

*The photographer will have a glorious field day at Mountain Palm Springs oases.*

## Oasis of the "Cabbage Trees"

**T**ROOPERS in General Kearny's Army of the West were the first Anglo-Americans to discover the native palm trees which grow near Vallecito creek in the arid north-eastern sector of San Diego county, California.

That was 98 years ago. The tattered soldiers were straggling through the sand and thickets of the creek bed when some of them spied green foilage against a gray hillside in the distance. When they turned aside to investigate, they found a small spring, and trees which some of them knew by name. Lieut. William H. Emory records the incident in his diary under the date of November 29, 1846. Emory wrote:

"A few miles from the spring called Oro Grande . . . several scattered objects were seen projecting against the cliffs, hailed by the Florida campaigners, some of whom were along, as old friends. They were cabbage trees, and marked the locale of a spring and small patch of grass."

Many Floridans still call them cabbage trees, or cabbage palmettos—but Californians know them as palms—the *Washingtonia filifera* of the Southern California desert.

Numbers of Desert readers are acquainted with the oasis known as Mountain Palm Springs in San Diego county, California, but many have visited this place without discovering the hiding place of a rare little forest of trees in nearby Palm Bowl. This is one of the few places on the Southern California desert where palms and elephant trees grow as neighbors.

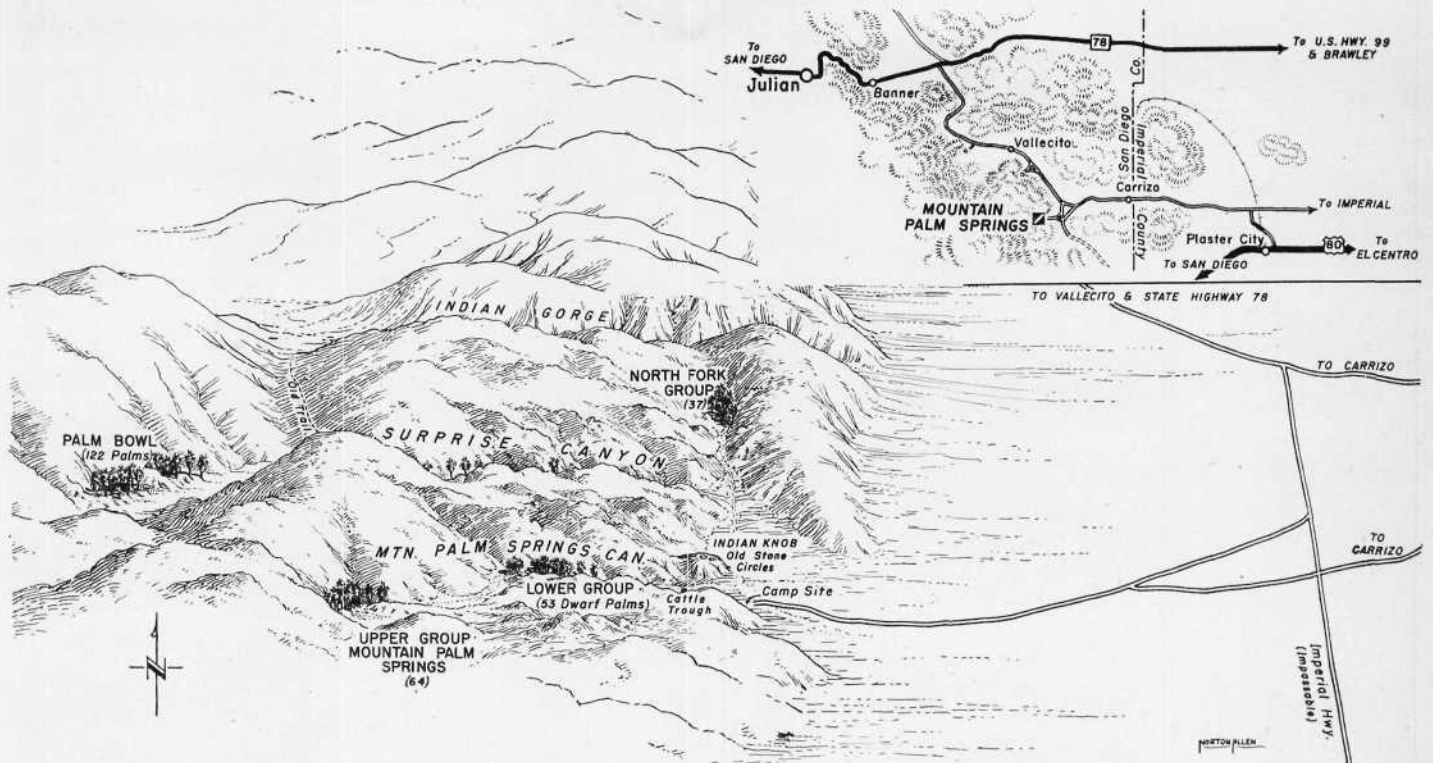
By RANDALL HENDERSON  
Photographs by the author

In reading Emory's diary I have never been certain whether Kearny's soldiers saw the palms now known as Mountain Palm Springs, or a smaller oasis marked on the old maps as Palm Spring. Both groups were visible from the floor of the valley. But the trees at Vallecito's Palm spring have long since disappeared and the place is marked today only by arrowweeds and mesquite growing in a salty cienega.

