



Just thirty-one miles east of Pendleton, one can step back in time! Bar-M Ranch, owned by the same family over 60 years, is the site of what was known as Bingham Springs--among other names. Now known as Bar-M Ranch, the springs has a long history first with the local Indian Tribe who considered the natural springs to be sacred and used the springs for sacred rites, and then as a place that whites found to be peaceful and healing in their own way.

Thanks to Jerry Baker, former family operator of the Bar M-Ranch, much of the history of Bingham

Springs, now Bar-M Ranch, can be provided here. If you have stories or information about Bingham Springs and/or Bar-M Ranch that you would like to share, please contact the Umatilla County Coordinator. All stories, information and photographs will be used here and then forwarded to Jerry Baker for his scrapbooks of the Bar-M Ranch history. Check back for more history and photographs!



Bingham Springs History

by Patricia A. Neal

The Indians called it "Warm Springs"

Bingham Springs has a long history associated with medicinal cures. The local Indians treasured and respected the springs as having powerful spirits. They would not pass by the area without stopping to pay a show of respect to the spirits that lived within. The natural hot springs was considered sacred and they called it "Warm Springs." As more and more whites began traveling through the area, Warm Springs became a favored stop of even more travelers. The whites who traveled through the area found the hot springs to be soothing and healing. Wooden tubs were built to take advantage of the natural hot springs which flowed out of the mountain.

The Thomas-Ruckel Road

The Thomas-Ruckel Road was built by George Thomas and Col. Joseph S. Rucke as a mail route. The road followed the Umatilla River Valley and over the Blue Mountains to the Grande Ronde Valley. It was one of several routes over the Blues.

Thomas and Ruckel operated a stage line that stretched from Walla Walla, Washington, over the Blue Mountains to the Grande Ronde Valley at Summerville, Oregon where a toll gate was situated to collect money from the travelers along that route. The route continued on to Boise, Idaho. Freight wagons pulled by oxen transported goods over the Thomas-Ruckel road about 1864. As travel along the route increased,

Thomas and Ruckel decided that a stage station was needed on the western side of the Blue Mountains. In 1864, they constructed a hand-hewn tamarack log hotel (30 feet by 50 feet) to be used as the stage stop and western toll gate near Warm Springs, as Bingham Springs was known at that time. Much of the road washed out in the early 1880's, but by that time the railroad was completed over the Blues so the road was abandoned.

Warm Springs to Purdy Springs

William "Tip" Parrent was the first manager of the stage stop, and eventually became the owner of the hotel. He sold the facility to John B. Purdy in 1881. Purdy reportedly was a prominent rancher from Athena. The stage stop was commissioned as a post office from August 7, 1882 and decommissioned on September 17, 1891. Purdy served as the postmaster. Warm Springs became known as "Purdy Springs." A footbridge led to the pool in back of the hotel. Purdy added the kitchen and dining wing to the hotel during the time he owned the facility. The railroad was built across the Blue Mountains in 1884.

Bingham Springs

Dr. John E. Bingham, Walla Walla, purchased the property from Purdy in 1892. Purdy Springs became "Bingham Springs" the name by which most people know this area. Bingham Springs was a popular place enjoyed by people from all over. The swimming pool was not the only attraction. Fishing was good and Dr. Bingham had built a bowling alley at the resort for guests to use for a small fee. (The bowling alley was later used as a dance hall.)

Dr. Bingham built a 40 foot x 60 foot rock masonry pool, added a deck and covered wood bleacher seats. He also built a large 32 room, two-story building with cupolas, fireplace and a porch along two sides across from the log hotel which he called the "Annex."

Dr. Bingham decided to close the resort to the public and operate it as a sanitarium, using the hot springs as medicinal cure. For whatever reason, the venture failed to be successful and he decided to use the Annex as a guest house.

