Remembering Kissengen Spring

Kissengen Spring, in the Lower Peace River Watershed, once boasted a flow of 20 million gallons of water a day. On February 19, 1950, it went dry, the first major spring in Florida to become a casualty of too much groundwater pumping. A historical marker in Mosaic Peace River Park, just south of the former spring location, commemorates its importance as a local tourist attraction and gathering spot.

This transcription was produced with the intent of creating a text documentation of an oral history video entitled "Remembering Kissengen Spring." It features the recollections of area residents and was aired on Polk County government television. It is hoped that it will provide writers and producers with material and inspiration to script a more perfect history for Polk's famous spring. Please direct questions and comments about the project to Charlie Cook at Charles.Cook@dep.state.fl.us.

S. L. FRISBIE, IV: When you think about summertime fun, what runs through your mind? A day at the beach? A picnic in the park? Dancing the night away? For some long-time residents of Polk County, it was all three and then some at a little place back in the woods between Bartow and Homeland called Kissengen Spring.

RICHARD FRISBIE: Well, Kissengen Spring was probably the premier entertainment center for high school groups in both Bartow and Fort Meade. The springs out there was attractive to us because you

could go and swim in really cold water. It had a great dance floor, a pool hall, and a very appetizing snack bar there.

S. L. FRISBIE, IV: Kissengen was one of the many springs that dot the north and central regions of peninsula Florida, and was probably known to early settlers. Although its heyday as a relaxing get-away destination for Polk County residents really began in the post-Civil War era, reaching its peak in the 1920s, '30s, and '40s.

Despite the backwoods get-away-from-it-all feel of the place, Kissengen Spring wasn't all that far away from Polk County residents at the time.

Situated along the Peace River between Bartow and Homeland, it was just a short drive or a long bike ride down Highway 17 or the Old Homeland Road to Kissengen Spring Road, and you were there.

FRANK "BUBBA" SMITH: I guess my greatest memory about Kissengen Spring is that when we were youngsters --I say we --Edmund Nunez and I used to either somehow get to Highway 17, and we would hitchhike to the turnoff there at Kissengen Spring. And I know about five mornings out of seven, Mr. Lyle would come by and he would pick us up. Lyle was a fertilizer salesman, and he worked the south part of the county, I guess. And he would always stop and give us a ride, and we would go down there. Sometimes maybe we would cop off with a watermelon there at the watermelon patch there at the corner of 17 and the old Kissengen Spring Road, and take it down there and put in the spring so it would be nice and cold.

S. L. FRISBIE, IV: But you can't get there from here anymore. This is all that is left of Kissengen Spring today. All that remains of the glorious old swimming hole is a weed-choked impression in the earth. The boil, which was the underground portal from which millions of gallons of cold, clear water per day at its peak, is now a hole in the ground, caked over with some 60 years of sediment and 100 years of memories, some of which you are about to hear.

BETTY AMBROSE: Always in my memory, approaching the spring, seeing the cypress trees, moss-draped cypress trees, I think I'll always remember.

TESS DULL: Just the swimming and the diving and looking at the fish. I always have loved fish. And the water was so clear that you could see the fish on the bottom. And it was fairly deep where the spring was, the main spring in the center of it. And it was fun to stand up on the dock and look down and see the fish down there.

FRANK "BUBBA" SMITH: You could get up there on the high dive and look down in that boil. And I don't know how deep that spring was, but it looked like you could see to the center of the earth. I mean, it was really a spectacular sight.

BEN JACKSON: The boil itself was somewhere around 20, 22 feet deep, and you could see it. The water was crystal clear. And you could see the boil and the water coming out by standing on the diving board and looking down into the boil. And, of course, the water at surface was displacing where the water had come up.

MONTEREY "BUDDY" CAMPBELL, III: We used to joke about diving down and going to China to try to go into that spring.

BEN JACKSON: There was a safety procedure when people would come there, particularly the young boys who were macho and wanted to show off for their girlfriends, we would tell them, no, don't go down near the boil. It's dangerous.

S. L. FRISBIE, IV: In its day, Kissengen Spring was a second-magnitude artesian spring, which means that cold, clear water flowed on out of the Floridan aquifer with considerable pressure. At its peak, some 20 million gallons per day flowed from the spring into the upper Peace River.

BEN JACKSON: It was very strong, very strong. Back in its heyday, if you were to walk over the boil, it would push you up to the surface.

PHYLLIS GILBERT: I used to be a pretty good underwater swimmer, but not that good. And something I read said that nobody really --it was such a force, that water came out with such a force that even very good swimmers could not reach down to the bottom.

S. L. FRISBIE, IV: Did you ever try to swim down into the boil?

DWIGHT "JUDGE" WILSON: Yes. You couldn't make it.

BEN JACKSON: I think they said something like 25 million gallons a day or something like that come from the boil when it was in its heyday.

S. L. FRISBIE, IV: In a time before television, video games, or theme parks, a natural attraction like Kissengen Spring was the best place to be on a hot summer day.

PHYLLIS GILBERT: There was no air conditioning. And in the summertime, where do you go to get cool? The one place we could go to get cool was Kissengen Spring. And that water was so cold that I can remember turning blue the minute I went in. And you really had to swim and splash around and move around a lot or freeze. So that's my memory. And it was so wonderful to be cool.

RICHARD FRISBIE: You couldn't help but be impressed by the temperature of the water. It was cool out there. And we used to sometimes swim out of the springs and on down the little waterway that left the south end of the springs, which was also cold and quite scenic. Some people would canoe down there.

BEN EWING: Boys used to go --I didn't do it. I wasn't stupid enough. But they would go down there, and they called --what was that word you used --noodling --and they would reach under them logs and catch fish under that log and get them in their hand. Once in a while, they would pull out a moccasin or something. Not very often, but it happened.

FRANK "BUBBA" SMITH: As we aged and got to be a little bit bigger boys, we would go down the river run, the run to the Peace River, and there would be old logs. And you could straddle those logs and go along with your hands and feel up underneath those logs and feel fish. And you could catch a little old

panfish or a catfish or something like that. If you were smart, you had a stringer so you had a mess of fish when you got out.

