



The earthquake frightened the people of Nashville and caused a fabulous spring of "medicinal waters" to break forth near the Hermitage

MS. Div. 68-175  
AC. NO.

'No cure, no pay' was the motto of the people who ran the famous spa which sprang up at the mineral spring created by the Quake of 1811.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY BOB FERGUSON

# The Earth Shook, and the Fountain of Health Was Born

By Louise Davis

**T**HE "FOUNTAIN of Health" burst out of a ripped hillside near the Hermitage one December night in 1811 while Nashville rocked in a terrifying earthquake.

It was the same tremor that changed the course of the Mississippi River, temporarily, and created Reelfoot Lake in West Tennessee.

Although no traces are left today of the "miraculous waters" which appeared only a mile east of the Hermitage, they were a sensation at the time.

In an era when mineral springs were the rage, these waters fairly dripped with chemicals from the earth's crust.

A thriving health resort blossomed on the spot, and flourished for 15 years. The lame and ailing came from as far away as New Orleans and the Virginia coast.

The owner and promoter, an enterprising lawyer named William Saunders, advertised the waters as a cure for everything from sore eyes and ulcerated skin to rheumatism, asthma, stomach disorders, "warts and tetters" and wens on the wrists.

One patient, once the richest girl in Virginia, came to the Fountain of Health to take the cure for dope addiction. She was the lovely young Anne McCarty Lee, wife of the tragic "Black Horse Harry" Lee. Lee was the older half-brother of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee.

Out of Anne Lee's stay at the Fountain of Health—and its proximity to the Hermitage—came Harry Lee's close association with Andrew Jackson, both during the Presidential campaign and at the White House.

It was sheer luck that the earth happened to rip open and create the springs on land owned by one of Davidson County's sharpest operators.

Saunders, who had come from Gates County, N.C., had bought the 193-acre farm just east of the Hermitage in December, 1807. He paid \$10 an acre for the tract which spilled over into Wilson County, deeds at the courthouse show today.

Saunders was farming the land and practicing law when the earthquake struck, about 2:15 on Monday morning, Dec. 18, 1811.

"The shocks which continued until after day were some of them very severe—so much so that the heaviest houses seemed to be racked to pieces,"

the *Democratic Gazette and Clarion* reported the next day.

"However we have heard of no real injury sustained except the fall of some chimneys in the country. . . . This being the first shock of the kind ever felt in the place and commencing at the hour it did, terrified the citizens at first very much, until recollection assigned the true cause of the dreadful visitation."

But it wasn't all dreadful, Saunders soon discovered. Below the hill where his house stood, the earth had cracked open to reveal a rushing spring with a strong sulphur and mineral taste. He began experimenting with its medicinal qualities.

The earth tremors continued through the winter of 1811-1812. By July, 1813, Saunders was open for business. He had turned his farm home into a health resort and advertised that he was building more cottages for guests.

The *Clarion and Tennessee Gazette* ran his first ad on July 13, 1813. It began with a description of the violent birth of the spring:

"Immediately after the tremendous Earth Quakes which visited our land in the winter of 1811 and 1812 and shocked our Earth to the very centre, a stream of purest Mineral Water broke forth from the bowels of the Earth on the plantation of the subscriber, which the All Wise Providence in his unbounded goodness and mercy seems to have intended as a peculiar blessing to mankind."

The ad spoke of the "great number of experiments which have been made upon persons variously affected," and said that "in no instance whatever has it failed to give more or less relief, and in most of them perfectly restored the patient to the highest health—contrary to the belief and expectations of all who saw them, which induces a belief that it is a fountain of Universal Medicine."

Saunders followed up with sworn testimonials to the benefits of his cure-all.

There was, for instance, General Overton's son, who was "cured of a very bad sore in four days constant application of this water, which had for some time baffled the General's skill."

