

Ritter: Far away in time and distance

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If you are looking for a health spa with herbal wraps, cucumber water and Yerba mate lattes, then Ritter Hot Springs is not for you.

However, what Ritter might lack in posh accouterments, it more than makes up for with scenic beauty, a rich history and plenty of hot, healing spring water.

Ritter was first discovered and homesteaded by William Neal McDuffee in the 1850s and was originally named McDuffee Hot Springs. One of McDuffee's original cabins can still be found on the site today. McDuffee was an interesting character, according to current Ritter owner Mike Tillay of Walla Walla. Tillay, who has studied the history of the hot springs, says McDuffee was a miner, a watermaster and even spent time in prison for murdering a man on the property.

"(McDuffee) was an out of luck miner and he struck gold with hot water," Tillay said.

Ritter was later renamed for the popular John Day Valley pioneer minister Rev. Joseph Ritter, who had bought the ranch where the springs are located.

The resort is 10 miles west of Highway 395 on Ritter Road, along a meander of the Middle Fork John Day River in Grant County roughly 20 miles north of Long Creek.

The sleepy little alcove was once, and still is, a destination for people looking to reap the health benefits of the mineral waters found at the hot springs, according to Tillay. He said the water feels smooth due to its high alkalinity, close to a nine on the pH scale, which can be good for your skin.

"I have a lady staying here right now that takes a five-gallon bucket of it home and sprays it on her after a shower because it makes her skin feel smooth," Tillay said.

A century old hot springs comes with a lot of upkeep and renovations seem to be constantly underway. Tillay, who is also president and CEO of Grab on Grips, a company that makes bicycle handlebar wraps, can be found working on improvements to the property most days of the week, although he has no plans to expand current operations.

While retelling an account for a guest, Tillay touched one of Ritter's biggest charms — its remoteness.

"The absolute best thing about Ritter is that there is nothing to do," Tillay said. "You can just put your mind in neutral. You can just chill."

Ritter Hot Springs sits in the bend of the Middle fork John Day River at the 13 mile marker on County Rd 15 near Long Creek in northeastern Oregon.