

# Downata Hot Springs History

*By Fern Hartvigsen, Penny Greaves and Darlene Downs*

Memories of Downata Hot Springs, located three miles south of Downey, belong to many people. Just the mention of "Marshall's Springs" brings a flood of memories to old timers who can still remember the chronology of owners Will Evans, Isaac Marshall, the Johnson family, the Raymond Horsley family, the Elton Nead family and currently, a conglomerate of several owners.

The hot water bubbles up from a rock-bottomed spring south of the pool, and test 109 degrees. It is piped to the swimming pool where cool water is added to make it comfortable for swimming.

In 1907, Alexander Marshall, his wife Diannah Bloxham Marshall, and their family moved to "The Springs" and since then the resort has been operated mostly as a family enterprise. Marshall had purchased the land and hot springs from Andrew Morrison, who had bought the homestead of Robert Miller. The Marshalls were the first to build a swimming pool, located south of today's pool, and featuring rock sides and a mud bottom. Two or three dressing rooms were built, and later 25 were added, along with a plank wall around the pool. Travel was difficult but many families came to swim for pleasure and the warm water was often used for baptism by the Christ of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Mrs. G.F. Dewey (Lottie Marshall) remembers that they were the only family among their acquaintances with a swimming pool in the back yard. Isaac Marshall, now of Robin, remembers hatching baby chickens by using the warmth of the hot water.

South of Downata, high on a hill, lays the grave of Eddie Miller Gladness, a daughter of the original homesteader, Robert Miller. She had requested prior to her death that she be buried there, and her father carried out her request. The Marshalls, helped to build a fence around the grave and care for it.

Much work and planning went into the resort, with Isaac Marshall and Wills Evans adding land from part of the original homestead of Ray Underwood. Jennie Marshall, who sold the property, was part of the original Marshall family. The Evans and Marshall families worked through the winter of 1929 to build the resort, shortening the route to the hot springs by building a road across the marsh directly west from highway 91, and a half-mile entrance to the resort made it more accessible. It took tons of gravel all hauled in a pickup and laboriously spread to create a road. The late Turner Cutright built the first log bridge that crossed Marsh Creek on the road and today the road belongs to the county road system.

The men dug a 50-by-100 foot hole and built the new pool with a cement bottom, new dressing rooms, a powder room, showers and other conveniences. When the resort was ready for opening, 30 gas lanterns lighted it for evening activity. Later, a gas plant was installed, and finally, electricity. The operation called for an icehouse, which Tyndale Evans says he remembers along with memories of working the old handle washer used to keep the suits and towels clean. In fact, every member of the two families worked—Mrs. Evans, Stan Tyndale, Gwin, Mrs. Marshall, Marjorie, and Jean (Mrs. Jack Hadley of Downata). Stan and Tyndale were the first lifeguards at the pool. An open-air dance hall was added to the facility, with Friday night and midnight dances a popular attraction. A Hawaiian orchestra and one from Malad City provided favorite dance music, and Isaac Marshall recalls paying \$300 one night for the Old Mill Orchestra from Salt Lake City. Enthusiasm for dancing waned, and roller-skating mania took over for a while, but the swimming pool continued to be a favorite.

Marshall sold his interest to Evans in 1937, and in 1939, the Johnsons-Osborn, Edna, Cliss, Joyce and Durke, purchased Downata and did some remodeling to the living quarters. The family worked through the winter and built a recreation hall, viewing windows, a snack bar and walk-in refrigerator, as well as renovating the dance floor. East of the pool, 75 Chinese elm trees were planted, along with fingerling pines at the front. West of the pool were a flower and rose garden. Later a nightclub was added. Patrons from Malad, Preston and all of Marsh Valley frequented the resort.

Raymond and Maxine Horsley and boy's Ray, Spence and Scott, who had been operating a drive-in restaurant in Salt Lake City, became a new owner of the resort in 1959, just in time to clean up and open at Easter. In the years of their ownership, they added a sun deck, kiddie's pool, "Dipsy-Doodle," slides, a pavilion and fireplaces. They also offered Red Cross swimming classes for 300-400 children a year.

Elton Nead, a former tugboat captain on the Columbia River, and wife Pat and their children, James, Colleen, Thomas, Paulette and Lauralee, of Stevenson, Washington, bought Downata in June 1974. They tore down the old dance hall and added a game room, and remodeled the dressing rooms, as well as the reunion rooms. They also made park improvements and added a miniature golf course and gift shop. They also bought the Downey Theater and operated it while owning Downata, selling it in 1983 to the Heugley family.

In July 1979, the Neads sold Downata to Wayne McQuivey (Salt Lake City) and Brent and Fred Coats, brothers from Dayton. Karl and Kade McQuivey came from Salt Lake to assist Wayne as managers, and they added all new dressing rooms, the first green tube slide in Idaho (1980) and the first "Black Hole" slide in the state (1983). They tore down the existing golf course and installed a new miniature golf course at the park, added tepees for rental, built an R.V. Park north of the park and installed bathrooms for the R.V. park. In 1985, when Wayne left, Kyle and Kathy Nielsen McQuivey joined Karl and Kade in managing the resort, which by now was known for family entertainment, youth groups, and a great place to have a reunion. In 1987, the Coats brothers, sold their share of the business to an investment group of businessmen from Utah, California, and Idaho, with Wayne maintaining his interest in the business.

