

# The Evolving Perception of Desert in American Culture

**Stephen M. Rowland and John Fraim**

*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* (1901)

The desert region of the United States was acquired from Mexico in 1848 in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican-American War. It was the last region of the contiguous United States to be explored and settled, so it long remaining unknown and mysterious. In the nineteenth century the vast majority of Americans lived east of the Mississippi River, and most had no reason to think about the newly acquired Desert Southwest at all. For those who did think about it, the desert was imagined to be a great sea of sand—a barrier to be crossed rather than a place to be inhabited.

The term ‘desert’ itself has evolved in recent centuries. Geographers now usually define deserts as places with less than 10 inches (25 cm) of annual precipitation, or places where the rate of evaporation exceeds the rate of precipitation. However the word ‘desert’ originally had a different meaning: it meant an area that was sparsely populated by people, or ‘deserted.’ Hence the term ‘desert island.’ In 1803, when the U.S. negotiated the Louisiana Purchase with France, acquiring the high plains on the east side of the Rocky Mountains, President Thomas Jefferson described the region as “immense and trackless deserts.” A government map produced in 1823 labeled that region “the Great American Desert.” Geographers now refer to such a biome as semi-arid grassland or steppe. In this chapter we are concerned primarily with the evolution of the perception of the arid lands west and south of the Rocky Mountains—the arid regions of New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, southern California, and western Utah.

In common American parlance, the distinction between high plains and desert was slow to become established. In the nineteenth century, as far as most easterners were aware, the territory between the 100<sup>th</sup> meridian and the mountains of California was a barren and uncivilized desert.<sup>1</sup> Nature rather than man dominated the landscape. In effect, it offered the American version of the unexplored Congo River basin in Joseph Conrad's famous 1899 novella *Heart of Darkness*. Americans saw this strange landscape first from Conestoga wagons and then—after the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869—from the windows of railcars. In either case, it was uninviting terrain—to be crossed as quickly as possible on the way to somewhere else.

The evolution of the perception of the southwestern deserts in American culture was part of the American conservation movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During the post-Civil War years of the late nineteenth century, high-profile surveys were conducted in the West, such as John Wesley Powell's exploration of the Grand Canyon in 1869. The resulting descriptions, paintings, and photographs of the grandeur of the western landscapes had a profound impact on the American public, and a novel idea slowly emerged: rather than taming and exploiting these exotic natural landscapes as quickly as possible, the most spectacular examples should be preserved for the use and enjoyment of future generations.

At first, there was strong resistance to this concept, but in 1872 Congress created Yellowstone National Park to “provide for the preservation . . . of mineral deposits, natural curiosities, or wonders within said park . . . in their natural condition.” Ten years later, in 1882, a bill was introduced in Congress which would have made the Grand Canyon the nation's second national park. That bill did not pass, but it demonstrates an increasing value being placed on natural landscapes in the arid Southwest. In 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt visited the Grand Canyon and famously said: “The Grand Canyon fills me with awe. It is beyond comparison—beyond description; absolutely unparalleled through-out the world . . . Let this great wonder of nature remain as it now is. Do nothing to mar its grandeur, sublimity and loveliness. You cannot improve on it. But what you can do is to keep it for your children, your children's children, and all who come after you, as the one great sight which every American should see.” By presidential proclamation, Roosevelt established Grand Canyon Game Preserve in 1906 and Grand

Canyon National Monument in 1908. In 1916 Congress created the National Park Service, and three years later it finally passed the Grand Canyon National Park Act.

In the waning years of the nineteenth century two gifted writers—Mary Austin and John Van Dyke—independently discovered the Desert Southwest. They produced the first purely literary accounts of this region, adding momentum to the movement to value, protect, and preserve these landscapes.

### **Mary Austin's *The Land of Little Rain***

The same year that President Roosevelt visited the Grand Canyon—1903—Mary Austin (1868-1934) published *The Land of Little Rain*, a reverent, often lyrical account of the Mojave Desert and its human inhabitants. Mary and her husband homesteaded in the Alabama Hills west of Lone Pine, California, and later they moved up the Owens Valley to Independence, on the faulted boundary between the Sierra Nevada and the Mojave Desert.

The Austins were financially stressed, and they ended up separating and later divorcing. Mary suffered from repeated bouts of illness, which added to the emotional stress of her failed marriage and raising a mentally handicapped child who was eventually institutionalized. As represented in the following passages, for Austin, immersing herself in the natural history of the Mojave Desert and the lives of its indigenous Shoshone and Paiute people was a joyful and salubrious diversion from the disappointments of her personal life:

*The country where you may have sight and touch of that which is written lies between the high Sierras south from Yosemite—east and south over a very great assemblage of broken ranges beyond Death Valley, and illimitably into the Mojave Desert. You may come into the borders of it from the south by a stage journey that has the effect of involving a great lapse of time, or from the north by rail, dropping out of the overland route at Reno. The best of all ways is over the Sierra passes by pack and trail, seeing and believing. But the real heart and core of the country are not to be come at in a month's vacation. One must summer and winter with the*

*land and wait its occasions.* <sup>2</sup>

*If one is inclined to wonder at first how so many dwellers came to be in the loneliest land that ever came out of God's hands, what they do there and why stay, one does not wonder so much after having lived there. None other than this long brown land lays such a hold on the affections. The rainbow hills, the tender bluish mists, the luminous radiance of the spring, have the lotus charm. They trick the sense of time, so that once inhabiting there you always mean to go away without quite realizing that you have not done it. Men who have lived there, miners and cattle-men, will tell you this, not so fluently, but emphatically, cursing the land and going back to it. For one thing there is the divinest, cleanest air to be breathed anywhere in God's world. Some day the world will understand that, and the little oases on the windy tops of hills will harbor for healing its ailing, house-weary broods. There is promise there of great wealth in ores and earths, which is no wealth by reason of being so far removed from water and workable conditions, but men are bewitched by it and tempted to try the impossible.* <sup>3</sup>

