

# Wild Palms of the San Ysidros

By RANDALL HENDERSON

IN MARCH 1774 when Captain Juan Bautista de Anza made his first historic trek across the Southern California desert the Indians who sulked behind rocks in Coyote canyon attempted to kill his horses. They failed, partly due to the alertness of Anza and his companions, and partly because of the inferior quality of their bows and arrows.

Father Francisco Garces who accompanied Anza, carved a record of the attack on a willow tree at Santa Catarina spring. That was 171 years ago and the willow has long since disappeared. Also, the Indians, whom Father Pedro Font later described as "so savage, wild, dirty, disheveled, ugly, small, and timid, that only because they have human form is it possible to believe that they belong to mankind," likewise have gone to their happy hunting grounds where it is hoped they are better fed and washed.

But Santa Catarina spring is still there—flowing 200 miner's inches of fine mountain water, and supplying moisture for the most impenetrable jungle of willows to be found on any desert.

Although Santa Catarina is within the general area of the Anza Desert state park, the spring is subject to a private filing made in the days before anyone thought of setting this rugged desert region aside as a public recreational area.

My story is concerned more with the willows than with the spring. For those willows at present are an impassable barrier to one of the most gorgeous sectors of the 400,000-acre park—that is, impassable to motorists.

Capt. Anza mentioned the willows in his diary. There are three groups of them in Coyote canyon—known as Lower, Middle and Upper Willows. Santa Catarina spring supplies water for the Lower Willows.

My first acquaintance with the Lower Willows was in 1934. At that time prospectors and cattlemen had a wagon trail of sorts up the canyon, following very closely the route Anza had blazed in 1774.

Wilson McKenney and I undertook to follow this historic trail in our jalopy. We got through—but only after we had spent most of a morning pushing and prying our car through that wilderness of willow trees. Then, a few months later a cloudburst torrent came down the canyon leaving a jumble of rocks below the willows that closed the route to all traffic except hikers, cow ponies and goats.

