Beginning in the late nineteenth century, people, with reasons varying from curiosity to seeking the healing of illnesses, found their way to the valley of “magical springs,” made famous by the founder of Red Boiling Springs, Shepherd Kirby. Soon, the news of the healing powers of the sulfur springs spread far and wide. This resulted in large numbers of people coming to RBS, seeking a remedy for any number of illnesses.

Very few people living in today’s RBS have much knowledge of this little hamlet’s history. I grew up in the mid-forties and early fifties. As a lad, I was one of the pin-setters at the Palace Bowling Lanes, which consisted of eight alleys. The Smith Chapel Boys, Bobby Joines, Earnest & Doyle Smith, and Billy & Joe Layne Whitley, myself, and others, worked as pin-setters for Clarence McClure and Harold Driver, who were the managers of Palace Lanes.

I earned as much as three dollars on the weekend, beginning Friday night and ending Sunday night, staying open until midnight on Saturdays.

There were not any unions, and each of us was poor and glad to earn a few pennies per week. There were bowling alleys on North Springs Road, near the Arlington Hotel, and at the Cloyd Hotel, known today as the Thomas House, too. In addition to these, there was another at Simmon’s Lake, which was in the lower part of East RBS, along Salt Lick Creek. Bowling was a favorite sport of most tourists. The more lively ones, however, preferred drinking and dancing at one of the two dance halls.

While the Smith Chapel Boys were setting pins, Doyle Gaines was going up and down the sidewalks and porches of the hotels with his now-famous shoe shine box, making a “killing.” An other well-known boy, Bobby Knight, was popping popcorn at the York Show House.

The crowds were unbelievable, especially on Saturday nights. The Palace Park was always filled with both visitors and local people. Next to the Palace Park was a shooting gallery, operated by King Milles, which attracted large crowds. Across the creek from the Palace Park was a café, owned by the McLerros family, who also owned both the Palace and Colonial Hotels. The café was managed by my parents from April through Labor Day. It stayed open all night on Fridays and Saturdays. An annual summer circus and carnival attracted even more visitors.

There was a time, before the days of which I’ve been writing, when the crowds were so large that visitors to RBS would go out in the county and stay at farm houses.

But time has a way of changing things and communities are no exception. There was a time, in the early twentieth century, believe it or not, when Red Boiling Springs was more popular than Gatlinburg. However as older generations were replaced by younger ones who had little love for the town's heritage, the handwriting on the wall became clear to those who dared to read it.

More recently, a group of elected officials closed down the sulpher wells and in so doing erased much of the history of our town. Only a handful of elected officials have supported the three hotels which are being operated by three great families. The only thing that could have kept RBS alive, and it is best suited for this very thing, is the concept of a small and desirable place to escape the turmoil of large cities. Perhaps one day, with the support of the entire community, the City of Red Boiling Springs will rise again. Otherwise all that it is, and all that it once was, is in jeopardy.