

The Great Spirit Water of Waconda Springs:
Mitchell County, Kansas, 1884-1964

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History 533 – Lost Kansas Communities

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12/09/10

“A most wonderful and marvelous sight,” is what Samuel C. Pomeroy said about Waconda Springs while on a tour of the Solomon River valley in 1870.¹ Waconda Springs was a site that depended on water; the natural spring determined its birth and death. Waconda Spring, which is also known as “the Great Spirit Spring”, was a natural water spring located in Mitchell County and in the township of Cawker. The waterhole of Waconda Springs was regarded as a sacred health spa for Native American tribes who lived on the Great Plains. In 1884 an investor named McWilliams began the construction of a stone sanitarium that would be finished ten years later and became a hotel and health spa.² In 1944 the U.S. Corp of Engineers began to survey the land surrounding Waconda Springs for sites to build a dam for flood control. With the Great Flood of 1951, heavy rains caused a dramatic rise of water in the Kansas River and areas surrounding. This called for the building of the Glen Elder Dam, which would essentially wipe out Waconda Springs. In 1964 the construction of the Glen Elder Dam came into effect tearing down the sanitarium and health spa, dumping the debris of the demolition into the spa.³ Although the site is now covered up by the Waconda Lake, it still holds many sacred memories and stories for those who had seen it grow, and those who had witnessed firsthand the powers that the Great Spirit Spring water could bring for those in need of medicinal purposes. Many traveled from all over the world to experience the therapy of internal and external body cleansing that Waconda

¹ Leisure and Sports Review, “Healing Waters: the Legend of Waconda Springs - Beloit, Kansas,” accessed December 6, 2010, http://www.lasr.net/travel/city.php?City_ID=KS0806003&VA=Y&Attraction_ID=KS0806003a011.

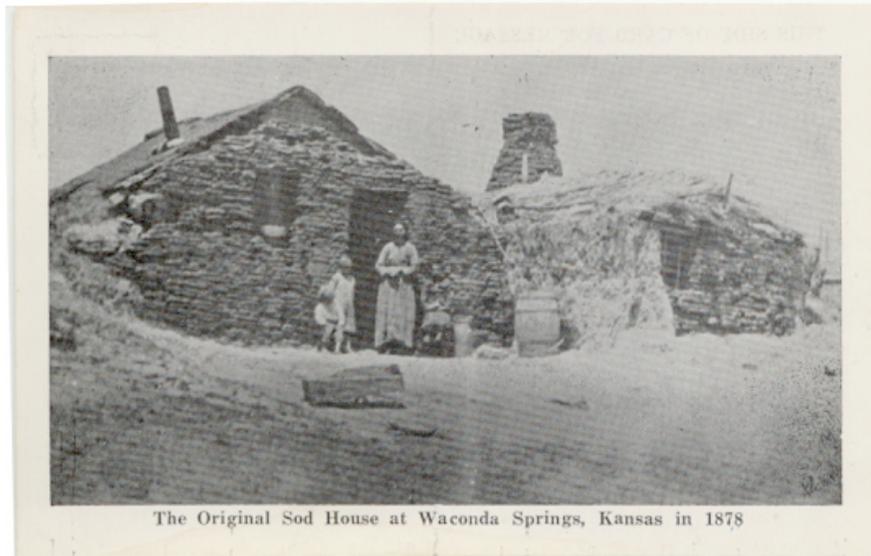
² Wikipedia, “Waconda Spring,” last updated September 19, 2010, accessed December 6, 2010, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waconda_Spring.

³ Schultz, Brenda Jo. *Waconda Springs From Legend to Lake*. Beloit: Box S Printing. August 2010. pg 67

Springs provided. Many others purchased bottles of the mineral water to be bottled up and shipped to them so they too could experience firsthand the powers that the Great Spirit Springs could bring them. Many regarded Waconda as the only spring like it in the world.

