
The Cave and Basin Hot Springs

By David Smyth

THE CENTENNIAL OF CANADA'S national parks is being celebrated in 1985 and a large part of these celebrations will be centred on the Cave and Basin Hot Springs in Banff National Park. Known as 'The Birthplace of Canada's National Parks', the Cave and Basin have undergone a multi-million dollar facelift over the last four years. The magnificent 1914 bathhouse and pool have been rehabilitated. The Basin pool, altered and enlarged over the years, has been returned to its nineteenth-century state, while bordering it a replica of the 1887 bathhouse with its 1903 renovations has been constructed. All this was done to restore a site which once drew thousands of bathers each year (but which by the mid-1970s had become somewhat derelict), and to provide an interpretive centre in which the history and present state of Parks Canada can be told.

The Cave and Basin are located in Banff National Park on the north side of Sulphur Mountain, just across the Bow River from the town of Banff. The mountain is permeated with hot springs which emit hot sulphurous mineral water from numerous places. Two of the major hot springs are those at the Cave and Basin. Though changed greatly since their development by Parks Canada and its predecessors, the following is a description of these springs by J.M. Gordon, a Dominion Lands Agent from Calgary, who visited the site prior to any man-made alterations having been made:

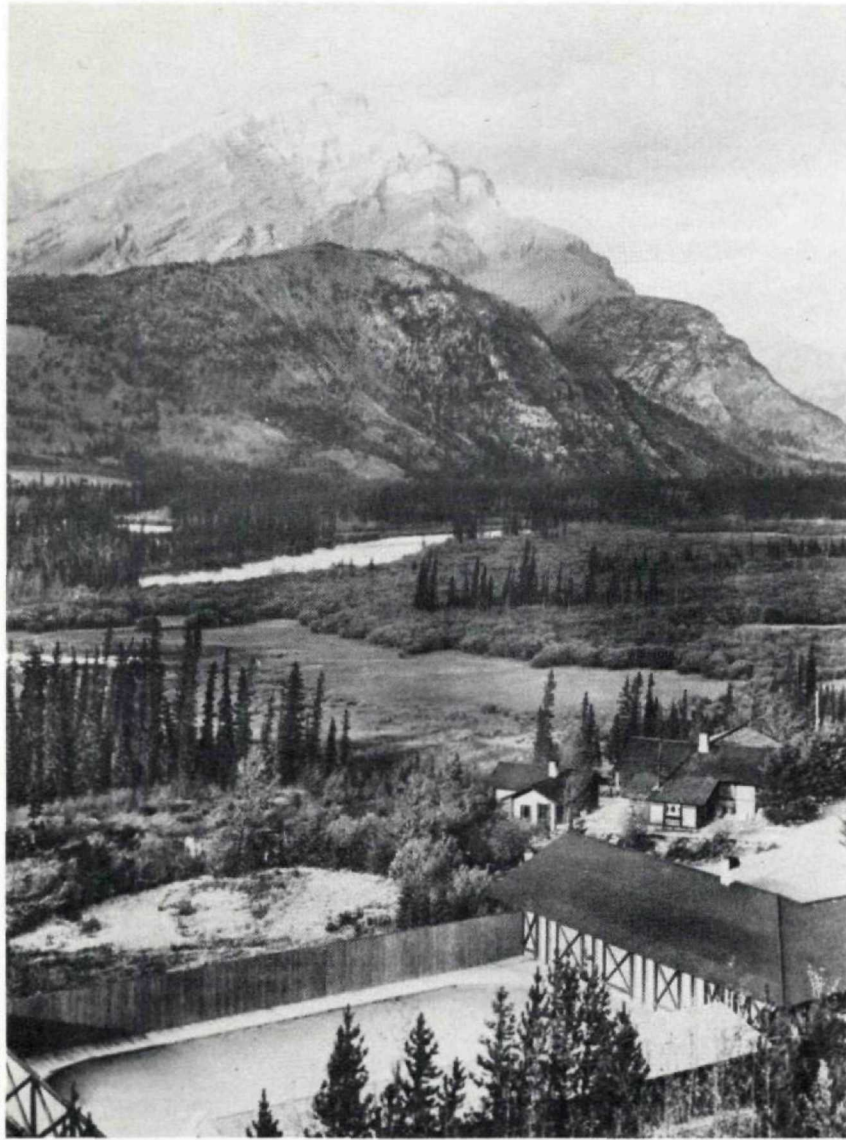
The Springs are two in number and they are only separated from each other by a wall of rock. One of them is in the open air and flows into a basin about 15 feet in diameter. The other is enclosed in a cave and is reached by ascending about 40 feet up the face of the hill and then descending about 45 feet through a small hole. The water flowing from this is caught in the basin between 25 and 30 feet in diameter and having a depth of about 3½ feet. The water in both springs is very strongly impregnated with sulphur — the outer one being the stronger. The temperature of the water is I should think about 90 degrees [F].

