

The Healthseeker Era, 1880–1940

The myth that sunny New Mexico was a good environment in which to recover one's health lured the first wave of educated middle- and upper-class Americans into the territory. The term "myth" is appropriate in two ways. First, a myth is "an imaginative idea that induces people to act," and the seductive belief in a magically healthful climate sparkles in written records from eighteenth-century travelers' narratives to twentieth-century Chamber of Commerce brochures. The other, more restrictive definition of myth as "a false folk belief" certainly applies to the experiences of more than half the tuberculosis patients who chased the cure to New Mexico but died before celebrating their first anniversaries as New Mexicans.

To appreciate why Americans of the 1880–1940 period felt so strongly about their health, one need only examine the state of medicine and the settlement patterns on the American frontier of the nineteenth century. Doctors used a patchwork of theories and medicines that didn't work on the vast majority of illnesses, and many people lived in abominable conditions.

People on the Mississippi and Missouri frontiers were settled in a pattern of villages or small towns built on floodplains. Drainage was poor, and the slow-moving water bred mosquitos. Muddy, unpaved streets, paths, and animal corrals gathered stagnant puddles that also bred pests and bacteria. Extended families, forced inside during rough winter weather, crowded into small cabins, lean-tos, and sod houses. There were communal baths and dining rooms in boarding houses and hotels. All of this set the stage for epidemics that raged throughout the Midwest and earned Missourians the unfortunate nickname "The Pukes." "Fever" and "ague" appear to have been malaria complicated with pneumonia, an inevitable complex when malaria is inadequately treated. Influenzas must have also been uncontrollable on the frontier.

Tuberculosis (TB), the leading killer of the nineteenth century, was an insidious and debilitating condition that crept into an area of the body, most often the lungs, and seemed to consume one from the inside out (hence its popular name "consumption"). As fluid filled the lungs, one had to spit constantly, which was a common way of transmitting the germs. TB sufferers were called "lungers" and "hackers."

The very unhealthy, long-suffering nineteenth-century population had no successful curing tradition to help them.

Doctors then knew that improving the diet cured certain malnutrition conditions, but they didn't understand germ theory until well after 1880. Rural practitioners did not practice the antiseptics methods until well into the twentieth century. A few frontier doctors used approaches that included humoral theory (concerning bile, phlegm, blood, and so forth) and folk remedies adapted from Indian traditions. But the doctors lacked the Indian ritual and spiritual elements that are so important in rallying the patient's emotional powers.

By the time settlement neared the arid plateaus and deserts, Midwesterners were familiar with travelers' praise of the dry and healthful Southwest climate. Early reports mentioned seeing Indian and Hispanic elders so wrinkled they seemed to have lived until mummified in the sun and dry air, while the life expectancy on the Mississippi frontier was not much beyond fifty years.

When rail service opened Colorado and New Mexico to convenient access from points east, railroad publicity campaigns immediately exploited the health angle. Pure air, dry sunny weather, awesome mountain scenery, and therapeutic hot springs seem to have at least equaled fertile farmland or mineral deposits as promotional come-ons beginning in 1880. The Denver and Rio Grande Railroad expanded south out of Denver to serve mining districts like Leadville and promising resort sites like Glenwood Springs, Colorado, and Ojo Caliente, New Mexico. The Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe followed the Santa Fe Trail across the prairies to Las Vegas, Santa Fe, Albuquerque, and the lower Rio Grande Valley. In 1879 the railroad bought the old adobe hotel at a hot springs six miles northwest of Las Vegas and built a Gilded Age palace called the Montezuma Hotel. The railroad advertised it as a spa, resort, and a place of healing waters and climate.

All sorts of claims and hopes bubbled in the thermal springs in those days. Waters rich in minerals were thought to cure kidney ailments, rheumatism, urinary problems, fever and ague, dyspepsia (indigestion), and so on. The romantic aura of TB was so well established that young Anglo women visiting the spas around the turn of the century would often use make-up to appear pale and "consumptive." Local Hispanics, in contrast, used the springs to appear healthy and able to work at all times.

Principal spas which developed in New Mexico, in addition to Ojo Caliente and

Montezuma, were Las Palomas Hot Springs (later Truth or Consequences), Radium Springs (north of Las Cruces), Faywood (or Hudson) Hot Springs (west of Deming), Ponce de Leon Springs at Talpa near Taos, Jemez and Sulfur springs in the Jemez Mountains, and Williamsburg, Van Patten's, and Alameda springs in the Las Cruces area. All of these springs rise from hydrologic formations heated by thermal activity along the Rio Grande rift.

