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Wood for Indian Bows

For years, Randall Henderson has been prowling the Southern California desert in quest of springs and waterholes where native palm trees grow. Some of these palm oases are quite accessible—others are found in terrain so rough they are comparatively unknown. This month the writer describes a canyon where Indians came in prehistoric days to cut desert willow for their bows—and where today palms grow beside a stream that cascades down over almost vertical rock walls.

By RANDALL HENDERSON

THERE are chill winter days on the desert when it is no great hardship to become mired in the sand—days when the warming exercise of shoveling and pushing and carrying rocks and cutting brush is a welcome diversion. Well, perhaps not exactly welcome, but at least not painful.

But to be bogged down in an icy stream on one of those days—that is something else.

I have in my memory a picture of such an experience. It was midwinter in 1939. A cattleman had told Arles Adams and

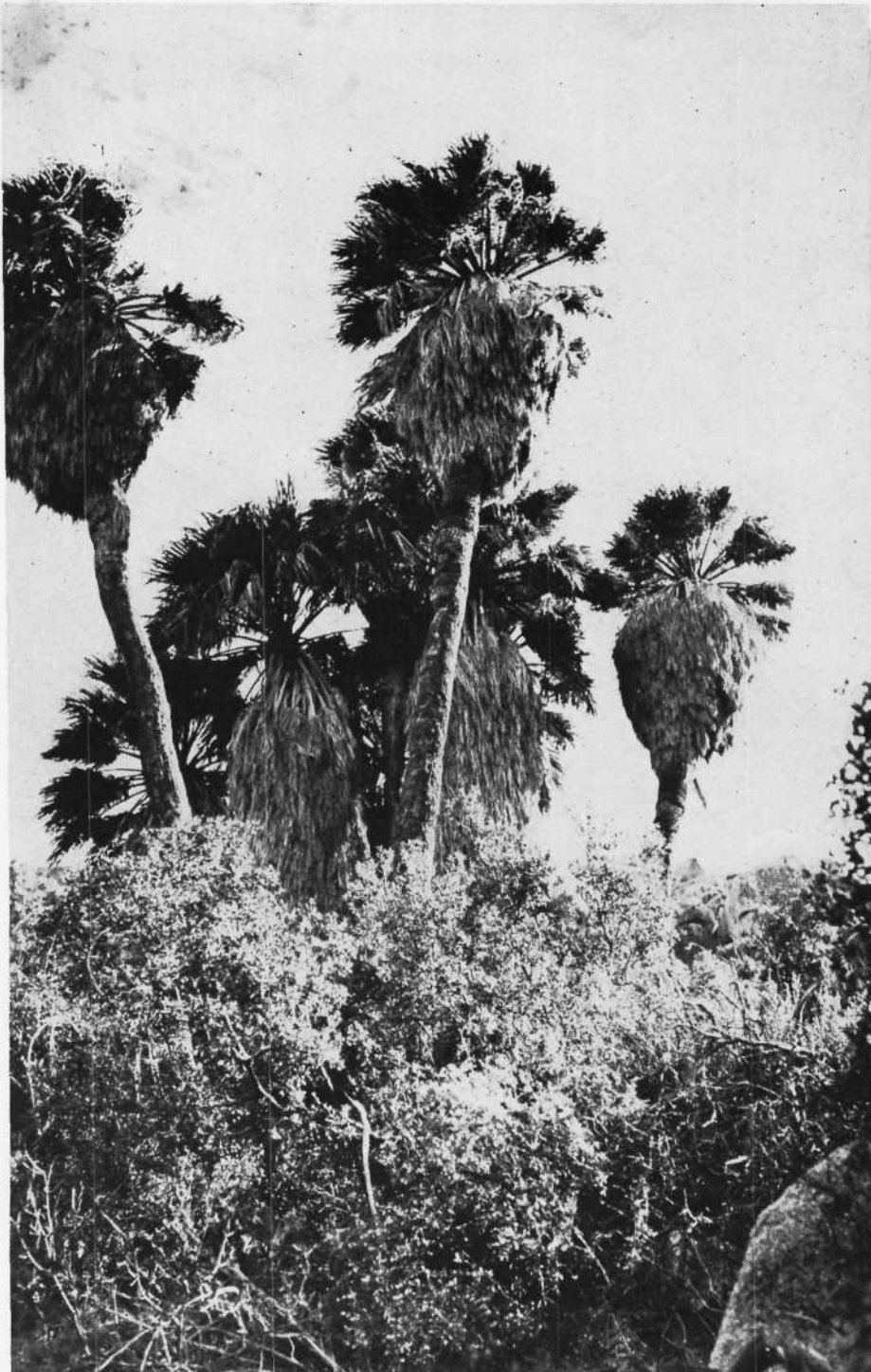
me that if we would drive out from El Centro over the Imperial highway to a little hill called Egg mountain, and there follow a wash which leads back into the Inkopah mountains, we would find a native palm oasis.

