

# Ramblin' Round

A new column by **Monica Emerich**

## The Land of Healing Waters

*For 25 years I have driven along Highway 160 from Durango to Walsenburg and back again. The little towns along the route — Alamosa, Monte Vista, Del Norte, Bayfield and Pagosa Springs are like old friends. I've become accustomed to their faces.*

*Pagosa Springs was sort of a special marker for me. Living in Durango as I did for many years, Pagosa meant I was either only an hour into my journey, or only an hour from home. The little town has been changing steadily through the years. I'm embarrassed to admit I always considered it a sleepy suburb of Durango*

*at best. Ah — I was mistaken. Come along on an arm chair tour of the land of "healing water."*

The Ute Indians christened the area "Pagosah" (healing water) for the abundance of mineral springs in the area. Still the largest, hottest mineral springs known in the USA, the average temperature is 153 degrees fahrenheit year round.

The Navajos coveted the springs as well, and soon the two tribes found themselves embroiled in a territorial dispute. In 1867 it was decided that two warriors, one from each tribe, would battle for the right to claim the springs for his

tribe. The Navajos chose their man, a muscular brave who towered over his kinsmen. He seemed a logical choice.

But the Utes' choice was a surprise. They asked a white United States Colonel to defend their claim. Col. Albert H. Pfeiffer was well known for his expertise with a rifle. No doubt the Utes were dumbfounded when Pfeiffer chose bowie knives as the weapons for the duel.

Standing opposite the Navajo giant, as history has come to call him, Pfeiffer no doubt looked like easy pickings, but he had a quick hand. He hurled the knife at his opponent where it imbedded in the brave's chest. The duel was won by the Utes, and the Navajos kept their promise never to return to the springs.

Pfeiffer, a native of the Netherlands, served as scout with Kit Carson and as Captain of the Mounted Volunteers of the Militia of New Mexico. After his young wife was murdered by raiding Apaches in 1863, Pfeiffer developed a deep hatred for that tribe, which in turn brought him respect among the Utes, who eventually adopted him into their tribe. Pfeiffer died April 6, 1881, and was buried near Del Norte. Today, a monument commemorating his historic duel stands on Highway 160, four miles west of Pagosa Springs.

By the 1870's the white man had made his presence firmly known in the Pagosa area. Miners were traveling through the area to the rich ore fields of the San Juans; settlement in the lower Animas River Valley was increasing and health seekers were bathing in the hot springs. It looked as if Pagosa might become the marketing center of the San Juans.

In 1878 the army built Fort Lewis in Pagosa. There were hopes that the Southern Ute agency would also establish there. Many believed the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad would extend its lines through Pagosa Springs to reach the mines in Silverton, and too, the new settlers of Pagosa had heavy bets that the Great Pagosa Hot Springs would attract hordes of visitors.

Pagosa Springs had a wealth of natural resources: coal, timber, oil and farm produce. Fort Lewis created service jobs for the citizens and by the 1880's public bathhouses were erected to take advantage of the geothermal springs. The future looked bright, but not for long.

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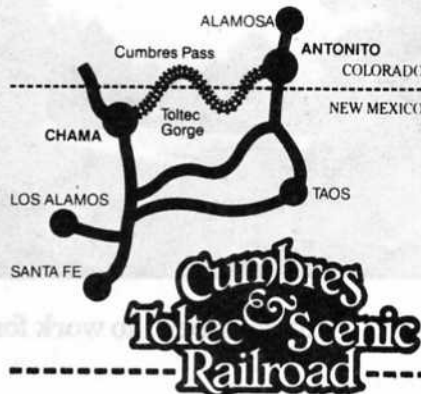
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The Denver and Rio Grande did build tracks to Durango, but not through Pagosa Springs. The tracks were laid 30 miles south. The soldiers of Fort Lewis were transferred from the area in 1882 and the fort closed shortly thereafter. The Southern Ute agency, which would have created a demand for Pagosa's services, was moved west to the Ignacio area. The "hordes" of visitors rode the train and missed the Great Pagosa Hot Springs altogether; although health seekers still came, the number was modest.

