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NACOGDOCHES AS A HEALTH RESORT? THE STORY OF AQUA VITAE PARK

by Joe E. Ericson

Before America's entrance into World War I, two enterprising Nacogdoches, Texas, residents developed a plan to make that old East Texas town into a health resort, a spa to rival Marlin and Mineral Wells. The impetus for their notion of a privately owned, public park operated for a profit and for recreation for the public came from "Uncle" Charlie Bird, "a well known Negro round town."¹

Early in 1908 Bird purchased a piece of land on the west side of LaNana Creek, south of the road later known as East Main Street and then a few blocks from downtown. When purchased, the plot of land had little value; containing only one or two houses, it was used primarily as pasture. Moving his wife to the spot in September 1908 with the intention of making it his homestead, Charlie Bird dug a well on the property to provide water for his home.

When water began to flow in his well, Bird learned that the liquid had a "particular taste and effect" that rendered it unpalatable to drink. Demonstrating a great deal of resourcefulness, the old man began to peddle the water around town, especially to the sick and afflicted.

About a year after he acquired the land, Bird "conceived the idea of disposing of his property" and approached Robert Lindsey and June C. Harris, local businessmen involved in dry goods, real estate, cotton buying, newspaper publishing, and a variety of other commercial activities. After consulting other local residents, Lindsey and Harris decided to organize a stock company, purchase the land, and exploit its location and resources.

The property acquired was described by the *Daily Sentinel* as "about seven hundred feet fronting on [East] Main Street and running back toward Hayward Mill taking in about fourteen acres. The east line meanders along the LaNana Creek, south line being partly formed by that stream."² As the promoters planned to improve the area and turn it into a public park, work to clear the site began almost immediately. Among the first changes was to straighten the bed of LaNana Creek to improve drainage.

By the end of the first week in April 1909, a large work crew had finished many of the planned improvements. In just four weeks, workmen converted a fourteen-acre piece of swampland, in places even a marsh, into "a scene of real pleasure, instead of an eyesore as it formerly was."³

The land acquired by the stock company fronted on East Main Street (El Camino Real or the Old San Antonio Road) west of LaNana Creek for some 700 feet; its boundary followed the creek; its western line extended approximately 870 feet south; and its south line was formed partly by the stream itself. In the center of the new public park was located the mineral

wells that were its principal attraction.

Dr. Joseph E. Mayfield, a local physician, suggested the name given to the park and its mineral water, Aqua Vitae (Water of Life), in keeping with an ancient Nacogdoches Indian tradition that nearby was a life-giving spring. After surveying the park just prior to its official opening, the local editor penned this glowing description:

A high solid wall fence had been built entirely around the resort, excepting along the line of the LaNana and the front. A net wire fence is built along the front ... The whole of the fourteen acres have been leveled and shaped ... In the center of the entrance fence is a vehicle gate, while between the city approach side and that gate is a pedestrian entrance. A wide driveway, some twenty or twenty-five feet, runs from the entrance to the farther side of the park, on each side of which, toward the front, [is] a broad, well planned site in grass lawns. On either side of the driveways hedges has been planted, while along the board walk built from the pedestrian gate, are two rows of growing cape jasmine plants. Nearer the center of the park, flower beds have been laid.¹

By that time two wells had been dug, a large pavilion erected over Well No. 1, a high curb for the same well laid down, a pump installed, and other facilities provided for dispensing the “cool, sparkling liquid, the Aqua Vitae, destined to place this city in the topnotch niche as a health resort.”² Similar installations were planned for additional wells.

South of the wells, hitching posts were provided for those who were conveyed to the park in horse-drawn vehicles. Scattered around the wells and over the remainder of the grounds were seats and swings for the comfort of visitors. A picnic grove with running water, grassy plots, and more swings were featured.

Samples of the water from all three wells (the third having been completed by July 1909) were submitted to a national government chemist for analysis. The report indicated that the well water contained significant amounts of calcium, magnesium, and sodium carbonate; calcium, magnesium, and sodium sulphate; and magnesium and sodium chloride. The carbonates were alleged to increase metabolism, dissolve uric acid, and soothe urinary tract irritation; and the sulfates and chlorides were thought to be useful as tonic and laxative.

Eleven prominent Nacogdoches area physicians announced on April 7, 1909 that they took great pleasure in informing all “who are seeking after health” that Aqua Vitae was a “very effective stimulant to all the excretory organs.” They further testified that the mineral water “is one of the best, if not THE BEST alkaline purgative we have ever seen. Its antacid properties also render it very valuable in certain stomach troubles.”³

Lindsey and Harris announced that there would be no entrance fee and the entire grounds were at the disposal of the public from 6:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. daily. Income to the park’s investors – now known as the Aqua Vitae Park Company – would come from the sale of the mineral waters. Half gallons were

priced at ten cents and gallons at fifteen cents, while a case of twelve half gallons could be purchased for \$1.50. In addition, coupon books could be obtained at all drug stores and at the wells. Books for fifty drinks sold for \$1.00 and those for 100 drinks for \$2.00. Mrs. A. V. Muller was placed in charge of Well No. 1 for the sale of water at the park.

