

Eternal Springs

After four decades of disuse and a parade of frustrated owners, Arizona's first resort is finally reborn.

BY
LAUREN LOFTUS



POSTCARD COURTESY MARK HUGHES

THE ROAD TO CASTLE HOT SPRINGS hasn't changed much in the last century. At 8 a.m. on an impossibly sunny morning in July, the heat is already smothering and oppressive. Humidity from the latest summer storm makes the air thick and viscous like gravy. Steam seems to rise from the wild-burro-riden wash bed made verdant and lush from the four inches of rain that sent a flash flood ripping through the canyon a week ago, turning the sandy, rocky road into a muddy mess.

It's no wonder that the site of the historic resort built around an ancient hot spring – 50 miles north of Central Phoenix, deep in a shaded nook of the Bradshaw Mountains near Lake Pleasant in Yavapai

County – has always closed during the summer monsoon since it opened in 1896. And when the place reopens this fall after 42 years, the tradition of operating seasonally, from October to May, will continue.

“The storms and the easily flooded dirt road add to the eerie sense of foreboding,” says Steve Sampson, director of sales and marketing at Westroc Hospitality, managing partner of the resort, while navigating his Jeep across the bumpy 10-mile turnoff from Carefree Highway (SR 74). Eerie and foreboding might not be the ideal word choice. Daunting, yes; unnerving, even. But “worth it” comes to mind most as the Jeep turns a corner and the green, shady palm oasis of Castle Hot Springs unfurls like a mirage made permanent in the sweltering desert.

Sampson says the best part of his job on the renovation of the resort, which has been closed to the public since a fire destroyed part of the property in 1976, is the flood of people who've reached out since the renovation was announced three years ago, eager to share their memories of the place. “Every few months, I know I'm gonna get a call out of the blue from someone saying their family member used to stay here or own it,” he says.

And many have owned it. Following the fire and closure, at least five owners, including Arizona State University, stepped up with sky-high dreams of re-vamping the place – turning it into a conference center or a weight-loss-focused health spa. But, like clockwork, years would pass, precious little would happen and the “for sale” sign would come out once again.

“When you put pen to paper, you realize this isn't going to make a lot of money,” Sampson theorizes of why so many short-term owners ditched plans of bringing the resort back to its halcyon days of grandeur. The most common alibis: The resort is too remote and hard to access, too expensive to repair relative to its return on investment, and too ill-suited as a high-volume hotel capable of hosting swarms.

So what was different this time? Sampson says it's “a labor of love” for the new owners – Mike and Cindy Watts, co-founders of Sunstate Equipment and noted Arizona philanthropists, who bought the place at auction in 2014 for \$1.95 million and then sunk more than \$25 million to renovate the property (Watts won't specify exactly how much). “It's never going to be a profit machine,” Sampson says. “They just want to bring it back to life and restore it to its original grandeur.”

The resort's resurrection is something of a mirage itself, of course – life would soldier on here regardless of bulldozers and construction crews. Just as it did before Native American settlers found it hundreds of years ago, and the white man after that, the spring will flow no matter who's around to admire, drink and bathe in it. It's a rare jewel of living green in the brown desert.

HEALING WATERS

Tens of thousands of years ago, the displacement of volcanic rock created an enormous cistern about 10,000 feet below the earth's surface under the Bradshaw Mountains. According to a 2014 report from the Arizona Geological Survey, the emergence of Castle Hot Springs is controlled by fault contact between a Precambrian basement of granite and schist (rocks that have been transformed due to years of pressure and heat), and Miocene age volcanic rocks. To the non-geologist: Essentially, old rocks rub against really old rocks, sending warm water up and out of the earth – about 200,000 gallons per day, to be exact.

