



## 'The Hot Lake Story'

Written by Dick Mason, The Observer August 02, 2008 12:51 pm



Smoke billows from the fire at Hot Lake Sanatorium on May 7, 1934. - Photo from "The Hot Lake Story"

He was as skilled as he was compassionate, a physician as flamboyant as he was determined to bring cutting edge medical care to his patients at Hot Lake Sanatorium.

He was Dr. William T. Phy, a physician who died in 1931 yet remains, in the eyes of many, the face of Hot Lake. A man whose tale is among those featured in a new book by Richard R. Roth — "The Hot Lake Story: An Illustrated History from Pre-discovery to 1974."

The 462-page book, which is almost coffee table in size, has more than 300 photos and covers aspects of Hot Lake's history not addressed in earlier books. This includes a detailed, objective look at Phy's story.

"He was an extraordinary individual but not infallible," said Roth, who grew up at Hot Lake and now resides in Orting, Wash.

Phy served as a physician at Hot Lake Sanatorium from 1901 to 1910 and from 1917 until his death. He made an indelible mark during his 23 years there.

"Almost everyone you speak with who knows Hot Lake history identifies Hot Lake with Dr. W.T. Phy first," Roth wrote.

The author quotes Walter Pierce, Oregon's governor from 1923 to 1927 and a man who played a major role in financing Hot Lake Sanatorium, to make his point.

"Ninety percent of the people came to the Lake because of his (Phy's) skills and magnetic personality. He was Hot Lake," Pierce said.

Physicians who worked with Phy at Hot Lake included Dr. Nathan Edward McAlister. He practiced under Phy for several years between 1919 to 1925. McAlister once described Phy as a surgeon so skilled that he "seems to have eyes in the ends of his fingers."

Phy was confident of his skills and enjoyed displaying them. He had a separate seating area with an observation window overlooking the operating room.

"The surgery room was his theater. His adoring audience could look through the observation window and marvel at his surgical abilities," Roth writes.

Phy's flamboyant nature was also evident by his mode of transportation. Phy, in 1908, purchased a \$4,600 6-cylinder Franklin. At the time there were only 17 cars in La Grande and 34 in Union County.

"He delighted in driving the most expensive auto in Union County," Roth said.

Phy also prided himself on having the most complete and up to date medical reference library possible.

"For a physician in rural Oregon, the number of texts in his library, covering treatment of disease, surgical care, etc., would rival that of any professor teaching in a hospital of the day," Roth wrote.

Phy believed in treating people regardless of their ability to pay. Roth found no documented evidence of a patient needing medical treatment at Hot Lake being turned away due to an inability to pay.

"This says a great deal about the time and age in American history. It also says a great deal about the man, Dr. W.T. Phy," Roth wrote.



**One myth Roth dispels** in his book is that Phy had connections to the Mayo Clinic of Rochester, Minn., and knew its founders, Dr. William W. Mayo and his sons, Dr. William T. Mayo and Dr. Charles Mayo. Roth said he found no affiliation, professional or social, between Phy and the Mayo family. Records also indicate that Phy never studied at the Mayo Clinic or worked there.

"Apparently the rumor and legend of an association between Phy and the Mayo brothers is



A group of employees pose with a patient at Hot Lake around 1910. The photo was taken when the site was known as the Hot Lake Springs Co. - Photo from "The Hot Lake Story," obtained courtesy of Helen Mae Phifer

unfounded," wrote Roth.

Roth attributes the Mayo Clinic connection rumor to a series of articles in the Oregon Journal in 1919 about Hot Lake. The writer of the series said, "The time is approaching when the fame of Hot Lake will be as well known to those in the West who need surgical attention as Rochester, Minn., is today through the work done by Mayo brothers."

Roth believes Phy may have let the Mayo rumors linger because he so enjoyed positive publicity and promoting himself.

The author learned of Phy's background and many other aspects of Hot Lake's history through extensive research, which is reflected in his book's bibliography, which has more than 600 footnoted references.

The book, though, is also filled with the author's first-person accounts of aspects of Hot Lake's history. Roth is able to provide these because he grew up at Hot Lake. His parents, A.J. and Fern (Jennings) Roth, purchased Hot Lake in 1942. A.J. had a doctorate in public health from the University of Michigan, and Fern was a graduate of what is today Eastern Michigan University. A.J. Roth was a professor of bacteriology at what is now Washington State University before he and his wife moved to Hot Lake.

The author, then just 3 months old, would live at Hot Lake the next 32 years and help manage it for a portion of this time.

The Roths ran Hot Lake as a resort-hotel-spa from 1942 to about 1952. The family moved out of the resort business after this time because of the development of the national freeway system. This meant that the main highway passing through Union County, which had gone past Hot Lake for decades, now passed through Ladd Canyon instead. The reduced traffic flow meant that the Roth family no longer could rely on overnight guests as their central revenue source. Offerings at Hot Lake were thus expanded to include assisted care for the elderly and a resident hotel for the retired and semi-retired.

Roth wrote that one of the attractions at Hot Lake in the 1950s was a black bear his family purchased in 1954 in Joseph. The bear was kept in a cage on the small lawn in front of the main building. The bear escaped in 1956 or 1957, and for a while nobody knew where it was. A minister staying at Hot Lake found the bear in the back of the main building. He got an ear of corn and led the bear back to its cage.

"Everybody thought it was a foolish gesture since he (the minister) could have been seriously injured," Roth wrote.

The bear was later shot and replaced by a raccoon, one which never escaped, the author said.

Roth began helping his parents with work at Hot Lake around 1950. He later attended EOU and then the University of Oregon where he earned an undergraduate degree in history and a master's degree in labor and industrial relations. Roth also earned master of public health degree in health administration and public policy from the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center in Oklahoma City and an MBA from Oklahoma City University.

**Hot Lake was** in poor condition when the Roths purchased it in 1942, worse than they realized. This is one of many reasons why operating Hot Lake proved to be very hard on the family.

"The long hours spent checking in late-night guests, getting up early to prepare meals, repairing broken water pipes took a toll."



A woman wears a "classic period" hat in this photo that depicts the Hot Lake Sanatorium in 1906 during the construction of its brick addition. - Photo from "The Hot Lake Story," obtained courtesy of Fred Hill

He said that as a result the family never took an extended vacation together during the 32 years it owned Hot Lake.

"The best the family could hope for was an occasional overnight trip to Anthony Lake."

Roth noted that his family moved to Hot Lake on Labor Day of 1942.

"My mom often said this was fitting because 'We have been laboring ever since.' "

Roth said he wrote the book because of his longtime intrigue with Hot Lake.

"Growing up at Hot Lake, I was fascinated by the early day hospital equipment and farm machinery, looking through former patient records and wondering what the area must have been like prior to the arrival of the white man," Roth said.

His intrigue was piqued further when Indian arrowheads were found in the Hot Lake mud and in other places on the property. This inspired him to begin collecting Hot Lake memorabilia, including postcards, brochures and photos when he was in junior high school.

Many photos of this memorabilia are in the book.

These items and memories of his family at Hot Lake and the many fascinating people who visited there give Roth reason to enjoy reminiscing about his youth.

“It was a fantastic place to grow up.”

“The Hot Lake Story,” published by Heritage Quest, is available in La Grande at Earth ‘n’ Book, the Mitre’s Touch Gallery and Sunflower Books.



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