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Advertising Indians

Abstract: Mountain Valley Spring Company (Hot Springs, Arkansas), the nation's first coast-to-coast bottled water company, ran an advertisement in 1939 that conflated American Indians and the natural world. While the company thought that it was selling bottled water by drawing upon a local myth that Hernando De Soto visited the area in 1541, in actuality it tapped into darker themes of conquest, exploitation, and co-opting the bodies of indigenous peoples into white American cultural conceptions of nature and health. This article contends that the Mountain Valley advertisement is indicative of many other advertisements at the time that functioned as the last step in normalizing indigenous people's conquest by the United States into dominant U.S. culture. Doing so allowed whites to experience both their conquest and the natural world in new ways by paying homage to the land's seemingly long-gone original inhabitants. The advertisement not only reflected dominant ideas about American Indians in U.S. society but actually helped to metaphysically reconquer peoples who were physically conquered long before.

Keywords: Mountain Valley Spring Company, natural spring water, indigenous peoples, advertising, conquest, nature

DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKER ERROL MORRIS SUGGESTED in a 2007 *New York Times* opinion piece that pictures "may be worth a thousand words, but there are two words that you can never apply to them: 'true' and 'false.'" Morris made this statement in reference to a number of historical photographs, asserting that these images required context to give them meaning. He explained that photos are "only true or false with respect to statements that we make about them or the questions that we might ask of them" (Morris 2007). And yet, while we may like to assume that photographs reflect some sort of objective truth about the world, we feel no such compunctions to have similar feelings about advertisements, which more transparently reflect a manufactured reality. But this does not mean that advertising is complete artifice devoid of verity. As Jackson Lears (1994: 1–2) explained in his history of advertising, while advertisements "urge people to buy goods," they also "signify a certain vision of the good life; they validate a way of being about the world."[1]

A 1939 advertisement for Mountain Valley Water, the nation's first coast-to-coast bottled water, reveals striking truths about the culture that created it, even if it cannot itself be called "true" (Cline 1971). The advertisement is representative of any number of images and texts that helped push the nation toward new "truths," even if those were ultimately false. In that advertisement (Figure 1), three strong, proud, and stereotyped American Indians in large, feathery headdresses take up most of the ink. But, in some ways, the most important character is a fourth, feeble Indian wearing only one feather—a single, enervated plume. The poor man leans heavily on a walking stick to show how sickly and frail he is, clearly suffering from some sort of joint ailment. Just in case those four, feather-adorned men did not depict a sufficiently authentic Indian scene, the illustrator included teepees, bushes, and a fluffy cloud in the background to demonstrate the Indians' supposedly inherent connection with nature.

Mountain Valley's bottled water advertisement deserves use as a case study for several reasons. Most importantly, it reminds us that the food we eat and drink is tied up in both local and national stories. Drinking Mountain Valley bottled water meant also consuming cultural tales about a particular American identity. The ideas contained within that advertisement are important not necessarily because they are odd or unusual, but instead because the ideas were so *common*. At its heart, the image represented the commingling of conquest, capitalism, and co-opting Indian bodies into white American cultural conceptions of nature and health. After the Louisiana Purchase, white Americans conquered not only the environment of modern-day Arkansas but also its peoples (Limerick 1987, 2000).[2] Advertising in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries functioned as the last step in normalizing that conquest into dominant U.S. culture, allowing whites to experience both their conquest and the natural world in new ways by paying homage to the land's seemingly long-gone original inhabitants. The advertisement not only reflected

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FIGURE 1: *"The Password 'Rheumatism,'" 1939.*[3]

IMAGE USED WITH PERMISSION OF THE MOUNTAIN VALLEY SPRING COMPANY, COURTESY OF THE GARLAND COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY—HOT SPRINGS, AK.

dominant ideas about American Indians in U.S. society but actually helped to metaphysically reconquer peoples who were physically conquered long before.[4]

Mountain Valley Water exploited a perceived American Indian identity and history to grant authenticity to its bottled water's supposed natural health benefits. The advertisement essentially boasted that American Indian rites and rituals not only drew upon the springs' healthfulness but, more importantly, Indians consecrated the natural space's health properties by their use. Drinking Mountain Valley bottled water could then ostensibly transfer the same healthfulness to the consumer (Deloria 1998). Displaying vanquished American Indians helped emphasize that white Americans had full control over the natural world that produced the bottled water—just as American Indians had been conquered, so too had the natural springs that could nourish white bodies. Mountain Valley Water was therefore not only advertising a bottled water, but also advertising supposed American Indian values and a multilayered connection to nature.

