

# MAGNETIC WATER TREAT WAS JUST A NINE DAY WONDER!

Lebanon's "famed" magnetic well and the hotel built nearby to attract tourists were a kind of "nine-day wonder" in the late 1800s.

The magnetic phenomena was first noticed in 1887 when a well was being drilled in the area now occupied by the Hughes Senior Center and Gasconade Park. At first, the magnetic properties were thought to be caused by the heavy steel and iron tools being used. Several months later, it was noticed that iron pipes in or near the well were highly magnetized, so much so that a compass in the vicinity of the well was affected. Within three feet of the well, the needle would point directly at the well from all directions.

Although this discovery excited local interest, no one claimed the magnetism had any medical applications. Nevertheless, invalids and "afflicted" persons tried bathing in water from the well and pronounced it curative.

Word of Lebanon's magical well spread quickly. Before bath houses and other accommodations could be built, visitors from other parts of the state began to arrive. In the first summer after it was drilled, the well was a mecca for thousands of hopeful invalids. Those who could not make the journey to Lebanon sent orders for bottles of the restorative water.

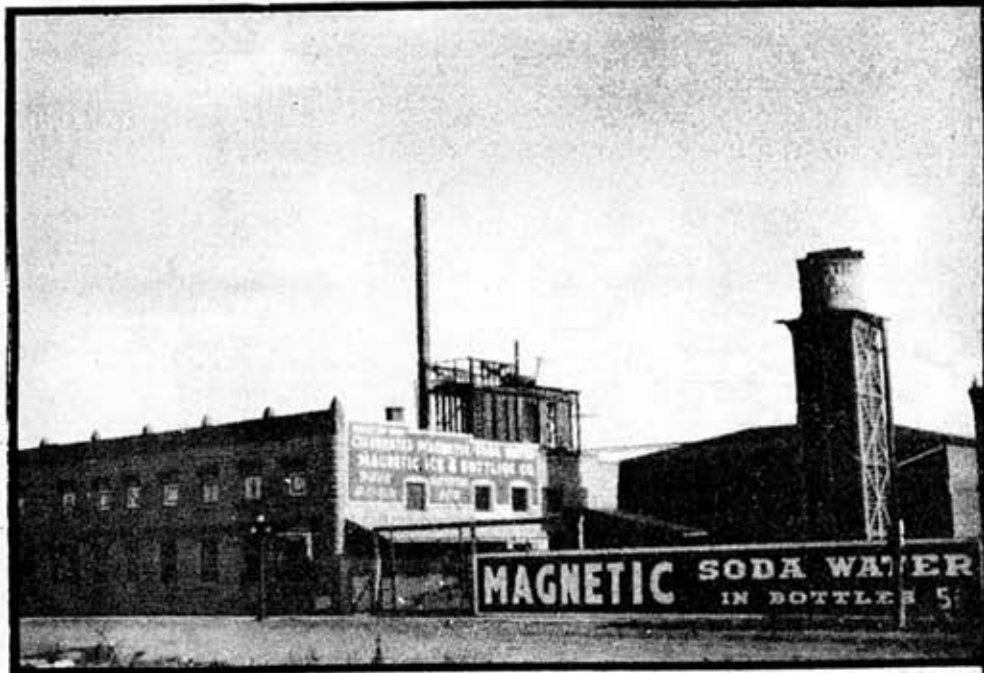
Analyzed by the chemistry division of the U.S. Geological Survey in June, 1888, water from the 1,000 ft. well was found to be very pure. An ad which appeared in the Laclede County Republican the following February noted that the magnetic water was recommended for: dyspepsia and other diseases arising from an excess of stomach acid, rheumatism, headaches, neuralgia, nervous debility, insomnia and "all diseases arising from a deranged action of the kidneys and urinary organs."

Testimonials to the curative properties of the water were, said the ad, available.

The magnetic well quickly became a distinct financial asset to the townspeople of Lebanon. A group of financiers from St. Louis focused their interest on the possibility of making Lebanon one of the country's famous "wat'ing" places. They formed a company and purchased the well and water rights from the Lebanon Light and Water Company, giving them an interest in the town's electrical and water plants.

Next on the list of the St. Louis backers was the construction of a grand hotel. The Gasconade, built in 1890, cost a remarkable-for-the-time sum of \$110,000. The building was 200 feet long and 50 feet wide with three stories and a basement.

The Gasconade Hotel had over 100 rooms and was said to be equipped as well as any modern hotel. Its main building housed a large gymnasium, an engine room



The Magnetic water bottling plant of Lebanon.

(Photo courtesy of Kirk Pearce)

and an ice house. The building was handsomely finished inside and elegantly furnished.

To make it easy for visitors to travel from the railroad station to the hotel, the company built tracks for an electric railway through town from the Frisco depot right up to the veranda of the Gasconade Hotel.

The luxurious bath house featured both male and female attendants who were trained to pamper their guests. A Rolla newspaper of the day noted, "It is a scientific institution for health and pleasure, located in a natural sanitary all-year resort".

Unfortunately, the fame of Lebanon's magnificent hotel and its healing waters was short lived. By 1893, only three years after the hotel was built, hotel management found it necessary to halt year-round operation. The hotel also went into receivership.

Although the Gasconade opened again in March, 1894, and stayed open for the season, it was not a profitable operation. By August of the following year, all of the property owned by the Lebanon Light and Water Company was offered at public sale to satisfy a mortgage of \$53,550.

The sale ended Lebanon's dream of being known as the site of a famous resort hotel. The hotel building saw a brief life as the Hamilton White College, a co-ed, non-sectarian institution of higher learning--including bookkeeping, shorthand, typing, elocution and

physical culture, music, drawing, and portrait painting in oils, water colors, pastels and on china.

