

The Burning Springs and the Commercialization of Niagara Falls

By Jessica Linzel

Niagara's unique physiography has always been the driving force behind its tourism sector and the Burning Springs near Dufferin Islands is one of the earliest examples.

More than 200 years ago, a sulphur-smelling spring with natural gas bubbling to the surface was discovered on the Canadian side of the Niagara River, above the Horseshoe Falls. It originated from a layer of Queenston Shale along the upper Niagara River, more than 600 feet deep and exposed during excavation for the Bridgewater Mills in the 1790s. It quickly became a curiosity mentioned in a number of traveler accounts throughout the 1800s and is said to have been one of the earliest tourist attractions in Niagara Falls.

The mill proprietors Thomas Clark and Samuel Street decided to turn it into a tourist attraction, building a wooden shelter over the sulphur springs as well as a contraption of a barrel with a corked pipe that would collect the gas. Once the audience had gathered round, the cork was removed from the pipe and the natural gas was emitted and ignited, creating the "burning springs".

The Burning Springs were advertised in various tourist guidebooks published throughout the 1830s and 1840s. Tourists were charged 12-and-a-half cents by its new keeper M. J. Conklin for a chance to view this natural curiosity. Conklin's son, and then grandson, inherited the attraction and eventually a new owner in the early 1880s repaired the building, adding gatekeepers, and raising admission fees which included access to the surrounding gardens and picnic areas. More than 25,000 tickets were sold in the summer of 1884 alone.

The attraction was forced to move when the Niagara Parks Commission took ownership of the land in 1887.

**THE CELEBRATED
BURNING
SPRINGS!**

A Great Natural Curiosity situated on the Niagara River, one and one-half miles above the

**HORSESHOE FALL
ON THE CANADA SIDE.**

This Spring is annually visited by thousands, charmed at once with the sight. The Spring is charged with Sulphuretted Hydrogen Gas, and when ignited burns with a brilliant flame. The Gas is composed from a bed of Coal, Iron Ore, and Sulphur. Sulphur, Iron and Magnesia are the Mineral properties of the water.

IT IS AN INDIAN DISCOVERY, accidentally found by them eighty years ago, shown as a curiosity over fifty years. Close to the Burning Springs is a

Pure Sulphur Spring, but not containing any gas, but its water is of a high Medicinal quality. The drive to the Springs is one of the most delightful around Niagara, being a continuation of Rapids all the way, passing

Cedar Island, Cynthia & Log Islands.

Arriving at the Springs, there is a stretch of the fastest Rapids above the Falls, on either side, running at the rate of twenty-seven miles per hour. All visitors are willing to say that the trip is a complete success, and that the Springs are among the best sights at Niagara.

**P. S. CLARK, Proprietor Burning Springs,
NIAGARA FALLS.**

Handbill advertising the Burning Springs in Niagara Falls, Ontario

For some unknown reason, the gas flow had dried up in 1885, but it was discovered during an arbitration hearing that the owner had continued collecting fees from tourists wanting to see the burning springs. Despite this, the Commission still paid the owner \$4,200 for the property with an additional \$2,000 per year for the rest of his life, determining that to be "fair compensation".

Entrepreneurs recreated "The Burning Springs" attraction a few times in its history by piping in natural gas. In 1924, the burning springs were featured at a restaurant and souvenir shop called the Falls View Observation Tower and Old Burning Springs, owned by Bryant Langmuir and William Laughlin. In the 1960s, it was part of a wax museum, located where the Marriott Hotel bus stop/Fallsview Boulevard hotel district is today. The museum closed in the 1980s.

References

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