

# The California Habitat of *Washingtonia Filifera*

## *Recollections of the Desert and its Native Palms*

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*Washingtonia filifera* is the only palm native to California. Its natural distribution there is in the mountainous canyons debouching into the Colorado Desert, about some of the waterholes in the more open desert and in a thin straggling belt along the foothills of the Little San Bernardino Mountains. There are perhaps as many as forty well-separated native stations in its California range as well as two or three in Baja California and the quite unique station across the Colorado in Arizona. The binomial *Washingtonia arizonica* is sometimes still applied to the Arizona palm, though Bailey considered it not distinct from *W. filifera* even while recognizing that much variation did exist in each of the two *Washingtonia* species he accepted as valid.

The California species (*W. filifera* H. Wendl. ex Wats.) and the Mexican species (*W. robusta* H. Wendl.) have both been planted in many parts of the globe, and both are widely cultivated in California where one common name for either species is simply "fan palm." Even a casual glance, however, serves to distinguish the species when adult, for the trunk of *W. filifera* is massive (about 3 ft. in diameter at breast-height or a little more) whereas the trunk of *W. robusta* is never so stout but is always relatively slender except for the sometimes flared-out butt. The same thing applies when the shag of down-folded dead leaves conceals the bole, for the shag of the massive palm is itself more than twice as massive as that of its Mexican congener. There are of course

other differences, as in the brighter green foliage of *W. robusta*, its shorter leaf petioles and in the color and armature of these, and still others that would elude a casual observer. The specific names of the two species, as now understood, have been somewhat confusing in the past, for *W. robusta* is not robust in the sense of being stout; moreover, it is extremely filiferous while still young, and the juvenile plants of the two species are not always easily distinguished. Not long since, the two specific names and the habitat of each species were often exactly reversed. The history of the genus itself, and the species too, has been complicated in the matter of names, which was partly owing to the lack of type localities. Luckily for me, I am concerned here with only one palm, *W. filifera* of the Colorado Desert and its margins, and have to deal only with its native occurrences in California.

The Colorado Desert, contrary to the implication, is not in Colorado but in southern California, taking its name from the mighty river that bounds it on the east. It lies south of the Mojave Desert, separated from it by the Little San Bernardinios and other ranges. At its northwestern extension it is separated from coastal California by the pass (San Gorgonio) that lies between high ranges of mountains, and from thence it extends in an ever-widening expanse east to the Colorado and south to the Mexican border. Drive eastward from the Pacific through this pass and you are at once in a different world; you are on the moon, and if not exactly the moon

itself, you are surely in some strange transplanted corner of Arabia.

Or you were, in times by no means distant. Only a little over three decades ago most of this desert, comprising some 8,000 square miles, was of solitude and emptiness all compact. All of it excepting the Imperial Valley, part of the Coachella Valley and a few more or less civilized oases, was a lure and a challenge only to prospectors or other such adventurous souls. It was dangerous, forbidding and inexplicably alluring all at the same time. The most part was a vast and excessively dreary plain of sand, cactus and creosote-bush contained between grim mountains, yet in places phenomenally varied by sand dunes, "devil's gardens," dry washes populated with eerie smoke-trees, beds of shining gypsum, startling rock formations, labyrinthine badlands, even the so-called "mud volcanoes," and, in its sunken bosom a dead sea, the Salton. All in all, the unlikeliest place for palms on this planet or any other, but this thirsty land was the Desert of Improbabilities and the improbable palms were there in keeping with its nature. Not so strange, then, to come upon a clearly defined beach where the waves of the Gulf had rolled in geologic times, and not an imaginary mirage-like beach but one from which the waters had vanished, seemingly, only yesterday instead of perhaps a million years ago.