You know, you see these guys on TV now that are really catching gigantic catfish, you know, that look like they could swallow --we didn't do anything like that. I mean, they were just basically panfish. But I remember doing that so well, and that was exciting. It was really exciting when you pulled a little old moccasin out from underneath that log instead of a fish. You'd say, oh, Lord, my mama sure taught me better.

S. L. FRISBIE, IV: The spillway and the spring run it fed was a connection to the Peace River. Before the spring was developed as a recreation area, the outflow from the spring ran unimpeded through the Peace River's floodplain and into the river. As the spring was developed, a berm or earthen dike was raised around the spring's perimeter to retain some of its water and make the pool deeper.

JACK BOOREAM: The spillway was like 12, 15 feet wide, and you could raise and lower the spill --the springs by taking boards out. And they would take boards out late in the evening or at night and let the spring level down. And the boys, those of us who were working there, we would go out and rake the beach and get all the trash up, you know, from the day, and then put the spillway boards back in again. And I can't remember. There was a tremendous flow of water going over that spillway. And I can't remember how many thousand of gallons an hour, actually.

MYRA HAAS: It was. It was amazing.

JACK BOOREAM: It would run over the boards. It was such a force of water, it would go that high over the top of the boards. No matter where you had the boards, what level you had them at, it would still go right over the top.

S. L. FRISBIE, IV: Regardless of the depth of the pool, there was one immutable truth about the water that flowed from Kissengen Spring.

HETTIE WHATLEY: It was always cold. And we used to go on Christmas Day, a bunch of fools go down there and say we went in swimming in Kissengen Spring on Christmas Day when it was so cold.

FRANK "BUBBA" SMITH: Buddy, I guarantee you, that water would take your breath away. It really would.

BETTY AMBROSE: The cold clear water --I think it was the clear water that I liked. The cold water didn't seem to bother me at the time, because we could spend all day in the spring.

MONTEREY "BUDDY" CAMPBELL, III: The swim team, of which I was a meager part, did its preseason training at Kissengen Springs. And I guess I could joke that it was so cold that my limbs wouldn't move very good. And I never was an outstanding swimmer on the swim team.

MYRA HAAS: After everybody left at night, I would go out and bathe. I would jump off and bathe. It was fun. It was cold.

BEN JACKSON: 72 degrees year-round. If you got a little inebriated, you could sober up real fast if you jumped in the spring.

S. L. FRISBIE, IV: This is what the spillway looks like today. Only this side remains intact. Trees have taken root and grown up on the top of the berm in the 60-plus years since the spring closed. The spring run is lost in the weeds that now dominate the floodplain along this stretch of the Peace River.

THE MOST WHOLESOME PLACE

MONTEREY "BUDDY" CAMPBELL, III: You know, it was a place where the young folks of Bartow and Polk County, particularly South Polk County, the Fort Meade-Homeland area, flocked to. I consider it a most wholesome place. It was remarkable that we had in Polk County, places like that to grow up and to associate with people. And our parents were not fearful of us being there, even when we were young.

The other place comparable to it, I guess, was the pavilion at Eagle Lake, and a similar type of atmosphere, although the swimming circumstances were different. Eagle Lake, being a springfed lake, of course, didn't have the chill factor that Kissengen Spring had.

BEN JACKSON: The pool was a sandy bottom. And in the early days, it didn't have a dike around it, you know. And sometime before my time, they came out and built a dike around the pool to hold the water in, to make a pool out of it. And it was a fairly large pool. I would say it was 40, 50 yards across. And you could walk all way around it, swim all the way around it, you know. We had the pool and the spillway and, of course, the boil, and we had the dock.

FRANK "BUBBA" SMITH: Kissengen Spring had a good diving board, a low dive and it had a good high dive. And I don't know if what --when they were built but, you know, that was spectacular.

HETTIE WHATLEY: It was the low dive that I got up the nerve enough to jump off of. Not dive. But the high dive, I never did get up enough pep, energy, whatever, to go off of that.

MONTEREY "BUDDY" CAMPBELL, III: The beach area was beautiful white sand. And I think that

was probably natural white sand. It had not been imported in there. And it was all on the north side. And that's where all the sunbathing and that's where the swimming took place. Nobody ventured much to the south side. The whole spring area was probably --was not as large as a city block.

TESS DULL: But my guess would be not much over an acre. It was a small pond, I think people would call it.

PHYLLIS GILBERT: As you came up to the facilities, the bathhouses were at your left. The desk you came to --I've got this picture of it -¬would be --let's see, about in the middle. And the --you would go up to the bathhouses to get your basket for your clothes. And the boys' facility was far to the left, and the girls' just went kind back in. And there were snacks available there, but not a lot.

MONTEREY "BUDDY" CAMPBELL, III: There was a dance pavilion on the south end of the pavilion that had a little refreshment stand in it, and girls' and men's locker rooms. And it had one of those big old

Wurlitzer juke boxes. And I often claim that what little dancing I learned to do, I learned through the gracious circumstances of the girls down there that were willing to dance with me and show me what to do.

PHYLLIS GILBERT: I'm trying to remember some of the songs. It seems to me that one of them was Glen Miller's "In the Mood," when you think the dancing has stopped, the music has stopped, and then all of a sudden, it starts up again. And, of course, in the dance pavilion --now, I'm remembering it as being built of wood to a certain height and then screened in. And it was just cooled by great big fans, which didn't do a very good job. It just stirred the air around a little bit. And --but that's all right. When you're that age and you're asked to dance, you dance.

And I can remember one young man was an excellent dancer, but he really sweat a lot. You really had to think twice, but any time he would ask you, you would dance with him because he was so good. And then when he --when you got finished dancing, you found some place to wipe your hands because --not pleasant --I think that's terrible that I'm remembering that young man by his sweaty hands. Well, his shirt and everything else. But he was a good dancer.

MYRA HAAS: Jitterbugging. And then yet, they could do it real slow, real slow. But they thoroughly enjoyed that.

PHYLLIS GILBERT: And it wasn't that big a room that --you couldn't have a big crowd in there but, still, that was --that was an aim, to go dancing. You had room for several couples to be on the floor.

BEN JACKSON: In the picnic area, we had a juke box out there. And, of course, they had to dance on the sand, in the dirt, but they did it. They played that juke box out there and danced out there.

