



A worker from the desert's early date industry.

A date with destiny for sweet desert treat

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"It's a date!" the title of the thin tome proclaims with a cheeky wink. Chronicling the Coachella Valley date industry from the 1930s perspective, this little book, written by Wayland Dunham, takes an amused view of the agricultural wonder that is the date farms of the American desert.

The publication recounts the facts in great detail in a "simple yarn, told in lighthearted, non-technical terms, of the history, romance, propagation, and usage of the fruits of the date palm...."

The date palm, *Phoenix dactylifera* is one of the man's oldest cultivated plants going back not just centuries in history, but millennia.

Dates appeared in cultivation in California in the latter half of the 18th century at the Spanish missions up and down the coast. However, the coastal climate wasn't particularly conducive for date production.

In the late 1800s, seeds and offshoots of date palms were imported from

Egypt, Algeria and the Persian Gulf to the arid Southwest of the United States. In 1904, the U.S. Department of Agriculture established a date experimental station in the Coachella Valley. Different date varieties from both seed and offshoot were tried.

In the following decades, crop production grew exponentially from approximately 100,000 pounds in 1919 to 1 million pounds in 1926, and then by 1955 to 48 million pounds of dates being produced in the Coachella Valley.

Ultimately, some 85 percent of the U.S. date acreage was situated in the Coachella Valley and this tremendous output was derived predominately from the 14,000 offshoots of the Deglet Noor variety of date imported from Algeria.

The Coachella Valley was and is uniquely endowed with favorable conditions for date production. The arid landscape, artesian water and high temperatures produce the highest quality of dates — sweet and plump.

Gorgeous groves of date palms planted in stately rows were interspersed

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A scenic postcard touting desert dates.

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with citrus and stretched for miles all over the valley. The prodigious output of the oasis of the Coachella Valley rivaled that of the Middle East itself, and created such abundance that new descriptions such as “Allah’s Garden” or “Our Araby” became common for the Coachella Valley.

The Middle Eastern reference was incorporated in books, street names and school mascots.

The City of Indio annually sponsors a date Festival, now dating back some 65 years. Over the decades, this elaborate celebration has featured camel races, Arabian dances, date judging and contests, and, of course, a harem of Date Princesses.

Since the early days, many residential sections of every city in the valley have been built upon former date farms as farms slowly gave way to development. Building and selling houses seemed easier and more profitable than date cultivation. Remnants of the groves persist though and continue to delight tourists when they happen upon

the soldiering rows of the tall handsome trees in the middle of Rancho Mirage or Palm Desert. To see the active industry now though requires a trip to Indio, Coachella and Thermal.

Over the years retail outlets sprung up advertising the unique sex life of the date, since reliable propagation requires the help of man.

In March of each year, the long, sharp thorns sticking out between the leaves are removed to allow for mechanical pollination. Strands of pollen from the male trees are cut and tied next to the female flowers just after they have opened, or alternatively, pollen is dusted into the flowers on a small powder puff by hand. Workers carefully cover the fruits with bags as it begins to ripen. Dates are a very labor-intensive crop.

Shields Date Gardens in Indio, opened in 1924 and is still operating today. They continue offer to ship a box of their homegrown fruit home for visitors. There’s a lunch counter unchanged over many decades allowing visitors to step back in time as they order a date shake as so many generations of desert travelers have done before them. And then there’s the theater in the back, showing their signature movie, “The Sex Life of the Date.” It’s a classic.