

BAY TREE SPRING: FROM MAKE WORK WELL TO SACRED SPRING

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In 2009, the San Bernardino National Forest capped Bay Tree Spring, a human-made well on Black Mountain. Local lore indicated that the well was dug by the Civilian Conservation Corps. At the time the well was capped, it was reputed to have healing qualities or was otherwise the center of religious or ceremonial activity by Hmong, Korean, Orthodox Christian, and the local spiritual community. This paper examines the archaeological and historical evidence for the creation of the well and its transformation into a sacred site.

Alongside the Banning-Idyllwild Road, between Lake Fulmor and the Vista Grande Ranger Station in the San Jacinto District of the San Bernardino National Forest, lies Bay Tree Spring (Figures 1, 2). The water source is located on the western slopes of Black Mountain, nestled in an unnamed, ephemeral tributary to Mellor Creek. Black Mountain was an important Native American resource gathering ground, but the spring's documented history cannot be traced so far back. According to local lore, the spring was improved by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the early 1930s. However, documentation of such public works during that period is extremely hard to come by, since their record keeping was far from systematic. Archaeological evidence indicates that multiple wellheads existed at the location before the present construction, which dates only so far back as 1979. But map and newspaper research suggests that the earliest water source at this location dates back no further than the post-World War II era, when the Banning-Idyllwild Road was improved and military engineers were active at Bay Tree Spring.

While its earliest history is hard to trace, the spring played an important role as a roadside attraction for decades. The site was popular with tourists due to its easy access by automobile, and became known for its pure waters. Perhaps because of this reputation, it even acquired religious significance, especially among immigrant Asian populations, because of its alleged healing powers. Mount San Jacinto was renamed by the Korean Seon Master Venerable Chung Hwa, and oral testimony or archaeological evidence shows Korean, Hmong, and Greek Orthodox activity at the spring. Ironically, however, for health reasons the well was capped in 2009.

An analysis of the development of the spring and its subsequent development is an interesting example of the emergence of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious sacred site. The well was almost certainly not the creation of the CCC, but due to its prominence was ascribed to those culture heroes. Against all evidence that the spring water was often unhealthy, it came to be viewed as an unusually pure water source. Travel writers spread these claims, adding to its reputation. And probably because of this reputation, the ease with which it was accessed, and the aesthetics of the development surrounding the well, it came to be viewed as a healing, holy site by multiple ethnic groups. It is one example of a phenomenon unusual in the United States but more common elsewhere. As such, not only might it be added to the gazetteer of new sacred sites that in the United States are developing on public lands, but it may illuminate generally how such shared sacred places develop.

I have described some of the history of Bay Tree Spring elsewhere (Beherec 2011; reprinted as Beherec 2013). However, this study revises and corrects the history of the origin of Bay Tree Spring. Also, for the first time data is presented about the physical remains of the earliest developments of Bay Tree Spring.

The earliest use of Bay Tree Spring is unrecorded, but we can draw some tentative conclusions based on oral history and local memory. Black Mountain was an important Native American gathering