TESS DULL: In the time when we grew up in elementary or in junior high, we had school parties, sometimes Christmas parties, Halloween parties, but always an end-of-the-year party. And because there were not many facilities in Winter Haven --I mean, we had plenty of lakes, but nothing with --with a diving board or that sort of thing. So we either went to Kissengen Springs or Eagle Lake. So we had --those places, you had to make appointments so that you could bring a group that way.

RICHARD FRISBIE: And the springs was --the site was used for family picnics, as well as youthful entertainment out there. And the politicos of that day used that for their platform for trying to tell people why they should be elected or reelected. It was just a remarkable facility. Mostly used by the Fort Meade and Bartow people, but it attracted people from all over Polk County.

BEN JACKSON: And we had a two-lane bowling alley out there. We had little duck pins, little balls about this big. And it was a two-lane concrete bowling alley-type deal with the duck pins in the back. And they would play on that.

BEN EWING: It was quite a recreation area. We had a play --room there to play softball, this, that, and the other. But it was fun.

MYRA HAAS: They played pool like crazy. Jack, you can tell them more about pool.

JACK BOOREAM: All day long.

MYRA HAAS: All day long, all night long, if I let them.

S. L. FRISBIE, IV: While Kissengen Spring was visited and enjoyed by Polk County residents for almost 100 years, the owners and operators of the spring have largely faded into the mist of time.

In the time frame of the former children who enjoyed themselves at the spring through the 1930s and '40s, there were two operators in particular whom they remember.

RICHARD FRISBIE: The days I remember most vividly were when the Clark family was running that facility out there. Mr. Sam Clark and his wife were the cooks and the disciplinarians, and there were some of their children involved in the operation, also. Twins, actually. And very attractive people. Mandy was the young boy and, golly, I can't remember the lady's name now, but she was a real knockout, and so they were --they attracted the young folks, also.

BEN JACKSON: I worked there for two years during World War II, and it was enjoyable. And as you probably heard from many of the people, how nice Kissengen Spring was. I mean, it was the gathering place. I mean kids from everywhere and adults would come there, all over Polk County. We even had a group come from Sebring up there to swim. And I met a lot of nice people in the years that I worked there.

RICHARD FRISBIE: The Clarks were vacated from the springs area by a change in the ownership out there. I believe the Logan family from Winter Haven purchased that. And at that time, there was a couple that came out there to replace the Clarks. I think it was Myra Haas and her husband were out there. And they more or less took up the operation that the Clarks had left.

MYRA HAAS: We went out there in the early forties, and stayed for about five or six years.

JACK BOOREAM: Yeah. Through end of the war.

MYRA HAAS: Did we? But it was --like I said, it was hard work, but it was fun. We enjoyed every minute of it. And we still remember people that were out there and they still remember us, which is wonderful.

S. L. FRISBIE, IV: Myra Haas and her late husband Martin managed Kissengen Spring through the war years. Most of the people you have been listening to were their customers in those years. We spoke with Myra and her nephew, Jack Booream, who was one of the boys who spent their summers living and working at the spring.

MYRA HAAS: When I got up, I fed everybody that came their breakfast. And then we got cleaned up and started in on the front, on the baskets that we had there. And got to clean it up, have the boys clean it up. We worked --we worked like crazy, but we had fun. And, Jack, what all did we do?

JACK BOOREAM: Well, you were taking up the money a lot of time -¬

MYRA HAAS: Yeah.

JACK BOOREAM: --they came in.

MYRA HAAS: That whole 25 cents. Yeah.

JACK BOOREAM: And handing out the baskets -¬

MYRA HAAS: Yeah.

JACK BOOREAM: --to keep their clothes in.

MYRA HAAS: But we just thoroughly enjoyed it, and we were tired at night. We would go to the picture show or something to get out --to get away from there. We just enjoyed the whole thing. And we had just some help like Jack and Stumpy and a few of the others that sort of stayed out in a little cabin.

JACK BOOREAM: A little bunkhouse, we called it. Gosh, it had to be 10 by 12 or something like that. It was real small. Had some bunk beds in it. I think two on one side, two on the other. And just enough for four guys to go --we didn't eat there or anything else, you know. We just slept there. But Myra fed us. So as soon as we would get up in the morning, we would run down and get breakfast. But she fed us every morning, every night, every noon. She was --she took care of us.

MYRA HAAS: We ate a lot.

JACK BOOREAM: Yes. And ate good, yeah.

UNIDENTIFIED VOICE: A heck of a summer job.

BEN JACKSON: I was --I did everything. I cleaned the restrooms after --every day. I would go in and clean the restrooms up. I was --worked behind the counter. And we had baskets where people, when they bought their ticket to go to the springs, they would put their clothes in the basket after they would change them in the dressing room. And they would bring them back to me, and I would put them up in a slot, and each one of them was numbered. I did that. I worked the cash register. Cleaned the picnic grounds up. Cleaned up the beach. We had a beach at the pool. And just a general handyman.

JACK BOOREAM: It was usually four of us. There were four bunk beds, as I recall, in the little house up the road. And most of the time, there was four of us there working. And we mowed all the grass and picked up the --picked the picnic table --or trash that was left around when people had parties and stuff out there. Generally just keeping it cleaned up.

And as Myra said, when they would let the spillway boards out and let the pool down at night, we would go out there and rake all that, clean it up, make it look nice for bathers to come. And we got paid because we didn't have to go to --pay to go swimming anymore for the whole summer.

BEN JACKSON: I was closing up one night out there, and it was, oh, late, early in the morning. People stayed late at the spring. And all lights were off. And we lived in a cabin up on top of the hill as you come into the spring. Us young boys would stay up there. So I closed up everything, and I turned on the security lights before I left.

I was about halfway up the --pitch black. And I was about halfway up to the spring run, and I heard this gosh awful scream. I mean --I knew there was nobody out there. No cars, no women, no --it was a panther had screamed back down in the Peace River. I didn't stop running until I hit the cabin, it scared me that bad.

THE BEST HAMBURGER IN POLK COUNTY

BEN JACKSON: One thing that we did that I did not like to do was on Sunday afternoons, we had chicken, fried chicken dinners, and it was up to me to go out and kill the chickens. I did not like to do that. That was not my cup of tea.