Management, investors, and the local news media were all highly optimistic about this ambitious venture. The local editor predicted, with pardonable exaggeration:

The opportunities for making Nacogdoches a famous resort are great, and much capital has been put at the command of the management for the making. This city and section is certainly a proper locality for a health resort and the climate and other extremely gratifying features places it above and beyond any other resort that can be mentioned.⁷

He also suggested that the city's historical sites would "add lustre to the brilliant opportunities now existing," and stated positively that "there is little doubt that a pleasure and health resort here would soon be the leading one in the state."

The editor further prophesied that "neither money nor pains will be spared in making this city and this pretty place" a spot around which thousands of people would congregate for improved health and greater enjoyment of life. Such was the general level of expectations on April 28, 1909, when the Aqua Vitae Park formally opened.

Opening day plans called for invitations to be extended to prominent railroad officials, including those of the Southern Pacific, Santa Fe, and Cotton Belt. Railroads were invited to run special trains with discounted rates for the day. A Reception Committee composed of twenty-four of the community's leading citizens, headed by banker E.A. Blount, an Entertainment Committee of twenty prominent residents of Nacogdoches, headed by businessman H.H. Cooper, and a Committee on Grounds of four, headed by developer Robert Lindsey, prepared for opening day. A day-long program began with a concert by the thirty-piece Elks Band of Nacogdoches at 11:30 a.m. on the public square and ended with a second band concert at 9:00 p.m. at the Nacogdoches Opera House on East Main Street.

The program featured a welcoming address by the Honorable S.W. Blount, speaking on behalf of Mayor W.U. Perkins; a major address entitled, "The Neglected Opportunities of East Texas," by Professor H.P. Attwater, industrial agent for the Sunset Central Railroad; and a dedicatory address by Judge James I. Perkins. Approximately 120 Confederate veterans turned out to lead the march from the public square eastward to the Aqua Vitae Park. The *Daily Sentinel* reported that a crowd estimated at from 3,500 to 5,000 persons attended the ceremonies in spite of "a downpour of rain" the previous night and showers the morning of opening day.⁸

For the Park to be a financial success and for the city to become a major health resort, Lindsey and Harris, along with other company leaders, realized that additional improvements would have to be made at the site. They

envisioned a total of four wells, but apparently only three were drilled. By early May the company announced that a bottling plant and shipping house would be erected to package the water for shipping to customers throughout the region; LaNana Creek would be straightened and a bathing pool and wading pool created just west of the wells; and a band stand built so regular concerts could be held.

Company managers also signed a contract for the construction of a scenic miniature railway and eight four-room cottages on the eastern side of the driveway. They also expected to contract for the erection of a bowling alley in the not too distant future.

In mid-June railroad officials issued an ultimatum and a challenge to the Park Company and the Nacogdoches community. They offered to bring passengers to the city and the park for one and one-third fare, round trip, as they had to established resorts such as Hot Springs, Mineral Wells, and Marlin. Their cooperation was contingent, however, upon the community and the company meeting stipulated conditions: ample hotel and boarding facilities to accommodate the visitors; attractive features for amusement, comfort, and pastime; adequate auditorium facilities; sufficient bath house arrangements; and judicious advertising. Cost of the new auditorium to seat at least 500 people was estimated at between \$2,000 and \$2,500, and cost of advertising placed at approximately \$500 per month.

What happened at this point is a good example of the almost total absence of progressive business attitudes among the people of Southern agrarian communities. On June 16, 1909, a Soliciting Committee composed of R.E. Davis, H.T. Mast, and E.H. Blount was selected to secure funds for the new auditorium and other projected improvements in the city and at the park.⁹ Solicitors assured prospective contributors that "no games or operas will be permitted at the Auditorium on Sunday, nor will any sort of gambling be allowed in said building at any time."¹⁰

After a period of about four weeks during which the community did not respond to the appeal voiced by the park's proprietors and other investors and to the railroad's prediction of failure if the fund raising failed, on July 30, 1909, Lindsey and Harris announced that they were transferring the water company to Houston and abandoning the park project. Robert Lindsey moved to Houston to open the firm's office for the sale of real estate and Aqua Vitae water. A complete bottling plant for the water was projected at the Nacogdoches site from which the bottled water would be shipped by rail in carload lots to Houston for further distribution.

June C. Harris, who remained in Nacogdoches to supervise operations, pinpointed the reason for the failure of the park project:

We hate to leave Nacogdoches, and still believe that this city and her people have let pass a brilliant opportunity when no effort to push this enterprise was made. Had the people shown a disposition to help us, we intended to lease the Orton pasture [to the east] for an artificial lake, boat house, bath houses, drive ways through the plot to the canyons and stock

it with park animals. A natural health resort Nacogdoches is, with these wonderful attractions for the summer tourists, and the fact that the railroads had promised to put five hundred people a day here next season, make it still more regrettable. But it can't be helped and we are compelled to go where we can have co-operation in another way, if not in the way we desired.¹¹

Editor Giles Haltom underscored the disappointment of the park's promoters in a September 1910 editorial in which he sharply castigated the lack of community support, asking rhetorically. "When will the people of Nacogdoches lay aside their 'opposition' and get together for the advancement and improvement and progress of this city and section?"¹² He left his question unanswered but strongly suggested that they had not been willing to do so for Aqua Vitae.

