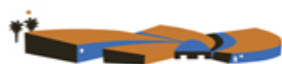


# DREAM of BLUE the FROG



*Wahinatukisnikie Tetayaw*



AGUA CALIENTE CULTURAL MUSEUM

# DREAM of BLUE the FROG

## **Abstract**

Both the Agua Caliente Band and the City of Palm Springs derive their names from the famous Agua Caliente Hot Spring. Cahuilla oral literature tells of the Spring's creation in the beginning by a powerful elder who created it as a perpetually-enduring place to heal.



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## Introduction

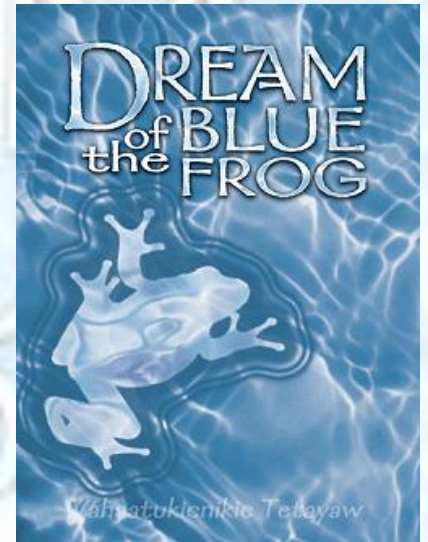
Both the Agua Caliente Band and the City of Palm Springs derive their names from the famous Agua Caliente Hot Spring. Cahuilla oral literature tells of the Spring's creation in the beginning by a powerful elder who created it as a perpetually-enduring place to heal.

According to *Stories & Legends of the Palm Springs Indians* by Francisco Patencio, the first Cahuilla Indians to live in the area dared not live near the Hot Spring because they were afraid of it. In the same way a stranger is treated with a cautious sense of distance, the Hot Spring was considered a sentient and unfamiliar entity. The Kausik community's eventual settlement at the Hot Spring happened only gradually.

Although the people came to bathe in its warm mineral waters, the Hot Spring was treated with the respect of a living being. If its waters were to be utilized or disturbed in any way, food and prayers were offered to the Hot Spring within the *kishumna'a*, or ceremonial house. By doing so, the Hot Spring could be made use of without any harm happening to community members.

Bathing in the Hot Spring eventually played a central feature in traditional life. As instructed by Menil, the Cahuilla Moon Maiden, bathing once in the morning and once towards evening was practiced. Hygiene was particularly important to hunters. The absence of a hunter's scent would allow them to get closer to their prey without being detected. The Hot Spring's palatable waters were also important for irrigation and consumption.

Mirroring the interconnected nature of Cahuilla communities reliant on one another for the reciprocal exchange of food and other goods, hot springs throughout the region were believed to be connected underground. The discovery of rotted ears of green corn found in the Spring — crops planted in other locations where hot springs existed — represented hard proof of this. Cahuilla shamans, such as Pedro Chino, likewise utilized these subterranean channels in order to consult with the *nukatem*, or sacred beings, dwelling there. The knowledge they obtained would be utilized to cure the sick.



"A giant frog, blue in color, lived in the spring, with eyes big as a bull's, a body over a foot across, and weighing something near a hundred pounds." - Francisco Patencio, *Stories & Legends of the Palm Springs Indians*, 1943

## Strangers at the Hot Spring

A Cahuilla community located adjacent to a Hot Spring was vividly described by land surveyors in 1853 while exploring the region in preparation for the construction of the Southern Pacific Railroad:

*“After traveling about seven and a half miles over these long and barren slopes, we saw a green spot in the distance, and soon came to two large springs of water rising in the bare plain, not far from the foot of the mountains.”*

*“One of these springs is warm, and forms a pool nearly thirty feet in diameter, and three to four feet deep. The cold spring is not quite so large, and is only ten feet distant from the other.”*

*“This place was evidently a favorite camping-ground for Indians. When we arrived, many Indian boys and girls were bathing in the warm spring, and a group of [women] were engaged in cooking a meal...”*

Among the Hot Spring’s powerful properties were its curative waters -- a trait that quickly became known to the outside world. Stagecoaches, followed by the Southern Pacific Railroad, began bringing tourists to the Hot Spring where they might be cured of their ailments.

Due to its rising popularity, the Hot Spring and its surrounding tribal land were leased to settlers in the late 1880s. A rustic bathhouse was constructed on the site. Palm Springs, and the tourist trade that survives today, was born.