The studied Mountain Valley advertisement operated at the confluence of multiple, complementary historical intellectual currents that connected American Indians, the natural world (especially, in this case, hot springs), and advertising. As historian Richard White (1985: 101) explained, "Native Americans and the environment have become so thoroughly linked in popular American culture that it is futile to introduce a scholarly discussion as if it could be conducted in isolation from popular ideas." This is also true of the relationship between whites, Indians, and hot springs, unsurprising given such Euro-American fascination with and conflation of Indians with wilderness and nature (Valenčius 2002; Krech III 1999; Harkin and Lewis 2007). In the particular context of hot springs, historian Vaughn Scribner (2016) argued that colonial American settlers transformed mineral spas from "savage" places most associated with American Indians into "civilized" bastions of health where their civilizing, colonialist mission could extend domination of American Indians and the natural world to control over the human body. The metaphorical conquest of American Indians thus began very early in the process of Euro-American western expansion.

Most germane to the current article, American Studies scholar Carolyn Thomas contended that using American Indians in advertising about hot springs allowed consumers to feel connected to a "primitive" idealized past while still reveling in "civilized" modern amenities (de la Peña 1999). Similarly, anthropologist Richard Wilk (2006: 310) expanded upon the paradoxical meaning of bottled water in current times: "the ambiguity of the concept of purity allows the water drinker to be both the subject and object of technology, since on one hand the purity of nature protects the drinker from dangerous technology, and on the other the drinker's agent wields advanced technology to purify nature or at least assure its purity." But whereas the images and ideas analyzed by Thomas and Wilk served as bridges from premodern landscapes to modern

technology and lifestyles, the Mountain Valley advertisement attempted to remove all traces of modernity. It harkened back to notions of bygone natural purity and a time when humans could more fully immerse themselves in the natural world, literally dousing themselves in or consuming nature. Because the water was associated with American Indians, imbibing it allowed customers to fancy that they had escaped the trappings of a modern industrial lifestyle to connect to a primordial natural world.

A long history of using images of American Indians in advertising buttresses the above ideas connecting American Indians and the natural world (Spring 1992; Smith 2000; Fixico 2012). Lears (1994: 146–48), for example, argued for the idea of "imperial primitivism" where many advertisers conflated supposedly primitive peoples with an authentic truth from nature. Doing so allowed advertisers to promise potential consumers access to previously unknown (to whites) native secrets, especially secrets about the natural world. Similarly, historian Robert F. Berkhofer (1979: 41) has claimed that white Americans often assumed that American Indians "were products both of their social and physical environment in the confused mixture of character and circumstance that constituted environmental theory at the time." In its application here, because American Indians' bodies supposedly took their form and character from their environments, whites could appropriate that special connection to the natural world by consuming Mountain Valley bottled water.

This article adds to previous scholarship by combining these mutually reinforcing intellectual currents. Each is necessary but alone insufficient to understanding the Mountain Valley advertisement and the ideas contained within it concerning conquest and American identity. Uniting multiple historiographical trends is thus required to show how manifest destiny did not end with the closing of the West and the conquering of American Indians, but instead continued metaphorically. Euro-Americans were not only reveling in past glories but also asserting their own identity of Americanness, an identity partially based in the subjugation of American Indians and their lands. Examining the advertisement in more detail is the first step toward understanding these themes.

