



ANDY STOLAREK



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LEFT: A postcard from the early 20th century features the Agua Caliente Bathhouse, a rustic structure situated over the waters. OPPOSITE: Ancient waters from the Agua Caliente Hot Mineral Spring flows into a tub at the now-closed spa at Tahquitz Canyon Way and North Indian Canyon Drive.

A Story of Healing

Exploring Agua Caliente Hot Mineral Spring's past, power, and enduring presence.

Long before Marilyn and Elvis, glitzy film festivals, and extravagant spa treatments, there was the water. Water that fell into the rugged desert canyons as rain. Water that melted into the mountains when the seasons turned and warmed the snow. Water that slowly seeped deep into the earth, heated by natural geothermal energy, and collected in an underground reservoir a mile and a half below the surface.

Water that found its way back to daylight thousands of years later, forced by pressure through a mineral-rich chimney and released as a bubbling hot mineral spring. Even today, that water is as precious as it was in the beginning. It's the hot mineral spring that serves as namesake to the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians.

This is the story of that water — the Agua Caliente Hot Mineral Spring. ►►



TOP: Black and white photograph featuring the Agua Caliente bathhouse, built circa 1910. **ABOVE:** Black and white photograph featuring a view of the 1930s bathhouse. The sign reads: "Time Limit 20 Minutes. Do Not Use Soap." **RIGHT:** Widening of Indian Avenue (Now North Indian Canyon Drive) at Tahquitz intersection in 1953. Entry to massage area of bathhouse visible at right.

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LEFT: A color postcard, circa 1963, featuring the Palm Springs Spa, with a colonnade reminiscent of a Roman bath and a statue of a water nymph. The Spa Hotel tower is visible in the background.

THE HISTORY

The Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians has been conscientious keepers of the Agua Caliente Hot Mineral Spring, located in what is now downtown Palm Springs, a city named after the spring and its attendant oasis. Long before non-natives discovered this desert paradise, during the time of the Kausik clan — the original Cahuilla Indians who inhabited the area — the sacred spring provided irrigation, potable water, warm baths, and healing powers.

According to Tribal Member Moraino Patencio, vice chairman of the Tribe's Historic Preservation Advisory Board, the great drought of 1897 compelled two neighboring clans, the Panik and Wanakik, to join the Kausiks for survival. "Each clan had its own water supply, but none were as reliable as our mineral spring," Patencio says. "Not only did [the spring] unify the three clans here, but it also integrated us with the outside world."

In 1863, the William Bradshaw Trail stagecoach sought a route through the Banning Pass, from Los Angeles to the golden fields of Arizona. The Cahuilla embraced the stagecoach route across the harsh desert using the traditional trade routes and watering

sites, establishing trade with the travelers. The Agua Caliente also later helped build the railroad while securing free passage for themselves and their harvest to the L.A. market. With the first steam engine chugging between Indio and L.A., the Southern Pacific Railroad followed in the 1870s. The railroad had a dramatic impact on the lives of the Cahuilla people when the federal government placed traditional Tribal lands into square mile sections and granted the odd-numbered parcels to the Southern Pacific Railroad. When the reservation was first recognized by President Ulysses S. Grant in 1876, the Tribe was given the remaining even-numbered parcels. This allocation exists to the present day as the Agua Caliente Indian Reservation.

And so it went that by the 1880s, the Agua Caliente began inviting settlers to plant roots in the desert around the healing spring. As interest in the area grew, so did word of the hot waters. In 1889, the spring's reputation for possessing restorative properties resulted in a three-year lease agreement between the Tribe and the settlers, the latter of whom erected a rustic bathhouse over the waters. By the mid-1910s, the original structure near Indian Avenue (Indian Canyon Drive today) fell into

disrepair and was replaced. By this time, the Tribe owned and operated the enterprise, and, 20 years later in the 1930s, the Tribe rebuilt the bathhouse with funds from another Section 14 land lease, upgrading the signage to further drive tourism.

A City of Palm Springs project in 1953 that widened and lowered Indian Avenue required a geological survey to ensure that the spring's flow remained undisturbed. The installation of a 20-foot steel bottomless collection tank protected the hot mineral spring and the pooling water collected for use in the spa baths.

