



photo: Keith & Sadie Dogle

by Kathleen Keifer

There’s nothing like new asphalt and concrete on Main Street to bolster prospects for a small rural town. The main drag that defines primary business locations in downtown Soap Lake recently got a face-lift and it’s looking good. With a new flagpole at the top of the hill that once defined the west end of Main Street which was nothing but a dirt road in a desert, things are looking good in this little slice of heaven in Eastern Washington.

Located in a prime spot on the state’s Ice Age Floods Trail, Soap Lake is a sweet spot for the traveller driving north on State Highway 17. Not only can they relieve their weary bones in a hot Soap Lake bath at one of two distinguished lodging establishments, they can also

take a dip in the mineral-rich waters of the lake along a shallow, easy-to-wade in shoreline.

At the turn of the last century, the once dirt road called Main Street in Soap Lake was the only defining thoroughfare. It wasn’t until 1933 that a dirt road was blasted through basalt on the east side of the lake and pushed further north towards Grand Coulee Dam. This was done in time to make Soap Lake a brief stopping place for President Roosevelt who was passing through on his tour through the county to check out the prospects for a high dam at Grand Coulee.

Soap Lake has a long and rich history, and is the oldest resort town in the Pacific Northwest. It was an important destination for patients suffering from diseases that could

not be treated by doctors in the days before penicillin and sulfa drugs. At one point in the early 1920’s there were ten sanitariums in town. All of them facilities people went to for treatment during a health crisis. Staffed by doctors, nurses, and massage therapists, most facilities offered hydrotherapy, steam, and mud baths.

In the 1920’s it became known that Soap Lake water and mud could arrest the advance of Buerger’s disease, a circulatory disorder that reduces blood flow to hands and feet causing excruciating pain as gangrene sets in. Amputation of fingers, toes, and eventually limbs was the only way to slow the disease. Soldiers that had fought in the trenches in WW I were being diagnosed with the disease and medical practices of the time could not effectively stop the ravaging effects. Doctors hearing of the good effects of Soap Lake water on the disease recommended it to their patients.

After years of dedicated lobbying efforts, veterans organizations around the country were able to convince the Washington State Legislature to fund the purchase of property in Soap Lake, and later, the

financing to build a hospital for the treatment of Buerger’s disease. In 1938, Governor Clarence Martin dedicated McKay hospital, named after a local veteran.

Throughout the first four decades of the 1900’s, Soap Lake flourished as one of the most popular resort spas in the Northwest. The beautiful Siloam Hotel built on a hill on the east side of town had over one hundred rooms. Horse draw carriages picked up guests at the nearby Grant Orchards rail station. If a person didn’t have a reservation when they arrived in town they would be lucky to find a tent to stay in, often rented as overflow by hotel owners and at several stores.

Soap Lake’s reputation as a health spa was eclipsed in part only by its reputation as a place to get down and boogie. There were five dance pavilions in town and bands came to play from as far away as Seattle and Spokane. There was also a movie theater in town and a nude beach on the southeast shore where careful effort was made to keep the women’s side separate from the men’s.

In a county that grows more potatoes than any other



photo: Keith & Sadie Dogle

Mayor Gravelle at Soap Lake’s Downtown Rededication Celebration

place in the nation, along with other crops, Soap Lake stands out as a sort of visual side bar to the geologic panorama defined by the Lower Grand Coulee. Located at the southernmost end of the coulee, Soap Lake paints a picture perfect backdrop against basalt cliffs that cleave a northerly path through ancient basalt flows in a landscape made ragged in every way by the tremendous force of ravaging floods that occurred intermittently for tens of thousands of years.

In terms of collective character, Soap Lake is a bit like an eccentric aunt. This may be on account of the diverse range of personalities that attach themselves to the community because, as most will say, it’s irresistible in a free-spirited sort of way. This accounts for the fact that Soap Lake is home to the idea of the Giant Lava Lamp that will, some day, hover sixty-feet above the south shore of the lake.

The town also has a performing arts center that is one of the oldest rural community theaters in the state.

Soap Lake is a community where artists, politicians, musicians, dancers, writers, and people of this-and-that account of growing familiarity. Most of all because there is a laid-back feel to the place that relaxes people into their own skin; comfortable-like after a while, and predictable.

The longish two block stretch of Main Street boasts an internationally diverse grocery store packed wall-to-wall with the most amazing groceries you will find anywhere east of Seattle. From caviar, chocolates, goat cheese, European rye bread, locally grown produce, the best hand-built sandwiches you will find anywhere, plus more, lots more. There is a canoe and kayak rental spot, a tavern that serves great food and live music on the weekends, a popular steak house and one of the few private clubs in the state of Washington where the legendary Bonnie Guitar plays every Saturday night. Memberships are available at the door of the club, located downstairs beneath the office of the Notaras Lodge, another iconic attraction. There’s a bead shop, with colorful bobbles worthy of the attention by any raven, a bicycle sales and repair shop, an organic grocery attached to a dance studio, and of course, the beautiful hundred plus year old cobble rock Inn at Soap Lake.

Main Street started as a dirt path. Over the last century it has weathered every stretch of history, every parade and circumstance that has made Soap Lake what it is today; an eclectic place, a free spirited place, a place where people come to relax, a place where people can spread their wings and learn to dance, or not. Either way, once you visit, there’s a good chance you will go back.



Buergers patients, McKay Hospital