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In winter the steam rising from the spring was visible for a considerable distance.

The Stoney and other Indian inhabitants of this region were certainly aware of the hot springs long before white men entered the area. Sir James Hector of the Palliser Expedition first noted the presence of hot springs in this vicinity in 1859 and the Reverend John McDougall was probably aware of them as early as 1863. It was not, however, until the 'discovery' of the Cave and Basin springs in November 1883 by Frank McCabe and William and Thomas McCardell that the existence of the hot springs became widely known. McCabe and the McCardells were workmen employed in the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway. Shortly after the discovery, the three built a small cabin by the Cave, which they frequented that winter. News of the springs spread rapidly among their fellow workers and many visited the site. The Upper Hot Springs, located farther up Sulphur Mountain and issuing hotter water, were found in 1884 by railway workers. By 1885 several of them, including Theodore Sebring, George Whitman and Frank McCabe, had also erected cabins there. No claims to title to the springs or to any land about them were made by any of these men until early 1885. In March of that year Frank McCabe wrote to the Minister of the Interior and applied for title to this land on behalf of himself, the McCardells, Archie McNeil and C.W.H. Sansom. This would not be the last such letter claiming title by right of discovery but it was the first step towards government involvement with the hot springs.

The Department of the Interior replied to the claimants' letters and in June 1885 sent J.M. Gordon from Calgary to inspect the sites in question. That summer and fall there followed a flurry of activity regarding the Banff hot springs. Legal wranglings arose over the sale of all or part of McCabe's and the McCardells' claims of right of first discovery. More private development by enterprising entrepreneurs occurred as many were quick to exploit the commercial potential of these reputedly health-giving waters. And the waters were touted as having wonderful curative properties; everything from rheumatism, blood diseases and syphilis supposedly succumbed to their power. In the fall of 1885 Doctor George T. Orton of Calgary, a former



In the summer of 1985 the famous Cave and Basin Hot Springs at Banff will reopen to the public, after nine years and a multi-million dollar facelift.

The Basin pool in the early 1900s, with the 1887 bathhouse built in the 'Swiss style', as it appeared after the 1903 renovations. The two smaller buildings are the caretakers' quarters.

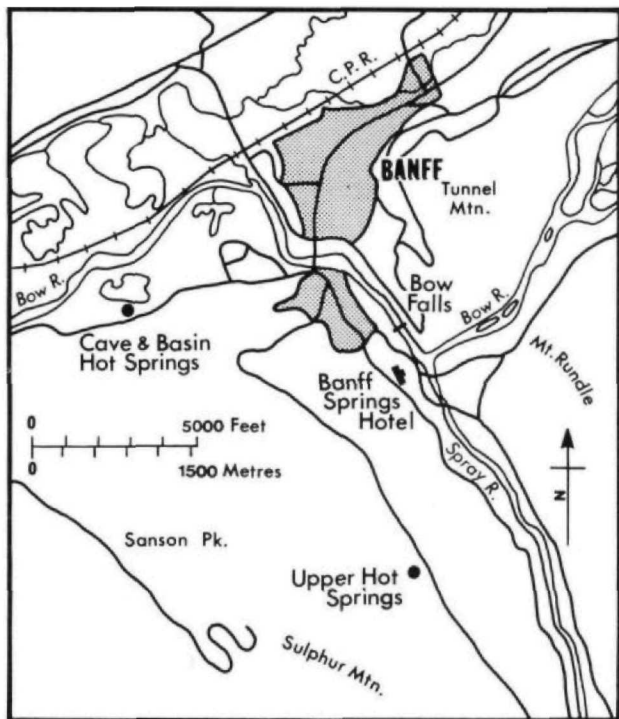
Member of Parliament, wrote to Deputy Minister Alex M. Burgess stating that he had already sent patients to 'take the waters' at Banff. He extolled the virtues of the hot springs and the magnificent mountains and concluded by saying, 'My opinion is with yours', that the springs should be claimed by the government. Obviously Burgess, the highest ranking civil servant in the Department of the Interior, was already in favour of the government's withholding the hot springs from private ownership.

