

Alaska Science Forum



MANLEY HOT SPRINGS HOTEL — The geothermally heated three-story log hotel at Manley Hot Springs. The 60-room structure burned in 1913. (Photo courtesy of the University of Alaska Archives, Charles Bunnell Collection.)

Manley Hot Springs

By NEIL DAVIS

Of the hot springs strung across north-central Alaska, Manley Hot Springs has one of the more colorful histories.

The spring is not large, it produces about 200 gallons per minute of water near temperature 58 degrees C (136 degrees F). From that flow one could use current technology to extract about the same amount of heat that would be produced by burning a barrel of fuel oil each hour. This is enough to heat a fairly large building in the Alaskan environment.

In 1901 a prospector named Karshner found the springs at Manley and homesteaded the surrounding land. Gold was struck soon afterward at nearby Tofty and Eureka, bringing thousands of hopeful miners to the region. One of them, a man who called himself Frank Manley, arrived from the Cleary Creek diggings near Fairbanks with several hundred thousand dollars in hand. Manley's money and Karshner's homestead soon combined to create Alaska's first large-scale geothermal project.

Irrelevant, but interesting, was the later finding that Frank Manley's true name was Willard Beaumont. He left Texas "hastily" and was returned there and tried for horse thievery, a charge of which he was acquitted.

Karshner and Manley cleared many acres of land, built a geothermally-heated 60-room hotel of logs and various other buildings including poultry, hog and dairy barns. Their grain, garden and potato crops thrived; in 1910 they shipped 150 tons of potatoes down the Tanana and Yukon Rivers to the Iditarod mining district.

By 1913 the area's placer mining began to decline and so did the Manley agricultural and resort enterprise. Loss of the 3-story log hotel to fire was a major blow.

Asparagus and strawberries grow wild and a few remnants of underground aquaducts are among the few remaining relics of that exciting early era. What are the chances of a major rebirth? Perhaps not too bad, considering the rising cost of energy, the ever-improving geothermal technology and increasing demand for the high-quality agricultural products that can be produced there.

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