To keep your geography clear, Imperial highway is a projected road which someday—if the Imperial highway association is successful in a crusade it has been carrying on for many years—will provide the Southern California coastal area with a new and rather direct route into the Colorado desert. A section of the road crossing

the southern edge of Los Angeles and into Riverside county is now paved. But the desert sector, following approximately the route of the old Butterfield stage road, is still just a crooked trail that isn't even passable in places.

But in 1939 Arles and I had a Model A Ford that would travel the desert regardless of roads. So we headed for the unnamed canyon to look for the palms. Egg mountain is not a very imposing landmark—just a low rounded hill. But we knew where it was located, and we had no difficulty in finding the sandy wash that extended back into the mountain range which is the dividing line between the Southern California desert and the coastal plains along the Pacific ocean. The range at this point is called Inkopah mountains.

At its entrance, the arroyo is wide and covered with a heavy growth of mesquite trees. But there was a trail through the mesquite forest. As we continued along the floor of the arroyo the hills began to close in on both sides and the sand became heav-



Two distinct generations of palms are seen in this picture—the scarred veterans whose skirts of dry fronds were burned in ancient fires, and a younger generation of mature trees having frond skirts that reach to the ground.

ier. Then we encountered water—a sheet flow that came down from the canyon beyond and spread over the floor of the wash and eventually disappeared beneath the sand.

Every motorist knows that wet sand makes better traction for the car than dry sand. We continued along the small stream nearly three miles, the canyon becoming narrower as we climbed. I was at the wheel and was congratulating myself on our good luck in finding water in this canyon—

until suddenly I turned a bend and there just ahead was a great barrier of boulders. In the meantime, as the canyon narrowed the water had become deeper, and when I tried to swing the car around sharply to head back down stream I lost momentum—and there we mired. The swift current cut the sand from around the wheels and we were down to the running boards.

Arles and I spent most of the day getting the car out of that stream. We finally solved the dilemma by bringing in flat

rocks and jacking up the car and building a rock platform under the wheels. In fact, we virtually had to pave the entire floor of the stream with rocks, for the canyon was so narrow it was impossible to swing around without much backing and cramping.

We would wade around in the icy water until our toes were numb, and then climb up on the bank and thaw out by a fire. Fortunately, there was plenty of deadwood.

Late in the afternoon, with the car out on solid ground again, we hiked far enough up the canyon to glimpse some of the fine *Washingtonia* palms ahead. But the fun of exploring the canyon its full length would have to be postponed to a future day.

Far up on a steep slope beyond where we turned back, I saw a little cluster of palms with a great split rock on the ridge above them. Since none of the maps gave a name to this canyon, I identified it in my field notes as Cleft Rock canyon.

Sometime later, talking with Robert Crawford, San Diego county ranger for the Vallecitos desert area, he told me one of the old Indians still living in the mountains of San Diego county referred to this as Bow Willow canyon. At an earlier period the Indians came here to cut wood for their bows from the desert willow (*Chilopsis linearis*), which grows abundantly in the arroyo below the rocks.

And so, as far as I am concerned, it is Bow Willow canyon—a most appropriate name. Edmund C. Jaeger tells me the so-called desert willow is not a true willow, but a catalpa. However, in every respect except its pinkish white blossoms, the tree reminds one of willow, and probably the common name by which it is known will remain popular.

Arles and I had often discussed a return trip to the canyon, but it was not until last November that we had the opportunity to go again. Peggy and Russell Hubbard of Los Angeles were the leaders of the Sierra club camping trip in that area, and they invited us to have Thanksgiving dinner with them in camp. We did not arrive until two days later—but a big portion of their Thanksgiving turkey, cooked ahead of time and taken on the trip, was still in the roaster, and I can assure you that turkey and sage dressing lose none of their flavor when served on a camp table among mesquite trees.

We found less water in Bow Willow canyon on this trip, and parked our car on moist sand near the spot where we had spent hours getting it out of the frigid water seven years ago.

A tributary canyon comes in from the south at this point, and as we could see palm fronds far up between the narrow walls of this side canyon, we divided forces and Arles explored the tributary while I continued up the main canyon.