Pawnee Indians called the spring “Kitzawitzuk”, which in Pawnee means a place where the water is on the bank. The Pawnee believed that if they threw material into the spring it would overflow its banks and make them able to bathe in the mineral water and undergo a purification process. The word “Wakonda” with a “k” came from the Kanza Indian tribe which translated to “Great Spirit”.⁴ It is said that most Indian tribes living on the Great Plains around the 1830s visited the sacred site including the Pawnee, Wichita, Kaw, Kiowa, Sioux, Arapaho, Comanche, the Miami, the Crow, and others.

Figure 1.
Waconda
1878.
Elder, “The
December



First Sod House of
Springs. Circa
SOURCE: Glen
History of
Waconda,”accessed
7, 2010, <http://>

www.glenelder.com/waconda_springs.htm - Sanitarium.

A sod house built in 1870 by a man named Pfiefer was the first known habitation built at Waconda Springs. As shown in Figure 1 above, a picture was taken of the original sod house eight years later in 1878.⁵ It was very common for people around the latter parts of the

⁴ *Sunflower Journeys*. Dir. Washburn University. KTWU Channel 11, 2006. Videocassette.

⁵ Glen Elder, “The History of Waconda,” accessed December 7, 2010, http://www.glenelder.com/waconda_springs.htm - Sanitarium.

eighteenth century to take pictures in front of their homes. A few years later a man named Burnham built a bottling company on the site and started selling and distributing the mineral water that he referred to as “Waconda Flier”. In 1884 this struck the eye of a man named McWilliams who then decided to invest in the site and put up the money necessary to construct a stone sanitarium. In 1894 Waconda Springs became a hotel and health spa and selling of the “Waconda Flier” mineral water continued. In 1904 it won a medal for its superior medicinal qualities at the St. Louis World’s Fair.⁶ In a Waconda Springs brochure it read: "There are few human ills of any kind whatever which treatment at this place will not cure."⁷

Dr. G.F. Abrahams, who operated a bathhouse in Mankato, KS, purchased Waconda Springs in 1906. He and his family continued to run the site as a sanitarium and health spa. In 1908, Dr. Abrahams hired a deep-sea diver to descent into the water to figure out the mysteries of the spring. A crowd gathered around the waterhole as hundreds of feet of hose were feed to the diver has he tried to find the bottom. When the diver finally submerged he announced that he could not find the bottom of the spring but did find things such as human bones, butts of guns, parts of tomahawks, and arrowheads. This turned out to be a hoax.

In September of 1907 Dr. Abraham’s daughter Anna Abrahams married a man named Dr. Carl Bingesser. Dr. Carl Bingessor later became the superintendent of the sanitarium.⁸ I had the opportunity to sit down for an interview with someone who witnessed firsthand the powers of the spa and all the attractions and customers it brought. I received the privilege to interview Mr.

⁶ Wikipedia, “Waconda Spring.”

⁷ Kansas State Historical Society, “*Cool Things-Waconda Springs Jug,*” accessed December 7, 2010, <http://www.kshs.org/p/cool-things-waconda-springs-jug/10170>.

⁸ Schultz, Brenda Jo. *Waconda Springs From Legend to Lake*. Beloit: Box S Printing. August 2010. Pg 52

John Bingesser who is the grandson of Dr. Carl and Anna Bingesser. John Bingesser was born in 1939 in a house at Waconda Springs. Mr. Bingesser helped out on the three hundred and fifty acre farm where they raised cattle, pigs, chickens, geese, and horses. They also farmed alpha hay, wheat and corn. He recalls Waconda Springs as a farm, hospital, and homestead.

The Waconda Post Office was built in 1906 and the postmaster was Dr. Carl Bingesser up until 1939 when his daughter in-law Mrs. Marjorie Bingesser took over, who is John Bingesser's mother (interviewee). About 25 people in the Waconda Springs area received mail. Also the Missouri Pacific Railroad line had a depot providing travel for passengers coming and going for treatments. Dr. Abrahams died in 1924, passing the operation down to his daughter Anna and son-in-law Carl. When Dr. Carl and Anna retired in 1946 they passed it down to their son Dr. Carlos Bingesser and his wife Marjorie (John Bingesser's parents). They continued running the sanitarium and health spa to customers as the family tradition.⁹ John Bingessor remembers helping out at the sanitarium giving baths and rub downs of patients. He said water was piped from the spring to the basement of the sanitarium. Patients were sprayed with high pressure spray with spring water as hot as they could stand and every sixty to ninety seconds they would dump a bucket of cold water on them to help circulation. Then let the patient soak in hot water, again as hot as they could handle then placed them on a bunk putting hot packs on their arms, backs and legs and covered them with heavy blankets. Patients would lie there like that for fifteen minutes then receive a massage with hot lotion. Mr. Bingesser claims that he saw firsthand the effects of these treatments and that they actually worked. He also said that the water was used as a laxative also. Patients would drink a glass of hot water from the spring to

