

Keough Hot Springs, Once Upon A Time

By Jeff Cook

Part I

"To the refrain of 'Splash Me' and the rhythm of the fox trot over 1000 persons swam and danced the splendid new Keough swimming pool into instant popularity Wednesday night." With this line the August 7, 1919 *Inyo Register* noted the grand opening of what was to be an important Owens Valley social institution for decades to come.

During its heyday in the 1920s and 1930s, Keough's Hot Springs was a complete health and leisure resort. The natural hot water-fed pools and therapeutic baths were the main attraction, but visitors to Keough's could also fish, dine, dance, and camp out or stay in a cabin. And the well-kept grounds were the scene of every kind of formal and informal get-together.

No one in the Owens Valley would think of celebrating an installation, Independence Day or Easter, the end of school, the beginning of spring or the middle of harvest without a picnic at the Hot Springs with its attendant games and speeches, swimming and dancing. Keough's was a place that now inspires real nostalgia for the good old days.

Of course, Keough's was built because of the water. In the late 1800s, as people of European descent moved into California, they discovered the widespread abundance of hot mineral springs. During this period many health resorts in the European tradition were built around these springs. The natural hot water flow at Keough's is perfectly suited for a resort; by all standards it is superlative. The temperature at the source, a cluster of three springs west of the bathhouse, has been a constant 127°F since it was first measured in 1859. The amount of flow remains an impressive 600 gallons a minute (only six percent of this goes into the pool; the rest is diverted directly into the well-known Hot Ditch). And although the water contains many minerals it has none of the objectionable taste or odor often associated with geothermal water.

Native Americans were the first to take the waters at Keough's, which they call u'tu'utu paya. Local tribal members say they've always used the springs for bathing and healing.

Helen McGee, a Pauite elder, says, "Indian people really believe the water is sacred. You pray to it before you use it; you tell those springs about your pain. And you leave something, maybe a coin. It's your Mother Earth."

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For hundreds of years the springs were in the middle of a Pauite village. Using a highly developed irrigation system, navahita, or wild hyacinth, and other plants were grown for food. With the settlement of the Owens Valley by whites, with their notion of private ownership, the springs passed into the hands of those who used the surrounding land for agriculture and ranching. The unique looking cabin built against a huge boulder, visible today north of the pool, dates from these early days as shown by its pre-1900s square nail construction.

In 1918 the property was bought by Philip P. Keough, one of the pioneers in the Eastern Sierra. Born in Ontario, Canada in 1857, Keough had come West at an m early age. He worked for the gas stage company that supplied most of the transportation in Eastern California and Southern Nevada, eventually advancing to superintendent of all lines. He moved to Bishop in the 1880s and became a large landowner and leader in civic affairs. In 1908 he opened the City Market on Main Street, which he operated with his two sons.

Keough had a vision. "He always thought those beautiful springs could be developed into something very fine," according to Laura Lutz, his granddaughter, who lives in Bishop today. Keough wanted to build a first class health resort, but more than that he envisioned a complete recreation and leisure center for the people of Owens Valley.

The setting did indeed offer much potential. Situated in a protected dip of land against the foothills and irrigated by nearby Freeman Creek, the ranch around the springs was covered by orchards and vineyards. Tall stands of locust and black walnut trees offered plenty of shade. And the unlimited hot water – Keough planned swimming pools and therapeutic baths, but he also wanted to pipe the water into the dwellings for space heating. He even planned a water-heated hothouse enterprise to grow flowers and vegetables in the winter.

Keough immediately began to spend a fortune on construction. He employed contractors Mike Milovich, Rufus Cornell, and Bill Utter who managed to have the big 48' by 100' pool, food concession, and outdoor dance pavilion completed for the August 1919 opening party.

By the following May, the large children's wading pool (which is now kept hot for soaking) and stone bathhouse were ready. The bathhouse, which is boarded up today, was a wonder. It was built of many kinds of colorful stone representing ore from mines all over Inyo County. The interior was of redwood to withstand the moisture from the steam baths and hot tubs. After a soak and a rubdown, patrons could lounge amid the indoor tropical plants which thrived in the humid warmth.

