

SOL DUC HOT SPRINGS: THE RESORT THAT REFUSED TO DIE

R. Gordon Bloomquist
Washington State University Energy Program
Olympia, WA



Figure 1. The main pool and lodge building.

Once the most noted pleasure and health resort on the Pacific Coast, Sol Duc has refused to die despite numerous disasters, including a fire that totally destroyed the resort in 1916 after only three years of operation.

However, the real story of Sol Duc Hot Springs begins in the early-1880s, when Theodore Moritz, a settler in the Quillayute Valley, found an Indian with a broken leg while out hunting. Mr. Moritz took the Indian home and cared for him until he was able to travel. Out of gratitude, the Indian told Mr. Moritz of some curative “fire chuck” (hot water) that bubbles from the ground and which the Indians had used for years to cure their ailments. After the Indian had led him to the site, Mr. Moritz returned to build a cabin and to file a claim on the property with the U.S. Land Office. Word spread rapidly and soon people were making the hard, two-day trip on horseback from Port Angeles.

In 1903, Michael Earles, owner of the Puget Sound Mills and Timber Company, accompanied a group of people to the spring--Mr. Earles had been told by his doctor that he was dying and to go to Carlsbad but he was too weak for the journey. The mineral water at Sol Duc cured him. Wanting to create a place where others could also be helped, Mr. Earles purchased the site from Mr. Moritz’s heirs in 1910 and founded the Sol Duc Hot Springs Company with four other men.

The company built a road at a cost of \$75,000 to make access to the site easier and constructed a health resort at a cost of over a half million dollars. The resort opened on May 15, 1912 and consisted of a four-star hotel with 165 guest rooms, each with an outside view, electric lights, hot and cold running water, telephones and steam heat. The main part of the hotel was 80 ft wide by 160 ft long with a wing 100 ft long. A sawmill had been constructed on site to supply the lumber for the hotel and other assorted buildings.

The most notable of the other buildings was the three-story sanatorium situated between the hotel and the bathhouse. There were beds for 100 patients, and facilities included a laboratory, operating room and x-ray. There was a 45-ft x 200-ft bathhouse and a gymnasium. Patients drank the mineral water and bathed in the waters in the tubs. Showers, mud or vapor baths were also available, as well as Turkish and electric baths.

Other facilities at the resort included an ice plant, powerhouse steam laundry buildings to house workers, cabins and a campground. Guests could use the golf links, tennis courts, croquet grounds, billiard rooms, bowling alley and theater, or enjoy dancing or games of poker in the evening. For the more adventurous, mountain trails were built and saddle horses, packhorses and equipment were provided to take guests on hunting or fishing trips, or just for a scenic ride.

HISTORICAL PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE RESORT



Courtesy of U.S. Park Service,
Burt Kellogg Collection.



The resort really was the place for health, fun, rest and relaxation. It attracted guests from all over the United States and from as far away as Europe. In its first year of operation, over 10,000 guests visited the resort, many of them making the six-hour steamboat trip aboard the Sioux or Sol Duc from Seattle to Port Angeles. Once in Port Angeles, they were transferred to one of several large red Stanley Steamer automobiles that drove the 19½ miles to East Beach or Lake Crescent. The passengers were then ferried across the lake on the Steamboat *Betty Earles* to Fairhaven; where, more Stanley Steamers transported them the remaining 15 miles to the resort.

Tragically, on the afternoon of May 26, 1916, after only three years of operation, sparks from a defective fire lit on the shingle roof of the main hotel building. The caretaker tried to put out the blaze but discovered that the water had been turned off for the winter. Winds blew sparks to the adjoining buildings. The fire short-circuited the organ, which played Beethoven's "Funeral March" until the wires burned out, silencing it. Within three hours, the Northwest's finest resort hotel and spa was in ashes. Insurance was insufficient to begin to rebuild and Michael Earles died in 1919.

In 1925, a gentleman by the name of Fred Martin bought the estate and constructed a lodge, two pools and 40 cabins—a far cry from the original splendor (Figure 1).

Over the years, it is reported that the site housed a successful bootlegging operation during Prohibition. At a later time, a motel was added, as were facilities for camping and recreational vehicle parking. In 1966, the resort was purchased by the National Park Service and became part of the Olympic National Park. A concessionaire was brought in to operate the resort.

By the mid-1970s, the resort was once again in trouble. This time it was the thermal waters. Flow into the hot water pool had diminished to the point that health officials required that the water be treated. Attempts to add chlorine or iodine to the water proved to be very unsuccessful due to the presence of barium that resulted in a chalky white or red precipitate. Unable to continue to use the natural thermal waters, the conservationists decided to heat fresh water in a propane-fired boiler. This proved very unsatisfactory to guests who were, after all, visiting the resort due to the therapeutic value of the natural thermal waters.



Figure 2. *The geothermal soaking pool.*

Attempts to locate additional sources of water also proved to be unsatisfactory and after spending hundreds of thousands of dollars in various attempts to restore the thermal water, the resort was rapidly heading toward financial ruin. In 1979, while the author was taking routine samples of the thermal waters for chemical analysis, it was discovered quite by accident that the cistern from which the thermal waters flowed was filled nearly to the surface with a vermiculite filter material. When the author inquired as to the origin and purpose, it was learned that it was simply a convenient way to dispose of a "waste product." The decision was made to see if pumping all of the material out of the cistern wall would improve the natural artesian flow into the pool. This turned out to be so successful that not only did the resort once again survive, it was totally rebuilt during the 1980s with new cabins, a new thermal pool and assorted facilities, and is yet once again one of the most popular thermal spa resorts in Washington State, having been visited by more than 50,000 per year. Unfortunately, we can only dream about the past grandeur when Sol Duc Hot Springs was the destination resort and spa.

Three main springs with temperatures up to 56°C (133°F) are piped into the soaking and swimming pools. The main pool is a large swimming pool, chlorinated and kept around 26°C (79°F) with heavy infusions of river water. There are also three small circular pools at one end of the swimming pool. These are not chlorinated and are maintained at temperatures of about 36 to 41°C (97 to 106°F). There are benches to hold about two dozen people and one pool is suitable for small children. The hottest pool has a little geyser sprouting out of the center (Figure 2). There is a pool-side snack bar and deli on the end of the cedar built lodge. Housekeeping cabins (Figure 3) and RV hookups are available. The resort is located in the Olympic National Forest; so, there are good hiking trails and campgrounds nearby.

Addition information on Sol Duc can be obtained by calling 360-327-3583 or visiting their website at www.northolympic.com/solduc/.



Figure 3. *Housekeeping cabins for rent.*