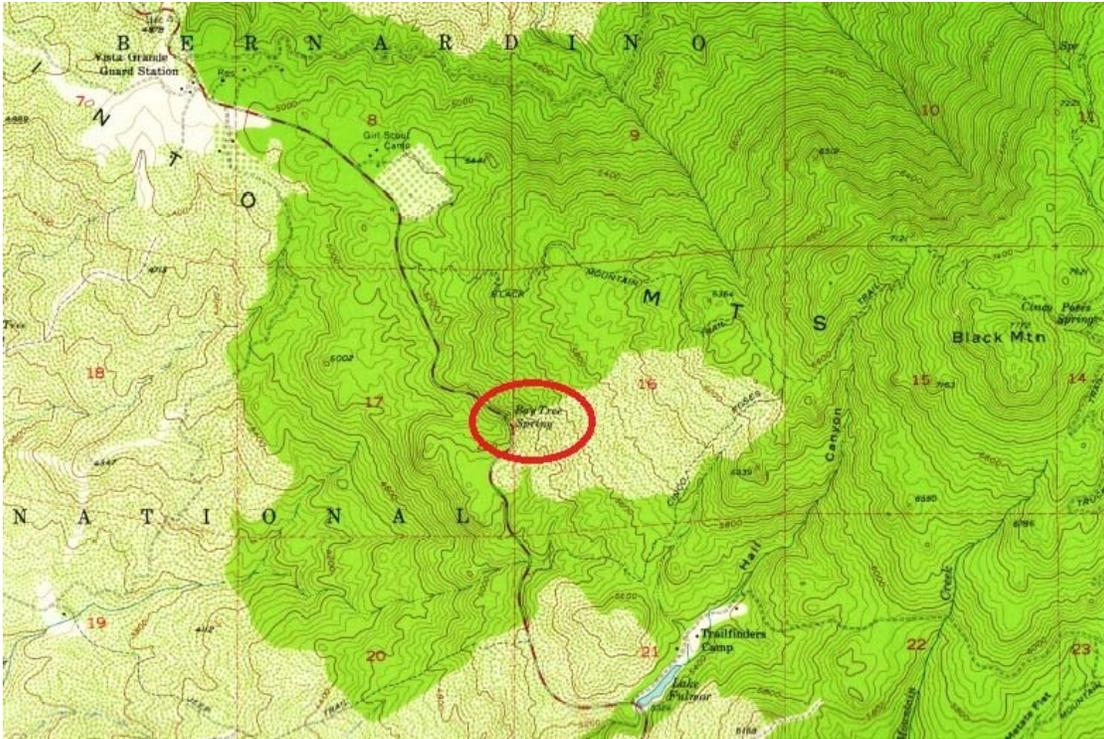


Figure 1. Bay Tree Spring (circled) on the 1956 Lake Fulmor USGS 7.5' Quadrangle (USGS 1956).



Figure 2. Bay Tree Spring in 2009.

spot, for the Cahuilla and probably also their neighbors the Luiseño and Serrano. And as Cahuilla scholars Lowell John Bean, Sylvia Brakke Vane, and Jackson Young wrote in *The Cahuilla Landscape*, “Springs . . . were religiously significant to the Cahuilla, as to their neighbors” (Bean et al. 1991: 8). But Bay Tree Spring lies in rough ground, improved by the passing of the Banning-Idyllwild Road. And as we will see, there is no evidence a spring existed at the spot so far back.

The Banning-Idyllwild Road, constructed in 1908-1910, brought more people into these remote regions of the San Jacinto Mountains, both sending them right past Bay Tree Spring and making a water source in this area a necessity. Readers of John Robinson and Bruce Risher’s book *The San Jacintos* know of the importance of this road in developing the Idyllwild area (Robinson and Risher 1993), but the Forest Service’s role in its construction is often overlooked. One of the men who spearheaded the construction of this road was Forest Supervisor Harold A. E. Marshall. In 1908 Marshall wrote to Congress requesting \$3,000 to help build a road which he hoped would stretch from the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks in the Banning area all the way to the Mexican border. He told Congress, “this will be a great boulevard for pleasure as well as for service” (Marshall 1908), and argued that county officials would quickly see the importance of such a road and help fund its construction. Early users of the road took careful note of the placement of water sources along the route, which were needed for overheating automobiles, thirsty travelers, and even thirstier horses. This road was the necessary precursor of the wellhead.

Local memory—which often preserves what the written record does not—has long maintained that the spring was improved by the Civilian Conservation Corps. The CCC, founded by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt as a means of improving the nation’s infrastructure while also helping the nation cope with the Great Depression, was active in the Black Mountain area in 1933-1934, when a camp was located at the Vista Grande. According to Jeffrey Allan Smith (2003), CCC enrollees at Camp Vista Grande bored two horizontal wells into a mountainside near the camp. Smith writes, “A newspaper article on June 16, 1934 affectionately named the project ‘Mystery Mine’ as the enrollee miners were mystified as to the source of water” (Smith 2003 46). Despite the name Bay Tree Spring, while there may have been an earlier, natural water source at the site, it is a horizontal well that, until 2009, brought water to the roadside. But Bay Tree Spring was not one of these mysterious wells drilled by the CCC men.

The CCC became legendary even in its own day. Known as “Roosevelt’s Tree Army,” the massive peacetime army built infrastructure across the nation (Cohen 1993). A “Real Property Physical Inventory Asset Data Form” completed by Ronald Lawson states that the well dates to 1934, which would coincide with the CCC’s most active year on Black Mountain (Lawson 1997). But that form dates to 1997, and other documentary evidence linking the CCC to Bay Tree Springs is suspiciously lacking. The CCC’s association with Bay Tree Spring appears unfounded, a later association between a group that became culture heroes and a roadside attraction that became legendary.