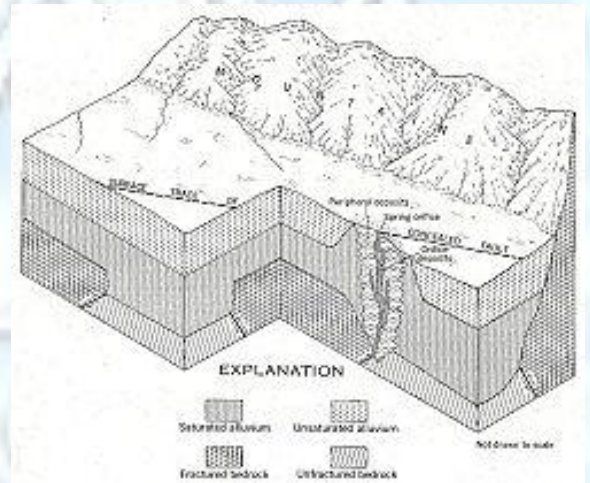


Executed during the William Blake survey’s journey through the Coachella Valley in 1853, this etching presumably depicts the Agua Caliente Hot Spring in its original state

## Agua Caliente Hot Spring 101

Evidence suggests that precipitation on the San Jacinto mountain range, seeping into a fractured, granitic basement complex, is the source of the Agua Caliente Hot Spring's waters. The Hot Spring may also be associated with seismic faulting, as its orifice has been known to change locations following earthquakes.

Uniquely situated in the heart of the Agua Caliente Indian Reservation on a square mile called Section 14, the Hot Spring was known as Sec-he ("boiling water") to Cahuilla-speaking people and as Agua Caliente ("hot water") to early Spanish-speaking expeditions to the area. Today it is located underground near the corner of Tahquitz Canyon Way and Indian Canyon Drive – its waters collected and diverted to a spa facility in the same location. The Hot Spring's waters remain popular.



Generalized sketch showing possible relation of the Agua Caliente Hot Spring to geological surroundings

## Den of the *Nukatem*

The existence of the Agua Caliente Hot Spring is explained in a Cahuilla migration legend. This legend was later retold by elder Francisco Patencio:

*“The head man, Tu-to-meet, was tired and sick and lame, so he took his whó-ya-no-hut (staff of power), which he struck in the ground. He twisted it around, and caused the water of a spring to come out – now Palm Springs Hot Spring. He named it Sec he, meaning boiling water, which is up to the earth and on the earth, which is to be for ever, never to dry up, never to go away, but to be there for ever and always for the sick.”*

As evidenced by the story of Tu-to-meet and the creation of Sec he, the Hot Spring’s importance was not limited to its physical gifts. The Spring represented an intermediary meeting point between the physical world and a supernatural underworld imbued with *i’va’a* (power) – the basic generative force from which all things were created. Beneath the waters was a subterranean world populated by powerful sacred beings called *nukatem*, remnants from the beginning of time with the ability to accomplish both good and evil. *Nukatem* were formed by Cahuilla creators Mukat and Temayawet. Most *nukatem* are no longer on earth, but some did not leave and remain active participants in this world.



Francisco Patencio as depicted by artist Paul Grimm

## ***Wahaatukicnikic* (Blue Frog)**

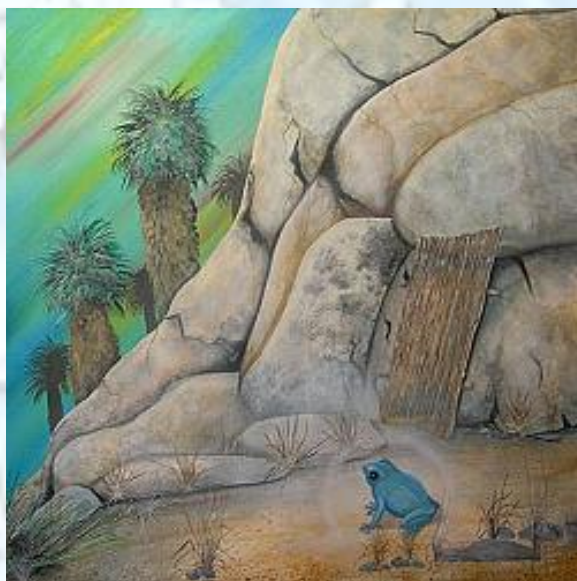
Once a medicine man was sick and wanted to cure himself, praying for three days and nights without eating or drinking. On the last night, the manner in which he might be cured was revealed in a dream. To do so, he must enter the Hot Spring and visit the *nukatem* dwelling there.