⁹ Schultz, Brenda Jo. *Waconda Springs From Legend to Lake*. Beloit: Box S Printing. August 2010. Pg 53, 56

help relieve their system. Cost for the spa treatment was \$5. Although some patients drove to the site, most stayed in the resort for many weeks. They hosted dog races, tourist sites, and a playground for children. Mr. Bingesser also remembers building a gift shop around the mid 1950s and he also took part in building a replica of the first sod house ever built at the site.¹⁰

The mineral water of the spring was sold and distributed as a medicine all over the country. They claimed that the mineral waters never failed to cure even after doctors had failed.¹¹ Mr. Bingesser remembers filling countless numbers of gallon jugs with spring water and hauling them to the railroad depot to be shipped all over the US. He also says that all meals served were grown and harvested on Waconda Springs land.¹² A sign stood near the Great Spirit Spring just outside the fenced in waterhole that read:

“Many moons ago, so runs an Indian Legend, Waconda, a beautiful Princess, fell in love with a brave of another tribe. Prevented from marriage by a blood feud, this warrior embroiled the tribes in battle. During the fight an arrow struck him as he stood on the brink of a spring and he fell mortally wounded into the waters. Waconda, grief stricken, plunged in after him. Believing her soul still lived in the depths, the tribes for countless ages carried their sick to drink the healing waters. Here they celebrated their victories and mourned their losses, never neglecting to throw into the spring some token for the Great Spirit”.

“Waconda Springs, ¾ miles south of this marker is a mineral pool about fifty feet in diameter, set in a curious limestone basin”.

This is how the Great Spirit Spring got its legend.¹³ Today the original sign is gone but there is a replica sign alongside highway 24 on the north side of Waconda Lake. In 1944 the Army Corps

¹⁰John Bingesser, interview by Matt Kelley, Beloit, KS, December 3, 2010.

¹¹ *Sunflower Journeys*. Directed by Washburn University. KTWU Channel 11, 2006. Videocassette.

¹² John Bingesser, interview by Matt Kelley, Beloit, KS, December 3, 2010.

¹³ Schultz, Brenda Jo. *Waconda Springs From Legend to Lake*. Beloit: Box S Printing. August 2010. Pg 4

of Engineers searched for a location for a dam along the Solomon River near the town of Glen Elder. The plan would mean the destruction of Waconda Springs. In 1951 massive flooding due to large amounts of rainfall caused more concern for the building of dams. As an act of fighting Dr. Bingesser hired a very valued hydrologist to examine the spring. At the end to the examination the hydrologists concluded that Waconda Springs was very unique and perhaps the only one like it in the world. Nonetheless, those in favor of the dam still criticized the spring and mocked the hydrologist's opinion saying that it was nothing more than a mud hole.¹⁴

