by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

"David Walley built the place as a health resort, the first in Nevada and one of the first in the West," wrote Basil Woon in the August 30, 1953 edition of Reno's *Nevada State Journal*. A long-standing belief espoused in numerous publications is that Walley's Hot Springs was Nevada's first hydrothermal, health resort. According to David Walley's obituary published in the *Carson Valley News* for March 13, 1875, the spa opened a couple of miles south of Genoa in 1862. A survey was made for Walley, and partners Jacob Jetter and J. W. Brown, on November 20 and filed with the Douglas County Recorder on December 1. With just a tent for shelter, baths sold for 50 cents each. Walley erected the first bathhouse the following year, and in 1864 Walley's wife, Harriet, arrived from the East to help run Genoa Hot Springs resort. "From a mere rock pile has risen a magnificent hotel, bath-houses, stabling and ball room," the weekly *News*

proclaimed after Walley's unexpected death at age 56 in Carson City's Ormsby House.

The truth is that Abe Curry's Warm Springs near Carson City, and Steamboat Hot Springs south of the Truckee Meadows, operated as health resorts, with the requisite infrastructure, before David Walley purchased the hot springs in Carson Valley.

A massive geothermal belt interspersed with hot springs, runs north and south along the eastern slope of the Carson Range. Explorers and immigrants trekking across the Great Basin discovered the hot springs in their travels, and bathed in the water if it was not scalding. Heated mineral water was, and still is, believed to have curative properties. By the time communities were established near the western Great Basin's Sierra Nevada in the 1850s-then a part of Utah Territory--early settlers had claimed most of the hydrothermal springs in the region that had long been the domain of the Washoe tribe.

Abraham Curry and his business associates purchased much of Eagle Valley in August 1858, established Carson City a month later, and included in their holdings was the warm springs where the State Prison on East Fifth Street is today. Curry soon acquired his partners' interest in the springs. According to Curry's biographer, Doris Cerveri in her book *With Curry's Compliments* (1990), "Curry walled up the spring and covered it with a hand-hewn stone bathhouse, one hundred-sixty feet long by thirty-eight feet wide." There were six bath areas of various depths and temperatures. A hotel was completed in the summer of 1861. Beginning in October, the hotel and spa served as the site of Nevada's first territorial legislative session.

Like Curry's Warm Springs, Steamboat Hot Springs as a location for a health resort also predates Walley's Hot Springs. "From the 1860s on," according to John Townley's work *Tough Little Town on the Truckee* (1983), "one hotel or resort followed another in futile attempts to merchandise a natural phenomenon either as a miracle-working medical facility or tourist haven surrounded by spa conditions beloved by 19th century vacationers." James Cameron and his associates "already have a hotel near the springs," reported the Territorial Enterprise on March 10, 1860, "and Dr. J. Ellis has taken up the Steamboat Springs and intends to erect vapor baths there soon, as he believes that the escaped steam from the springs can be used with great advantage in the cure of diseases." In 1862 according to Myron Angel's *History of Nevada* (1881), Dr. Joseph Ellis built a thirty-four bed hospital with six or seven bathhouses.

Territorial Enterprise reporter and humorist Mark Twain partook of Steamboat Springs in August 1863. He wrote a colorful letter detailing his efforts to improve his health. Young Twain also spent time at Curry's Warm Springs and, it is claimed, at Walley's Hot Springs.

Numerous other geothermal springs have brought pleasure and/or therapeutic benefit to their patrons. For example, Grover Hot Springs in Alpine County, California (John C. Fremont and Kit Carson camped near the hot springs in February 1844); Carson Hot Springs (formerly Swift's, 1879 and later Shaw's Hot Springs, 1882); and both Moana and Lawton Hot Springs in the Reno area, to name just a few.

Taking the risk of getting figuratively into some hot water, the distinction of operating the first health resort business in Nevada actually goes to William P. Cosser. By 1854, according to Paolo Sioli's *Historical Souvenir of El Dorado County. California* (1883), Cosser (spelled Cozart in Sioli's publication) was the proprietor of a "bathhouse at the warm and cold springs, two miles south from the old Mormon Station." Cosser, a Scotsman who with his family moved to Carson Valley in 1852, ran a modest health spa at the site where David Walley would open his business in 1862. Walley clearly did not operate the area's first health resort, however the location two miles south of Genoa was the site of Nevada's first hot springs resort thanks to William Cosser. The Cosser family is buried in the Mottsville Cemetery.

For additional information, see *A Steamboat In The Desert: A History Of Steamboat Springs, Nevada* (1999) by Roger Bowen Weld.

Photo: Walley's Hot Springs in Carson Valley. circa 1915. Courtesy of the Nevada State Museum

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