All the way from Natchez, Miss., came William Ewell, who had suffered "upwards of four years with the intermitting fever" and doctors had sup-

posed him "to be at death's door." Ewell said he was so ill that he "came to Tennessee with considerable difficulty" and was so weak when he arrived that he could hardly make it from the resort hotel to the spring 150 yards down the hill.

But after 10 days of drinking and bathing in water from the Fountain of Health, he was again a "healthy and hearty man."

Thomas A. Oden, who lived near Nashville, stated in a testimonial that he had suffered for about a year from a "complaint of the bowels" and was "reduced very low" when he went to the Fountain of Health. After two weeks there, he was cured.

One Negro man, "who was ulcerated from the crown of his head to the sole of his feet . . . inasmuch that a finger could be thrust into many places about his head, shoulders, elbows and legs" was "healed of this putrefaction entirely from the drinking and washing in this water."

Saunders' ad stated that he had had the water analyzed, and had determined that it contained "Chalybeate and sulphur," and was believed by doctors to be "impregnated with a kind of salts and Magnesia."

The story of the Fountain of Health came to light again recently when Syd Houston Hailey, a retired civil engineer for the N.C.&St.L. Railway, began tracing his wife's family history. Mrs. Hailey, the former Mary Margaret Saunders, turned out to be a great-granddaughter of William Saunders Sr., owner of the Fountain of Health.

Much research has turned up old deeds, wills, family records referring to the property. Hailey is impressed with Saunders' salesmanship.

Saunders changed his rates at the Fountain of Health as it grew in popularity. In 1813, when the resort opened, he charged \$5 a week to board a man and his horse. Or, if a guest paid by the day, the charge was \$1.

Two years later, Saunders was pushing the Fountain of Health as a summer resort "situated in the most sociable neighborhood known in all the country—four miles East from the Clover Bottom, and 14 miles above the town of Nashville."

By that time, he had built "an excellent ice house" and had "safely deposited within its walls 1200 bushels of ice." That meant plenty of ice cream and iced drinks for guests. That same year, 1815, he added to the main building and the rows of guest

Ham Springs, about 10 mi E, had very effective medicinal water.





Word spread quickly throughout the South that the spring was a "fountain of universal medicine"

cottages around it "a very convenient and agreeable Summer dancing room."

\*\*\*

But the emphasis was still on restoring health. "There are but few diseases that flesh is heir to in which some relief has not been experienced," he advertised in Nashville newspapers.

By 1819, the Fountain of Health was booming and rates jumped to \$9 a week. The main road from Nashville to Lebanon—an old stagecoach road much traveled not only by local residents but by politicians on their way to Knoxville and Washington—was changed to go by the resort.

Sam A. Weakley, also a retired civil engineer and amateur historian, made a special project some 30 years ago of determining the exact course of the old road that was re-routed by the Fountain of Health. He says the road bed has been completely obliterated by lots in a subdivision east of the Hermitage now.

Saunders, in his ads, stated that the road that came to his door was "the best road from Nashville to Lebanon." He directed travelers from Nashville to turn off on it "at Cherry's, near Clover Bottom." Travelers from Lebanon were to turn "at the Eagle Tavern."

In 1824, a post office was established at the Fountain of Health, and mail from Washington to Andrew Jackson and his neighbors was addressed simply to the "Fountain of Health, Tenn."

\*\*\*

As neighbor and admirer of Andrew Jackson, Saunders named his youngest son for the general in 1823, long before he became President.

It may have been Saunders who introduced one of his most distinguished guests, Mrs. Henry Lee of Virginia, to Rachel and Andrew Jackson. At any rate, Mrs. Lee, one of the saddest figures in history, became Rachel's devoted friend while she was "taking the cure."

Mrs. Lee, an heiress who had entertained elegantly at the Lee mansion at Stratford, had lost family, fortune, home.