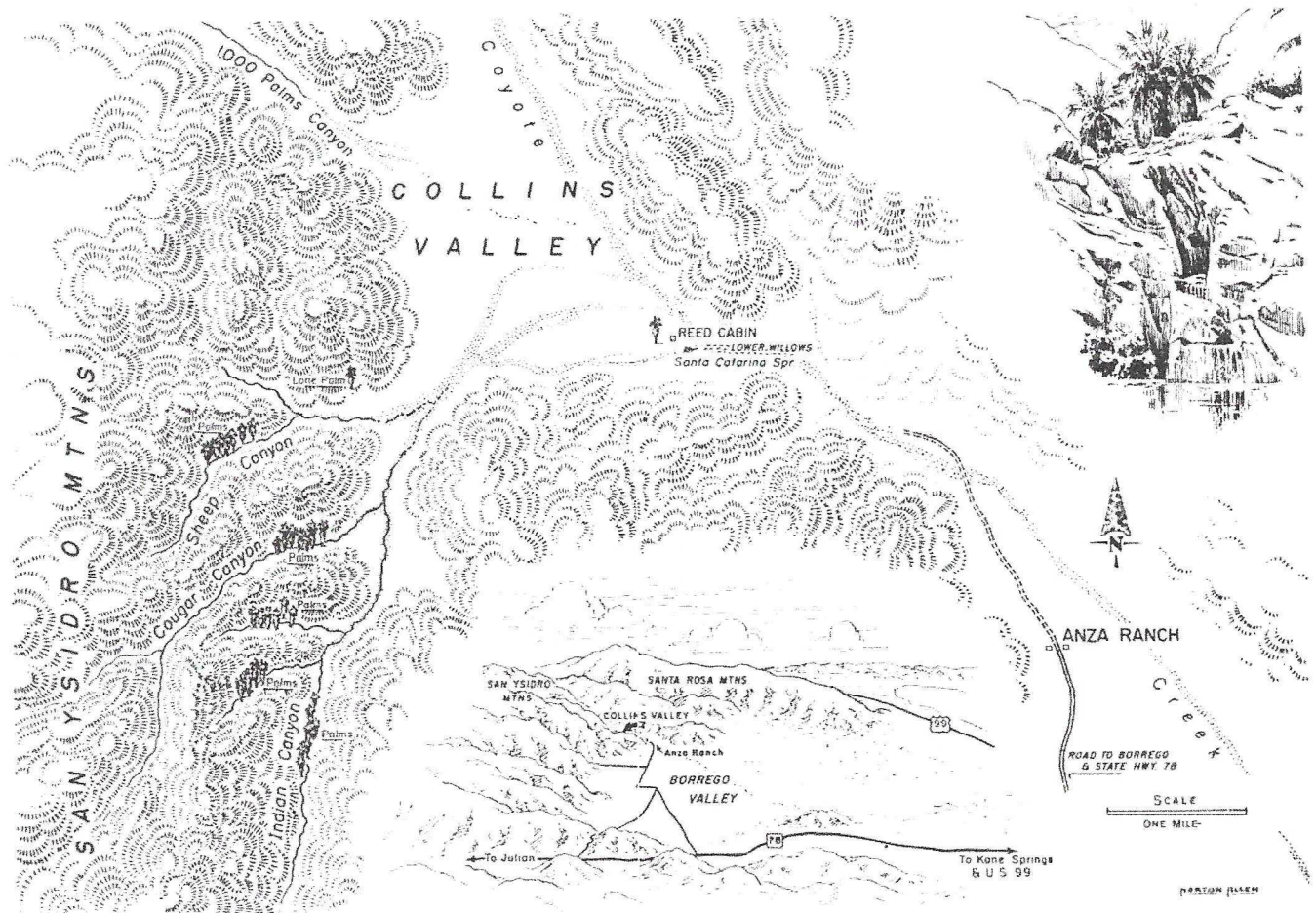
Recently, Arles Adams and I, loafing

This is just a preliminary report, writes Randall Henderson—just a glimpse of the rugged scenic beauty to be found in a little known group of canyons in San Ysidro mountains where palms grow wild amid splashing waters that tumble over huge granite boulders. Capt. Juan Bautista de Anza passed near this spot 171 years ago, but Anza and his soldiers and settlers on their way to San Francisco had no time for side trips. And so it remains for the Americans of this generation to discover and explore this rugged terrain in Anza Desert state park.

Photographs by Arles Adams  
and the author

*These full-skirted veterans grow among the boulders in Sheep canyon. Collins valley in the background.*





around a campfire one evening in another part of Anza park, brought up the subject of Coyote canyon. We wondered if we couldn't take his spider-legged jalopy, sans fenders and top, over the rocks and through the forest of willows.

Neither of us had visited Coyote canyon for four years. We knew we would be in for rough going. But there are some palm canyons in Coyote canyon's tributaries and I had wanted to revisit them to get pictures and data for *Desert Magazine* readers. So we decided to make the attempt.

We started for Coyote canyon early one Saturday morning in April this year. Going through Borrego valley we stopped at the Anza ranch where water from Santa Catarina spring is being used to irrigate a large acreage of winter tomatoes and early grapes.

The Anza ranch was homesteaded in 1909 by "Doc" A. A. Beatty who filed on the water in the spring. More recently, the ranch together with several hundred additional acres in Borrego valley, was purchased by A. A. Burnand, vegetable grower and shipper.

Burnand was not at home, but Lawrence Way, ranch foreman, intimated that anyone who would try to take a car up Coyote canyon should be examined by a sanity board. "We've a half dozen saddle horses that need exercise out in the corral," he

said. "You'd better leave your car and buck those willows in a saddle."

We thanked him for the offer, but we wanted to have a look before we discarded our four-wheeled tarantula. Anyone could ride a horse up that canyon. We wanted to see if it could be done in a car.

From Anza ranch house to Lower Willows is three miles—rough crooked going, with frequent fords across the irrigation canal which brings water from the spring down to the ranch. At the end of the three miles the trail ended abruptly on a sandy bench with a 12-foot drop off to the bottom of a creek bed strewn with boulders.