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In those days, hot mineral water was credited with many medicinal uses. Many even took it internally, including Keough himself who drank it with cream and sugar at every meal. People began coming from Southern California to take the cure and stay in the cabins being built.

The grounds in the early 1920s looked very different from today. The large grove of locust trees south of the pool building was kept raked, and tables were built for use by picnickers. The orchards and vineyards were kept up so that visitors could help themselves to grapes, apples, pears, and peaches free of charge. The large irrigation storage pond to the south (now dry) was stocked with fish for the catching. Flowers graced the stonework that was built around the source springs. Says Laura Lutz, "It's hard for people to visualize how beautiful it was. Travelers would stop just to be refreshed and wander around the grounds.

The three impressive stone pillars which now overlook the road to the resort are all that's left of a large two-story house that burned down in 1945. Here Keough lived with his son "Ches" and family. When Keough died suddenly in 1921 at age 64, Ches inherited the resort.

Keough's other son Karl, who later became a State Senator, inherited the ranch property to the north. Keough's death a short three years after he began his project undoubtedly kept much of his dream from becoming reality. Nevertheless, Ches and Karl continued the work and kept Keough's spirit of excellence alive.

In the news reports of the day and in the words of those who remember, we get a picture of just how important Keough's Hot Springs was in the social life of the area up until the Second World War. This is shown by the great variety of activities that took place there. The pool was a focus for fun with regular diving and swimming competitions and a yearly bathing beauty contest for young women. For a time lively boxing matches were held until new laws required that the sheriff stop any fights that got too rough. Said the Inyo Register: "Most of the time the boxers were tenderly caressing each other's anatomy. The limitations imposed brought the contests down to the savage-ness of a pink tea."

Keough's was always available for parties and special picnics. Farm Bureau picnics were especially colorful, with games for everybody: rolling pin throwing and nail-driving for ladies, tug-of-war and blind-folded wheelbarrow races for gentlemen, and pie-eating, greased pig, and three-legged contests for boys and girls. Babies had their own beauty show. One such gathering in 1926 attracted some 1200 people. Fourth of July every year was celebrated by a fireworks display high up on the hill, and of course much swimming and dancing.

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Dancing at Keough's! Today the wooden platform next to the pool is barely recognizable as a dance floor but every Saturday night in the summer throughout the 1920s and 1930s it was packed. People came from Lone Pine to Lee Vining to dance under the stars to a live jazz band. Teenagers were welcome, and they came in large numbers. Children came too, with their parents.

Helen Keough, sister-in-law to Laura Lutz, remembers, "You didn't have babysitters; you just brought 'em along." Little kids slept on the benches that surrounded the dance floor. Older kids would swim until the pool closed at 10 p.m., then go to sleep in the car.

Keough's was a kind of paradise for children. Laura Lutz recalls, the pool was always open to them. I can just picture them by the hundreds streaming in there." There was baseball and family picnics and fishing in the pond. And there were special celebrations. Every year Keough put on an end-of-school party with swimming and feasting and games, staggered on different days to accommodate all the school children in the valley.

Easter was a big occasion too. Women from the community worked for days boiling and dying thousands of eggs which were hidden all over the grounds and in the foothills. On the big day a fan child who was lucky enough to find one of the several dozen "golden" eggs got to take home a live bunny.

But these ongoing activities took place against a background of great change at the Hot Springs. In 1926, Ches Keough sold the property and water rights to the City of Los Angeles. Thus began a long period continuing until today during which the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power has leased the resort to various tenants. DWP has never granted long-term leases, with the result that no tenant has had the incentive to invest the money required to make Keough's what it was in the early days.

Keough's has changed greatly in physical appearance. Soon after DWP took ownership, irrigation was stopped. The more tender vegetation, and eventually the big trees, died off. Most of the facilities have deteriorated to a point where the big pool is the only original attraction still in use. And today it is in use only by adults. Because of the recent insurance crisis, no children are allowed to swim there.