The McQuivey family left the Springs in 1988, and were replaced as manager by Nate Hale of Preston. A year later, in 1990, Larry and Marilyn Lathen, a young couple from Moscow, Idaho, replaced Hale. Under the direction from the cooperation, now called Downata Ranch & Recreation, the Lathens supervised the tearing down of the old entrance building and game room, which was replaced with a chain link fence to allow spectators free view, remodeled the building west of the pool to accommodate a family restaurant and snack bar and new reception area, added lifeguard room, tore down the old house northwest of the slides to create a picnic area, tore out the miniature golf course and added a double sandpit volleyball court.

In October of 1993, owner Marilyn Gunnell reorganized the operation, naming a management team of Darlene Downs, Julie Anderson, Connie Johnson, and Melissa Wakley, with Terry Morrison as Pool Operations Director. After refurbishing the dining room, the team sponsored a contest with Downey Elementary children to name the restaurant, The PoolSide Restaurant, which will be open for holiday gatherings.

Darlene's husband, Bret Downs, joined the team in 1994 to manage the 2,000-acre ranch and help manage the swimming resort. Bret and Darlene Downs are the general managers of the resort along with Melissa Wakley, Joni Sorensen, Ryan Howe, Kathleen Miller, and Earl Owen as the management team. Leonard and Edna Zeedyk are currently living on the grounds in a new home and are the campground managers. Special event and activities have been added for weekend fun at Downata. Hot Air Balloon rides, Wagon rides, and Horse activities are just a few. The fall of 1994 two lovely Bed & Breakfast houses were completed and will accommodate about 20 guests. An amphitheater in the new Cedar Campground above the resort was completed in 1996. The Downata Corporation purchased fourteen snowmobiles the winter of 1995 which are rented out to vacationers. Guided Tours will be offered the winter of 1997 in the Cottonwood and Oxford Peak area.

A camp store was created in the building that was part of the old snack bar building. The new entrance made a better access for wheelchairs and strollers. Nine new hookups were created to replace the popular non-hookup spaced at the bottom of the park. A new pavilion in the soccer baseball field was added in the summer of 2001 and a roof was built over the top of the top of the slide platform. Floor heating fed by the springs was installed in the dressing rooms.

The summer of 2002 was full of construction. A new sewer system was installed. New sidewalks and pavement in front of the resort were poured and a new entrance for handicap access was created to replace the old stairway entrance. New floors were installed in the dressing rooms and RV bathrooms. Two showers were added to the RV bathrooms for campers to use during closed hours. A new water playground was built in the slide area along with a new picnic area and sand volleyball area. Four new pavilions were built in the picnic area. Improvements in the campground included a new paved entrance and level gravel pads in the RV hookups. A self-serve area was added to the snack bar for food and drink items. At the beginning of 2003 and a new slide was installed in the pool area to replace the old famous silver slide. Memorial weekend of 2004 another slide was added to the pool to replace the old white curly slide.

In 2004 a new cooling device called the water cannon was added to cool the hot water during the hot summer days. A new pavilion was also built to replace the old west court picnic area. A new cement court replaced the old basketball court down by the volleyball area.

The year 2005 brought more sleeping accommodation. Four Yurts were built where the tepees were once located. The tepees were moved to the soccer field area and new trees were planted. Winter retreats brought massages and water relaxation for many scrapbookers and groups.

Cabins and a new wall tent were added in 2006. The Bunk House was moved and sold to the farm bordering the hot springs. The cabins were built where the Bunk House was located. The new wall tent is located by the tepees. A new covered pavilion was added to the large group tenting area #1 next to the wall tent. Several other improvements were made in the pool and picnic areas. In 2007 three more cabins were added with kitchens. In 2008 a new meeting room and ADA bath-rooms were added to the main building along with a ADA ramp and observation deck to the pool and slide area. A Tranquility room with sauna and massage was also added in 2008 for sweetheart retreats. In 2010 more improvements were made to the 100 year old resort. The hydro slides were refinished in the spring of 2010. More power hookups were added to the campground and large group area #1. Several large trees were removed and new bathroom and showers were added to the picnic area for the campground and reunions. The new restroom is naturally heated with the floor heat and will remain open year around for scout groups and winter campers. A sauna was built next to the hot tub and includes the same heat tubing as the sidewalks and buildings. The old RV bathrooms were updated and improved. More fire pits were added to the campground and cabins. A new entrance was completed to the main building in the fall of 2010. Steak & Soak specials were introduced during the off-peak season.

2011 improvement goals consist of another large yurt, new bunk house, three more tepees, new lifeguard room, more power RV and tent hookups, two new group areas by the west court pavilion, pavilions in pool picnic area and more. Pizza & Pool deals were introduced for families.

Bret and Darlene Downs still manage the resort operations. Each owner and manager has left a mark on Downata Hot Springs resort, making it a four-seasons resort for all of south-eastern Idaho and travelers from afar.

