



# Health wealth

## in Hot Springs

**NEW MEXICO**

**LAND OF ENCHANTMENT**

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**N**ew Mexico was known as a “salubrious spot” to explorers and traders in the early 19th century. Although some health seekers came when New Mexico was annexed to the United States in 1846, a stream turned into a flood once the Indian wars were over and the railroad had arrived in the last decades of the 19th century. Territorial Secretary William Ritch wrote in 1885: “Since the railroad entered New Mexico, the mineral springs of the territory have been put within easy and comfortable reach of the world.” In New Mexico, resorts developed around springs at Faywood, Montezuma, Radium Springs and other places.

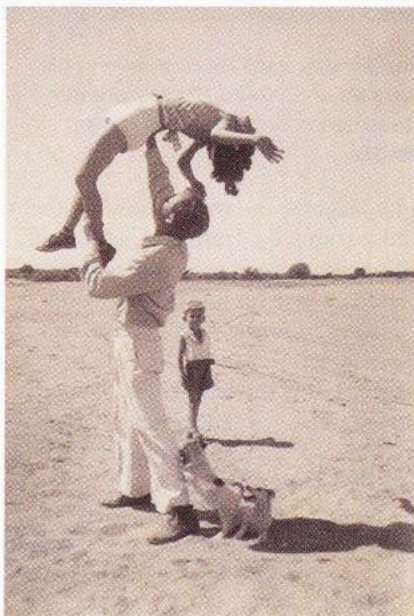
Hot mineral waters have been fundamental to the history of Truth or Consequences, as evidenced by its previous incarnations before April Fool’s Day 1950, when its name was changed to a television game show: Geronimo Spring (1884), Palomas Hot Springs (ca. 1895-1914) and then Hot Springs (1914-1950).

Thermal water in the area of present downtown T or C formed pools used by Native Americans for centuries. Travelers in the area also utilized the hot springs, including soldiers from nearby Fort McRae. One group from the fort was attacked by Apaches while soaking in 1863, resulting in a number of casualties. The first bathhouse was built in 1884.



**Opposite**—An old postcard shows how Hot Springs looked before it was renamed Truth or Consequences.

**Above**—“Grandma” Wiseman, who raised Jack Keas in El Paso, Texas, and a milk cow. **Below**—Jack Keas lifts his wife, Sara, as their son looks on in this posed shot taken on the shore at Elephant Butte Lake in 1939.



In the early 20th century, Hot Springs was gaining recognition as a health center with its sodium-potassium-chloride-rich water issuing from springs at a rate of 2.5 million gallons a day, containing, according to one source, the largest mineral table in the Southwest and the highest mineral content in the United States.

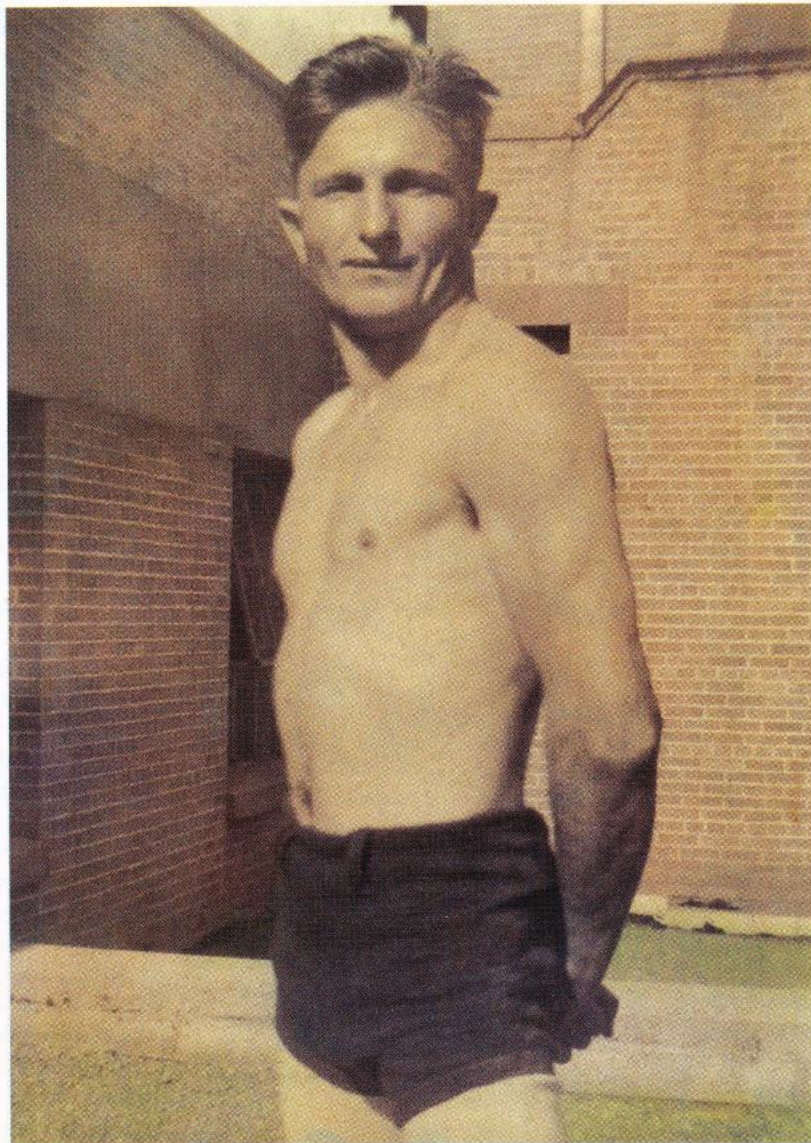
Highway improvements in southern New Mexico enabled motorists to flock to resorts in the region. An expanded road system, construction of Elephant Butte and Caballo dams, Carrie Tingley Hospital for Crippled Children, and a number of public-building and street-paving projects caused the area around Hot Springs to prosper in the 1920s and 1930s. Bathhouses, hotels, rooming houses and tourist camps served the motoring—and bathing—public.