This concept of public reservation of natural or scenic resources for preservation or control of development by the government was definitely a radical departure in Canada. Its origins were in the example of the United States; it was nurtured by the Canadian Pacific Railway. The United States had led the world in the public setting aside of natural resources for preservation and enjoyment of future generations. In 1832 the federal government there had created the Arkansas Hot Springs Reserve. In 1864 it had given the Yosemite

Valley and Mariposa Grove of Big Trees to the State of California to be held for public use and recreation. Finally, in 1872, the Congress of the United States passed legislation creating Yellowstone National Park, the first such park in the world. Australia soon followed suit with the creation of Royal National Park in 1879.

With these examples before them it was not long afterwards that officers of the Canadian Pacific Railway, upon seeing the awesome beauty of the Rockies and other western mountain chains, recommended a like practice in Canada. In 1883 Sir Sandford Fleming suggested the setting aside of one or more national parks in the Rockies. That same year a national park reserve at Lac des Arcs was suggested by Sir William Van Horne, who envisioned a private villa on an island in the middle of the lake. Van Horne's and the CPR's support of the idea of national parks was not completely altruistic, for the expectation was that tourists would flock to these proposed parks — riding CPR

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trains, eating at CPR restaurants and staying at CPR hotels. By the summer of 1885, amid more claims to right of first discovery of the Upper Hot Springs and the Cave and Basin Hot Springs, the CPR was actively urging the Department of the Interior to take control of the hot springs at Banff, as had the Government of the United States in the case of the Arkansas Hot Springs.

Support for reservation of the springs was growing on all sides by that fall. Members of Parliament who had earlier visited Banff over the new CPR line were in favour of reservation, as was Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald himself. Within the Department of the Interior, Burgess was ardently supported by William Pearce, the Superintendent of Mines and an early advocate of the national park concept. After visiting the hot springs in September 1885, Pearce used all of his considerable influence to have the area set aside. As a necessary first step prior to reservation the Department had the four sections surrounding the springs surveyed in late September and early October. Thomas White, the newly appointed Minister of the Interior, visited Banff in October 1885 on a trip through the West. Shortly thereafter from Calgary he instructed Burgess to prepare a recommendation for the Privy Council to reserve sections of land about the hot springs, the boundaries to be those outlined by Pearce in an earlier memorandum to White.

On 25 November 1885, Order in Council No. 2197 received approval, reserving for future park use an area of about 10 square miles on the north slope of