The water trickles out of a rock wall at a nearly scalding 122 degrees – the hottest non-volcanic spring known in the world, according to the Arizona Heritage

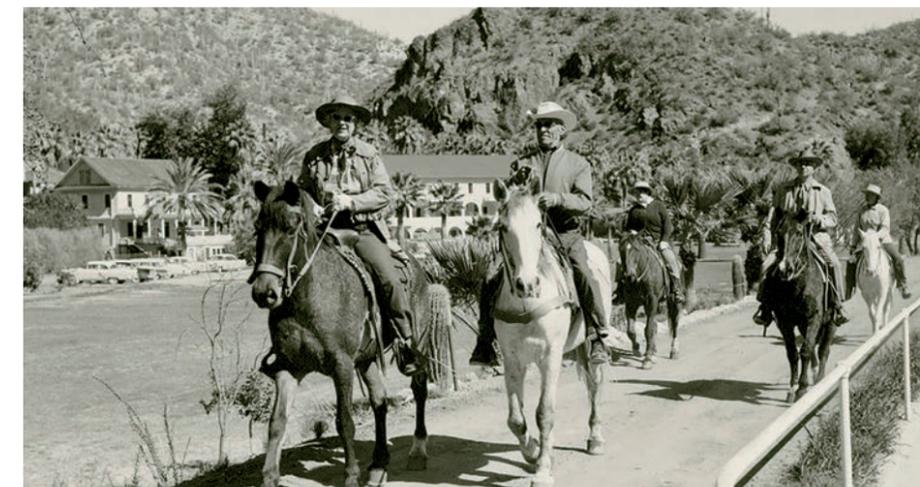
“**EVERY FEW MONTHS, I KNOW I'M GONNA GET A CALL OUT OF THE BLUE FROM SOMEONE SAYING THEIR FAMILY MEMBER USED TO STAY HERE OR OWN IT.**”



PHOTOS COURTESY ARIZONA STATE ARCHIVES/CASTLE HOT SPRINGS



Clockwise from left: Bathers at the resort in 1896; fashion show at the pool circa 1930s; horseback riders circa early 1950s



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Waters project at Northern Arizona University. The pools formed by damming the waterflow are crystalline and odorless, an anomaly among typically sulfur-smelly hot springs elsewhere.

Yavapai and Apache tribes who first discovered the springs believed them to be medicinal and healing. As legend goes, the Apaches – a notoriously fearsome tribe of warriors – were so mystified by the miraculous water that they allegedly called temporary truces to allow warring factions to soak in the medicinal waters. Water trumped war.

During the Indian Wars centuries later, Colonel Charles Craig, then-commander of Fort Whipple in Prescott, and his troops happened upon the springs while pursuing Apache raiders in 1867. The surrounding jagged cliffs jutting up from the sandy floor reminded the men of foreboding Renaissance castles, hence the name. In an 1877 story in the *Weekly Arizona Miner*, it's said the springs were able to clean all dirt from "a miner's shirt after a three month's prospecting tour in about five minutes."

Word spread about the mystical water, and Castle Hot Springs became a popular spot for desperate consumptives and lungers who believed the desert's arid climate and hot mineral water could cure them – the Arizona Geological Survey found high levels of fluoride and low TDS, or total dissolved solids, like inorganic salts of calcium and magnesium.

An 1898 railroad booklet on health resorts of the Salt River Valley issued by the Santa Fe Route passenger department enumerates the benefits of "climate cure." Called "The Persia of America," Arizona is lauded as the "land of sunshine... where lung and throat troubles can be relieved." On Castle Hot Springs, the

booklet claims "the waters... have proven successful in curing maladies of the blood as well as in generally toning up the system."

Railroad entrepreneur Frank Morrill Murphy – who owned the Congress Mine near Wickenburg – caught wind of the springs and purchased the land in 1896, reportedly spending \$75,000 to clear a 23-mile road to the springs from the train station in Morristown (then called Hot Springs Junction) served by the Santa Fe Route and build permanent accommodations. His brother, Nathan Oakes Murphy, the 14th governor of Arizona Territory, moved the territorial capital from Prescott to Castle Hot Springs in the winters.

Via stagecoach, Murphy could deliver resort-goers to the springs in a cool four hours. The 1898 health resorts booklet describes the early hotel thusly: "The accommodations, while good, are rather limited; but this deficiency will soon be remedied. Extensive improvements are being made and it is proposed to open a new hotel, wholly modern in its equipment." Electric lighting and a telephone booth were installed – some claim it was the first telephone in Arizona with a number of 1. Private bungalows were built along with the doomed Palm House, containing a kitchen, dining room, bar and dozens of rooms. The springs were dammed, making three swimming holes of progressively cooler temperatures, and a large lawn was cleared for golf, tennis and polo. A 1913 advertisement published by Arizona Good Roads Association says rooms started at \$4 a day.

