In 1927, the newly created California State Park Commission appointed landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. to make a survey of potential state park areas. Olmsted asked Mrs. Hoyt to contribute information on four desert counties: Inyo, Mono, Riverside and San Bernardino. His final report outlined nine desert projects, including the Joshua tree forests near Barstow and Victorville. Mrs. Hoyt favored an area east of Palm Springs, extending from the Salton Sea northward to Twentynine Palms. "It was this region, over 1,000,000 acres stretching from the sand flats of the Colorado Desert to the juniper-Joshua Tree forests of the Mojave, that she came to champion as a vast desert park," writes Sorensen.

"There was never much doubt that Mrs. Hoyt wanted a national rather than a state park," adds Sorensen, but the National Park Service was already considering two other desert projects — Death Valley and a saguaro cactus area near Tucson, Ariz. Temporarily stymied, she turned her attention south of the border where the governor of Baja California had suggested creation of a desert park near La Paz. Developing the theme, Mrs. Hoyt wrote a magazine article suggesting the creation of an international desert park somewhere along the Mexico-U.S. border. In 1931, Mexico named a newly discovered species of cacti *Mammillaria hamiltonhoytea* in her honor. Mexican president Pascual Ortiz Rubio also announced that a 10,000-acre cactus forest near Tehuacan would be reserved as a memorial to Mrs. Hoyt and her League. He also called her the "Apostle of the Cacti," and so she is known today.

Prospects for National Park Service action on a Joshua tree national park brightened with the proclamation of Death Valley and Saguaro as National Monuments during the last months of the Hoover Administration and the election of conservation-minded Franklin D. Roosevelt as President in 1932. However, the final National Park Service report on the Joshua tree reservation recommended an area smaller than the 1,136,000 acres originally envisioned. Despite vigorous protests and lobbying by Mrs. Hoyt, the lower figure was adopted, and on August 10, 1936, FDR signed the proclamation establishing Joshua Tree National Monument, an area encompassing over 825,000 acres. "Mrs. Hoyt's dream had become a reality...The reserve had monument rather than park status, but this mattered little because the monument — over 100 miles long and 50 miles wide — was still larger than many national parks," writes Sorensen. Some of Mrs. Hoyt's friends urged that the reservation be named the "Minerva Hoyt National Park," but Park Service policy forbade the naming of projects for living persons.

Mrs. Hoyt died in 1945. Almost half a century later, on October 31, 1994, the final chapter of the Joshua tree story was written when President Clinton signed the Desert Protection Act returning 234,000 acres (removed in the 1950s) to Joshua Tree National Monument and promoting the Monument to National Park status.

This profile is based on an article by Conner Sorensen that appeared in Women in the Life of Southern California, an anthology compiled from the Southern California Quarterly in 1996 and published by the Historical Society of Southern California.-- *Contributed by Albert Greenstein, 2000 and reprinted with permission from the Historical Society of Southern California.*

Minerva Hamilton Hoyt

Minerva Hamilton Hoyt (1866-1945) was a South Pasadena socialite whose relentless crusade to preserve the deserts of Southern California earned her international fame as the "Apostle of the Cacti" and a place in history for her role in establishing Joshua Tree National Park.

A native of Mississippi (her birthplace was her father's plantation near Durant, Mississippi), Mrs. Hoyt and her husband, New York surgeon Dr. Albert Sherman Hoyt, moved to South Pasadena, California in the late 1890s. A wealthy and cultured woman, Mrs. Hoyt was active in a number of civic and arts organizations, but always maintained her interest in the California desert which she first saw as a young woman traveling west by rail. As Conner Sorensen writes: "Her habit of making desert excursions was reinforced by-

tragedy when, sometime early in the century, her infant son died, and again in 1918, when her husband died. Following her husband's death the grieving widow turned more frequently to the desert for peace and consolation."

Public access to desert lands was undergoing irrevocable change during these years, due primarily to improved roads and the automobile revolution. "Palm Springs, in the 1920s," Sorenson continues, "grew from a small artist colony into a minor metropolis and a popular weekend resort. On the 'high desert' northeast of Palm Springs the new community of Twentynine Palms was promoted as a health colony for returning World War I veterans. The new settlers homesteaded desert tracts previously known to only a few prospectors and miners."

