

1985: A WATERSHED YEAR FOR BATHHOUSE ROW

By Kirby Williams

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

Margaret Mead, American Anthropologist

From a distance of 25 years, it now seems prescient that the most popular movie of 1985 was *Back To The Future*. For that was the year when a small group of Hot Springs citizens proved Margaret Mead’s oft-quoted maxim and changed the course of history for Bathhouse Row and Hot Springs National Park.

The 1970’s had been hard on Hot Springs and the old girl had not fared well. Seemingly casting about for an identity after the gambling raids of the sixties, various attempts to “modernize” downtown had only resulted in the demolition of some historic structures and an unattractive sidewalk canopy that leaked rainwater and scratchy Muzak. Many storefronts were abandoned and too many of the ones in use were home to nefarious auction houses and seedy nightclubs.

But the biggest sore thumbs were the structures that should have been – had been in the past – the source of our greatest pride - Bathhouse Row. The venerable Buckstaff was still serving its intended purpose but the rest of the Row was crumbling, some houses literally rotting from the inside because of captive springs in the basements. 1946 had been the peak year for the bathing industry in Hot Springs with more than 650,000 people enjoying the waters. By 1980 the number was under 100,000 and headed south. Overall visitors to the Park had dropped precipitously – almost one million visitors disappeared between 1972 and 1976. The National Park Service had written up fairly grandiose plans for the national landmark in their 1960 and 1978 General Management plans, but impetus and, more importantly, funding had never been forthcoming. In 1984, the Parks Service nationally spent, on average, \$2 per park visitor. The average visitor to Hot Springs National Park garnered a paltry twenty-one cents. A survey of local visitors done the same year cited 82% as saying they would not make a return visit to the Spa City. The *New York Times* reported that “under the Reagan Administration, nearly one billion dollars was spent on rehabilitating and repairing facilities in the National Parks but the funds for Hot Springs National Park were only enough to “stabilize” the bathhouses to slow the decay.” Estimates at the time put the cost of needed restorations in excess of ten million dollars. In an interview that seemed to characterize the Hot Springs National Park staffs’ opinions, Management Assistant Hugh Crenshaw told the *Arkansas Democrat* “As long as we can keep the roofs from leaking (they’ll) be OK. Some of the skills used to make those buildings just don’t exist anymore. They’ve been forgotten.”

In addition to money, what Bathhouse Row really needed was a champion. City government had an unofficial hands-off policy, laying the responsibility solely on the NPS. The NPS pointed to Washington, saying their hands were tied by lack of funding from the Interior Department. And Interior had apparently looked the other way for

years, choosing more high-profile projects advocated by vocal Congressmen and lobbyists.

Local attorney Clay Farrar, whose family had operated the Superior Bathhouse, had first-hand knowledge of negotiations with the Park Service and had over the years developed a reputation as an advocate for the adaptive reuse of the houses. What Farrar needed was an organization that could lend his ideas credibility and resources – the Hot Springs National Park Rotary Club, of which he was a member, seemed to fit the job description. Founded in 1915, the group was one of the first Rotary Clubs in Arkansas. The civic club had always held a reputation as much more than a “meet & eat club.” Activist to the point of being referred to as “The Downtown Politburo,” the Rotary Club had brought Boy Scouts to the area in 1917, literally took pick and shovel in hand to improve roads in the 1920’s, and provided college scholarships to local students since the 1950’s. Farrar was in line to be President of the club in 1986, but he convinced 1984-85 President Mark Fleischner and President-elect Joe Fish (whose family businesses had been fixtures in downtown for decades) that the time was ripe to instigate a “revitalize downtown” movement and that the Rotary Club should lend its leadership and reputation to the effort.