Entering into a den-like room, the medicine man encountered a Blue Frog, a Snake, another (Red Racer) snake, a Bear, a Lion, and an Albino Child.

Addressing the Blue Frog, he asked how he might be cured.

The frog redirected the man to the Snake. Asking the Snake the same question, the Snake coiled itself around his body and sent him on to

the Red Racer. The Red Racer did the same, sending him to the Bear and then to the Lion. Finally, the Lion sent him on to the Child, the chief power among the group.



Painting by Amil Pedro

*“Now the child had taken the form of an old man, and was sitting smoking a pipe. The medicine man went in and lay down before him. He told him he was sick and had come to be cured. But the old man was looking away, and did not look or speak to him.”*

*“So the medicine man said again, ‘I am sick, and came down to be cured.’ Then he rose and reached for the old man’s pipe, which the old man handed to him quickly.”*

*“The medicine man swallowed the smoke three times. Then the old man snatched it away. The medicine man then felt more power and knew that he was cured.”*

- Francisco Patencio, *Stories & Legends of the Palm Springs Indians*, 1943

## ***Sukat Tevishnekish (Magical White Deer)***

Another spiritual being residing in the Hot Spring waters is a Magical Deer that is said to be completely white in color.

Pedro Chino, one of the most powerful type of Cahuilla shamans, was known to visit the Magical Deer beneath the Spring's surface. Here, in a place he described as "not really water [but] dry land underneath," Pedro Chino was instructed by the Deer and other sacred beings on how to cure his people. "The beings living in the water show me," he once said.

*"Before the white man came, the Deer would appear at the hot springs. There would be a storm. The medicine men would spring upon the back of the deer and ride the lightning to the Upper Regions, where they found herbs and medicine for our people."*

- Fannie Siva

*"Sukat tevishnekish pe pe. Yen pe pe panga hiwqa." Translation: "That is the so called White Deer. But it lives in the water."*

- Katherine Siva Saubel, *A Dried Coyote's Tail*



Painting by Amil Pedro

## ***Pa-aqniwetem* (Water Babies)**

In Cahuilla culture, supernatural beings are considered to be capable of both good and evil. The Hot Spring, dwelling place of such *nukatem*, was both revered and feared for this reason. Cahuilla legends tell of strange sounds or voices emanating from the Spring, reinforcing a respectful and cautious relationship to the Hot Spring and its powerful inhabitants. These voices might be human or animal in nature.

According to tribal elder Pedro Chino, the Agua Caliente Hot Spring was inhabited by Water Babies – precognitive *nukatem* that audibly cry, like human infants, when unfortunate events are about to take place. To hear the cry of a Water Baby, or to be called by one when nearing the water, is considered an ill omen that might mean death. Their cries are heard in the wee hours of the night.



Painting by Amil Pedro

*"If you hear a baby cry, don't go to find it – because it'll pull you into the water, you know, and you'll be drowned."*

- Donna Largo

Though normally heard but not seen, Water Babies at times emerge from the Hot Spring. They are described as hairless, like newborn children. In one legend told by elder Francisco Patencio, Water Babies emerge from the Hot Spring for the purpose of luring an unsuspecting victim into the waters, where they are drowned. These are *nukatem* to be feared.

*"One morning three of the sisters went to the Spring, and they saw a little child crying on the top of some fallen tule. But, instead of being dark skinned like an Indian, this child had pure white skin and hair."*

*"The younger sister went to it, thinking that it belonged to some of the people. But the other sisters told her to let it alone – that it was an animal, and not a child. But she would not listen, and she picked it up in her arms."*

*"Then a whirlwind came and lifted the girl and the child and whirled them up in the air. Then the whirlwind settled over the water, and both the girl and the child disappeared down with the water in[to] the Spring."*

- Francisco Patencio, *Stories & Legends of the Palm Springs Indians*, 1943

## Bathhouse #1: Late 1880s

Acknowledging of the popularity of the Hot Spring and its potential for building tribal revenues, tribal leaders in 1889 leased the Spring and the land surrounding it to settlers for three years in exchange for an annual rental of \$150.00, land improvements, and use of the Hot Spring waters during non-business hours. A rustic bathhouse, described by James Smeaton Chase as a “rickety little hut,” was constructed on the site. The lease of the Spring was later renewed for a period of ten years.