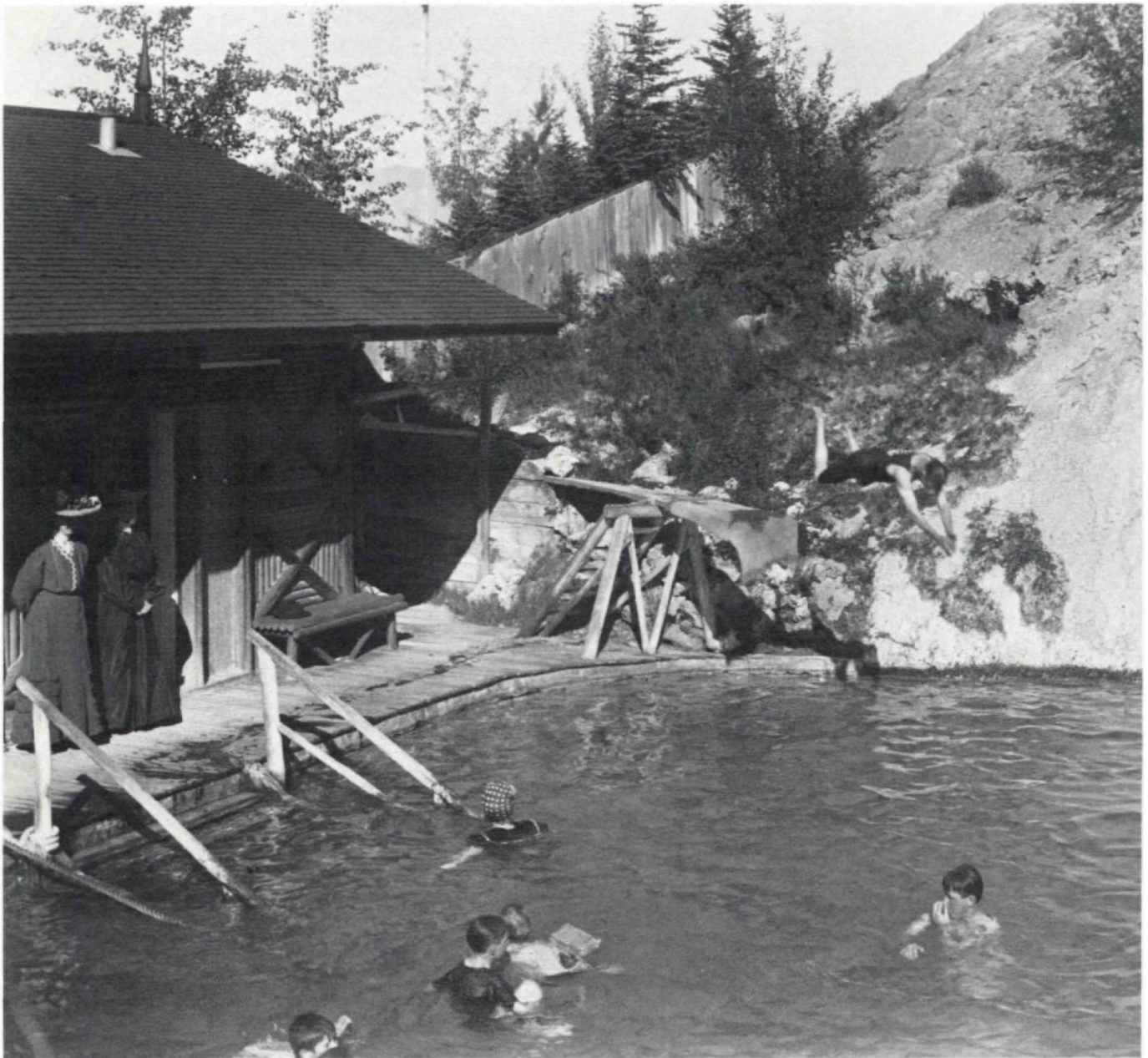
Sulphur Mountain. The hot springs were the reason for creating this, Canada's first park reserve. The Order in Council read in part:

... there have been discovered several hot mineral springs which promise to be of great sanitary advantage to the public, and in order that proper control of the lands surrounding these springs may be vested in the Crown, the said lands in the territory including said springs and in their immediate neighbourhood, be and they are hereby reserved from sale or settlement or squatting.

The reserve included the Cave and Basin, the Upper Hot Springs, others known as the Middle Springs and virtually all the area where numerous smaller outlets of hot sulphur water were located. The Cave and Basin and the Upper Hot Springs had already undergone some private development by the early discoverers, and several latecomers as well. The only other major springs in the area, the Middle Springs, briefly in this century had their water diverted to a fish hatchery but have not since been developed.

