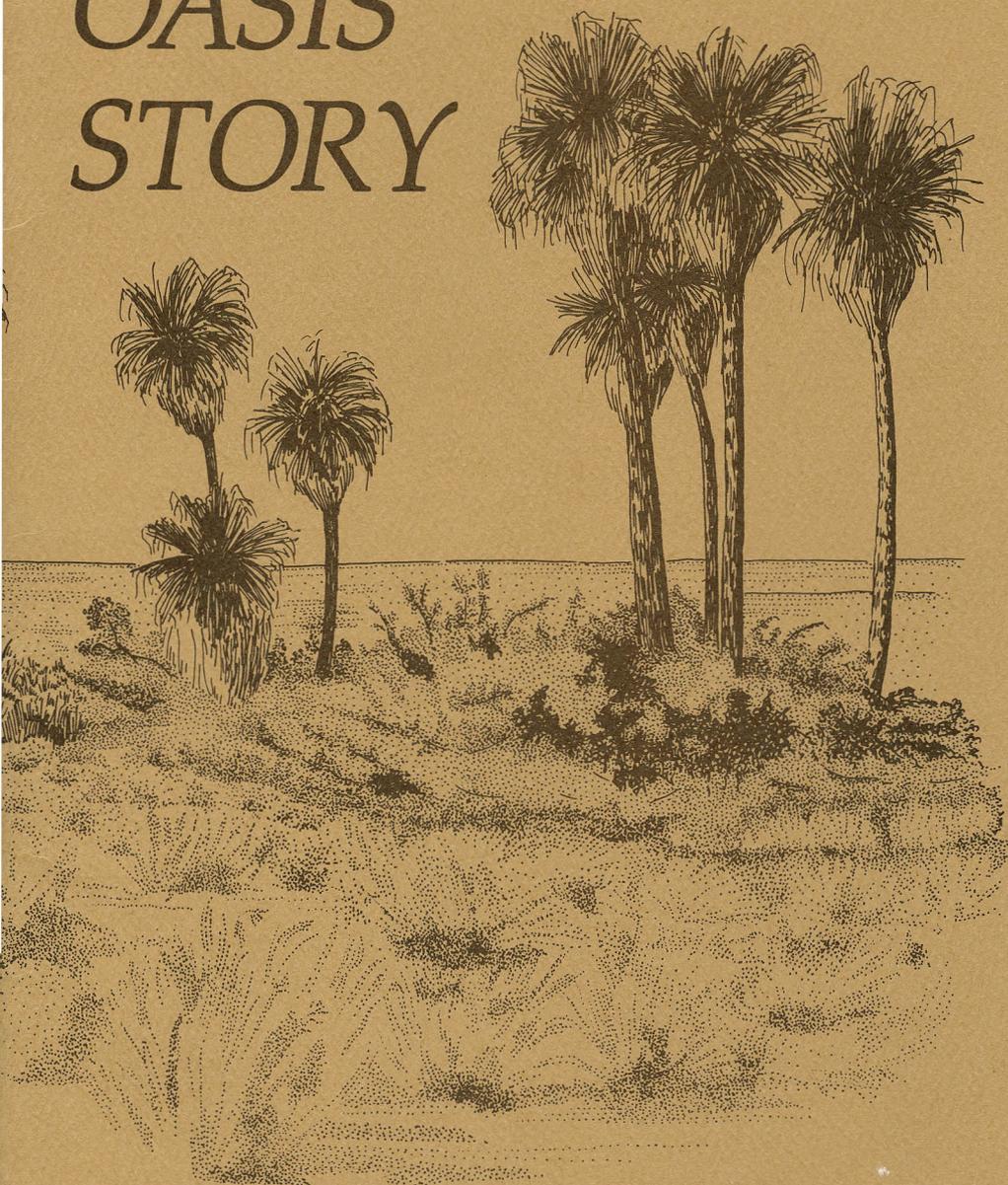


# THE OASIS STORY

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*"The desert is different. Not so hostile as the snowy peaks, nor so broad and bland as the ocean's surface, it lies open . . . to leisurely exploration, to extended periods of habitation. Yet it can hardly be called a humane environment; what little human life there is will be clustered about the oases, natural or man-made. The desert waits outside, desolate and still and strange, unfamiliar and often grotesque in its forms and colors, inhabited by rare, furtive creatures of incredible hardiness and cunning, sparingly colonized by weird mutants from the plant kingdom, most of them as spiny, thorny, stunted and twisted as they are tenacious."*

Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*

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Author: Conger Beasley, Jr.

