



Part I

Soap Lake's Healing Waters, a True Story: The Proof is in the Oil

By Kathleen Kiefer

The US Food and Drug Administration doesn't take kindly to claims that a product heals any kind of health condition, and if someone claims that about a mineral lake in the middle of Eastern Washington's food belt, look out, their representatives will be knocking at your door. That is what happened to Roxie Thorson in the 1980's.

The story starts long ago, before the regulatory behemoth noted above, known as the FDA, was ever an apple in an over stuffed government's eye. Before the turn of the last century, Soap Lake, a mineral lake located in eastern Washington was a well-known spot frequented by the indigenous people of the Columbia Plateau. Though no definite source for the stories can be identified, early settlers were aware that native people used Soap Lake water and mud as treatment for snake bite, rashes, skin disorders and just about anything that ailed them. It didn't take the settlers long to figure out there was something to these stories and by the early 1900's they had figured out a way to extract minerals from the water to make salts that were sold at the local Soap Lake mercantile store. By 1910, the salts and numerous other products were being shipped all over the country.

Prior to and well into the 1900's medical doctors often recommended their patients seek treatment at a

spa or sanitarium with mineral springs. By 1907, Soap Lake had several sanitariums staffed with medical doctors, nurses, massage practitioners, and hydro therapists. The earliest written testimonials of patients receiving treatment at Soap Lake are from 1913. People were visiting the lake and finding relief from rheumatism, neuralgia, stomach problems, psoriasis and other skin disorders and, around 1919 from the ravages of Buerger's Disease, a circulatory disorder that affected many soldiers returning from World War I.

By 1915 Soap Lake was advertising itself as a 'mecca where thousands of people afflicted with rheumatism, kidney trouble, stomach, skin and blood diseases could find relief.' These claims can be validated in testimonials kept by Roxie Thorson and now on file with a private collector. Roxie owned and operated Soap Lake Products Company, the longest operating salt extraction company in the town. The demand for salt products from customers throughout the country kept Roxie in business until her death in 1984. She saved years worth of notes and letters from people that testified to the effectiveness of the products she sold which included salts in 1 and 5 pound boxes, concentrated water, shampoo and bars of soap. It was Roxie who received several visits in the 1980's from representatives of the FDA, advising her to cease making any claims about the efficacy of her products in treating any

health condition.

In the early 1930's the Veterans Administration (VA) allocated \$15,000 for Dr. E.M. Bogard from the VA hospital in Walla Walla to conduct studies of Soap Lake water as treatment for Thromboangiitis Obliterans (Buerger's Disease). No records have been found about the results of these studies. In 1937 the Washington state legislature authorized the Commissioner of Public Lands to buy land in Soap Lake for the purpose of establishing a hospital for the treatment of the disease. The state of Washington funded the building of the facility. On November 11, 1938 the Governor of the state of Washington dedicated the new McKay Memorial Research Hospital with 500 people in attendance at the ceremony. Resident war veterans, their wives or widows who were legal residents of the state of Washington were admitted to the hospital at no cost. All patients admitted had to furnish proof that they were afflicted with Buerger's Disease.

In 1940 one in eighteen people living in Soap Lake had Buerger's Disease. The population, according to the census at that time was 619. April Notaras grew up in Soap Lake and as a child whose family business was on the Main street of town, she recalled seeing men scooting about town with their legless torso's on top of a rolling board which they pushed along with gloved hands.

T.J. Fatherree was the medical doctor in charge of research at McKay. In 1941 he published a report in The American Heart Journal of his findings on the spa treatment of Buerger's Disease. His conclusions were unremarkable, but he did note: ".....The explanation for the popularity of Soap Lake as a spa for the treatment of Thromboangiitis Obliterans undoubtedly lies in the considerable percentage (66 percent in the cases included in this study) of gangrenous and ulcerative lesions which heal while the patients are treating themselves at Soap Lake."

Now, in 2015, on any weekend day in the summer you will find dozens of bathers along the shores of the lake behind the two hotels

on Main Street and on both public East and West Beach locations. Some of them will be slathered in mud while others will be sitting in the shallow water along the shore. Most of them will tell you, if you ask, why they visit Soap Lake. Many of these visitors are of Eastern European decent. There are numerous mineral water spas, and salt bath locations in Europe.. These are popular locations where people go for relaxation and health care. The reason most of these European natives come to Soap Lake is for treatment of a particular health condition.

The American Psoriasis Foundation notes on their website that Soap Lake's mineral-rich water and mud are thought to be

curative for a number of skin diseases. While not going so far as to endorse Soap Lake for the treatment of psoriasis, they note that studies need to be conducted to better determine a precise treatment. There are numerous anecdotal stories about people who come back year-after-year for treatment in the lake for psoriasis, eczema and shingles.

Analysis of the content of Soap Lake water has been done for decades, with one of the first tests conducted in the early 1900's by the State College of Washington. Part 2 of this story will cover the contents of the water and reveal more about the oil, which is at the heart of it's properties.

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(ORCHARD COVE)

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The Wonderful Medical Sea

SOAP LAKE, Wash.

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