I found two grown palms about 300

yards beyond the point where our car was parked. Then I tramped a half mile before seeing more of them. There is a fair trail in the lower canyon, made by cattle who in dry seasons sometimes have to go some distance up the gorge to reach the receding water supply.

The canyon rose steeply and by the time I reached the next palm trees I was finding it necessary to detour around great blocks of granite lodged in the bottom of the creek. Then, for a distance of 1½ miles palms were scattered along at intervals—many of them vigorous young trees, others mature and skirted with dead fronds to their bases. Occasionally there was a much older palm that had been burned in fires perhaps 50 or 100 years ago.

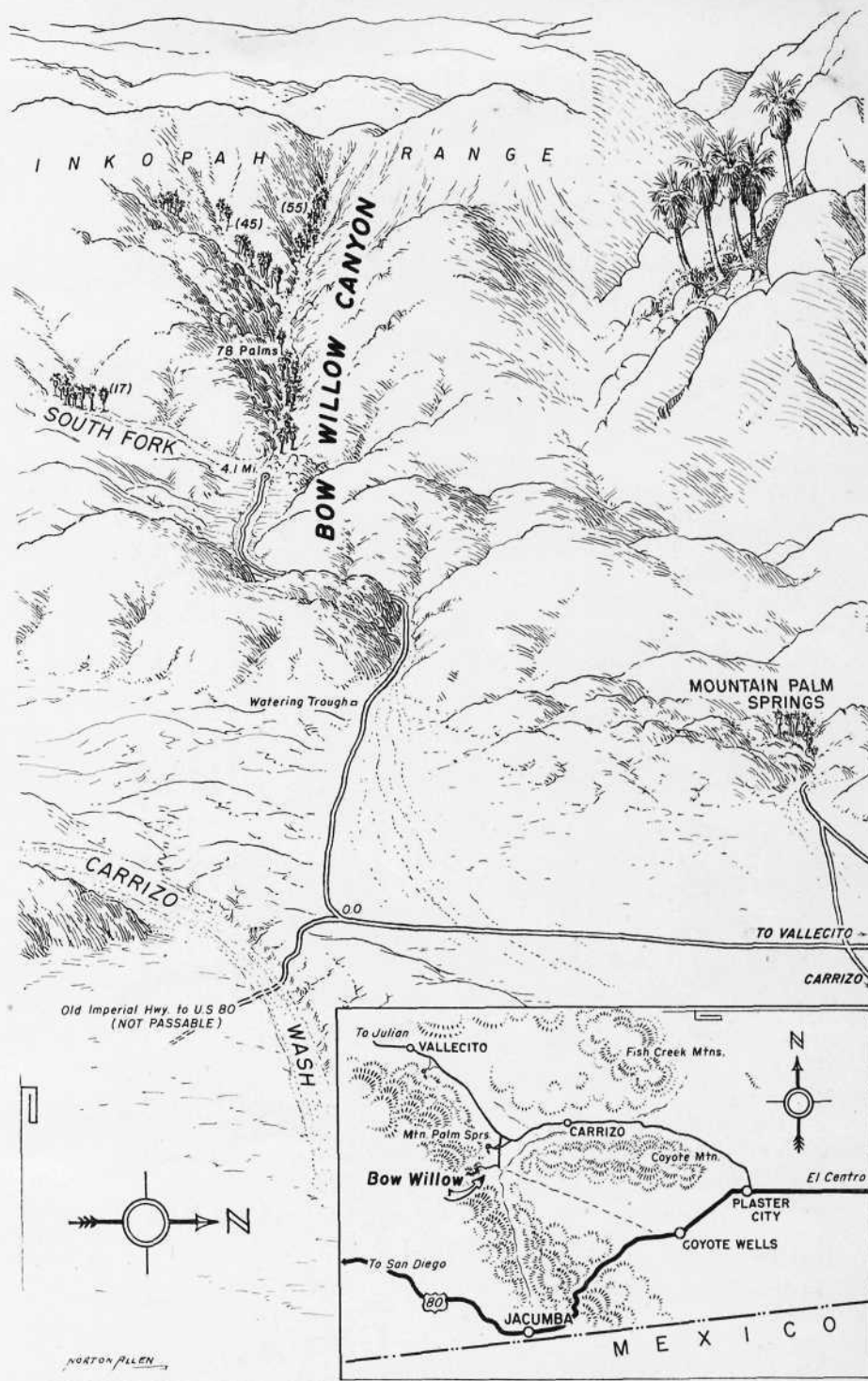
Once I knelt beside the stream for a drink and there a few inches from my eyes was a tiny bar of sparkling yellow mica—the most realistic exhibit of fool's gold I have ever seen.