Titled "The Password 'Rheumatism,'" the ad drew upon the ultimately erroneous folktale that Hernando De Soto visited what is the current-day Hot Springs, Arkansas area (home of Mountain Valley) in 1541 and encountered American Indians who used the natural hot springs to treat any number of ailments. That myth claims the bubbling waters were so important that different Native groups made it a permanently peaceful neutral ground open to everyone. Mountain Valley would use this myth, well known in Arkansas, in its publications and circulars for years, as exemplified by Figure 2. This brochure cover explicitly shows an American Indian acting as a helpful figure—in the vein of the mythos surrounding Squanto or Sacajawea—introducing a benign De Soto to the springs and healing nature in 1541. Even historian Dee Brown (1982: 9–11) unknowingly spread this folklore when he explained that American Indians "surely viewed [the springs] with joy" and came for sweatbaths, believing in the area's healthfulness so much that they permanently buried "the war hatchet … between the green mountains."[5] American Indian groups certainly frequented the area over a long period of time (more likely for the novaculite nearby than the springs), but this story is effectively Hot Springs's creation myth, fraught with inaccuracies, and laden with much more meaning for the group that created it (Euro-Americans) than for the group it depicts (American Indians) (Arkansas Archaeological Survey).[6]

Hot Springs National Park Ranger Mark Blaeuer argues De Soto never visited the area. Blaeuer instead contends that this myth developed after a booster used an English-language translation from an embellished, French-language version of De Soto's travels to increase business. The passage most frequently cited to support De Soto's 1541 presence in Hot Springs does not appear in the original Spanish-language text. Although American Indians most surely inhabited the area at the time (and still do), documented proof of their presence would not appear until more than a century after De Soto's expedition (Blaeuer 2007). The De Soto story is thus a creation myth that plays into stereotypical notions of Euro-Americans finding untouched, pristine nature with Indians in it.

In addition to drawing upon this myth to evoke ideas conflating nature and American Indians to consumers in 1939, the figures in the advertisement would have looked distinctly "Indian." Many whites at the time had only experienced indigenous peoples through Wild West shows, dime novels, or silent movies. As historian Jacquelyn Kilpatrick (1999: 34) has argued, Hollywood American Indians "stood flat-footed with their arms folded high on their chests, said very little but could be seen grunting, and had an almost perpetual scowl on their faces," precisely the representation in the advertisement. Because most consumers' experiences with indigenous peoples were so heavily slanted toward the mythical West, authentic Indians had to resemble Plains Indians, down to the feathered headdress and teepee. Even if local American Indians were more likely sedentary farming peoples who lived in houses, not teepees, farming peoples would not have seemed authentically "Indian" and therefore not sufficiently connected to nature as premodern hunter gatherers.

These stereotypical embodiments of American Indians played a critical role in creating white American sensibilities.