In 1958, the third bathhouse was razed after the federal government granted the Tribe the right to sign a then-unprecedented 50-year lease with developer Samuel Banowit, who began construction on the Palm Springs Spa the following year. The new spa, dubbed "the most beautiful bathhouse in the world," opened to grand acclaim in January 1960. A few years later, in 1963, Banowit & Associates added a 229-room hotel on the 8-acre parcel of Section 14. Since 1971, The Riverside County Historical Commission has designated the Agua Caliente Hot Mineral Spring a historical site. ►►

BELOW: Published in 1943, *Stories and Legends of the Palm Spring Indians* features the words of the late Tribal elder Francisco Patencio. In it, he recounts how the hot mineral spring played a part in daily existence, providing sustenance and protection to the Tribe. **MIDDLE:** Moraino Patencio, vice-chairman for the Tribe's Historic Preservation Advisory Board. **RIGHT:** Painting depicting the mythical Moon Maiden, *Menil*, by Lisa Patencio.

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COURTESY OF LISA PATENCIO

THE SPIRIT

A Cahuilla legend retold by Tribal elder Francisco Patencio — Moraino Patencio's great-great uncle — in the mid-1900s offers this colorful tale about the creation of Agua Caliente Hot Mineral Spring: "The head man, *Tu-to-meet*, was tired and sick and lame, so he took his *whó-ya-no-hut* [staff of power], which he struck in the ground. He twisted it around and caused the water of a spring to come out. ... He named it *Sec he*, meaning the sound of boiling water, which is up to the earth and on the earth, which is never to dry up, never to go away, but to be there forever and always for the sick."

Considered a living being, the hot mineral spring was the heart of Tribal life. In *Stories and Legends of the Palm Springs Indians*, published in 1943, Patencio writes that the native people were at first apprehensive of the spring's powers and believed the hot waters were a portal to the underworld where the *nukatem*, or ancient sacred beings, lived. The *Kauisik* people would offer food and prayers prior to bathing to appease the spirits and keep the clan safe. Over time, the hot mineral spring became part of traditional existence, providing sustenance and protection.

"*Menil*, the Moon Maiden, told the people this was our ritual, to come to the spring and bathe so your spirit is protected," tells Moraino Patencio. "She had been attacked by other spirits and taken away from us, but she left us with this knowledge." Patencio adds that he believes he is spiritually aligned with the hot mineral spring. "We don't consider ourselves different and apart from the First People," he says. "And the First People included the animals, the palm trees, and the locations that were created for us, so we have to pay them respect and see to their needs." ►►

Where the Water Comes From

Geological studies show that the Agua Caliente Hot Mineral Spring is not linked to the Coachella Valley aquifer — the desert's main source of drinking water. Results from a U.S. Geological Survey study released in 2011 confirm that the spring water comes from its own reservoir 1.5 miles below the surface. The estimated temperature of this deep thermal water is between 160 and 180 degrees Fahrenheit. As pressure pushes the water up toward the earth's surface through a chimney of denser matter, the temperature drops and the water emerges at approximately 105 degrees at an average of 24 gallons per minute.

The USGS study goes on to suggest that the spring's genesis is likely the result of a fault intersecting with a buried ridge of the San Jacinto Mountains, essentially creating a pathway for the spring to reach the surface. Carbon-14 dating indicates that the water bubbling from the spring's main orifice is 12,000 years old, created near the end of the last ice age — older than the ages of the Sphinx and the Giza Pyramids combined. Perhaps most remarkable about this ancient spring is that it remains untouched by other water sources. Overall, the water's quality has not changed appreciably since it was first tested in 1876. — M.D.