The Truth or Consequences thermal area (originally called Las Palomas Hot Springs) was accessible to the railroad from Engle (seventeen miles to the east), and from 1900 to 1911 the visitors stayed at Las Palomas, a few miles south of the springs. The site of Las Palomas is now inundated by Caballo Reservoir. In 1911 the small community of Las Palomas Hot Springs was formed at the site of the thermal water. Its name was shortened to Hot Springs in 1913 and changed to Truth or Consequences in 1950. By 1903, Jemez Hot Springs, connected to Albuquerque by stage, had a series of healthseeker hotels and bathing houses with sweating rooms. Ojo Caliente (or Joseph's Hot Springs) had been named by Cabeza de Vaca in 1534 and was reported as a consumption spa with bathhouses and cottages as early as 1875. By 1900 most of the hot springs and warm springs had some form of bathhouse erected near or on them. Many of the locations would become seasonal tent cities for people suffering from various incurable ills.

Of more impact than the spas, however, were the sanatoria built for people suffering from respiratory tract problems, mostly TB, but also asthma and allergies. Later, sanatoria were created for soldiers gassed on World War I battlefields. Just as the century turned, town boosters began to join the railroad publicists in portraying New Mexico as a health haven. Albuquerque's business community, through its Commercial Club (forerunner of the Chamber of Commerce), donated both land for a sanatorium and office space for *The Herald of the Well Country*, a monthly magazine published by and for healthseekers. Old copies of the *Herald* indicate that the immigrant healthseeker community was self-conscious, educated, and well-off, and that businesses in Albuquerque were eager to cater to them. Many of these sanatoria have since become the major metropolitan hospitals in the state, such as St. Joseph's and Presbyterian of Albuquerque, St. Vincent's of Santa Fe,

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and St. Anthony's of Las Vegas.

In the first few decades of the twentieth century, the theory of curing TB called for isolation, inactivity, fresh air, sunshine, and a diet high in milk and eggs. Isolation and fresh air were provided by rows of single-person cabins with screened "sleeping porches" and lawn-type chairs for outside sunning. An excellent example of this type of facility, which today only operates a small outpatient facility, is the huge hospital-cottage complex at Valmora, north of Las Vegas. The German researcher Robert Koch had proved in 1880 that TB was carried by a microbe, so it seemed logical to isolate patients to reduce the chances of contagion. The emphasis on outdoor living, however, must also have come from fitness buff Teddy Roosevelt, widely admired in the nineties for his ebullient support of the healthy outdoor life. Roosevelt visited the Montezuma Hotel more than once and recruited many of his Rough Riders from the Las Vegas area.

In addition to hospitals with TB wings, rows of bungalows, and rooftop

"heliotherapy" facilities, there were tent cities (like Sunmount at Santa Fe), summer camps in the mountains (like Kamp Killgloom in the Manzanos), and "ranches" to accommodate TB sufferers. By the end of the nineteenth century the military joined in by constructing large hospitals and sanatoria at Fort Stanton and Fort Bayard. These hospitals were expanded into large medical facilities by 1920 in order to handle the influx of soldiers with a new lung-debilitating disorder resulting from gassing in World War I. By the 1930s the military also added a large Veteran's Administration hospital in Albuquerque.

The paradox of the isolation-in-the-outdoors therapy was that New Mexico's gorgeous land and weather weren't too enjoyable to an immigrant under orders to sit alone most of the time. In fact, the inactivity was often very depressing to busy Americans. To counteract the depression, *The Herald of the Well Country* was full of upbeat gossip columns from each sanatorium and inspirational poetry stressing that optimism was a necessary companion to

fresh air and sun in beating TB. This "happy talk" is evident in the name Kamp Killgloom and in the "Joyflingers" of Santa Fe's Sunmount. The Joyflingers were a loose group of jokesters and journalists who may have inspired the symbolic "burning of Old Man Gloom," Zozobra, at the Santa Fe Fiesta, a ritual that was instituted in 1926.

Little remains of the sanatoria and spas in the state. A few spas, such as Palomas Hot Springs, Jemez Springs, and Ojo Caliente, have continued to operate on a reduced basis. The grand Montezuma Hotel has been converted into a college following several fires and long years of abandonment. The sanatoria have gone out of business and converted to various other uses if located in a growing urban area (St. Joseph's and Presbyterian became large medical centers in Albuquerque). In the rural areas the large buildings, such as Valmora, remain as monuments to an interesting period of New Mexico history.

