

# The Healing Waters of Circle Hot Springs



Owners Frank and Emma Leach built a three-story hotel in 1930, attracting tourists and overwintering miners. Anchorage Museum of History and Art, Library and Archives.

Collection Name:



Identifier:



Title:



Description:

[AMRC. General Photograph File](#)

[AMRC-b65-15-7d](#)

[Circle Springs Hotel, Circle Springs, Alaska](#)

[Circle Springs Hotel, Circle Springs, Alaska. View of hotel, surrounding buildings, cabins & parking lot.](#) From verso: ["Property of Cook Inlet Historical Society."](#) n.d. [Postcard. Original photograph size: 3 1/2" x 5 3/8"](#).



University of Alaska Anchorage. Archives & Manuscripts Dept.

**The pool remained in a natural state for many years. This 1947 photo shows amenities of a diving deck and waterside chairs. Cool water had to be added to the 138°F natural flow. University of Alaska Anchorage, Archives and Manuscripts Department.**

**Collection Name:**

[Crystal and Ray Williams. Photograph Album, 1947. UAA-HMC-0549](#)



**Identifier:**

[UAA-hmc-0549-1c](#)



**Title:**

[Swimming Pool, Circle Hot Springs, 1947.](#)



**Description:**

[Title taken](#) from [verso](#). A [view](#) of the [swimming area](#) at [Circle Hot Springs, Alaska](#), with [three adirondack-style chairs](#) to the [right](#) of the [swimming area](#) and a [diving deck](#) on the [far side](#). [1947](#). [Original photograph size: 2 3/4" x 4 1/2"](#).



Anchorage Museum of History & Art. Library & Archives.

**Rows of log cabins near the hot springs were home to local miners and families. Anchorage Museum of History and Art, Library and Archives.**

**Collection Name:**

[AMRC. Wien Collection](#)



**Identifier:**

[AMRC-b85-27-1028](#)



**Title:**

[Cabins](#) at [Circle Hot Springs](#).



**Description:**

[View](#) of [log cabins](#) at [Circle Hot Springs, Alaska](#), with [bicycle](#) in [front](#) of [cabin](#) at [left](#) and [moose antlers mounted](#) on [center cabin](#). 1950's? [Original photograph size: 4" x 5"](#).



Anchorage Museum of History & Art. Library & Archives.

**With eight miles to the nearest village, the Circle Springs Trading Company served as the general store. Anchorage Museum of History and Art, Library and Archives.**

**Collection Name:**



**Identifier:**



**Title:**



**Description:**

[AMRC. Wien Collection](#)

[AMRC-b85-27-1031](#)

[Circle Springs Trading Co.](#)

[Title taken](#) from [sign](#) on [building](#). [View](#) of [log building housing Circle Springs Trading Company](#) in [Circle Hot Springs, Alaska](#), with [truck](#) at [left](#), [bear skin hanging](#) on [wall](#), and another [log building](#) at [right](#). [1950's?](#) [Original photograph size: 4" x 5"](#).



Anchorage Museum of History & Art. Library & Archives.

**Nourished by hot springs water and the Midnight Sun, the gardens around Circle Hot Springs prospered, producing giant cabbages and other vegetables. Anchorage Museum of History and Art, Library and Archives.**

**Collection Name:**

[AMRC. Wien Collection](#)

**Identifier:**

[AMRC-b85-27-1032](#)

**Title:**

[Indian girls, Arctic Circle Hot Springs.](#)

**Description:**

[Title taken from verso. Two young women standing in cabbage field holding large cabbage at Circle Hot Springs, Alaska, with buildings in right background. 1950's? Original photograph size: 10" x 8".](#)

## **More about Circle Hot Springs:**

The naturally heated mineral waters of Circle Hot Springs had cleansed and comforted Athabascan Indians for generations before prospector William Greats stumbled upon it in 1893. With hot spring water available year-round, it soon became a favorite overwintering spot for local miners. The earliest bathhouses were tents; however, ice build-up on tent flaps was always problem. If someone wanted in or out of the tent, the

flap had to be chipped. The large pool, formed from a constant flow of 138-degree water, developed from a natural pond, to a somewhat improved outdoor pool, to a modern, poured-cement swimming pool with changing rooms and a snack bar.

By the time it closed in 2002, Circle Hot Springs Resort had gained statewide as well as national and international attention for its aurora-viewing opportunities, its Olympic-sized outdoor pool, and for the funky, old-time atmosphere that owners wisely protected through the years. At its heart was a grand, three-story hotel that has hosted thousands since it first opened in 1930. The hotel became famous for the mineralized water that heated it, the log cabins that surrounded it, and for the ghost that—perhaps—haunted it.

Back in 1909, Franklin and Emma Leach bought the 106-acre homestead from Cassius Monohan. Their garden flourished in the Interior's sun-soaked days, the soil warmed by springs water. In 1930, the couple decided to build a hotel on the site, and they hired a local gold miner and trapper, a sourdough named Billy Bowers, to oversee the project. Early in the century, Bowers, whose birth name was Bigger John Bower (without the "s"), had mined claims on Cleary Creek, Ruby, Iditarod, and elsewhere in the Interior, earning a reputation as an honest, hard-working man. Sometime before Emma Leach died in 1974, she allowed journalist Ms. Mike Dalton to tape-record her as she reminisced about the early days of the springs. Mrs. Leach remembered Bowers as "an elderly man" by then—he would have been about sixty-three—and that under his direction, work was done efficiently. They began building in March and opened by Fall 1930.