*For all the toll the desert takes of a man it gives compensations, deep breaths, deep sleep, and the communion of the stars. . . It is hard to escape the sense of mastery as the stars move in the wide clear heavens to risings and settings unobscured. They look large and near and palpitant; as if they moved on some stately service not needful to declare. Wheeling to their stations in the sky, they make the poor world-fret of no account. Of no account you who lie out there watching, nor the lean coyote that stands off in the scrub from you and howls and howls.* <sup>4</sup>

*The Land of Little Rain*, which consists of fourteen literary sketches, was Austin's first book. It was an immediate success and launched Austin's prolific literary career as a writer, novelist, poet, critic, and playwright. She was also an early feminist and defender of Native American and Spanish-American rights. From Independence, Austin moved to Carmel, California where she became part of a literary circle that included Ambrose

Bierce, Jack London, and George Sterling. She spent the last years of her life in Santa Fe, New Mexico, continuing to write—including a book that she co-authored with photographer Ansel Adams. Austin's literary prominence during the early decades of the twentieth century helped to keep *The Land of Little Rain* in print and widely read, establishing it as a literary classic of Southwestern natural history.

### **John Van Dyke's *The Desert***

The other writer who discovered the Desert Southwest at the end of the nineteenth century was John C. Van Dyke (1861-1931). In his day, Van Dyke was a well-known writer and art critic, and a prominent member of the Northeastern high-culture community. He was the art consultant to millionaire industrialist Andrew Carnegie, and he wrote the introduction to Carnegie's autobiography. Van Dyke was the first professor of art history at Rutgers College (now University). He published nearly fifty books in his lifetime, on subjects ranging from art to nature to travel. In the art-history field, Van Dyke is best known for writing a book on Rembrandt that stirred up the art world by challenging the authenticity of many paintings that had previously been attributed to the Dutch master.

Van Dyke's best-known book is *The Desert: further studies in natural appearances*, in which he wrote about the arid Southwest with the same power that John Muir used when writing about the Sierra Nevada. Van Dyke offered a new way of perceiving the desert. To him, the desert was "a land of illusions and thin air. The vision," he wrote, "is so cleared at times that the truth itself is deceptive."<sup>5</sup>

*The Desert* appeared in 1901, at a time when American culture was ready for a fresh perspective on the Desert Southwest. As Van Dyke scholar Peter Wild has observed, "*The Desert* appeared at precisely the right time, when the public was ripe for its message. . . . No sooner had Americans conquered the wilderness, cut down the forests and slaughtered the buffalo than the romantic nation began sentimentalizing the past, longing for what it had just destroyed. Now as cities grew and the surrounding countryside was reduced to fields of stumps, people yearned for what they perceived as the freer and more harmonious life of their ancestors, lived closer to nature. That is, the bored, industrialized nation of offices and smokestacks and streets lined with brick row

homes was longing for the exotic. A vigorous corollary resulted from the widespread fear that, cut off from our pioneer heritage, the nation was going soft.” Wild continued: “Van Dyke told Americans about a romantic and exotic place where they might renew themselves. With a grand, dramatic gesture, he pointed to a land where the wolves still howled as a globose moon tore through the silver clouds, to an uninhabited region of endless enchantments awaiting them, out there in the long-ignored deserts of the Southwest.”<sup>6</sup>

Van Dyke’s artistic sensibilities are conspicuously expressed in *The Desert*, as exemplified by the following excerpts from his chapter titled “Light, Air, and Color:”

*Desert air is very recognizable by the eyes alone. The traveler in California when he wakes in the morning and glances out of the car-window at the air in the mountain canyons, knows instantly on which side of the Tehachepi Range the train is moving. He knows he is crossing the Mojave. The lilac-blue veiling that hangs about those mountains is as recognizable as the sea air of the Massachusetts shore.*<sup>7</sup>

Later in the same chapter, Van Dyke describes the colors of the desert sky with the same vocabulary he might use to describe a French Impressionist painting:

*All color—local, reflected, translucent, complementary—is, of course, made possible by light and has no existence apart from it. Through the long desert day the sunbeams are weaving skeins of color across the sands, along the sides of the canyons, and about the tops of the mountains. They stain the ledges of copper with turquoise, they burn the buttes to a terra-cotta red, they paint the sands with rose and violet, and they key the air to the hue of the opal. The reek of color that splashes the western sky at sunset is but the climax of the sun’s endeavor. If there are clouds stretched across the west the ending is usually one of exceptional brilliancy. The reds are all scarlet, the yellows are like burnished brass, the oranges like shining gold.*<sup>8</sup>

Van Dyke's writing style was exuberant and expressive—sometimes almost poetic. But he saw himself more as an advocate for the desert than as a poet. "The desert," he wrote, "has gone a-begging for a word of praise these many years. It never had a sacred poet; it has in me only a lover."<sup>9</sup>

In *The Desert*, Van Dyke frequently describes specific places in California, Arizona, and Sonora that he visited, but he provides no details of his itinerary or means of transport. In one passage he describes lying "in the sands of the desert, alone at night, with a saddle for your pillow, and your eyes staring upward at the stars,"<sup>10</sup> so the reader is led to infer that he was traveling alone on horseback. This is reinforced in a later book, *The Open Spaces*, published in 1922, in which Van Dyke describes some of the circumstances under which he wrote *The Desert*: "The book was written during that first summer [1899] at odd intervals when I lay with my back against a rock or propped up in the sand." His sole companions on that trip, he tells us, were a horse and a fox terrier named Cappy. "I cannot well remember the exact route of the Odyssey," he writes, "for I kept no records of my movements. I was not travelling by map. I was wandering for health and desert information."<sup>11</sup>

Because of the literary importance of *The Desert*, Van Dyke scholars have attempted to reconstruct the details of his desert travels from personal letters, photographs, and accounts of his friends and family—but with limited success. Some decades after Van Dyke died, a manuscript unexpectedly appeared that was Van Dyke's autobiography. It was finally published in 1993, sixty-one years after his death.<sup>12</sup> In the autobiography, Van Dyke fills in a few more details of his solo horseback trip in 1899-1901, "drifting with the wind" across the desert country of California, Arizona, and northern Mexico.

