

Huff's Spring

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A.O. Wickman's Daughter Alice drinks water from Huff's Spring

The spring was a widely known Rocklin curiosity and source of clean drinking water in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. A nearby cluster of 88 bedrock mortars and about 4 acres of gently sloping terrain, partly covered by Springview School's soccer field, tell that the area was formerly home to a large community of native Nisenan. According to archeologists Norm Wilson and Arlean Towne, the slope, called a "midden", covers the refuse of more than 1500 years of Nisenan seasonal encampments. Rocklin's creeks ran dry in the summers before European settlers dammed the Sierra watershed. The spring was possibly the best source of the water that the Nisenan needed in the fall to wash tannin from their acorn mush.

In the 1940's one Rocklin old-timer could remember seeing Nisenan at the spring as late as the 1880's.

It's called Huff's Mineral Spring, named after William Huff who lined it with granite blocks in 1887 and sold the water – 25 cents for all a person could carry.

Huff's spring gurgles 120 gallons per minute of chilly water over its granite lining into a tributary of Antelope Creek. Mysteriously, the flow slows noticeably at midday but is strong again by early evening. Rocklin Hydrologist Christian Carleton, who lives nearby, attributes this to deep-rooted oaks which take up water from the underlying aquifer while the sun is high. He describes the variations in flow this way: "Assuming that there is no significant local groundwater pumping, the diurnal change in flow is likely caused by water uptake from oak trees. The roots of oaks go deep and probably tap into the same source of water as Huff spring. This is a phenomenon that is also observed in local creeks where tree uptake of water during the day causes the creek level to temporarily drop." he said.

The water is alkaline and not suitable for irrigation. But it is cool and clean and early Rocklin settlers relied on it to augment the stream and lake water that the railroad companies brought down from Blue Canyon in tank cars.

Early Rocklin homes were built atop an underlying granite cap. Effluent from septic fields and outhouses flowed in unpredictable ways so residents were suspicious of water from their shallow wells. The spring and the tank cars were their best alternatives for clean water.

Former Rocklin mayor and quarry operator Roy Ruhkala remembers carting spring water in burlap covered jugs to workers in his family's quarry in the 1920's and later. "The quarrymen preferred the taste of Huff water and it didn't seem to cause belly aches like other water," said Ruhkala.

Earliest land records show that James Bolton bought the spring site from the first recorded owner, James Coffee, in 1852 as part of a 160-acre parcel on which Bolton laid out Rocklin's original town site in 1866. At that time the Nisenan were still visiting the

area, but possibly only in small numbers during acorn season. A Euro-American-borne malaria epidemic had reduced their numbers by 75 percent in 1833.

Huff bought the site from Bolton in 1886 as part of 128 acres on which he established a dairy farm. He marketed the spring water and promoted its medicinal value as a sidelight to his dairy business. The spring was a 6-block walk from Rocklin's train station and tourists traveled to Rocklin for a dip in the spring, or a drink of its water, to cure their rheumatism and stomach ailments.

Rocklin quarryman A. O. Wickman bought the spring and dairy operation from Huff's estate in 1919.

Ray Johnson married Wickman's daughter Florence in 1926 and the pair bought out Wickman in 1936. Johnson ran the dairy and was Rocklin's home delivery milkman until about 1960

Johnson provided free access to the spring for Rocklin residents with the proviso that they close the gate on their way in and out to ensure that his dairy cows didn't escape into town. At times Johnson bottled the water and delivered it on his milk route for 5 cents a gallon.

In the last half of the 20th century modern plumbing and water systems gradually lessened Rocklin's dependence on Huff's spring water, while large dairy operations and chain store milk sales lessened the viability of local milk operations like Johnson's. The City of Rocklin gradually bought up most of Johnson's property to develop Johnson Springview Park. Florence Johnson donated the spring and much of the midden to the city in 1998. Bulrush hid the spring and its tributary until 2007 when outdoor sports company R.E.I. donated funds to the city to clean up and beautify the area. The spring is now it an attractive point of interest for Springview Park visitors.

Both Wickman and Ray Johnson uncovered Nisenan artifacts as they plowed the midden for their dairy operations. Their finds include 3 thirty-pound portable bedrock mortars, 50 rock pestles and tools for grinding nuts and seeds. Many of these items are on display at the Rocklin History Museum.

This article is based on documents archived at the Rocklin History Museum, a Smithsonian article on the Nisenan culture by Norman Wilson and Arlean Towne, and discussions with former mayor Roy Ruhkala, and Ray and Florence Johnson's son Gene who recently refurbished the 100 year old Huff home at Fifth Street and Rocklin Road.