A corps of workers attended to the needs of health seekers in Hot Springs. One of them was Newton Watson “Jack” Keas (1905-1971) who spent about five years in the health-service industry in Hot Springs during the heyday of bathhouses.

Keas worked as a hot-pool therapist at Carrie Tingley Hospital, as a therapist and masseur at the Virginia Ann Hospital, as a masseur at the Yucca Baths and James Bath House, as a wrestling promoter, as sports editor of the *Hot Springs Herald* and as editor, publisher and owner of the *Hot Springs Health City News*, later morphing into

**By Charles Bennett**





another newspaper called *New Health*.

Born in Illinois, he and his siblings were taken by their mother to Kansas when he was 2 years old to escape their abusive father. There the children were cared for during the day by other families so Mrs. Keas could work full-time. One evening young Newton did not return as usual. The childless couple looking after him had suddenly departed for points unknown, traveling in their horse-drawn wagon with all their possessions, and Newton.

The couple resettled in El Paso, Texas. Soon all memory of his true mother and siblings was gone. When the mother of his new family died—the father remarrying—he started spending more time with his new “grandmother,” who had been told that her son had adopted Newton.

When Newton was 12 his “grandmother” saw a newsreel depicting his abductors, recognizing her own son

The athletic Jack Keas shown in his days as an El Paso, Texas, wrestler. He wrestled on both sides of the border.

and daughter-in-law, confronting them and learning the truth about Newton’s kidnapping. Soon he was on a train to Nevada where his mother lay dying. Now in California with his true family, it was determined that Newton had received only the basics of an education, and he was sent to private school to catch up. But he ran away, returning to El Paso.

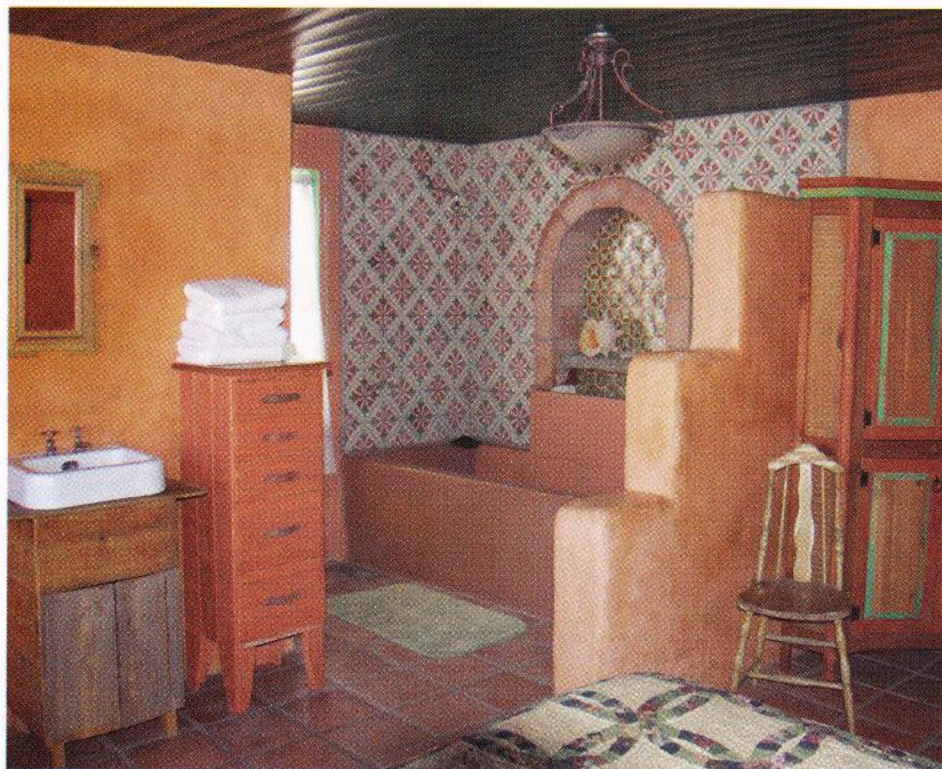
When he was in his 20s, Newton drank and smoked. His health declined and a doctor gave him the ultimatum to change his life or die. He read about a professional wrestler named Jack Reynolds who also suffered from drinking and smoking, dropping these habits to become a champion. The story moved and inspired Newton,