Officially, the Rotary Committee was referred to as the Downtown Revitalization Committee. It recruited non-Rotarian civic leaders to spawn a more comprehensive group called the Committee for the Enhancement of Hot Springs National Park, Incorporated. Unofficially and in the press the working group was known as “the citizens group dominated by members of the National Park Rotary Club.” Rotarians, guided by Farrar’s deft leadership and inspired by his simmering drive, lent credence, manpower, money and, perhaps most importantly, it’s weekly podium to the group that dove into their work like they were being pursued.

Interestingly, it was a Rotarian who wasn’t even officially on the committee who may have made the most significant early contributions. Cecil Cupp, Jr., at the time President and CEO of Arkansas Bank & Trust, had tight relationships with both of Arkansas’ US Senators – Dale Bumpers and David Pryor - and Congressman Beryl Anthony. Cupp had learned his way around Washington as a representative of the banking industry and state Chamber of Commerce, and he’d proven his commitment to Garland County economic and tourism industry development by doggedly pursuing a Smithsonian Institution extension for Hot Springs, which became the Mid-America Museum in 1978. The Congressional Delegation also knew Cupp as someone who could raise money and deliver blocks of votes – they always took his phone calls.

So when Cecil Cupp started making calls to the congressional offices in January of 1985 the “Save Bathhouse Row” snowball was started downhill. Bumpers, Pryor and Anthony all made time when they were home during the February congressional break to sit down with Cupp and Farrar, and all three elected officials had the same advice after hearing Farrar’s spiel. “Go for it.”

The timing, history and contacts of Arkansas’ Washington leadership in 1985 couldn’t have been better for Hot Springs. Senior Senator Bumpers was a key member of the Senate’s Committee on the Interior Department that controls National Park Service funding. Pryor, his wife Barbara and their sons owned a lake home on Stokes Creek and practically lived in Hot Springs when not in Washington. Congressman Anthony’s family’s connections to Hot Springs were well known, with several local landmarks

bearing family names - Anthony Island, the Avanelle Motel and the Velda Rose to name a few. It wouldn't be hard to get this group passionate about helping Hot Springs.

Once back in D.C., the delegation each assumed vital roles in progressing the vision they'd heard back in Hot Springs. Senator Bumpers directed the N.P.S. Director to expedite the Hot Springs National Park General Management Plan – a new one wasn't expected until 1988. Senator Pryor arranged an invitation for the Rotary Club group to address a Congressional committee and meet face-to-face with Park officials at the Interior Department to discuss adaptive reuse and a more ambitious leasing schedule. Congressman Anthony's immediate contribution, at first glance, seemed the least obvious but ultimately became one of the most significant.

Knowing the Washington reality that no serious project gets very far without someone constantly working the issue, Anthony strongly recommended that the group hire lobbying representation. The consultant who immediately popped to the top of the search list was Hershel Lipow. Lipow was a Capitol Hill operative with contacts and experience in the housing and development sectors. A lobbyist for the American Institute of Architects, Lipow recognized Bathhouse Row as a treasure. "It's rare to find a small town with international-quality architecture," he told *Preservation News* magazine. A Memphis native who had visited the Spa in the 1960's, Lipow recalled "Southerners regarded it as the center of the universe – you would meet stimulating people from St. Louis, Chicago, even New York." He also happened to have been a classmate of Farrar's when both were undergraduates at Rhodes College. He had access to the Hot Springs political landscape and was a quick study who took on the assignment with gusto. The Rotary committee needed Lipow primarily for his ability to find and dissect federal agency budgets. He knew the questions to ask and where to find answers that had been eluding the local activists. Lipow also brought a great personal network to the assignment – his ability to directly contact and motivate staffers in Congressional offices and federal agencies proved invaluable.

Concurrent with Lipow's activation were invitations to visit Hot Springs from Bumpers to the National Park Service Director's office and by Anthony to Congressman Bruce Vento, Chairman of the House Subcommittee on National Parks.

Up to this point, most of the activity had been playing out behind the scenes, but that was about to change as details of the draft management plan started to become public.

