

Oh Mercey!



JEANINE BROWN/Photographer

San Juan Bautista resident Larry Ronneberg is rebuilding Mercey Hot Springs, located near the southeastern edge of San Benito County. Some people say the spring water at the site has healing powers.

Springing Back To Life

► Mercey Hot Springs offers therapeutic stop for weary travelers

By **JEANINE BROWN**

Free Lance Photographer

If you are out in the middle of nowhere and need a hot bath, try Mercey Hot Springs.

Just beyond the southwest San Benito County border in Fresno County, the springs have long been a favorite retreat for residents of San Benito County. Now, after years of being closed to the general public, locals and not-so-locals can once again



A bath house at the resort will have five tubs and two showers when completed. The tubs are original.

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enjoy the area's invigorating waters.

Larry Ronneberg, a San Juan Bautista resident and his father, Lawry, from Los Angeles, bought the property in November 1995. The place has been unofficially open since day one.

Larry Ronneberg had been looking for an alternative to the hi-tech world of

engineering, and after a two-and-a-half year search found the hot springs.

"It wasn't a planned thing, it just happened," said the younger Ronneberg regarding the purchase. So, leaving behind a five-and-a-half year career at

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Mercey

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Western Digital in Silicon Valley – and the benefits that went with it – Larry Ronneberg is refurbishing the old resort.

Larry Ronneberg said he does not miss his old life. "I don't want to make my income from the computer business," he said. "People need a place to get away."

Located on 165 acres that empty into the San Joaquin Valley, Mercey Hot Springs can easily be reached from Highway 5 by turning off on Mercy Springs Road, or taking J-1 from Hollister south on Highway 25 past the Little Panoche Inn.

Currently, two of the six cabins are available for use. Two more will be available soon. The bath house will have five soaking tubs (two are working now) and two rest rooms with showers.

The hotel was designed with eight rooms, but the Ronnebergs plan on converting them to four larger rooms with hot tubs on private decks. Adjoining the hotel is a restaurant.

The Ronnebergs estimate on having the hotel and restaurant fully operational in two years. Mike Howard, manager of The Inn at Tres Pinos, is offering advice on restaurant design.

The cabins and bath house were built in the late 1920s, and the Ronnebergs want to retain that feel. The soaking tubs in the bath house are original.

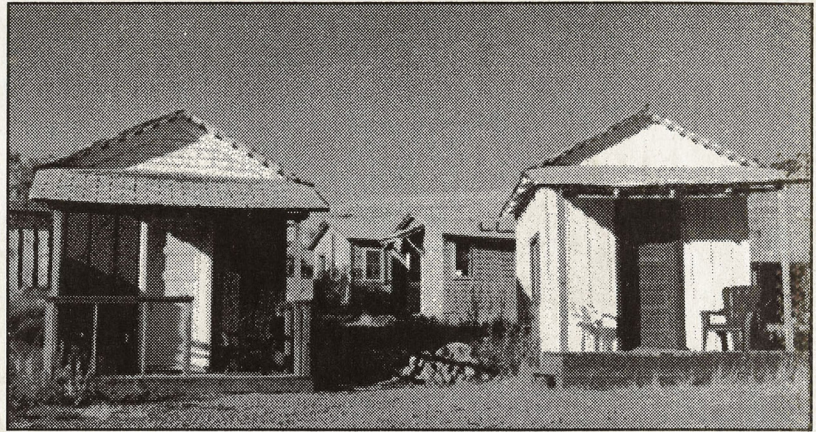
"When we bought the place, the tubs were in good condition, but the rooms were trashed," Larry Ronneberg said.

The Ronnebergs supply electricity to the resort with solar power and they are hooking up a wind generator. They will plant new grass in the fall and also plan to grow vegetables. Larry Ronneberg built a hot tub and deck, and the pool is always warm from the hot springs water that bubble up from beneath the resort.

Lawry Ronneberg drives up from Los Angeles for four days every two weeks to help with renovations.

"At first I wasn't enthused about this venture," he said. "I had to get adjusted to country life." Now he looks forward to his visits. "The stars are so bright it looks like you can pluck 'em down."

The springs were first used by Native Americans – cooking utensils that prove their presence were found during the renovation. Around the turn of the centu-



JEANINE BROWN/Photographer

These cabins at the hot springs site were built in the 1920s. Once totally refurbished, the business will have six cabins, some hotel rooms, 20 RV spaces and room for camping.

ry, John Merci bought the land for sheep farming. He filled horse troughs with water of different temperatures and a bather would choose which one they wanted.

Lee Swatzel was the second owner of the hot springs and became a believer in the healing properties of the water after her husband came to the springs on a stretcher and – after 21 days of treatment – was able to walk again.

The resort thrived under their ownership. Swatzel later sold the property to Mural Lyle who owned it for 20 years. Lyle spent the later part of her years writing a book, and let the buildings go. People could visit the springs, but only with permission of the owner.

Lyle died in 1992, and the Ronnebergs bought it from her children.

Bina Pometta of Gustine, Calif., who has been visiting the hot springs for 30 years, said she is excited that it is re-opening.

She visited the hot springs last weekend when the pool temperature was 96 degrees. "I believe it's miracle water,"

she said. "The water relieves my sciatic pain."

Apart from the soaking tubs, the hot tub has been a huge success. The hot tub is clothing optional, but pool use requires clothing.

The hot tub is five feet deep and 10 feet in diameter. "It is great to watch mother nature do her thing," said Larry Ronneberg, when talking about the springs.

The Ronnebergs said they are pleased with their progress on the renovations.

"We've come a long way in two and a half years," Lawry Ronneberg said.

For reservations call (209) 283-0064, or visit the web site at merceyhotsprings.com. On weekdays, double-occupancy cabins are \$45 (\$60 with kitchen). The weekend prices for cabins are \$55 and \$65.

One hour use of the hot bath is \$10. All day use of the pool and hot tub is \$10. RV parking is \$40 for up to two people and \$7.50 for each additional person. Camping per tent for up to six people is \$10 per night.