We-Na-Ha Springs and Back Again

J.A. Borie, a well-known pioneer of Pendleton, purchased the resort in 1908 from Dr. Bingham. It included the sanitarium, the hotel buildings, springs, grounds and eight hundred acres of timbered land. Bingham Springs was renamed "We-Na-Ha Springs." As with past owners, the venture did not prove to be profitable and Dr. Bingham found himself the owner of the facility again. We-Na-Ha Springs became Bingham Springs once again.

Some time after Dr. Bingham took back the resort, he sold it to Billy Hoke. He operated it until about 1917, when Herman Rosenberg, a prominent rancher from Umatilla County purchased the property. Rosenberg hosted a grand opening on Memorial Day in 1920. Under his ownership, a small pool was constructed alongside the larger one.

M.A. Rigby, a local Pendleton businessman, was the next owner of Bingham Springs when he purchased the property in 1932. He operated it for about six years when he sold it to Howard and Bonnie Baker in 1938.

Grangeville, Idaho to Bingham Springs, Oregon

In 1938, Bingham Springs was purchased by Howard and Bonnie Baker, of Grangeville, Idaho. It has been in the family ever since. It is no doubt a fluke that the Bakers ended up as the owners of

Bingham Springs. Howard was very active in the Grange in Idaho and was supposed to attend meeting in Pendleton. Bonnie had a cousin in Walla Walla and decided to join Howard on this trip. After the meeting was over, they ended up being given a tour of Bingham Springs on a Sunday afternoon, and found it very nice, a beautiful spot. Mind you, this was in winter with snow on the ground and "the biggest icicles I had seen in my life," according to Bonnie.

The older couple who owned the facility were running it by themselves and were wanting to retire. They gave the Bakers the grand tour from the guest house to the pool. At that time there were more 20 cabins around the ranch with enclosed cooking and a screened room for sleeping plus 18 outdoor privies! The Bakers then continued on their way back to Idaho.

Evidently they must have made a wonderful impression on the owners, because the Bakers received a phone call the next morning telling them that the owners felt that the Bakers were the perfect couple to purchase the resort and operate it. Well, Bonnie didn't think that was such a wonderful plan! "I had never been to a resort or anything like it and I thought, good grief, what would a person do—how would you run a place like that."

But the couple didn't give up. They continued to call and write to the Bakers until finally Howard went back to Pendleton and then called on Bonnie's birthday to let her know that he had signed the papers. The Bakers were the new owners of Bingham Springs! All Bonnie could do was cry at the news.

It wasn't long before everything at the Grangeville ranch was up for sale. It was right after the depression of the 1930's and it was going to be too costly to move the household to Oregon. So, everything was put up for sale except for Howard's horse, a piano that Bonnie had bought right after their marriage and their clothing. Their children, Gene and Virginia, stayed behind to finish the school year out while Howard and Bonnie headed for Oregon to start their new venture—or is that "adventure"?

The first thing that they had to do was to tear down the Annex that Dr. Bingham had built as it had been condemned. The lumber was to be used to build three or more cabins. Howard located a couple of old carpenters who could not stand the thought of tearing down the building. They convinced Howard that they could put in a new foundation, but the building down to one story by taking off the boards a layer at a time. They decided to use the lumber to build a new dance hall because the one that building had collapsed under a heavy snow. And according to Bonnie, you couldn't run the resort without a dance hall.

There was no running water to the cabins (other than the Umatilla River!) so all the water used at the resort had to be hand carried to the rooms. Pitchers were filled with water in the rooms, chamber pots and dirty water had to be carried out. It was not a job that Bonnie enjoyed doing, but there was no one else to do it. There was running water to the ranch house, in the kitchen. The first year the Bakers were at the ranch, the water froze during the winter, leaving them without water for most of the winter--until spring thaw.

Once the dance hall was rebuilt, the Bakers would hire an orchestra to play for the dancers. It wasn't long before they noticed that they weren't making enough money to hire an orchestra. By the time they fed them, provided housing and paid them, they hadn't made any money. So somehow, Bonnie was chosen as the piano player for the dances. That meant she was working most of the day and half the night!

