

Eternal Spring

A new steel ring will complete the retrofit of the Agua Caliente Hot Mineral Spring collection system, ensuring its healthful benefits for generations to come.

By Mona M. de Crinis

Winds shift and seasons change. A quaint village swells into a sophisticated resort town. Soon, steel supplants wood and asphalt blankets the once-dirt roads. With each spin, the world transforms, lives unfold, and the pace of progress quickens.

Yet in downtown Palm Springs, the waters of the Agua Caliente Hot Mineral Spring effervesce unfazed, as they always have.

For centuries, the Tribe and its people have been the spring's faithful guardians. They once revered it as a living entity with a source of great power and a place of healing — a connection point with a spiritual underworld populated by ancient sacred beings (*nukatem*) — some with malicious potential. They relied on it for fresh water, bathing, agriculture, and community, and later shared it when others came for its curative properties. Even as its use, purpose, and meaning shifted, the Agua Caliente Cahuilla and their descendants have always and shall continue to rely upon, respect, and protect the Agua Caliente spring.

“We don't consider ourselves different and apart from the First People,” says Moraino Patencio, a member of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians. “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 ourselves.”

As the original and everlasting stewards of the hot waters, the Agua Caliente Band walks the path of its forbearers with unflinching conviction through an ever-evolving political, social, and economic landscape. Even through several incarnations of the Hot Mineral Spring buildings throughout the past 150 years, preserving the spring remains the top priority.

In 1953, the City of Palm Springs widened and lowered what was then called Indian Avenue, bringing the street precariously close to the hot spring's main orifice. This action prompted a geological survey ensuring that the spring's flow remains undisturbed. To protect the spring from possible contamination and contain the naturally heated water that would later supply baths in the Spa Hotel, engineers



ABOVE: This Agua Caliente bathhouse was built in the 1910s in what is now downtown Palm Springs; it offered direct access to the healing mineral waters. **LEFT:** The bathhouse had various incarnations over the years.



TOP: Road widening construction in 1953 of what was then Indian Avenue (now North Indian Canyon Drive) by the city of Palm Springs created the need for a holding tank because the street covered the Agua Caliente Hot Mineral Spring. **ALL OTHERS:** In order to protect the integrity of the historic spring, the Tribe embarked in April 2015 on a retrofit of the 62-year-old holding tank.



constructed a bottomless tank using a large steel ring supported by structural beams and fitted with a sturdy cover. The collection ring or tank measured 20 feet in diameter with a depth of 10 feet and included pumps that moved the water to storage tanks. For almost six decades, the system functioned unobtrusively below street level. Over the years, the steel beams and collection ring eventually corroded, leaving the spring and surrounding area vulnerable.

Upon discovering the structure's atrophied state, the Tribe took proactive measures to preserve the spring and safeguard the spring from the tank's possible collapse. After considerable study and analysis, they determined the need for a complete retrofit of the collection system, including replacing the brittle ring with a stainless steel ring less susceptible to corrosion.

"The tank was way past its useful life," says Scot Stormo, a hydrogeologist with Earth Systems Southwest and a lead consultant on the collection ring retrofit project of the Hot Mineral Spring. He snaps a chunk of corroded, rust-colored steel like peanut brittle. "This is what was holding up the lid," he says. "It's not supposed to do that."

Preparation for the retrofit required extensive excavating around the structure to

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reduce the pressure and allow removal of metal components (footings, pumps, beams, and the ring). As this would impact buildings and landscaping, the Tribe is taking the opportunity to identify plans to revitalize the property at large. Redevelopment began in 2014 with

the complete teardown of the hotel and spa building, followed by the Hot Mineral Spring collection ring retrofit project.

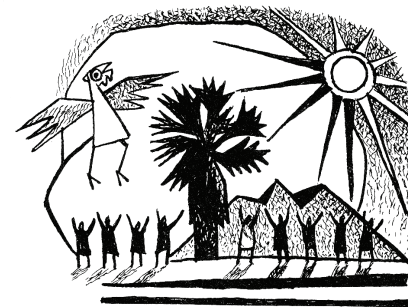
In April 2015, the lid to the old tank was removed for the first time in more than 50 years. After lowering the water level in the tank by pumping it to a dry well, the team began analyzing the spring's main orifice and bubblers, the water, and the surrounding soil. This information would help drive the delicate project with as little disturbance as possible to the spring and existing system.

"We've learned a lot since we've had a chance to get in there and look at the spring close up," Stormo says. "It's a very robust and resilient spring. The flow rate remains consistent at about 25 gallons per minute."

Stormo explains that the project will move forward by using the existing tank as an excavation wall. "We're placing a new stainless steel ring outside of the old ring and suspending everything from two bridge spans supported by foundations that cross over the top of the spring, so we can have all the new weight born by features that are outside the spring area," Stormo says.

The collection ring retrofit project continues with great care. "We're taking the time to do it right," Stormo says. ●

Agua Caliente Hot Mineral Spring Stories: As Everlasting as the Water



Cahuilla culture pulses with vibrant stories about the creation and naming of all earthly things, from natural phenomenon to the origin of the First People. For thousands of years, storytelling served as teacher and lesson plan — a phonic textbook through which the Cahuilla people learned about their history and environment. This oral tradition lives on through the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, passed down from elders to youth, so they never forget their story.

The legend of the Agua Caliente Hot Mineral Spring, as retold by Francisco Patencio in the book *Stories & Legends of the Palm Springs Indians*, begins with Tu-to-meet, one of the five headmen of the Fifth People. Tu-to-meet, also known as Sungrey, was tired and sick and lame, "so he took his *whó-ya-no-hut*, his staff of power, which he struck in the ground. He twisted it around and caused the water of a spring to come out, now [Agua Caliente Hot Mineral Spring]. He named it Sec he, meaning boiling water, which is up to the earth and on 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."

Cahuilla oral literature is flush with stories about the hot waters: There are tales of Cahuilla shamans using the spring for healing and as a portal to an underworld populated by *nukatem*, or ancient sacred beings; stories that helped the Cahuilla flourish, such as Menil the Moon Maiden instructing her people to bathe once in the morning and once in the evening to ensure good hygiene; and stories that unfold like dreams, filled with wonder and imagination, talking animals, powerful magic, epic battles between good and evil, and even a giant blue frog.

Whether rich in fantasy or simple in presentation, these stories continue to teach the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians and other Cahuilla tribes about their culture, history, and heritage.