

History

Calistoga's Hot Springs



Calistoga's hot mineral springs and the volcanic ash used to make its famous mud baths, were born when Mt. Konocti erupted 10,000 years ago. In 1883, Robert Louis Stevenson wrote in *The Silverado Squatters*, "The whole neighborhood of Mount Saint Helena is full of sulfur and of boiling springs. The Geysers are famous – they were the great health resort of the Indians before the coming of the whites."

Napa Valley's sole inhabitants from 2,000 BC to 1823, the Wappo Indians built sweat lodges, utilizing the hot springs for their healing properties. They named the area "Ta La Ha Lu Si," meaning "Land of Health-Giving Springs" or "Oven Place."

Spanish missionaries Don Francis Castor and Father Jose Altimira, the first Europeans to explore the Napa Valley, called the area "Agua Caliente," or "Hot Water."

When legends about Calistoga's magical waters reached San Franciscan Sam Brannan, California's first millionaire, he developed a plan to build a resort town to rival Saratoga Springs, opening Calistoga's first Hot Springs resort in 1862. According to legend he named the town when he mixed up his words at dinner one night after a few glasses of wine, declaring that the area was becoming "the Calistoga of Sarafornia, rather than the Saratoga of California."

Dr. John Wilkinson, a chiropractor with a passion for alternative, holistic health care, arrived to "check out" the small summer resort town in 1946. Immediately taken by the intriguing healing powers of the area's naturally hot mineral water springs mixed with volcanic ash, he leased a resort, launched his career as "mud king," and founded Dr. Wilkinson's Hot Springs Resort in 1952. The resort quickly gained momentum, attracting an ever growing clientele and developing legions of loyal fans and customers from around the world. Calistoga became the epicenter of an industry that continues to grow to this day.

The original mid-century neon sign, which has appeared in dozens of publications around the world, still glows outside Dr. Wilkinson's Hot Springs Resort. It serves as a landmark on the lovingly preserved four blocks that comprise the town of Calistoga.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation chose Calistoga as a Distinctive Destination in 2001. The criteria included cultural diversity, natural beauty, stunning architecture, and the overall pride of its residents.

History



Dr. John Wilkinson, Founder 1914 - 2004

Dr. John Wilkinson, a chiropractor with a passion for alternative, holistic health care, founded Dr. Wilkinson's Hot Springs Resort in Calistoga, California in 1952. His parents, John and Julia Wilkinson, were of modest means. Great Grandfather Charles Sharkady, a well-to-do Hungarian, spent the family fortune traveling the world. Earning their living growing crops on rented land in California's San Joaquin Valley, the Wilkinsons adhered to their European heritage, filling the house with music from their Steinway and instilling the value of education in their son.

Young Wilkinson attended the Los Angeles School of Chiropractic and became a practicing chiropractor in 1944. He spent six months at Rancho la Puerta in Tecate, Mexico, during its early years, studying with the school's famed founder, the late Edmund Bordeaux Szekely. A scholar, philosopher and natural living experimenter and advocate, Szekely wrote 80 books, founded the International Biogenic Society with Nobel Peace Prize winner Romaine Rolland, and translated portions of the Avesta, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and documents from pre-Columbian Mexico.

While practicing chiropractic in a large Bay Area clinic, Dr. Wilkinson heard about Calistoga, a tiny village in the northern reaches of Napa Valley, which the Wappo Indians had dubbed "Ta La Ha Lu Si," meaning "Land of Health-Giving Springs," or "Oven Place," and where San Franciscan Sam Brannan, California's first millionaire, established a resort community in the mid 1800's.

When he arrived to "check out" the small summer resort town in 1946, Dr. Wilkinson was immediately taken by the intriguing healing powers of the area's natural hot springs mineral water mixed with volcanic ash, the lasting by product of the eruption of Mt. Konocti more than 10,000 years ago. He went out on a limb, leased a resort, built a house on the hill, and launched his career as "mud king."

In 1950, Edy, his wife to be, visited Calistoga for the summer with her mother, Carolina Risso, and nephew, Joe Spina. She frequently visited the swimming pool at his resort, while staying at what is now know as Hideaway Cottages, the sister property of Dr. Wilkinson's Hot Springs Resort. When he learned that the young boy who accompanied her was Edy's nephew and not her son, a courtship, spiced with Carolina's famous Italian dishes, began in earnest. Married that November, their partnership led to the establishment of Dr. Wilkinson's Hot Springs Resort less than two years later.



Edy ran the household, engaged in artistic activities including the design of numerous mosaic pieces that were incorporated into the resort patios and decor, raised their children, Carolynne and Mark, and saw to their education.

Dr. Wilkinson, who some first thought of as a “health nut,” championed his industry. Dr. Wilkinson’s Hot Springs Resort quickly gained momentum, attracting an ever-growing clientele and developing legions of loyal fans and customers from around the world. Calistoga became the epicenter of an industry that continues to grow to this day. “Doc” Wilkinson, as Dr. Wilkinson became known throughout his adopted home town, became the unofficial father of a movement that bears witness to his vision with a profusion of day spas in every major city and in virtually every major hotel and resort in America.

“Doc” loved to “shoot the breeze,” with the guys around town and became an avid historian. He was active in local politics and served as mayor of Calistoga in the late 1960s. He served on several tourism boards and participated in numerous local and statewide marketing campaigns. In 1998, the California Travel Industry Association named he and Edy “Entrepreneurs of the Year” ~ an honor that put them in the company of luminaries including the late Robert Mondavi and Gene Autry.

Dr. Wilkinson passed away in 2004 at age 89, and Edy passed away at age 82 in 2000. Their children, Mark Wilkinson and Carolynne Wilkinson Clair, who have been immersed in running Dr. Wilkinson’s for more than 20 years, continue to own and operate the resort. They have faithfully preserved the therapeutic spa treatments created and perfected by their father, while continuing to modernize and expand the resort’s facilities. Entering its 57th year, Dr. Wilkinson’s Hot Springs Resort is a wine country landmark, one of Calistoga’s oldest spas, and the only local facility that still operates under the original family ownership.

The original mid-century neon sign, which has appeared in dozens of publications around the world, still glows outside Dr. Wilkinson’s Hot Springs Resort, an ongoing tribute to the “Dean of Calistoga Spas.” Not only did “Doc’s” gamble pay off, but his faith in his hot springs and volcanic ash treatments gave birth to a movement that, a half century later, has never been more popular.