On April 2 Acting National Park Service Director Mary Lou Greer had responded to a Dale Bumpers inquiry at a Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on the Interior hearing that the Service was already sitting on 134 applications for leasing information on the bathhouses.

Congressman Vento's group came to town on April 9 with all the subtlety of a circus, complete with their own media retinue featuring New York Times reporter Phillip Shabecof. The field investigation team and NPS officials from the Santa Fe regional office were toured through five bathhouses and briefed by Farrar, Congressman Anthony, Park Superintendent Roger Giddings, Lipow, and Mayor Jim Randall. The consistent message they heard all day was that the "park is now in a state of crisis" and any remedies must include at least these three parts; move the visitor center into the Fordyce Bath House, lease the other houses to entrepreneurs, and let the local people have a say in the park's future through an advisory commission. The visiting congressmen were also informed that the NPS had spent \$11 million on Hot Springs National Park since 1972,

not to maintain or improve the existing holdings, but to increase the size of the park from 900 to nearly 5000 acres to “protect the thermal waters recharge zone.”

The *Sentinel Record* reported the following day that Vento commented, “it’s a shame this park has not received the kind of attention it deserves,” and that Hot Springs businesses should have a “working partner” in the national park. The local newspaper’s editor chimed in the same day, claiming, “Farrar argued his case with all the pointed panache of a young Clarence Darrow.”

In addition to the three oft-repeated goals, the local delegation took the visiting Park Service officials to task over some other items that were leaking out about the in-progress management plan. There was going to be pointed and vocal resistance to their plans for closing Black Snake Road and the Gulfa Gorge campground. And their plan to increase the cost of thermal water to the bathhouses by 1000% wasn’t going sit too well either.

Farrar reported to the Rotary Club on April 11 that the congressional field investigation team had gotten an earful as their hosts chastised the NPS as “absentee landlords” who didn’t have the skills necessary to manage rental property and that “no businessman would have a building sit empty since 1963, yet this is what has happened to the bath houses.”

The torpor of the NPS folks in the tour didn’t escape the notice of Congressman Anthony, who was quoted in the *Arkansas Gazette* on April 19 as reporting to a House Interior Appropriations subcommittee meeting in DC the following week “They’ve been bad managers of the public property under their trust” and that they’d “shunted us aside. They’re just more geared to (parks in) the West than they are to us. If you get inside (the bath houses) you’d throw up, it’s so ugly.” Anthony then requested \$5 million for the refurbishment of the Fordyce and said “Congress should tell the Park Service to get off their rear ends and try to lease (the) other bathhouses.” Knowing that the local leadership already had commitments from downtown property owners, Anthony put a point on his argument by saying “Downtown Hot Springs is decaying and dying as the national park is decaying and dying. If you don’t put in any money, the private sector’s not going to put in any money.”

As the committee was deliberating Anthony’s request, additional pressure was administered from another front. Shabecoff’s article in the *New York Times* got passed around, and everyone noticed the paragraph that read “What happens here will be carefully watched as the first major effort of the Park Service, under legislation passed in 1980, to lease historic structures under its protection to entrepreneurs. This effort is likely to serve as a model for future programs, particularly the impending leasing of historic structures on New York City’s Ellis Island.”

One last visit to Washington before the release of the final management plan put Farrar, Cupp, Lipow, Eric Jackson, Les Green and Leonard Dunn, representing the Hot Springs Chamber of Commerce, in a meeting with Henry Woods of Senator Pryor’s office and Hugh Miller, head of the NPS historic leasing program. The purposes of the meeting were to; “move the battleship one degree to the left or right,” discredit the proposal Giddings was promoting from the draft management plan that would lease all the houses and “see what’s left” for a visitor center, stress the need for a Park Service leasing specialist assigned to Hot Springs, and advance Anthony’s request for the Fordyce rehab with anyone who’d listen.

