

# Everlasting Spring

The Agua Caliente Hot Mineral Spring shaped the desert's First People and continues to be a sacred source of water for the Tribe.

BY MONA DE CRINIS

1947: WHITTIER COLLEGE - FAIRCHILD COLLECTION









PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY



**OPPOSITE:** The third Bathhouse.  
**ABOVE:** The third Bathhouse, circa 1947.

they needed to embrace the spring, to pay it homage and respect but utilize it on a daily basis," explains Tribal Member Moraino Patencio, Vice Chairman of the Agua Caliente Historic Preservation Advisory Board.

One of the most enduring stories is the legend of the spring's genesis as told by elder Francisco Patencio in his book *Stories and Legends of the Palm Springs Indians*. It begins with *Tu to meet*, who was also known as *Sungrey* and was one of the five headmen of the Fifth People. Patencio writes that "*Tu to meet* was tired and sick and lame, so he took his *whó-ya-no-hut*, his staff of power," which he struck in the ground and twisted with such force that he created the spring's orifice. He named it *Séc-he* [meaning the sound of boiling water], "which is up to the earth and on

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Tribal Chairman**

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the earth, which is to be forever, never to dry up, never to go away, but to be there forever and always for the sick."

"Our legends tell us that the spring contained very powerful beings, such as the Blue Frog, who was the primary being in there," Patencio concurs. "When our headman descended into the spring to visit the *nukatem* for healing and rejuvenation, he went from creature to creature. He finally found Blue Frog, who was able to cure him of his illnesses and give him a renewed life."

During early times of the *Kauisik* clan — the original people who inhabited the hot mineral spring area, long before outsiders discovered this desert paradise — the spring was the soul of community providing water for bathing, drinking, cooking, rejuvenation, and general sustenance. The early *Kauisik* people revered it as a living entity flush with metaphysical properties, an intermediary meeting point



between the physical world and a supernatural underworld steeped in *i'va'a* — the essential generative force which gave birth to all earthly things.

The belief that water sources were connected underground led to a sense of interconnection among Indigenous communities in the region that helped stimulate trade and reciprocal relationships. Archaeological collections featuring coastal shells support the exchange of food and other commodities among tribes in Southern California and beyond.

In 1857, natural events compelled the Agua Caliente People to adapt to a shifting landscape. The Great Fort Tejon Earthquake rerouted the

generous stream tumbling over smooth boulders in Tahquitz Canyon, inhibited the year-round flow that supplied much of the Agua Caliente's water and forcing them to rely even more heavily on the hot spring for their immediate and long-term survival and prosperity.

A few years later, in 1863, the William Bradshaw Trail stagecoach followed an old Indian trail route cut through the Banning Pass traveling from Los Angeles to the Arizona gold fields. The Southern Pacific Railroad followed in 1876 as the first steam engine chugged between L.A. and Indio.

As non-Indian settlers began planting roots in the desert, interest in the region grew and so did word of the hot waters.

In 1889, the spring's reputation for its restorative properties resulted in a three-year lease agreement between the Tribe and these entrepreneurial newcomers, which resulted in a rustic bathhouse being erected over the spring. This original structure was replaced in the mid-1910s. By this time, the lease had expired and the spring's rightful stewards — the Agua Caliente People — controlled the area and the enterprise. In the 1930s as the Palm Springs area grew in popularity, the Tribe rebuilt the bathhouse with funds from another land lease.

As the city of Palm Springs eventually developed, infrastructure demanded the lowering and widening of

**ABOVE:** The 1960s Spa Hot Mineral Baths & Pool.

Indian Avenue (now Indian Canyon Drive). The 1953 project required a geological survey to ensure that the spring's flow remain undisturbed. A 20-foot-tall steel bottomless collection tank was installed to protect the spring and pumps added to propel the spring's discharge to storage tanks for use in the baths.

In 1958, the third bathhouse was razed after the federal government granted the Tribe the right to sign a then-unprecedented 99-year lease with developer Samuel Banowitz, who began construction on the Palm Springs Spa the following year. The new spa, dubbed

“the world’s most beautiful spa,” opened to great acclaim in January 1960. A few years later, in 1963, Banowit & Associates added a 229-room hotel on the eight-acre parcel of the Agua Caliente Indian Reservation’s Section 14 that today is also home to the popular Agua Caliente Casino Palm Springs. In 1971, the Riverside County Historical Commission designated the Agua Caliente Hot Mineral Spring as a historical site.

For almost six decades, the spring’s storage and pumping system functioned below street level until time and wear took their toll. The original beams and collection ring corroded, leaving the spring and surrounding area vulnerable.

In late 2014, the Agua Caliente Tribal Council contemplated a retrofit and replacement of the spring’s collection ring and hardware. The project required extensive excavation around the hot spring to reduce the pressure and allow removal of metal components (footings, pumps, beams, and the ring). As this would impact buildings and landscaping, the Tribe took this opportunity to revitalize the property — which involved the teardown of the 1960s hotel and spa building, followed by the Agua Caliente Hot Mineral Spring collection ring retrofit project.