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Healthseeker Facilities in New Mexico 1880–1940

Location	Name	Date established	Location	Name	Date established	Location	Name	Date established
A. SANATORIA AND SANITARIA								
Albuquerque	Bronson	1912	near Lincoln	The Ranch	1911	near Las Vegas	Harvey's Mountain Home	—
Albuquerque	St. Joseph's	1902	Fort Stanton	Mariner's	1896	near Las Vegas	Romeroville Lodge	1907
Albuquerque	Murphey Lodge	1914	Roswell	Roswell Lodge	1927	near Las Vegas	El Miramontes Camp	1923
Albuquerque	Southwest Presbyterian	1908	Roswell	St. Mary's	1928	Raton	Alta Vista Ranch	1905
Albuquerque	Methodist Deaconess	1912	Roswell	Yater's	1919	Roswell	Mountain View (Ward's)	1902
Albuquerque	Cipe's	1914	Carlsbad	Anderson	1907	Roswell	Siegrist	1931
Albuquerque	Albuquerque Lodge	1910	Carlsbad	St. Francis TB	1912	Roswell	Roswell Tent City	1907
Albuquerque	Sunshine	1927	Tularosa	Home	1919	Hagerman	Hagerman Mineral Wells	1930
Albuquerque	Knights of Pythias	1927	Alamogordo	Mountainair	1919	Alamogordo	Alamo Cottage	1907
Albuquerque	Jameson	1918	Cloudcroft	Babies Children	—		(American Co-op)	
Albuquerque	Booker T. Washington	1919	Las Cruces	St. Anthony's	1931	Radium Springs	H H Bailey Home	1927
Albuquerque	National Lutheran TB	1931	Hot Springs	Sutton's	1932	Myndus	Sunkist (Elzey)	1913
Albuquerque	(Ahepa)		Deming	National Colony for Consumptives	1900	Deming	Deming Cottages	1915
Albuquerque	Monkbridge	1926	Deming	Holy Cross	1924	Silver City	E A Woodhull	1912
Albuquerque	St. John's	1923	Fort Bayard	Military Home	—	C. MINERAL SPRINGS WITH SPAS		
Albuquerque	Hillcrest	1928	Silver City	New Mexico Cottage	1908	near Albuquerque	Coyote Spring	—
Albuquerque	Albuquerque Indian	1940	Silver City	Sunnyside	1911	near Albuquerque	Camp Whitcomb	—
Albuquerque	Read and Dolph	1918	Silver City	White Cross	1918	near Santa Fe	Ojo de Gigante	—
Alameda	Nazareth	1932	Silver City	St. Joseph's	1890	Ojo Caliente	Ojo Caliente Hot Springs	1875
Santa Fe	Sunmount	1907	Silver City	National Methodist TB	1916	Ranchos de Taos	Ponce de Leon Warm Springs	—
Santa Fe	St. Vincent	1895	B. HEALTH HOMES, RANCHES, AND CAMPS			Arroyo Hondo	Manby Hot Springs	1895
Las Vegas	Palace (Plaza) Hotel	1890s	Albuquerque	Sandia Ranch	(1946)	near Las Vegas	Montezuma	1897
Las Vegas	St. Anthony's	1890	Albuquerque	Shadynook Ranch	—	near Las Vegas	El Porvenir	1905
near Watrous	Valmora (Valmore Ranch)	1908	Albuquerque	Rosedale Home	—	Jemez Springs	Jemez Hot Springs	1902
Aztec	Aztec Lodge	1912	Albuquerque	Miramontes-on-the-Mesa	1923	Jemez Mountain	Sulfur Hot Springs	—
Ute Park	White Cross	1915	Albuquerque	McKeller Ranch	—	near Socorro	Sedillo Warm Springs	—
Raton	Mt. St. Paul	1931	Albuquerque	Glazebrook	1921	near Truth or Consequences	Las Palomas Hot Springs	1904
near Springer	Chico Springs	1907	near Tijeras	Well Country Camp	—	Radium Springs	Radium Springs Hotel	1899
Des Moines	Bassett	1931	near Manzano Mts.	Kamp Killgloom	—	near Las Cruces	Dripping Springs (Patten's)	1880s
Mosquero	Lake View	1923	Jemez Springs	Jemez Mountain Inn	(1942)	near Las Cruces	Alameda Spring	1902
Roy	Polish National	1911	Jemez Springs	El Rancho Descanso	(1946)	Carlsbad	Carlsbad Springs	1895
Tucumcari	Home TB	1911	Santa Fe	Diaz Home	1911	Grant County	Mimbres Hot Springs	1897
near Clines Corners	Tapia	1936	Santa Fe	Sierra Inn	1915	near Deming	Faywood Hot Springs (Hudson)	1869
Laguna	Laguna Government TB	1917	Tesuque	Wilklow's Ranch (Godwell)	—	near Pleasanton	Lower Frisco Hot Spring	—
Gallup	St. Mary's	1928						
Socorro	New Mexico State TB	1938	Rociado	Rociado Lodge	—			
Carrizozo	Sisters of Mercy	—	Las Vegas	Windsor's Camp	—			
Carrizozo	Rathman	1938						

Source: New Mexico Commercial Directories—1902–1947