KEN LAURENT: I remember back in those days, Sam Clark, on some Sundays, would have a breakfast. He would have sausage and pancakes and coffee. And you would go out there --of course, you had to pay for it, but it wasn't much. But he always had a crowd. I wish we could do that again.

DWIGHT "JUDGE" WILSON: One summer I remember --I don't know who did it --the boy working behind the counter was by the name of Dick Acree, who was in high school with me at the time. He's a little older than me. But in the drink cooler where they cooled Cokes and so forth, somebody had pealed a whole bunch of oranges, and they were selling oranges a nickel apiece. And they were floating around in that cold water, and they tasted pretty good.

KEN LAURENT: Later on, when they ran the concession, you know, where the pavilion was, you could get hamburger and a chocolate milk for a quarter. Because when I was in my days of wandering up and down the river, I would always take a quarter with me.

RICHARD FRISBIE: If I recall correctly, they had about the best hamburgers you could find in Polk County.

BEN JACKSON: We had hamburgers, hot dogs, and like I mentioned, Friday --sometimes on Sunday sometimes, we would have a fried chicken dinner. You could always find something to eat out there.

HOW I SPENT MY SUMMER VACATION

S. L. FRISBIE, IV: Kids will be kids, even if these kids are old enough now to be your parents or grandparents. Here are some tales about how they spent their summer vacations.

KEN LAURENT: I was going to wade around the edge of it all the way around. At the time, I couldn't swim. And I was in front of a little old dock down there close to where it spilled out to the run to the river, and I stepped in a hole. Fortunately, there was a young man standing on the dock grabbed my hair, and pulled me back up.

FRANK "BUBBA" SMITH: I remember that we would have --Ed and Earl Stevens was pretty instrumental in organizing horseback rides, and they would have moonlight rides. And we would always ride the horses to Kissengen Spring or to Sam's pool, you know, wherever we were going to cook and eat. But --and that was a fun time. And that happened, you know, almost monthly. You know, we would go

full-moon time, we will ride the horses down there. You know, there would be 14 or 15 or 25 or 30 people on horses. And it was fun. It was a neat process.

RICHARD FRISBIE: Well, I guess, the difficulties that arose were from the competition that the boys from Fort Meade and Bartow were engaged in for the better female dancers out there.

BEN JACKSON: One Saturday night, I was about 16 years old, and all the other guys were older than me. And the two --the couple that run the springs, at least, they were all gone. They were gone into town. And all the lights --I had turned off --everybody had left. I was the only person out there. It was about 12:30, 1:00 in the morning, and I had turned off all lights, the lights to the pool, the lights to the dressing room, and the picnic area. Everything was black except the light that I was working on to check out the cash register. Well, all of a sudden, I looked up and I saw this --headlights come down the spring road, you know, and I said, oh, no, not this time of the night. And they parked out there by the pool, and I heard all the giggling and talking going on out there. And I said, what in the world is going on?

So I just nonchalantly reached over and flipped on the pool lights. And there was five young girls running to the pool in their birthday suits. And I left the lights on. And, of course, the water is 72 degrees, and at 12:30, 1:00 in the morning, it's cold. And they were begging me, Ben, please turn the lights off. Turn off the lights. I said, huh-huh, I'm not going to turn them off.

Finally, I reached over and turned them off so they could get out. But that was the most humorous thing that I run into when I was out there.

MONTEREY "BUDDY" CAMPBELL, III: When I was about to begin the sixth grade, and I guess I can confess that would have been in the fall of 1941. My father was the principal of the Bartow elementary and junior high schools at the time. And the day before school was to start, Jack Booream and I, who were classmates, decided to spend one last day at Kissengen Springs. And to show how our parents felt about safety of it, Jack and I got on our bicycles and rode from Bartow down to the springs.

The only bad part about it was --particularly for me and the complexion that I have --is that we rode down wearing only our bathing trunks, no shirt, no nothing, and we spent the day down there. Had a delightful time as young folks are likely to do, not thinking about the consequences of it later.

And I got home that night and realized that I was pretty badly sunburned. But I didn't realize how badly until I woke up the next morning, and I had blisters on my back the size larger than half dollars. I can remember later having to go to Dr. Newman, who was the doctor in town, and he had to puncture those to -¬

But the point of the story is that I got up the next morning and school was supposed to start in the sixth grade for me. And I told my dad, in considerable pain, Daddy, I can't go to school. I'm so sunburned, I can't wear a shirt. And he being the principal, said --looked at me and he said, yes, you can. And I said, but I can't wear a shirt. And he said, well, then you'll go without one.

BEN EWING: Most of the time, we would get out there, and boys would go out and then the girls would come later. And everybody would be having fun and what-have-you. And the girls loved to get their hair washed in the spillway. And two or three of us boys would go down there and wash their hair all day.

RICHARD FRISBIE: I think one of the primary reasons I remember Kissengen Springs so well also was the fact that I proposed to my first wife at Kissengen Springs, and she accepted and I presented her with an engagement ring.

BEN JACKSON: Well, we had the lower diving board and the high diving board. And one of our young Bartow males was going to be macho one day. He was going to get on the railing of the top dive. He was going to jump from the railing to the top of the top diving board. From there, bounce down and hit the lower diving board and dive into the water. We pulled him out with a broken leg.

KEN LAURENT: I had my Keds and a pair of shorts, no top --we didn't wear tops during the summer --and a straw hat. That was my outfit.

S. L. FRISBIE, IV: Stand out in the water.

KEN LAURENT: And you know, I've thought about it since then. I would come up to the springs, and I would go up to the pavilion, and I had my pistol. Nobody ever commented. It was a .22 pistol. It was not a big one. But it was strange back --you couldn't do that today without somebody calling somebody.

MONTEREY "BUDDY" CAMPBELL, III: On the west side of the whole pond area was a dam that impeded the flow in order to keep some of the water level high in the spring area as that runoff went down to the Peace River. And if you went across that dam, beautiful clear water in that spring area. And I can remember wading in there and fishing with a little rod and reel that I had as a child.