About the third year that the Bakers owned the resort, they finally decided that the dance hall wasn't

making a profit and the local motels were sprucing up and providing nice accommodations for travelers. The resort didn't have that type of facilities so it was decided to divide the dance hall up into small apartments. It took some time to remodel, find furnishings and find the bathroom fixtures but eventually the former dance hall remodel was complete and it now provided nice accommodations at the resort.

Next to be remodeled was the ranch house. Two small bedrooms upstairs that had been used by the help and then the Baker's children, were cleared out and turned into small bathrooms. After that first year of going most of the winter without water because it had frozen up, Bonnie wanted running water in the ranch house. They felt pretty proud of themselves to have indoor plumbing upstairs. Another two rooms on the other end of the house were turned into an office for Howard.

About five or six years after they bought the resort, the Bakers made the decision to close the facility to the public. Bonnie confessed that she was scared at that prospect. But given the alternative, losing their investment, making the resort into a successful venture would take work. Up to that point, people arrived on a Saturday, stayed the night and left the next day. That was the most anyone spent at one time at the resort. They camped all over the lawns, built fires and were never charged for the use except for a mere twenty-five cents for swimming all day. While the public came to spend the weekend, the Bakers lived there year-round because they wanted to and because they wanted to make money doing it.

One day after a very busy weekend, a businessman, his wife and grandson drove up to the resort in a big fancy car. He was on his way to Walla Walla to buy a jewelry store. He described his desire to run a place like the resort and how he would run it so that people stayed there by the week--and it made money. That gave them some ideas of how it could be done successfully.

The dining room and kitchen were remodeled, adding a gas range with a grill to replace the old wood stove that had been in the kitchen. The dining room was moved closer to the front of the building to accommodate paying guests and the public who came only on the weekends. Regardless of the status of your stay at the resort, everyone was fed.

Once the decision was made to close the resort to the public, most of the small cabins were torn down. The interior of the inn was refurbished with knotty pine and a fireplace was added. Electricity arrived at the resort in 1947. For several years they had used light plants to generate lights in the evenings. A huge log barn was built in 1959 to provide for the livestock.

The Bakers brought the first horse to the resort when they moved there from Idaho. Some of the people who owned cabins there weren't pleased to see the horse and informed the Bakers not to bring the horse any further than the barn. The Bakers were able to buy them out, fortunately, and Howard began buying Indian ponies--descendents from the wild horses that the Indians raised. Howard would ride with them all day, help them herd the horses and learned how they marked their horses by watching what yearling was following the mother. Then they marked the yearling as belonging to the mare since it was following her. The original 850 acres that came with the resort eventually grew into 2500 acres. Howard "wheeled and dealt" until he had obtained a sizeable acreage. The disbanding of the Cattle Association helped in creating the present ranch. According to Bonnie, the land had been over grazed for so long that they didn't allow anything on the land until it finally came back into its own.

While scrubbing out the cabins with 10 gallons of lye soap, cleaning outhouses and feedings hordes of people was the downside of owning the resort, driving the horses to winter pasture was the upside. Bonnie recalled riding her horse on the drives to take the horses to winter pasture where they would

have milder climate and hay to eat. She carried the red flag to let people know that horses were coming. At night people along the way would let them pasture the horses in a fenced area and allow them to camp alongside the herd. And of course, the wintertime was the best time because there were no guests to deal with once school started.

Closing the resort to the public meant coming up with a new name. Howard wanted to bring in cattle and horses so they needed a brand. Nothing they thought of that started with a "B" was accepted because it had already been used. Then one day, Howard found a brand in the barn--it was a Bar-M--and that's what was accepted.

Right up to the 1960's the road ran right through the resort. It followed the old stage coach road past the ranch house. Which meant you had the public driving right through your property. While Bonnie tried various tactics to get the cars to slow down, it still was a problem. Howard finally offered a right-of-way to the county commissioners if they would re-route the road up above the resort. They were agreeable to that, so where the pavement ends, the USFS road takes off up the hill. There is no longer a roadway through the resort.