About one quarter of the desert lies below sea level. Through the centuries the Colorado River has overflowed many times into this depressed basin, forming each time a lake which eventually evaporated, and the lines of old beaches are still discernible at various levels. In 1905-1906 the entire river reversed its normal course to the Gulf and flowed into the basin, creating in this most recent incursion a weird lake with an area of nearly 500 square miles

and a maximum depth of 84 feet—the same Salton Sea, now somewhat shrunken, of modern maps. Engineers finally subdued the river in 1907 and put it back in its bed before the waters could drown the Imperial Valley and all the rest of the huge area below sea level.

The original habitat of the palms, according to one speculative version, was about the margin of the marine waters when all that depression was occupied by the Gulf of California, and indeed there is a thin, sporadic belt of palms, or there was in my day, along the base of the Indio Hills just above the ancient beach line. That the palms are of the desert there can be little doubt. I have just cited one instance of it, where they grew along ledges without benefit of canyon walls. I think of other places in the open desert where I visited the palms or camped under them—the Twelve Apostles, Two-Bunch Palms, Twenty-nine Palms. I vividly recall Seven Palms, an old waterhole frequented only by prospectors, about seven miles north of Palm Springs; paradoxically there were about twenty palms at this windblown, sun-ridden, sand-blasted oasis, manifestly created by the Devil along with the general area surrounding it. Nowhere, however, did the palms occur unless there was a supply of water, usually bad, in the form of a spring, a stream, a seepage, a mere trickle on alkali-encrusted ground, or else invisible ground water. Their presence was a sure indicator of water either on the surface or not too far below it—not, like the presence of mesquites, an indicator of a water table too low to be hopefully available.

The name "desert palm," sometimes applied to *Washingtonia filifera*, may seem an anomaly, for the plant has no xerophilous properties whatsoever; that is, it has no built-in water storage capacity nor any other defenses against



Fig. 29. A scene in Palm Canyon. Photograph by Stephen H. Willard.

prolonged drought. The name is apt, nevertheless, for the reason that the desert canyons and other desert sites are uniquely its habitat. There is not one instance, so far as I know, of a natural occurrence of the palms in coastal California except for reported fossil remains. The westernmost native station, or nearest approach to the coast, was in Snow Creek Canyon near the northwestern end of the desert (imperfect or past tenses frequently employed here because the writer does not know where the aboriginal palms still survive); there were seven or eight palms, as I recall, with only a thin trickle of water rising to the surface, and the influences at work in this location were predominantly of the desert rather than of the mountains.

Back there in 1924 I roamed that transplanted bit of Arabia in a stripped-down flivver equipped with half-deflated balloon tires, penetrating into many a canyon on foot and camping at many a waterhole. I got on good familiar terms with the palms as one result of all this wandering, and came to have an abiding reverence for them. They were a goal for practical reasons, too; usually their presence meant water and always shade, and not seldom the difference between life and death. During midsummer a man traveling on foot under that murderous sun cannot live without water more than three or four hours; the time is still shorter if he is toiling up grade, as on the miles of rising talus-slope in the mouth of some immense wide-mouthed canyon. But perhaps I should explain how I came to be fraternizing with lizards and competing for existence with coyotes in that inhospitable region.

By dint of house-to-house peddling of dubious goods, during the course of which I must have rung every doorbell between Pasadena and Santa Monica at least twice, I amassed about one thou-

sand dollars, which convinced me that I was independently wealthy; so, with this stupendous grubstake, I decided to throw off the shackles of sordid commerce and become an author-explorer. Accordingly I gathered up my family, consisting of one wife and one baby, and headed for Palm Springs where we established ourselves in a stylish shack whacked together with packing-box boards and canvas. I explored the desert, wrote reams of high-toned literature which was uniformly, even rudely, rejected by sundry magazines, and achieved only ignominy instead of renown. The grubstake and likewise the grub came to an inglorious end in just over eight months, but not before I had managed to drive, walk or crawl into every cranny of that desert not made inaccessible by terrain or lack of water. Of course thousands of people have viewed the famous stand of native *Washingtonia* in Palm Canyon, just a short drive south of Palm Springs, but the multitudes have never glimpsed the palms in the remoter canyons or at such unsung waterholes as Seventeen Palms. This last is not to be confused with Seven Palms. Even today, I suspect, one can still share with a handful of Indians and "desert rats" whatever thrill goes with the quasi-discovery of several lonely palms far up in Magnesia Spring Canyon—unless some understudy of Death Valley Scotty has dynamited the canyon and erected an air-conditioned castle complete with TV and swimming pool.