But in the nearly 60 years since the Los Angeles DWP took over, Keough's Hot Springs has remained open to the public. During most of this time the Vonderheide family and later the Denniss' have kept it going. Their efforts to serve the public and keep the traditions alive is another interesting story, still to come. (see Part II below)

The Inyo Register.

BISHOP, INYO COUNTY, CAL., THURSDAY, JULY 10, 1919

MUCH WORK DONE ON A FINE RESORT

Keough's Hot Springs Nearing
Readiness for Public Service

The big tank at Keough's Hot Springs has been completed by contractor Kufua Cornell, and water will be turned into it this week. It is 38 by 100 feet between walls, and slopes from 2.5 to 8 feet depth. It is arranged so that the surface will be constantly drawn off, while the whole pool can be rapidly emptied through a 12-inch outlet at the bottom.

Concrete sidewalks are being laid around the edge. Work on the dressing rooms, office and concession stands will begin at once.

The establishment is being built with scrupulous attention to the requirements of law and approved practice. A laundry will be in continual operation, and a lifeguard will be kept on duty when the place is open for business. The tank will not be covered over to begin with, but probably will be roofed later and made a winter as well as summer resort.

Seventy inches of water at 130 degrees runs from three groups of cement enclosed springs. This water's taste gives no suggestion of the minerals which chemists say it contains. A cold mountain stream carrying from 100 to 200 inches is available, permitting any desired modification of the temperature of the water supply of pool or other baths.

Vapor baths are also to be provided.

Situated at the foothill base seven or eight miles south of town. In a sheltered dip of land, the site certainly presents almost unlimited opportunity for development into an unsurpassed resort. Many years of occupation have grown fruit and shade trees in profusion, and a grove offers an attractive picnic ground.

Hot water is now piped to the fine dwelling, which Mrs. Mowrer built on the place. Electric lights are to be provided, either by use of some of the hot water stream or by utilizing the 700-foot fall of Freeman creek when brought to the crest of the hill just west.

In addition to the numerous changes planned by Mr. Keough to make it an attractive resort, it is probable that a hothouse enterprise will be launched by E. M. Nordyke. By use of the hot water, there can be a yield of fresh vegetables and flowers in winter as well as summer. This has not been completely planned, so far, but will become a factor.

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Part II

Phillip P. Keough was a wealthy man with a grand vision. In 1919, he began building a health resort, called Keough's Radium Hot Springs, around a geothermal water source seven miles south of Bishop. Within a few years there were bathhouses, guest cabins, a dining room, and an outdoor dance pavilion. A large wooden building, open to the sky, sheltered an Olympic-sized swimming pool and children's wading pool. There were lawns and abundant shade trees, picnic tables, and a fishing pond. The resort soon became a popular tourist destination as well as an important social gathering place for the residents of the Owens Valley. In a previous article (The Album, Vol. 1, No. 3), the author recounts the early history of Keough's. What follows is a continuation of the story.

In certain rare places, hot water flows out of the ground like a gift. At the springs behind Keough's resort, where sweet, odorless 127° water flows endlessly at almost 600 gallons per minute, it's as if a benevolent nature is saying, "There it is; take it!"

Undoubtedly, the native people of the area enjoyed this water for many hundreds of years, but we only know the story of what has been done with this gift in more recent times.

There are two overlapping parts to the story. Part one is the glory time in the 1920s, when the Owens Valley still had a thriving agricultural economy. Keough's was then at its peak. It was a focal point of community spirit for the entire valley, as symbolized by the Farm Bureau and Independence Day picnics, which brought together as many as 1200 people – more than the population of Bishop at that time. These picnics were also important organizing events for the movement that resisted the destruction of that economy by the city of Los Angeles, according to John Walton, University of California historian and author of *Western Times and Water Wars: State Culture and Rebellion in California*.

Part two began in 1926, when the city of Los Angeles bought the resort property, and continues to the present. This is a story of decline, partly due to the difficulties caused by the city's absentee ownership. It's also a story of the perseverance and ingenuity of the people who have kept Keough's alive despite the difficulties.