Two miles from the car, the canyon divided into two prongs, with palms high up toward the ridge where the canyons ended, in both of them.

I took the left fork, finding many Washingtonias along the way, and eventually climbed the mountain slope for a close-up view of the tiny cluster of trees I had seen from the distance seven years before. Evidently there had been a spring here at one time, and water was still close, although none came to the surface. There were 17 palms here, grouped so close it was hard to count them.

Nature has done a very orderly job of perpetuating this little palm oasis. There were four generations of trees, with age separations as distinct as one would find in any human family. The older generation—the great grandparents—were dead. One tree was lying on the ground and there were two crownless trunks that had not yet fallen over. The next generation—the grandparents—were four veteran trees, burned and scarred and bent with age—still green at the top, but obviously with not many years to live. The next generation consisted of four fine full-skirted trees in the prime of life, perhaps 75 years of age. And at their base were six young palms not over ten feet high, reaching out for the sunlight that would give them strength and growth to bear seed and perpetuate the little hermit family to which they belonged. Nature's plan for an orderly and balanced universe is not always as apparent as in this remote little palm oasis.

I returned to the bottom of the canyon and followed the creek up nearly to its source, until I was satisfied there were no more palms in this prong of the canyon. Then I worked up over a ridge and down to the headwaters of the other fork. Here I found a fine stream of water cascading down over a series of falls. The tragedy of the moment was that the sun had gone be-



low the horizon and there no longer were the shadows necessary to get good pictures of the cascades.

It was dusk when I reached the car, and Arles was waiting. He had found 17 palms in the south tributary, and a limited supply of water. The tabulation of Washingtonias in Bow Willow and its tributaries is as follows:

Main canyon, to the forks—78 palms.

Left prong, including sidehill oasis—45 palms.

Right prong, the cascade tributary—55 palms.

South tributary—17 palms. Total 195 trees.

Bow Willow is within the area of the Anza Desert state park. However, there are some privately owned sections in this part of the state playground, and since Bow Willow is not plotted accurately on any of the maps available, I cannot be sure that all the palms are within the park. Regardless of their park status, however, they are well protected by a terrain so rugged as to be closed for the most part to livestock and to all except the rock-climbing members of the human family. The elevation of the highest palms is 2600 feet, and the



Looking down from about 2000 feet to the floor of the desert.



On the ridge above the sidehill oasis is a great cleft rock.

ascent of the two prongs involves considerable hand-and-toe climbing.

For the information of those who may be interested, the old Butterfield road between Plaster City and Agua Caliente is practically impassable, due to heavy sand. This is only a temporary condition, resulting from heavy rains last August. Light rains this winter will pack the sand—but those who have been over the route well know that at best it is not a boulevard.

Even in the jalopy with big tires, we were stuck several times, and on the return trip down Carrizo wash we spent an hour getting out of one sand pocket. When the sand in an arroyo is so soft one cannot travel downstream with over-sized tires, then it is no place for a stock model automobile.

Until such time as the California park commission can provide adequate ranger service for Anza park, probably it is fortunate that such scenic palm oases as those in Bow Willow are virtually inaccessible. As part of the park system, these palms belong to you and me. It is good to know Mother Nature is guarding them so well.

Sez Hard Rock Shorty of Death Valley



At the Inferno store the salesman for the Komfort Kooler was demonstrating the fine points of his air-conditioning device. "There should be one of these Koolers in every cabin in Death Valley," he was saying. "The old days when you sweltered through 120-degree summer weather are gone forever.

"And now, are there any questions you want to ask about the Komfort Kooler?" the salesman asked when he had finished his demonstration.

"Well, I ain't got no questions," said Hard Rock Shorty from his perch on the counter. "But I'm tellin' yu, we ain't got no use for them new fangled things. We've tried 'em, and they ain't no good.

"Ol' Pisgah Bill got a notion once that he wanted to rig up a contraption for coolin' his shack. That wuz in the old days when Bill was in the chicken business.

"He lugged in a lot o' pipe from that ol' Blue Buzzard mine up in the Panamints, and ran a line out to that ammonia spring in Eight Ball crick. Bill spent a lot o' time laying that pipe under the floor and around the walls. Then he turned on the ammonia, and it seemed to be workin' pretty good. Except one night he took off his shoes before goin' to bed. He got his toes frostbit, and there wasn't no snow to rub on 'em.

"But Bill had forgot about havin' an incubator full o' duck eggs over in one corner of the room. An' two weeks later when them eggs hatched out they wuz all penguins."