However, experienced desert naturalists have found some of Van Dyke's descriptions and travel accounts to be problematical. Some of the animals he describes encountering—notably gray wolves—did not exist in the region where he allegedly encountered them, while other species that he should have encountered—javalinas, for example—are not mentioned at all. Astonishingly, for an art critic who paid very close attention to color, Van Dyke's description of the color of saguaro blossoms is wrong. His

account of going from sunrise to sunset, day after day, without drinking water, and occasionally, when the temperature was “one-hundred and twenty-five in the shade,” slaking his thirst by sucking on the “juicy pulp” of a cactus,<sup>13</sup> severely strains the credulity of experienced desert travelers. Peter Wild, the leading modern Van Dyke scholar who edited Van Dyke’s autobiography, writes that Van Dyke’s travel writing—and especially those writings dealing with his desert travels— “tends to slip from reality into the world of fantasies,” that he “sometimes leaves the realm of the factual and begins spinning tales.”<sup>14</sup> Wild quotes a desert naturalist who attempted to reconcile Van Dyke’s accounts with geographical and biological reality; the naturalist considered many of Van Dyke’s desert observations to be “fabulous” and “patently untrue.” He concluded, furthermore, that “Van Dyke never spent a night sleeping out among the cactuses and coyotes of the Southwest but preferred the amenities of civilization to the hard ground.”<sup>15</sup>

Van Dyke had a brother who owned a ranch in the Mojave Desert, near Daggett, California, ten miles east of Barstow. There is no question that Van Dyke visited his brother, probably learning from him some of the elements of Mojave desert lore that were passed along to his readers, thus accounting for the fact that his accounts of desert wildlife—including those allegedly encountered in Arizona and Sonora—are “told from a Southern California perspective.”<sup>16</sup>

So we are confronted with the irony that the art historian who challenged the authenticity of putative Rembrandts has had the authenticity of his own masterpiece impugned. Van Dyke did, after all, refer to the desert as “a land of illusions” where “the truth itself is deceptive.” Perhaps we should not be surprised to discover that Van Dyke’s own “truth” is also deceptive.

In terms of the historical significance of Van Dyke’s book, however, the revelation that he probably exaggerated the ruggedness of his desert travels, and that he often slipped into the world of fantasies, is little more than a literary footnote. His book was presented as an esthetic interpretation of his desert experience, not as a journalistic document. As summarized by Peter Wild, “[a]s regards the esthetic quality of his writing, it should make little or no difference whether Van Dyke wrote *The Desert* while roughing it alone with dog and horse, as he claims, or, more probably, while gazing out the windows of trains and hotels and sitting on the porch of his brother’s ranch.”<sup>17</sup>

## **Promotion of Railroad Tourism in the Southwest by Fred Harvey and the AT&SF**

Largely through the literary influence of John Van Dyke and Mary Austin, a new perception of the desert began to take shape in the American psyche. It was no longer seen as a barren place between the edge of the frontier and the West Coast, but rather as a place with its own unique virtues and values—a place to be explored and even inhabited. The desert of the American Southwest was becoming a destination rather than a barrier to be crossed.

In the late nineteenth and earliest twentieth centuries, most travelers who came to the desert traveled by train. The Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad (AT&SF), in particular, aggressively promoted train-based tourism in the Desert Southwest. By 1897 the AT&SF had a line from Chicago to the Pacific Coast, through Barstow and Mojave in the Mojave Desert of southern California, and desert tourism was an important part of their business.

Attracting large numbers of train travelers to the Southwest required attractive lodging and food, and the entrepreneur who recognized this business opportunity was Fred Harvey. The Fred Harvey Company collaborated with the AT&SF to build and operate the legendary Harvey House chain of restaurants and hotels at rail stops throughout the western United States. It was the first hotel-restaurant chain in the U.S., and some of the former Harvey House buildings are treasured icons of turn-of-the-century-era, rail-side architecture. When a spur of the AT&SF was extended to the South Rim of the Grand Canyon in 1901, the AT&SF designed and built the El Tovar Hotel—owned and operated by the Fred Harvey Company. The El Tovar is still the grand old hotel at the South Rim, and a fine example of the architectural style now known as “National Park Service Rustic.” In Barstow, California the Harvey House hotel and restaurant—called *Casa Del Desierto* (House of the Desert), which opened in 1911—was designed in a Spanish-Moroccan style. It is now a California historical landmark.<sup>18</sup>

Beyond their often-stunning architecture, Harvey House hotels and restaurants became famous for two things: attractive, young waitresses (the “Harvey Girls”), and large portions of good food. Harvey recruited well-educated, well-mannered, white women “of good character,” eighteen to thirty years old. They wore starched black-and-

white uniforms, opaque black stockings, and black shoes. Make-up was prohibited, and a 10:00 p.m. curfew was strictly enforced by a house mother. He paid them well, provided room and board, and required a one-year employment contract. If they left early, they forfeited half of their base pay. The fame of Fred Harvey's wholesome, girl-next-door waitresses became entrenched in American culture through the 1946 musical film *The Harvey Girls*, starring Judy Garland and Angela Lansbury. This film also introduced a catchy song by Harry Warren and Johnny Mercer: "On the Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fe."

