

Horn Springs Eternal:
Leisure, Health and Mineral Water in Middle Tennessee

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A drive through any city makes one realize the scope of the health industry in the United States. Health clubs provide opportunities for people to exercise, and stores provide nutritional supplements to assist in weight loss and the building of physique. The rise of this vast industry leads many to believe that the desire for a healthy lifestyle is a modern phenomenon. However, health has been a thriving business throughout the history of the United States.

In Summer Places, Brendan Gill and Dudley Whitney write that thousands of towns dot the landscape with “springs” in their names.¹ Many of those “springs” began as health resorts that provided mineral waters to patrons wanting to improve their health. Long before health clubs and supplement stores, mineral spring resorts thrived on the health consciousness of the nation. The resorts varied in success and popularity. Some, such as Saratoga Springs, New York gained fame throughout the world as a leisurely destination. Others operated in virtual anonymity, known only to the people who lived in the area. Despite the differences, the mineral water resorts of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries became favorite vacation retreats for Americans in the developing middle class and upper class.

The remnants of the mineral water industry can be found scattered throughout the nation, and evidence of a thriving business can be found in Tennessee. Perhaps, Red Boiling Springs is the most famous of these, and it remains a viable historic attraction. However, Red Boiling Springs provides only one example of dozens of springs that dotted the landscape in the last two centuries.

The early nineteenth century saw mineral springs begin a long era of success, and many entrepreneurs saw the potential for profit. In Sumner County, Richmond Tyree

owned Tyree Springs. The resort sat on two hundred acres, and by 1825 “the most celebrated watering hole in the state” provided Tyree with a net worth of \$2,000.²

Bledsoe’s Creek, another Sumner County establishment, provided water described as “highly medicinal” and “equal if not superior to any in the state.” Another description stated:

The fountains are numerous and the waters are uncommonly cold, clear and palatable: their constituent qualities are somewhat variant, but they all contain portions of sulphur, soda, salts and magnesia... There is no doubt of their medical efficacy.³

Furthermore, the water described could be enjoyed in “spacious and comfortable” accommodations built in a “peculiarly picturesque” landscape.⁴

Of course, Sumner County did not contain all of the mineral resorts in Tennessee. Robertson County boasted Robertson’s Springs, a place where the water contained “sulphur and small portions of neutral salts, which are known to be serviceable in obstructions of the liver, and other abdominal viscera.”⁵ The people of Cheatham County and the surrounding area enjoyed visiting Kingston Springs and Sam’s Creek Springs, and residents of east Tennessee vacationed at Sulphur Springs.⁶

Obviously, selling mineral water and offering a place to drink that water became a popular and profitable business before the Civil War. The war briefly interrupted business, but people returned once the fighting ceased. Many older resorts continued to prosper. Bledsoe’s Lick was “noted for mineral water, much resorted to by invalids and pleasure seekers, and ‘mounds’ and antiquities.”⁷ However, competition for the older resorts increased as new mineral springs developed throughout the state. Horn Springs, in Wilson County, provides an excellent example of the retreats that developed in the late nineteenth century and faltered in the twentieth century.

In 1810, Hickory Ridge, an area that would later be known as Horn Springs, became the home of Ethelred Horn, who received a 640-acre land grant.⁸ Horn and his family settled the land and farmed for several decades. Upon Horn's death in 1846, James Baker Horn, his son, inherited the land and for two decades continued the farming tradition. However, in 1870 the younger Horn made a discovery that would change his profession and the name of the area where he lived.⁹

Horn raised livestock as well as crops and needed an additional water source for his stock. While digging a new well, he found a spring flowing with water that tasted strange.¹⁰ Horn realized that the water contained minerals and sent a sample to Dr. J.M. Safford at Vanderbilt University. The doctor analyzed the water and discovered that it contained:

carbonate of lime, carbonate of magnesia, carbonate of iron, carbonate potash, sulphate of soda, sulphate magnesia, sulphate of lime, chloride sodium, phosphoric acid, salacia acid, carbonic acid, sulphuretted hydrogen and organic matter.¹¹

Safford also stated that the water contained more salt than any water in Tennessee and concluded that the water would cure ailments of the stomach, liver, blood and kidneys. Finally, Safford proclaimed that the water from Horn's well would prevent colds, cure Bright's Disease and act as a blood purifier.¹²