As with all of its land purchases in the Owens Valley, the Department of Water and Power – the agency in charge of the city's interests in the valley – wanted Keough's only as a source of water. However, the resort was allowed to stay open for business as long as the water eventually

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drained into the city's aqueduct. In 1926, DWP leased the property to Bishop rancher George L. Vonderheide and his wife Rowena.

The Vonderheides put a lot of energy into keeping the resort successful. From the start, their Independence Day and Easter celebrations were as lively as ever.

They brought in hot bands every week for the big Saturday night dances, and spent hours polishing the dance floor and filling the cracks with straw. As in the Keough family, there were two sons, Harry and George Jr., to help out, and except for hiring a lifeguard, they did all the work themselves.



Rowena Vonderheide was a strong woman with a colorful style. She raised parrots and canaries, and kept ducks and geese on the pond. Several peacocks ran loose on the grounds. At one time, she had 48 pairs of parakeets in the bathhouse lobby, where she also raised tropical plants.

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She took on a lot of the management duties, and even helped keep order at the dances. According to her niece, Bea McGraw, "Aunt Rowena was as good a bouncer as any."

Despite the Vonderheide's dedication, there were problems behind the scenes. The interests of the Department of Water and Power were simply not consistent with the operation of a small business. Commenting on the DWP's interests in the valley, Walton writes, "...two fundamental considerations shaped [its] policy: the city wanted to maximize the water supply available for its own use, and minimize unfavorable publicity that would hamper its image and operations."

Therefore, Keough's was allowed to remain in operation; but under a tight rein: no tenant has ever been given more than a five-year lease. Without a long-term lease, even dedicated tenants have had little incentive or ability to finance improvements or pay for costly upkeep. When their lease ran out in 1930, the Vonderheides chose not to renew.

The next few years were a struggle for the new tenant, B.F. Leete. General hard times probably were a factor. Walton writes: "Under the combined impact of the depression and city purchases, local economic activity hit bottom around 1930, stayed there a few years, and then started the slow climb back."



By 1934, the resort was closed. Much of the vegetation had died, and the buildings were in disrepair. In the words of a DWP memo, "Keough's is now in a dilapidated condition. [It] is a liability rather than an asset." City officials considered offering it to the county on a long lease. They also considered demolishing it to avoid the costs of taxes

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and maintenance, which were normally paid by the lessee. However, at the end of that year, the Vonderheides agreed to come back.

A NOTABLE RELIC

The lunch department at Keough's Hot Springs is now possessor of a somewhat notable relic of Goldfield's liveliest days – the bar of the Northern saloon, in its day one of the most noted gambling resorts of the West. The bar cost thousands of dollars, originally, and with its back bar and big mirror will be a handsome addition to the fixtures at the swimming resort.

Inyo Register, May 20, 1920

Although no longer what it was in its heyday, Keough's when it reopened continued as a happy scene of swimming, holiday celebrations, and family picnics. The dining room and lunch counter were open, and the mineral baths were popular. A big change occurred at the Saturday night dances. When Prohibition was repealed, the way was open for liquor to be sold for the first time. A bar was built to meet the demand. As Harry Vonderheide remembers it, business was so good that the bartender mixed fifty highballs at a time, adding ice as they were sold. At 25¢ for a mixed drink and 15¢ for a beer, they took in as much as \$400 a night in liquor sales alone.

The Vonderheides kept things going into the period of the Second World War. But when the lease came up for renewal in 1945, Rowena wrote a goodbye letter to the DWP, thanking them and saying, "I almost weakened to the thought of wanting it back ... to restore it to its used-to-be."

By then the facilities were in bad shape. Most importantly, the cooling tower had decayed to the point of being unusable. Without it, there was no practical way to cool the hot water to a comfortable swimming temperature. For the next several years, under a series of caretakers and short-term tenants, Keough's saw little use.

During this period, the DWP made little rental profit from the resort, and was faced with paying property taxes and caretaker's wages. As revealed in their records, DWP officials began thinking seriously of

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allowing a long-term lease. In a series of internal memos from 1945 through 1955, there was much talk of finding a developer who would rebuild the facilities at his or her own expense. It was even suggested that the resort be expanded, with more pools, a guest lodge, motel units, a gasoline service station, horse stables, "and other required improvements to meet the demand." In return, a 25-30 year lease would be granted, "so lessee could have time to amortize permanent improvements."

