

# WACONDA SPRINGS—LOST LEGACY?

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## ABSTRACT

Today in Kansas there exists a body of water known as Waconda Lake, at the bottom of which can be found remnants of a sacred mecca to native Americans from past centuries and a major naturopathic healing center from this century. The story of the former Waconda Springs reveals traditional forms of living, spirituality and healing that, in Euro-American expressions, have survived the watery grave of this historic site. (*J Naturopathic Med* 2000;9:62-64)

## NATIVE SACRED SITE

In what was once part of the fertile Solomon River valley of the Smoky Hill region of north central Kansas now lies the 30-year-old Waconda Lake (1). Kansa Indians called the river *Nepaholla*, meaning "water on the hill." This Indian name referred to a fountain atop a mound rising out of the river's flood plain which they called *Ne-Woh'kon-daga*, or "Spirit Water." Spelled variously as *Waukantanka* or *Waconda*, this name was used by Sioux dialect-speaking tribes to identify the Great Spirit, and the fountain became popularly known as Great Spirit Springs. There was a strong association between the river and the springs. The Pawnee name for the Solomon River was *Kitz-a-witz-uk*, translated as "water above." The Omaha name, *Niwa'xubeke*, meant "holy river." After 1830, the Pottawatomis, an Algonquian tribe, were driven into Kansas from the east and remain to this day on the state's largest reservation. The Pottawatomis especially revered the site of this spring which they called *Meaton 'beesh*, *Meaton* being their term for what the English translated as Manito, or Great Spirit of the Algonquians (2).

Once a favorite wintering site for one of the largest buffalo herds in the country (3)—the herd was estimated at five million and would blanket the valley and surrounding hills (4)—the region was warred over by local tribes for hunting rights (5). The major tribes that lived

and hunted in this area (the Kansa, Osage, Pawnee, and Comanche) held their religious ceremonies near the springs and bathed in its medicinal waters. Tribes from all over the Great Plains including the Sioux, Wichita, Kiowa, Arapaho, and Cheyenne would offer sacrifices by throwing valued objects into the Spirit Water whenever they passed by. These tribes held similar legends about this site. They told of a love affair between a brave and maiden of enemy tribes that ended disastrously when one or both lovers were killed and/or forever submerged in the springs (1,3,5,6). Though sold by the U.S. government in 1870 to a private owner, groups of Indians continued to journey to Waconda Springs from their Oklahoma reservations from 1870-1890 to hold ceremonies that lasted for days (5,6). Even into the 1950s, Indians returned to the springs to ritually apply the healing waters (3,6).

The spring in its physical dimensions was a 55 feet diameter mineral pool, almost circular in shape, that surfaced atop an unusual stone mound. The hillock measured 35 feet high, 150 feet across at the top, and 300 feet wide at the base. This unique travertine formation was created by minerals deposited from the overflowing spring over a period of 8,000 years (7). The depth of the inverted cone of the pool basin was 16-18 feet to the point of reaching the spring's unfathomable source (5). Its mineral water contained mostly sodium chloride, but also yielded significant amounts of both sodium and magnesium sulfates and magnesium and calcium bicarbonates, along with traces of silica, iron, manganese, and fluoride (7,8).

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### EARLY DEVELOPMENTS

A sod house was built at the site in 1870. In 1876, a mineral grant was obtained by the Cawker City Mineral Company. This company distributed 16-ounce bottles of spring water known as Waconda Flier in Kansas City, the further eastern United States, and eventually even to Europe. In 1884 an eastern entrepreneur, John J. McWilliams, began construction on a 30 by 80 foot four-story limestone structure which took six years to complete. It served as a hotel and restaurant for sightseers and the social elite from Kansas City. Tourists would take weekend excursions on the Missouri Pacific Railroad to this country resort for gambling, drinking, and dancing. In 1904, the Waconda water won an award at the St. Louis World's Fair for mineral waters of "superior medicinal qualities." However, in 1905 a fight over a woman at the site ended in a man being shot, and the resort was closed (1,3,6).

One year later, the 48-room hotel was bought by George F. Abrahams, a German immigrant, and converted into a nature cure sanitarium. Prior to purchasing the Waconda property, Abrahams had worked at spas in Germany and successfully established the Lithium Water Sanitarium in Mankato, Kansas. He developed a reputation as a healer by performing manipulations and was accorded the title "Doctor" by those he treated. After taking over the Waconda bottling company and resort, he began giving hydrotherapy treatments at this new sanitarium (1,3,9,10). The locally-renowned author Margaret Hill McCarter wrote *The Peace of the Solomon Valley* while sitting on the front porch of the spa, discussing the amenities of rural life and the mystique of the springs (1,11).

In 1907, Abrahams' daughter Anna, his assistant in women's treatments, married another German immigrant, Carl Bingesser (10). Carl enrolled at the National College of Chiropractic (NCC) in Chicago in 1909 and received his doctorate in 1911 (12). NCC was founded in 1906 by John Fitz Alan Howard who had studied under Father Sebastian Kneipp in Germany. NCC became one of the first schools to advocate broad scope chiropractic practice (13). Records indicate that Anna Bingesser enrolled at NCC extension courses while recuperating from surgery at the Kellogg Sanitarium in

Battle Creek, Michigan (12,14). She finished her formal naturopathic education at the Lindlahr College of Natural Therapeutics, also located in Chicago. Anna also studied the use of native American herbs with the well-known pioneer herbalist from north central Kansas, "Indian John" Derringer (14). Anna's mastery of iris diagnosis became an important emphasis in her patient assessment (10,14).

