

Zzyzx, California, Or the Biggest Health Spa Scam In American History

Of all the legendary hucksters, grifters, and con men throughout American history, there is perhaps none more brazen than Curtis Howe Springer. In 1969, the American Medical Association, not a group prone to wacky turns of phrase, dubbed Springer “King of the Quacks.” Springer’s entire life was a combination of wild lies, get-rich-quick schemes, and bizarre ploys.

But perhaps his crowning achievement is a town in California that still stands: Zzyzx, in the Mojave Desert.

Springer was born in 1896 in Birmingham, Alabama, which is one of the last objectively true facts about his early life we can confirm. He may or may not have served in World War I as a boxing instructor, may or may not have preached against the scourge of alcohol for William Jennings Bryan, may or may not have worked at a school in Florida and may or may not have attended college in Chicago. By the 1930s, Springer began touring the United States, with his base in Chicago, giving lectures.



Springer usually gave himself whatever advanced degrees he felt sounded best at the time, from MD to Ph.D to ND. None seem to have been accurate, which is easily proven because the institutions that supposedly issued these degrees did not, for the most part, exist. He claimed to represent “The National Academy,” “Westlake West Virginia College,” and, perhaps best of all, “The Springer School of Humanism.” (Let’s take a moment and reflect on the cojones to not only give yourself a false honorific but also to insist it was issued by a school that doesn’t exist that you have named after yourself.)

Starting in the mid-1930s, Springer began doing sort of vague Christian-ish speeches on radio. The first radio station at which he applied reported him to the American Medical Association for being a crazy liar. By 1936, the AMA had issued an entire paper debunking any possible claim Springer might have to any training or degrees of any sort. (The paper had the excellent title of “Nostrums and Quackery and Pseudo-Medicine.”) It doesn’t seem to have mattered much; Springer got a job at another radio station in Chicago, then moved to Pittsburgh, where his radio career took off.

His radio pronouncements were bonkers. Some Christian stuff, some political stuff (he liked FDR), and some shilling for his miracle cures, which almost exclusively took the form of beverages. A common refrain was that following his advice and imbibing his cures would make anyone “internally, externally, and eternally clean.” After a few initial failures, he eventually found a location to create a health spa to more thoroughly hawk his wares: an oasis/swamp in the Mojave Desert.



*Springer was at this point touting himself as “the last of the old-time medicine men,” which is not too far off, really. He filed a mining claim on 12,800 acres in the Mojave, which legally would give him the right to mine for whatever he wanted and to keep the proceeds, but which did not give him ownership of the land. *Weird U.S.*, a publication tracking the strangest stories throughout the country, has written extensively about Springer, and makes it*

clear that at no point did he entertained the idea of actually mining anything.

Zzyzx was founded around a natural spring, historically known as Soda Springs. It is a very cool-looking place, an oasis in the desert surrounded by palm trees, and is currently patrolled by the National Park Service, as it borders federally protected Mojave. Springer named it Zzyzx (which rhymes with “Isaacs”) to be “the last word” in health, alphabetically.



And that’s where the miracles come in. Soda Springs was not a hot spring; there are plenty of those in California’s desert, but not this one. So Springer installed a bunch of heating pumps to fake it. At Zzyzx, Springer built a hotel, which was very cheap, but which served as a base to sell most of the 27 different miracle health cures he claimed to create during his life. These included:

Antideluvian Tea: A mixture of various barks and herbs, described as a “laxative in a tea bag.” It shows up on eBay every now and then; the cover art is nice.

Re-Hib: An antacid found to be mostly baking soda, which, weirdly, probably would have worked, though certainly could have been made at home for much cheaper.

Hollywood Pep Cocktail: A blend of “concentrated vital food energy,” according to the Mojave Project. It was likely a smoothie of several cheap root vegetables and some brown sugar.

Mo-Hair: Likely a bunch of salt and mud, which Springer instructed users to rub on their heads while holding their breath as long as they could. The redness of the user’s face was claimed as evidence that the product was working.

Zy-Crystals: Dried salt from the oasis, which according to a lawsuit contained these instructions:

“Again the label on the can has the warning for “External Use Only” and the suggestion, “To hasten results, breath deeply, get at least eight hours of uninterrupted sleep in twenty-four, exercise in moderation and think only clean and constructive thoughts. Also, drink one pint of water one hour before each meal, none at meal time or for two hours thereafter; none before retiring.” There are many others about which we have much less information; really all I could find were the names of the products and their brief description from Springer’s catalog, listed in a 1972 lawsuit. Here’s a few of those:

Shangralae: “Suggested by an Asian Missionary” (cost: \$20.00 for four, about \$114 in today’s dollars)

Cosmo: "Suggested by an Indian for Lovely Skin" (\$15.00 for three, about \$85 in today's dollars)

F-W-O: "Food Delightfully Pleasing to Women" (\$15.00 for 24 ounces)

Anthron: "My Mother's Favorite Food" (\$25.00 for 24 ounces)

Zzyzx Foot Crystals: "For Poor Tired Feet" (\$15.00 for 40 ounces, about \$142 in today's dollars)

Eventually the government figured out that Springer was a lunatic, that he didn't own the land he was squatting on (and, sometimes, trying to sell), and that none of his miracle cures consisted of much besides over-the-counter chemicals plus mud and minerals from the desert. Springer was evicted in 1974 and convicted of false advertising, for which he served 49 days of a 60-day sentence. After prison, he moved to Las Vegas, where he died in 1985 at the age of 88.

Zzyzx remains the last name in the American atlas, if not in health circles, and it remains in use as an outpost for a few California universities. It's now home to the Desert Studies Center, a research facility run by the California State University system; its proximity to Mojave National Preserve makes it ideal for studying the desert.

None of Springer's miracle cures were ever found to do what they claimed, except possibly the antacid cure. Baking soda is, after all, also the main ingredient in Alka-Seltzer.