

From hot springs to a big stink

Paso Robles will soon begin filling in its 'hole from hell,' a sulfurous pit opened by the San Simeon quake of 2003. It's a reminder of the hot springs that once made the city a haven for travelers.

By Steve Chawkins, Los Angeles Times, 3-22-10

PASO ROBLES -- City officials here call it the "hole from hell."

It's 20 feet deep and 100 feet across and at its bottom bubbles a steaming black sulfur-laden pool. It's gobbled up roughly half the parking lot serving City Hall and the town library. At times, its fumes drift over the quaint downtown, clashing with even the boldest Zinfandels in the wine-tasting rooms that line virtually every block.

"When the wind is right, it'll clear out your sinuses," said Mayor Duane Picanco as he surveyed the fenced-off chasm that is the last grim souvenir of the San Simeon earthquake of 2003. "I can't wait to see it closed up and this chapter of the city's history ended."

After nearly seven years, work to finally fill in the pit begins next month -- not a moment too soon for what the city's public works director, Doug Monn, calls a "gaping sore."

"Every morning when I cross the parking lot, I'm reminded of the quake -- the collapses, the fatalities," he said. "I'd just as soon not be."

On Dec. 22, 2003, the San Simeon quake killed two people downtown, damaged hundreds of buildings and opened a fissure hundreds of feet beneath the parking lot. A foul-smelling geyser shot through the asphalt -- a bizarre reminder of the vast underground hot springs that once made Paso Robles a haven for ailing travelers.

Water cascaded down the streets at up to 600 gallons a minute. In search of its source, the city excavated its parking lot, eventually creating a temporary fix by pumping the sulfurous brew into the ordinarily dry Salinas River.

The permanent solution entails building a pipeline into a leach field, where the water will filter through soil beside the river -- losing its heady aroma in the process.

"The long and short of it is that everyone will be happy to see it go away," said Leo Scotti, whose Sears Hometown Hardware store faces the plastic-slatted chain-link fence surrounding the pit.

Hot springs in Paso Robles used to enjoy a more genial reputation. In the early 1800s, padres from nearby Mission San Miguel relaxed in them. On the mend from gunshot wounds, the desperado Jesse James dipped into the baths to speed his healing. Ignacy Paderewski, the great pianist and a former prime minister of Poland, swore by the hot Paso Robles mud for the arthritis in his hands.

He eventually became a major landowner in the area and is honored today in the city's annual Paderewski Festival.

By the 1960s, the springs' popularity had waned. Long gone was the era of wealthy travelers taking the waters

at grand hotels. Conscious of the smell permeating Paso Robles, landowners capped their wells -- including one that lay beneath the land that would one day be home to City Hall.

Today, a handful of area spas rely on the vast geothermal aquifer under the city. Across the street from City Hall, the Paso Robles Inn pumps hot springs water into selected rooms.

After the geyser erupted, "a lot of old-timers were saying we should bring the baths back," Picanco said. "But that's not so easy."

For one thing, the Federal Emergency Management Agency would pay only for restoring a parking lot, not recapturing a faded tradition.

As it was, it took years to jump the bureaucratic hurdles; redirecting a torrent of sulfur-laden water with a temperature of 111 degrees required the blessings of the California Department of Fish and Game, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Army Corps of Engineers -- "anyone," Monn said, "with an interest in and responsibility over inland waters."

The \$826,000 job will take six months to a year, depending partly on how easily workers can avoid disturbing the migratory birds that nest beside the river from March through August.

Almost all of the buildings damaged by the quake have been repaired or retrofitted. Once on the verge of collapse, Mission San Miguel was restored and reopened late last year. The main building at Flamson Middle School, a 1928 structure that once served as the local high school, was demolished after the temblor. Its \$15.2-million reconstruction is nearly complete.

Meanwhile, the "hole from hell" has become a low-key tourist attraction.

Peering through the fence at the weedy pit, the churning water, a rusty catwalk and an assortment of pumps, Freda Smit-McKie of Prince Edward Island was among a group of excited Canadian visitors one recent afternoon.

"How many parking lots open up with hot springs bubbling out?" she asked. "This is too cool!"