished, it showed a beautiful finish, much like a bird’s-eye maple, said another source.

While the focus was on the marble, a chemist named Dr. John Hewston Jr. undertook the analysis of the soda springs running through and around the marble deposits. He reported a high content of sodium chloride, followed by carbonate of soda, carbonate of lime, carbonate of Magnesia, and iodide of potassium. According to him, the high mineral content indicated “remedial virtues superior to any other of the vaunted waters of California and equal to any in the world.”

This favorable pronouncement attracted Thomas M. Swan of Benicia to purchase the land around the Soda Springs in 1858.

The Honorable Thomas M. Swan was born in Harden County, Ken., on March 14, 1819, as the fourth son of Thomas Swan. He was educated at the Harden County Academy in Elizabethtown and graduated with honors. He then took up the study of law, first with Jesse Craddock and then under Kentucky Gov. John L. Helm, and was admitted to the bar in 1842. He served in the lower house of the legislature in 1848-49.

Then California beckoned, and he set out, crossing the Isthmus of Panama, to settle in Benicia on Jan. 27, 1851. By 1852, he appears to have acquired large tracts of land in Solano County. The Assessment Records of 1852 list him as owning

\$1,500 in personal property and

\$1,035 in land. As part of the partnership Swan & Marshall, he also co-owned another \$7,130 worth of land, making him a very wealthy person.

Within a short time, he was elected district attorney of Solano County, and two years later, in 1853, county judge. He also served in the lower house of the California legislature in 1855.

He moved on to settle in Fairfield on May 9, 1858, intrigued by the idea of developing a health resort around his newly acquired soda springs.

For the next 20 years, he spent much of his energy in the development of the health

resort. Most of his customers were local residents. Besides the construction of a bathhouse, he also had the mineral waters bottled and sold as "Tolenas Springs Soda."

Pamphlets extolled the medical propensities of the springs. The water has "a reputation for rare medicinal properties ... is highly recommended by the Medical Fraternity, and possesses medicinal properties not found in any other mineral water in the United States."

"To those suffering from a loss of virile power, this beverage is an absolute blessing, and to the aged and infirm it is a sustenance and comfort."

"It is a sure cure for dyspepsia or any other stomach trouble," providing "great value as a purifier of the blood and all diseases, such as tetter, scrofula, ecxema (sic) or salt rheum, and rheumatism are immediately relieved and permanently cured by free use of this water.

"In particular, for diseases of the urinary organs, where ordinary remedies known to medical science in most cases fail to reach the seat of these diseases, Tolenas Springs water acts directly upon the urinary glands, and not only affords the requisite stimulus when they become inactive, but increases their vigour (sic) and secretive power.

"... this water is also a mild cathartic, purifying and strengthening the abdominal organs, invigorating the stomach, and is an absolute specific against malarial disease of whatever name or nature."

Besides all these diseases, the waters also served as an excellent remedy for the common hangover. "Those suffering from the too frequent indulgence of alcoholic drinks will find this water a much more effective remedy than citrate of magnesia, seidlitz or bromide of potassium."

All these cures were contained in one bottle of "water charged with natural gas by the gnomes of the subterranean chemical works, and comes to the consumer absolutely pure from Nature's fount."

Despite these health claims and his ongoing efforts, the health resort did not attract the large clientele Thomas Swan had envisioned. By 1874, Thomas Swan is mentioned as living in the Fairfield-Suisun area as an attorney-at-law. By 1878, he is listed in the Suisun directory as the owner of 993 acres. It seems that he sold the soda springs and the resort sometime around 1878 to Mr. Thomas P. Hooper, who continued to operate the resort.

Though it did not become a famous attraction, local residents enjoyed visiting the grounds around the springs. On May 4, 1883, the Solano Republican gave a detailed description of a May 1 celebration at the Tolenas Springs.

“At an early hour on the morning of the first of May those of our townspeople who still slumbered were agreeably awakened to a realization of life’s pleasures by the stirring strains of an excellent brass band. As the music ushered in the day, time-honored, of picnics and merrymaking, the majority of our people, young and old, promptly responded to the call, and in a short space of time the streets and road leading out of town were thickly dotted with moving vehicles of every variety and degree, all headed for the famous Tolenas Springs, wither the musicians had preceded them in their conveyance.

“The fair sky turned black during the morning and it began to rain. Notwithstanding this unsettled state of barometrical conditions, however, some 500 jolly picnickers congregated upon the grounds at the Springs, and at once proceeded to enjoy themselves according to their individual ideas of pleasure. The onyx quarries, mineral springs, wild plants and shrubbery, pavilion, dancing floor, refreshment stands, etc., etc., all came in for a general inspection and patronage and were well worthy of the same. An excellent bar served to resuscitate the weary; also furnished sterling preventatives of poison oaks and snake bites. This feature of the arrangements was admirably conducted and equipped in every detail.”

The new owner, Mr. Hooper, seems to have made improvements to the grounds, which were much admired. “The substantial, commodious and ornamental structure recently erected for a pavilion could not be improved upon. It would be a credit to the metropolis. As our space is unusually limited this week, we are unable to give more than a meagre description of the more prominent features of this affair. In conclusion, we return our hearty thanks to the genial, whole-souled and accommodating proprietor, Mr. Thomas P. Hooper, and his amiable lady, for their kind treatment of representatives of this paper, who had the pleasure of feasting on some of the largest strawberries they ever gazed upon. The road leading to the springs has been put into splendid condition, and is now perfectly safe. After the picnic a dance was given at Hooper’s Hotel in the evening, which, we believe, was well attended. Although it labored under many disadvantages, this Mayday celebration proved a perfect success socially, and we trust financially, as the manager has been to great expense in preparing the grounds, and deserved a liberal support.”

Despite the enthusiastic attendance at the 1883 May celebration, the resort eventually slipped into oblivion. By the early 20th century, it seems to have been mostly forgotten. A fire sometime in 1924 destroyed what was left of the buildings.

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