When Horn received the report, he saw the mineral water as an opportunity for profit. Several examples of successful mineral resorts stood in middle Tennessee, and this spurred Horn to enter the health industry. He built onto his home and began advertising Horn Springs as a mineral resort.¹³ Little is known about Horn Springs Resort during its early years, but the enterprise must have been successful. Upon James Baker Horn's death in 1893 he bequeathed the property to his son, James A. Horn.¹⁴

The year of James Baker Horn's death proved important in the history of Horn Springs Resort. Its ownership changed hands to an ambitious proprietor and obtained a valuable asset. Colonel Jere Baxter had failed in his attempt to purchase the North Carolina and Saint Louis Railroad. Recovering from this setback, Baxter built the Tennessee Central Railroad and completed it in 1893. The track passed within a few feet of the Horn Springs Mineral Resort.¹⁵

Horn saw the railroad as an opportunity to expand the resort and began an aggressive advertising campaign that claimed, "The most valuable medicinal waters ever discovered for certain ailments make Horn's Mineral Springs the most desirable summer resort in Tennessee." He included Safford's report from years before and compared the springs to those found in Germany. The combination of the railroad and advertising worked, as more people visited Horn Springs than ever before.¹⁶

As Horn Springs became more popular an expansion was needed, therefore in 1894 builders completed an addition to the main building. In 1898, Horn added a dining room and more guest rooms, and through the turn of the century the resort continued to grow. In fact, Horn expanded the business by shipping water throughout the eastern United States. As the Horn Springs Resort name spread, more visitors came, and in 1907 an annex and a dance pavilion were constructed. Over 200 invited guests took the train from Nashville to tour the enlarged hotel and attend the opening ceremony. Dignitaries made speeches and guests dined and danced into the night. To commemorate the occasion, the revelers placed a fruit jar in the cornerstone of the building. The jar contained a note written by Judge Beard, the keynote speaker, and a list of the guests in attendance. The

elaborate party marked the opening of a newly renovated resort but also marked the beginning of the hotel's peak in popularity.¹⁷

During the 1910s and 1920s, Horn Springs Resort continued to be a popular retreat for the affluent citizens of Nashville and middle Tennessee who traveled by train through the hills of Wilson County. When the train arrived, the vacationers saw on their left a two-story hotel and a three-story annex with 3,000 feet of porches.¹⁸ The passengers disembarked from the train and walked down a concrete sidewalk that passed through a grove of trees toward the hotel. The travelers first passed a croquet court with an ornate gazebo beyond it. As they scanned the grounds, the visitors could see many gardens and cobblestone paths that guided guests to the outdoor dance floor. As the people neared the hotel, they could peak into the dance hall and bowling alley. From the train to the hotel, the guests could see that Horn Springs offered a peaceful and activity-filled retreat where they could leave the stresses of the city behind.

Through the years many people visited the resort. Businessmen brought their families for the entire summer season to escape the heat of the city. The men commuted to their jobs daily or boarded the train to Horn Springs on the weekends, and their wives renewed friendships from past summers. As their mothers spent the days with friends, young men and women used the time to court members of the opposite sex. However, Horn Springs offered more than a place for socializing. The elderly and ill came to the hotel to drink the water, and literary minds arrived to use the peace and tranquility for inspiration.¹⁹ Corra Harris spent many summers at Horn Springs and wrote Recording Angel there in 1911 and later wrote The Circuit Rider's Wife at the resort. Virginia Frazer Boyle, a poetess, also spent several summers vacationing at the resort.²⁰

An analysis of the hotel register provides a better understanding of the resort and its patrons. A study of the seasons of 1910, 1911 and 1912 leads to several conclusions about the time that represents the peak of popularity of Horn Springs. The 1910 season ran from the end of March to the beginning of October and saw 1,214 people enter the register. According to this document, Fridays and Saturdays were, consistently, the busiest days of the week. This leads to the notion that most people came for the weekend or a week's vacation. However, entries in the register are made every day. Therefore, the hotel saw a steady stream of patrons throughout the entire season.²¹