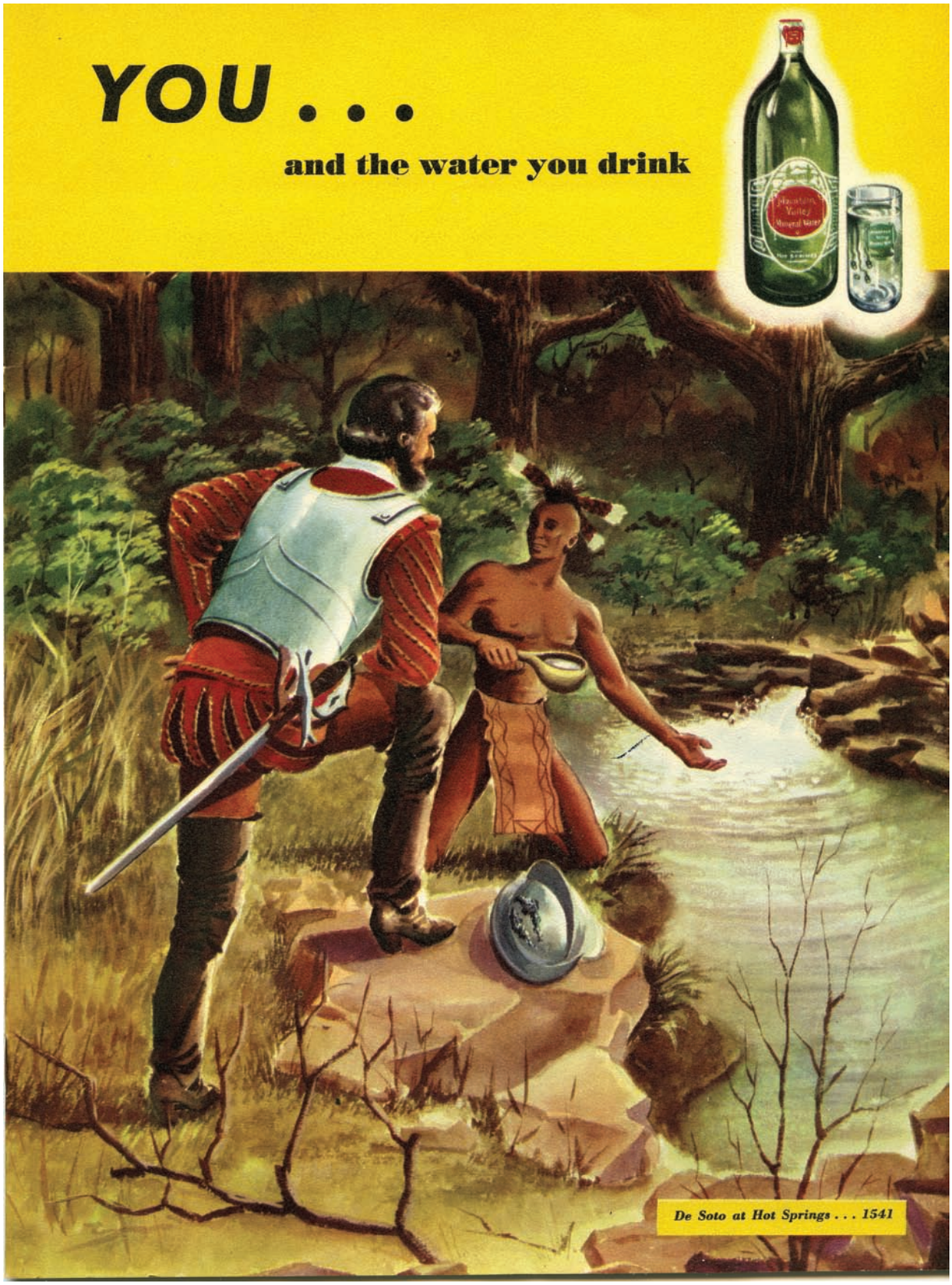

FIGURE 2: *"YOU... and the water you drink," 1956.*

IMAGE USED WITH PERMISSION OF THE MOUNTAIN VALLEY SPRING COMPANY, COURTESY OF THE HOT SPRINGS NATIONAL PARK ARCHIVES—HOT SPRINGS, AK.

Hot Springs itself even hosted the "101 Wild West Show" during 1913. The town newspaper, the *Sentinel-Record*, called the spectacle "a genuine Wild West exhibition in every sense of the word." It further proclaimed the "picturesque representation of old-time, border warfare has a realism that will not be possible a generation or two in the future" ("'101' Ranch Show Opens Here Today" 1913).[7] Building on that idea, historian Leroy Ashby (2012: 80–85) has argued that Wild West shows functioned not only as entertainment, but also as "visions of empire," convincing viewers of the thoroughness of the whites' conquest of American Indians. Mountain Valley's use of American Indians did precisely the same thing.

Part of the 101 Wild West show included a sharpshooting "Indian Princess." After detailing her life story, the paper declared, "Princess Wenona lives in a tepee among her own Sioux people in the Indian village with the 101 Ranch show—a proof of the power of blood and environment—but she is nevertheless bright and clever, and withal as gifted a conversationalist as any educated white girl" ("Indian Princess Is a Sharpshooter" 1913). (Relatedly, the idea of the "Indian princess" was almost as common in contemporary advertising as the "noble savage" stereotypically found in cigar stores [Behnken and Smithers 2015: 36–39; Lears 1994: 104–5].) The articles made clear a number of ideas implicitly used by the Mountain Valley ad studied here.[8] American Indians were quite dangerous, even if whites had pacified them in the present. Additionally, all Indians were Plains peoples, and their "blood and environment"—the two were intertwined—held great sway over them as a people. Contemporary white Americans thus had expectations about what it meant to be an Indian, and Mountain Valley both mined and added to such cultural assumptions to sell its water.