Archaeological and documentary evidence indicates that at least two wells preceded the 1979 construction. A PVC-lined boring pierces the granite mountainside approximately three feet east of the 1979 wellhead. Lawson’s real property form states “Replacement horiz well added around 1965” (Lawson 1997). PVC became widespread after 1965, and this borehole may be the remains of a ca. 1965 wellhead capped at the time of the 1979 construction. But an even earlier construction is located uphill about seventy feet in elevation above the present wellhead, on the east side of the creek, next to the base of an approximately 20 foot waterfall. It consists of a box created by building a wall of concrete with plentiful pea-sized gravel aggregate four feet long, four inches thick, and about two feet tall, to enclose a natural alcove surrounded by granite (Figure 3). The wall was constructed about 3 feet from the natural granite wall, connecting two rock outcroppings on either side, creating a pocket in which water is trapped. An overflow pipe, also of concrete, is visible in the bottom of the wall, and a 2-foot length of 1-inch diameter metal pipe is set in cement on the floor of the creek about two feet downstream. This pipe probably once connected to the box in some way in order to pipe water down to the level of the road. The box is now full of debris, so nothing could be determined about its depth or other attributes, or whether



Figure 3. Abandoned uphill spring box.

anything is inside of it. It was overflowing with water at the time of visit, while the cliffside above was dry, suggesting that the box contains a spring or well. For reasons I will now discuss, this earliest development probably dates to the post-World War II redevelopment of the Banning-Idyllwild Road.

After World War II, America took more and more to her highways and byways in quest of recreation. The Banning-Idyllwild Road of 1910 was not built for the automobiles of the 1930s and later. Beginning in 1935 county prisoners began work on improving the road. Work went slowly, and World War II interrupted the work for years. But on October 14, 1950, the road was finally dedicated. Along with the road went infrastructure. Roadside fountains were common on roads of the period, such as the Banning-Idyllwild Road and the Palms to Pines Highway, since they were needed for a generation of automobiles more prone to overheating than today's. Similar fountains, including a fountain and parking area that could host 100 cars, were established along what is now Highway 74 at about the same time (Idyllwild Town Crier 1953).

Other period infrastructure constructed with the Banning-Idyllwild Road included the dam and related structures that created Lake Fulmor. Angular stone walls and structures at Lake Fulmor resemble what appear to be early walls at Bay Tree Spring. A pyramidal fountain at Lake Fulmor fed by a hose is similar in appearance to the fountain at Bay Tree Spring (Figure 4). It is possible that the structure which preceded the angular cobble fountain at Bay Tree Spring may have resembled this angular stone fountain.

It is probably to this time of roadbuilding and infrastructure development that Bay Tree Springs properly belongs. The 1943 United States Geological Survey (USGS) Banning 7.5' topographic map carefully documents the springs around Black Mountain, such as Peach Tree Spring, Buck Spring, and Black Mountain Spring (Cinco Poses Spring) (USGS 1943). But Bay Tree Spring, which lies right beside the road, does not appear on this map, or any other pre-1956 map I have seen. Bay Tree Spring does appear in the 1956 USGS Banning quadrangle (USGS 1956), indicating that the well was bored sometime between 1943 and 1956.

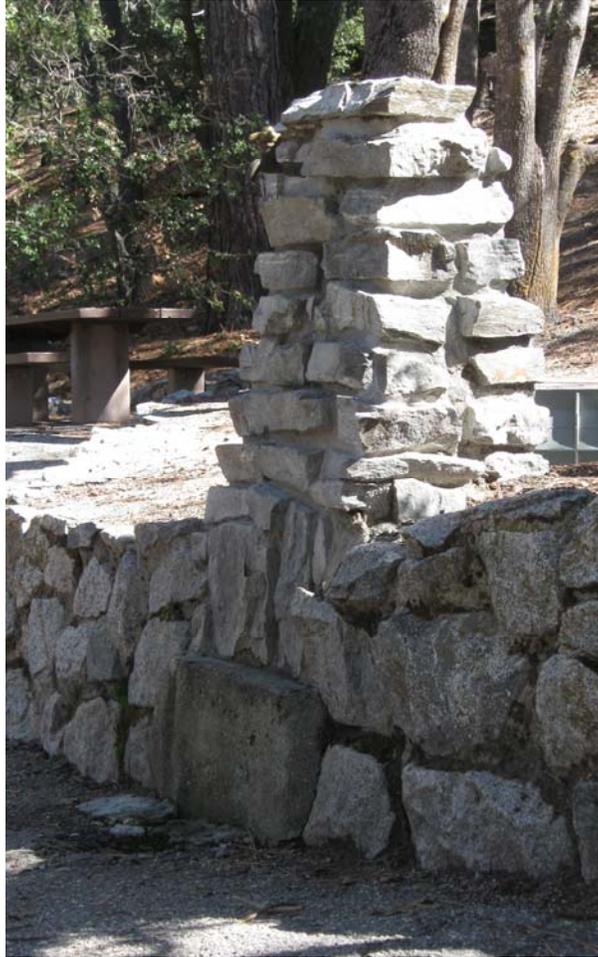


Figure 4. Pyramidal stone fountain at Lake Fulmor.