The vast majority of entries consist of couples, families and women. In fact, the name of a single man is rarely seen. Also, the names of women are often grouped together, with each listing the same town as a place of residence. For example, on July 29, 1910 Mrs. L.G. Bennett, Miss Agnes Gordon, Miss Agnes Bennett and Miss Margaret Moss registered into the hotel and recorded their home as Franklin, Tennessee. The similarity in place of origin and the fact that the same person wrote all of the names leads to the conclusion that the women traveled together. Theoretically, the group consisted of a mother, daughter and two of the daughter's friends going away for the weekend.²²

The books also provide information on visitor's points of departure. Most entries state that people came from Nashville or another city in middle Tennessee or southern Kentucky. However, the registers also show people from New York, Minnesota and Italy. Despite the travelers from outside the region, most visitors to Horn Springs came from the southeastern United States.²³

The seasons of 1911 and 1912 are similar to the 1910 season. In 1911, the number of guests increased to 1,319. However, there is no difference in the type of clientele and the

places the came from. The 1912 season saw the numbers drop dramatically to 903, but the cause of this reduction has not been determined.²⁴

Studying the hotel registers of 1910, 1911 and 1912 leads to several conclusions about how the affluent people of the era spent leisure time. First, people rarely traveled alone. They vacationed as a couple, a family or a group. Frequently, women traveled together without a male escort. Perhaps, they were single, or their husbands were busy with their own activities. Also, an older woman usually accompanied young women while young men often traveled without a chaperone. Second, people did not travel far from home. Most of the visitors traveled from Tennessee or southern Kentucky. Occasionally, someone signed in from outside the immediate region. Perhaps, they were visiting friends or relatives in the South, and they all went to Horn Springs together. Finally, the popularity of mineral springs can be surmised. Horn Springs received an average of 1,145 visitors a season, and it was only one of many mineral springs resorts in the area. Undoubtedly, the various springs garnered success and held important places in the lives of the affluent in Tennessee.

Every guest that visited Horn Springs began their day the same way. The morning began with the delivery of a hot cup of mineral water, after which the patrons went to the dining room for breakfast.²⁵ The people would then fill their day with the many activities offered by the resort. Young people would bowl or swim while women would write letters and mail them from the Horn Springs Post Office.²⁶ As the day progressed, the activities became more formal. Dinner was served in the main dining room and was strictly a coat and tie affair.²⁷ After dinner activities varied, but frequently the proprietors held dances. One advertisement read:

One of the best orchestra available will be at the service of the guests throughout the season, furnishing the best music every morning and evening for those who like to dance.²⁸

Another advertisement stated that “Graham Baird and His Tennesseans” was one of the most popular bands to play at the resort.²⁹

James A. Horn built his hotel into a successful business, but another business saw success as well. Hamilton Springs sat just over the hill from Horn Springs, and a heated rivalry developed between the two owners. The events at a 1912 political rally in the Leeville community provide an example of the competition. R.A. Gotto, a detective for the Tennessee Central Railroad, witnessed and recorded the incident. The candidates had spoken when the sponsor of the rally spotted Horn and his rival, Jim Hamilton, in the audience. He asked the two men if they would like to say a few words about their businesses. Horn spoke first and stated that Horn Springs was the greatest health and recreation point between Nashville and Knoxville because it produced the most outstanding mineral water in Tennessee. Hamilton spoke next and stated:

I concur fully with his statement about it being the best mineral water in the state of Tennessee, because Jim Horn is drinking out of Jim Hamilton’s branch. Therefore, Gentlemen, when you desire the original water, come to the Hamilton Springs Resort and get the best. Thank You.³⁰

Despite Hamilton’s claim, Horn Springs became the more well-known of the two resorts.