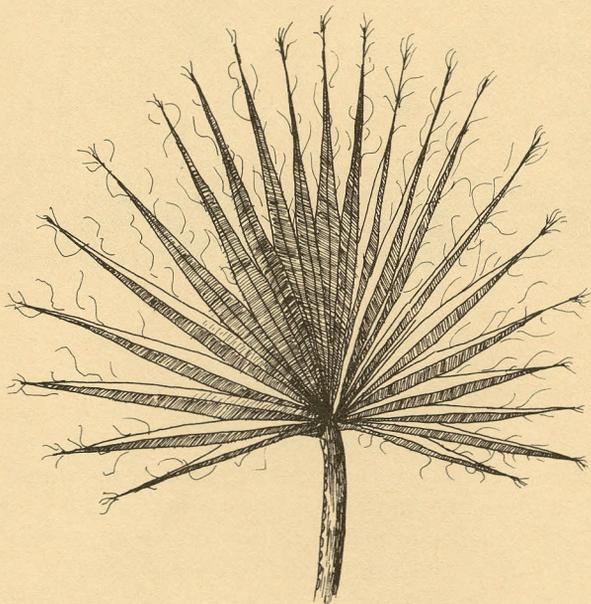
Illustrator: Alice H. Siebecker



Travelers plodding across the High Desert in the 1890s would have seen on the northern slope of the Little San Bernardino Mountains a brushy line of green foliage indicating the presence of that most precious of all natural substances — water. As the travelers drew closer they would have seen that the foliage consisted of a number of tall *Washingtonia* palms, a few willows and cottonwoods, and a great deal of mesquite. Most likely the travelers would have approached from the west, following the path that California State Highway 62 now takes; most likely, too, the travelers would have come out from Banning, 60 miles to the west, a trip by horseback or wagon that took as long as five days. Or perhaps the travelers had journeyed from the east, from Parker or Wickenburg in Arizona, 120 miles away. A hot, miserable, exhausting trek across some of the most forbidding terrain on the continent. For them the appearance of a green spot on the horizon could only have been a mirage — the heat shimmering off the desert to produce a tantalizing illusion of shade and sanctuary. But the spot of green was real. The closer the travelers drew the larger the foliage grew, until at last they were resting in shade and slaking their parched throats with sweet water from a natural spring — the Oasis of Mara, as the Serrano Indians called it; later rechristened Twentynine Palms Oasis by white settlers.

An oasis is a very special place. Water is the source of all life, and the water that bubbled up between the palm trees at Mara attracted a variety of creatures. The area around the Oasis has supported some kind of human life for the last 9,000 years. The first recorded inhabitants were the Serrano Indians, who, according to

legend, gave the place its modern name. In the old days, the story goes, the Serrano lived to the west, in the San Bernardino Mountains. Women of the tribe had difficulty producing boy babies. A medicine man told them to go east, out into the desert, to the first place where they found water. There they would find a good place to live, and there the women would have boy babies. Everytime a boy was born, the medicine man instructed the father to plant a palm tree. The first year in their new home the Serrano had 29 boy babies born to them.



Whether true or not, the story underscores the importance of these tall, stately palms to the first inhabitants. The Serrano found many uses for the tree. The long trunks served as poles and beams for housing. The fronds were made into sandals and used as roofing; the tough stems made excellent cooking utensils. Inside the thatching of dead fronds that cloaked the trunks, many birds made nests. Occasionally the Serrano burned this dry tinder, not only to increase the yield of seeds and buds at the top, but also to chase away bad spirits that inhabited the fronds at night.