Harvey House meals were served on fine China with Irish linens. In some dining rooms, male customers were required to wear a coat and tie. The AT&SF provided a private line of refrigerator cars to supply Harvey House restaurants with fresh meat and dairy products. Fred Harvey built the reputation of his business by efficiently serving high-quality food in large portions at reasonable prices. His pies were cut into fourths, rather than sixths. It was said that the staff of a Harvey House restaurant could feed an entire train in thirty minutes. When dining cars were introduced onto trains, it was the Fred Harvey Company that operated the food service. The AT&SF promoted their dining-car-equipped trains with the slogan: "Fred Harvey Meals all the Way."

Building on the writings of Mary Austin and John Van Dyke, Fred Harvey and the AT&SF continued the transformation of the perception of the Desert Southwest in American culture. Not only did the desert offer enchanting landscapes and spectacular sunsets, these phenomena were now available as part of deprivation-free experience, through the window of a comfortable train and from the porch of a Harvey House hotel, with sumptuous meals served by attractive, young Harvey Girls. No asceticism required.

### **Railroad Tourism Comes to Death Valley**

Train-based tourism finally arrived in Death Valley in 1927, with the opening of Furnace Creek Inn by the Pacific Coast Borax Company.<sup>19</sup> From the AT&SF railhead at Ludlow, California, about 40 miles (67 km) east of Barstow, Death Valley-bound travelers rode northward about 120 miles (192 km) on the Tonopah and Tidewater Railroad to Death Valley Junction—east of Death Valley. There they transferred to the Death Valley Railroad's 30-passenger, narrow-gauge rail car that carried them 17 miles

(27 km) to the mining camp of Ryan, in Death Valley. At Ryan they were met by touring cars that carried them the remaining 12 miles (20 km) to Furnace Creek Inn. A lower-budget hotel was also operated for a short time at Ryan.

The idea of developing a winter resort in Death Valley had circulated within Pacific Coast Borax for several years, but the company was focused on its primary business of mining borax in Death Valley.<sup>20</sup> However, a dramatic event in 1925 led the company to get into the business of desert tourism. In that year a Pacific Coast Borax geologist discovered a huge new borax deposit in the west-central Mojave Desert, just 30 flat miles (48 km) east of the railhead town of Mojave. This deposit, where the town of Boron is now located, is the largest borax deposit in the world. The remote mines in Death Valley could not compete with the new mine at Boron, so they were shut down.

The company had invested heavily in the Death Valley Railroad and other infrastructure in Death Valley, and they were loath to abandon that investment. So they turned Death Valley into a tourist destination. The rail line to Death Valley was already in place, and the AT&SF and Fred Harvey had demonstrated the viability of train-based tourism in the Desert Southwest, so Pacific Borax gambled that they could make a profit by attracting tourists to Death Valley. They built an elegant resort—Furnace Creek Inn—on company property at the mouth of Furnace Creek Wash, with a spectacular view of Death Valley and the Panamint Range.

When the Inn opened in February of 1927, there were just twelve rooms. The room rate was \$10 per day, including meals and a private bath in each room. A few months earlier a rival hotelier named Bob Eichbaum had opened the Stovepipe Wells Hotel, located about 20 miles (32 km) farther north. Eichbaum, who had no railroad route to his hotel, perceptively anticipated the future demand for automobile-based tourist accommodations in Death Valley.

Railroad-based tourism in Death Valley lasted just three more tourist seasons after the winter of 1927. The stock market crash of 1929, leading to the Great Depression, cut deeply into the market for expensive train travel and winter resorts. With a dearth of paying passengers and no more borax ore to carry, in early 1930 the Death Valley Railroad ceased operations, and the Tonopah and Tidewater followed soon after.

## **Automobile Tourism in the Desert**

The rapid expansion of automobile ownership in the first half of the twentieth century changed the way most people traveled to and within the Desert Southwest. At the beginning of the century there were only a few thousand automobiles in the entire U.S. This number increased to 79,000 by 1905 and ten million by 1921. The number of cars continued to double approximately every twenty years; by the mid-70s there were more than 120 million cars in the U.S.<sup>21</sup> Along with the cars came an expanding network of roads.

In Van Dyke's and Austin's day, a visit to the desert required a serious commitment of time. Train travel significantly reduced the travel time, but it was primarily an option available only to the wealthy. By the 1920s and beyond, the automobile made the desert accessible to millions of people.

In Death Valley, automobile traffic kept Furnace Creek Inn in business after the railroad disappeared. Furnace Creek Inn added a swimming pool and tennis courts in 1929, as well as additional guest rooms. In 1930 a nine-hole golf course was opened a short distance away at Greenland Ranch, whose name was changed to Furnace Creek Ranch in 1933. At 214 feet below sea level, the golf course was marketed as the lowest course in the world.

Pacific Coast Borax had closed their low-end hotel at Ryan when they shut down the Death Valley Railroad. To attract low-budget travelers, in 1933 they opened some tourist cabins at Furnace Creek Ranch. In subsequent years Furnace Creek Ranch grew into the primary tourist center of Death Valley. A general store and restaurant were added in 1934-35, and a swimming pool in 1952.

In 1933, with the creation of Death Valley National Monument, the National Park Service entered the picture, and they chose the Furnace Creek Ranch area for their visitor center and administrative offices. The presence of a national monument in Death Valley led to paved roads, easier access, and more motorists.