"Devil's Garden," Morongo Pass, Mt. San Jacinto in Background

In addition, writes Sorensen, "the collection of exotic desert plants became a fad in the 1920s, as more and more people came into contact with the desert. Cactus gardens, the latest rage in landscaping, and the adoption of the Spanish mission style of architecture increased the demand for cacti and native palms. Desert lovers, alarmed at the practice of transplanting full-grown palms, barrel cacti, and Joshua trees to urban patios and cactus gardens, feared that indiscriminate collecting would destroy the desert vegetation... It was in response to these dangers that Mrs. Hoyt began her work for desert preservation."

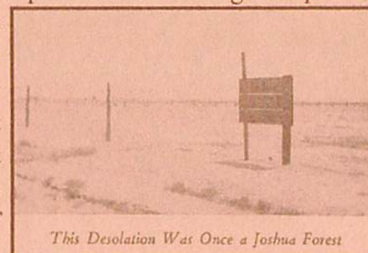
Her first project was a desert conservation exhibit displayed at the 1928 Garden Club of America's flower show in New York. Designed to convey a sense of the total desert environment, the exhibit consisted of a live habitat group, including stuffed birds and animals, augmented by lighting effects and painted backdrops. The exhibit proved so popular that a similar one – this time featuring the Mojave Desert, Death Valley and the California redwoods – was mounted the following spring at the Centennial Flower Show in Boston. The most elaborate exhibit was staged later that year in Chelsea, England, at the Royal Horticultural Society's Spring Flower Show and was later donated to the Royal Botanic Gardens.

In March, 1930 Mrs. Hoyt organized the International Deserts Conservation League and became its president. One of her primary objectives was the creation of a large desert park in Southern California. Mrs. Hoyt stressed two reasons for desert preservation, writes Sorensen. "First, there was the need to protect desert plants and animals. Equally important for Mrs. Hoyt was the value of the desert as a retreat, which she described in terms of its 'calm' and 'silence.' Through the establishment of desert parks Mrs. Hoyt wished to preserve this 'unique desert atmosphere [of] silence and mystery.'"

Adds Sorensen: "Everything the desert represented for Mrs. Hoyt – beauty, uniqueness, permanence and vulnerability – were symbolized in the most characteristic plant of the high desert, the weirdly branched tree-yucca called the Joshua tree. Forests of Joshua trees were scattered over the higher desert elevations from southern California to Arizona, their distribution delineating the limits of the Mojave Desert... Mormon settlers reputedly applied the name Joshua tree because its branches reminded them of the biblical Joshua with his arms stretched upward in prayer."

No longer "the most repulsive tree in the vegetable kingdom" (so described by John C. Fremont in 1844), the Joshua tree underwent an image change in the 1920s and was now hailed as the defiant "Sentinel of the Desert." For Mrs. Hoyt the Joshua tree represented, above all else, the permanence of the desert, a notion she associated with the reputed age of this plant," writes Sorensen. "She always referred to the Joshua tree as the 'oldest living desert plant,' regarded by 'many desert authorities' to be over 1,000 years old, though scientists knew that the Joshua tree, compared to other desert species, was not particularly long-lived, the oldest reaching an age of about 300 years."

Beautiful or ugly, the Joshua tree faced a human onslaught that threatened its existence. "Collectors uprooted the full-grown plants, which often died in urban cactus gardens," writes Sorensen. "The pliable wood...was utilized for the commercial production of surgical splints, artificial limbs and as trunk protectors for young fruit trees...Most distressing to admirers of this plant was the burning of large numbers of Joshua trees by motor tourists. In 1930 the editor of Touring Topics reported that pairs of young people, traveling over the desert at night, were setting fire to single Joshua trees as a signal to other motorists." (That same year, the tallest Joshua tree known to exist was burned by vandals.) Even Hollywood was guilty of despoiling the plant, using its lightweight wood for mock movie furniture.



This Desolation Was Once a Joshua Forest