The advertisement's text also promoted a feeling of authentic connection to nature through American Indians. Calling rheumatism the "password" in the title reflected a sense of mystery and implied that by consuming Mountain Valley water a person could somehow get in on ancient American Indian secrets not normally available to those outside the "tribe." The text furthered that idea, emphasizing that the mineral water held "pain-relieving properties" and was used "Long before the coming of white men." And by pronouncing, "even the most hostile Braves … were allowed to pass peaceably on their way to drink from the spring 'down the valley,'" the ad implied that nature's healing powers were so powerful so as to overcome the supposedly violent nature of American Indians. While American Indians might have been largely considered "savage" and "uncivilized" by an unthinking U.S. public, those stereotypes also supposed that indigenous peoples held a special connection to nature that helped authenticate the water's purity. Paradoxically, while many Americans might have considered Indians to be backwards and dirty, in the context of nature, their presence signaled purity precisely because indigenous peoples were not respected as modern humans.

But, as if to remind potential customers that their water was now a safe product that whites should drink, the advertisement ended, "For 75 years suffering men and women have praised this natural, health-restoring aid." If the water had such an important connection to ancient American Indians, the advertisement logically should have used a different time figure than seventy-five years, which was closer to when whites resettled the area after the Civil War. The ad thus presented conflicting ideas: while the American Indians using the spring water emphasized the water's supposedly natural qualities (essentially Mountain Valley claimed that its water was so natural that Indians used to drink it), potential customers were to note that it was safe for whites to drink because it had been disassociated with modern-day American Indians. The ad presupposed that consumers wanted to feel a spiritual or emotional connection to American Indians but did not want to imagine those peoples anywhere near the current-day springs.

In many ways, therefore, the advertisement's message is unsurprising. Euro-Americans have long deployed American Indian imagery to denote a variety of different ideas and tell a multiplicity of stories (Albers and James 1987). The hot springs were imbued with legitimacy, in effect certified as being pure nature, because the spaces had historical ties to American Indians. Crucially, Euro-Americans then dispossessed American Indians of the land, removing all linkages other than cultural association and historical memory. Such actions distilled wild, seemingly "savage" spaces into a product that could be bottled for consumption. After that, whites could enjoy the waters without any actual interference from American Indians while still relishing a space made even purer for its association with the vanquished Native peoples. The advertisement thus celebrated two concurrent expansions of American power: the conquest of Native peoples and the newfound sense that natural spring water, through a perceived connection between American Indians and the natural world, allowed whites to experience their own bodies in new, seemingly authentic ways (Lewis 2001).

Mountain Valley would continue to sell bottled water by using American Indian imagery and the De Soto myth in advertisements for years, even going so far as to have an "Indian" at fair booths who would wear a feather headdress, moccasins, and other "Indian" accouterments. Most fascinatingly, pants worn by the fair-booth "Indian" featured what modern-day peoples would call a swastika. There are two possible explanations for

FIGURE 3: *Mountain Valley Mineral Water fair display booth.*

IMAGE USED WITH PERMISSION OF THE MOUNTAIN VALLEY SPRING COMPANY, COURTESY OF THE GARLAND COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY—HOT SPRINGS, AK.

this. First, perhaps this was intended to be a Sanskrit "svastika" as has historically been very important to Buddhism and Hinduism on the Indian subcontinent. Or, more likely, the pants come from a stereotype derived from Navajo use of the symbol, whereby the display operated under the assumption that Plains Indians worked as a sufficient representation of all American Indian peoples (moccasins and a feathered headdress back up this second interpretation). Either way, Mountain Valley used a symbol for the wrong sort of "Indian." Multiple signs in the background called Hot Springs a health resort. Historian Philip Deloria (1998: 7) has suggested that "playing Indian" has had two particular purposes over time: creating a national identity and using Indian play "to encounter the authentic amidst the anxiety" of modern industrial life. In the case of Mountain Valley's fair booth, "playing Indian" allowed the company to do both, concurrently drawing out an Indian identity that could lend its product natural legitimacy while holding up a poor facsimile of an American Indian to make consumers feel that all the real Indians were long gone.[9]

American Indian habitation thus functioned to emphasize a myth of pristine nature, with De Soto serving as a harbinger of civilization. As historian Carolyn Merchant (2003) pointed out in an essay on race and environmental history, most (but certainly not all) of U.S. history has seen wilderness as being something inherently Indian (see also Merrell 1999; Perreault 2007). Potential customers most likely would have made that association quite quickly. And yet, even though "civilized," the space would have retained its association with American Indians and thus its authenticity. Capitalism and conquest worked hand in hand, with the advertisement ultimately reinforcing and completing the annexation of Indian lands by appropriating American Indian identity into, literally, an easily digestible form. Mountain Valley Water was not just a beverage, but a declaration of how many Euro-Americans defined their Americanness via power over American Indians, pure nature, and the land that was conceived as previously belonging to both.

