

Lithia Springs

Quiet Douglas community was once a hangout for elite

By H.M. Cauley

The country's wealthiest citizens. Atlanta's elite society. The rich and famous meeting for afternoons of lawn tennis and evenings of dancing in the ballroom of a grand hotel. A mineral water boasting amazing restorative powers. The poor of health steaming in the spa's vapor baths, hoping for miraculous cures.

The history of Lithia Springs reads like a romance novel. In this quiet community at the northeast corner of Douglas County, history does include a world-class hotel, glamorous guests and an alleged elixir. It's a town where it's easy to get caught up in the past.

From the time he was 4, Ruth and Fred Enterkin's son, Keith, was consumed with a love of history for Lithia Springs and the Sweetwater Park Hotel, a resort that flourished in the late 1880s. His mother still keeps his faded, yellowed scrapbook, brimming with stories and old photos he assembled as a grade school class project 30 years ago. From a carefully labeled box, she gently lifts the relics he uncovered in their back yard: pieces of monogrammed dishes, a rusted ring of keys, a heavy, slate roof shingle.

"Our house is on the grounds of the old hotel, and he was obsessed with digging up relics," said Mrs. Enterkin, who has lived in the same white frame home on an acre-plus lot for 47 years.

Train ride from Atlanta

During the town's heyday, presidents and business magnates rode the train from Atlanta to Austell in Cobb County, then switched to the "dummy line" for a short ride to the sprawling Sweetwater Park Hotel.

The imposing Victorian resort advertised 300 rooms, private baths, electricity, an Atlanta telephone line, 700 feet of porches and sun parlors, a ballroom, tennis courts and "no dust or mud" on 15-plus acres.

Across the croquet lawns and under the shade of ancient magnolias wandered the elite of Atlanta and the country: Joel Chandler Harris, James Whitcomb Riley, Grover Cleveland, Mark Twain and William McKinley were among those who came to drink the town's cure-all water and relax in the mineral steam baths.

But by the early 1900s, automobiles began taking travelers to destinations once unreachable by train, and the Sweetwater's popularity began to wane. A fire in 1912 destroyed the hotel and

**NEIGHBORHOOD
OF THE WEEK**



*Sweetwater Park Hotel,
300 Rooms,
Lithia Springs, Georgia.*



THE HOME OF THE CELEBRATED
BOWDEN LITHIA WATER.

A postcard from Keith Enterkin's collection promotes the old resort.



Photos by PHIL MAYER/Special

Ruth and Fred Enterkin: Years ago, their son did a study project on Sweetwater.

closed a prosperous chapter in the town's history.

There is no monument marking the spot of the old resort.

Small frame cottages and brick ranches have replaced the Sweetwater's well-tended lawns and gardens. The roar of traffic from nearby Interstate 20 and six-lane Thornton Road provides a rush-hour serenade along the same countryside that once echoed music from the hotel's ballroom.

Town 'sort of went to sleep'

"After the hotel burned, the town sort of went to sleep," said Mrs. Enterkin. "It was just a little community, and the only people who lived here had worked at the hotel or in tourist-related activities."

Mrs. Enterkin describes moving to Lithia Springs in the mid-1940s as "coming to another country." There were only a handful of stores, built with Alpine facades, on the main street.

Eighty years after the town's liveli-hood burned, people are once again flocking to Lithia Springs. But the famous mineral water, available today in most major groceries, is not the main attraction: Today the town's location, accessibility and abundance of reasonably priced housing have pushed population figures into the 11,000 range.

With new residents came businesses, shopping centers and expanded roads that have transformed Lithia Springs from an almost-forgotten village into a bustling bedroom community.

"We built here because we're still close to town," said Rick Oyler, who moved into a new home more than a year ago. "We spent six months looking for our retirement house, and now I hope to die here. The quality of life is really

good. You've got the small-town atmosphere close to the big city."

The Oylers paid \$126,000 for a four-level, pastel-stucco European in Stonewood, one of several new developments in Lithia Springs. A project of Benchmark Homes, Douglas County's largest builder, the subdivision will have 132 homes with an average of 2,000 square feet on 1/3- and 1/2-acre lots. Prices range from \$105,000 to \$140,000.

Lower land costs in the Lithia Springs area have helped builders keep prices down, said Benchmark's Doug Hembree. "Our costs are 15 percent less here than in other counties where we do business. We can offer a better value [here] than in Fulton and Cobb counties."

Nice houses for less

At the Fairfax, Knott's Landing and Herring Place subdivisions, prices for new traditionals, Cape Cods, ranches and split-foyer plans range from the low \$50s to the \$90s.

"This same house in Smyrna was \$10,000 more," said Tena Toft, who lives with her family in a cedar contemporary home on 1/3 acre. "And the taxes weren't real high."

"Douglas County has one of the lowest unincorporated millage rates in the Atlanta area," said Mr. Oyler, who pays about \$1,000 in taxes on his 3,000-square-foot home.

The majority of new residents are transferees working for companies in the Fulton Industrial Boulevard corridor and at Hartsfield International Airport said Benchmark sales agent Margai Smith. "We're also starting to become a hub for Dobbins and Marietta. Atlanta 25 minutes down Interstate 20, and airport is about 20 [minutes] on the