We might have found a way down off that bench, and with a crowbar and shovel and much work we probably could have opened a passage through the boulders—but up ahead, only a few hundred yards, were those willows! They've grown bigger and thicker with the passing years. They completely block the canyon for nearly a half mile. They are growing in a swamp criss-crossed with channels. The mud and water ranged from ankle deep to knee deep. Lawrence Way was right. No sane human would try to take a car through that willow-forested morass.

We returned to Borrego valley for an overnight camp, and early next morning, with Burnand and Way as companions,

we wrangled the horses through the willow jungle to Santa Catarina spring.

Above the spring there is a wide bulge in Coyote canyon, known as Collins valley. John Collins and his wife and three children took up a homestead here in 1897 and built a cabin. With the spring as a source of water they planned to grow fruit and winter vegetables. But the cattlemen who were running stock in Coyote canyon resented their coming, and after years of persecution during which his home was burned, Collins gave it up.

Later Joel Reed filed on the land and built a cabin which is still standing, although it has been unoccupied for years.

A conspicuous landmark on the bench where the cabin stands is a tall Washingtonia palm that may date back to the time when the Collins family lived here. Santa Catarina spring bubbles from the floor of a nearby ravine. You can hear the water—but unless you have the hardihood to penetrate a dense jungle of trees and wild grapevine, you cannot see it.

Burnand and Way bade us goodbye at the cabin, for there was work to be done on the ranch. Arles and I followed a cattle trail through the mesquite which surrounds the cabin site and emerged eventually on the great creosote-covered bajada that extends from the floor of Collins valley back

to the base of the San Ysidro mountains on the south.

To my knowledge there are six canyons tributary to Collins valley having native palm trees and running water. Three of these canyons have their outlet directly into the valley and are more or less known to Anza park visitors. They are Indian, Sheep and Thousand Palms canyons. The story of Thousand Palms, written by Hulbert Burroughs, appeared in *Desert* of September, 1941. But there are three other canyons, hidden deep in San Ysidro mountains, which are practically unknown to desert travelers, and which in my opinion are of greater scenic interest than the three I have named. These are Cougar canyon and two unnamed tributaries of Indian canyon.

There may be other palm oases in this rugged San Ysidro area. But there is no record of them, and I have not yet explored the region thoroughly enough to be sure.

It was eleven o'clock when Arles and I had covered the three miles from Santa Catarina spring to the foot of the San Ysidro range where Sheep and Indian canyons come in from the southwest and southeast and join channels on the bajada.

It was evident we would not have time to visit all the palm canyons in one afternoon, so we divided forces. Arles tied his horse to a Palo Verde tree and started the rocky climb up Cougar canyon, which really is a tributary of Indian, while I continued along the cattle trail that led up to the water in Indian canyon.

There is nothing very spectacular about Indian canyon. For a desert arroyo, it has an exceedingly dense growth of chaparral and trees and a fine stream of water. There are only seven palms in this canyon, and they are growing in such dense thickets of cottonwood, mesquite and shrubbery as to make photographs impossible.

It is in the two unnamed tributaries which enter Indian gorge from the west that I found palm oases which I am sure will delight visitors to Anza park in future years.

One of them might properly be named the Canyon of the Hidden Springs. Far up on the rocky slope on one side are seven or eight tiny clusters of mature palms, their green fronds glistening in the sunlight against a background of drab grey rock. There are not more than two or three or a half dozen in each group, and they cling so closely together it is impossible to count them without climbing the slope to examine them closely.

There is no surface water coming down the slope where these palms grow. But you may be sure there are underground springs at their roots. Otherwise they would not be growing there. They, or their predecessors, probably date back to a period when there was much water on this mountainside—perhaps numerous springs gushing from

among the rocks. There is still a clear stream in the bottom of the canyon.