The Twentynine Palms Oasis is the northernmost habitat of the California fan palm. South of here, in the Coachella Valley and all the way to the Mexican border, it can be found growing around springs and oases. Early explorers referred to it as a "cabbage tree." In 1879, a German botanist named Wendland gave the tree a more dignified name after the father of our country — *Washingtonia filifera*.

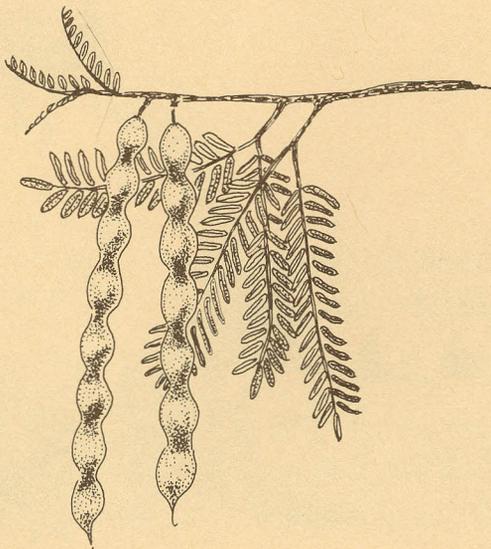
The fan palm is one of the most remarkable organisms of the desert. Its presence is synonymous with water — the most valuable natural resource in the arid Southwest. When we conjur up an image of a desert oasis in our minds, we

usually include a palm tree or two. It looms over the water site like a lofty sentinel and the wind rattling its stiff fronds makes a ghostly sound. J. Smeaton Chase describes it best when he says, "In the talk of desert men, the palm figures constantly . . . the name means to the traveller not only water, but shade, with the chance of grass for his animals, and the relief of verdure for his sorely harassed eyes."

A member of an early surveying party (1856) mentions the fact that the Oasis was under cultivation. Corn, beans, pumpkins, melons, squash, and watermelons were all growing plentifully, aided by an irrigation ditch that diverted water from a nearby pool. Reportedly there was also a peach orchard. The techniques for such an agricultural enterprise may have been learned from the Mission Fathers in the San Bernardino Valley, where many of the western branch of the Serrano lived.

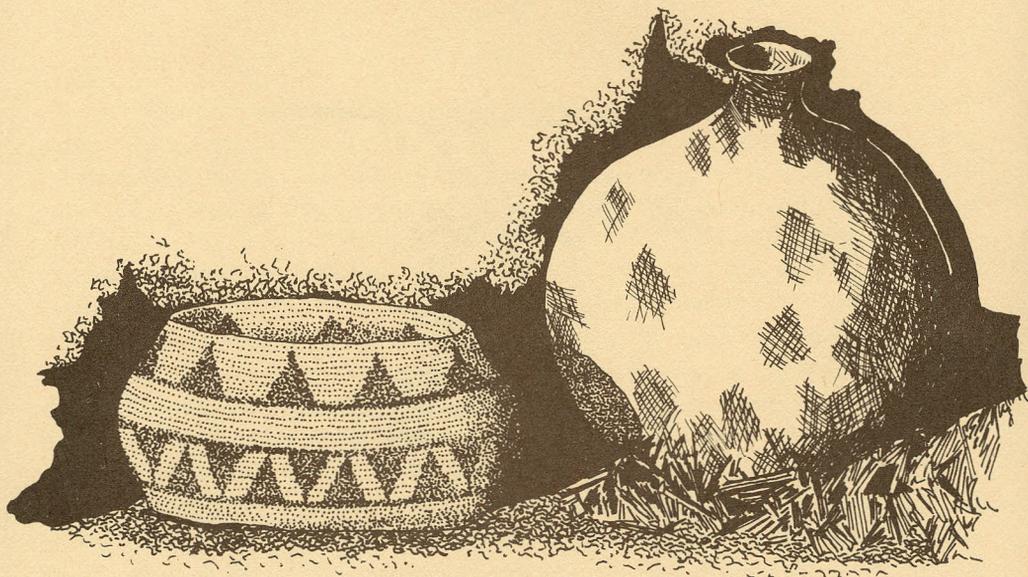
Present also in great quantity were mesquite trees. This tree was sadly misunderstood by the early explorers. A doctor named Bigelow, who accompanied the Whipple surveying party that passed through the Twentynine Palms area in 1853, declared the mesquite tree to be "one of the most repulsive that can well be imagined. It is the surest indication of a sterile, worthless soil that can be found in the vegetable kingdom . . ."