Something akin to this brand of progress has long since converted the once tiny resort of Palm Springs into one of the plushier of world-renowned playgrounds. It has become a city, no less, replete with paved streets, costly cha-teaux, smart shops, and all the super-charged adjuncts of civilization. Its swimming pools are as numerous as spines on a biznaga, though the only

water in sight. c., 1924, was in an irrigation ditch. The simple and charming village that was my desert headquarters had then but the one and only Desert Inn, two or three dusty lanes, a general store which was also the post office, and a permanent population of three or four whites and some thirty Indians. In winter this was augmented by the seasonal advent of several hundred people, many of them guests at the Desert Inn and the rest health-seekers or loafers scattered about the village. Come summer, everyone who could cleared out to avoid temperatures occasionally rising above 120°F. in the shade. Of the village washingtonias a small group near the wooden bathhouse over the hot springs was supposed by the Indians to be natural, and in fact an old woman pointed them out to me as indigenes like herself; but were I to return today in an attempt to sort out the native palms from those now cultivated, very likely I'd get lost in the strange new city and besides get pinched for vagrancy by a cop in a natty uniform.

Since 1924 no small part of the open desert has undergone a transformation equally drastic. *Phoenix dactylifera*, that other palm ideally adapted to desert oases, now roams in seemingly endless date groves the former wastes where grew only greasewood, spiteful chollas and other xerophytic plants. New resorts have sprung up, and romanticizing the desert has become a sort of cult that plays into the hands of ambitious promoters. Water skiers and outboard racers ply the Salton Sea, that former synonym for utter desolation and death. Trailers are hauled into the mouths of once inviolable canyons and campers camp there. Sunday drivers fan out over every passable road; smart-aleck slickers venture beyond them, sometimes ending up in serious predicaments. Notwithstanding all these encroachments, over half the desert re-

mains untouched and unseen by the horde, the far dry reaches and the funereal mountains as full as ever of peril to the careless and challenge to the dreamer. Anyone fond of foolhardy risks can still achieve his sure demise by starting with only a quart canteen of water, any July day, for some uncertain water hole but five miles away and then losing his bearings. All too often even nowadays, in the southwestern deserts, the reckless and innocent alike still die of thirst in the furnace heats of summer. Some of these needless deaths occur because the danger had been believed exaggerated.

How does any of this relate to the palms? It relates directly, for their true home is in this grim but fascinating land and in the canyons of the bare, baleful mountains that are part of it. Its mood, its topography, its water or lack of it, its every aspect, all have to do with the palms and their manner of life in the varied footholds it has provided for them. Footholds, certainly, and only the barest of such, is the right word for many of the native stations. Two or three palms growing far back in some blistering, blighted canyon where it dwindles beyond its fan of boulder-strewn detritus, with only *Atriplex* and ocotillos for company, inspire a different kind of awe from that felt by the tourist gazing at the stately groves in Palm Canyon where an incredible stream of water flows in the midst of other-worldly magnificence. No, our mere foothold is a different kind of miracle, minus prodigal array of greenery and minus visible water. Perhaps one of its two or three palms is growing high on the canyon wall, in a niche of sun-baked red granite, eternally beyond the reach of water. Or so it appears, but you know that the appearance lies and that the roots are supplied with moisture, brought to them by an uptilted stratum of rock. The awe

proceeds from feeling yourself a discoverer of a natural wonder, although the odds say you have been preceded, and from coming upon, perchance unexpectedly, grand and noble palms where no palms should be; huge forms of life they are, massive, not little or pretty like violets, but big, bigger than your father or even your grandfather, and longer lived, and venerable, and more eloquent in their virility and magnitude than any puny form of beauty is eloquent. In this thermal cleft of Hades you have come upon defiantly grand palms that seem dreamlike but yet real, and you feel that you have surprised the stuff of which the most moving poetry might be made. If your canteen is not empty and the temperature below  $110^{\circ}$ , you vaguely think of Ozymandias and other such dithyrambs without even knowing quite why.