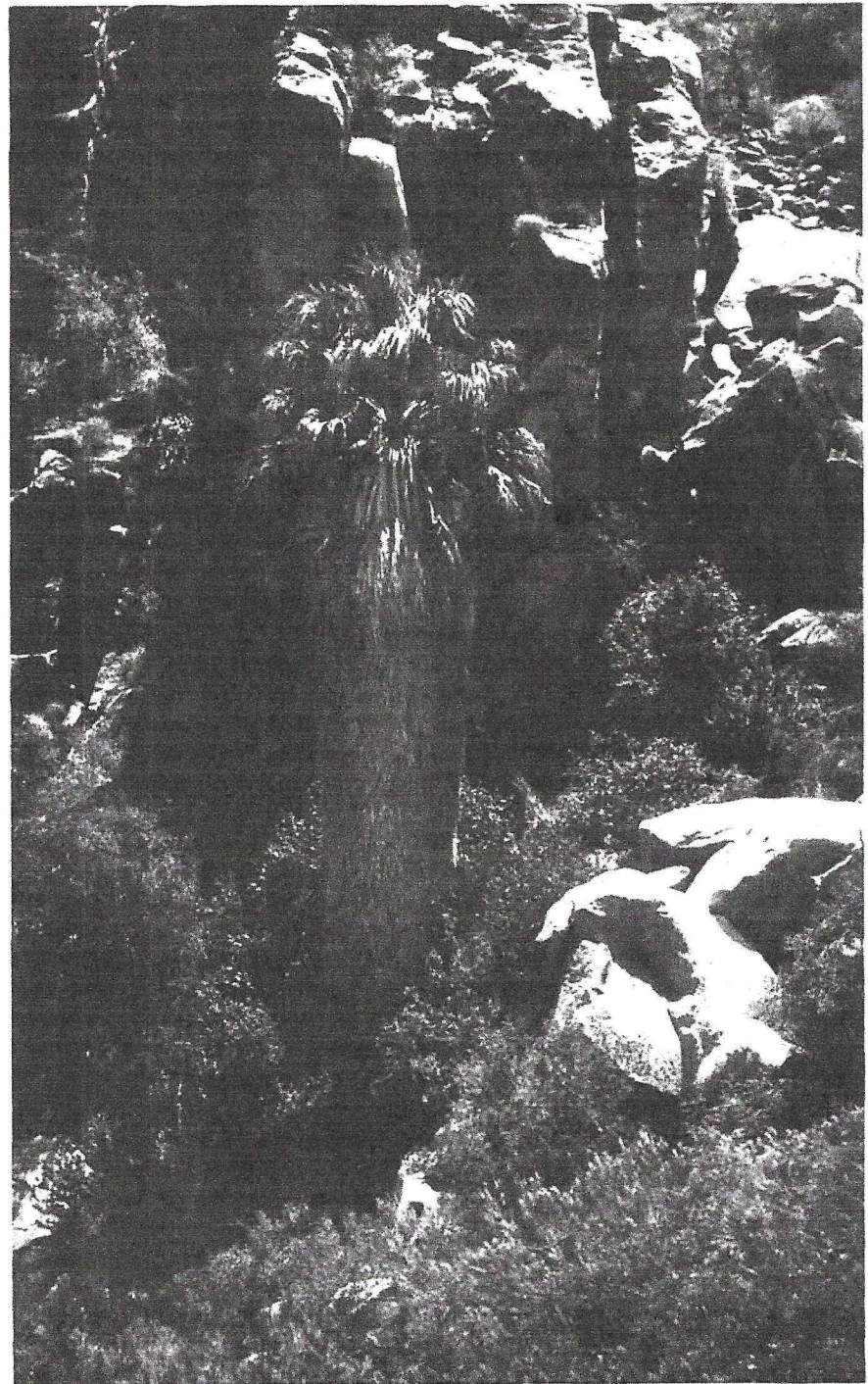
This gorge is too steep and rocky for a horse, and I climbed the last half mile on foot. But it was worth the effort. This remote canyon is a tiny world of its own—a very peaceful little world. The only sounds here are the wind rustling through the dry fronds overhead, the singing of the birds that come here to drink and bathe and make their nests, and the music of water tumbling over boulders in the creek.