Nearly a year after Lindsey and Harris and the Aqua Vitae Company abandoned the park, the *Daily Sentinel* reported that the grounds were covered by weeds and grass but that the improvements were still there – seats, swings, pavilions, band stand, flower beds, and green lawn – the water was still available, and that the private investors were still willing to operate their enterprise. All that was lacking was popular support.¹³

Local people "loved the park and its splendid trees, excellent driveways, and other features." They came and went at leisure, reveling in the beauties of the place. When the park's management sought to expand the scope of operations, however, those same people expected the original investors to shoulder the entire cost. The investors had more than \$8,000 tied up and were receiving a good return from the bottling and shipment of the waters, but the bottling operation did little to stimulate the local economy.

E.A. Blount, a prominent local figure, in a letter to the editor in the *Daily Sentinel*, offered a compromise: "[I]t would be a wise and popular move ... for the city to buy that portion of the Aqua Vitae property known as the Jule Smith tract and use it as a public park, being so close in and also being near the wells it would always be a popular resort and should be owned by the city and kept in good condition for the public."¹⁴ Blount's suggestion apparently generated little or no public interest.

To better exploit the waters themselves, the Aqua Vitae Mineral Water Company laid a pipe line from a spring on J.G. Orton's property to bring water to the site. An abandoned Negro church building on the grounds was utilized as a storage house. Well No. 1 was enlarged to eight feet in diameter and lined with cement, new pumps installed, and bottling apparatus put in place.

Early in 1911 Robert Lindsey became the sole owner of the Aqua Vitae properties. He announced that sale of the mineral water would continue but that sales at the wells would be handled by one man at the park between the hours of 8:00 and 6:00 p.m., Monday through Saturday. Orders, he said, could be placed for home delivery. Local and out-of-town drug stores would handle retail sales, while bottling and shipment to the distribution center in Houston would not be materially changed.¹⁵

By the time of America's entrance in World War I, all mention of Aqua Vitae mineral waters had disappeared from the local newspaper. Presumably the war and declining sales spelled the demise of the promising enterprise.

Despite abandonment by the Aqua Vitae Company, the park did not cease to be utilized by the local community nearly that early. Charles Lee Hill, who moved to Nacogdoches with his family in 1920, attended a speech delivered in the park in 1926 by former governor James E. Ferguson on behalf of his wife, Miriam A. Ferguson, during her gubernatorial campaign. He also recalled attending a band concert there performed by the Allen Academy Band.¹⁶

Later, probably when Hill was a student in Nacogdoches High School or Stephen F. Austin State College, "the park settled into its final decay..., lost in a tangle of plants, weeds, [and] fallen trees."¹⁷ Still later, the frontage along East Main Street was sold and a variety of business establishments erected.

Acknowledging that turn-of-the-century small Southern agrarian communities (as Nacogdoches undoubtedly was) had limited quantities of fluid capital and that their philosophical bent made them reluctant to gamble what capital they possessed, the collapse of the Aqua Vitae Park project was an excellent example of an opportunity lost. Development of mineral water spas in Mineral Wells by 1897 and in Marlin by 1900 demonstrated the significant economic impact that could be generated by this type of enterprise.¹⁸ Another opportunity of this magnitude did not arise in Nacogdoches until the State of Texas began searching for a site for a regional normal college in East Texas a decade later.

NOTES

¹Daily Sentinel, April 8, 1909.

²Daily Sentinel, April 8, 1909.

³Daily Sentinel, April 8, 1909.

⁴Daily Sentinel, April 8, 1909.

⁵Daily Sentinel, April 8, 1909.

⁶Daily Sentinel, April 7, 1909. The local physicians were F.T. Ford, A.A. Nelson, J.E. Mayfield, C.H. Rulfs, F.R. Tucker, R.P. Lockey, W.I.M. Smith, E.D. Williams, G.S. Barham, J.H. Reagan, and W.H. Campbell.

⁷Daily Sentinel, April 8, 1909.

⁸Daily Sentinel, April 28, 1909.

⁹Daily Sentinel, June 29, 1909.

¹⁰Daily Sentinel, June 29, 1909.

¹¹Daily Sentinel, July 30, 1909.

¹²Daily Sentinel, September 1, 1910.

¹³Daily Sentinel, May 12, 1910.

¹⁴Daily Sentinel, May 13, 1910.

¹⁵Daily Sentinel, January 17, 1911.

¹⁶Letter to the Editor, Daily Sentinel, October 30, 1992.

¹⁷Charles Lee Hill to Joe E. Ericson, November 27, 1992.

¹⁸Mineral water wells had been opened in 1891 in both Mineral Wells and Marlin, and the highly publicized Crazy Water well was drilled at Mineral Wells in 1885.