

## THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

# John Muir enchanted by Palm Canyon

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In the last week of August in 1916 the world was at war overseas. That week, President Woodrow Wilson turned his attention home and signed an act creating the National Park Service. The new federal bureau, under the auspices of the Department of the Interior would be responsible for vast lands and important natural treasures. The act made clear “the Service thus established shall promote and regulate the use of the Federal areas known as national parks, monuments and reservations...which purpose is to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life (sic) therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.”

In the desert, the Palm Canyon, ancient territory of the Cahuilla Indians, was a landscape unlike any other. Palms sprouted improbably from cracks in massive rock formations that seem to tumble into each other. Water, so precious in the desert, flowed through the bottom of the canyon formed by the base of the great mountain. Surely this natural wonder qualified to be a national park.

In 1903, President Teddy Roosevelt and naturalist John Muir camped in the Yosemite for three nights. Muir seized the opportunity “to do some forest good in freely talking around the campfire.” The discussion captivated Roosevelt. During his presidency, Theodore Roosevelt would subsequently sign into existence five national parks, 18 national monuments, 55 national bird sanctuaries and wildlife refuges, and 150 national forests.

Just two years later in 1905, John Muir, champion of the Yosemite, would be camping in the Palm Canyon near the tiny settlement at the base of Mt. San Jacinto.

That the peripatetic Muir found his way to the desert is not that surprising in the context of his travels. At the end of the 19th century, before there were airplanes or the cross-continental railway, Muir managed to literally see the world.

He came from Scotland in 1849, settling in Wisconsin. He walked 1,000 miles from Indiana to Florida through Kentucky and Tennessee. He visited Canada; points east in New York and Boston; went to the Chicago World’s Fair; spent months in Texas; landed in San Francisco, and made yearly trips to Alaska. In 1893 he returned to Europe visiting Scotland, England, Norway, Switzerland, Italy and Ireland. And in 1903, along with camping in the Yosemite with Roosevelt he managed a world tour that took him to London, Paris, Finland, Russia, Korea, China, India, Egypt, Australia, New Zealand, Philippines, Hawaii and Japan. He would eventually see the Amazon, Uruguay, Argentina, Chile and South Africa.

But in 1905 he was in the tiny village of Palm Springs, with his daughters Wanda and Helen, hoping



John Muir reading in Andreas Canyon circa 1905.  
PALMSPRINGS

the salubrious climate would reinvigorate Helen from a respiratory illness. Muir’s arrival on the desert coincided with the residence of his friend, and fellow conservationist, Theodore Parker Lukens. Lukens was staying at Welwood Murray’s Palm Springs Hotel with his own daughter, also named Helen.

The impending arrival of the Muirs was noticed by telegram to Murray, setting the household into a flurry of cleaning and preparation. The hotel was closed for the heat of summer and the cottages were “deep with dust from recent sand storms.” Lukens had been allowed to stay only because Murray was an avid amateur horticulturalist and deeply respected the “Father of Forestry.” Now Murray was to host the most famous naturalist in the world.

Helen Lukens described the preparations years later, “In a paroxysm of haste (Murray) dashed across the road to the Caliente Reservation, returning speedily with Ramon, a stalwart young Indian, and Amada, gowned in a voluminous calico mother-hubard. Given brooms, mops, buckets and soap, Dr. Murray ordered them to ‘exterminate the superfluous accumulation of dirt.’ One of his pet hobbies was to familiarize the Indians with niceties of the English language.”

Helen Lukens and Marcus Pete, a Cahuilla man, rode out in “a rickety, heat-shrunken uncovered wagon...dragged by two antiquated mustangs” to the train

station to pick up the distinguished visitor. On the trip back to the village, the desert wind “stabbed” at them with “dagger-like” pellets of sand. “In the open-jawed spaces, outside shelter of Mt. San Jacinto, in an out-of-doors new and strange to him, Mr Muir had the opportunity to compare this maniac wind with the clean crisp tempests he’d met with his beloved forests.” No one had done more to preserve natural landscapes for future enjoyment than Muir, and it seemed he’d seen all scenery the planet had to offer. Yet this was new and strange, and wonderful, to him.

For several days after the Muirs arrived, the thermometer ranged from 100 to 120. Murray suggested a picnic in the canyons, where cooling streams and the deep shade of the palm trees that grew densely close to the water, would offer some respite from the heat. “Muir stepped from the wagon, he was reverently, quietly in tune with his surroundings. For some time with hands clasped behind him—a characteristic posture—he studied the far-reaching vistas of sand wastes below us, where shadows and brilliant sunset colors mingled in kaleidoscopic confusion. Turning, he faced the canyon walls that soared to great height, where jumbled boulders gleamed like polish brass. Gazing at this nature phenomenon born ages ago, he remarked: ‘Definite evidence of glacial energy!’”

After the picnic outings, and back at Murray’s hotel, “Star-bright evening hours were spent in the palm-thatched pergola over the rugged pillars of which were vines heavy with clusters of purple grapes. The night air in contrast with the intense heat of day, was cool, and drifted with fragrance of oleander and orange blossoms. In this rare botanical garden were trees, vines and shrubs which had been shipped to Murray from far corners of the world for experimental planting in the desert.”

Soon the shaded picnics were not enough. Muir announced his intention to camp in the canyon rather than continue to sleep inside. Muir, his daughters Wanda and Helen, with T. P. and Helen Lukens, spent six “carefree” days in Andreas Canyon and as many “evenings around the camp fire singing the old-time songs best loved by Muir: listening to his stories of travel and adventure....”

Helen Lukens observed, “Muir’s contentment was evident. His voice was low, leisurely as a woodland brook, as he talked on and on of his adventures in the out-of-doors; weaving rare word pictures of rugged peaks, deep canyons, waterfalls, glaciers, wildflower meadows and cathedral forests.”

The dramatic landscape of the palm-filled canyons, so unusual, would not become a national park despite Muir’s enchantment with it. Doubtless though, the desert oasis figured in his future stories told on starry nights around a campfire.

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