If the plans of the park authorities are

carried out, sooner or later there will be a paved road down Coyote canyon—making this San Ysidro mountain recreational area accessible to park visitors. But because of its isolation and the ruggedness of its terrain, the remote Canyon of the Hidden Springs probably will remain a sort of limited access area—reserved for those who are willing to pay something extra in physical effort for the privilege of enjoying its tranquil splendor.

I did not have time to follow this canyon to its source. I would estimate there are

*In Cougar canyon—every palm is a picture in this rugged gorge of the San Ysidros.*





*One of the palm groups in Cougar canyon.*

less than 100 palms. But it is one of those cases where every palm is a picture.

Returning to Indian canyon, it is only a few hundred yards up the cattle trail to the point where the second of the unnamed tributaries comes in from the west. And that also will have to await a more thorough exploration at a future date.

While I was spending the afternoon Jeep in the San Ysidro range, Arles Adams was having a grand time scaling the rocks and waterfalls in Cougar canyon. He counted 32 palms in that gorge, but lacked the time to follow it through to the end. There is a fine stream of water in Cougar, with a series of scenic waterfalls framed in stately Washingtonias. In this canyon one needs a rope for security in scaling the almost vertical walls that rise in gigantic steps toward the ridge behind.

In a hurried trip up Sheep canyon we counted 26 palms, which is two more than I recorded there eight years ago. Sheep

canyon also has a fine stream of water tumbling over great blocks of granite that make climbing very difficult. If the park authorities later budget funds for a foot trail in this area, Sheep canyon would be the logical selection for one of those trails. This is the most accessible of all the palm oases in the area I am writing about. It would require only a half mile hike from the floor of the desert to this wild jumble of palms and boulders and waterfalls. And I can think of no more delicious experience on a warm summer day than a palm-shaded seat on a rock in the spray of one of those falls.

While there are streams in these palm canyons the year 'round, none of this water normally reaches the floor of the desert as a surface flow. It tumbles over the rocks among the palms and then disappears in the sand down toward the mouth of the canyon. It is quite possible

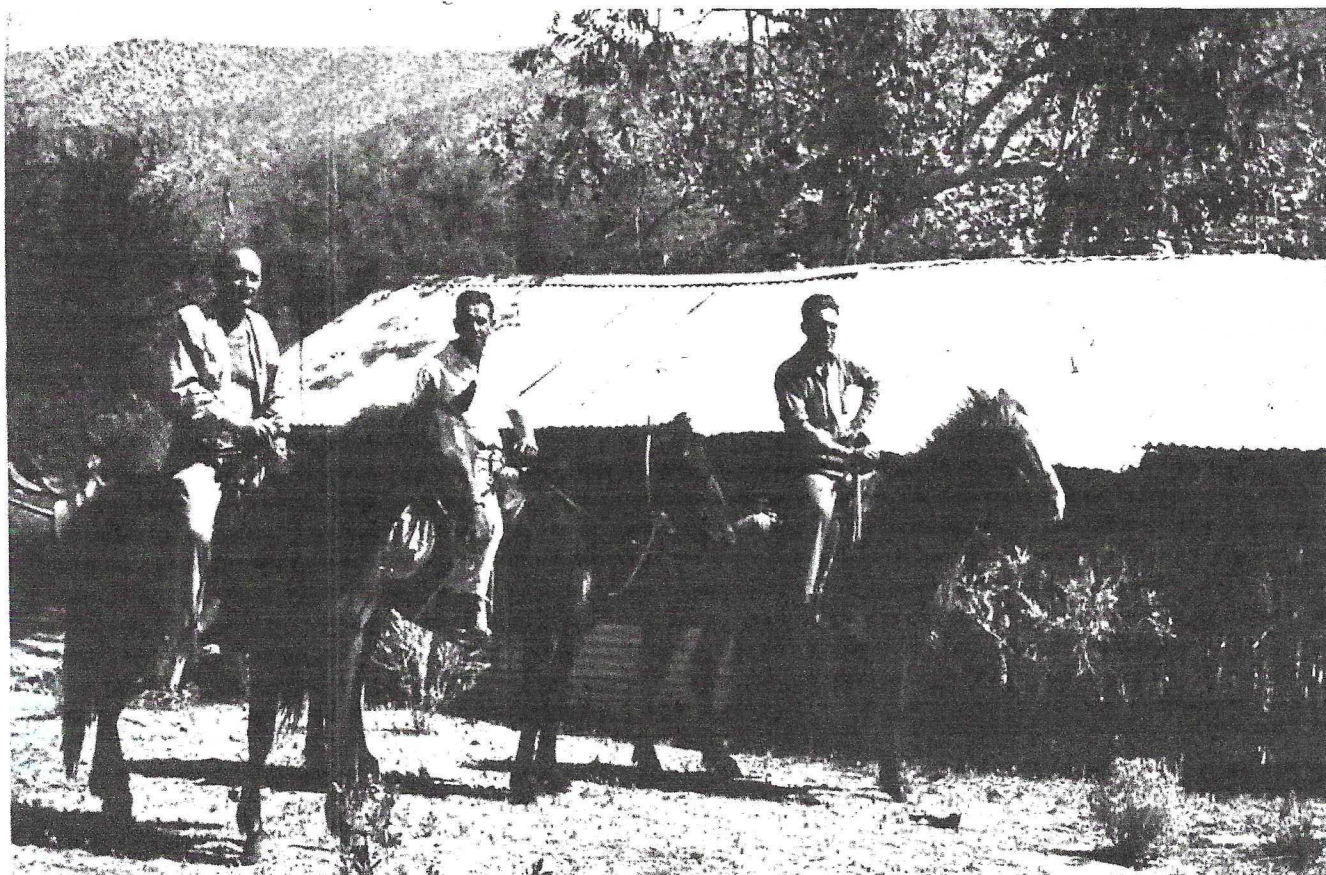
*A seat in the spray of this Sheep canyon cascade is reward enough for the steep climb to this palm oasis.*

