

# Mystery of the healing waters in Tolenas

By Nancy Dingler

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Two centuries ago, in the 1800s, it became all the rage to “take the cure” in natural waters alive with sulfur and other curative minerals. Throughout Europe and America, the wealthy would flock to sumptuous resorts to be slathered in mud or to soak in hot waters that would soothe the body’s ills from indigestion to arthritis. Such a popular remedy did not remain solely the indulgence of the idle rich.

Soon resorts were being built to accommodate the middle class as well. Some of these resorts still remain, such as those found right here in Northern California, around Calistoga.

Fairfield could claim as part of its fame in 1859, to be part of “the cure.” Hutchings’ California Magazine sent their correspondent, J.A. Rankin, to report on the new resort opened by Judge Thomas Swan, who had purchased the property the previous year. “Among the various wonders that Nature has lavishly bestowed upon California, but few are more deserving of notice than her Mineral Springs.”

How did Judge Swan know of these Fairfield waters? The natural bubbling springs had been known for eons. The native Patwins, who were comprised of Suisuns, Tolenas and Yolotoys, to name a few, had long ago learned of the many springs and their locations. The water burbled as well as spouted up through the rocks, along the crests of the Suisun and Fairfield hills. The curative powers of the waters at the Tolenas site that Judge Swan purchased were particularly well known by the natives.

In 1855, the discovery of marble stone near the Tolenas Springs brought national interest. The Suisun Marble and Quarry Co. was formed soon after. The marble quarried from the site was shipped by schooner to San Francisco and from there, the stone found its way into homes and businesses on the East Coast.

The quarry’s operations were reported on in 1857: “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 it 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.”

With national attention focused on the quarry, a Dr. Hewston of San Francisco showed an interest in the natural spring that spouted 10 feet in the air just above the quarry. He

did an analysis of the water, announcing that he felt that the Springs “possessed of remedial virtues superior to any other of the vaunted waters of California and equal to any in the world.”

Thomas Swan had arrived in Benicia in January 1851, having traversed the isthmus of Panama. He had been a lawyer in Harden County, Ky., before moving to California. He quickly rose in prominence in his new home, becoming Solano County’s district attorney in his first year. By 1853, he was elected county judge and then re-elected in 1855 before running and winning a seat in the state Legislature in 1859. The year before the legislative post, he had read Dr. Hewston’s analysis, purchased the quarry with springs, then established a resort. Swan spent 20 years developing the springs. Part of the development and promotion was to bottle the water.

The bottles were labeled as Tolenas Soda Springs and were marketed statewide. Quite popular in San Francisco, the locally bottled water was reported to hold its own against other brands. Swan printed advertising pamphlets to extol and market the magical healing properties of the spring water: “To those suffering from a loss of virile power, this beverage is an absolute blessing, and for the aged and infirm it is a sustenance and comfort.” The Tolenas Soda Springs water remained popular until around 1905, then it just faded into history along with the resort. There does not seem to be an explanation as to why it disappeared, just another mystery in time.

The quarry continued its operation for a time. The clear, textured white onyx with light yellow veins, continued to be popular for ornamental clocks, mantels, vases and tabletops, finding its way into workshops in Vermont. When the marble and onyx lost their popularity and the markets dried up, the quarry produced crushed white rock for garden patios and roofs. In the process of producing the crushed product, a lot of blasting was done. The results of this blasting was to kill the “healing waters.” The waters stopped naturally spouting to the surface, disappearing mysteriously forever.

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