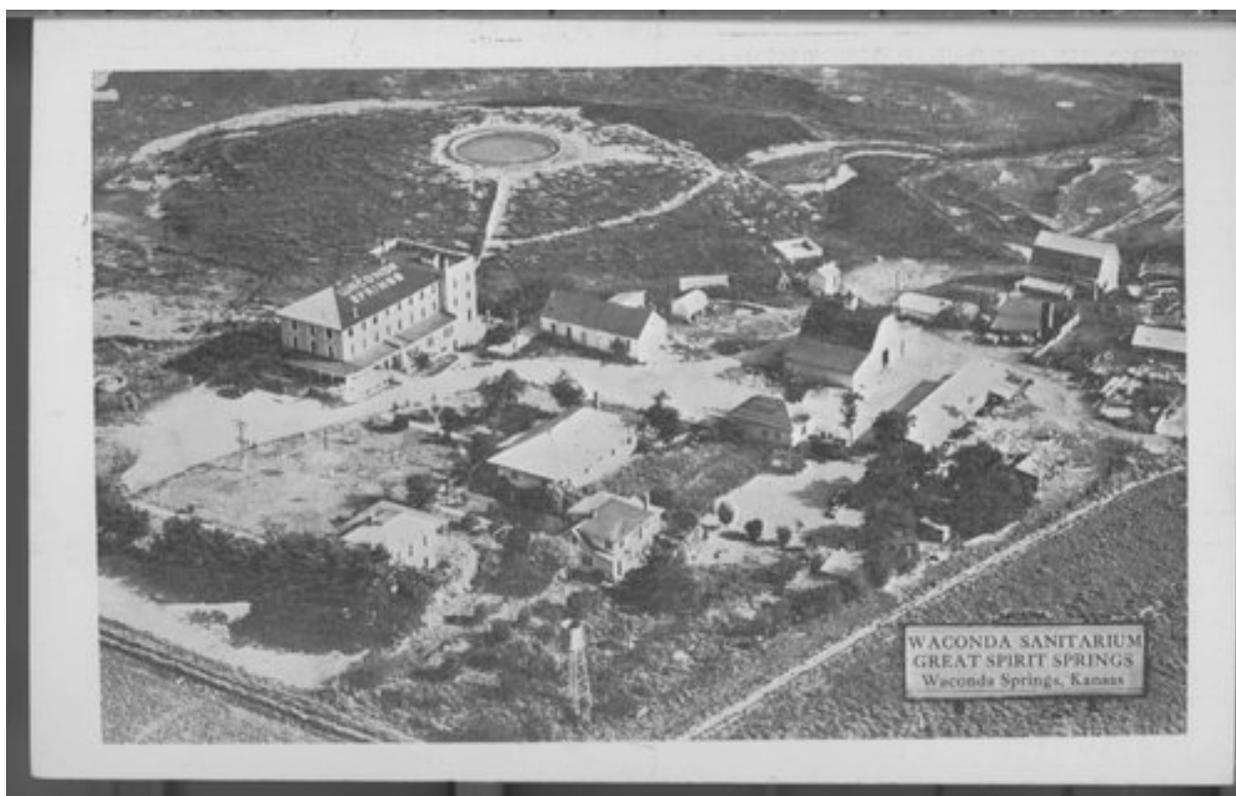


Figure 2. Overview of Waconda Springs, Circa 1830. SOURCE: Brenda Jo Schultz, *Waconda Springs from Legend to Lake*

Although the Bingesser family tried to stop it, construction of the Glen Elder Dam went underway in 1964 and was finished in 1968. The entire area was bulldozed to the ground, with

¹⁴ Wikipedia, "Waconda Spring."

debris from the construction dumped into the Spirit Spring. Water from the Solomon River filled the valley, which was completely under water by 1970.¹⁵ Mr. Bingesser ran the bulldozer for the destruction of Waconda Springs. Figure 2 above shows an overview of what Waconda Springs looked like. You can see the Great Spirit Spring in the top part of the picture which is connected to a road to the sanitarium. Mr. Bingesser said on an average day they would go through around 40 patients in the sanitarium. Mr. Bingesser's father was born in the sanitarium and he was born in a house in the bottom left corner of the picture (beside a line of trees). This is where he had spent his whole life up until it was torn down. In the picture is also a dance hall they had, a diner, house for hired hands, barns and much more.¹⁶

Although Waconda Springs no longer exists, its memory still lives on. Stories are told by those who remember the sacred site and those who had lived it. Nowadays with all the historical landmark laws, Waconda Springs would have never been bulldozed down. Some say that the legend of the Great Spring just expanded its medicinal powers into the Waconda Lake, which covers the sacred site today.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ John Bingesser, interview by Matt Kelley, Beloit, KS, December 3, 2010.

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