

In Manitou Beach, Sask.
Reporter

Miracle of Manitou Beach: The Cree knew something about the healing waters of this salt water lake in Saskatchewan. Subsequent visitors also experienced extraordinary results when they waded in. So why haven't Canadians exploited it?

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The most recent survey on the topic of miracles shows 74% of Canadians believe in miraculous healing. With that figure in mind, the National Post begins an occasional series on miracles across the country, both historical and current, believable and not-so believable. This is the first in the series.

MANITOU BEACH, Sask. - The real miracle, of course, would be if you could walk on the water. You cannot, not quite, but if you try to reach the bottom you will be thrown back as surely as if the hand of God has reached down and yanked you back to the surface. If there were a diving tower at this obscure public beach an hour south and east of Saskatoon, cannonballers might bounce clear across Little Manitou Lake to the far shore, where the green hills rise quickly again to the prairie stubble and where, unfortunately, the Lake of the Healing Waters vanishes instantly from view and usually from thought.

Perhaps that, too, is part of the magic, that the secret powers of the waters the Crees once used to cure fevers remain largely a secret to Canadians. Governor-General Adrienne Clarkson, who has come here to partake of the waters, once wondered aloud how it could be that even those Canadians who come from Saskatchewan know so little of this remarkable place.

"You could write a book here," says Arnold Strueby, who moved to Manitou Beach from nearby Humboldt 20 years ago and ended up spending more than half that time as mayor of the little shore community.

Mr. Strueby is a dreamer. He recently put his retirement savings into a huge barn of a local dance hall called Danceland -- beloved by square dancers for its springy floor of tongue-in-groove hardwood laid over six inches of horsehair -- simply to ensure that outside investors could not tear it down and cart it away to a busier location in Alberta. Manitou Beach, Mr. Strueby believes, needs to hang on to what little it has -- and somehow to regain a grip on what once was, but is lost.

What he sees when he closes those darting eyes is nothing less than the Dead Sea come to rural Saskatchewan; hundreds, no, thousands, of hotel rooms plugged with ailing believers who not only come but are sent -- courtesy of a national health plan that accepts, as so many European countries have, that spas have a legitimate role to play in the well-being of Canadians.

"I'd love to see them set up a real Royal Commission," Mr. Strueby says, "and prove once and for all that there's something here -- there's something to this place."

There was a Royal Commission, once. It was struck by the province of Saskatchewan in 1945 to determine, once and for all, if there is anything to this curious little lake in the hollow that native lore maintained had magical healing qualities.

Cree oral history had three hunters reaching these waters in the midst of a smallpox epidemic, one of the men coming down with fever so deep that all he could do was crawl to the edge of the shoreline and, irrationally, attempt to slake his thirst by sipping on water that is three times saltier than the ocean and so unbelievably buoyant that bathers have been known to float about in it while reading newspapers.

When the hunter awoke the following morning, the fever had passed. For decades, nomadic tribes came here to bathe in the soothing waters, which they also found cleared up skin eruptions and eased the elders' pain from arthritis and rheumatism.

It was not long before an early homesteader, John J. MacLachlan, saw there might be wiser uses for this inland seawater than watering crops. What he envisaged in 1905 is little different than what Arnold Strueby sees nearly a century later: a fabulous resort, with people coming from all over the country to enjoy the magnificent discovery of the Cree hunters.

The difference is that, for a while, John MacLachlan saw his dream come true. Bathhouses and cottages went up, then a tourist hotel. More inventive minds got involved and, soon enough, they were extracting salt and oils and crystals from the waters, shipping mineral water, making salves and ointments for sale and, at one point, even making hair tonic and toothpaste.

There were, at times, the most grandiose of plans. Toronto money lined up for a huge resort hotel to rival Lake Louise. There was talk of a trunk line in from nearby Watrous. None of the wilder rumours ever came about, but Manitou Beach did boom in the 1920s to the point that it was, for a brief moment, considered the No. 1 destination for Western travellers. The streets filled with cars, rooms were so tight people had to camp or stay in nearby communities. Big companies, such as Eaton's, even brought employees by train to spend evenings dancing at one of the three big dance halls and days benefiting from the curative powers of the Little Manitou waters and mud.