By 1955 the situation had become urgent. The buildings had further deteriorated, and the county was threatening closure due to unhealthy conditions. When a married couple, Dick and Liz Denniss, applied to take over the resort, the DWP decided to grant them a five-year lease.

Liz Denniss had come from a 30-year career in Hollywood. Beginning as Samuel Goldwyn's receptionist, her work included acting as stand-in and double for Jane Wyman and Bette Davis, with whom she spent nine years. Dick Denniss had an extensive background in mining and millwork. His knowledge of machinery and construction would be essential to the job of renovation. Working together, they set about reversing the years of neglect. They replaced the roofs, which Dick says were so bad "you could throw a cat through them." They repainted everything and laboriously removed the buildup of alkali deposits and algae from the pools. They got the city to sink a good well, ending the long-standing problem with drinking-water quality. Eventually they built mobile home sites, adding an important source of income.

Cooling the hot water was a particular challenge. When the pool was refilled after its weekly cleaning, it often took three days for the water to cool to the preferred 90°. Mixing in creek water didn't work; it made the pool murky and promoted rapid algae growth. After years of experimenting with different techniques, Dick located a surplus industrial cooling tower. "Our business took off when we got that," he says. "Before people were constantly calling to ask if the water had cooled down yet."

As always, Keough's was a paradise for young people, who were welcome in the pool anytime it was open. They came by the hundreds for summer fun at Keough's, beginning with the traditional end-of-school picnics that Dick and Liz hosted for schools as far away as Nevada.

They also came for swimming lessons. Many valley residents first learned to swim from Thelma Mathie, who taught at Keough's from 1955 through 1979, or from Gloria Bame, her successor. According to Mrs. Bame, Keough's warm water is the perfect learning environment for young children, who tend to get cold easily.

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But that ended in 1985. In that year, the Dennisses were told by their insurance company they would have to close to children and teenagers to keep their coverage affordable. Since then, Keough's has been a "key club," for adult members only.

Today, Keough's Hot Springs remains open for business. The grounds are well-kept and the pools are clean. Members can still enjoy some of the pleasures that have been available there for over 70 years: swimming laps in the crystal-clear water of the big pool; talking with friends or strangers while immersed to the shoulders in hot water, (the ultimate social lubricant), or watching the clouds and stars in fetal comfort, even in freezing weather.

But much has changed. The bathhouse and snack bar are closed, the picnic tables and guest cabins are gone, the fishpond is dry. The dance floor is unrecognizable. Most of the big shade trees died long ago, although many young trees are being nursed along by the mobile home residents.

Because of insurance stipulations, the clientele is different now. There are no kids, no families, and only a few tourists are willing to pay the high one-time admission price. Keough's is now quiet; there's no yelling or splashing, and diving and horseplay aren't allowed. Most visitors come to do laps, sunbathe, or soak. The hot pool (formerly the children's wading pool) is very popular for soothing the tension and body aches that grownups get.

What's in the future for Keough's? Because of their long, capable tenancy, the Dennisses are assured of their lease being renewed. But everyone retires eventually, and change will come when the DWP decides what to do with its property.

Keough's old-timers and current regulars have various opinions about what will happen: DWP will bulldoze it. DWP will lease it again to whoever buys the rights from Dick and Liz. DWP will allow it to be privately developed under a long-term lease. The county will negotiate to run it, as at Tecopa Hot Springs or Whitmore Hot Springs.

People also have opinions about what should happen: Keep it as a club, low-key and uncrowded. Open it to the public so everyone can enjoy it again. Modernize the facilities and maybe build more pools. Keep it as it was – it's a historical landmark.

These notions reflect the common view that what will happen is up to others, and may not be what the users and friends of Keough's believe should happen. But the resort's long history qualifies it as a public

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resource, and the water still rushes from the ground as a gift to all. Perhaps people should have a say.

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