

Paso shook to its historic roots in '03

Phil Dirkx, San Luis Obispo Tribune, 11-19-10

Letter to the editor

I was pleased late last week to notice Paso Robles' "Hole from Hell" was finally filled and paved over. It was a pit in the parking lot of our library and City Hall. It was 20 feet deep, 100 feet across and surrounded by tall fencing.

It dates back to Dec. 22, 2003, when a magnitude 6.5 earthquake violently bruised Paso Robles, damaging many buildings and killing two women.

It also awoke the dormant sulfur spring under the parking lot of the library.

I was there. I saw steaming, grayish water flowing over the parking lot. I smelled the sulfurous odor. People say sulfur water smells like rotten eggs. (I wonder how many of them these days have actually smelled rotten eggs.)

There wasn't any geyserlike eruption. I think the water was percolating up through the landscape island. Some people walked quickly, gingerly across the flooded pavement.

The hot, gray water overtopped their shoes. The water flowed off the parking lot, to the streets and then to the Salinas River.

But it wasn't the reawakened spring that made that big pit; it was men and machines looking for a broken pipe. They knew the parking lot was on the site of the city's first hot-spring bathhouse.

Paso Robles once had several flowing hot springs, but the one under the parking lot was the "Main Spring." It was the reason for the town. The town's first post office in 1867 was called Hot Springs.

The Main Spring stopped flowing in the early 1900s. I don't know why; neither did the people digging that pit. They just hoped to stop the flow, but there was nothing to cap.

The water came from a long crack in the earth. So they put a pump in the pit and a temporary 6-inch pipe under 10th Street to carry the sulfur water to the river.

The just-completed, permanent cure cost an estimated \$2 million, with the Federal Emergency Management Agency paying a large share. Getting approvals from FEMA and environmental authorities took six years.

But now, there's some engineered apparatus under the restored parking lot. It collects the sulfur water and sends it to the river through a new 10-inch pipeline under newly rebuilt 10th Street.

I visited the restored parking area. I saw two small concrete squares in the new landscape island.

On each square, I saw a steel cap labeled "sulfur." I sniffed a mild whiff of sulfur in the air.

I hope it never leaves. It reminds me of Paso's roots and nature's power.