Following the November 1885 reservation of the hot springs area the government was faced with the problem of what to do with those individuals who claimed rights to the springs by reason of discovery or those who had spent money making improvements there in expectation of return on their investment. Among those in the latter category was D.B. Woodworth, a politician from Nova Scotia who claimed to have purchased McCabe's and the McCardells' rights in the springs and also claimed to have spent more than \$4,000 in developing them. Woodworth sought compensation from the Department of the Interior. The Minister replied that the federal government did not 'recognize any right of discovery in connection with the hot springs at Banff'. Under constant pressure from Woodworth and other claimants, White relented. It was decided that some form of compensation should be made to those who had spent money in building facilities at the springs.

William Pearce, the federal officer most conversant with the problem, was chosen to head the claims inquiry which was held at Banff in July 1886. Depositions were read and testimony was heard from 14 different witnesses, all claiming either financial remuneration or simply recognition as first discoverer. The Department accepted Pearce's recommendations and awarded compensation to four men: David Keefe, Frank McCabe, William McCardell and D.B. Woodworth. Pearce did not confer the title of first discoverer on any one person. Yet from the evidence presented at the inquiry it seems that Willard B. Younge, from Ohio, was the first white man whose discovery of the Cave and Basin was documented; he had built a shack and lived at the site during the winter of 1875-1876. David



The Basin bathhouse and pool, c. 1900.

Keefe may have been the first white man to discover the Upper Hot Springs, in 1884, but certainly, whether the original discoverers or not, Keefe, McCabe and the McCardells deserve recognition for bringing the springs to the attention of the world at large for the first time.

Interest in the establishment of more mountain park reserves quickly grew in many sectors: the general public, both sides of the House of Commons, the Department of the Interior and, not least of all, the CPR. There was close co-operation between the government and the CPR both in the fostering of the national park concept and in the actual selection of

potential park locations. It was not just a case of wanting the heavily government-subsidized railway to flourish. The CPR seemed to be virtually the only practical means of access to these newly opened up regions. In early 1886, in response to outside pressure for the creation of more park reserves Pearce recommended several possible sites to White, who then forwarded the information to the CPR. Railway officials were generally favourable to Pearce's recommendations but advised that one of its officers would soon be travelling in the region and could perhaps make further suggestions. Later that year the Minister accepted the CPR's suggested locations and



Main pool at the Cave and Basin Springs, 1941.

by an Order in Council of 10 October 1886 four more mountain park reserves were set aside. Though two of these reserves were later deemed inappropriate for parks and were abolished, the remaining two formed the nuclei of what were to become Yoho and Glacier national parks.

By 1887 a great deal of private and public development had taken place at Banff. George A. Stewart, a Dominion Land Surveyor, had been appointed in early 1886 to conduct a full legal survey of the Banff reserve. By the end of that year not only had he been ordered to extend his surveys to include an area of about 260 square miles but he was put in charge of the planning and supervision of the development of the park reserve. He was formally appointed its first superintendent on 1 January 1887. Under his direction roads were installed, improvements and enlargements were made to the natural bathing areas at the Cave and Basin, two government bathhouses, with change rooms for both men and women, were erected there and a tunnel was blasted through to the Cave to allow easier visitor access. Already, or soon to be, completed in the vicinity were private bathhouses and hotels at the Upper Hot Springs, the CPR's Banff Springs Hotel, a major sanitarium and many smaller private establishments.



Parks Canada

Architect's drawing of the renovated pool, stone bathhouse and belvederes, originally constructed in 1912-14. The 1887-1903 Basin pool and building (not visible in this drawing) have also been recreated.

The waters for these privately owned operations were all supplied from the Upper Hot Springs. The water at this site was hotter than that at the Cave and Basin and it was also believed to have greater curative properties. Throughout their early history the Cave and Basin attracted more recreationally inclined bathers, while the Upper Hot Springs drew a higher percentage of those 'taking the waters' for their therapeutic value.

