



AROUND HERE

By Woody Laughnan

MERCEY HOT SPRINGS—People used to come here by the hundreds in the old days seeking relief from about as many diseases as there were names for, like quincy, lumbago, rheumatism, gout, housemaid's knee and probably even the blahs if the truth were known.

They came from Los Angeles, Sacramento, San Francisco, Phoenix, El Paso, Reno, Las Vegas, Fresno and who knows where else by horseback, buggy, stagecoach, wagon and later by bus and automobile.

And some people still come here, although not in nearly the numbers since the doctors kicked up such a ruckus over the controversial benefits of hot mineral baths, radioactive water and the like.

In its heyday there was a fine hotel in this tiny hillside village, but it burned in 1927 and was replaced by the present 10-room rambling white structure which was built to connect some existing cottages. A dining room and kitchen were added over the years.

The lobby of the little hotel is rather long and narrow. Indeed, at one time it was a porch with northern exposure to the hills, a fine place to sit on a hot summer's night.

TODAY'S GUESTS, many of them on the elderly side and suffering from arthritis, and the like, sit on either side of the lobby watching television, reading, working jigsaw puzzles and just visiting. At night the village is very quiet. Only the wind, the rustling leaves and sounds of the nocturnal Little Panoche Hills animals break the heavy stillness.

The guests take their meals in the hotel dining room, family style.

In the spring and early summer, like now, the hills around "The Mercey" are very green. Earlier there were great orange splotches of poppies on the hillsides and more recently lupine.

Here and there in this faraway place, the furthestmost western point in Fresno County, sheepherders tend their flocks, moving them slowly to greener pastures before nightfall engulfs the hills.

Little Panoche Creek still flows this time of year, wiggling its way along the valley which is dotted by the ruins of yesterday farmsteads, broken down windmills and swayback barns and chicken coops.

This vast area, where one sometimes drives for half an hour without seeing another living being or a vehicle, is a yesterday land. Some people out there call it Heartbreak Valley instead of Little Panoche because when the scorching summer came and lasted throughout the fall it shattered the dreams of some early settlers.

The ranchers are few out there. The closest towns are Mendota, Dos Palos and Hollister, all some 40 and more miles distant.

THE SOLE YEAR 'round residents of The Mercey are owner Elise Lee Swatzel, and Mr. and Mrs. Fletcher Gray, the bathhouse attendants.

But some folks from Fresno, Merced and Modesto weekend here in mobile homes set up beneath the trees. And from April through October as many as 10 guests live in the hotel and a half dozen or so more in the tiny white cottages on the hillside above the old bathhouse.

Mercey Hot Springs was discovered by a young Yaki Indian shepherd, Franciosa Sanava, on a fine spring day like this more than 125 years ago.

He rushed home to tell his father. They drank of the warm water bubbling like magic from the ground, dug deeper and found even hotter water.

John N. Mercey, an early day West Side cattleman, took title to the property in the middle of the last century and neighbors and the afflicted from around the countryside came to take hot mineral baths and drink the "miracle" water.

THE MERCEY GAINED some fame throughout the country. Indeed, a large pharmaceutical company from the east erected a small mission style building at the spa (it still stands) and bottled the mineral water, selling it in drug stores across the country, acclaiming "miraculous healing powers" for a score of different ailments.

At one time the 110 degree water in the old-fashioned bathtubs, with chemicals and mineral agents such as bicarbonate, sulfate, nitrate, phosphate, bromide, calcium, magnesium, sodium, potassium, manganese and iodine, reputedly was a cure for everything from rheumatism to goiter to high blood pressure.

Young Corbett II of Fresno recalls that he trained at The Mercey 40 years ago for his successful welterweight title fight with Jackie Fields, taking hot baths and doing roadwork along Little Panoche Road.

While by law The Mercey can no longer lay healing claims for its waters, some folks still come to take hot baths and drink of the water, which tastes a little salty, a little like unsweet bubbly.

And they come for the same old reasons that they always did to cure quincy, lumbago, arthritis, rheumatism, gout, housemaid's knee and probably even the blahs if the truth were known.

And the nights are very nice out here, quiet, the wind in the trees and the hill animals conversing like they do only in places as yet untamed by man.