Should rhetoric seem to have the upper hand here, then picture yourself starting to hobnail your way from Palm Springs up into the head of Chino Canyon where, you've been told, are a few wild palms. Not today, for I hear that a subdivision for nabobs has been planted in its mouth, but back there in the Paleozoic year 1924. It's seven miles up there and seven back, so you fill your two-gallon canteen. Nothing to it until you come to the base of the wide alluvial fan filling the canyon mouth. The palms at the head, where San Jacinto abruptly begins its mighty soar to 10,000 and more feet, are out of sight, but in that deceptive dry air the mountain wall looks only half a mile distant and the intervening slope looks only a little out of level. Actually the mountain is three miles away and you soon find that the gentle slope is steep and made steeper by a sun hot enough to scorch the ears off a jackrabbit. The very lizards whiz madly from bush to lee of boulder to avoid singeing their feet. In

summer no rattler ever ventures out under the sun; experiments with them have shown that a ten-minute exposure at noonday kills them outright. If you see a sidewinder as you toil up the slope, it will be hugging the sparse shade under a bush or a boulder. No shade, no rattlesnake.

Before you reach the palms up there near the mountain wall, the water in your canteen will be half way to the boiling point. Your pulse pounds insanely at your temples, and you wonder if you must die absurdly while taking a short walk. Those black shapes up ahead resolve into palms with green crowns. They are well advanced out under the same sun that does you violence, and they make your fears seem asinine and shameful. You come up to them near a warm spring; they are few in number, not of the tall or imposing kind, and their trunks are clothed to the ground with a heavy thatch of appressed dead fans. But, as a sequel to the miles of glaring talus-slope and its scant starved vegetation, the vivid green crowns salve your abused gaze and proclaim that hopeless desolation has found its master. Now you know that you will live to a ripe and jaunty old age.

Only a stone's-throw up the canyon, beyond the palms, the desert suddenly ends as if fenced off. Willows spring up, then merge into a thin copse of cottonwoods, plane trees and alders continuing on up to the cliff face down which a flattened band of water traces a film. Right here under the mountain mass the ground moisture is obviously plentiful, so you searched the copse for palms. There were none, of course, for you had ventured a few rods beyond the desert's own domain. The palms would have none of this negation of the desert, demanding to be at home in their austere overlook out there in the fire. In





Fig. 30. Below standard but contemporary with the text, says the author, is this 1924 photo he made in a palm canyon with a battered 2A Kodak fitted with groundglass back for film pack.

among the leafy trees, you found instead of palms a stretched-out six-foot diamondback which you would have treaded upon with your next step. It obligingly held itself motionless while you crushed its head with your stick. You cut off its head, trudged home with it, nailed it up on an outer wall of your palatial home, skinned it, buried the carcass, dug it up six months later expecting to see a bare skeleton, and found the flesh uncorrupted by that dry soil.

Palms grew natively in every canyon near Palm Springs—in Tahquitz, Andreas, Eagle, Murray and most profusely in Palm Canyon itself. Each of these canyons had its own special features and charms. Though greatly varying in quantity of water and in form of rock and cliff, the scenery was striking in every one. That rarest of phenomena in such places was the stream of clear mountain water that coursed through Andreas Canyon, forming little cascades and rock-bound pools overhung by tall palms with clean trunks. Here the palm fronds stood out in singular beauty against cliffs of granite sunbaked to shades of red and brown that somehow made the foliage appear a more vivid green than it actually is. Murray Canyon I remember chiefly for the stand of palms uniformly clothed, from their crowns to the ground, with an immensely thick shag of bleached-out, tinder-dry dead leaves. Most of these straw-colored columns were thirty to forty feet tall, each with a diameter of about ten feet. What a conflagration one careless match could have caused in this grove! Because the dead foliage clung to the trees with such persistence, it struck me as odd that the ground here should be covered, as it was, with a foot-thick carpet of dead leaves. In this canyon and others where the same heavy thatch of crunchy

fans littered the ground, I trod with no little trepidation for fear of rattlers.

