

Charleston Mountains Described as One of Nature's Grandest Paradoxes

Called A Yosemite In The Sagebrush

By PHILIP JOHNSTON
(In "Touring Topics")

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It is so delightfully written and so true to the facts that we are pleased to be able to give this lore of the Charleston Mountains wider circulation among Age readers.

A hermit kingdom where stately sentinels hold sway; an island of verdure teeming with animal life surrounded by a sea of gray desolation—such is the Spring Mountain Range, locally called the Charleston Mountains, of Southern Nevada. Magnificent in their isolation, the towering peaks dominate a vast expanse of unrelieved wilderness whose mysterious borders are far beyond the horizon that in the purple haze of distance.

The wasteland of the Western States is truly a land of paradox, a realm where life and death are subtly blended in an enigma that baffles solution. And here, truly, is the crowning riddle of creation, a domain which derives its interest from the fact that it is so completely incongruous to its surroundings, so exotic is its locale, contrasting as it does with the bare tones of the land which underlies it. Drought and perennial thirst rule its immediate environs, yet its highest eminence, known as Charleston Peak, is the home of eternal snow.

Some times of remote antiquity these mountains have played an important part in the existence of the few people who have penetrated the depths of their aboriginal canyons, or climbed their forested heights. Long before the first white settler made his appearance, Indians made their homes in the water worn caves, hunted the deer and mountain sheep that roamed over the grassy slopes, and gathered acorns and berries. Then came the Mormon pioneers to establish the first outpost of Caucasian civilization in the broad valley just to the east, on the site of Las Vegas (the fruitful plains). From the magnificent stand of timber they cut a few logs and saved a small quantity of lumber—sufficient to meet their need for modest homes.

The appearance of several small settlements along the Colorado created a ready market for lumber, and one Matthew Kyle built a sawmill in a canyon on the east slope of the range, which to this day bears his name. That he was a pioneer mill operator of remarkable ingenuity is shown by the fragments of machinery, carved from mountain mahogany, that he scattered about the decaying ruins of the old mill. When Kyle stopped a bullet during an argument more than sixty years ago, one of the most picturesque pioneers of Southern Nevada passed from the scene.

Came then the auspicious days of logging, when timber was in great demand. Other sawmills were erected, contributing much to the prosperity that followed. But in time these were abandoned, and the mountains no longer echoed to the stroke of the woodman's axe and the rattle of the saw. Save for an occasional hunter or nature lover the forests were unvisited, and reverted to the primordial silence that held sway before the coming of the white man. Today, a transcontinental motor highway skirts the base of this range, and hundreds of cars pass by, guided by travelers who little suspect that a few miles to the west lies magnificent scenery that is in many respects comparable to the renowned Sierra Nevada. Indeed, little is known of these mountains outside their immediate environs. The State in which they are located has long had a reputation for sterility, and it is a matter of great wonder, to many who have become familiar with its geography, that such a paradise for flora and fauna

exists within its borders. If Nature has been niggardly in the vast areas of desert that make up a large portion of Nevada, she has atoned, to a great extent, by her lavish gifts to a few mountain ranges that are practically terra incognita to the motoring public.

The Charleston Mountains consist of a single ridge forty miles long. Its western slope is gradual, but the eastern side is extremely rugged, broken by great chasms, and rising in colossal pinnacles and escarpments. Viewed from a distance in the oblique rays of the morning sun, some sections display all the ruggedness of the Grand Cañon, lacking none of its vivid color and bold outline. Here is a striking similarity to the lofty walls of a mighty city rising from the gray desert, reared to guard treasures that lie beyond them.