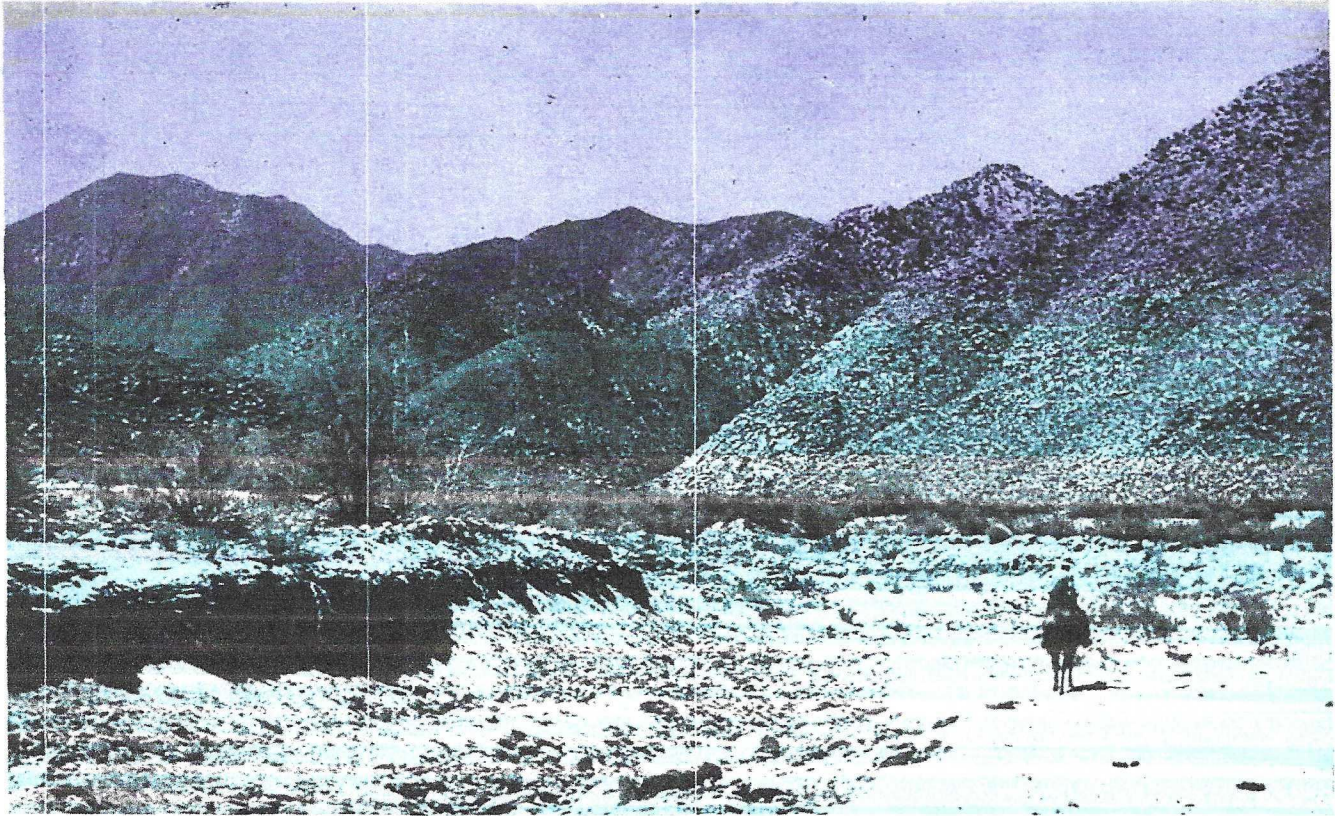




*In the Canyon of the Hidden Springs the wild palms grow in little clusters far up on the side of the granite slopes.*

*At the deserted cabin on Joel Reed's homestead near Santa Catarina spring. Left to right —A. A. Burnand, Laurence T. Way and Arlex Adams, companions of the author on the Coyote canyon trip.*





*Entrance to Indian canyon. Looking at the San Ysidros from the floor of Collins valley one would never suspect that hidden in these barren desert mountains are some of the most charming palm oases on the American desert.*

that the generous fountain of water at Santa Catarina spring, three or four miles away, is served by underground channels from the streams in these palm canyons.

A conspicuous landmark guards the entrance to Sheep canyon—a lone palm tree growing on the western mountain slope above the bajada, a native *Washingtonia*, dwarfed in size but obviously a veteran. It is an outpost, on perpetual duty—a very unusual sentinel because it extends to each visitor a silent invitation to explore the fastness of the canyon beyond.

It was nearly dark when Arles and I returned the horses to their corrals that night. Five palm oases are too many to cover in one day. I hope future visitors will have more time to enjoy the peaceful luxury of those rocky oasis retreats than we had on this trip. But I'll be going back there. In the meantime I will ask Desert readers to regard this merely as a preliminary report on the wild palms in the San Ysidro mountains.