who started calling himself “Jack” Keas, deciding to become a professional wrestler, too, and lead a healthy life.

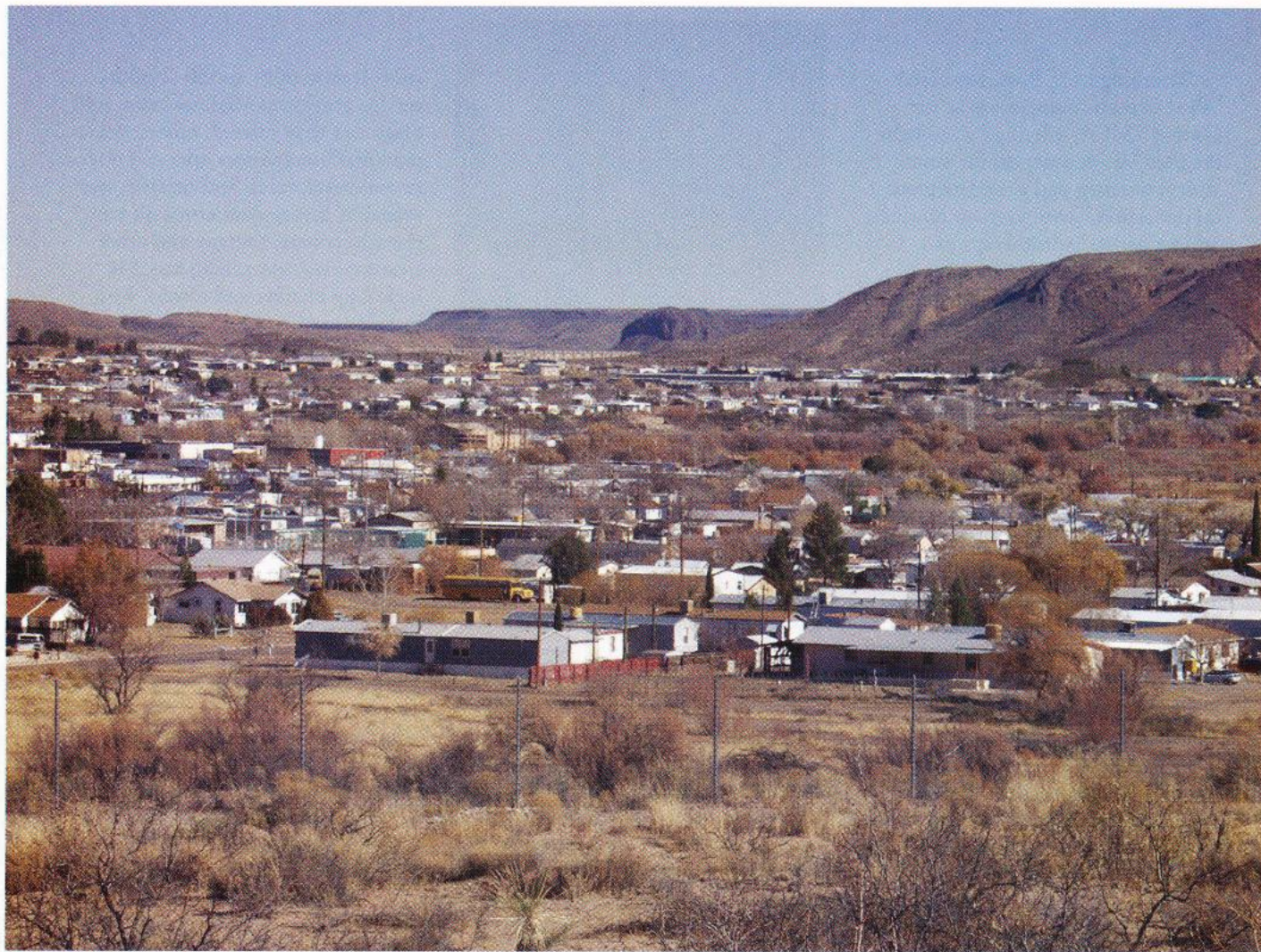
Keas developed into a goodly professional wrestler, on both sides of the border, and a promoter and trainer of wrestlers. His nickname in Mexico was “El Mañoso” (“the sly, tricky one”). He claimed the title of “Featherweight of the West, Claimant to the World’s Title,” challenging any and all wrestlers or fighters any place, any time.