JACK BOOREAM: Mostly we did spear fishing, which is illegal today, but it wasn't back then. We made our own spear guns because you couldn't buy any. Flatten out a clothes hanger, put a sharp end on it and a V on the other end, use bamboo, burn out a hole in the middle so you had two joints to make it a little bit longer, and tie a rubber band, rubbers, on it. And we shot a lot of fish down there. A lot of fish.

In fact, I shot --I've got a scar right there, where we were down there fishing, and there was a favorite place for these fish to be, was up under a deep hole where the river would bend. And I was down there and I put my hand up on the top to get back up, and put it right on a moccasin. And so I jumped up. And I got so excited when I pulled back this spear, I was going to shoot the moccasin, I shot myself in the hand. I pulled it out past the --and we had to --we pulled it out, and I had to get my buddy there with me to help me pull it out. It went in there pretty good.

BETTY AMBROSE: It was near enough to Bartow that we could ride bicycles to the spring. We would --we would ride out the Old Bartow-Homeland Road and then across 17, and ride to the spring. Of course there wasn't as much traffic then, so it was safe --a safe thing to do. And we would spend the day and take a picnic lunch and eat there.

RICHARD FRISBIE: In my younger days, I used to ride my bike out there. And when I was a senior in high school, I had a little flimmer that I drove out there.

HETTIE WHATLEY: If we had somebody with a car, we, of course, drove up 17. But I often walked it up the railroad track from Homeland to Kissengen Spring. And the Crum family, which, you know, is a big family from around Homeland and Bartow, they had a reunion there every year. So we got a ride up on that day because my best friend was a Crum.

BEN EWING: There was a lot of boys rode bicycles. They rode a bike out there when they couldn't catch a ride with somebody. But most of the time, you could get a ride with somebody. Somebody was going to the springs, especially in the summer.

BEN JACKSON: We had a bull gator out there we named Old Joe. And he would come up the spring run to the spillway at night, and he would bellow. You could hear him grunting like a humongous frog over there. But nobody went over there to check on him because we didn't want to get around him. And then during the day, I don't know where he went. Down the run somewhere, maybe. Maybe back out into Peace River.

MYRA HAAS: They would come --sometimes we would have a number of people at night. So like I said, it's hard to say what went on, but that pool table was --I'm telling you. I wonder if it's still alive.

KEN LAURENT: For the age that I was then, you know, 14 to 18, it was the year --that's when they had the dancings and so on. And I can remember some of the dancers. One of them was Ann, your -¬Ann Lipscomb, who's Ann Frisbie now.

S. L. FRISBIE, IV: Right.

KEN LAURENT: And she was a great dancer. We just loved to watch her. You know, she could jitterbug like nothing. And she wasn't the only one. There were others. Some of the boys -¬Russell Cline was a great jitterbugger. And you probably don't remember the Clines.

S. L. FRISBIE, IV: No, sir. So there was a pavilion. This is where the dance was held?

KEN LAURENT: That's where the dancing was held.

S. L. FRISBIE, IV: Did they have a jukebox?

KEN LAURENT: Yeah. And it cost a quarter. That was a lot of money. And we loved the day when the fellow came to collect the coins from the box. And --because he would always trip it for about 10 or 15 free ones.

JACK BOOREAM: You didn't run them out, did you, Myra?

MYRA HAAS: No. They stayed. And if one of us got tired, one would go to bed and the other would stay up and wait for them so --because it was --there was nothing unusual. It was safe, you know. They were good kids, and we enjoyed them. We worked hard, played hard, and took care of our young'uns.

DWIGHT "JUDGE" WILSON: There was a crowd of us. And I won't mention any names, but it was late in the evening about dusk. And we were out on the dock where the diving boards were. And some girl in the crowd --all of us were fully dressed. Picked her up and threw her in over the boils. She didn't appreciate that very much.

BEN EWING: The boys that graduated --Bubba Boswell and that outfit in '45 --would have been '45. When they graduated, we had a dance at the civic center with a band. Proctor --do you remember Charlie Proctor's band from Eagle Lake -¬used to come and play. Well, about 9:30, we would start slipping out, a couple or two at a time. And we would all meet up out at Kissengen Spring and finish the night out there, to the jukebox.

TESS DULL: Well, there were swings in the oak trees, you know, rope with a board on it or a tire on it. There was some of those back in the oak trees. My most enjoyable thing was to go around the side of the spring where there was a bridge over the overflow. And my mother wouldn't let us go very far down the overflow stream, but that was enjoyable because it was, you know, adventuresome that way.

KEN LAURENT: Along those lines that --when I was later in high school, I worked at Mack's Groceries. Do you remember Mack's?

S. L. FRISBIE, IV: I remember Mack's Grocery, yes, indeed.

KEN LAURENT: Mack was --he looked stern, but he was a great guy to work for. And we went from 7:00 in the morning until midnight. Midnight, we closed the door. You couldn't buy any groceries after that. And it would take us another hour to clean up. And all of us boys, there was about six of us, they worked at the A&P and at Mack's, and we would get together and go to the springs and skinny dip. It was cold.

BEN JACKSON: Mainly, the guys training at the airbase come out for their graduation party. It was kind of sad because, you know, they were going over to fly the fighter, P51 Mustangs, into combat. And you would look at them and you would say, hey, you know, maybe this guy is not coming home. It was kind of sad, you know, to see that. But they had a ball.

MYRA HAAS: And they would take the planes and come out and go straight down. And just about the time they hit the water, they would zoom up. We -¬I mean, we would sit there, horrified, thinking they were going to hit. But it was fun to watch them. And then they would come out and swim and enjoy it and picnic, and what have you.

BEN EWING: Well, I remember one time after a hurricane, all us boys got together and went out there. And we couldn't drive all the way to the spring because of high water. The river was flooded. So we decided we would wade the road. And we got our shorts and bathing suits on, and we waded out there. And as we got closer to the spring itself, they had built a beach around it, white sand. And all you could see was alligators laying up on that sand, sunning.

And we --needless to say, we didn't go all the way up to the spring, but we did go up and see it. And the pavilion and everything was out of the water. It was built up off the ground a little. And the best I remember, it didn't flood. The building was fine, but it was a home for alligators for a while.