Agua Caliente Spring Water Analysis*

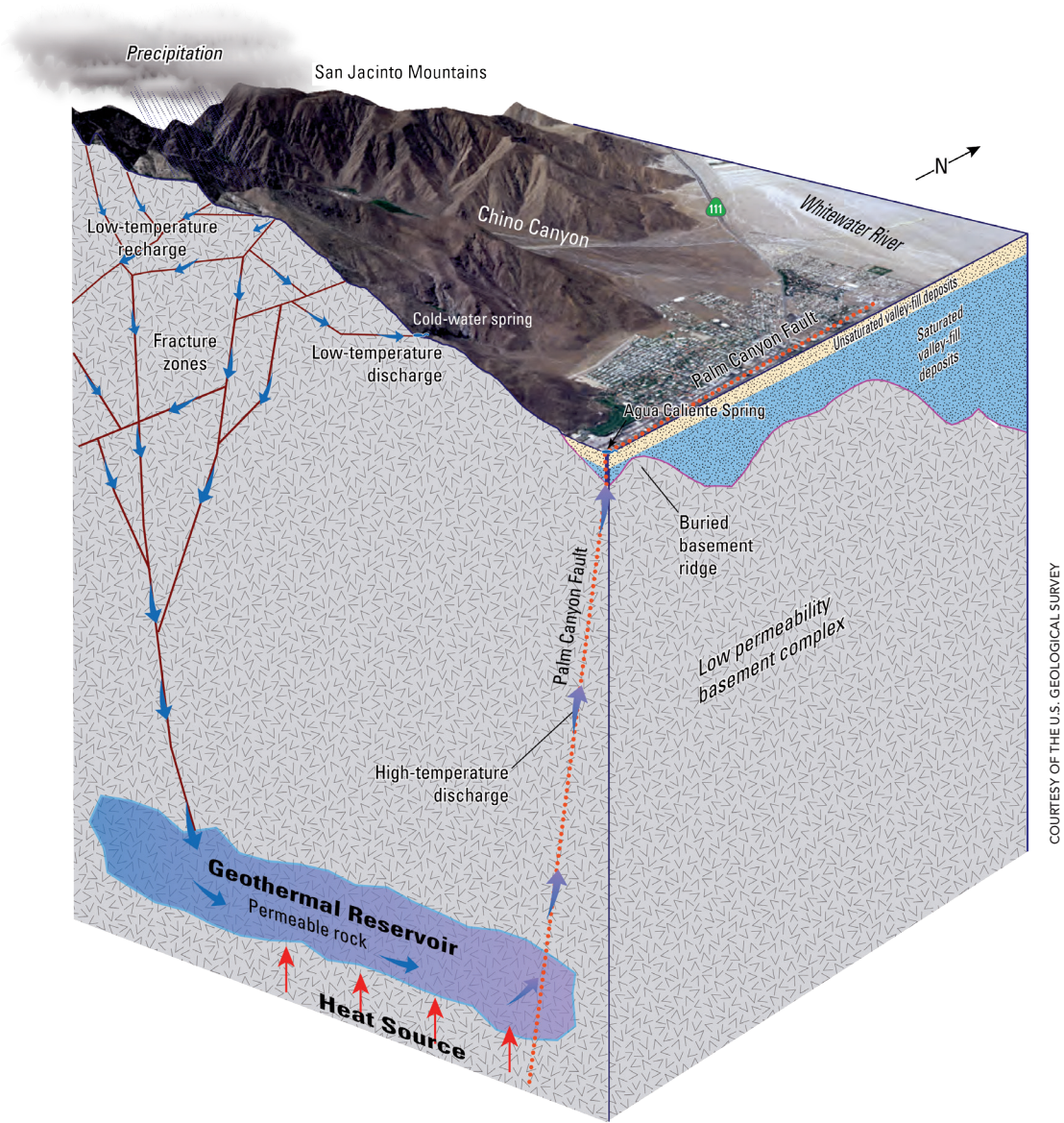
Bicarbonate: 6
Calcium: 3
Carbonate: 48
Chloride: 25
Hydrogen-ion activity: 9
Magnesium: 2
Potassium: 2
Sodium: 72
Sulfate (Sulfur): 40

*Parts per million

Benefits of Soaking

According to a study by the Mayo Clinic, soaking in hot mineral water increases heart rate while lowering blood pressure, which provides the same benefits of exercise with less stress to the heart. Bathing in a hot mineral spring can deliver a variety of benefits, which includes increasing the flow of oxygen-rich blood throughout the body and providing healing to the body. The skin absorbs the minerals, promoting feelings of well-being.

The source of water to the Agua Caliente Hot Mineral Spring in the Agua Caliente Spring study area, California. From the 2011 USGS survey.



RIGHT: Actress Irish McCalla (*Sheena, Queen of the Jungle*) inside the new spa facility with the daughter of a Tribal member. **BELOW:** Postcard, circa 1920s, of the Agua Caliente Bathhouse.

For the Tribe, the Agua Caliente Hot Mineral Spring is a great source of power. “It helped us through the drought and also created a market for our culture and healing powers, bringing people here to enjoy what we have always had,” Patencio says. Indeed, over the years many generations of guests experienced the therapeutic powers of the Agua Caliente Hot Mineral Spring. Its water is silky and mild with a very high pH. A 10-minute soak in the slightly sulfuric waters is said to relieve stress, ease muscle aches and joint inflammation, and help treat skin conditions such as dryness, redness, eczema, and rashes.