Floodwaters on the Umatilla River destroyed the small pool, spectator beaches and roof in 1965. A cable suspension bridge was built to circumvent future flooding of the river and logs hitting up against a solid bridge and destroying it.

While Howard and Bonnie retired from running the resort, their family continues to own and operate the resort. Where many failed before them, the Bakers have proven that hard work, the pioneer spirit and the willingness to do whatever it takes is the formula for success. That, and a family which is willing to carry on the family business.

-- Material used for this article came from documents furnished by Jerry Baker, Bar-M Ranch. This information included an interview with Bonnie Baker in 1988, by Sharlene Minshall, Lynchburg, VA. All rights reserved.



Early History: The natural hot springs was considered sacred by the Indians. They called it "Warm Springs" and used it as a site for scared rites. They believed it to be the abiding place of powerful spirits who ruled the birds of the air and the beasts of the forest and plain.

White men initially used tubs carved from logs. The first swimming pool was built of poles set on end, and then banked with mud and rocks.

In early days a plan was used to cross from the inn to the springs. Through the

years, several log bridges have been built and then washed away by floodwaters.

1864: The Thomas-Ruckel Road was built by George Thomas and Col. Joseph S. Ruckel. It apparently followed an Indian trail and the route pioneered by Marcus Whitman (the Whitmans and the Spauldings were Presbyterian Missionaries. Their wives--Narcissa Whitman and Eliza Spaulding--were the first white women to cross the continent into the Northwest Territory.

A two-story, hand-hewn log inn was built as a stagecoach stop and western toll gate for the Thomas and Ruckel Road which stretched from Walla Walla, Washington, over the Blue Mountains to the Grande Ronde Valley at Summerville, Oregon and on to Boise, Idaho.

The first owner and manager of the Inn was William Tip Parrent. The inn was known as "Warm Springs."

1881-1891: The inn was also used as a post office.

1882: Floodwaters wiped out most of the bridges.

1882-1892: The inn was owned by John B. Purdy. Warm Springs became "Purdy Springs."

1884: The railroad was built across the Blue Mountains.

1892: The inn was purchased by Dr. John E. Bingham of Walla Walla, Washington. Dr. Bingham changed the name to "Bingham Springs." The resort was closed to the public and operated as a sanitarium. This did not prove successful. Dr. Bingham built a 40x60 foot rock masonry pool, the foundation of the present pool. He added a deck and wooden bleacher seats with a roof. A 32 room, two-story building called the "Annex" with cupolas, fireplaces, and a porch along two sides. A bowling alley was built and later used as a dance hall.

1905: Dr. M.S. Kern drove the first automobile to the resort. It was a one-cylinder Krit.

1908: J.A. Borie purchased the resort. He renamed it "WE-NA-Ha Springs." Mr. Borie was not successful in this venture and Dr. Bingham had to take it back. He renamed it "Bingham Springs."

??: Billy Hoke owned the springs.

1917-1918: Herman Rosenberg bought the springs.

1926: A small pool was built alongside the large one.

1932: The springs was purchased by M.A. Rigby.

1938: Howard and Bonnie Baker (ranchers from Grangeville, ID) bought the resort.

1939: The Bakers demolished the condemned bowling alley and dance hall building. The cupolas, fireplaces, and porches of the Annex were removed and the roof was lowered one board at a time by going around and around the building. It is now called the "Homestead."

1948: The facility was closed as a public resort and registered as the Bar-M Ranch.

1940's: The interior of the inn was refurbished with knotty pine and the fireplace was built.

1949: Electricity arrives at the Bar-M Ranch.

1959: The log barn was built by Gene and his father.

1961: The road was re-routed up and behind the Bar-M complex.

1965: The small pool was destroyed by a flood, along with the spectator bleachers and roof. The current cable suspension bridge was built.

1974: Flood

1986: The pool was recemented.