



Bathers flock to warm paradise



Tucked into a ravine near the McKenzie River's South Fork, the four tiered pools of the Cougar Hot Springs warms crowds of bathers.

Each bather seems to think that the simmering, sulphur-smelling water that sends steam rising through the trees overhead, is a well-kept secret.

"We don't mind if you take pictures," one bather says as he stretches out in the pool closest to the hot spring, "but promise not to print a map."

Signs placed by the U.S. Forest Service directing hikers to the spring have been torn down

or defaced. Queries from curious visitors are met with cryptic answers from locals.

"You'll know you're there when you see a bunch of naked people," grunted a man in a pickup parked above Cougar Dam.

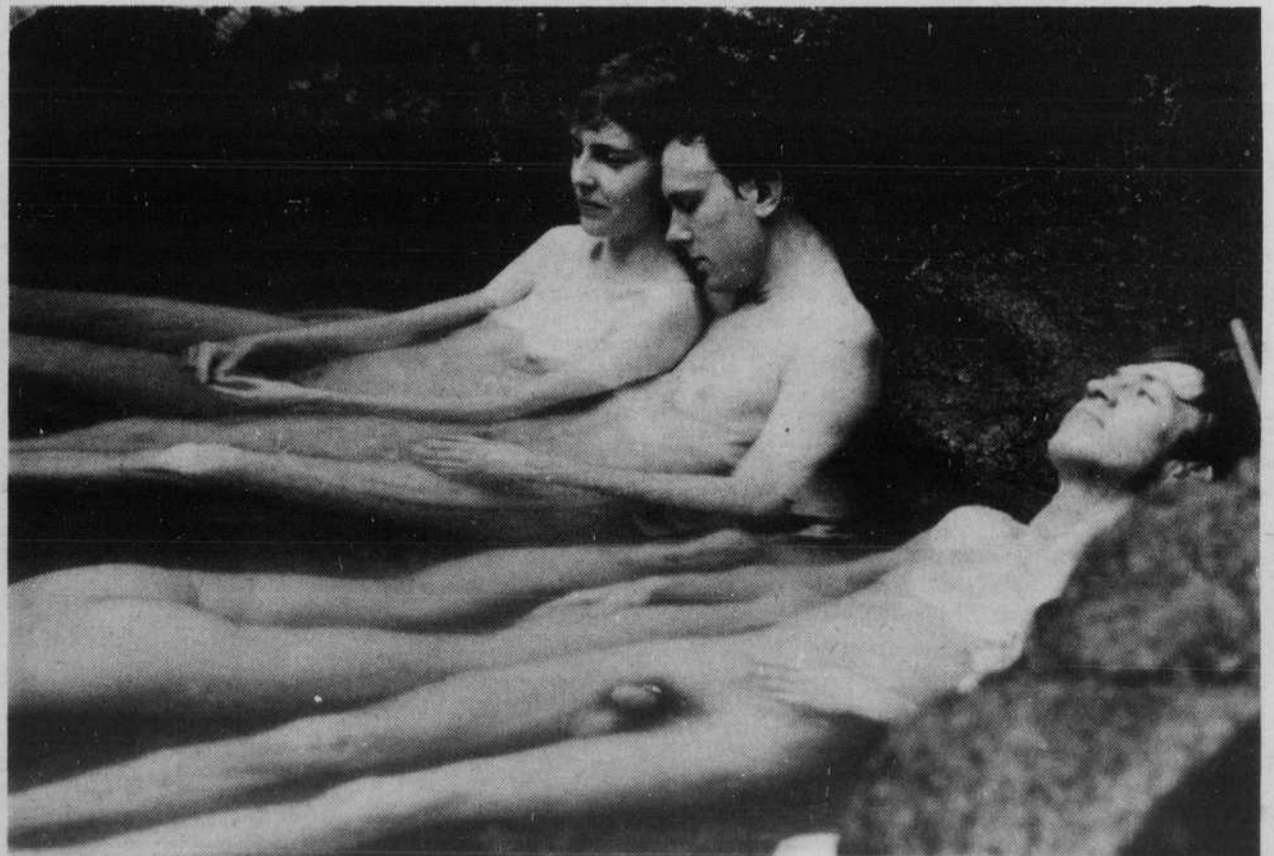
When people come to the spring, they leave their modesty in the city. "There's nothing better to do than sit around in a hot pool with a bunch of naked people," says a man wading in the shallow water.

In the top pool a man and woman go through a rebirth session; a couple from Montana

in the second pool play with their baby.

Bathers graduate from one pool to the next, since the lower pools are not as warm as those closer to the spring. "Usually you can't stay in the top pool for more than five minutes or you'll burn . . . it's on the cool side today," says a woman standing washing in the icy stream next to the pool.

People shift to the higher pools as new bathers arrive. One student slips into the water saying, "I'm sure glad these aren't any closer to Eugene or we would have to pay to get in."



Photos by Keith Allen

Story by Keith Rimov