Agua Caliente bathhouse, late 1880s

The leasing of the Hot Spring and other tribal assets were savvy business decisions that would prove to be valuable precedents for the general development of the tribe in the years to come. Land leasing, business development, and tourism laid the foundation for the City of Palm Springs and continue to support the tribe to this day. Business decisions of this type were a continuation of the traditional role of Cahuilla leaders, which was to make economic decisions and utilize land to its best advantage on behalf of their communities. In traditional times, elders advised how to properly utilize an environment that was unpredictable and continually changing. Their ability to apply these traditional skills within the context of a new socio-economic reality would serve them well.

## Bathhouse #2: Mid-1910s

By the early 1910s, the original bathhouse had fallen into disrepair and was in need of improvements. Although the bathhouse enterprise was now owned and operated by the tribe, the federal government viewed tribal members as wards and collected money on their behalf. Ironically, federal red-tape prevented repair of the bathhouse due to the government's inability to account for entrance fee money. Tribal leaders were aware of these missing funds because they had kept accounts.



Agua Caliente bathhouse, circa 1910s

Eventually the bathhouse was razed and a second one was constructed in the mid-1910s. This bathhouse, immediately recognizable thanks to its signature turret and "BATHS" sign, witnessed more instances of federal interference. Federal agents routinely questioned tribal use of bathhouse profits, including one \$500.00 donation to the Mission Indian Federation: a pro-sovereignty Indian organization. Not understanding that economic decisions were the hereditary and sacred duty of tribal leaders, federal Indian agents routinely failed to understand Cahuilla leadership traditions during this period.

## Bathhouse #3: 1930s

The bathhouse was rebuilt again in the 1930s with funds obtained from a recent airport lease on Section 14. In its updated form, the bathhouse began drawing such Hollywood notables as Dolores Del Rio, Robert Taylor, Bruce Cabot, Ralph Belamy, and Charles Farrell; the stars in turn attracted the attention of the editor of the *March of Time* news movies, who sent a photographer to film the bathhouse. The Agua Caliente Hot Spring, and the city which grew up around it, had become famous.

Despite (or possibly due to) the financial success of the bathhouse, the 1930s marked an all-time low for tribal sovereignty. Having managed the bathhouse enterprise for more than thirty years, tribal leaders began making business decisions that were at odds with the non-Indian community, such as the raising of Indian Canyon and bathhouse entrance fees. Such decisions incensed non-Indian business owners who felt that increased fees negatively impacted their own businesses; they demanded that federal authorities intervene to solve what they called “the Indian problem.”



Agua Caliente bathhouse, circa 1930s

The federal government responded by taking control of the Agua Caliente Indian Reservation and its business enterprises and later arrested tribal leaders on November 20, 1937. Fees were forcibly reduced to their pre-1937 levels – temporarily.

Tribal member Clemente Segundo traveled to Washington D.C. to expose these actions, which were later criticized as an over-stepping of federal authority. Addressing the House of Representative’s Committee on Indian Affairs, Clemente described a collusion of interests between federal officials and the Palm Springs Chamber of Commerce that had given rise to these events. Control of the reservation was returned to tribe some time later.

The third and final bathhouse was destroyed in 1957 to make way for the next incarnation of the tribal bathhouse.

## Albert Santos Patencio: Keeper of the Bathhouse

The three bathhouses which stood at the site of the Hot Spring were important tribal enterprises for the Agua Caliente Band. They provided much needed income during a period of limited economic opportunities. Groundskeepers were required to look after the daily operations of the baths, including the acceptance of entrance fees, limiting use time to 20 minutes, and enforcing sanitary rules.

Although there were many tribal members employed in this manner, Albert Santos Patencio remains one of the more memorable of the tribal members who filled this role. Albert lived during a transitional period in Agua Caliente life and was active in both tribal affairs and the non-Indian community.

Palm Springs at the turn of the century began to develop a robust tourist industry attracting health-seekers and invalids, thanks to the popularity and curative reputation of the Hot Spring. Following construction of the Desert Inn, one of the first non-Indian businesses catering to health-seekers, Albert became the new hotel's first handyman. He routinely drove to the new Southern Pacific Railway station at Seven Palms to pick up hotel guests and to gather provisions. In tribal life Albert held the position of *net*, or ceremonial leader, between the years 1947-1951.

In traditional times, the *net* was responsible for perpetuating the cultural laws and history of the Cahuilla people, codified by an intricate system of songs.