## ***Death Valley Days***

To promote tourism in Death Valley, and also to market their household borax products, in 1930 Pacific Coast Borax boldly launched a radio drama called *Death Valley*

*Days*. The weekly program featured adventure stories about the Death Valley region, along with commercial messages promoting Boraxo hand soap and Borateem laundry detergent. *Death Valley Days* remained on the radio until 1944, eventually transitioning to television in 1952 where it continued as a popular show until 1970. By some accounts, it was the longest running radio-TV show in history. The very successful television format involved a rotating roster of celebrity hosts who introduced the episode of the week. The most famous host was Ronald Reagan, who hosted *Death Valley Days* in 1964 and 1965, his last work as an actor before being elected Governor of California in 1966. The extraordinary long run of *Death Valley Days* on radio and television in the 1930s, '40s, '50s, and '60s introduced multiple generations of Americans to Death Valley and the Desert Southwest.

### **Desert-Travel Magazines**

With the ease of automobile travel, magazines devoted to desert travel began to emerge. As early as 1921, the Arizona Department of Transportation initiated *Arizona Highways* magazine, to promote automobile-based tourism and road improvement in Arizona. Specializing in high-quality photography, *Arizona Highways* introduced many people—including many beyond the boundaries of Arizona—to the scenic beauty of the southwestern deserts, strongly reinforcing the perception that the desert is a place to be treasured and protected.

In 1937 a very different, privately published periodical—*Desert Magazine*—sprang from the desert sands of southern California, containing articles about the desert by explorers and inhabitants of this intriguing new territory. In the inaugural November 1937 number, founding editor Randall Henderson presented his now-famous “two deserts” editorial, capturing the developing tension that continues today between those who seek to profit from the desert and those who value the desert for its beauty and solitude. As Henderson observed, there are really two conceptual deserts:

*One is a grim desolate wasteland. It is the home of venomous reptiles and stinging insects, of vicious thorn-covered plants and trees, and of unbearable heat. This is the desert seen by the stranger speeding along the highway, impatient to*

*be out of 'this damnable country.' It is the desert visualized by those children of luxury to whom any environment is unbearable which does not provide all of the comforts and services of a pampering civilization. It is a concept fostered by fiction writers who dramatize the tragedies of the desert for the profit it will bring them. But the stranger and the uninitiated see only the mask. The other Desert—the real Desert—is not for the eyes of the superficial observer, or the fearful soul or the cynic. It is a land, the character of which is hidden except to those who come with friendliness and understanding. To these the Desert offers rare gifts: health-giving sunshine—a sky that is studded with diamonds—a breeze that bears no poison—a landscape of pastel colors such as no artist can duplicate—thorn-covered plants which during countless ages have clung tenaciously to life through heat and drought and wind and the depredations of thirsty animals, and yet each season send forth blossoms of exquisite coloring as a symbol of courage that has triumphed over terrifying obstacles. To those who come to the Desert with friendliness, it gives friendship; to those who come with courage, it gives new strength of character. Those seeking relaxation find release from the world of man-made troubles. For those seeking beauty, the Desert offers nature's rarest artistry. This is the Desert that men and women learn to love.<sup>22</sup>*

*Desert Magazine* survived until 1985. In 2006 it was revived as an on-line magazine. *Arizona Highways* continues to thrive in print format, as well as being available on-line. In very different ways, these magazines helped to redefine the concept of 'desert' for different segments of the American public.

### **Disney's *The Living Desert***

By mid-century, many Americans had accepted the desert as a region with beauty and enchantment, but few knew very much about the lives of the animals and plants that lived there. Walt Disney changed that.

In 1953 Disney released *The Living Desert*, the studio's first feature-length "true-life adventure" film. This ground-breaking film received the 1953 Academy Award for "best documentary feature," and it was also chosen for preservation in the National Film

Registry due to its “cultural, historic, or aesthetic significance.” *The Living Desert* exposed the American public to the drama of desert wildlife, permitting viewers to peek into the day-to-day lives of kangaroo rats, scorpions, tarantulas, bobcats and other desert species, thus adding a layer of excitement, drama, and perceived intimacy to the American perception of desert.

### **Preserving Pieces of the Desert**

Throughout the twentieth century, elected representatives—in state houses, Congress, and the White House—were persuaded by conservation-minded constituents to protect and preserve treasured portions of the Desert Southwest. A common pattern emerged in which a sitting president would use the Antiquities Act (which does not require Congressional approval) to create a national monument. The national monument would then become well known to nature-oriented tourists. Eventually, in several cases, the popularity and cultural significance of the site increased to a point at which Congress was pressured into converting the national monument into a full-fledged national park.

President Theodore Roosevelt, for example, created Grand Canyon National Monument in 1908, and Congress converted it into Grand Canyon National Park eleven years later, in 1919. A much slower conversion occurred in the case of Petrified Forest National Monument, in east-central Arizona. President Roosevelt created Petrified Forest National Monument in 1906, but it wasn’t until 2004—98 years later—that Congress finally converted Petrified Forest into a national park.

In the Mojave Desert, President Herbert Hoover created Death Valley National Monument in 1933, and it finally became Death Valley National Park in 1994. More than a simple name change, in the case of Death Valley the conversion to national park status also involved the incorporation of a huge amount of surrounding lands that had previously been managed by the Bureau of Land Management. Joshua Tree National Monument was created by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1936; it became Joshua Tree National Park in 1994, in the same congressional action that created Death Valley National Park. The Mojave National Preserve, in the central Mojave Desert of California, was also created in 1994.