Bulldozers and backhoes began demolishing the former Spa Hotel in early 2015 to make room for today’s Agua Caliente Cultural Plaza, which is emblematic of the First People’s indigenous ties to the desert and a tribute to the beloved spring — the eternal heart of Agua Caliente cultural heritage, life and identity.

Even during demolition, the Tribe remained ever vigilant in safeguarding the spring’s mineral-rich hot waters. Crews delicately and methodically replaced the spring’s brittle

collection ring with a new stainless steel ring less susceptible to corrosion and erected support structures well beyond the fragile main orifice.

“We had companies and experts consult with us on where to place the Plaza buildings so they wouldn’t disturb the water as it came up,” Agua Caliente Tribal Chairman Jeff L. Grubbe said.

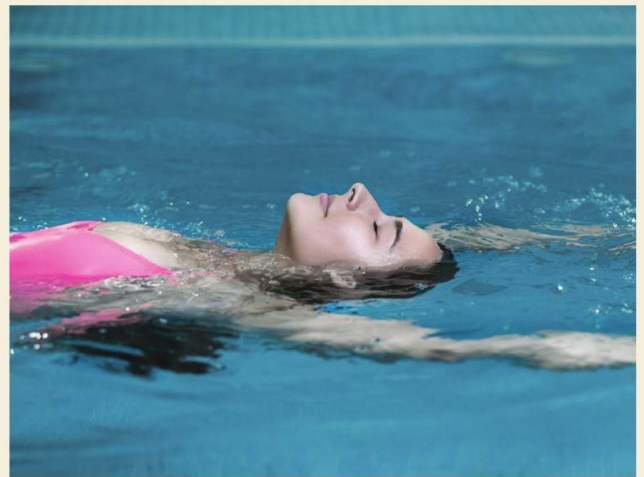
The first phase of the 5.8-acre development features a plaza, gardens, walking paths, a new Agua Caliente Cultural Museum, and The Spa at Séc-he.

“This is where our creation story is based,” Grubbe acknowledged. “It’s one of the most important pieces of land we have. For us to be able to start over from scratch and build a Cultural Plaza that reflects us as a people — our history and culture and traditions and how we got here — is very special to us.”

When the Tribe first entered discussions about rebuilding this Reservation parcel in downtown Palm Springs, it was understood that, from a financial standpoint, the optimal move would be relocating or expanding the casino, explains Tribal Member Patencio. “But there are other things besides making money that are important to us. When we talked about this as culture, as heritage, there was no question that we would place culture above commerce.”

The decision to build the Agua Caliente Cultural Plaza was viewed as not only a pathway to enlightening others about Agua Caliente culture and traditions but also a way to celebrate and showcase the Agua Caliente Hot Mineral Spring.

“That was a big tribal decision, and everyone agreed that we need to go forward with this,” Patencio said. “We decided to build an open space for the hot waters, so they’re always protected.” 🍷



## THE TAKING OF THE WATERS

For the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, the Agua Caliente Hot Mineral Spring has always provided a consistent well of power and prosperity. It has offered critical water supply when natural events such as earthquakes and droughts dried up other sources and created a reliable stream via the spring’s high-pH silky warm water infused with a wellness-promoting mineral mix that relieves stress and addresses skin conditions, such as dryness, redness, eczema, and rashes.

Naturally warmed by deep geothermal energy, water from the spring emerges from the spring’s orifice at approximately 105 degrees and is rich in bicarbonate and carbonate, calcium, chloride, magnesium, potassium, sodium, and sulfur.

Sulfur alone contains considerable therapeutic properties in helping soften tissue and easing muscle aches and joint inflammation. It is a key element in collagen synthesis and is commonly found in skincare products from healing ointments to acne treatments.

For centuries, the Agua Caliente People utilized this

resource for their wellbeing and later shared it with others through various incarnations of bathhouses and resorts.

Prior to the 2015 demolition of the former Spa Hotel, the “Taking of the Waters” was a main attraction for visitors and locals alike. Today, The Spa at Séc-he once again presents the opportunity to dip body and spirit into the restorative hot waters and soak in its ancient curative baths.

Tribal Member Moraino Patencio, the last person to take the waters before the ongoing redevelopment of the area, says he’s looking forward to absorbing not only the minerals but also “the spiritual aspects — the rebirth, regeneration, and re-invigoration offered by the spring itself.”

“We’re all looking forward to getting back to that clear connection to our cultural heritage and the healing aspect of grounding us in what is our place in the world,” he explains. “It’s where we recharge ourselves. When you consider that this water hasn’t seen the top side of the earth in 12,000 years, it’s like you’re stepping back in time, healing, and absorbing history.”