James A. Horn made Horn Springs a successful resort, but it began its decline shortly before his death. In 1928, the Department of the Interior performed a geological survey of the ground water of middle Tennessee. The test included water from Horn Springs and concluded that the water from the spring contained a large quantity of minerals that had been absorbed from the various types of rocks in the area. However, the water did not contain an unusual amount of minerals and possessed no curative qualities.³¹ Basically,

the only effect the minerals had on the water involved a rancid taste and odor. By this time, however, most people came to Horn Springs as a getaway rather than a health resort. In 1929, the Great Depression devoured the nation's economy and Horn Springs along with it. The people who had visited the resort spent time trying to survive financially rather than take vacations. Horn died in 1933 during the midst of the depression.³²

Joseph W. Horn became proprietor upon his father's death and tried several ways to increase business. He advertised special rates for weekend parties, luncheons, dinners and bridge parties. Rooms cost \$3 per day, and rooms with adjoining baths cost \$17.50 per week. Rooms without a bath cost \$16 a week. Horn also held a dinner and dance every Saturday night by the new swimming pool.³³ These efforts paid off as a few guests began to visit the old hotel. In 1935, H.L. Davis, a prominent novelist of the time, wrote Harp of a Thousand Strings while staying at Horn Springs as his wife recovered from an illness. At the time of his visit, Davis learned he had received the Pulitzer Prize for Honey in the Horn. Upon hearing the news, he decided to stay at Horn Springs rather than travel to New York City for the ceremony.³⁴

In 1937, Joseph Horn demolished the old hotel and built a new structure with a colonial design. The new hotel contained a dining room with an adjacent private dining room and ballroom. Horn also included a private card room where guests could gather for cards or other activities. In addition, the building contained living quarters for the Horn family and employees of the resort.³⁵

These changes ushered in a new era for the resort, however the days of grandeur at Horn Springs had ended long before. Ironically, during the demolition of the older

building workers discovered a part of the glorious past. Cards used for advertising fell from the wall during the destruction. They read, "Horn's mineral water for Sale here."³⁶ In 1945, Horn sold the property to Dr. R.D. Wilkinson, who remodeled the hotel once again and added a miniature golf course to compliment the remaining activities of bowling, croquet and swimming.³⁷

A look at the hotel registers from this era shows that the improvements made by Horn and Wilkinson created success for a while. The season of 1947 saw 1,150 entries. However, the clientele had changed as most of the visitors participated in organizations that used the establishment for group functions. For example, the Vanderbilt University chapter of the Sigma Chi Fraternity, the Lebanon Girls Cotillion Club and the Tennessee Department of Employment Security Districts III and IV used the hotel for various reasons.³⁸

Couples and families still came to the resort, but they usually traveled from the surrounding counties and towns. In 1948, the number of visitors dropped to 642. The return of the Sigma Chi Fraternity enhanced this number as they held their annual house party. In the 1950s the numbers fall further. The seasons of 1952 and 1953 saw a total of 121 visitors, and they were all members of the Delta Gamma Beta Sorority. Due to the return of the sorority, 117 people stayed at the hotel in 1954.³⁹

The hotel registers during this time tell a different story than the registers discussed earlier. Horn Springs no longer provided a destination for the affluent. Those people had stopped visiting Horn Springs during difficult economic times, and by the end of the Great Depression and World War II, a new generation searched for ways to spend their leisure time. Unfortunately for Horn Springs and other resorts, they did not want to spend

this time doing the same things that earlier generations enjoyed. This generation owned automobiles that took them further than their parents and grandparents could ever imagine. They drive past Horn Springs and other mineral resorts to new vacation spots with a faster pace and more to offer.

Horn Springs remained for those who wanted to spend a day to swim or have a picnic. Only college students stayed at the hotel because it provided an inexpensive place to remove themselves from the professors and their parents. The young men and women that traveled together would have been a strange sight during the Victorian Era when young women never traveled without an escort.

Late in its existence the Horn Springs Hotel burned, but it and other mineral springs died long before that. Horn Springs faded into history in a similar way as Epperson Springs in Macon County. A newspaper article written about Epperson Springs could be an epitaph for Horn Springs and other places like it. The article reads:

Epperson Springs has gone, to come no more, so far as present indications go. It is true that the same healing waters flow...but the hotel building is gone and those who knew the resort in its heyday are now old men and women and Epperson Springs is hardly more than a memory now.⁴⁰

Mineral springs resorts, popular for more than a century, no longer play a major role in American society and leisure. Perhaps people learned that the water was not medicinal, or perhaps the world began to pass these places on highways and interstates. Mineral resorts became part of the past, and the nation quickly forgot about them. The health and resort industries continue, but Horn Springs, and places like it, have been replaced by workout facilities and amusement parks.