The "boomtown" dreams of the 1870's gradually evaporated in the face of the disappointments of the 1880's, but dreams of a good and solid community became reality for the townspeople who stayed on. The land was rich and it was beautiful. In 1891 Pagosa Springs was incorporated.

The economy took another sharp turn during the early 1900's when Pagosa's stately ponderosa pines caught the eye of timber barons. Suddenly the community which had painfully courted the Denver and Rio Grande for so long, found itself with two railroads to carry away the lumber harvest. The timber business remained fruitful until 1917, when the last of the large lumber operations closed its Pagosa business. Unfortunately, it also meant the end of the railroad lines.

Pagosa Springs was a survivor. It had faced hard times before and was pluckier for it.

In 1916, Wolf Creek Pass was opened to the public, and Pagosa Springs entered the 20th Century.

### *The New Pagosa*

The ponderosa pines still tower alongside Highway 160 into Pagosa Springs. The town is still appealingly small — Archuleta County officials estimate 6,800 people for the county with 85% living in a 10-mile radius of Pagosa Springs — but changes are taking place as Pagosa Springs develops what is perhaps its greatest asset ... its native beauty.

Tourists love its alpine splendor and recreational opportunities. Fairfield, the national resort chain, has a complex west of town with a golf course, spa, and tennis courts; Wolf Creek Ski Area is only 20 miles away and gets more snow than any other ski area in Colorado; and, yes, the Great Hot Springs are still cooking.

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St. Mary-Corwin Hospital provides low-cost, comfortable lodging to out-of-town family members and outpatients. The facilities include apartments at the Minnequa Shores complex, just west of the hospital on Lake Avenue, and a guest house, just east of the hospital on Orman Avenue. Med-Tel rates vary according to length of stay and location. A lower rate applies per week. Call the Department of Social Work, 560-5260, for information and reservations.

The healing waters are available to the public at the Pagosa Springs Inn and the Spa Motel in tubs and a swimming pool. Locals tap the springs by running the boiling waters through the heating pipes of their homes, offices and schools.

Pagosa Springs was also the home of Fred Harman, originator of the Red Ryder and Little Beaver comics and a western artist. The Fred Harman Art Museum is located two miles west on Highway 160 and is open Monday through Saturday from 10:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Every July 4th the town holds the Red Ryder Roundup, a weekend filled with festivities including a parade, rodeo, melodramas, carnival, arts and crafts fair, dance and dinner.

Up the road, some 20 miles west of town, are the Chimney Rock Anasazi Indian ruins. The US Forest Service conducts tours on Wednesday and Friday mornings (call (303) 264-2268 for reservations).

For amateur sleuths there is also an intriguing mystery of missing fortune. Legend says some \$5 million in gold was hidden at Treasure Mountain, 16 miles northeast of town, by an ill-fated group of 300 Frenchmen. According to the story, in 1790 the men were driven out of the Pagosa area because of disease, Indian attacks and the onslaught of winter. They decided to hide their fortune and return later for it. Only 17 of the men returned to Fort Leavenworth alive and before any of them could summon the energy for a return trip, the directions to the fortune disappeared. A man named Le Blanc did eventually search for the gold but found nothing.

Pagosa Springs is a haven for those looking for an escape to the wilderness; they'll find good fishing, renowned hunting, and hiking trails galore. The sleepy hamlet does have its amenities; there's an active nightlife, many delightful restaurants and well-stocked shopping grounds.

*The town has grown since I first traveled through in 1960, covering under a blanket in the back seat of my father's Chevy, recovering from the shock of my first trip over Wolf Creek Pass. It hasn't boomed, but rather it has become more worldly. This sportsman's paradise has the sheen of sophistication.*