The earliest documentary evidence of Bay Tree Spring that I have found is a 1951 newspaper article describing military exercises on Black Mountain. At the dawn of the Korean War, the United States recognized its unpreparedness to fight in winter battles in mountainous terrain. Black Mountain was one federally-owned site deemed similar enough to Korea to serve as a suitable training site, and Camp Pendleton deployed Marines to build infrastructure and carry out maneuvers on the forest. But temperatures didn't get cold enough. Snow levels were low, and tanks bogged down on the muddy shores of Lake Fulmor, which failed to freeze sufficiently (Desert Sun 1951a). But in the one article that mentions Bay Tree Spring—and the activities of the Seventh Engineers, who were encamped there—uses the Spring as a landmark, as though it preexisted USMC use of the site (Desert Sun 1951b). The spring most likely dates to postwar road improvements.

Starting in the 1960s, travel authors such as Russ Leadabrand and John Battle mention the spring in guides to the region. Battle wrote about the spring in the *Los Angeles Times* in 1964, and Leadabrand mentions the spring in two of his popular guidebooks (Battle 1964; Leadabrand 1965, 1971a). Leadabrand waxes poetic about the well in a 1971 article for *Westways*, the magazine of the Automobile Club of Southern California: “There are two places in southern California that I know of where such ambrosial water originates. Here, at Bay Tree Spring, and at a similar spring on the way up the side of Palomar Mountain. I always fill my canteen with the water and when I get home it tastes even better than the spring water we buy delivered” (Leadabrand 1971b). Similar praises appear in local guides through the ensuing decades into the new millennium.

The most recent construction, the cobblestone feature at a turn-off from the Banning-Idyllwild Road, is a well which was drilled in 1979. In that year, the National Forest was engaged in a number of improvement projects in the Black Mountain area. Some of these were related to recovery from the Soboba Fire, which broke out on the Soboba Reservation in 1974 and was not stopped until it had burned 19,600 acres, including the area around Bay Tree Spring. A lonely, charred incense cedar stump uphill of the spring silently testifies to this old fire. But the Lake Fulmor area in general was a beneficiary of a National Forest initiative to make the San Jacinto District more accessible to the public. "At this time, Southern California has the largest deficit of recreation facilities in the nation, according to the 1974 California Outdoor Recreation Resources Plan," District Ranger Danny Brit told the Town Crier when announcing the improvements Idyllwild and her visitors continue to benefit from today (Britt 1979). The 1979 construction also replaced a well unsafe due to *E. coli* contamination. As early as the winter of 1970-1971, signs were posted warning of bacteria content due to snowmelt at the predecessor to the most recent well (Leadabrand 1971b:24). The 1979 construction made the spot a lush area with benches and stone walls, an idyllic resting place where a motorist could take a break and fill a bottle. Moreover, it was already highly praised by travel authors and easily accessible, even to those who might not usually use Forest amenities.

In its last years, Bay Tree Spring gained a reputation as a healing well. Indeed, even the scoping letter issued by the Forest Service in regard to capping the well notes, "Some groups believe that this water has holistic, medicinal properties" (Rosenthal 2009). The beliefs probably began with the widespread but simple belief that the well's waters were unusually pure. But they soon developed a religious nature.

By 1994, the Hmong immigrants in Banning are documented to have viewed Bay Tree. These Hmong came to the United States from Laos after aiding our country in the Vietnam War. More than 110,000 Hmong were accepted in the United States, most of them after 1980, and Banning became one of the centers of Hmong settlement in the United States. Riverside Police Captain Ross Koepp, whose book *Culture Shock* details his involvement in catching the teenage Hmong gang members who killed German tourist Gisela Pflieger at the Indian Vista Overlook in 1994, told me about the importance of the well to the Hmong. In his book, he describes the spring as a "'mystical fountain' below Lake Fulmor where pure mountain water mysteriously bubbles up from an unknown ground source" (Koepp 2000:239). Several Hmong elders, he said, suggested that the assailants were in the area because of the healing spring (Koepp, personal communication, 2009). The Hmong are animists, believing all of nature has indwelling spirits. As Koepp pointed out, this no doubt contributed to their beliefs about the spring.