Eastward across the desert from Palm Springs lies Thousand Palm Canyon, a worthy objective in the foothills of the Little San Bernardino range. Mind, this is 1924 and no road goes to the canyon. We can make it as far as Indio and worry later on about the rest. The Coachella Valley is not one endless date plantation as now, but already there are a few prosperous date "ranches." Near Indio we hail an acquaintance who is a grove owner; he gaily waves back from his barrel of water, in which he is immersed up to his chin with all his clothes on—a customary way to cool off a bit. After Indio the Model T chugs as far as it can and the rest of the way is on foot. Rounding a spur of the hills, the canyon suddenly opens its wide jaws and there at once are the palms in patches and groves, and singly too. The first palms are well advanced on the plain, venturing out as far as their roots find moisture. Most are tall trees with bare trunks and only the minimum of shag up there under the crowns. The trunks of short but old trees are likewise bare. But I would be on much safer ground to switch out of the present tense.

Thousand Palm was not a continuous forest but a succession of thickly populated groves separated by acres of open spaces. Besides these groves there were outposts of stragglers, groups of three or four palms, thin files of others, following the erratic pattern of underground moisture. The sun-struck and nearly bare expanses separating the dense groves from one another supported only a few starveling creosote-bushes and other such exponents of cruelest drought. Even so, several parched gulches tributary to the canyon each contained a few palms in perfect vigor. The ground under the compact stands was thatched with dead fans made



slippery by excessive dryness. No other plants grew in this brittle carpet of leaves that crunched and slithered disconcertingly underfoot.

Gazing desertwards from about midway among the palms the view had the fascination of unreality: pale desolation falling away downgrade to the Salton, relieved here and there by the groups of stately palms advancing upon it under a pitiless cobalt sky. The scene was utterly alien, and yet a moving one finding no adequate reflection in words. From this point the two-mile height of San Jacinto was out of sight, but the gaunt Santa Rosas flanking its bulk loomed up anemic and skeleton-like in a sort of lunar loneliness far across the waste. I made no attempt to guess at the number of palms in Thousand Palm Canyon. Whether 3,000 or only 999, the day was too hot even for guessing.

I have some uncommonly warm recollections of Twenty-nine Palms, a natural oasis in an elevated basin north of the Colorado Desert and south of the Mojave (although sometimes held to be actually in the latter desert). I started for it on an infernally hot day in August by a route from Indio. This route should not have been attempted in any kind of car, for Twenty-nine Palms was then readily reached by a fair road up through the Morongo and then over an easy stretch east of the Joshua trees. But no, I had to do it the hard way, and was lucky to come out of it alive. The road worsened steadily in the hills north of Indio, becoming steeper, rockier and strewn with small boulders some of which obliged me to jack up the flivver. The rear wheels spun on loose stones and eventually the radiator boiled away all my extra supply of water and even the drinking water from two waterbags. Only a miracle could extricate the '21 Ford and me from this stupid plight,

and that is exactly what happened. It happened, that is, in God's good time, when I knew beyond doubt that I was finished. A banging and a screeching preceded the freight wagon that finally drew up beside me, and the teamster replenished my water supply from his barrels, mumbling about idjets and cursing all the while. After his parting shot to the effect that next time he'd see me in hell first, I went on up that miserable excuse for a road. Still shaken up by the close call, I took the first faint but wrong tracks to avoid deep wagon-ruts. This was a bad mistake that culminated in a whole new series of nightmarish misadventures, but, after floundering about all night, I emerged next day on a traveled road leading to the Virginia Dare gold mine. Where the car ground at a snail's pace up the steep sandy rise to the camp, some foul ball had put up a sign lettered: "Welcome to Dale. Slow down to 50 m.p.h." An off-shift miner took me in hand and saw me off on the right road to Twenty-nine Palms, first priming me with a belt of rotgut which, he assured me, would be good protection against sunstroke in my topless jalopy.

