

Cure-alls at Cinnabar Springs

BY EVELYN BYRNE WILLIAMS



This magical place, Cinnabar Springs, where the “healthy water” was drunk and bathed in to take care of all kinds of illnesses back in the old days, was located in the Siskiyou Mountains just south of the Oregon-California border. Some interesting old photos show people staying there for long periods of time in temporary quarters they made from supplies brought with them. My Byrne family was there several times in the early 1900s. They went on horseback over the mountains from their home on Squaw Creek (now covered by the Applegate Lake). How I wish I had asked them more about that time in their life. Evidently drinking the Cinnabar water didn’t do them any harm, but did it do them any good? It contained the principal ore of mercury, a mineral and mercuric sulfide.

In one of my scrapbooks I found this account written by Drew Clerin for the Medford Mail Tribune about 1958. I find it too interesting to leave any of it out, so here it is...

“During the summer of 1907, our family, father, mother and five kids, camped out at Cinnabar Springs. We took with us from Portland two tents, sundry camping equipment and supplies of all sorts sufficient for our two-month stay. I remember that we purchased canvas, cut it up into bed sizes and installed grommets through which rope would run to fasten the canvas mattresses to frames which we planned to construct from small logs at our destination. They worked like a charm.

My dad cashed a check at the bank and brought home a stack of \$20 gold pieces, ten in number, which was sufficient to pay for transportation and living expenses for our two-month camping trip.

We took the Southern Pacific train to Medford, then the narrow gauge from Medford to Jacksonville, and a horse-drawn vehicle from Jacksonville to the Saltmarsh farm on the Applegate River. We five youngsters slept in the hay in the Saltmarsh barn. Early next morning, Mr. Saltmarsh saddled the horses, loaded the pack animals and we headed south over some 20 miles or so of narrow mountain trails, across the California line a couple of miles to Cinnabar Springs.

The horses and mules knew every inch of the trail and never so much as stumbled on the rocky trail over the Siskiyou divide between the Applegate and Klamath River watersheds.

Cinnabar Springs was located in a rugged canyon through which ran a beautiful mountain stream, one of the forks of Beaver Creek that flows into the Klamath. The entire area was covered with the most beautiful stand of sugar pine I have ever seen. I was only 12 and seven of these years were spent in Aberdeen, Wash., at the turn of the century. Aberdeen in 1900 was in the heart

of the Douglas fir forest of the Olympic peninsula and stands of virgin timber were beautiful to behold but the sugar pine in the Cinnabar area was majestic beyond description and made an impression on me that will last my life time.

The main mineral spring was roofed over by an octagon shaped spring house, open at the sides, with benches that surrounded the pool which was five or six feet in diameter. Each of the men who was taking the mineral water cure had staked out squatter’s rights to a seat on the bench. Each had an empty quart size tomato can to serve as a drinking cup and behind his seat he tacked a piece of paper on which he tallied the number of quarts consumed each day. The can was dipped in the pool, the contents consumed and a tally mark entered on the sheet.

Par for the course, as I remember, was in the neighborhood of 20 quarts a day. Competition was fierce in the matter of establishing and beating records for liquid consumption. These old gentlemen spent hours on the spring house bench. Numerous and varied were the topics discussed and a great deal of boasting was indulged in on the subject of their liquid capacity.

One old fellow was the acknowledged champion of the entire field with a specialty no one could equal. He would fill his quart can to the brim and down the entire contents without removing it from his lips. With highly charged, ice-cold mineral water, this was an accomplishment which was the envy of all the other contestants. Of course, he would only perform if a suitable audience were present.

Generally there were 10 to 12 couples who participated in the Saturday night dances. Square dances were the rule and often one or two youngsters were recruited to fill out the squares. It was my impression that the quicksilver mine on the ridge at the south was practically a one-man operation. Gossip had it that the mine owner shipped out his flasks of

quicksilver in the early fall, one on each side of a mule packsaddle. The pack train was driven over the Siskiyou summit to Jacksonville, six or so mules making up the train. On the return trip, each mule was supposed to have carried two kegs of whiskey, which was the winter supply for the mine owner. I know that several of the ladies at the camp were shocked at the amount of whiskey required for one winter’s use. They were quite sure that the mine owner—I have forgotten his name—would drink himself to death. Perhaps he did. He was in his 80s at the time. I have neglected a comment on the qualities of the healthy water. I cannot vouch personally for the medicinal virtues of Cinnabar Springs mineral water but I can talk with authority about its quality.

The water in the main spring was ice cold and so highly charged with soda that it would bubble through one’s nose like champagne. After drinking it for several days one would develop a taste for it to the extent that ordinary pure-mountain water suffered by comparison.

I remember that after we returned to Portland on some of the hot September days I would develop a craving for Cinnabar Springs water that Bull Run could not satisfy.

Cinnabar Springs is still within the borders of the Klamath National Forest and it is possible that so-called progress has not yet polluted the beautiful streams and destroyed the sugar pine forest.”

I also wonder what it looks like today. It was over 50 years ago that my husband and I went there one day hoping to find what was left. I don’t remember there being much. I was more interested in the drive getting there. Too bad that I did not take any photos of at least what remains.

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Photos:
Top left: the Kubli Family
Top right: Members of the Byrne Family
Bottom: Members of the Byrne Family. No other people in the photo have been identified

