

White Sulphur Springs: An 1800's Louisiana Spa Resort

While going through my Grandmother's papers, I found an old typewritten report on the history of White Sulphur Springs. It was compiled by the LaSalle Parish Development Board probably in the 1960's. I had heard of the Springs in LaSalle Parish. I remember as a little girl, my grandparents took me to this small covered bubbling fountain out in the middle of nowhere. The air smelled like rotten eggs. My grandparents filled up a couple of milk jugs with the smelly water, but I wanted no part of it! Little did I know that it was a huge tourist spot in the mid 1800's. People came from all over the country just to drink and bathe in the water, hoping to be cured of their ailments.

In 1833, a man named Joseph P. Ward was passing through the area when he discovered the spring. Seeing the potential investment opportunity, Joseph decided to build a resort around it. He would call it White Sulphur Springs, after his native town in Virginia. Joseph constructed a hotel, dance hall, saloon, slave quarters and many other buildings. Brothers Jim and Rezin Bowie were said to be frequent gambling guests of the saloon.

Word spread about the sulfur water's supposed healing properties and the business soon poured in. It is said that wagon loads of crutches and canes had to be carried away due to cured patrons! By the 1850's, the resort had expanded to two hotels, a livery stable, cotton gin and grist mill, a post office and a school. White Sulphur Springs Resort was making money hand over fist.

One of the guests of the resort, a woman known only as Jennie J., described a trip to the resort in the *Louisiana Democrat* newspaper of August 15, 1894. Jennie had been staying at the Bethard Hotel at the springs for five weeks, "*...the cool spacious, rambling house, on top of the hill, that catches every breeze from Heaven blown.*" The day would start with a walk down to the spring to drink as much water as they could, followed by breakfast. The men would then head off to go fishing. Jennie described how the men would come back from their fishing trips loaded down with trout, perch and bar fish. She relates that "*...trout weighing over five pounds are numerous.*" After lunch, the guests would take a nap followed by four o'clock coffee and a walk in the woods. Jennie described her hiking trips as only a Victorian era lady can; "*I love the woods, the beautiful woods and restful, peaceful hills. I feel like I could lay down a burden of care and forget that I had ever borne it, for the solitude of the forest comes like a rest after a fretful day. Here cares slumber, aching thoughts are lulled by murmuring [sic] sounds, and the wind thus soothed, quickening pulses lose their feverish throb and peace and rest come to the weary.*" Once the sun set in the west, the sounds of violin, guitar and harmonica would drift out of the dance hall. Jennie stated that guests would gather to dance the quadrille, waltz, reel and something called the pea vine for hours into the night.

Near the turn of the century, only the Whatley House remained to accommodate guests. The springs had been on the decline ever since the Reconstruction Era. White Sulphur Springs resort was given its death blow in 1911. The president of the Louisiana Board of Health, Dr. Oscar Dowling had the water analyzed. Dr. Dowling announced the water had no healing properties. As a matter of fact, it was a health hazard. The water was laced with bacteria. The resort was abandoned and the buildings eventually fell to time.

On the side of Highway 8, about twelve miles southwest of Jena, you will find a little octagon roof and a low concrete wall sheltering what is left of White Sulphur Springs. Is the bacteria gone? I haven't heard if the water has been retested in modern times so drink at your own risk. Locals still come to fill their jugs at the springs with no apparent ill effects. If you happen to stop by, hold your nose and drink deep! It may just be the cure for what ails ya!

Lora Peppers, a Monroe native, grew up in Bastrop and graduated from ULM. Her love of history dates back to childhood when one of her favorite activities was visiting local cemeteries to examine headstones. She also loves to travel, the Great Smoky Mountains National Park being her favorite place on Earth. Her job as a genealogist and historian has given her the opportunity to lead many lectures and author several books. She can be reached by e-mail at loradpeppers@hotmail.com.