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Still awaiting its June coat of stain, the gazebo was renovated by Freed Construction in spring 2021. (Herald photo - Meiners)

Iconic Gazebo at St. Louis Library Receives Significant Upgrades

By William Meiners
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It's fitting that on the grounds of a library — a place filled with stories and rich histories — that an edifice would be erected to honor the origins of a place. That had been the original idea, back in 1999, when the board from the T. A. Cutler Memorial Library in St. Louis sought to build a gazebo that replicated one that stood as a well-house over the flowing mineral spring on the banks of the Pine River more than a century ago. Now, with more time marching on, the gazebo has received some much-needed renovations.

Over the last two decades the gazebo has become a meeting place for library reading groups and various organizations, a spot for senior pictures and wedding photographs, and even a Geocache site. In recent times, in spite of some periodic touchups over the years, a leaking roof made the hangout inaccessible to the community. Originally made entirely of cedar, the gazebo needed to better withstand the elements, said library director Jessica Little. Now, new shingles on the roof made to look like cedar, will allow spring, summer, and fall gatherings, both formal and informal, to continue. And the refurbished structure will better withstand the harsh Michigan winters.

There are no plans for any grand reopening, but Little reported people gathering there a day after the scaffolding came down. After the weather warms a bit, they'll put a stain on it in June, making the whole thing look better than new.

Miraculous, healing water

The story goes that on a summer day in 1869, George Helmer, a traveling salesman, submerged his severely arthritic hand and wrist into the newfound mineral waters of St. Louis for four full minutes. Upon withdrawing his hand from the 50-degree water, he was amazed, as were his colleagues, to reveal that he could suddenly unfurl his fingers and flex his wrist. He was pain free for the first time in years.

The late David McMacken, a Gratiot County historian and teacher, detailed how that surprising reaction would forever change the town. In his book, "The Saratoga of the West: The Story of The Magnetic Mineral Springs and Park Hotel of St. Louis, Michigan," McMacken writes, "The discovery had been made. The water was

not merely water, but a miraculous, healing water. It was water that would push the small, backwoods settlement of St. Louis, Michigan, into the national limelight within months. Not only was the reaction immediate, but the discovery of this wonderful water would have a significant effect on the town for more than a century."

In addition to what seemed to be an accidental discovery of a natural painkiller, the water displayed some other traits, such as magnetic qualities. "A knife blade held against the well pipe would become a magnet capable of lifting screws, needles, and watch keys," McMacken writes. "This amazed St. Louis folks, but some other mineral wells in the state were claiming to be magnetic as well."

McMacken rediscovered the crowds that quickly made their way to St. Louis now 150 years ago. Many braved treacherous stage-coach rides — from Saginaw to the east and St. John's to the south — to drink from and bathe in the miracle springs they heard about. Certainly, good news traveled fast even back then. From backwoods to boomtown, the town's existing hotels soon "overflowed with patrons," requiring additions to be built.

People who had the resources to make money off the springs threw their irons into the fire. "Elias Smith turned his new home into a boarding house and added a sizable addition to hold up to thirty guests," McMacken writes. "He named it the St. Louis Magnetic Springs House, and it became the aristocratic boarding house in the village."

What spawned the crowds, of course, was the promise of a natural cure — for most anything. From Helmer's "loosened fingers" to an "old paralytic" in town who began showing signs of recovery after regularly ingesting and bathing in the water. The news, like wildfire, spread throughout the country.

Of the hotels, one stood out in particular. "The new hotel opened in September 1881," McMacken writes. "Called the Sanatorium, it was officially known as the Magnetic Springs Hotel. Since it adjoined the pleasant-landscaped approach to the bath house, it soon was known as the Park Hotel or the Park House."

St. Louis became a destination for people seeking relief from a variety of ailments — from cancer to kidney stones — as well as a pampered getaway for the rich, powerful, and famous.

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From: You Asked for it . . . (1980)

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The Bath House of the Park Hotel, shown here in 1870, offered reception rooms and facilities to provide 500 baths a day.

Among that latter group to stay in the Elias House was Allan Pinkerton, General Joe Hooker, and Chief Justice Salmon Portland Chase. Though it remained a place where most anyone could come to test the waters.

Sadly, heydays don't last forever, and the mineral-spring attraction of St. Louis eventually ran its course. With the advance of modern medicine, mineral water would not be considered a "cure all" for too long. And perhaps the appeal for a healthy infusion getaway faded away. McMacken writes, "By 1960, however, signs were clear that the eating and traveling habits of Americans were undergoing some major changes. Motels, air travel, growing numbers of restaurants, and the interstate highway system sounded the death knell for the old hotels and their dining rooms."

Within a decade, the famed Park Hotel, by then closed and at one point infested with rats, had its furnishings auctioned off. Soon after, that grand old hotel would be razed.

Historical significance

In 1999, Pam Carberry, then the library director, wanted to have a gazebo built on the grounds. She told the Herald on April 22 of that year, "We talked about doing it, but I hadn't come across a design that I really liked. I wanted something different. Then City Manager Dennis Collison showed me an old postcard with a picture of the gazebo that used to be at the mineral springs. I knew that was it."

Dick Gibson, a master craftsman, took on the task, challenged by the many angles of the original gabled well house he had to replicate. Later that spring, alongside the landscaping that would lend itself to such a photographic setting, the gazebo became that historic link to St. Louis past.

Fast forward 21 years and even the nod to history called for an upgrade. Freed Construction did the work this time. What stands today in full repair should look even better with the new stain and the summertime flowers just around the corner.

For Little, who joined the library staff in 2003 and became director in 2008, the gazebo has always been outside her work window. "I was involved with the repairs along the way," she said. "I also learned some of the history through David McMacken, who was president of the Library Board for years."

To others, many of whom have passed on themselves, the cultural significance cannot be overstated. McMacken, who died in 2019, seemingly left the reminder by writing, "Over the years St. Louis became the destination of thousands seeking physical healing, rest, and relaxation. When the baths faded in popularity, the famed duckling dinners drew diners by the hundreds. The Magnetic Mineral Springs and Park Hotel are the cornerstone of St. Louis' history. It is a story that deserves to be remembered."