

# Renovation nearly complete, historic Mercy Hot Springs reopens

By Dan Gleason

San Juan Bautista resident Larry Ronneberg has spent the past two plus years restoring, renovating and remodeling historic Mercy Hot Springs, a labor of love which continues and has now proceeded to the point where visitors are welcome.

Mercy Hot Springs was once a part of Monterey County. It is located just beyond the southeast San Benito County border, one mile into Fresno County, on Little Panoche Road. It is more connected to San Benito than Fresno by virtue of a common mountain range, water table, road and history.

"Our intentions are to put the facilities back into operation in an early 1900's style that is clean, down-to-earth and affordably priced," Ronneberg said. He noted the remote get-away will never be a 5-Star resort, but it can't be beat for peaceful serenity and a place to unwind. On a recent day numerous birds were chirping, the only sounds to be heard.

Ronneberg worked in the high-tech industry for 21 years and had been working for Western Digital when he got tired of it and opted for a change in lifestyle, which now involves an incredible peace and quiet which comes from having your nearest neighbor four miles away. His father, Lawry, comes up from his Los Angeles area home about every other weekend and spends three or four days helping out. There is lots to do.

"It's a lot different from the high-tech world. I sure do enjoy it a lot more," Ronneberg said. "I want to go faster (with the renovation) but it comes down to a matter of funding," he added. Much of the cost has been for infrastructure, such as new pipe and putting wires underground.

## Self-taught

He attended Pierce College in Los

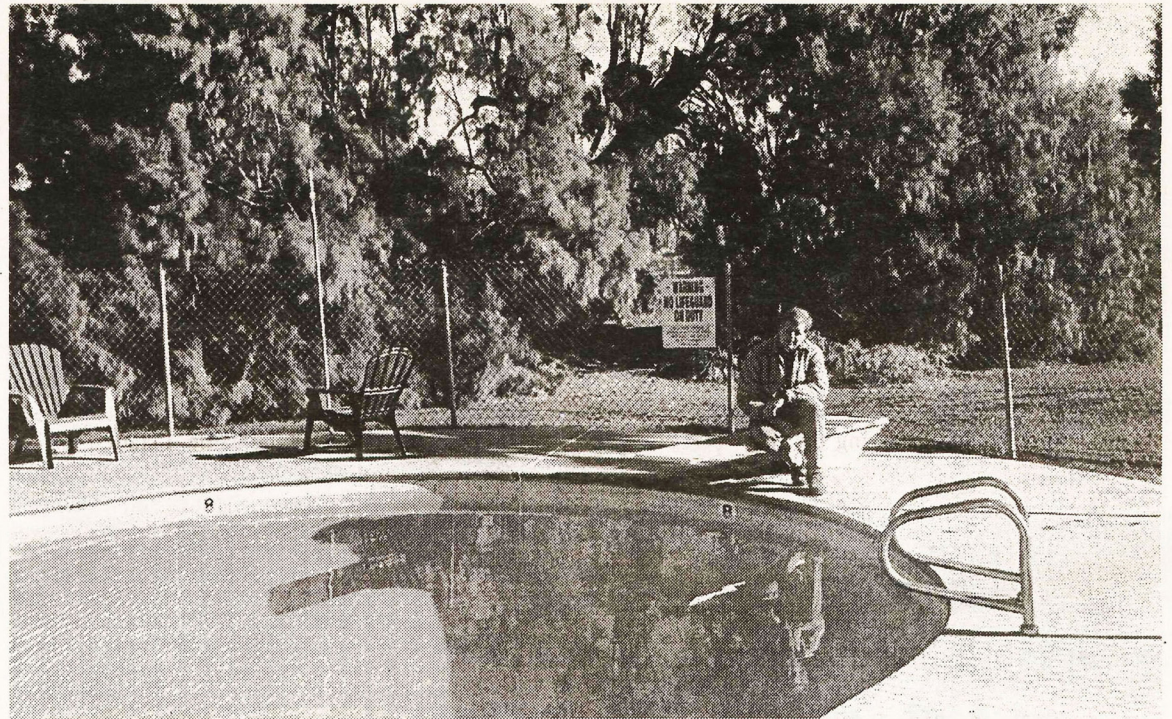
everything from constructing a large outdoor hot tub with a water temperature over 100 degrees Fahrenheit, renovation of the swimming pool, which got up to 92 degrees and was very popular last summer, restoration of cabins and the hotel and turning the bathhouse into a place where visitors can come for a relaxing indoor bath and massage.