Each of those canyons—Indian, Cougar, Sheep and the two unnamed oases deserves a more detailed description and more adequate pictures than are presented at this time. And since this is park country—those palm canyons are to be reserved for the enjoyment of you and me and other Americans who love the desert wilderness.

*Sez*

## Hard Rock Shorty of Death Valley . . .

By HARRY OLIVER



Outside the Inferno store the wind was howling, and the air was so thick with sand it was impossible to see the hitching post 10 feet from the door.

"Good day to wash the kitchen pans," remarked Hard Rock Shorty as he emptied the sand out of his corncob and refilled it from his old buckskin pouch.

"Don't take no water for dish-washin' this kind o' weather," Shorty explained. "Jes hold the skillet an' things outside the door an' the wind'll scour 'em clean.

"Reckon some folks is glad to see all this wind ablowing, 'specially from the east this way. I'm thinkin' about Arkansas Joe who has that lit-

tle patch o' garden down Mojave river way. Arkansas calls hisself a dirt farmer. But shucks, there ain't enough dirt in that homestead o' his'n to grow a potted tulip. Mostly all sand.

"But Joe keeps a tryin', with what water he can raise with that one-hoss pump he's rigged up. He's away late with his farmin' this season. Y'see every winter the wind starts blowin' from the west, and blows most o' Joe's farm away. A couple o' months later the wind changes and blows from the east.

"Joe's been frettin' a lot lately. The winds is late and he cain't start his spring plowin' 'til his farm blows back."