The area became known as The Carlsbad of Canada, a reference to Europe's best-known spa. Someone came up with a civic motto -- Watrous Waters Work Wonders -- though the locals much preferred their own, Limp In ... Hop Out!

It seemed, to some, that this was merely the beginning of something that would one day be as big as the real Carlsbad, perhaps even the Dead Sea, where Cleopatra herself was said to have gone to bask in the mud and bathe in the legendary waters.

Soon, however, there were other, bigger attractions beyond the horizon. The automobile was opening up a world far beyond the train routes. As well, the popular infatuation with spiritualism and unknown powers faded quickly with the reality of the Depression. Not only that, but Little Manitou Lake itself began to disappear, the long drought causing the waterline to fall so far that, by the 1940s, people believed there might soon be no more water over which to marvel.

That, more than anything, was what led to the Royal Commission of 1945. Did Manitou Beach have any future? And if so, what connection might there be to the waters?

The commission, composed of medical doctors, did the predictable. They surveyed "deans of approved medical schools" for opinions on the mineral-rich waters, almost entirely discounted what few testimonials they

received from regular people, and reported that "no scientific evidence has been obtained that the waters of Little Manitou Lake have any specific medicinal effect."

The primary concern was far more the shrinkage of the lake. No scientific evidence of the waters' or mud's curative powers was presented or even argued, and the closest the commission came to stating what the locals hoped for was a vague suggestion that, if water levels could somehow be maintained, then further investigation would be justified to study the use of the lake as an "arthritis or poliomyelitis centre."

No matter, the damage had been done. The report might just as well have read, *Doctors Turn Thumbs Down on So-Called Healing Waters*.

Public perception changed rapidly from a certain faith in the spas to an attitude of quaint curiosity. More and more looked upon spa life with the sort of disdain shown by Hermann Hesse, the German novelist, who claimed the true magical spell cast by European spas was little more than "companionship in suffering."

Manitou Beach became increasingly run down in the years following the Royal Commission report. Old businesses closed, including the fanciest resort, which was turned into a camp for Easter Seals in the 1950s. New businesses often started up -- such as a brine-shrimp industry that harvested the lake's tiny crustaceans to produce feed for tropical fish. They usually failed. All that remains of the shrimp industry that once seemed so promising is the boarded-up factory at the edge of the village.

The water level eventually came back, partly through pumping from neighbouring irrigation channels and partly on its own. When scientists found the water level rose during winter, they concluded it had to be from a number of deep springs continually pumping in both the water and its mineral content, making this completely enclosed body of water even more mysterious than originally believed.

There were periodic flurries of renewed interest, but little came of such endeavours as a political fact-finding mission to European spas and a Woods Gordon study in 1982 that called, once again, for "a complete investigation into the use of water at Little Manitou Beach for therapeutic purposes."

For all the calls for scientific proof, there still was none. The closest, perhaps, was hardly the stuff of tourism, for it involved the capacity of the slightly oily lake water to put a quick and effective end to constipation.

In the most celebrated incident, an entire train of conventioners had to be brought to an emergency halt at nearby Undora, the conventioners foolishly having drained the tiny bottles of Little Lake Manitou mineral water they had been given as the train passed through Watrous.

But if the medical profession was negative and the bureaucratic world dubious, the lack of hard evidence did little to rattle the faith of those who believed. They continued to come, many to stay permanently near the waters.

Allan and Yvonne Anderson first came in 1982 with friends from rural Saskatchewan who thought the waters might help Allan. For reasons doctors could never determine, the middle-aged farmer had developed lumps under the skin, disfiguring lumps that formed on his back and arms and even on the sides of his face.

Doctors in Saskatoon thought at first it was a skin cancer, but when no test could verify the diagnosis they turned, instead, to veterinary medicine, thinking his strange condition might somehow be tied to the chemicals used in the raising of livestock and crop spraying.