In the end, while the Mountain Valley Spring Company did not create the ethnic stereotypes upon which its advertisement drew, it cannot totally escape blame for recreating and reinforcing those stereotypes, doing further harm to American Indian peoples. More than that, the advertisement functioned as the last wave of conquest, pushing American Indians farther out of their rightful place in U.S. land and history. Doing so had the effect of reinforcing a white American identity built upon conquest and Manifest Destiny. While Mountain Valley endeavored to tap into the perceived rich historical heritage of Hot Springs, Arkansas, the advertisement ultimately employed a different rich U.S. heritage of American Indian ethnic distortion and exploitation. In this application, advertising Indians meant advertising Indian values while paradoxically making their conquest more palatable to consumers.

Mountain Valley's consumers thus imbibed refreshing bottled water and guzzled local and national tales of conquest, with every consumer purchase helping to support and propagate those stories.

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NOTES

1. Lears later called advertisements "commercial fables […] that have evoked fantasies and pointed morals, that have reconfigured ancient dreams of abundance to fit the modern world of goods" (Lears 1994, 1–2). For further reading on the history and theory behind advertising, see Lears (1994: 414–15nn3–14).
2. Patricia Limerick (2000: 20–21) has argued that the U.S. West was "transformed by [the story of conquest], as the seizure of resources and the imposition of colonial dominance, along with the often more benign processes of collaboration, intermarriage, and syncretism, have reshaped the lives of native people."
3. The particular copy used for this article was clipped from the Louisville *Courier-Journal*, but the advertisement likely ran elsewhere in at least a regional campaign. The advertisement's exact reach is possibly lost to history—the Mountain Valley Spring Company, *Courier-Journal*, and Garland County Historical Society (Hot Springs, Arkansas) could all find no other records relating to the advertisement.
4. Finis Dunaway (2015: 1, 81–82) has similarly argued that Iron Eyes Cody, the "Crying Indian," functioned as a ghost from the past who "evoked national guilt for the environmental crisis but also worked to erase the presence of actual Indians from the landscape." About advertising specifically, Lears (1994: 2) has argued, "advertising collaborated with other institutions in promoting what became the dominant aspirations, anxieties, even notions of personal identity, in the modern United States."
5. Brown was not the first scholar to propagate the De Soto myth. See also Jones 1955.
6. Novaculite is a rare stone very useful for making tools.
7. After the show was over, the newspaper story proclaimed, "The Indian brigade at this opening show was particularly a feature of the show. Chieftains and squaws from all the important tribes of the reservation about the Oklahoma country were there in numbers, and they were the most dressed up bunch of Indians probably ever seen in a group. They had spent the winter seasons with their beads and needles, and their peculiar looms and their handiwork, and from the white beaded moccasins on their feet to the varicolored long feathers that stretched out from the tops of their heads and fell in festoons to the ground at their backs, they are 'new'" ("Happy Auspices Opens 101 Show" 1913).
8. Mountain Valley coincidentally had its own ad running all week ("Mountain Valley Mineral Springs Water, 'King of Mineral Waters'" 1913).
9. Quite a few proposed but unpublished ads also demonstrated these themes of nature, health, and American Indians. All ads are held by the Garland County Historical Association (Hot Springs, AR): "If TIME Reported Events 400 Years Ago"; "Where DeSoto Discovered 'The Cure' for Arthritis"; "A 'League of Nations' Founded for Arthritis"; "Pains - - - - -Joints"; "Five Million CAN'T Be Wrong"; "GOOD for you …"; "If you refuse to be old…"; "Water- - -That More Than Quenches Thirst"; "400 Years Ago"; "Wherever You Are …"

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