## Varied clientele

Ronneberg has a copy of the hotel's registry that starts in 1928 and he has also kept a visitors book from the time he has owned the resort. Many of the guests are from the San Joaquin Valley and San Francisco Bay Area, but there is also a number of international visitors, from Poland, Germany and Hawaii.

The actual spring is covered with cement where the date December 1930 is written. The water is piped to various locations around the resort. "The water, especially in the summer, is too hot for people to get into. We have a tank up on the hill to let people regulate it to the temperature they want," Ronneberg said. As to how deep the spring is, he said that is a matter for debate, with the U.S. Geological Service saying evidence suggests it should be very deep but volcanic outcroppings on the site are too old to believe there is any gas coming from those.

"They told us there is a very rare gas, called Helium 3 and Helium 4 which, according to them, is only found in recently cooled lava or lava right out of the ground from a volcano and its very rare and they have been able to detect that in this water, one to two parts per million," Ronneberg said. "From looking at the amount of dissolved quartz in the water, that tells them it should only be about 2 1/2 miles deep," he added. The Ortigalita Fault runs through the



Larry Ronneberg takes a short break at the swimming pool from his work of refurbishing Mercy Hot Springs. He has spent more than two years restoring the resort and is now open for business.

of the pool or \$10 for all day use of the hot tub. Facility use, at \$15, includes any two of the three or all three for \$20.

Cabins are \$45 double occupancy on weekdays and \$60 with kitchen and the weekday rate for RV parking is \$35, which includes full facility use for up to two people and \$5 for each additional person. Weekday camping is \$8 per tent for up to six people.

On weekends the cabin rates are \$55 double occupancy, \$65 with kitchen. RV parking is \$40 on weekends and tent camping is \$10.

For more information or to make a reservation call (209) 250-0007.

The springs were first used by native North Americans. According to a 1916 news story, Indians would travel all the way from San Diego to

feet enjoy its healing properties.

High in sodium chloride, calcium chloride, sodium carbonate, and silica, the water contains 52 major minerals and more than 100 minor ones. Besides providing for a curative bath, it can also be good refreshment to serve, once it has cooled.

According to the 1916 news story, "Mercy water has proven wonderfully effective in cases of rheumatism, gout, all forms of catarrh, kidney and bladder

disorders, malaria, dropsy, all ailments of the digestive organs, heart disease, diseases of the genito-urinary organs, blood and skin and venereal diseases."

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Angeles and Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, but didn't graduate. "I'm self-taught. I was very addicted to computers and basically taught myself and got myself in a management position at Western Digital but I'm not there now," Ronneberg said.

There is no PG&E service to the remote site, so Ronneberg has installed a large solar panel on a nearby mountain top and he will soon be putting up a new wind machine which will also be used to generate power. The phone service is cellular and a generator is also used as a supplemental power source.

Ronneberg owns 161 acres in what from a distance resembles an oasis, with numerous trees in an area of rolling hills. The old hotel originally had 12 rooms, but that has been modified as two on one end were converted to the restaurant/kitchen area and two on the other end that had been the manager's quarters and a now being transformed into a spacious suite. The remaining eight will be enlarged, with walls removed so they become four large rooms.

"It was basically a hodge-podge of four rooms. It didn't have any rhyme or reason to it. Now each one will be the same with a large shower and dressing room area, with a deck in back and each room will have its own hot tub" Ronneberg said.

A hobbyist astronomer from Santa Cruz visits regularly, because the views are great, with no city lights to block sweeping views of the overhead sky.

"We worked on it weekends only for a year and a half and now I'm here full-time. We also have one employee, Mario," Ronneberg said. He enjoys the challenge of such a diverse project, which includes ev-

area.

In the area around the pool Ronneberg is planning to install volleyball courts and picnic areas near the trees. Future plans also call for refurbishing an outbuilding into a meeting hall and to bring back the old airstrip on the property.

From Hollister, visitors to Mercy Hot Springs have a choice. They can take the rural and winding Panoche Road east from Paicines and beyond Panoche on Little Panoche Road (J-1) or travel over Pacheco Pass and south on Interstate 5 to Little Panoche Road, and then west 13 miles.

Rates are \$10 per person for a bath (limit one hour), \$10 for all day use

visit the springs, carrying their sick brethren nearly 450 miles to the famed spring to let their tired and red



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