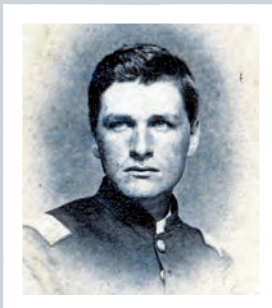


Family Ties

BY J.B. BISSELL

A descendant (in-law) of STEAMBOAT SPRINGS' founding father mixes some history with the hot springs for an ideal visit to this ideal Colorado mountain town.



Some people marry into money or royalty, or both. I did even better. I married into the first family of Steamboat Springs, Colorado. My wife Michelle's grandfather's grandfather was James Harvey Crawford (left), the first white settler to stake a claim at the spot that later blossomed into Ski Town U.S.A.

The Crawford House — with its new porch — around 1910 (below), and the author and his family enjoying the same space in 2016 (right).



Strawberry Park Hot Springs' natural setting is a wonderful complement to the 102-degree (or so) soaking pools.



T

he CliffsNotes-style version of the story goes like this: Following a recommendation from an old fur trapper, Crawford set out in 1874 to find what was already known as the Steamboat Spring, a mineral-rich water source that fountained into a river and sounded like — you guessed it — an old steamboat when weary travelers came within earshot. His expedition's first pass through the area ended up too far west, so Crawford and one of his partners doubled back. When they finally found the fabled oasis in the heart of the Yampa Valley, Crawford lit an aspen tree ablaze to officially announce his intentions to permanently set up shop there.

One hundred twenty-two years later — lacking any cool stories about getting advice from fur trappers or negotiating the untamed Rocky Mountains — I showed up to Steamboat Springs with Crawford's great-great-granddaughter.

The Tread of the Pioneers

That was two-and-a-half decades ago, so my memory is a little hazy. We went on a hike and we ate brisket at a barbecue joint that has since closed. And I do remember wondering when I'd get my "Steamboat Springs Founding Family All-Access" membership card. (Ah, the blissful naivete of life in one's early 20s!)

Alas, there is no such card, but Michelle did walk me through the Tread of Pioneers Museum, where it felt as though (and still does) every other display — ranging from a high chair to a Colt .45 revolver — was a relic procured from the Crawford family's local tenure at the turn of the 20th century.

Many of the heirlooms on display came straight from the family homestead, a three-story stone dwelling about 5 blocks northwest of the museum. Known as the Crawford House, it dates to 1894 and served as Margaret and James' primary residence until 1939. After being owned by a handful of people outside of the family, Michelle's Aunt Anna and Uncle Jim purchased the home in 2004. Along with overseeing some careful restoration projects, they spearheaded a successful effort to have the house placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2005.

It remains a private residence, but the museum does offer occasional tours through the home's main public spaces. Historic highlights include the original family piano in the parlor and a collection of artwork done by the Crawfords' daughter, Lulie.

Playing Tour Guide

Thanks to our connection to the community (here's the part of the story where my matrimonial good fortune comes to full light) and the fact that we have a key to the Crawford House, Michelle and I, along with our two boys, have hosted family reunions and celebrated a few Christmases and Fourth of Julys in Steamboat throughout the years.

Which means I've played tour guide on numerous occasions and planned plenty of vacation itineraries for visiting relatives. Of course, coming off as a local expert here is effortless when you simply point friends and family to the outdoors: Is there snow in the forecast? Go skiing. Are the wildflowers blooming or aspen leaves changing colors? Go for a hike.

Speaking of which, the Fish Creek Falls trail is a must-do — and you don't have to be a mountaineer to enjoy the most popular scenic spoils. There's a paved half-mile walkway to an overlook of the namesake cascade and an even shorter gravel path to the bottom of the 280-foot spill. If possible, continue your trek on the more challenging trail to Upper Fish Creek Falls. It's about 2.5 miles one way,

and you'll gain nearly 1,600 feet en route to a striking scene where a second waterfall tumbles over a craggy rock face and into a tranquil pool tucked between stone walls.

Shared Experiences

Still, I do earn my tour guide credentials when I successfully fill the time *between* those outdoor excursions. And whether it's destiny, karma, or mere coincidence, my favorite way to do that is with a visit to the same type of hydrological phenomenon that enchanted James Harvey Crawford back in 1874: a mineral spring.

Unlike Crawford, though, there's no need to break out your old-time compass for a full-on group expedition. The Old Town Hot Springs facility — situated right off Highway 40 as you come to downtown — is about as accessible as it gets, and just as restorative.

If you've never submerged your tuckered-out muscles in a hot springs pool, don't shrug off the experience as merely a glorified hot tub session. It's way better. I'm not a scientist, so I can't speak to what exactly the boron, lithium, magnesium, sulfate, and other naturally occurring minerals do to enhance the curative sensations. What I can say is that whether I'm in town to partake in the aforementioned outdoor activities, or to simply escape city life for a weekend, I never miss the opportunity for a soak.



ABOVE: Scenic views of Fish Creek Falls are accessible for the entire family. FACING PAGE: The first F.M. Light & Sons opened on Nov. 9, 1905, and it's still *the* place to get your cowboy hat, boots, and other Western wear.

FAMILY MATTERS

When it comes to planning a trip to Steamboat Springs, the entire family gets involved. So I asked Michelle and our two boys — Dade (20) and Roan (18) — for their top recommendations. After explaining that the obvious outdoor activities were already spoken for, here's what they had to say:

MICHELLE:

"It's called Steamboat Springs because there's more than one. Old Town is great. It's convenient, and they have locker rooms and sell snacks. But if you like a more rustic scene, check out Strawberry Park Hot Springs. It's about 7 miles north of town and gorgeous. There are restrooms and chairs, of course, but beyond that, you're just soaking in the middle of the woods. It's fantastic. Keep in mind that after sunset it's adults only."

ROAN:

"The first thing I do when we get to town is walk Lincoln Avenue to Fuzziwig's and stock up on treats for our stay. F.M. Light & Sons is right across the street, so if you need some cowboy clothes, you're all set. And don't miss the Main Street Steamboat Farmers Market that runs from June through September. They have cool art and stuff like that, but the street food is where it's at. Jamerican Joe's and Q Live Crew BBQ are my favorites."

DADE:

"You gotta go to Winona's for breakfast. Their cinnamon rolls are ridiculous. I love playing disc golf over at the mountain when the ski resort sets up the 19-hole course in the summer and regular golf at the Steamboat Golf Club. The Outlaw Mountain Coaster is fun, and that self-guided walking tour of Iron, Soda, Sulphur, Steamboat, and Lithia springs that Mom took us on just south of the Crawford House is cool."



Plan at least a couple of hours for your visit. Old Town Hot Springs is home to one large soaking pool, plus three additional spa-sized tubs — as well as separate lap and children's pools and two waterslides. Start your rejuvenation journey in the main pool and then alternate among the other spaces. My preferred spot is the Heart Spring. The water in this spa is unchlorinated and essentially flows into the pool exactly how it's been pumping out of the ground for more than a century.

So every time I take a dip in the Heart Spring, I smile because I consider it the closest shared experience I can have with James Harvey Crawford. After all, it's been 25 years since my first weekend in the Yampa Valley, and while I still don't have any enthralling stories about fraternizing with fur trappers, I like to believe I'm doing my very small part of carrying on the family legacy by welcoming folks to Steamboat Springs. ■

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