Shortly a scattering file of palms appeared on the skyline, and five minutes more brought me to the poolside in the center of Twenty-nine Palms. The colony of palms, numbering less than twenty-nine, was far removed from any other and presumably marked the northern limit of distribution in California. The supposition that the occurrence was natural is, however, subject to question, for the Indians who formerly lived on the site may have introduced the palms from the southern desert a century or more ago.

Two burros were foraging in the reedy bog about the waterhole, and I looked around for their owner. I had

not far to look, for there he was—the most dessicated prospector I ever saw—reclining against a bank in the dappled shade of a cottonwood. When I saluted him with the remark that the temperature must be close to 120, he snorted and said I oughta be glad of it; he had camped there the past winter and one night ice busted his canteen plumb in two. I should try camping there, come January, and I would wish it was July. Fact was, he said, some skunks stole his shed for firewood and he like to froze hisself solid. There were two or three dilapidated shacks about, apparently abandoned, so I had to discount the revelation.

We talked listlessly about the palms, which this withered old hoss called pams to rhyme with hams, then drifted off to the subject of desert water and again back to the palms. Water there was fine, he told me, but other places it had a little arsenic in it. Too much in some places, would pizen anybody or anything but a pam. Pams liked arsenic. Pizener the water the better they grew. Well, I surely cannot vouch for the arsenic, but it is a solid fact that the palms flourished at places where the water was too vile to drink. Excessive alkalinity was apparent in the sickly white crust about many springs and seepages and along the margins of feeble streams in canyons. Saline waters were commoner than not at the sites where palms spontaneously occurred, and often the content of noxious salts was high enough to cause a drinker to vomit.

Here again at Twenty-nine Palms the aptness of the term "desert palm" was made forcibly manifest. Twenty or so tallish, bare-trunked palms were dotted about this waterhole set down in the midst of a vast sun-stricken plain ringed by the ghosts of mountains. This region for its funereal quality, sheer immensity, and intensity of heat, could have vied

with some awesome corner of the Sahara itself. Momentarily I almost expected to see a column of the Foreign Legion or a camel caravan advance upon the oasis. None appeared just then, but in time they did when the movies went on location there.

We two transients did not suspect that a town of 6,000 population would spring up here. Over the years that have since elapsed I had heard rumors of such an incredible development and at last have had them confirmed by a brochure received from the Chamber of Commerce of Twentynine Palms (no hyphen now). From it I learn that this former haunt of desert rats and Indians is "a well-zoned city" containing a bank, stores, churches, theaters, bowling alleys, an art gallery, *etc.*, and that "Twentynine Palms welcomes farsighted industrialists." My last visit there was in July, 1925, on another blistering day when, so far as I could make out, the entire population consisted of me and some lizards and the palms.

Not so well-known or readily accessible as some of the stations that I have already mentioned are others that, because of either remoteness or difficult terrain, should be still primeval and unspoiled by human encroachment. One such unspoiled palm-locality is Corn Springs, an old watering-place frequented only by Indians and nomadic miners, on the north flank of the Chuckwalla Mountains. It is easily reached by a modern low-slung car—or it was as lately as 1946 when I camped there overnight while on my way from Palm Springs to Death Valley. But I see that my allotted space has been overrun, wherefore I shall mention only briefly some other stations in the hope that they still remain inviolate and that someone of an inquisitive mind and adventurous spirit will want to seek them out.

