

Super springs

Tolenas area once boasted spa with much-touted healing waters

(Editor's note: This is one in an occasional series of articles delving into Solano County's past.)

By Ian Thompson

Daily Republic Staff Writer

FAIRFIELD — Like much of Solano County's history, the Tolenas Soda Springs and the small bottled-soda-water market it created now lie mostly forgotten.

Located not far from present-day Fairfield, the springs were once a gathering spot for Solano County's health-conscious residents. Touted by doctors as healing, its bottled water sold well.

Long-time county residents say nothing remains of the building which housed the spa. The springs themselves are also said to be almost or completely gone. The site is private property, and trespassing of any sort is illegal and strictly forbidden.

More than a century ago, the Suisuni Indians used the springs as a natural spa, calling it the "Land of Healing Waters." After they were gone, local settlers took over.

Thomas M. Swan, a lawyer from Harden County, Ken., developed the springs.

Swan came to Benicia in January 1851 after passing over the Isthmus of Panama. He quickly carved out a career in his new home.

In his first year here, he became Solano County's district attorney and, by 1853, county judge. In 1855 and again in 1859, he was elected to the state Legislature.

He moved to Fairfield on May 9, 1858, buying the springs and developing a small spa.

At the time, the county's most



commercial spring spa was located near Vallejo. An 1877 atlas of the county called it the only one "of commercial importance, while there are some other minor mineral and soda springs elsewhere in the county."

Two years later, Tolenas Springs got its first mention in Hutchings' California Journal.

J.A. Rankin said the springs are "amidst the most beautiful and romantic of scenery," with vistas of Mount Diablo to the south and the Sierra Nevada to the east.

Rankin said he found several springs upon reaching the glen, the most considerable being Empire Spring, followed by White Sulphur, Seltzer and Congress Springs, as well as lesser ones.

On Empire: "This spring furnishes a considerable volume of water, that issues as a jet, with a gurgling noise at intervals of one to two seconds," evidence of carbonic acid. Congress, a short distance from Empire, sent forth the same water, but with less force.

White Sulphur Spring was smaller and had a slight flow, but Rankin said it was "highly impregnated with sulphur, the smell of which is perceptible for some distance."



DR Photo by Gary Goldsmith



Above: this artist's rendition, published in Hutchings' California Magazine, shows what the small spa looked like in 1860. Right: one of the surviving bottles from Tolenas Soda Springs.

Rankin said Seltzer Spring, on the west side, was the best. "Its pellucid and sparkling waters are equal in taste to the best soda water ever drank, eclipsing, in flavor at least, the more celebrated Congress and Empire," he said.

In 1860, the California Mercantile Journal said the springs were "possessed of remedial virtues superior to any of the other vaunted waters of California and equal to any in the world."

That was good enough for Swan, who worked on developing the area for the next 20 years. Most of his customers were local residents.

The spring water was bottled as Tolenas Soda Springs and sold

statewide, mainly in the San Francisco Bay area. It reportedly held its own against other brands.

The product was popular until 1905. After then the brand slowly slid into history — why is unclear — and the spa was abandoned.

A quarry located downhill from the spa also produced clear, textured white onyx with light yellow veins. The polished onyx, used in the 1880s for ornamental clocks, was also shipped to San Francisco and Vermont to become mantels, vases and tabletops.

When those markets declined, the quarry was used for a while to supply crushed white rock for garden patios and roofs.

The quarry has also been abandoned.