

DOWNATA HOT SPRINGS



Downata Hot Springs

OVER 100 YEARS OF FAMILY FUN

DARLENE DOWNS

ESTABLISHED 1907

Downata Hot Springs History

By Fern Hartvigsen, Penny Greaves, and Darlene Downs

Memories of Downata Hot Springs, located three miles south of Downey, belong to many people. Just the mention of "Marshall's Springs" brings a flood of memories to old-timers who can still recall the chronology of owners: Will Evans, Isaac Marshall, the Johnson family, the Raymond Horsley family, the Elton Nead family, and, currently, a conglomerate of several owners.

The hot water bubbles up from a rock-bottomed spring south of the pool and tests 109 degrees. It is piped to the swimming pool, where cool water is added to make it comfortable for swimming.

In 1907, Alexander Marshall, his wife Diannah Bloxham Marshall, and their family moved to "The Springs," and since then, the resort has been operated mostly as a family enterprise. Marshall purchased the land and hot springs from Andrew Morrison, who had bought Robert Miller's homestead. The Marshalls were the first to build a swimming pool, located south of today's pool, featuring rock sides and a mud bottom. Two or three dressing rooms were built, and later, 25 were added, along with a plank wall around the pool. Travel was difficult, but many families came to swim for pleasure, and the warm water was often used for baptism by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Mrs. G.F. Dewey (Lottie Marshall) remembers that they were the only family among their acquaintances with a backyard swimming pool. Isaac Marshall, now of Robin, remembers hatching baby chickens in the warmth of the hot water.

South of Downata, high on a hill, lies the grave of Eddie Miller Gladness, a daughter of the original homesteader, Robert Miller. Prior to her death, she had requested that she be buried there, and her father carried out her request. The Marshalls helped to build a fence around the grave and care for it.

Much work and planning went into the resort, with Isaac Marshall and Will Evans adding land from Ray Underwood's original homestead. Jennie Marshall, who sold the property, was part of the original Marshall family. The Evans and Marshall families worked through the winter of 1929 to build the resort, shortening the route to the hot springs by constructing a road across the marsh directly west of Highway 91. A half-mile entrance to the resort made it more accessible. It took tons of gravel; all hauled in a pickup and laboriously spread to create a road. The late Turner Cutright built the first log bridge that crossed Marsh Creek on the road, and today the road is part of the county road system.

The men dug a 50-by-100-foot hole and built the new pool with a cement bottom, new dressing rooms, showers, and other conveniences. When the resort was ready to open, 30 gas lanterns lit it for evening activities. Later, a gas plant was installed, and finally, electricity. The operation called for an icehouse, which Tyndale Evans says he remembers, along with memories of working the old handle washer that kept the suits and towels clean. Every member of the two families worked- Mrs. Evans, Stan Tyndale, Gwin, Mrs. Marshall, Marjorie, and Jean (Mrs. Jack Hadley of Downata). Stan and Tyndale were the first lifeguards at the pool. An open-air dance hall was added to the facility, with Friday night and midnight dances that were popular attractions. An orchestra from Malad City provided favorite dance music, and Isaac Marshall recalls paying \$300 one night for the Old Mill Orchestra from Salt Lake City. Enthusiasm for dancing waned, and roller-skating mania took over for a while, but the swimming pool continued to be a favorite.

Marshall sold his interest to Evans in 1937, and in 1939, the Johnsons-Osbourn, Edna, Cliss, Joyce, and Durke, purchased Downata and did some remodeling to the living quarters. The family worked through the winter, building a recreation hall, installing viewing windows, opening a snack bar, installing a walk-in refrigerator, and renovating the dance floor. 75 Chinese elm trees were planted east of the pool, along with fingerling pines at the front. West of the pool was a flower and rose garden. Later, a nightclub was added. Patrons from Malad, Preston, and Marsh Valley frequented the resort.

Raymond and Maxine Horsley and their boys, Ray, Spence, and Scott, who had been operating a drive-in restaurant in Salt Lake City, became the resort's new owners in 1959, just in time to clean up and open at Easter. During their ownership, they added a sun deck, a kiddie pool, "Dipsy-Doodle," slides, a pavilion, and fireplaces. They also offered Red

Cross swimming classes for 300-400 children annually. A cold-water well was drilled to supply the pool. Previously, the pool had to be filled and left to sit for a couple of days to cool the water before swimmers could enter.

Elton Nead, a former tugboat captain on the Columbia River, and his wife Pat and their children, James, Colleen, Thomas, Paulette, and Lauralee, of Stevenson, Washington, bought Downata in June 1974. They tore down the old dance hall, added a game room, and remodeled the dressing rooms and reunion rooms. They also made improvements to the park and added a miniature golf course and a gift shop. They also bought the Downey Theater and operated it while owning Downata, selling it to the Heugley family in 1983.