"He had those lumps for 13 years," Yvonne Anderson remembers from her home within easy walking distance of the beach, "and they could never find what it was. We came out here to see if it might help. Allan went in,

and he said he could feel himself burning something terrible where those lumps were. He was really upset. He cursed and swore and said, 'Never again!' but, you know, a month later it seemed like he had less lumps than before. We came back so he could give it one more try.

"In he went again, and he got that burning again every place he had those lumps. Only worse. He was really upset. But those lumps went away. They just vanished like they'd never been there. That's why we moved here the next year."

Last fall, 18 years after the Andersons came to Manitou Beach, Allan Anderson died of Alzheimer's disease at the age of 74. The lumps had never returned.

"I've seen it happen myself," says Arnold Strueby. "I was a pessimist. I came from Humboldt where people don't buy these things easily. I said, 'This is no different, this is just the same as our salt lakes.' But, you know, I had this bad paper cut. I know it's just a little thing, but it hurt. And I went into the waters and, you know what, an hour later I couldn't even find it!"

Bob Guist, a Saskatoon accountant, has another story, this one concerning his father. Mike Guist had come out of the war with 67 pieces of shrapnel in his body, according to X-rays. Surgery was able to remove some, but not the majority.

Mike Guist worked for decades as a CNR trackman, and always kept a cabin at Manitou where he could visit the spas in winter and swim in the lake in summer, sometimes staying all day long in the water. "He's 80 years old," says his son, "and there's not an ounce of arthritis in his body."

Bob Guist has become a quiet crusader for the waters that he believes have been so crucial to his father's health. He thinks his family's Austrian background makes them more open to the concept of spas, and he personally has taken it upon himself to assemble the closest thing Little Manitou Lake has to an archive.

His Saskatoon office is filled with file folders on government reports, water analyses (magnesium, carbonate, sulphate, potassium, mineral salts, sodium, chloride, calcium, iron oxide, aluminum oxide, silica and sulphur are all found in the water) and even scientific papers on Dead Sea water that shows, convincingly, that such diseases as psoriasis can be treated effectively by nothing more than sun and sand and water. "The waters don't differ a hell of a lot," says Mr. Guist. "I have eczema. I don't have it any more. My daughter has eczema. If she goes in, it stings a bit, but for four months or so it will be all cleared up."

He shares Mr. Strueby's dream of a revitalized, government-supported Manitou Beach where people could come from all over Canada to take the "cures." There are already a number of hotels that cater almost exclusively to elderly visitors who find comfort in the waters; and several spas -- including the large Manitou Springs with its heated 400,000-litre pool, -- do a respectable business, but nothing compares with what the local dreamers imagine.

"The key," says Mr. Strueby, "is to get the medical profession on your side -- and we've been fighting that all along. But, you know, doctors are more accepting now. There could be great opportunity here for us."

"It would do wonders for this province," says Mr. Guist. "It would do wonders for Canada. Think of the tourism. And don't forget, the whole population of Canada is getting older." The problem, he says, is the isolation of the place. That, combined with a persistent Canadian skepticism prevalent in the 1946 report of the Royal Commission remains as strong today.

"If we weren't in Saskatchewan," says Mr. Guist from his office in Saskatoon, "if we were anywhere else. Think about it. There's a two-year waiting list to get into the Carlsbad spa."

"If this place was on the other side of the border," adds Mr. Strueby as he sits at a table in Danceland, "you couldn't buy your way in here."

"The question is," says Mr. Guist, "Would the province? Our province would say, 'This is a little bit hokey, isn't it?' And it is hokey. But all these people say it works."

Arnold Strueby nods, his eyes almost closed as he thinks again about what could be. "The Indians," he says finally, "must have known something."

Black & White Photo: Richard Marjan, National Post / Arnold Strueby at Manitou Beach where he sees nothing less than Saskatchewan's version of the Dead Sea.