Years before statehood, Arizona officially had its first resort – earning the nickname the "grand dowager" of Arizona resorts. Not unlike the *Downton Abbey* connotations that moniker conjures, Castle Hot Springs soon became a refuge for the rich, famous and elite.

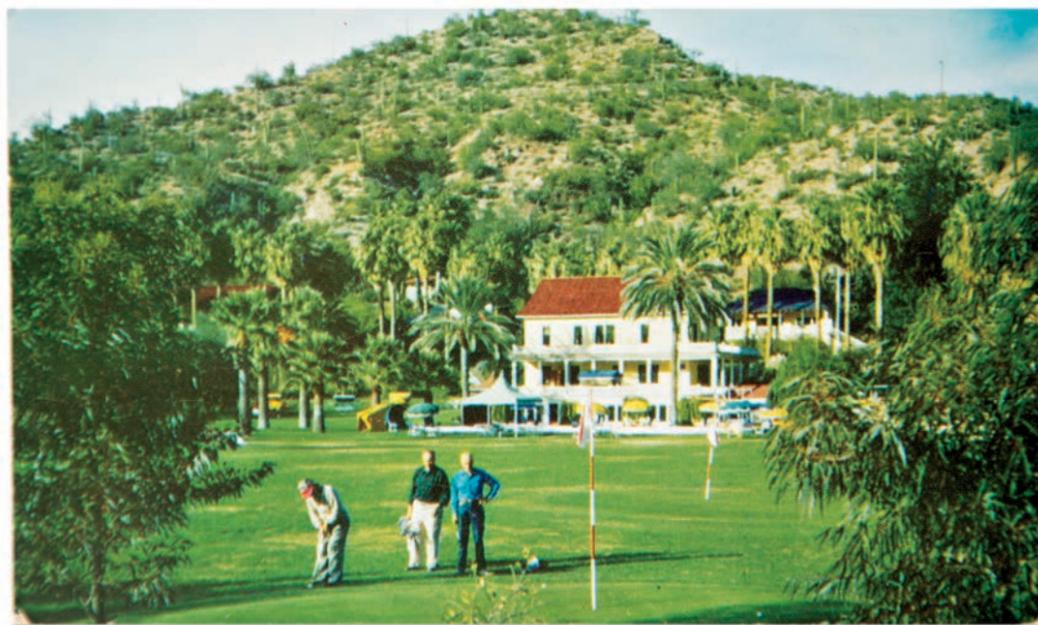
FLUSH WATERS

"The tuberculosis patients were long gone, but the springs were still the main attraction... Castle Hot Springs attracted a particularly beautiful set of people," the narrator explains over a silent 1916 film advertisement titled "One of the Beauty Spots of America" curated by the National Film Preservation Foundation into a 2011 collection of 40 films called *Treasures 5: The West 1898-1938*. "Building roads and planting palms and fruit trees amid the cactus did more than make the springs accessible, it welcomed visitors into a more refined civilization and defined the place as a garden retreat in the middle of the inhospitable desert," the narration continues as the camera pans through the resort's iconic palm tree-lined drive (there are 524 in total), lingering on corseted ladies in impractical white dresses and mustachioed men in safari hats.

The narrator, University of Notre Dame history professor Annie Gilbert Coleman, describes the elite resort culture around the turn of the century into the 1920s and '30s as "a little example of bigger Western history themes; one of those is Americans taking control of Western places and redefining them for their own purposes." While most of those narratives are related to military or economics, the Castle Hot Springs story is one of recreation and leisure. Here, she says, guests "could get away with things they wouldn't be able to do at home, including climbing over rocks, swimming in skimpy clothes, splashing and playing with members of the opposite sex."

Like private jets of today, in the early 1900s, wealthy families would attach their private rail cars to commercial locomotives and go where they pleased. Some of them were fond of hitching a ride to Morristown to spend a month or two at the springs in cottages named just for them. Such Richie Riches included the

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: COURTESY MARK HUGHES; GRAVING HAVEN/CASTLE HOT SPRINGS (2); BY LAUREN LOFTUS



likes of the Rockefellers out of New York, the Wrigleys – of baseball and chewing gum fame – and their fellow Chicagoans, the agriculture and media pioneering McCormicks, as well as the storied Vanderbilts, known for "summering" all over the U.S. (but "wintering" here). When Frank Murphy died in 1917, he left the resort to his attorney, who improved and revamped some structures. It was sold several times over the following decades, passing from private millionaires to the U.S. military to hotel corporations.