In July 1979, the Neads sold Downata to Wayne McQuivey (Salt Lake City), Brent, and Fred Coats, brothers from Dayton. Karl and Kade McQuivey, who came from Salt Lake City to assist Wayne as managers, added all-new dressing rooms, the first green tube slide in Idaho (1980), and the first "Black Hole" slide in the state (1983). They tore down the existing golf course and installed a new miniature golf course at the park, added teepees for rental, built an RV park north of the park, and installed bathrooms for the RV park. In 1985, when Wayne left, Kyle and Kathy Nielsen McQuivey joined Karl and Kade in managing the resort, which by now was known for family entertainment, youth groups, and reunions. In 1987, the Coats brothers sold their share of the business to an investment group of businessmen from Utah, California, and Idaho, with Wayne maintaining his interest in the business.

The McQuivey family left Downata Hot Springs in 1988 and were replaced as managers by Nate Hale of Preston. A year later, in 1990, Larry and Marilyn Lathen, a young couple from Moscow, Idaho, replaced Hale. Under the direction from the cooperation, now called Downata Ranch & Recreation, the Lathen's supervised the tearing down of the old entrance building and game room, which was replaced with a chain link fence to allow spectators free view, remodeled the building west of the pool to accommodate a family restaurant and snack bar and new reception area, added lifeguard room, tore down the old house northwest of the slides to create a picnic area, tore out the miniature golf course and added a double sandpit volleyball court.

In October of 1993, owner Marilyn Gunnell reorganized the operation, naming a management team of Darlene Downs, Julie Anderson, Connie Johnson, and Melissa Wakley, with Terry Morrison as Pool Operations Director. After refurbishing the dining room, the team sponsored a contest with the children of Downey Elementary to name the restaurant. The PoolSide Restaurant opened for holiday gatherings and summer snack bar food.

Darlene's husband, Bret Downs, joined the team in 1994 to manage the 2,000-acre ranch and help manage the swimming resort. Bret and Darlene Downs are the resort's general managers, and the management team includes Melissa Wakley, Joni Sorensen, Ryan Howe, Kathleen Miller, and Earl Owen. Leonard and Edna Zeedyk are currently living on the grounds in a new home and are the campground managers. Special events and activities have been added for weekend fun at Downata. Hot Air Balloon rides, Wagon rides, and Horse activities are just a few. In the fall of 1994, two lovely Bed & Breakfast houses were completed and will accommodate about 20 guests.

The Downata Corporation purchased fourteen snowmobiles in the winter of 1995, which are rented to vacationers. Guided Tours will be offered in the Cottonwood and Oxford Peak area in the winter of 1997.

An amphitheater in the new Cedar Campground above the resort was completed in 1996. Darlene Downs started a Downata Youth Soccer League for all youth in the Marsh Valley area. Bancroft was included in the league for a couple of years. Players ranged from kindergarten through 6th grade, and the number of players grew from 80 to about 250. The league first started playing soccer at Downata Hot Springs and then moved to Marsh Valley Middle School, where Bret sets up the fields each year. The league was transferred to Marsh Valley Soccer in the year 2024.

A camp store was created in the building that was part of the old snack bar. The new entrance improved wheelchair and stroller access. Nine new hookups replaced the popular non-hookup space at the bottom of the park. A new pavilion at the soccer baseball field was added in the summer of 2001, and a roof was built over the slide platform. Floor heating fed by the springs was installed in the dressing rooms.

The summer of 2002 was full of construction. A new sewer system was installed. New sidewalks and pavement in front of the resort were poured, and a new entrance for handicap access was created to replace the old stairway entrance. New

floors were installed in the dressing rooms and RV bathrooms. Two showers were added to the RV bathrooms for campers to use during closed hours. A new water playground was built in the slide area, along with a new picnic area and a sand volleyball area. Four new pavilions were built in the picnic area. Improvements in the campground included a new paved entrance and level gravel pads in the RV hookups. A self-serve area was added to the snack bar for food and drink items. At the beginning of 2003, a new slide was installed in the pool area to replace the famous old silver slide.

During Memorial Day weekend in 2004, a new slide was installed at the pool, replacing the former white spiral slide. In 2004, a new cooling device, the water cannon, was added to cool the hot water on sizzling summer days. A new pavilion was also built to replace the old west court picnic area. A new cement court replaced the old basketball court, which is now the volleyball area.

The year 2005 brought more sleep accommodation. Four Yurts were built where the teepees were once located. The teepees were moved to the soccer field area, and new trees were planted. Winter retreats brought massages and water relaxation for many scrapbookers and groups.

Cabins and a new wall tent were added in 2006. The Bunk House was relocated and sold to the farm next to the hot springs. The cabins were built where the Bunk House was located. The new wall tent is located by the teepees. A new covered pavilion was added to the large group tenting area #1 beside the wall tent. Several other improvements were made in the pool and picnic areas. In 2007, three more cabins with kitchens were added, and a maintenance shed was built. In 2008, a new meeting room and ADA-compliant bathrooms were added to the main building, along with an ADA ramp and an observation deck for the pool and slide area. A Tranquility room with sauna and massage was added in 2008 for sweetheart retreats. In 2009, new heated decks were installed around the pool, a new pipeline was added to the spring, and the dressing rooms were remodeled. In 2010, group areas were created with new electrical hookups and bathrooms for the picnic area and campground. The hill slides were refurbished with a new exterior coating, a new outdoor sauna was added to the pool area, and heated decks were installed on the yurts and the ranch house. In 2010, a sauna was added next to the swimming pool, heated with spring water in the floor and walls. A sauna heater was also installed. The old RV bathrooms were updated and improved. A new entrance to the main building was added in the fall of 2010. Steak & Soak specials were introduced during the off-peak season. New RV bathrooms were started in 2010.