### SANITARIUM SUCCESS AND SERVICES

By 1920, the business was shipping 150 gallons of bottled water internationally and selling 10 gallons daily to visitors for home use as a laxative (1). When G.F. Abrahams died in 1924, Carl Bingesser took over administration of the Waconda Springs Health Resort. In the 1920s Anna traveled to study with Dr. George Starr White, a prominent advocate of natural therapy in Los Angeles, California (14). A few years later, Carl took his son, Carlos, to Germany to study the methods used at various springs and health spas (3). Following his return, Carlos enrolled at the Kansas City College of Osteopathy and graduated in 1932. He joined his parents in treating patients at Waconda Springs, by then the most famous sanitarium in the state of Kansas (3,15). Over the years, an average of 15 to 35 patients were treated daily, but in 1942 this number peaked at 90 per day. Since housing at the springs could accommodate only 60 patients, others found rooms in neighboring Cawker City or the Downs Hotel, run by Carlos's sister, Louise. Two physiotherapists and two nurses were included in the staff of 16-18 employees. In 1946 Carlos Bingesser took over full operation of the sanitarium when his parents retired (6).

The naturopathic treatments at Waconda Springs centered on the use of mineral water piped into the sanitarium for both drinking and baths. Exercise, rest, nutrition, and a positive attitude were emphasized. The daily regimen included drinking the mineral spring water at the fountain early in the morning, followed by long walks in the natural beauty of the country surrounding the springs (16). Part of the morning walk included going barefoot in the grass (17). Other activities included deep breathing and exercising, pure air and sunshine baths, and enjoy-

ing the fresh foods from the farm's gardens. Great importance was placed on a wholesome diet, individualized for each patient's needs. In conjunction with manipulative therapy and instructions in naturopathic principles, the center offered an opportunity for patients to escape from their normal routines to relax and recuperate in peaceful, supportive surroundings. Herbal remedies were individually prescribed (16,18).

Other treatments employed included a whole spectrum of drugless therapeutics. Massage was used as an important adjunct to chiropractic and osteopathic manipulative therapy. Neuropathy was another technique utilized to release pressure from nerve trunks. Electrotherapy included high frequency, galvanic, sinusoidal currents, and diathermy. In addition, heat and light from natural and artificial sources (depending on the season) were employed as curative agents. All of these were done under the umbrella of the naturopathic system of healing, utilizing the "physical, chemical, biological, mental, and spiritual laws for restoration and maintenance of health and the correction of physical and mental disorders without the use of drugs or surgery" (18).

### POLITICS OF DESTINY

In the early 1950s, a movement began to establish Waconda Springs as a national monument to honor the indigenous peoples of this country (5,19). Bills were introduced in both houses of Congress in 1955 to designate Waconda Springs as the first national monument to Native Americans (6). Around the same time, however, construction of dams to create reservoirs for flood control became a government priority. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers chose the valley around Waconda Springs as the sight for a new reservoir.

In spite of significant local and state opposition, the Bureau of Reclamation built a dam on the Solomon River at nearby Glen Elder. In 1964, the sanitarium was closed as the federal government took possession of the property (1,3,6,20). Following a sale of their personal property, Dr. Carlos Bingesser moved with his family to Cawker City and continued to practice medicine in the local community. In 1967 the limestone sanitarium was bulldozed

into the mineral pool on the mound. The lake began filling in 1969 to a depth of 10 feet over the site of the former spring and sanitarium (3,21).

### PERSONAL IMPACT

The history of Waconda Springs remains more than an intriguing story for me personally, since my family was treated at these waters for three generations. My sole surviving uncle, John, and his family still live near the lake. His sister, Louise Brinker Greif, worked at the sanitarium as a cook before training as a nurse. My father, Francis, operated a business, Waconda Native Grass Seeds, with Carlos on the Bingesser farm property associated with the spring and sanitarium. In addition, the children of the Bingesser and Brinker families grew up and explored the wilds of the river and its banks together. Some of my fondest childhood memories are of times spent playing around the springs. My first experience with natural healing was a hydrotherapy cleansing regimen within the walls of the sanitarium. The federal government acquired our family farm in 1965 and the waters of Waconda Lake covered much of my former home, though it still provides the site of Glen Elder State Park campground. A state historical marker stands nearby on U.S. Highway 24 commemorating Waconda Springs.

On August 9, 1997, an auction by the family of the deceased Dr. Carlos Bingesser dispersed the last remaining medical equipment, antiques, and historical paraphernalia associated with Waconda Springs and its health facilities. Though the Indians have long been removed, the sanitarium destroyed, and the springs covered with a lake, even now love for this land, the work of natural healing, and manifestations of the Spirit live on. As the waters of Waconda have taken on another form, so has its heritage continued to thrive in new ways, other places, and many people.

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### BIOGRAPHY

Francis Brinker, ND, received undergraduate degrees in biology from the University of Kansas and in human biology from Kansas Newman College. In 1981 he graduated from the National College of Naturopathic Medicine, where he then received postgraduate certification in general practice and botanical medicine. Dr. Brinker has been an instructor at NCM and the Southwest College of Naturopathic Medicine & Health Sciences and is currently co-facilitator in botanical medicine for the Program in Integrative Medicine at the University of Arizona College of Medicine in Tucson, AZ. His published works include *The Toxicology of Botanical Medicines, Formulas for Healthful Living, and Herb Contraindications and Drug Interactions.*



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