According to some accounts, most of the building materials were brought up the Yukon River to Circle City, then moved to the hot springs by horse-drawn wagon. However, in Mrs. Leach's taped recollection, she said the men logged trees not far from home, by a lake a few miles northeast of Circle Hot Springs. The trail they likely used to haul in the logs is still marked on contemporary maps, a dotted red line between the hot springs and the expansive lake.

"My husband brought most of the lumber from Medicine Lake," she said. "There were a lot of big trees down there. Oh, we also had lumber from Fairbanks, of course."

Circle Hot Springs lies at the end of an eight-mile spur road off the Steese Highway at the town of Central. Further down the highway, another 34 miles, the town of Circle City sits on the banks of the Yukon River. Circle was named in error—the miners mistakenly thought the town was on the Arctic Circle, another 40 miles north. In earlier days, driving the Steese Highway was the only way that motorists could reach the Yukon River. That changed with the building of the Dalton Highway, commonly known as the Haul Road, during construction of the Trans-Alaska Pipeline in the early 1970s.

With Frank's death in 1955, Emma oversaw the resort until she passed away in 1974 and was buried next to her husband on a hill near the hotel. In Emma's later years, she was more reclusive, living alone in one of the cabins. For the taped interview with Dalton, some of Emma's oldest friends came to visit and remember their youth in this remote part of the country. Dalton's final remarks concerned how rare it was that Emma received any guests at all, yet she agreed to visit a friend's house in Central for a tea party and conversation that was recorded with her permission.

As of late 2006, current owners Bobby and LaVerna Miller were keeping the hotel and hot springs property maintained, but had it up for sale. Even at age eight-nine, Bobby Miller wasn't selling because of his age.

"Truthfully, my body feels like it's twenty years old," he said. "I've never had a headache in my life, and I've been under pressure something terrible. . . . I've never even had high blood pressure. One of the reasons I'm so healthy is I've worked outdoors all of my life, until it was 40 below. And I had a policy: if it was 40 below, I worked indoor in my brother's shop."

Miller had bought the hot springs in 1980, remembering it fondly from his days when he labored at a bulldozer and dragline operation on a local creek.

“I worked up there before the war—worked in 1937-38 on Deadwood Creek,” he said. “The hot springs was fifteen miles away. We were up there seven nights a week. It was a real nice place—all the cabins had families in it. I always liked it.”

As for the rumors of a resident ghost, Miller has a ready answer.

“Yes. That’s Mrs. Leach,” he said. “I heard rumors, I couldn’t prove it, but one of my best friends, an elderly fellow was up there. He’s real hard-headed, very honest. He was up there once and he says he saw it.”

With or without a ghost, the hot springs will remain closed, he said, until he finds a buyer willing to pay his \$6.25 million price tag. If not, it doesn’t matter to Miller. He’ll stay busy keeping the place in shape.

“I’ll go to my grave with it,” he said. “They can lay me out in the lobby.”

## **LINKS:**

**Mike Dalton interview with Emma Leach on Circle Hot Springs history:**

<http://uaf-db.uaf.edu/Jukebox/central/biohtm/emleb.html>

**The Haunting of Circle Hot Springs:**

[www.uaf.edu/journal/extreme/xdream/Great/ghost/index.html](http://www.uaf.edu/journal/extreme/xdream/Great/ghost/index.html)

**Geology of the Circle Mining District:**

[www.gi.alaska.edu/~jesse/treasure/akmining/circle.html](http://www.gi.alaska.edu/~jesse/treasure/akmining/circle.html)

**National Park Service, Circle Mining District history:**

[www.nps.gov/archive/yuch/Expanded/mining\\_history/mining\\_history.htm](http://www.nps.gov/archive/yuch/Expanded/mining_history/mining_history.htm)

## **Visit the library for more information:**

Alaska’s libraries include audio, visual, and written material about Circle Hot Springs and the mining history around it. Visit your local library or go online to see what’s available in holdings all over the state. Take these simple steps:

1. Access **SLED** (State Library Electronic Doorway) at <http://sled.alaska.edu/library.html>.

2. Click on the listing for **ALN**Cat (the Alaska Library Network Catalog) to view the Basic Search window.

Go to the Keyword field, and type in **CIRCLE HOT SPRINGS** or **CIRCLE MINING**.

### **More Reading:**

Lampright, Richard L. *Gold Placer Deposits Near Fairbanks, Alaska: An Inventory of the Gold Placer Mines, Prospects, and Deposits located within the Big Delta, Charley River, Circle, Eagle, Fairbanks, and Livengood Quadrangle*. Anchorage, AK: Iron Fire Publications, 1996.

Heller, Herbert L. *Sourdough Sagas: The Journals, Memoirs, Tales, and Recollections of the Earliest Alaskan Gold Miners, 1883-1923*. Cleveland World Publishing Co., 1966;

Mertie, John Beaver, L. M. Prindle, and Ron Wendt. *Circle Goldfields, 1893-1938*. Wasilla, AK: Goldstream Publications, 1997.

### **VIDEO:**

Alaska Magazine Television. Vol. 6, *Alaskan Lifestyles*. Produced by C. Vincent Shortt; directed by Jerry Caires; Written by Susan McInnis. Videocassette (ca. 30 min.). Anchorage, AK: Alaska Magazine, 2001.

### **AUDIO:**

Carstens, Peggy. *Peggy Carstens Interview on Her Life in Alaska, Cooking on the Riverboats, Gold Mining, and Running Circle Hot Springs*. Sound cassette with William Schneider and Doris Southall, 1947-1990