In 2011, improvements included a larger yurt that sleeps 12 people, a new bunkhouse, three additional teepees, two new group areas by the west court pavilions, pavilions in the pool picnic area, and a new tenting area with power hookups. A Spa Room was built at the end of the old snack bar building, and massages were available. New Year's Eve brought a new tradition of fireworks to welcome the new year.

At the beginning of 2012, the massage room was enlarged to accommodate couples' massages and steam treatments. The winter business increased at the beginning of this year. The spring of 2012 brought additional improvements, including another pool pavilion, a west court group area pavilion, and a new pay entrance to the campground. A new entrance sign will be placed on the highway, and additions will be made to the water playground. A larger laundry facility was added for lodging rents, and some RV sites were enlarged and made into pull-through sites.

In the fall of 2012, the owners purchased the Hadley farm across the street from the resort. The purchased house was remodeled and used as a lodging rental in May of 2013. It is called Hadley House. The Hadley House was a railroad section house built in 1904 in Swan Lake, Idaho. Around 1950, Jack Hadley moved from Swan Lake to Downata Hot Springs. The area behind the house and the spring will be developed into a walking path and an expanded campground and lodging. A children's sleigh riding hill was built on the property in the winter of 2012 and 2013, which added some fun to the winter-time pool parties and soaking fun.

In the spring of 2013, an automatic sprinkler system was installed in the RV park, and some additions were made to the water playground. The wall tent was retired, and a "Cowboy Hangout" was built. A small cabin structure for rustic lodging. In the fall of 2013, a large new project was started. The construction of two soaking pools, a large dining room, dressing rooms for the soaking pools, and a new entrance reception area began. This was the beginning of a new Downata Hot Springs year-round resort.

The Soaking pools and Dining room were completed, and an open house was scheduled for May 2014. Further construction on the major project was completed in 2015. In 2016, a walk-in fridge-freezer unit was installed. It was needed so the PoolSide Restaurant could expand and serve more dinners. Downata became a year-round destination resort. Winter sweetheart retreats, scouting winter campouts, and family getaways became popular during the less-busy summer. More improvements were made in the campground and other areas of the resort.

In 2017, a new family slide was added to the swimming pool. More camping sites were added below Hadley House, marking the start of the campground's and Hadley property's expansion. Improvements to the drinking water system were made to support the development of more lodging and water hookup campsites. A gate system was installed at the campground entrance.

In the summer of 2019, Downata purchased six Conestoga wagons to accommodate our Glamping guests. More hookups were also added to the same area. An amphitheater was built for summer movie-in-the-park nights and live entertainment.

Ongoing improvements have occurred since 2019. More hookups and a small lodging den were built across from the main office. Some more improvements include an ice-skating rink, pickleball court, and new basketball court, a memory park with solar lights and bells in memory of Colleen Thomspson and Marilyn Gunnel, who have passed away, and our wives of the main owners, a new group area and tent spaces across from the main office, and more!

The Fireflies Festival began in 2024 and is held every June, when the fireflies are in the marsh. Our current management team includes Darlene Downs, executive director; Richard Downs; Bret Downs; Justen Greenwood; Kelli Sampson; and Sterling Purser.

In 2026, Downata's pool is open year-round, with weekday pool parties and weekend soaking hours in winter, and all facilities are open during the summer months. Each spring and summer, the resort offers Red Cross swimming lessons and Lifeguard training sessions to provide the thirty employees needed each summer with lifesaving skills. Senior Swim & Soak classes are currently held during the week. A couple's retreat is offered during the off-peak season—the best Dinner & Soak deal in Idaho—with steak and other delicious entrees on the menu, plus soaking afterward in the Hot Pools. Breakfasts, massages, and special events are sure to please families and couples.

The year of 2026 brought more change to the management team. Bret Downs retired from the Marsh Valley School District but continued managing Downata Hot Springs full-time. The current management team consists of Darlene Downs, General Manager, who has been in this role since 1987. with Bret Downs, Kelli Sampson, and Justen Greenwood as managers. Each owner and manager has left a mark on Downata Hot Springs Resort, making it a four-season destination for southeastern Idaho and travelers from afar.

Downata Hot Springs comes from the name itself, which means down at a hot spring. Many years ago, Native Americans and pioneers enjoyed the wonders of nature, and today, many guests travel to the hot springs to experience the same healing and relaxing powers. Each owner has left a mark on Downata Hot Springs Resort, making it a four-season destination for travelers from across Southeastern Idaho. For more information, visit www.downatahotsprings.com or our Facebook page, Downata Hot Springs History.