The Serrano Indians didn't think so. To them the tree had many uses. It was an important food source. The tree produces a bean pod which is highly nutritious. Ground up and mixed with water, the beans were fashioned into cakes which could be eaten warm or stored for long periods of time. Bows were made from the branches, the thorns were used as needles, the bark was woven into skirts for women and diapers for babies. A fire of mesquite wood burns a long time and is very hot. Conversely, the shade of the mesquite is considered to be the coolest in the world. The leaves turn easily in the slightest breeze, offering both shade and circulation.



In 1867 a band of Chemehuevi Indians moved to the Oasis. The Chemehuevi were originally from the country to the east, along the Colorado River. In 1867 they fought a war with their traditional enemy, the Mohave, and lost. The war had an interesting origin. The Chemehuevi were allied with their Shoshonean-speaking cousins, the Paiutes, and the early Mormon settlers of southern Nevada. The object of the alliance was to capture as many Mohave women as possible for the Mormons to have as wives. Mohave women were renowned for their good looks. Presumably the Chemehuevi and Paiutes would have a share in the spoils. However, the men of the Mohave tribe, fierce warriors — the most feared of all the Indians of the lower Colorado River — broke up the alliance and scattered the Chemehuevi.

When the Chemehuevi reached Twenty-nine Palms they mixed peacefully with the Serrano, and there was a great deal of intermarrying between them. Due to their primitive material culture and food-gathering methods, the two tribes were contemptuously referred to by explorers and settlers as "Diggers." The image unfortunately stuck, and later settlers persistently treated the Indians with disdain. As late as 1962, a reporter for a California newspaper declared that "the less said of the (the Serrano) the better, for they were of low IQ and very lazy. Not having patented the bow and arrow they used rocks to kill game for food."



Such ignorance is crippling, both to those who suffer from it and those to whom it is directed. The Serrano and Chemehuevi deserve a better fate. A strong, agile people, with graceful limbs and dark, burnished skin, they evolved a life-style over the centuries that was ingeniously suited to the sparse terrain of the desert. Both tribes possessed rich mythologies, and both were adept at basket- and pottery-making. In addition to deer and antelope and jackrabbit, they ate lizards and insects and mesquite beans — items that might seem unpalatable to us, but that are highly nutritious. The Oasis of Mara — a Serrano word meaning “little springs and much grass” — was bountifully endowed. For years the Indians lived in harmony here, taking only what they needed in order to survive and leaving the rest for their fellow creatures.

*“There is a simplicity about large masses — simplicity in breadth, space and distance — that is inviting and ennobling. And there is something very restful about the horizontal line. Things that lie flat are at peace and the mind grows peaceful with them. Furthermore, the waste places of the earth, the barren deserts, the tracts forsaken of men and given over to loneliness, have a peculiar attraction of their own. The weird solitude, the great silence, the grim desolation, are the very things with which every desert wanderer eventually falls in love.”*

John Van Dyke, *The Desert*

Beginning in the 1870s and extending over the next 40 years, white prospectors and cattlemen slowly displaced the Indians as the dominant human presence at the Oasis. In 1849, thousands of fortune-seekers had poured into California from all over the world. Those who were unable to find treasure around Sutters Mill began searching for gold in the outlying portions of the state. In 1874, the Anaconda Mine opened up south of the Oasis, at a site now within the Joshua Tree National Monument. Other mines soon followed — the Lost Horse, the Desert Queen, the Golden Bee — operated by such colorful characters as Phil Sullivan and Johnny Lang and Chuckawalla Wilson. Mines require a great deal of timber and water to function, and as a result a number of trees at the Oasis were cut down and much water was siphoned off.