The college was successful for several years, but closed its doors in August, 1898. Another was set to replace it, but before the dream could become reality, the hotel went up in flames on September 21, 1899.

The magnificent structure was the victim of a flue fire which started in the office fireplace. The fire spread to the roof through a crack in the chimney and the building was rapidly devoured by the flames as helpless Lebanon residents watched.

The fire did its destructive work so swiftly that few of the contents of the hotel could be saved. Most of the furniture, 4,000 books donated to the college by townspeople, other school paraphernalia and the private possessions of students were lost. There was no insurance on the building or its contents.

Lebanon residents quickly assembled at a meeting to discuss what they could do to keep the college in their town. Stirring speeches of appreciation and sympathy and resolution were made. College representatives were assured of the cooperation of townspeople if a plan could be made to keep the college in Lebanon.

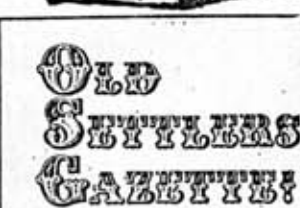
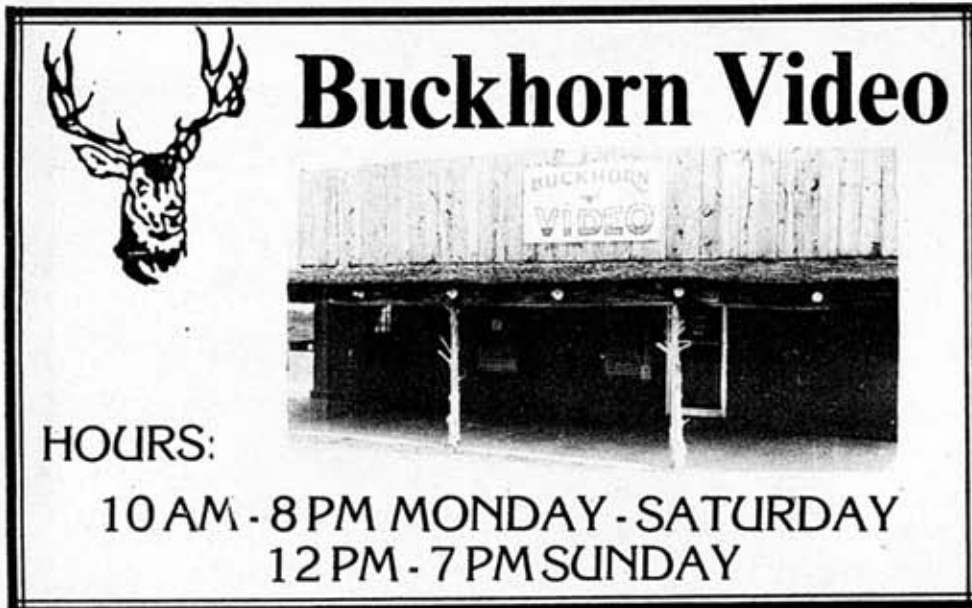
A campaign to raise money for building the new college got off to a brisk start. Within a week after the fire, 72 subscribers pledged a total of \$5,200 for construction. Two weeks

later, the donations had stopped with the building fund at only \$5,615. Not another cent was contributed.

The college was held for a time in temporary quarters, but interest soon died completely. With the burning of the old Gasconade Hotel, Lebanon's career as a college town ended almost as quickly as its hope of becoming a prosperous resort town.

(The preceding information was taken from "A History of Laclede County" written in 1926 by Leo Nyberg.)

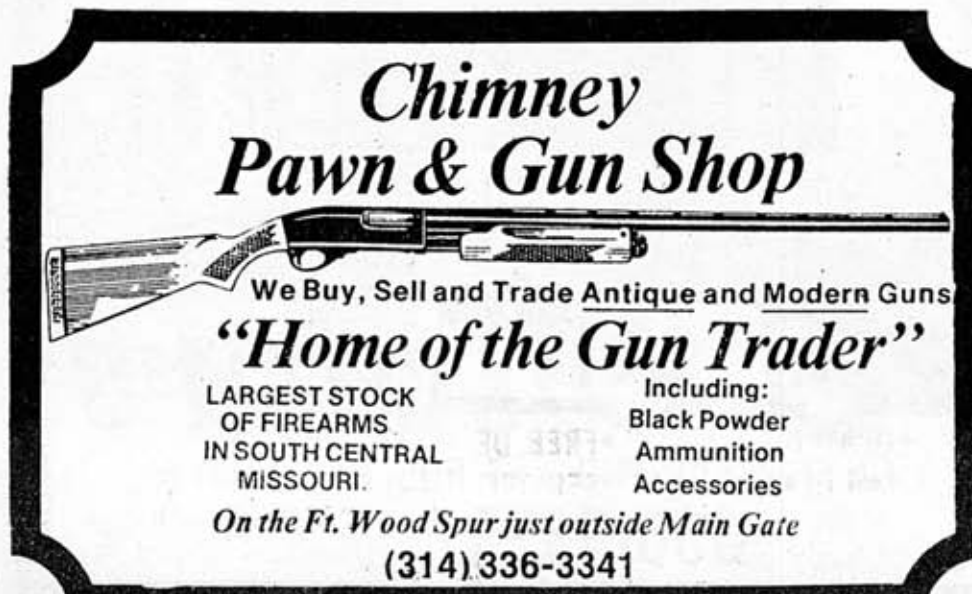
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