He married Sara Rodríguez in January 1934. Their only child, Gilbert Elwood, was born a year later. The family lived in Los Angeles for several years where Keas learned massage and was a conditioner of Hollywood celebrities including Edmund Lowe, Johnny Weismuller, Buster Crabbe, Joel McCrea, “Big Boy” Williams, Ward Bond, Frank Capra, Walt Disney and “many others of picture fame.”





**Left**—A hot soak awaits visitors to the Waterfall Room in the Fire Water Lodge, one of many bathhouses with accommodations in Truth or Consequences. **Below**—an overview of T or C, which adopted its unusual name after Ralph Edwards offered to broadcast his TV show *Truth or Consequences* in the town that would change its name. (Photos on this page by Gilbert Keas. All other images in the story courtesy Gilbert Keas.)





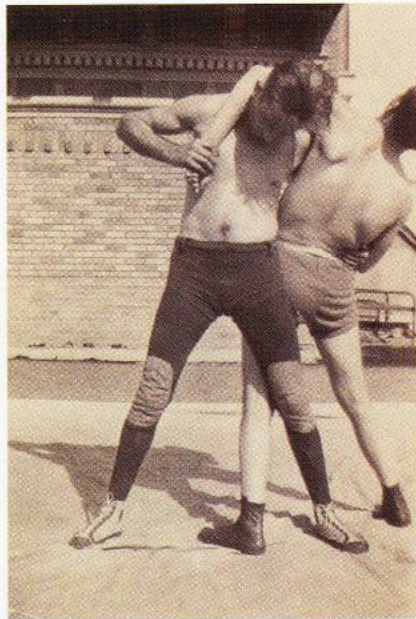
# Health

Returning to El Paso, Keas established a conditioning room at the Central YMCA, offering "... to help the tired businessman or the young athlete to attain and complete physical perfection," with exercise routines, cabinet baths, hydrotherapy and "Scientific Swedish Massage."

By 1938, the Keas family was living in Hot Springs, attracted by its standing as a hot springs health mecca. A newspaper clipping from this time shows a photo of Keas massaging Mike London, "the celebrated bearded wrestler," in preparation for a match in El Paso.

Keas' voice as a health promoter emerged most stalwartly in his newspapers. The first issue of his weekly *Hot Springs Health City News* proclaimed "Health wealth is the most valuable asset." Keas' monthly newspaper *New Health*, "A Sparkling New Publication Dedicated to New and Better Health," first published in 1942, carried advice that "Health wealth, we must have. It is of primary importance in winning this war." Sara Keas was associate editor, penning articles on women's health.

The procedure for therapeutic bathing in the hot springs of Hot Springs



Jack Keas grappling with another wrestler in El Paso, Texas.

at this time was revealed in a story in *New Health*: 21 baths were generally sufficient for rheumatism and other ailments. Ten minutes in the hot water was considered adequate. After soaking people were wrapped in blankets to sweat for 20-30 minutes, showering and drying thoroughly, taking care not to go outdoors until perspiration had ceased. Individual health problems

were dealt with by specific health-service providers: Medical exams and diagnoses were offered, nurses were present, chiropractors operated out of several bathhouses, and massage was available, as was diathermy, physiotherapy, colonic therapy and other treatments. A sweat bath was 25¢, including blanket and towels, with massage costing \$1.

The Keas family left Hot Springs in 1943. Keas engaged in various business ventures and does not appear to have pursued a career in the health-service industry. The family moved to El Paso in the early 1960s, where Newton Watson "Jack" Keas died at the age of 66. His stint as a health-provider is a glimpse into the life of a health-service industry worker reflecting at once a personal commitment and an interest in the quest for good health in the 1930s and 1940s. ■■■

**Charles Bennett** is a free-lance writer residing in *Truth or Consequences*. Since the November 1997 issue, Bennett has been a bimonthly contributor to New Mexico Magazine's "Southwest Bookshelf" column.





**Above**—Jack Keas, at far right, is shown at the Yucca Baths in 1938 in Hot Springs. Keas promoted the health benefits in his newspapers. **Below**—The old Carrie Tingley Hospital as it appeared in a postcard from Hot Springs.