BEN JACKSON: Some guy, I don't know who it was. He come out there one day, and he had this apparatus. He made the helmet out of a big tin bucket and put a glass in it. And he brought along an old hand air pump that you had to pump the air to the guy who had the helmet on underneath the water. And we had a belt that we put around us to keep us down on the floor. And we would take that and put it on. And I did it one time, and one time was enough.

So after that, I walked on the bottom of the floor, the spring, but we never got into the boil because that's where the water was gushing up, and it was coming up pretty fast, so it would really mess you up. And we would go down on the bottom the boil.

But the only thing that bothered me about the whole procedure, those guys pumping the air, I was scared they was going to stop and I would be down there without the air. Of course, we could have taken the bucket off, but we didn't think about that.

S. L. FRISBIE, IV: We asked: How many people would visit Kissengen Spring on a given day?

TESS DULL: Not hundreds. Oh, I would guess probably 30, 40, 50, something like that, if it wasn't a church party or a school party.

BEN JACKSON: It stayed crowded, I would say anywhere from 100 to 150 people, maybe not so many on some days, maybe 50, you know, but it was pretty crowded. Because you've got to remember, this was the day before television, before cell phones, before all the technology we have. The only thing we had then was the radio and the electric light. But --and that's where people gathered.

S. L. FRISBIE, IV: Then we asked how much was the admission charge to get into the spring. No one knew for sure, but we received quite a range of answers.

BEN JACKSON: It --my recollection, about 25 cents to go in to swim, somewhere in that area.

PHYLLIS GILBERT: In talking to some friends who also went, we've about decided that everybody got in free. It was the bathhouse that cost. But you see, we used to go there for class groups at the end of the year. That was the big thing, to go to Kissengen Spring for the end-of-the-year party. And all those kids got in free. Had to, because I can't remember collecting money. And you're right. This was during the depression when I was going. And some of those children certainly could not have afforded anything to go. So I think that probably we got in free. What cost was using the facilities, the bathhouse.

BEN EWING: We used to stop before we'd get there and change clothes, and drive up there and park and go in the pool. There would be 100 people out there. They didn't know whether we were paid or not.

MYRA HAAS: And I'm afraid so, and it was all okay. You know, we didn't --we weren't in it for a lot of money, anyway. That's a good thing, because we didn't make a lot.

S. L. FRISBIE, IV: Busted, Ben. Some of the biggest, best attended events at Kissengen Spring were of the political kind. Here are some eyewitness accounts of political rallies in the days of Spessard Holland.

MONTEREY "BUDDY" CAMPBELL, III: It was as much social as it was political. I think political rallies then were used as a means of social gathering. We didn't have the forms of communication that we have today. So more of the political campaigning was done on a one-on-one -¬well, not one-on-one, but on a personal basis of making speeches in staged --I don't mean badly staged, but staged incidents. And Senator Holland would always come home, whether it was when he was Governor or when he was in the United States Senate, he would always come home to kick off his campaigns. And I can remember a number of those.

But I can remember being out --and as I said, in that picture that I think is in your mother's book, nearly all of elected officials in the county, state or county-elected officials, were there.

KEN LAURENT: Well, my first recollection of Kissengen Spring, my father took me out there at some political rally they had, you know, up in the area, used to be a beautiful shaded oak area, perfect for a gathering. And I can't remember who was in it, but my father was always interested in politics. And he took me, I must have been seven, eight years old, so that would have been around 1930, back then, '30, 31. And there was always a crowd.

BEN EWING: And the county commissioners who were running for office, instead of being at the courthouse or uptown, they would go out there and have a little barbeque and what have you, and draw a crowd. I remember Claude Pepper came out there and had a political meeting out there.

And a lot of companies had fish fries for their --I know Alturas Packing Company, which Daddy was a member, owner, part owner, whatever. But they used to have a fish fry at end of the fruit season, and they would have all the people that worked for Alturas Packing Company out there to eat fish and swimming and whatever.

BEN JACKSON: We had political rallies out there in the 1930s. When I was about eight, nine, ten years old, the politicos would give me five dollars to go around and put their political memorandums, whatever, on people's windshields, you know.

S. L. FRISBIE, IV: Five dollars in that day, it was a considerable sum of money.

BEN JACKSON: It was a lot of money, and I thought I was rich. Eight, nine, ten years old, that bought me a lot of bubblegum.

RICHARD FRISBIE: Senator Holland was out there one time, and I think the candidate for Polk County Sheriff, Monroe Brannon, spoke there one time when I attended the festivities out there.

PHYLLIS GILBERT: I think they had rallies and that sort of thing, but that's more for people in Bartow. We would not come all the way from Winter Haven to Bartow to hear a man speak, but we would come from Winter Haven to Bartow to swim.

WHERE DID THE SPRING GO?

JACK BOOREAM: I was sitting there and all of a sudden, the water stopped flowing. It wasn't running past us. It got real still all around us. You're talking about some teenagers down there and the water stopped flowing. It would scare you to death. We came flying back up as fast as we could to get to the springs. This was after Myra was gone. It was when Tommy Jones was running it.

And so we went up there and got Tommy Jones, and he wouldn't believe us. He had to go down there with us. And by that time, it was starting to back up right there at the spillway. And we went down there, and then we started seeing phosphate slimes coming in.

And what had happened was the old Homeland mine slime pond where they put the big berms around them, you know, and hold that water, it had broken and went down in the Peace River. And it backed… there was such… so much water, so much slime, that it backed it all the way up to the Peace River and then up the spring's run and clear up to --it did not get into Kissengen Spring. It didn't come over the spillway.

But, you know, it wasn't but --there was all kind of hullaballoo in the newspapers and everything about it. But it wasn't too long until Mother Nature had cleaned herself all up again. You didn't see anymore of the slime in the spring's run or in the Kissimmee --Peace River.

It just --we did find some fish, big bass, in there. We picked them up. I don't know if Tommy Jones is still living or not, but he could verify this. We brought, I'm going to say four or five 8¬to 10-pound bass back up there. And we was going to take them and eat them. And he said, oh, no, no, you boys better not eat that. And he says, I'm going to have to have them, you know, examined to make sure that this stuff isn't poisoned. So -¬well, you know who ate the bass.