Korean interest in Bay Tree Spring probably developed due to the activities of Venerable Chung Hwa. Ven. Chung Hwa was born in Muan, Korea, in 1923. In 1972, he founded the first Korean Buddhist temple in the United States, the Sambosa Diamond Meditation Center, in Carmel, California. Ven. Chung Hwa believed that "America is the most influential country in the whole world," but that it needed to learn "the essence of religion," which he felt was most refined in Buddhism (Dharma Talks n.d.:14). In 1998, after spending three years in intensive meditation near the San Jacinto Mountains, Chung Hwa founded the Diamond Zen Center in Hungry Hollow, in the Poppet Flats area a few miles from the Bay Tree Spring (Dharma Talks n.d.:3). Although he died in 2003, Ven. Chung Hwa remains an inspiration to Buddhists both in California and in the homeland. Ven. Chung Hwa returned to Korea, but a portion of his ashes were returned to California and are entombed in a memorial pagoda at the Center.

According to a sign on the Center grounds, Ven. Chung Hwa gave Mount San Jacinto the new name of Sung An San. Monks contacted at the Center by District Archaeologist Oberndorf acknowledged some of the local Buddhists believe in its curative powers (Oberndorf, personal communication, 2009). Newspaper reports document that people came from away as far as Orange County to collect water here, and state that the spring was reported in a Korean language newspaper in Los Angeles (Zimmerman 2005). Material collected by the University of California, Los Angeles' Korean Folklore Archive (2006) even credits the spring with curing two people of cancer. The Korean Folklore Archive account tells of an elderly Korean woman who not only collected spring water, but also took away acorns near the site of the

spring, suggesting that Black Mountain itself has sacred significance, perhaps due to Chung Hwa's blessing. At a minimum Ven. Chung Hwa brought Koreans to the mountains, where they came into contact with the spring.

Finally, in the spring of 2009, while documenting the spring before its decommissioning, I came across a series of Greek icons and posters in the Greek language along the creek overlooking the spring, near the abandoned uphill spring box. One of these was an icon of the Prophet Elijah, who was taken up bodily into heaven on the banks of the Jordan (2 Kings 2). Another was an icon of St. John the Baptist, who of course baptized people in the same river and is linked to Elijah in New Testament theology (Matthew 11:13-14). The figures are also linked by their water-symbolism, and Elijah is considered a bringer of rain in the Orthodox Near East (Hanauer 1907:46-53). A Greek-language catechetical poster was also found at the spring, suggesting a group retreat had been held there, rather than individual devotions (Figure 5). It is unclear if the Greek community views the spring as a healing place, but they clearly used the area as a place worthy of meditation and prayer.

Ironically, it was health reasons that necessitated the capping of the spring. After significant rainfall or snow melt on Black Mountain, coliform bacteria from animal feces washes into the groundwater that supplies the spring. As early as the winter of 1970-1971, the National Forest posted signs warning of bacteria content at the spring (Leadabrand 1971b:24). In 2009, the County of Riverside, which monitors such health risks, was bound by law to step in (Zimmerman 2009). The Forest Service posted warnings in English, Spanish, and Korean, and called for public comment regarding plans to cap the well. The well was capped with a temporary cap in July of 2009. This required removing the top part of the well's cobblestone wellhead and sealing off the water supply (Figure 6). The well might still be opened someday, but that would require public interest and, like all things, money. It would need a deeper shaft, and most likely a water treatment system. And, as District Recreation Officer John Ladley told the *Town Crier*, "That would require some kind of filtration or chlorination system with certification as a water operator. And that is not a core function of the Forest Service" (quoted in Smith 2009:2).

Bay Tree Spring is one of a number of mostly poorly-documented places on public lands that have acquired special significance. Another example is the Wisdom Tree on the side of Cahuenga Peak in Griffith Park, Los Angeles, which has become a sort of secular pilgrimage spot (Cox 2015). In their appeal to a broad cross-section of people, they are similar to sites elsewhere in the world, where various ethnic and religious groups converge on the same holy spots. As these sites are developing in the United States, these can only exist on public lands, where they can be visited by groups and individuals of diverse backgrounds and beliefs.

Bay Tree Spring is an example of the emergence and demise of a modern multi-religious and multi-ethnic sacred site. The site was apparently first developed as part of road improvement projects in the 1940s to 1950s, although its popularity has caused it to be ascribed to culture-heroes of the CCC. The site was then popularized for its reportedly pure waters. This purity reputation for purity developed into a reputation for holiness. The Hmong animists viewed the spring as sacred. The Korean monk Venerable Cheong Hwa's influence brought Buddhists to the mountain and may have elevated the well to the level of a sacred site. The Orthodox also held religious meetings at the well. But finally and ironically, the water's very unhealthiness led to its capping by the USFS. Thus the unlikely holy site with a uniquely American history had its beginning and its end.

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