

How Minerva Hamilton Hoyt saved Joshua Tree park

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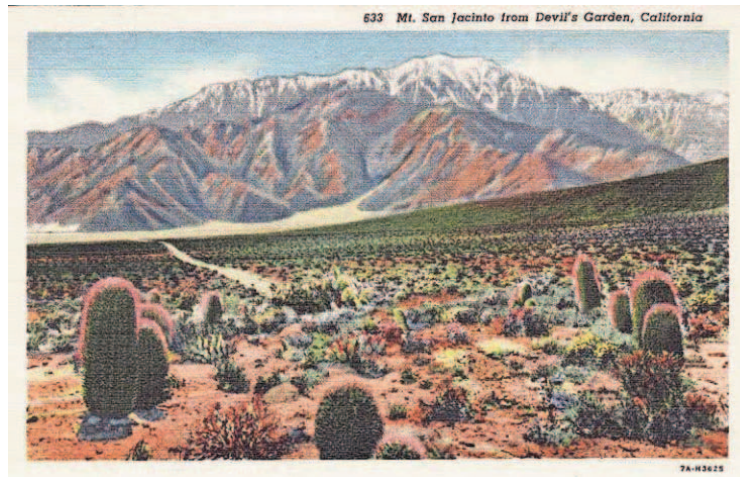
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Even in the desert built by remarkable women, Minerva Hamilton Hoyt's perspicacity stands out. Born during the Civil War to a wealthy Mississippi family, the Southern belle moved with her physician husband to California, after a stint in New York and Baltimore, naturally becoming part of the finest social circles in South Pasadena. She was involved in important civic causes, most notably the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the prestigious Garden Club of America. The wealthiest and most influential ladies in the country were members of the Garden Club (this is still true today) and Hoyt was right at home in their ranks.

The gardens of Southern California in the early 20th century were something special. The irrigated desert was a veritable Garden of Eden, as every imaginable cultivar grew with ease. Strange and wonderful new specimens, exuberant in form and color, unknown in eastern gardens, were abundant.

Landscaping in early 20th century Los Angeles with desert plants, particularly cacti, was highly fashionable. In search of specimens, gardeners and landscapers routinely drove from Los Angeles to the Coachella Valley to harvest yuccas, barrel cactus, cholla and anything else they could dig up. At the west end of the Coachella Valley, the Devil's Garden, a dense stand of barrel cacti, made for a natural nursery, was decimated (during the Spring of 1932 so many motorists came to pick desert verbenas from the sand dunes north of Palm Springs, the sheriff posted men on the weekends to prevent the poaching).

The pillage was alarming and created a conservation effort and several ordinances preventing transport of desert plants on county highways were passed, but this did little to stop the devastation, until Minerva Hamilton Hoyt joined the effort.



Devil's Garden. PHOTOS: PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY/SPECIAL TO THE DESERT SUN



Stephen Willard photographed this Joshua tree.

She fell in love with the desert on a trip in the late 1890s. In an appeal to conservationists in 1929, the Los Angeles Times quoted her, "Over thirty years ago I spent my first night in the Mojave desert of California and was entranced by the magnificence of the Joshua grove

in which we were camping and which was thickly sown with desert juniper and many rare forms of desert plant life. A month ago ... I visited the same spot again," she continued. "Imagine the surprise and the shock of finding a barren acreage with scarcely a Joshua tree left standing and the whole face of the landscape a desolate waste, denuded of its growth for commercialism." She systematically set about protecting the rest of the beloved desert from the same fate.

Hoyt consciously cultivated respect for desert plants through a series of extravagant desert displays in Boston, New York and London. The Los Angeles Times, in a recent article, characterized the shows as lavish noting that Hoyt filled seven freight cars with desert rocks, plants and sand and shipped it all back East. She flew in desert flowers twice a day, storing them in her hotel bathtub before installation. The Associated Press reported that her London exhibition was so popular that a policeman had to be stationed in front of the cacti and stuffed coyotes to "keep the

folks from crowding too hard against the ropes." The Garden Club was impressed, as was the general public. Hoyt had succeeded spectacularly in raising awareness of the wonders of the desert.

Hoyt was duly considered a desert expert; a species of cactus was named in her honor; when the California State Park Associated hired Frederick Law Olmstead, Jr., whose famous father had designed all the major municipal parks in the country, including New York's Central Park, to survey the state for its important horticultural geography, he enlisted her help. Hoyt selected one million acres extending from the Salton Sea to Twentynine Palms, recommending preservation, and advocating for National Park status.

Hoyt founded the International Desert Conservation League in March of 1930, and installed powerful and connected men, museum directors, university presidents, and the founder of the Forest Service as vice presidents. She cultivated the Agriculture Secretary and other Washington officials, constantly pressing for preservation. Thwarted by a park service bureaucrat after a protracted effort and then all-out battle, Hoyt decided to go over his head directly to the president.

She procured a letter of introduction from California Governor James Rolph Jr. (for whom there is a street named in Palm Springs). She commissioned a slew of gorgeous landscape photographs from Stephen Willard, and assembled the letter and the images into a glorious picture book, arranging for it to be presented to President Franklin Roosevelt himself by her friend, Henry Harriman, president of the Chamber of Commerce of the United States. Delivered in summer of 1934, the album was persuasive. Harriman reported the president's great appreciation and interest in Hoyt's work. In 1936, Roosevelt signed a presidential proclamation establishing Joshua Tree National Monument as a mechanism for conserving desert plants.