S. L. FRISBIE, IV: Did this event foreshadow the end of Kissengen Spring? Remotely in the sense that after World War II, phosphate mining was growing to its peak in the area around Kissengen Spring. Over the years, the loss of spring flow from Kissengen has largely been attributed to the presence of nearby water wells drilled by phosphate miners who pumped millions of gallons of water a day from the same intermediate acquifer that fed Kissengen Spring. The level of the aquifer fell below the point where Kissengen Spring could flow.

JOHN DAME: Any kind of an aerial photograph, even in those days or now, show that it's surrounded by intensive phosphate mining operations. So some people blame them for the spring going dry. Others blame the citrus industry. So probably that, along with use by the cities drawing from the Floridan aquifer all have played some role in this.

ROGER D. GRIFFITHS: There's no question that the phosphate industry had a huge impact on a lot of issues that took place. I don't really blame them. I think that the things that they were doing at the time were highly acceptable. They were certainly legal. And we just --maybe we've learned from some of that. But I don't think you could put all the blame on the phosphate people. I think we've seen some rebounding of our aquifer since the phosphate companies are no longer pumping as much as they did and certainly discharging as much as they did. But then there's a whole lot people here, there's a lot more agriculture here. So there's a lot of other uses of water that are taking place.

S. L. FRISBIE, IV: So we all put demands on our water supply, but where does our water come from?

JOHN DAME: In Florida, the aquifer is only recharged through rainfall. Some people have the misconception that we have underground streams coming from North Carolina. Well, that isn't -¬that's purely a myth.

ROGER D. GRIFFITHS: I don't know that the average person who lives in this area would be aware that water truly is a finite issue, and probably won't realize that until they turn their tap on and nothing comes out. We can kind of laugh about that, but that has actually happened in some coastal areas. It has happened with some people who are operating off of maybe not as deep a well as they might wish that they had had.

So that is happening, but it's happening in just small areas. This is something that is happening under the ground. You can't see it. So it's a big problem. It's going to continue to be a bigger problem. And one of the solutions is to be able to explain to people that this is taking place even though they can't see it. Now, they can see that some of the swamps are drying up and some of the lakes are drying up and some of our canals are maybe not as navigable as they once were. But it's still something that's a little bit difficult, I think, for the average person to get a handle on.

MIKE BRITT: You think of areas along the Ridge areas like Lake Wales, Haines City, you know, parts of Auburndale, when water hits those Ridge areas, 100 percent of that water infiltrated into the ground and it percolated into the ground and it filled up aquifers and eventually traveled to lakes. So we think that restoring that natural hydrology the best we can, is the smartest way to treat stormwater.

So instead of treating stormwater at the source, you know, why not treat it as a resource? Why not put that water back in the ground, let it percolate in the soils to provide that treatment, and that gives us future water supply from the aquifer, it stores water in the surficial aquifer that eventually makes its way to the lakes, and it cleans that water. So I think that treating stormwater on a small scale and let it percolate in the ground where it can is, by far, the smartest way to do it, and it provides the most benefits for the future, too.

S. L. FRISBIE, IV: I have heard of the spring situation in Florida being compared to the canary in the coal mine, that early warning that tells you that something is not going right. Does the situation with springs drying up, is that, in fact, a warning of where we're heading as a state?

MR. DAMES: That is an excellent analogy of the actual situation. This is really happening. And it's a question of monitoring and determining the severity of this in the other areas and trying to figure out what to do about it.

ROGER D. GRIFFITHS: I think that's probably a good analogy. It's certainly a way to look at the result of some of the things that man has done upstream and in that particular watershed that might actually bring a little bit of interest to see what we can do to make it a little bit better again.

MR. DAMES: The concern is that this is happening in other parts of the State of Florida. There has been at least one other major spring of this type to dry up. And a lot of the others are showing a significant

lowering in level. For instance, Ichetucknee up near Gainesville, the overall height of that spring has lowered. It's a question as to how much more it can take.

S. L. FRISBIE, IV: The end of Kissengen Spring is officially dated as February 19th, 1950. Ironically, Myra Haas' birthday. From then on, the spring has managed to flow a few times for a limited amount of time.

MONTEREY "BUDDY" CAMPBELL, III: Still while I was in college, everybody got excited because after it had dried up, it restarted, the flow restarted briefly. And I don't know when that was. I think it dried up around 1950, so sometime within the next couple of years, it restarted again, and people got excited that it was going to restore itself. But it was a false alarm, unfortunately.

S. L. FRISBIE, IV: During your tenure on the county commission, did the county take any particular interest in the Kissengen Spring restoration?

FRANK "BUBBA" SMITH: None. I think they said that the springs sort of quit flowing in the early-fifties or it was in 1950. And that was ten years before I went to work for the clerk. If I ever heard anything about it, it was just people grousing because, you know, the pool was no longer in existence. But it was --it was a great recreational place.

S. L. FRISBIE, IV: The sporadic resumptions of spring flow with Kissengeng have been largely preceded by hurricane events, most notably after Donna in 1960, and in 2004, after our unprecedented onslaught of Charley, Frances, and Jeanne. In 2004, the spring flowed for six weeks due to the combination of three hurricanes' worth of water suddenly appearing in the aquifer and the equally sudden decrease in demand due to a lack of electricity to run well pumps. In the years since the demise of Kissengen Spring, the best summer place in Polk County has been misted over by nostalgia.

MONTEREY "BUDDY" CAMPBELL, III: When I was on the Court of Appeal, the state authorized us to enlarge our headquarters in Lakeland, about 1985 or 1986. And the then-Chief Judge appointed me as a committee of one --that's the best kind of committee to have if you're on it --to oversee the implementation of the remodeling --we more than doubled the size of the building --and to make all of the decisions in regard to it.

And one of the things that you had to do then, the state --in better economic times, the state required a certain percentage of the construction costs --and I've forgotten, like half of 1 percent or something --to be invested in art to be placed in the building.

And being the committee of one, I got to choose that art. And I was an admirer of Robert Butler and his work. And Robert, who was one of the great to be --perhaps the greatest --I don't want to insult anybody else, but he's just spectacular, of his Florida scenes. And I got in touch with him.