The congressional action that converted Death Valley and Joshua Tree to national

park status, and which also created the Mojave National Preserve, was the California Desert Protection Act of 1994. The passage of this act was a landmark event in the evolving perception of the Desert Southwest in American culture. The law reads, in part:

*Congress found that federally owned desert lands of southern California constitute a public wildland resource of extraordinary and inestimable value for current and future generations; these desert wildlands have unique scenic, historic, archeological, environmental, ecological, wildlife, cultural, scientific, educational and recreational values; the California desert public land resources are threatened by adverse pressures which impair their public and natural values; the California desert is a cohesive unit posing difficult resource protection and management challenges; statutory land unit designations are necessary to protect these lands.*<sup>23</sup>

Such sentiments about the “extraordinary and inestimable value” of desert lands—and not in an economic sense—would have been unimaginable one hundred years earlier, in the late nineteenth century. Mary Austin and John Van Dyke would be pleased to see that American culture finally caught up to the sensibilities that they expressed in the early 1900s.

But of course it is not so simple. The California Desert Protection Act of 1994 was a highly contentious piece of legislation that had originally been introduced into Congress in 1986—unsuccessfully—and there was uncertainty about its passage in 1994. Such legislative battles are part of the process by which American culture works out its differences and attempts to move forward.

### **A Cacophony of Modern Perceptions of Desert**

The modern perception of desert in American culture is complex and multifarious. Toward one end of the spectrum are purists such as Edward Abbey (1927-1989), whom fellow writer Larry McMurtry has called “the Thoreau of the American desert.” Abbey embraced the philosophy of *Desert Magazine* editor Randall Henderson, rejecting the conveniences of civilization and metaphorically sucking the desert’s “juicy pulp” the way

John Van Dyke claimed to get moisture from a saguaro.

Abbey's most widely read book is *Desert Solitaire: a season in the wilderness*, published in 1968 and still on sale in many national park bookstores in the Southwest. It is Abbey's polemic-infused memoir of six months as a seasonal ranger in Arches National Monument (now Arches National Park). In *Desert Solitaire*, Abbey not only promotes the perception of the desert as a place with high intrinsic value, he rails against the 'improvements'—paved roads, flush toilets, "steel-and-asphalt campgrounds"—being made to promote what he calls 'Industrial Tourism.' He argues that the accommodations being made to make remote places accessible and attractive to the general public are ruining the experience of being there. Here is a sample of vintage Abbey, from the introduction to *Desert Solitaire*:

*Do not jump into your automobile next June and rush out to the canyon country hoping to see some of that which I have attempted to evoke in these pages. In the first place you can't see anything from a car; you've got to get out of the goddamned contraption and walk, better yet crawl, on hands and knees, over the sandstone and through the thornbush and cactus. When traces of blood begin to mark your trail you'll see something, maybe. Probably not. In the second place most of what I write about in this book is already gone or going under fast. This is not a travel guide but an elegy. A memorial. You're holding a tombstone in your hands. A bloody rock. Don't drop it on your foot—throw it at something big and glassy. What do you have to lose?<sup>24</sup>*

Abbey's gentler, contemplative side is captured in the following passage, also from *Desert Solitaire*:

*The tourists have gone home. . . . [A]nswering a mystical summons, [they] have returned to the smoky jungles and swamps of what we call, in wistful hope, American civilization. I can see them now in all their millions jamming the freeways, glutting the streets, horns bellowing like wounded*

*steers, hunting for a place to park. They have left me alone here in the wilderness, at the center of things, where all that is most significant takes place. (Sunset and moonrise, moaning winds and stillness, cloud transformations, the metamorphosis of sunlight, yellowing leaf and the indolent, soaring vulture . . . )*<sup>25</sup>

For purists in the Ed Abbey mold, the deserts of the American Southwest were among the last vestiges of wild America, now dissected by too many paved roads and overpopulated with—to use Randall Henderson’s term—”children of luxury.”

One bow-legged step to the political right of the Ed Abbey purists are the anti-government libertarians. These rugged individualists perceive portions of the desert to be public domain where anything goes. Challenging the authority of the federal government to regulate cattle grazing and other activities on desert land that is managed by federal agencies, they argue that local people are better able to manage the land than are Washington bureaucrats.

From the perspective of the energy utilities, the desert is vacant land for which the highest use is the siting of utility-scale solar-energy arrays and the power lines that connect them to the cities that are demanding increasing amounts of carbon-free energy. The military, meanwhile, sees sparsely populated desert lands as the perfect place to train troops. The mining industry’s mission is to make a profit by digging holes in the ground and extracting the mineral resources that modern civilization requires; and the complex geology of the Desert Southwest provides abundant opportunities. Add to all of these the real estate developers; when they look at the desert they see the potential for more “active-retirement” communities and resorts for the growing cohort of Americans who are attracted to warm weather and sunshine.

At the preservationist end of the spectrum is the Sierra Club and other environmental organizations. These groups aggressively resist any uses of the desert that pollute the air, modify the terrain, disturb the native biota, and restrict public access, putting them in direct conflict with all of the land-altering users listed above. Thanks in large part to the California Desert Protection Act of 1994, a large portion of the Mojave Desert is managed by the National Park Service, which strives to maintain the

environmental integrity of the desert lands that Congress has placed under its stewardship.

The twentieth century was a transformative century for American culture generally, but especially so for the perception of desert. The writings of Mary Austin and John Van Dyke in the early 1900s provided America with a flirtatious introduction to the desert. In subsequent decades, through the impact of Fred Harvey, *Death Valley Days*, automobile travel, *Arizona Highways*, and *Desert Magazine*, the American public's relationship with the desert evolved into one of increasing familiarity. In mid-century, when Walt Disney brought the desert to life on the silver screen, familiarity turned into intimacy. Thus, in half a century, beginning as a poorly known, uninviting region adjacent to Mexico, the Desert Southwest was transformed in the American consciousness into a highly valued region, with its own unique flora and fauna, charms and attractions.