It all began when her only child, a two-year-old daughter, was killed in a fall down the tall stone steps of the family mansion. Mrs. Lee, unable to face the tragedy, had locked herself in her room and blocked the grief out with dope. For months, while the young mother so grieved, her 17-year-old sister,

Elizabeth, had an affair with Mrs. Lee's husband. The scandal rocked Virginia society when the girl had a child by her sister's husband.

The shock brought Mrs. Lee out of seclusion. She left Lee. They sold the house and the 3000-acre estate that had been in the Lee family for seven generations. The disgraced sister, Elizabeth, returned to other relatives to become a recluse. The sisters never had any contact with each other again.

\*\*\*

It was in 1820 that the Lee child had died, and about 1825 when the bereft Mrs. Lee—only 27 at the time—came to the Fountain of Health to cure herself of the dope habit. She soon met Rachel Jackson, and her kindness and encouragement—perhaps more than the medicinal waters at the resort—restored Ann McCarty Lee to a new hold on life.

Rachel and Andrew Jackson are credited with reuniting Ann Lee and her long estranged husband—by that time called "Black Horse Harry" Lee.

Lee, son of "Light Horse Harry" Lee, was a scholarly and distinguished man in Virginia life until scandal ruined him. But Jackson—well aware of the doors being slammed in Lee's face in Virginia—invited him to visit at the Hermitage. There the Jacksons brought the Lees together again, and their loyalty to each other through a singularly trying life became legend.

The Lees lived for a time at the Fountain of Health, and then rented a home about two-and-a-half miles from Nashville, on the road to the Hermitage. Lee stayed on as Jackson's secretary, writing many of his speeches and handling his correspondence during his campaign for the presidency.

The Lees were with Jackson at Rachel's funeral. They went with him to Washington and Lee continued as his secretary when Jackson was in the White House. Repeatedly Jackson risked the wrath of unforgiving Virginians when he tried—and finally succeeded—in getting Lee an appointment to a diplomatic post abroad.

\*\*\*

Meantime Saunders—apparently because of his excessive claims for the cure-all waters—had run into trouble. He stated in an ad in April, 1823, that he could understand why "uninformed" people would find the claims hard to believe. To prove his own confidence, he offered a guarantee: "No cure, no pay."

Saunders had been advertising his Fountain as cure for "ulcers of the liver, gonorrhea, jaundice—some of the most difficult diseases, which for many Centuries has baffled the skill in medicine." He issued thanks to the public for their patronage of "this extraordinary fountain of Medicinal Water, with its 'efficacious effect upon almost all the complaints that fall to the share of humanity.'"

Three years later, in an ad in *The Nashville Banner and Nashville Whig*, he was playing it cagey:

"I have made no preparations, nor ever shall again, to invite visitors to this Fountain," he stated on May 10, 1826, just as the summer season was about to open. "But I will never deny its benefit and a decent accommodation to the afflicted."

"Nor will I receive any compensation from any person unless the benefit is commensurate in any of the following diseases: all bowel complaints, affections of the liver, dyspepsia, rheumatism, ulcers, gonorrhea, wens, warts and tetters and for all irregularities incident to the delicate female."

\*\*\*

By 1832 he was identifying the location as next door to "the Hermitage, President Jackson's seat."

That year he advertised a new invention, the "water railway"—a system of ropes and pulleys by which water could be hauled from the spring at the foot of the hill to the resort quarters above—all in two minutes, "with the help of a little boy."

Saunders was still at the fountain when he died at age 70, in 1846—one year after his neighbor Jackson's death.

None of Saunders' four sons (three of them lawyers) or four daughters was interested in operating the place.

\*\*\*

In time, the earth presumably filled in the earthquake-born spring, and eventually tilled soil covered every trace of it.

The old house and all the cottages were torn away long before the memory of anyone living today, but some 30 years ago Sam Weakley found a few bricks from the foundation.

Out of the plowed field came an old rock biscuit block where biscuits were once beaten for guests at the Fountain of Health—a reminder of the night Nashville trembled "to the earth's centre." \*\*\*