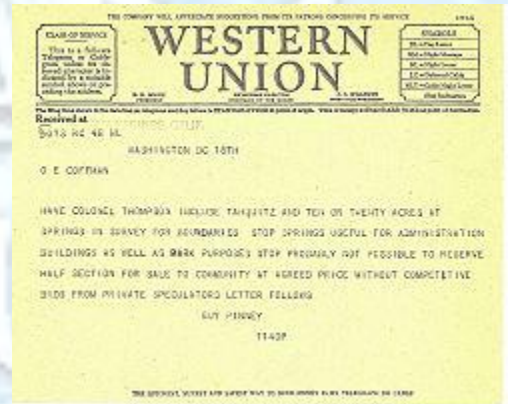


Albert Patencio  
Gift of Renona Pennington

## Hot Commodities

The Agua Caliente Hot Spring is communally owned by the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians. Following presidential orders in 1876 and 1877 that established the Agua Caliente Indian Reservation, the federal allotment policy divided up the Reservation into individual parcels owned by individual tribal members. Some portions of the reservation were excluded from allotment, however, so that they might benefit the tribe as a whole.

The Hot Spring is one of them. This parcel of land, located in Section 14 just east of Indian Canyon Drive, is commonly referred to as the Mineral Spring Parcel.



Western Union Telegram showing the Palm Springs Chamber of Commerce's interest in the Hot Spring Parcel in the 1930s

Following construction of the first bathhouse, the Mineral Spring Parcel was rendered a valuable piece of real estate due to its popularity and income-producing potential. For much of the past 150 years, many individuals and groups have attempted to gain control of the parcel and its valuable hot spring waters.

- Indian Agent Lawson attended an 1881 Los Angeles trial of a non-Indian arrested for “malicious mischief” who had settled on Section 15 and then tore down fences on Section 14, taking over the Hot Spring. By the time he was found guilty and forbidden to return, another such man had taken his place.
- In 1889, former Indian Agent J. G. McCallum traveled to Washington D.C. to secure rights to the Hot Spring. In years prior, McCallum in his official capacity had approved non-Indian claims to even-numbered reservation lands on a legal technicality, despite the fact he’d been employed to protect Cahuilla interests. His efforts to secure the Hot Spring failed.
- Following the lapse of the first 3-year lease in 1892, federal agents attempted to renew the lease at a reduced yearly rental price, against the wishes of tribal leaders. Tribal captain Jose Rafael responded with a letter of protest to federal officials and by taking back the keys to the bathhouse.
- In response to the tribe’s refusal to renew the original 1889 lease in 1892, a federal agent roused tribal leaders from their sleep in the middle of the night and forced them to sign a document approving a ten year lease renewal which now included a five acre parcel of land surrounding it. This land contained mature fruit trees and farm land vital as tribal revenue sources. Tribal leaders protested that they had been duped and placed a padlock on the bathhouse door. The lease was re-written to exclude the additional land.

- Following seven years of tribal control of the bathhouse, the federal government took over its operation in 1909. Federal oversight continued until the 1930s. Not understanding traditional tribal modes of economic distribution and decision-making, the government felt it was resolving internal disagreements over profit usage.
- Throughout the 1930s, the Palm Springs Chamber of Commerce sought to gain control of the Mineral Spring Parcel and the Indian Canyons by means of National Monument designation. The Mineral Springs Parcel was envisioned to be an administrative headquarters for National Park administration staff. These efforts ultimately failed.
- In 1936, tribal leaders raised access fees to the bathhouse and the Indian Canyons. Non-Indian business owners, organized through the Palm Springs Chamber of Commerce, viewed this as a threat to their tourism-based livelihood. Colluding with Chamber of Commerce business owners, the federal government assumed direct control over the Reservation and its tribal enterprises, including the bathhouse, on January 1, 1937.
- The 1959 federal program of Equalization, the re-parceling of allotments due to their varying real estate values, also threatened to remove Mineral Spring Parcel's reserve status when the Bureau of Indian Affairs, in favor of federal termination policies, proposed to allot the parcel to individuals. Indian termination was a policy that the United States Congress implemented in the 1950s and 1960s to terminate the government's trusteeship of Indian reservations. Tribal members successfully opposed these efforts so that the parcel would continue to benefit the tribe as a whole.

## Primary Sources & Further Reading

We suggest the following source materials for further research on the Agua Caliente Hot Spring. Materials are available at the Agua Caliente Cultural Museum library by appointment.

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