In the second half of the twentieth century—and into the twenty-first—as the population of southwestern states has swelled and diversified, the relationship between American culture and the desert has grown more complex. Sizable portions of the desert have been preserved and set aside as national parks, state parks, and national conservation areas, while other portions have been sacrificed or otherwise removed from public access in the interest of national defense, solar energy production, mineral extraction, and urbanization. The “weird solitude” and “great silence” of the desert described by Van Dyke in the epigram at the beginning of this chapter can still be found, but one has to look harder to find them. Sadly, “the divinest, cleanest air to be breathed in God’s world,” described by Austin, is a distant memory.

The relationship between American culture and the Desert Southwest is still evolving. It is, of course, a microcosm of the relationship between *Homo sapiens* and the Earth, with the same mélange of challenges, compromises, and ambiguities. We can do no better than learn the lessons of history and, as a culture, strive to make the wisest possible decisions about land use. Now, if only there was still a battalion of Harvey Girls to serve each of us a quarter of an apple pie, to fuel the contemplation of our evolving relationship with the desert.

Endnotes

1. The 100<sup>th</sup> meridian is a meridian of longitude that runs through western Texas and Oklahoma, and north through Kansas, Nebraska, the Dakotas, and western Saskatchewan. It roughly marks the edge of the Great Plains. The significance of this geographic feature was solidified in American culture by Wallace Stegner's 1954 book *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*, a biography of John Wesley Powell.
2. Austin, M., 1903, *The Land of Little Rain*. 1961 edition, American Museum of Natural History, p. xiv.
3. Austin, M., 1903, *The Land of Little Rain*. 1961 edition, American Museum of Natural History, p. 11.
4. Austin, M., 1903, *The Land of Little Rain*. 1961 edition, American Museum of Natural History, p. 13-14.
5. Van Dyke, J.C., 1901, *The Desert: Further Studies in Natural Appearances*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925 illustrated edition, p. 2.
6. Wild, P., 1999, Critical introduction to Van Dyke, J.C., *The Desert: Further Studies of Natural Appearances*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, p. xxvi.
7. Van Dyke, J.C., 1901, *The Desert: Further Studies in Natural Appearances*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925 illustrated edition, p. 81.
8. Van Dyke, J.C., 1901, *The Desert: Further Studies in Natural Appearances*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925 illustrated edition, p. 93-94.
9. Van Dyke, J.C., 1901, *The Desert: Further Studies in Natural Appearances*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925 illustrated edition, p. xi.
10. Van Dyke, J.C., 1901, *The Desert: Further Studies in Natural Appearances*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925 illustrated edition, p. 105-106.
11. Van Dyke, J.C., 1922, *The Open Spaces: Incidents of Nights and Days Under the Blue Sky*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922 University of Utah edition, p. 91.
12. Van Dyke, J.C., 1993, *The Autobiography of John C. Van Dyke: A Personal Narrative of American Life 1861-1931*, edited by Peter Wild. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press.
13. Van Dyke, J.C., 1922, *The Open Spaces: Incidents of Nights and Days Under the Blue Sky*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922 University of Utah edition, p. 84-85..

14. Editor's introduction to Van Dyke autobiography, p. xxviii. See note 12.
15. Conclusions of desert naturalist Neil Carmony, as related by Peter Wild in the editor's introduction to the Van Dyke autobiography, page xxviii.
16. Quote of Neil Carmony by Peter Wild, in the editor's introduction to Van Dyke's autobiography, on page xxix.
17. Editor's introduction to Van Dyke autobiography, p. xxxi. See note 12.
18. Information on the Fred Harvey Company retrieved August 1, 2015 from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fred\\_Harvey\\_Company](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fred_Harvey_Company)
19. The history of the Furnace Creek Inn presented here is largely from *A History of Furnace Creek Inn*, a 32-page booklet by Joseph Gennaro, published in 2001 by Furnace Creek Inn in celebration of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Inn in 2002.
20. The term 'borax' is often loosely used for several boron minerals (borates): borax, kernite, colemanite, and ulexite ("TV rock"). Borax (*sensu stricto*) and kernite are both hydrated sodium borate hydroxides; colemanite is a hydrated calcium borate hydroxide, and ulexite is a hydrated sodium-calcium hydroxide. These are evaporite minerals that occur in some ephemeral lake sediments, most famously in the Mojave Desert. The constituent elements are the weathering products of volcanic rocks. In American culture, borax (*sensu lato*) is best known as the key ingredient in Boraxo, a brand of powdered soap that was manufactured, marketed, and popularized beginning in the late nineteenth century by the Pacific Coast Borax Company under the "Twenty Mule Team" trademark. Borax has a wide range of uses beyond hand soap and detergents. It is also used in the manufacture of cosmetics, heat-resistant glass (e.g., Pyrex brand glassware), fiberglass, fire retardant chemicals, enamel glazes, and anti-fungal foot soak. In metallurgy borax is used as a flux, for example as an ingredient in solder that allows the solder to flow evenly over the joint. In the chemical industry, borax is used as a pH buffer; in taxidermy it is used, among other uses, as a curing agent for snake skins; and in automobile mechanics it is used for plugging leaks in car radiators and engine blocks. In small-scale gold mining, especially in the Phillipines, borax is sometimes used in place of mercury to concentrate microscopic gold. The word 'borax' apparently comes from similar sounding words in Arabic and/or Persian.

Borax is an ancient commodity that was originally mined in Tibet and transported to Arabia via the Silk Road. In ancient times it was highly valued for its use in the production of ceramic glazes, such as on ceramic tile.