And he told me that he would do it, but one of the things he had always wanted --Robert mainly did not do back at that time actual scenes. He visualized things, how things in Florida looked or should look. But he said he had always wanted to do a painting of Kissengen Springs. And he would do what we were asking him to do for the court if I could get him into the old area so that he could see it and do a painting of it. And I said I think that can be arranged.

And Myra Haas, who Myra and Martin used to operate the springs --and I'm sure you've talked with them or are going to. Myra was then operating her studio on Stanford Street where she did painting and framing. So I took Robert to Myra first. And he went over a lot of pictures and things with her.

And then I got in touch with the --and I've forgotten now which phosphate company was controlling it at the time. And they provided Robert with access to the property.

And as a result, he did the painting. And there have since been prints done of it. But if you've never seen the actual painting, you should go to the Second District Court of Appeal headquarters on Memorial Boulevard in Lakeland, and see it. It is a painting that's about 8 or 10 feet wide.

S. L. FRISBIE, IV: Wow.

MONTEREY "BUDDY" CAMPBELL, III: And when you walk into the lobby, it's there. And it warms my heart because Robert captured Kissengen Springs in all of its essence. I mean, it's like he took a picture of it that he did 35 years after it dried up. But it's got the pavilion and diving board and the springs, and you can see the boil, and it's wonderful.

ROBERT BUTLER: I was asked to do some paintings of Florida. And in having these paintings in the courthouse here, one of my objectives in doing that was to show appreciation and --were close to the history for people of Polk County. And that's how Kissengen Springs came up as a subject for me to do.

S. L. FRISBIE, IV: Obviously, you are too young to have been to Kissengen Spring when it was a --not tourist attraction, but when it was a recreational venue in Polk County. The painting was done in 1986, some 30-odd years after the spring dried up and some years after the pavilion was gone. How did you do this picture?

ROBERT BUTLER: Well, I did my research on it. And that was one of the most enjoyable parts about getting a job like this, is that you can do research on it. But in picking the subject, I started to go around and talk with people who were there, who told me numerous stories about the place. And so through that kind of questioning, I began to develop a sense of what Kissengen Spring was.

I also researched the newspapers and went back to about 1890, somewhere back in there, right up to when it was discovered, and it was being used as a spring back at that time, too, but not as much as it started to be used after the war, the Second World War was over, and I guess the GIs came back. And so it began to be used a lot more. And that's how I developed a sense of the subject.

S. L. FRISBIE, IV: And I assume that you also had one or more photographs to work from, presumably black and white. There wasn't a lot of color photography back then.

ROBERT BUTLER: Yes, that's correct. And I think one of the things that I do when I start to research on things like that, I have to keep in mind that things are different now than they were back when Kissengen Spring was operating. A little fine, little points of historic value that I had to keep track of. But, yes, I guess this picture comes from a newspaper article somewhere in the seventies, that I got.

S. L. FRISBIE, IV: You say you interviewed a lot of people who had been to the spring and had stories of it. Is there one story or one thing that stands out in your mind, something that either everybody had to say or something that only one person new about?

ROBERT BUTLER: Well, I talked with some of the people who worked there, and they would be the ones who had the most contact with people as they come and go in the location there. There was nothing that particularly stood out, but I noted that after interviewing all of those people and seeing all the articles, in my head, I could hear the noise that perhaps frolicking in the water, kids chattering, it reminded me of places where I've been where that's been the case.

But all of that was kind of --as some people call, getting in the groove to paint this painting. And that's the part I enjoy about this, because that gives you a sense more than the physical object that you're looking at. You get a sense of what it's like to be there.

And I don't talk too much about that kind of thing, but in this case, I love that place because it was a community place where people come together and had picnics and political rallies. They told me about the hot dog stand, things like that. So it's general Americana, I call it.

FRANK "BUBBA" SMITH: But the springs was a great place to grow up and remember growing up. We used to swim a lot. We used to --as a matter of fact, one of the stories that I've been reminded of recently was that Rick Aulsley and a lady teacher, a vocational --no, I think she was --she was a girl's PE teacher, and she yet lives, and she's 82. And I don't know whether she's on deck to come or not. But before the City of Bartow would fill up the pool --because they wouldn't fill up the pool until the summertime, until it got hot. But that's where the swimming team did their practicing, was in Kissengen Springs.

BEN JACKSON: I tell you, I wish people that were born after 1950 could have experienced Kissengen Spring. It was a place to go. It was a gathering place.

RICHARD FRISBIE: It was always fun to go out there and meet your friends out there and splash around.

BETTY AMBROSE: It was always just a very pleasant experience there.

BEN EWING: Nothing can be negative about the springs, that I can think of. It was a fun place to go and a lot of happy memories of people that made a lot of friends out there.

MYRA HAAS: The springs was just a wonder place. It really was. I don't know of any place any better. We've been all over the country, all of the world, and I still don't know of any place any better than old Kissengen Springs.

BEN JACKSON: The remnants of the spring is still there. We were doing some fish --frying some fish out behind Clear Springs mine at one of their pavilions out there. And a buddy of mine who went to the spring a lot, too, during our young years, we got to talking and, you know, the spring was around here somewhere. Let's see if we can't find it.

So we walked back through the woods, the bushes. And the first thing I recognized was the old oak trees over the picnic area. I recognized those big old oak trees. And about 75 yards further on, we run into where the spring was. And the hole was still there. The concrete where the pavilion was still there. The spillway across was still there. And you could see the dike that they had put around the spring pool to hold the water in.

And an old cypress tree that was by the pavilion had fallen. And we used to use that cypress tree with a cable to swing out over the pool and drop into the water. The cable was still attached to that cypress tree. And as far as I know, it's still there.

PHYLLIS GILBERT: We's just had a magical time at Kissengen Spring.

S. L. FRISBIE, IV: And so, Kissengen Spring is no more. If there is one thing we would like for you take away from this event, it's that Kissengen Spring was more than just that old swimming hole back in the woods that Grandma talks about. It was a big part of the young lives of those we've heard from this evening, and many more from whom we haven't. Several generations worth, in fact.

What would it take to get Kissengen Spring flowing again? That is a question for another conversation. Tonight, we wanted to help those long-ago kids relive their childhood adventures in Kissengen Spring, and for the rest, to give you a flavor for what you missed when the spring went away.

I'm S.L. Frisbie. Thank you and good night.