The following decade saw the arrival of the cattlemen. In the 1880s, the higher elevations of the Joshua Tree National Monument received as much as ten inches of rain and snow annually, compared with only four or five today. Grass grew tall in places, and there were several springs that provided water year around. Perhaps the most famous of all the cattlemen who operated in the area was the McHaney Gang, led by two brothers, Bill and Jim McHaney. In addition to their legitimate operations, they were reputed to be rustlers who carried on a lively two-way cattle trade between California and Arizona. Hidden Valley, located deep inside the Monument, was where the gang reportedly kept their stolen cattle and where they rebranded them to sell to new markets.

Bill McHaney was the first white person to take up permanent residence at the Oasis. The year was 1879. Development after that was slow. Indian families moved in, stayed awhile, then left. According to a 1902 census, there were 37 Serrano and Chemehuevi Indians living at the Oasis. In 1909, a Paiute named Willie Boy shot and killed a Chemehuevi named Mike Boniface, and touched off the largest manhunt in the history of the area. Willie Boy was finally tracked down in the Bullion Mountains north of the Oasis, where he took his own life rather than surrender to the posse. Anti-Indian sentiment increased considerably, and one-by-one the Serrano and Chemehuevi families who had lived for so many years at the Oasis began to slip away. By 1913 they were all gone.



Well into the 1900s the Oasis was used primarily as a jumping off spot for prospectors and cattlemen. It was the magnet to which people passing through the area were attracted. Despite increased use, it was still unspoiled. A surveyor in 1920 described the Oasis as "a large group of springs aligned over a distance of nearly a mile from east to west. At the west end . . . three or four large pools discharge a considerable quantity of water, which runs for a half mile or more into the desert."

Eve Violette, a homesteader from Canada, declared the water to be "crystal clear, pure, fine, fine water." Early settlers in the region took all their water from the Oasis. One of the springs had a wooden lid, fastened by leather hinges, laid over it. Anyone who wanted water simply lifted up the lid, took what they needed, and replaced it. The spring, according to Eve, was always full.

In addition to the springs, a well was dug around 1900 by employees of the Barker and Shay cattle company. The well was dug primarily for human consumption, livestock using the springs nearby. The well was sixteen feet deep and held about 600 gallons. When the well was depleted, it took about twelve hours for it to fill back up.

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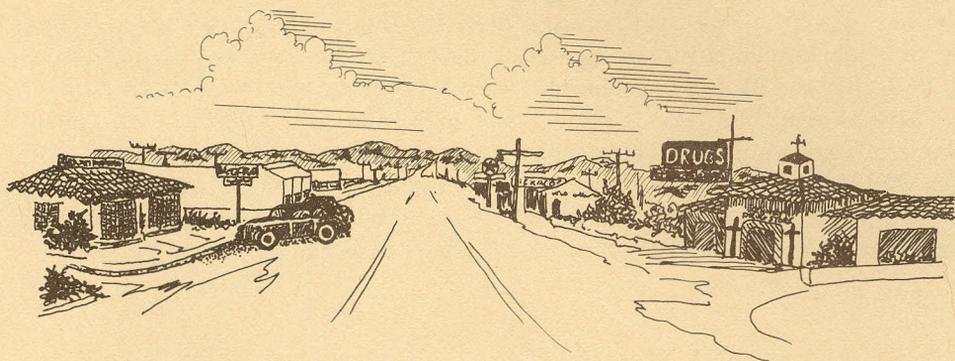
*"The deserts should never be reclaimed. They are the breathing spaces of the west and should be preserved forever."*

John Van Dyke, *The Desert*



In 1888 an adobe house was built at the east end of the Oasis by Jack Rankin and Billy Neaves. For the next 40 years, the house was the most important man-made structure in the area. At various times it was used as a waystop for a stage line, a dentist's office, a real-estate office, a store, and a meeting house. Miners lived in the house, riders for cattle outfits, and, after 1918, homesteaders looking for good land to occupy. Bill McHaney lived there for awhile before he built a dugout just west of the adobe. The house was torn down in the 1940s.