In addition to titans of industry, Castle Hot Springs also hosted major names in U.S. politics – including both presidential Roosevelts, Herbert Hoover and Calvin Coolidge. During World War II, the resort was used as a rehabilitation center for injured soldiers, including a 28-year-old John F. Kennedy, who convalesced there for three months in 1945 to recover from a back injury sustained from the sinking of his Naval boat. Though, rumor has it, the war hero's party boy personality had him itching for the dance clubs of Phoenix rather than the overbearing quiet of Castle Hot Springs.

Clockwise from this page, top: The Kennedy Lodge, pre-restoration; the Stone House (chapel) fell into disrepair, losing its roof; a hot spring pool on property; a vintage postcard shows putting practice in the '60s.



WATER FOR ALL

A little more than a decade later, fresh out of the United States Marine Corps, Max “Lobo” Henry got a job as the resort’s chauffeur and truck driver. “I was 21 years old – it was the best job I ever had,” he says from his retirement home near Downtown Phoenix of the one season (1958-59) he worked at the resort, when he received \$170 a month plus room and board. “[Resort guests] could rent me for the day, I’d drive them to Wickenburg or Scottsdale... they’d turn me loose with \$100 in tips and I could buy all my cowboy clothes.” Once, he recalls taking a Mr. Fowler McCormick to survey a large parcel of land in Scottsdale. “He bought all that land, and it became McCormick Ranch.”

By the time Henry came on the scene, the resort was more accessible to families of less extraordinary means, though employees and guests weren’t exactly considered equals. “We weren’t supposed to mingle with the guests, but you know, you’d take ’em out on a moonlit ride and you get to know them pretty well,” Henry says of the times he’d help out on horse excursions. “They wanted us to tell ’em Wild West stories... We used to kill burros and barbecue them – a lot of the guests thought that was something exotic,” he says. “Most of the guests were rich white people, but I don’t think there was a set rule [of segregation]. If you could afford \$100 a night, you could be any color you want.”

Just outside the resort was Champie Ranch, in operation since the 1880s, which provided the horses for trail rides. Ibbie Champie, now 75 and living in Chino Valley, recalls “dudes” [wranglers] and resort guests



alike coming to dances in the one-room schoolhouse on her family’s property while she was growing up. “My dad was so colorful, so was my uncle – they were world champion rodeo riders. We’d put on ropings and rodeos... and my dad would take guests mountain lion hunting,” she recalls. “There were some [guests] that were snobby, but the most wealthy were very nice – the least wealthy were the ones that had the worst attitudes. What do you call them? ‘New Money.’”

For the most part, Champie says, the guests were enthralled with the ranching lifestyle, which must have seemed hopelessly rugged and romantic to the East Coast upper crust. “They were pretty envious of our lifestyle,” she says. Each summer, when the resort closed to guests, the Champie clan was welcome to take dips in the pools. “We swam in there all summer long. One of my cousins drove a car into one of the pools once!”

Days before the resort was due to open for the season in 1976, fire leveled the historic Palm House. Accounts vary, but either an errant ember in a guestroom fireplace or faulty wiring are to blame for the blaze. Shortly after, it was donated to the nonprofit Arizona State University Foundation for use as a conference center by owner Mae Talley, whose husband Franz founded the aerospace engineering Talley Industries in Chandler. During this time, the resort became a popular place for Phoenix teens to sneak soaks in the springs. Dave Alford, president of the Parada del Sol, was one of them. “My friends and I rode horses around there,” he says. “Everybody wanted to go to Verde [Hot Springs, near Sedona] because it was closer and clothing-optional. Castle Hot Springs took effort to get there.”

When ASU decided to cut its losses and sell in 1982 – a history brochure of the foundation from 2013 says the resort’s “operating costs were threatening to sink the foundation in a sea of red ink” – Sherri Finkbine bought the place with business partner Barbara Van Ess. Well-known in Phoenix as Miss Sherri on the children’s television show *Romper Room*, Finkbine had visions of turning Castle Hot Springs into a health spa. “This was the 1980s – Beverly Hills diet, oat bran, all that,” Finkbine’s daughter, local documentarian Kristin Atwell, says. “You go to the retreat, you lose a few pounds, you come back feeling fab.”