The only native palms near Vallecito creek today are those at Mountain Palm Springs where there are five separate groups of trees in three tributaries of the same canyon system.

Following the old Butterfield route from the site of Carrizo stage station toward Agua Caliente, Vallecito and Warner's ranch, the foliage of the lower palms in Mountain Palm Springs canyon may be seen far off to the left, nestling in a little cove at the base of the mountains.

There is a good natural campsite at the entrance to the canyon, and since none of the palms may be reached by motor, this campground is a conveniently located base from which to explore the nearby canyons. At the point where the road ends, the



arroyo divides, the main canyon extending back into the mountains toward the west, and a tributary coming in from the north.

The ridge which divides the two canyons ends in a little butte less than 100 yards from the campsite. It is worth the effort to climb this butte, for at its summit is a series of rock circles evidently made by prehistoric Indian tribesmen. There is nothing here for souvenir hunters to carry away—just a collection of big boulders rolled into place to form rings perhaps eight or ten feet across. They may have been used as anchor stones for Indian dwellings. They may have been put there for lookouts, or forts, or the place may be a ceremonial ground. I do not know the answer, nor does any living person, although I am quite sure Malcolm Rogers of San Diego museum can make the best guess because he has been studying in this field of archeology for years.

During much of the year a trickle of water comes down Mountain Palm Springs canyon, and cattlemen whose stock range in the Vallecito valley have placed a water trough at the entrance to the gorge.

There are two groups of palms in this canyon about a half mile apart. It is not an inviting place for picnic parties for the reason that the cattle come here for shade and water.

The lower group of these palms is unique among all the oases of Southern California. They are dwarfs, and this might properly be called the pigmy oasis of the Washingtonias. For some reason, perhaps lack of water, or chemicals in the soil, their growth was stunted—and now they are mature trees with only half the stature of a normal Washingtonia. The dry fronds had been burned recently when I was there on New Year day, but they had a fine crop of seed when I saw them. There are 53 palms in the group and 64 in the oasis further up the canyon.

The third group in this area is located in the North Fork, visible from the campsite a half mile up a rocky arroyo. There are too many boulders for cattle to reach this spot, and it is a clean orderly oasis of 37 palms, young and old.

Going up the North fork, just before reaching the palms, the hiker passes a little tributary canyon coming in on the left. Most desert canyons appear rather drab and uninteresting from a distance—and this little gorge is even less inviting than a thousand other minor tributaries found in the desert mountains.

But do not ignore this little tributary because it has no glamor. This is Surprise canyon—and worthy of the name. There are 15

young palms scattered along the floor of this canyon—also much catsclaw and some scrub mesquite. But there are few boulders, and it is a pleasant 20-minute walk along the canyon until it suddenly opens into a magnificent amphitheater—and over across on the far side of the picture is one of the most charming palm oases on the American desert.

This is Palm Bowl—a little forest of trees growing so closely together as to be almost impenetrable in places.

There is no water on the surface, but the underground supply is plentiful, for the trees are green and healthy, and at least one-third of the 122 palms here are youngsters. I wouldn't guarantee that count. Counting palms in such a cluster as this is more confusing than a jigsaw puzzle.

This oasis has been preserved in all its natural beauty. These palms can be reached only by walking a mile and a quarter—and perhaps that is their best protection against the damage and destruction wrought by thoughtless campers.

An old Indian trail, still marked by broken bits of pottery, leads from the northwestern side of the bowl over a ridge into Indian gorge, a hike of not more than a half mile.

Far up on the canyon slopes in the area around Mountain Palm Springs an occasional Elephant tree may be seen. The trees are not as numerous here as in the Borrego area north of Split mountain canyon. The tall dead flower stalks of agave dot the hillsides, and along the canyon floors chuparosa was in blossom on New Year day.

Robert Crawford, who has a cattle ranch in the hills above Vallecito valley is now on full-time ranger duty for San Diego county in this area. Crawford makes his headquarters at the old Vallecito stage station and patrols the entire area as far east as the Imperial county line near the site of the Carrizo stage station. He knows every canyon and waterhole in this region, and is a friendly source of information for visitors who come this way.

Vallecito and the Mountain Palm Springs oases probably have not changed much since General Kearny and his weary army came this way 98 years ago. The "cabbage trees" are still there—"green foliage against a grey hillside" where weary travelers may come for clear sweet water and shade that is no less refreshing today than it was when Lieut. Emory and the Floridians first saw these trees.



*This picture does not do justice to the palm scene revealed as one emerges from Surprise canyon and into the natural amphitheater of Palm Bowl*



*These are dwarf members of the Washingtonia family—found in lower Mountain Palm Springs Canyon. They are mature trees, stunted at some period in their growth*