The efforts of the Hot Springs Chamber of Commerce during this period cannot be over-stated. President Eric Jackson committed the full resources of the Chamber to the Enhancement Committee's efforts and was personally responsible for the creative, behind-the-scenes work that kept the private sector running apace with the efforts directed specifically at the National Park.

To keep the Bathhouse Row issue on the front burner locally, the Rotary Club hosted a series of "Symposia" at their Wednesday meetings in June, each one covered as front page news by the local newspaper.

Eldon Reyer, associate director of the NPS southwest region faced the group as a specialist in planning and cultural affairs focused on the National Historic Leasing Program. Reyer acknowledged that the draft management plan called for "mothballing" the bathhouses and had no provision for moving the visitor's center. However, he also stated that other government agencies had participated in 12,000 leasing projects nationwide with an average investment of \$800,000 from the companies seeking the available rehabilitation tax credits.

The second symposium revealed the groundwork the City and Chamber of Commerce had been doing on their side of Central Avenue. Mike Sigman, President of First National Bank and Chairman of the Mayor's Downtown Redevelopment Task Force stated that a Central Business Improvement District was being formed by downtown property owners to implement "The Magnolia Plan." The concept envisioned "removal of the sidewalk canopy, extensive use of shrubbery and trees, utility alterations and new parking facilities." Financing would come in the form of a bond issue, a \$500,000 grant from the Arkansas Community and Economic Development Program, and a pool of low-interest loans from local banks.

Hershel Lipow was introduced at the third seminar by Majestic Hotel Manager Leland Hilborn as one who "has done more in two months than we were able to do in 20 years." Lipow then talked about what to expect the following week when the National Park Service finally faced their critics at the unveiling of the new General Management Plan for Hot Springs.

In a news release later in the week, Superintendent Giddings announced that the management plan's principal components include "the development of better interpretive programs... (the) protection of the thermal springs, long-term adaptive use leasing of the six non-operating bathhouses, rehabilitation of the visitor center/park headquarters, and increasing thermal spring water prices to commercial bathhouses."

Farrar characterized the plan differently in a Sunday guest editorial, saying; "Our community has been in error trusting the good intentions of the decision makers of the National Park Service. We must actively fight for the betterment of our National Park. This (upcoming public hearing) is the only meaningful opportunity for our community to participate in the future planning of our Park during the balance of this decade. There is an underlying effort on the part of some Park Service officials to dismantle Hot Springs National Park. The new proposed master plan is a catastrophe. Never has Hot Springs National Park been presented with such a negative plan. This plan has no vision for the enhancement of our National Park. Rather, the plan is a retreat from the worthwhile goals established in the 1978 master plan."

The fuse was lit for an exciting Independence Day week in the Spa. It started when Representative Anthony called a news conference to announce that a House

subcommittee had approved \$1,163,000 to begin construction of a new visitor's center in the Fordyce bathhouse. That wasn't in the draft plan that the Park Service had put out for public comment, but it was in the response document that the Rotary Committee had published. A cadre of politicians and community leaders had been recruited and rehearsed to hammer the community response point by point on Tuesday night. The defensive and anxious posture and facial expressions of Reyer and Dusty Augenbaugh of the Santa Fe NPS office in a front-page picture of that day's Hot Springs newspaper just about said it all. They were not looking forward to the hearing.

A 1987 *Arkansas Times* article recalled the event this way, "It is unlikely (NPS planners) were ready for the ambush they walked into at the Convention Auditorium that muggy night. Roger Brown, the Denver-based Park Service official responsible for the new plan, played Custer to the (response team's) circling savages before an audience of 400. Not averse to overkill, Farrar's batting order led off with Senator David Pryor, followed by Senator Dale Bumpers, congressman Beryl Anthony, and a bevy of state and city elected officials. Only then did the group which had organized the blitz present its case with seven local orators who each attacked a specific proposal from the management plan."

Representative Anthony not only talked up his Fordyce bathhouse funding haymaker, he also got to announce that newly appointed NPS Director William Penn Mott would be coming for a visit in August.