Thomas White set the legislative wheels in motion in early 1887 to establish the Banff reserve as Canada's first national park, and only the third such park in the world. Using the Yellowstone National Park Act as a model, William Pearce drew up the first draft of what came to be known as the Rocky Mountains Park Act. White introduced the bill in the House of Commons on 22 April 1887 and it was vigorously debated on 29 April and 3 May. There was almost no opposition to the idea of creating a national park. John V. Ellis, the newly elected Liberal M.P. from St John City (N.B.), did state 'I think that the whole plan of this measure is very objectionable. I do not think that the country wants such a park, or that it is able to pay for it.' He represented a small minority. The vast majority of the House was in favour of the park. The debate centred on three areas: the 'impropriety' of expenditures already made without the consent of the House, the extent of political patronage possible under the discretionary powers given to the Minister of the Interior, and the question of future expenditures related to the park. Sir John A. Macdonald extolled its benefits, not only as a health resort but as a potential financial boon to, not drain on, government coffers. He stated,

I do not suppose in any portion of the world there can be found a spot, taken altogether, which combines so many attractions and which promises in as great a degree not only large pecuniary advantage to the Dominion, but much prestige to the whole country by attracting the population, not only on this continent, but of Europe to this place. It has all the qualifications necessary to make it a great place of resort.

The bill received third and final reading on 6 May and on 23 June 1887 royal assent was given to 'An Act Respecting the Rocky Mountains Park of Canada'. The park was renamed Banff National Park in 1930.

The Act stated that the area was 'hereby reserved and set apart as a public park and pleasure ground for the benefit, advantage and enjoyment of the people of Canada.' In less than two years the original reserve of 10 square miles, encompassing little more than the hot springs, had become Canada's first national park and covered an area of 260 square miles. During this time four other park reserves, already noted, had been set aside. With public support and persistent, far-

sighted government officials such as William Pearce and later the Minister of the Interior, Thomas M. Daly, the more than somewhat disorganized and under-financed national park and park reserve 'system' grew by the early 1900s to include, besides those reserves already mentioned, the beginnings of Waterton and Jasper parks and the addition of Lake Louise to an enlarged Rocky Mountains Park. Today there are 31 natural parks under Parks Canada control, stretching from Pacific Rim to Terra Nova, Pointe Pelee to Auyuittuq, and some 80 national historic parks and major sites. Thus, though the establishment of the first reserves and parks was done more from a desire to create tourist and health resorts in the newly accessible mountain ranges of the West than to preserve the natural wilderness heritage of Canada, the entire national park system, which now conserves more wilderness area than any other national park system in the world, grew from the original hot springs reserve at Banff.

Over the years a great deal has changed at the Banff hot springs. A government bathhouse, in the 'Swiss style', was built at each of the Cave and Basin pools in 1887 and these were greatly expanded and renovated in 1903. The following year, a new pool was excavated there to accommodate an ever increasing number of bathers. In 1905 a government bathhouse was opened at the Upper Hot Springs, after fire had destroyed the principal privately operated facilities. Visitor demand continued to grow. In 1912-1914 an imposing new stone bathhouse and outdoor pool, the latter then the largest in Canada, were built at the Cave and Basin, replacing the existing Cave bathhouse. They were the design of Walter S. Painter, a former chief architect of the CPR. By the 1930s the facilities at both locations were proving inadequate to meet the needs of the visiting public. The government erected a new bathhouse at the Upper Hot Springs in 1932. Three years later the rustic wooden 1887-1903 bathhouse at the Basin was torn down and replaced with a new stone and wood structure. By the 1970s the Cave and Basin site had deteriorated greatly, due both to the action of the hot sulphur water and the sinking of the buildings' foundations into the porous tufa rock upon which they had been erected. By 1976 the Cave and Basin were closed to the public.

This summer the Cave and Basin Hot Springs will officially reopen with the 1914 bathhouse and pool renovated and the 1887-1903 Basin building recreated. Bathers once again will be able to enjoy the pleasure of swimming in the naturally heated outdoor pool. The centennial of Canada's national parks is being celebrated across the system but its focus appropriately is at Banff. Though its title really ought to be shared with the Upper Hot Springs, 'The Birthplace of Canada's National Parks' is not a misnomer when applied to the Cave and Basin Hot Springs. ♦