Her mother owned the place for four years but couldn’t get it off its feet. “She dreamed big and she went for it and she lost it all,” Atwell says. Now working with the resort to film a documentary on the history of Castle Hot Springs, Atwell says the springs were a place of healing for her family after her parents’ divorce. “It was the coolest place... we’d go out there and we’d play tennis and golf, we would soak and my brother would sing [Bob] Dylan at the lodge,” she remembers. “Even though it was financially devastating for my mom... on a family level, it really reunified us and gave us an opportunity to know each other again.”

PHOTOS COURTESY GRAVING HAVEN/CASTLE HOT SPRINGS (2); EDWARDS DESIGN GROUP



NEW WATERS

“The water is really the through line,” says Atwell of how she plans to focus her documentary. “Without it, it would be just another dude ranch. The water provides the alchemy to make it this special, one-of-a-kind pocket – it’s literally an oasis in the desert.”

Indeed, the new resort – featuring 32 brand new accommodations that will average about \$400-\$600 a night, including grand “spring bungalows,” smaller “sky view cabins,” the three-bedroom Historic Cottage, as well as 25 employee units and the cheery, yellow Wrigley cottage remodeled into a duplex to permanently house married general managers, Maureen and Terry Bauer, and executive chef Christopher Brugman, re-assigned from Westroc’s Mountain Shadows property, and his wife – is centered around water.

In addition to two main soaking pools at the source, there will be a huge, 9-foot-deep swimming pool using spring water, outdoor bungalow bathtubs with piped-in spring water and an on-site brewery that will use hot spring water in its signature brew, Lithium Lager.

Spring water will irrigate the sprawling grass lawn and the citrus trees around the pool. It will irrigate the large garden outside the restaurant for harvest-to-table dining – open only to resort guests – planted by Ian Berger of Brother Nature Farms in Scottsdale. (Sampson promises 37 varieties of heirloom tomatoes will be grown on-site – many of which will find their way into a CHS signature bloody mary mix.)

Arizona’s own landmark Groundwater Management Act of 1980 came to fruition, fittingly, at the springs. Kathleen Ferris, then-executive director of the Arizona Groundwater Management Study Commission, says the irony of about 100 state and city politicians, agriculture and mining lobbyists making immense, impactful decisions about water use while soaking in the springs was lost on her. “I don’t even think people thought about that,” she laughs. “I just think for everybody that was there, they’ll never forget the experience... It was a historic location for historic action.”

As for whether there’s ever been controversy over the private ownership of a natural resource, the Bureau of Land Management thinks not. “These lands have been out of federal ownership since the late 1800s, and the location of the hot springs themselves with surrounding structures does not make it likely that the BLM would be interested in acquiring this land,” says Mariela Castaneda with the BLM Phoenix District office.

Still, “it’s hard to believe the springs are private property,” says Westroc CEO Scott Lyon. His father, legendary late Valley mall developer Rusty Lyon, long had a fascination with Castle Hot Springs and followed its sale from one hopeful investor to another, including the likes of Schlitz Brewing Co. heirs the Trainer brothers. When the Wattses bought the resort at auction in 2014 through a Phoenix-based investment group, they partnered with Lyon to navigate the tricky property management via Westroc. (The Westroc roster also includes Sanctuary on Camelback Mountain, Hotel Valley Ho and Mountain Shadows.) “A lot of the historic structures were in disrepair, it was in bad shape,” Lyon says of the abandoned resort. “The only thing that never changed, and hasn’t changed for eons, is the water source... so the most unique thing we did was resurrect a creek [from the springs] and build bungalows along it.”

It’s a gospel of Arizona real estate since pre-statehood, says Atwell: “If you have water in the desert and this exceptional winter climate, people will come... You had [resort founder] Frank Murphy recognize that if there is water involved, it will create your business model – to me, it’s a microcosm of our state.”

So, it seems, the many owners of the resort between its closure in 1976 and now needn’t have worried about creating something flashy and modern. Build it near water and they will come, the paraphrased mantra goes. And at Castle Hot Springs, the water never stops flowing.

PM

Clockwise from this photo: A rendering of the new hot springs soaking pools and cabana; the renovated Historic Cottage; Cottage interior, garden and front porch

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