After World War I, veterans who had been gassed on the battlefields of France were encouraged to come out to the High Desert where the air was pure and easy to breathe. Homesteaders, drawn by the salubrious climate and the wide-open spaces, also began arriving in large numbers. Slowly the town of Twentynine Palms began to take shape. Slowly, too, the character of the Oasis began to change. More palms were cut down, along with willows and cottonwoods. The mesquite trees were thinned out, and then allowed to grow back wild. With the incorporation of the Monument into the National Park System in 1936, many new visitors came to the area. As development increased, the water table began to drop. By the late 1940s, water no longer bubbled out of the springs and had to be piped in by the National Park Service. The thumbprint of civilization had left its mark upon the area. The era of the natural oasis was over forever.



The increase in population brought all the attendant woes of an expanding civilization. In addition to the loss of water, there have been acts of vandalism, some minor, some major, some of them detrimental to the well-being of the Oasis. On the night of April 23, 1982, someone set fire to the palms in the heart of the Oasis. There was some damage to the palms, but they will survive. Despite the scorched trunks, new growths have appeared among the old fronds at the crowns of the trees and numerous seedlings have sprouted near the base of the trees. Fire is natural to an oasis environment. Carefully controlled burning is beneficial to the palms and surrounding vegetation, eliminating diseases, fire hazards and encouraging new, healthy growth.

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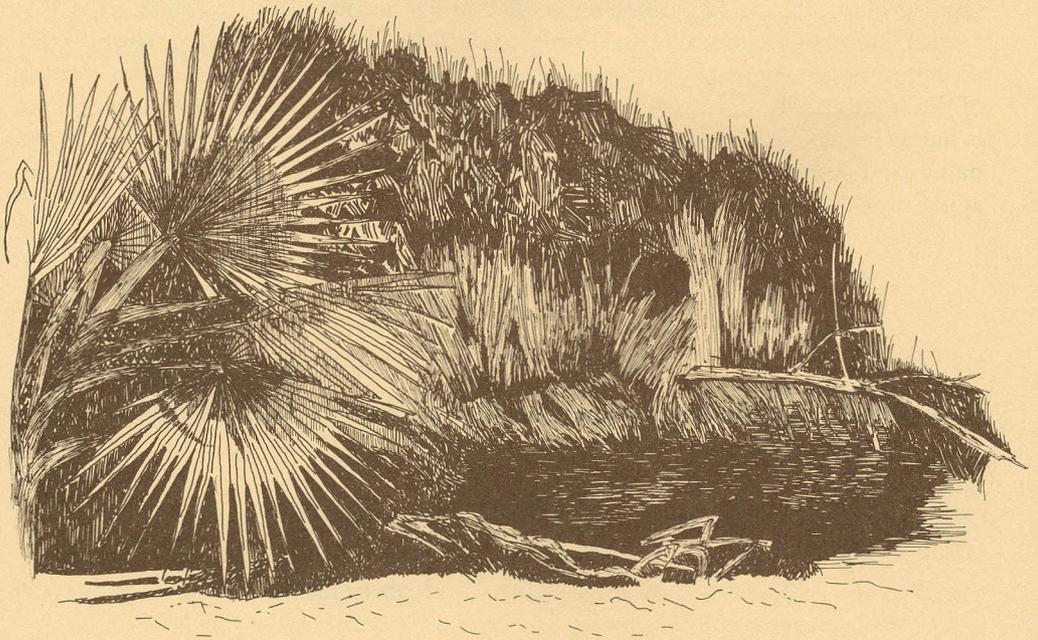
*"But all journeys in the desert are pilgrimages: you come out wiser, with some of the cheap shine worn off."*

Rob Schultheis, *The Hidden West*

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The value of an oasis to modern man is more difficult to gauge than it was to his ancestors. They could not live without it. Not only did it provide water, but food and wood and shade. Today, we have other sources — power from hydroelectric dams, beef stew from supermarkets, water from Colorado River aqueducts. We no longer *need* oases in any specific sense.

