

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Long-Standing Fame

For several hundred years before Americans came to Monterey or to California, the Tassajara Springs were famous, according to an article written by Jack Swan, who arrived in Monterey in 1843 and built the adobe building now known as "The First Theater." Writing in 1876, he said:

"I first heard of Tassajara Springs in the spring of 1843 while hunting in the Carmel Valley. I met a large band of Indians coming up the valley, some being on horseback and others on foot. The leader, who had been educated at the Mission, spoke good Spanish. He stated that he and his bride were bound for Tassajara Springs to take the waters for a rash or skin disease that had broken out among them.

"They would build a sweat hut of mud and branches over the place where the hot water flowed from the ground and then remain there until they got so weak the medicine man would have to carry them out. After which they would scrape their bodies with the ribs of a deer or some other animal."

Frequently there would be several tribes in there at one time but because of the great abundance of wild game of all kinds, and fish, they had no trouble living. In fact there was so much game there, according to Swan, and it was such an ideal place to dry the meat, that the Indians gave it the name of Tassajara - meaning a place to dry meat. It is pronounced "tass - a - hara" and has been repeatedly used as a place name in California. It is a Spanish-American word.

There is another delightful tale concerning the Carmel Indians and the origin of the name of the hot springs at Tassajara. It goes something like this according to legend:

There was once an Indian chief who was all-powerful. He was the favorite of the Sun God that ruled the universe and from this deity received his powers. So supernatural was he that he could hear the grass grow and see his enemies and game a day's travel away. The chief had a young sister who was very dear to his heart and when she became stricken with a strange malady, the hills and dales were ransacked for herbs for the medicine man for a cure.

Everything failing, the brother started her on a trip to the big water, hoping that the ocean air would benefit her. By the time the stream now known as Tassajara Creek was reached, the sister had failed so rapidly that it was not possible to proceed further. All the powers of the chief had failed, and her life was ebbing away.

Finally, in desperation, he supplicated his Sun God, offering his own as a sacrifice. He fell prone on the ground. Although it was mid-day, the sun soon was obscured, and the earth became dark. The body of the chief stiffened, and he grew rigid and was turned to stone. As he dissolved into a mass of rock, "hot tears poured from it. The sister fell prostrate over the place where he made the sacrifice, and was soon covered with the hot tears of her sorrowing brother. When she arose, she was completely cured.

The news of the miracle spread among the Indian tribes of California, and, it is said, that after that, every year the lame, the halt and the blind wended their weary way to bathe in the hot waters which poured from the rock where the chief had died.