Often there will be but two or three

palms. Nearly all the place-names will be found on the old U. S. Geological Survey maps accompanying the Water-Supply Papers. First, there is wide-mouthed Deep Canyon, about 14 miles southeast of Palm Springs; the palms are far back in the canyon where it narrows to a gorge. A different "Thousand Palm Canyon" opens on Coyote Creek above Collins Valley, and a different "Palm Canyon" penetrates into the San Ysidro Mountains. In this same quarter of the desert there were spotty occurrences of palms far up Coyote Creek Canyon and in some of the unnamed side-canyons. Other localities on the Water-Supply maps, in various parts of the desert, are Mountain Palm Spring, Palm Wash, Burnt Palms Spring, two waterholes forty miles apart each called Dos Palmas Spring (the better-known one easily reached by road from Mecca), Agua Caliente, still others. The palms at Figtree John's, if there is

still a place of that name, were planted by John himself. I had heard that there were a few palms in Martinez Canyon, but failed to find any; and I often heard vague reports of palms in unnamed canyons and at waterholes, mythical perhaps, which were beyond my powers to investigate.

To explore every last large or small canyon and rift in the Colorado Desert would have been impossible by any ordinary means, whereas the thing might be accomplished nowadays by helicopter. Jeeps and sand-buggies are good up to a point, but cannot overcome dry washes with vertical sides and certain other obstacles. When one considers that the Arizona station of sixty or more trees was not discovered until 1923, it seems highly probable that some California occurrences of only two or three palms may remain still hidden and unseen by man since the dawn of time. At least I like to think so.

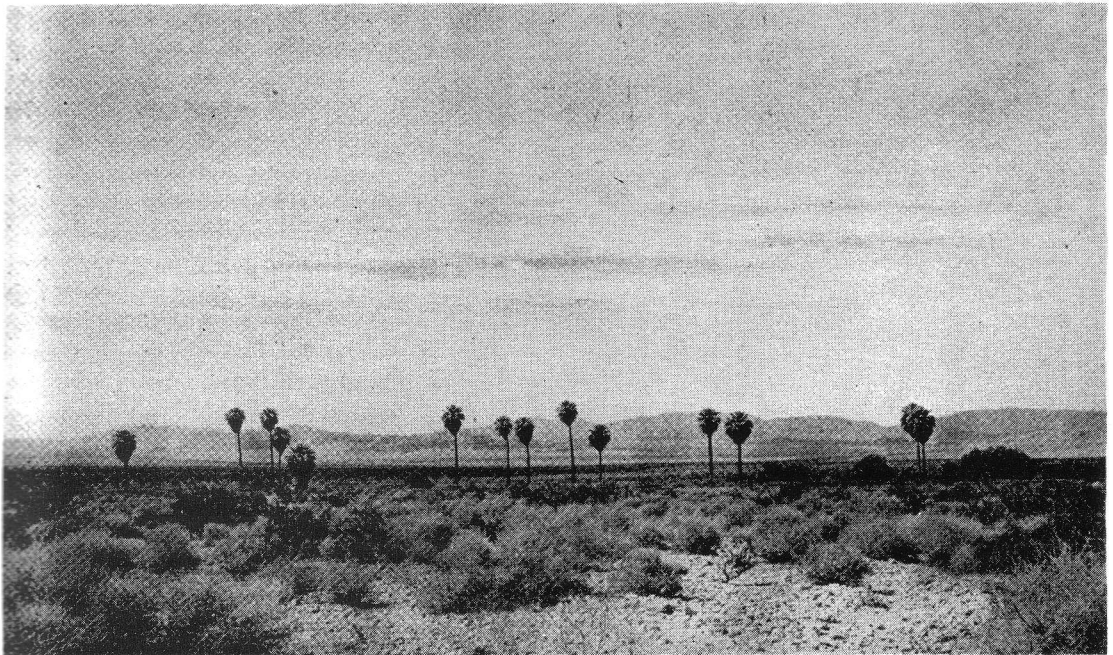


Fig. 31. Twenty-nine Palms as it appeared in 1924. Photograph by Smeaton Chase.