¹Brendan Gill and Dudley Whitney, Summer Places (New York: Methuen, 1978), 33.

²Sherry Falcon. "Will of Richmond C. Tyree." 20 August 1825.
<<http://www.rootsweb.com/~tnsumner/wtrty.htm>> (7 September 2004).

³Easton Morris. "The Tennessee Gazeteer." 1834.
<<http://www.rootsweb.com/~tnsumner/gazet.htm>> (7 September 2004).

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶J.M. Allen. "Historic Cheatham County Tour Sites."
<<http://www.rootsweb.com/~tncheath/tour.htm>> (7 September 2004); Norval F. Ziegler.
"Letter by Laura Ziegler Lewallen." 1924.
<<http://www.rootsweb.com/~tnmcminn/LauraZieglerLewellan.htm>> (7 September 2004).

⁷"Rural Sun." Vol. 1, No. 37 19 June 1873.
<<http://www.rootsweb.com/~tnsumner/sumnrurl.htm>> (7 September 2004).

⁸Gene Sloan, "Wilson County Gets Wise to Its Recreational Advantages," The Nashville Banner Magazine, 1 August 1937, 2.

⁹Joseph W. Horn, "History of Horn Springs Community, 1933," p. 2, Horn Springs Collection, Charles A. Bell, Lebanon, Tennessee.

¹⁰Josephine Murphy, "Springs Party," The Nashville Tennessean Magazine, 18 July 1948, 10.

¹¹Horn's Mineral Springs, "Advertisement," Horn Springs Collection, Charles A. Bell, Lebanon, Tennessee.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Murphy, "Springs Party," 10.

¹⁴Joseph W. horn, 2.

¹⁵Frank Burns, ed., History of Wilson County, Tennessee: Its Land and Its Life, 2d ed. (Nashville, Tennessee: Benson Printing Company, 1986), 94.

¹⁶Horn's Mineral Springs.

¹⁷Bob Adams, "Notes for Newspaper Article, 1937," 2, Horn Springs Collection, Charles A. Bell, Lebanon, Tennessee. Unfortunately, the fruit jar has not been found.

¹⁸Dixon Merritt, ed., History of Wilson County, Tennessee: Its Land and Its Life (Nashville, Tennessee: Benson Printing Company, 1961), 272.

¹⁹Murphy, "Springs Party," 10.

²⁰Adams, 4. The Circuit Rider's Wife later became the movie, I'd Climb the Highest Mountain.

²¹Guest Register, Horn Springs Hotel: 1910, 1911 and 1912, Horn Springs Collection, Charles A. Bell, Lebanon, Tennessee.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Murphy, "Springs Party," 11. The Horn Springs Resort gained notoriety for its food. Late in his presidency, Harry S. Truman took part in a ceremony at Cumberland University to honor Cordell Hull. After the ceremony, local dignitaries took Truman to Horn Springs for lunch. He signed the register, "Harry S. Truman – Independence, Missouri.

²⁶Burns, 232. A letter has been found describing events at the resort. The writer and the time period in which it was written has not been determined.

²⁷Murphy, "Springs Party," 12.

²⁸Horn's Mineral Springs.

²⁹Burns, 452.

³⁰Merritt, 272. The rivalry between the two resorts affected the Tennessee Central Railroad as well. Instead of using one depot, they built two depots five hundred feet apart.

³¹Department of the Interior, Study of Ground Water in Middle Tennessee, by A.M. Piper, Geological Survey, 1 (Washington, D.C., 1928).

³²Adams, 3.

³³Horn Springs Hotel, "Advertisement," Horn Springs Collection, Charles A. Bell, Lebanon, Tennessee. The swimming pool remained long after the hotel closed. It continued to be a popular attraction until the 1970s.

³⁴Burns, 412.

³⁵Adams, 1.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Murphy, "Springs Party," 11.

³⁸Guest Register, Horn Springs Hotel: 1947, 1948, 1952, 1953 and 1954, Horn Springs Collection, Charles A. Bell, Lebanon, Tennessee.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Timothy R. Meader, Jr. "Cal's Column." 14 February 1952
<<http://www.rootsweb.com/~tnsmith/ccarticles/Feb14-ABC-1952.htm>> (7 September 2004).