For the Tribe, the spring is a source of deeper healing. “*Sec he* is where we recharge ourselves and our connection with this place and with our spirits,” says Patencio. “It’s hard to conceptualize that this water hasn’t seen the top side of the earth in 12,000 years. When you soak in it, *Sec he* embraces you and you’re stepping back in time, healing and absorbing history.” — Mona de Crinis

The Dawn of a New Era

These very special waters are currently closed to the public. In July 2014, the Tribe made the decision to close the downtown hotel and spa and take action to protect and preserve the hot mineral spring for future generations. “We have a responsibility to respect our environment and play a leadership role in the future of Palm Springs,” says Tribal Chairman Jeff L. Grubbe. “It is the place where it all began — the site of our natural hot mineral spring, for which our Tribe and the City of Palm Springs were named. It has been more than 50 years since we’ve made significant investments in and around this valued cultural resource. They are long overdue. And the time is now.”

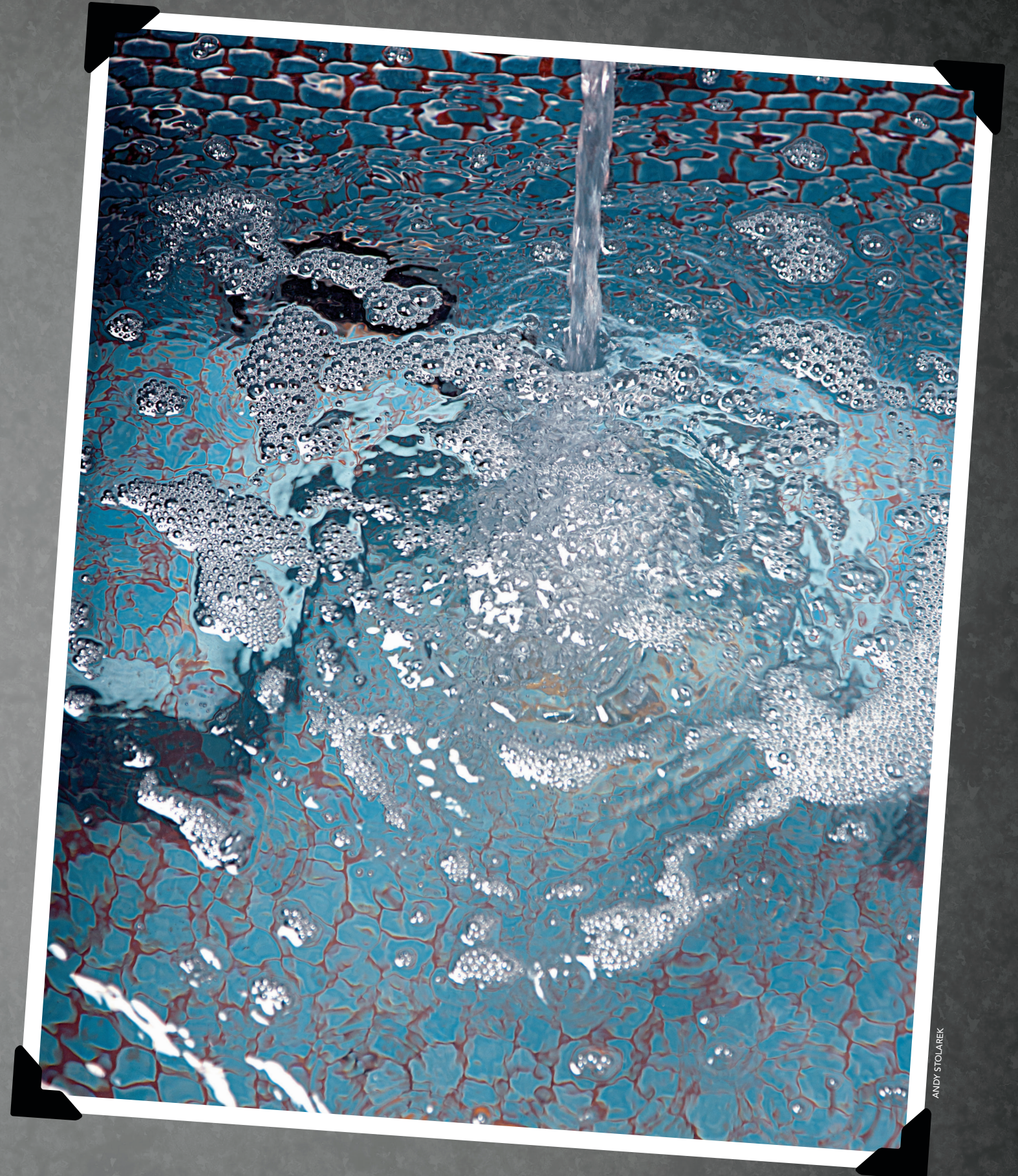
Visit www.visionaguacaliente.com to stay up to date on the future of the Agua Caliente Hot Mineral Spring. — M.C.



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