BAS 184 Pipestone Hot Springs Welcome to Butte, America’s Story. I’m your host, Dick Gibson.

Butte’s people found relaxation in diverse ways, but two hot springs, Gregson (Fairmont) to the west and Pipestone, 33 miles to the southeast, were among the most popular destinations.

Pipestone springs were discovered in the middle 1860s by John Paul, about the time gold was found at Butte. Paul was an indentured servant in Missouri who fled to Illinois, where he engaged a lawyer to challenge his indenture – a suit that was won by his lawyer, Abraham Lincoln. Paul worked briefly as an errand boy for Lincoln in Springfield before heading west.

Paul homesteaded the area at the springs, called pipestone supposedly for clay that was good for making pipes, although there is little material in the area that would serve that purpose. Legend said Native Americans would visit the springs under truce, and that wickiups were still standing there when Paul and other gold-seekers arrived. According to prospector Thomas Seerley’s journal, he probably “made” $206 in gold from Pipestone in six weeks during September and October 1864. A village named Milner’s Store developed to support prospectors, but had no long-lasting life.

The next known landowner there was Ms. Ollie Barnes, probably a step-daughter of John Paul, with her brother who came to Montana about 1870 and acquired the springs in 1875. By 1879 Ollie was the sole owner and the following year she became the first postmistress for the small community of Pipestone. She constructed a hotel, barn, and guest house.

About 1886 John Paul was on the scene again as owner. The post office, which had closed, was reopened in 1887 as Pipe Stone Springs and operated until 1928.

John Paul was apparently succeeded again in the 1890s by his step-daughter Ollie and her husband, Charles Burket, who ran the facility until the 1910s. John Paul died in Butte in 1913 at age 84. Burket advertised round-trip access via the Northern Pacific Railroad, at $2.30 and $1.60, good for thirty and ten days, respectively, presumably for multiple trips. That was an increase from a dollar per round trip in 1897. As early as 1895 it cost $2.00 to $3.00 per day for the “first class” accommodations at the Springs. That probably included lodging, meals, and access to all the recreational amenities.

The property was acquired about 1918 by a consortium of Butte businessmen led by James Finlen, Roy Alley, attorney for the Anaconda Company, John Corrette, and other Butte entrepreneurs. During this time the hotel was joined by a bathhouse and 100 canvas-roofed cottages. A resident physician was on site and managed a sanitarium.

Advertisements bragged that the waters, at temperatures around 100 to 136 degrees Fahrenheit, cured rheumatism and paralysis, “made ancient kidneys new,” and eliminated ills. Swings, a croquet ground, and a dance pavilion afforded additional types of relaxation. By 1932, when the highway from the Nineteen Mile to Whitehall was completed (Highway 2 today), Finlen and Alley’s consortium had added a short-lived golf course and a large indoor plunge or swimming pool.

Even during the Great Depression, it was common for 200 or more people to dance the night away at the pavilion at Pipestone Hot Springs. Paleontologists from the Carnegie Institution stayed there during some of the many explorations for fossils which abound in the rocks nearby. Fossil horses, camels, and rhinos, as well as small rodents, marsupials, dog-like carnivores, and more have been found dating to about 35 million years ago.

The resort was closed about 1965, but the Alley family continues to own most of the area surrounding the springs. Today, from the road you can see the ruins of about 19 wooden cabins, and both the original (circa 1910) and second (1923) schoolhouses are still standing on private property.

Thanks to Susan Vuke for some of the resources used in this episode.

As writer Edwin Dobb has said, "Like Concord, Gettysburg, and Wounded Knee, Butte is one of the places America came from." Join us next time for more of Butte, America’s Story.