After being harangued by the Congressional delegation for decades of mismanagement, the Park Service folks probably welcomed the suggestions specific to their plan. Eric Jackson asked for a formalized relationship between the community and the Park, Farrar laid out the plan for the Fordyce Visitors Center, Hershel Lipow said that the Service should aggressively seek lessees for the other houses, Kirby Williams spoke in favor of using one of them for an arts center, Gene Harwood requested thermal water for a heat exchange unit at the Arkansas Rehabilitation Hospital, Leland Hilborn spoke against the proposed water rate hike, and David Love argued that any fees collected in Hot Springs National Park should be used for local improvements and maintenance.

The last of the four Rotary symposiums was the next day and featured a panel discussion among many of the previous evening's participants. The affable Giddings was roundly applauded when he said he believed the Park Service has "gotten the picture," and that "it looks like the Fordyce might make a very nice visitors center." Brown was much less enthusiastic, promising a modified plan in about six months but making no commitment about the Fordyce or any of the Enhancement Committee's goals. That prompted Farrar to challenge Brown with probably the most combative rhetoric of the week. "If the Park Service will not act to improve the park, the Enhancement Committee will seek mandatory appropriations from Congress. If that fails, the committee might as a final resort file a lawsuit because the Park Service is not doing its duty of protecting the fabric of the community."

Back in Washington after the holiday break, both Senators wrangled meetings with new NPS Director Mott to not only thank him for committing to a visit to Hot Springs, but to encourage him to turn up the heat under his people in Santa Fe. At a Senate Subcommittee on Public Land hearing, Bumpers said to Mott "I want to get your commitment that you are going to do everything in your power to help us revitalize that park."

On July 25th, light speed in federal government time, the National Park Service issued the final version of the Hot Springs National Park Management Plan. In it were all of the main concessions that the Rotary Committee had fought for – the Fordyce was to become the new visitor’s center, the “moth balling” language used in previous drafts was removed in favor of a commitment to take immediate action to prevent further deterioration of the other houses, a leasing specialist was to be assigned to Hot Springs to seek entrepreneurs for adaptive reuse of the properties, a priority was established to set aside one bathhouse for use as a local arts center, the foundation of and cooperation with a new local “Friends of the Park” organization was suggested, and no changes were made to the rates of the thermal water used for traditional therapeutic bathing.

Mott’s visit on August 30 amounted to a victory lap. The rancor between his National Park Service and the local gentry had been replaced with an “era of good feelings” with both sides progressing. The Magnolia Plan was gaining steam and it looked like all of the property owners were going to sign on for the improved streetscape project to come with the new Central Business Improvement District. So, in light of recent events, it seemed almost paradoxical that Mott’s central theme was “We’re taking care of our side of the street – now you take care of yours.” His repeated exhortations to “Think big” didn’t fall on deaf ears; they were heard loud and clear by civic warriors who had already thought big. And won big.

In a Fourth of July editorial headlined “The Spirit of ’85,” Melinda Gassaway gushed “Hot Springs held a revival on Tuesday night and hundreds of the faithful came to Convention Auditorium to reaffirm their belief in the place we call home and in the property we pridefully call our National Park. It has been the foresight and perseverance of the Committee for the Enhancement of Hot Springs National Park, Inc. that exemplify The true Spirit of Independence we celebrate today. Patriotism is more than a pledge to the Flag, a hand over the heart. And patriots are not always heroes of battles fought with guns. Our Park has its patriots. And Our Town is better because of them.”

REFERENCES:

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Personal files of the author and Clay Farrar

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

This article initially focused on two significant events that reshaped the city of Hot Springs in 1985 and 1986; the Bathhouse Row battle described here and the events leading up to the City of Hot Springs changing its form of government from Mayor/Alderman to City Manager. Due to the length and detail of the bathhouse row portion of the article, the city government part of the story is being written separately and will appear on its 25th anniversary in the 2011 issue of *The Record*.