21. Ponting, C., 1991, *A Green History of the World*. New York: Penguin.
22. The *Desert Magazine*, v. 1, no. 1, November 1937.
23. Partial text of the California Desert Protection Act of 1994, retrieved September 1, 2015 from  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/California\\_Desert\\_Protection\\_Act\\_of\\_1994](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/California_Desert_Protection_Act_of_1994)
24. Abbey, E., *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*. 1968. New York: Simon and Schuster, p. xiv.
25. Abbey, E., *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*. 1968. New York: Simon and Schuster, p. 264-265.

**Figures (captions to be added later)**

1. Mary Austin's *Land of Little Rain*
2. John Van Dyke
3. Ronald Reagan pitching Borateem
4. Walt Disney's *The Living Desert*
5. Ed Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*
6. Diagram of competing perceptions of preferred uses of desert lands

THE LAND  
of  
LITTLE RAIN  
By Mary Austin.



*The* LAND  
of  
LITTLE RAIN

By Mary Austin



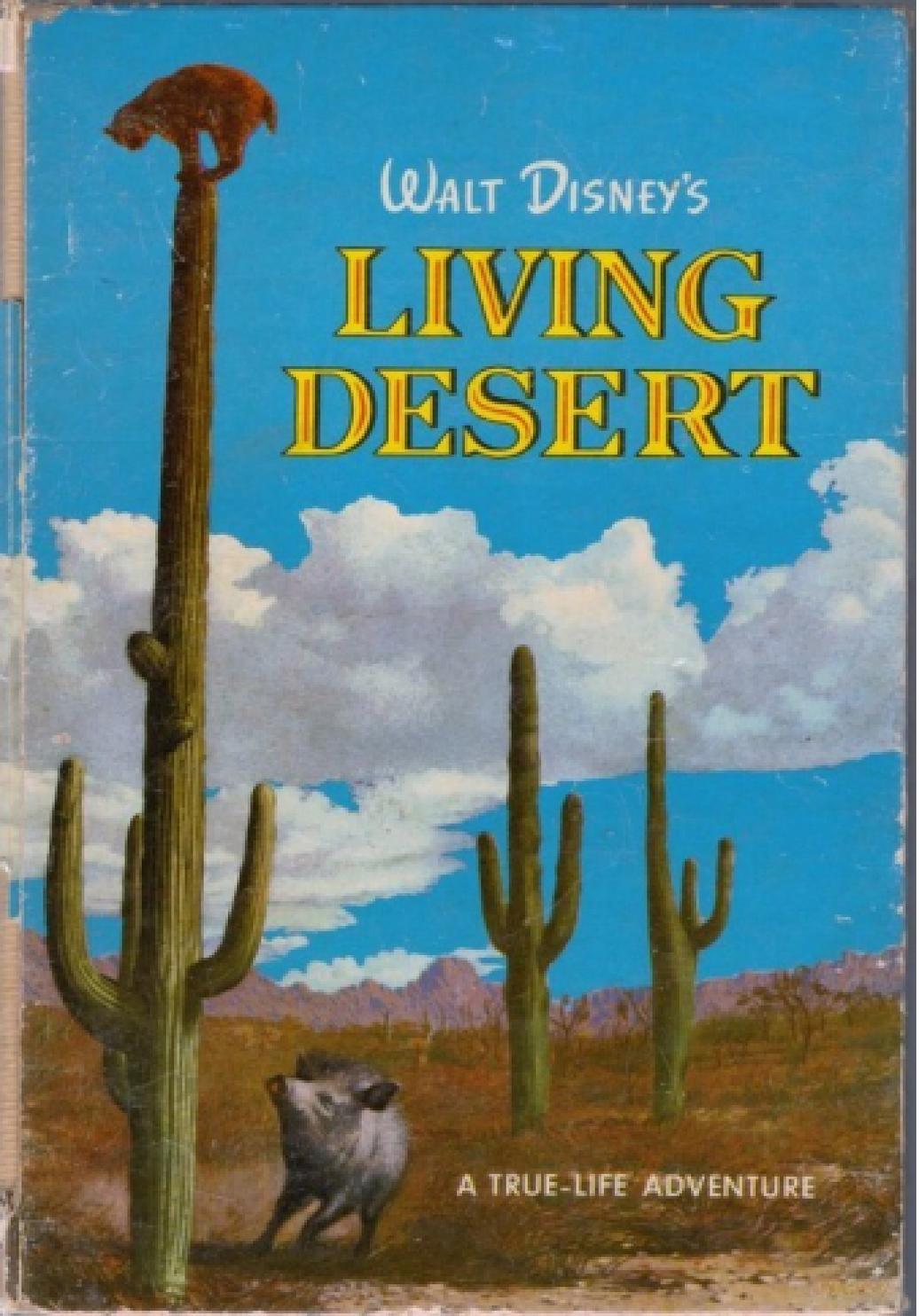
HOUGHTON  
MIFFLIN & CO.





**Borateem**  
All Purpose BORAX

**LAUNDRY**

A vintage movie poster for Walt Disney's 'Living Desert'. The background is a desert landscape with a bright blue sky, white clouds, and purple mountains in the distance. In the foreground, there are several saguaro cacti. A large saguaro on the left has a brown animal perched on its top. A smaller grey animal is running in the lower left. The title 'LIVING DESERT' is written in large, yellow, stylized letters with a black outline. Above it, 'WALT DISNEY'S' is written in a smaller, white, cursive font. At the bottom right, the text 'A TRUE-LIFE ADVENTURE' is written in a simple, white, sans-serif font.

WALT DISNEY'S  
**LIVING  
DESERT**

A TRUE-LIFE ADVENTURE

# Desert Solitaire

A Season in the Wilderness

Edward Abbey



# Competing perceptions of preferred uses of desert lands