Or do we? Though largely intangible, the value of an oasis for us today is considerable. They offer us shade, a spot of green to salve our parched eyes, and down below in their shrunken aquifers, a taste of precious water. More importantly, they offer us a chance to pause, to cease our hurrying, and to reflect. Or perhaps not to think at all, but rather to sit and listen to the myriad sounds that such a queer tangle of vegetation produces. A chance also to look, and hopefully to *see*, sights that otherwise might never come to our attention — a family of quail doddering single-file through a mesquite thicket; a jackrabbit rotating his ears like radar screens; a carpenter bee hovering fat and glossy over an arrowweed blossom.



Such sights can enrich our lives by making us aware of Nature's diversity and wonders. Wonders that by their very timelessness can transport us out of the drudgery of personal concerns into the realm of mystery and delight. An oasis is a reflecting pool in which we can see mirrored the riddles of why we are here, and where we think we would like to go.

In addition to the plants and trees mentioned earlier in the history of the Oasis, the following are also of interest because of their abundance and many Native American uses.



*Prosopis Juliflora*: Mesquite. To the Serrano, green patches of mesquite indicated the presence of water. Where mesquite grows, water is usually available, five to 20 feet under the ground, which the mesquite taps with its long roots.

Accompanying the mesquite in its struggle for survival is an unruly reddish growth known as mistletoe (*Phoradendron Nutt*). A parasite, mistletoe lives exclusively off other organisms. Planting roots deep into its branches, the mistletoe draws water and nutrients away from the mesquite. Eventually the mesquite may die.

The phainopepla, a slender black bird with a shaggy topknot, participates in the symbiotic relationship between mesquite and mistletoe. It eats the berries of the mistletoe then disperses the seeds onto the limbs of the mesquite through its bill and feet and through its droppings. In this way, the phainopepla ensures itself a future supply of food.

A mesquite thicket makes an excellent cover for animals. If you look closely, you might see a jackrabbit or a family of quail tucked between the lower branches.

*Larrea divaricata*: Creosote bush. The dominant shrub of the High Desert, popularly known as "greasewood." The waxy leaves help the plant to retain precious moisture. The plant makes excellent firewood; its medicinal properties were of great value to the Indians. It had almost as many curative uses for them as penicillin has for us today.

Tea brewed from the stems and leaves was used to cure colds, chest infections, intestinal disorders, stomach and menstrual cramps. Leaves were boiled in a sweathouse and the steam inhaled to relieve congestion. Poultices were made from the leaves to heal open wounds and draw out poisons. It was given to horses to cure distemper. It was even used to get rid of dandruff!



*Pulchea sericea*: Arrowweed. A slender, willow-like shrub, it grows in dense thickets as high as ten feet. The plant flowers from March to July. The leaves are covered with tiny silver hairs. Bees gather in large numbers to collect the nectar of the blossoms.

The Serrano Indians roasted the roots of the young plant and ate them. The long slender stems made excellent roofing material for their houses. The flexible stems were interwoven with other plants to create a wattle-and-daub effect. Houses constructed in this fashion were said to be impervious to wind and rain.

Arrows were also made from the plant. A shaft was cut and then moistened and slipped into the groove of a heated stone arrow straightener. The shaft was then worked back and forth until the natural curves were "ironed" out.

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*"Despite its clarity and simplicity . . . the desert wears . . . paradoxically, a veil of mystery. Motionless and silent it evokes in us an elusive hint of something unknown, unknowable, about to be revealed. Since the desert does not act it seems to be waiting — but waiting for what?"*

Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*



*"For all the toll the desert takes of a man it gives compensations, deep breaths, deep sleep, and the communion of the stars."*

Mary Austin, *The Land of Little Rain*