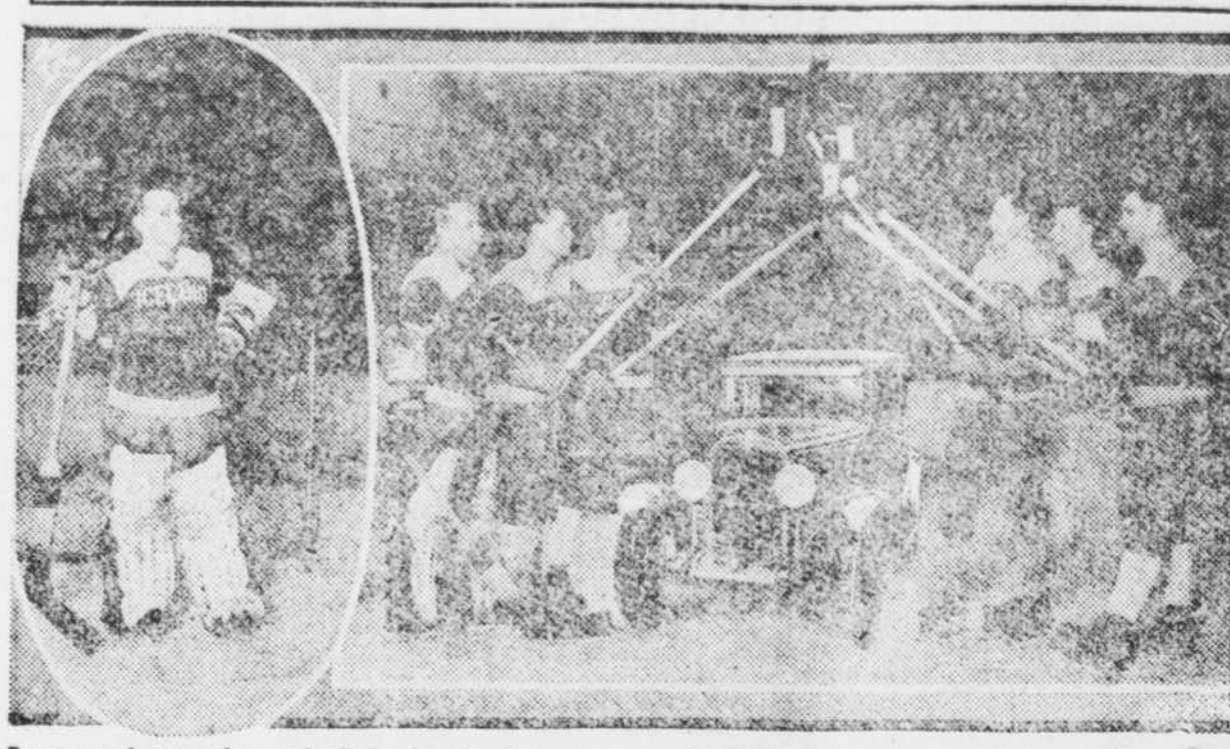
Only within recent years have scientists made a careful study of the plan and animal life of this remarkable mountain range, and this research has disclosed many startling facts. The most complete report published to date has come from the pen of Edmund C. Jaeger, well known California naturalist, who has devoted several seasons to a thorough exploration of the Charleston Mountains.

"The highly dissected country rock," he writes, "is largely metamorphosed limestone bearing recent fossils and everywhere the surface soil is very shallow. In spite of this many of the slopes and benches are well wooded with forests of conifers and aspens of large size. Below 9,000 feet altitude xerophytic shrubs such as mountain mahogany (cercocarpus), Gambel oak, service berry (Amelanchier), junipers and pinons predominate. So pronounced is the influence of the broad desert environment that Lower Sonoran plants and animals are dominant almost everywhere below the 6500-foot contour line. Due to the character of the rock, the steepness of the slopes and the small annual rainfall there are few streams even high on the mountain. There are no meadows, few cleavages and even springs are of infrequent occurrence. As a consequence one notes a general dearth of animal species which require frequent visits to water.

"Up to the present time the isolation and difficult approach to this superbly beautiful area have for the most part kept naturalists from making a study of its plant and animal life and little has been published concerning it. In 1926 the author published a preliminary paper on the flora in the Occasional Papers of the Riverside Junior College. During three weeks in the same year he visited the range for the third time and while making further botanical studies and collections made observations on the birds. These notes were then made and may be of interest as being the first list of birds from the region. The species listed here were with few exceptions observed wholly within the Transition and Boreal life zones. Further time spent in the field would doubtless add to the list, especially if studies were carried on during the vernal and autumnal seasons when migrants were passing through.

"The author was impressed with the dominant abundance of birds in the thickets of mountain mahogany. In the pinon belt and on the edge of the yellow pine belt occur islands of almost pure stands of rank growing mountain hoganies; veritable trees are there, often with several stems twelve inches in diameter and fifteen to

Hockey Season Closes



Last week saw the end of the ice hockey season, which has enjoyed a great run on the coast this past winter. Here are some of the players of the San Francisco team holding their clubs over the diminutive Chevrolet Convertible Coupe.

sixteen feet high. At all times of the day smaller birds congregate in their midst. Several species were feeding on the ripening seeds while others found there abundant insect food and shelter from predaceous species.

"A careful study of the plant life of the area indicates that here is a strange commingling of the Southern California mountains, the Idaho, Montana and Kiabab. The three floras, the middle and southern area of the nearest floral affinity is the Kaibab plateau area of Northern Arizona. A further study of birds may reveal that this mountain range is also a meeting place of birds from similar rather distinct geographic areas.

"The author wishes to append that no poisonous reptiles are known to occur in the forested areas of the Charleston Mountains. Rattlesnakes are found only in the Lower Sonoran desert borders. This knowledge adds immeasurably to one's feeling of security and comfort when one is climbing on hands and knees through thick brush or when scrambling over rocky ledges. I saw but a single snake, a racer, while in this region."

One of the most remarkable inhabitants of these mountains is a species of bluebird having a plumage of unusually brilliant color. For many months of the year they fairly swarm in the aspens and spruces of the mountain mahogany. Strangest of all is the fact that they appear at no other place in Southern Nevada. The Charleston Mountains comprise their domain, from which they do not wander afield, save in the seasons of migration. Concerning these birds the Indians have a curious legend, which they believe accounts for their presence throughout this mountain range in such vast numbers.

Many years ago, according to the story, two Indian tribes held sway over the regions lying west of the Colorado River: one was the Moapa Indians, who lived at the junction of the Virgin and the Muddy rivers; the other was the Charleston Indians, who made their homes in the mountains of that name. Of all aboriginal tribes, the latter was the strangest that ever existed; for its personnel was composed exclusively of men, none of whom had ever seen a woman. One of these mountain dwellers went on a hunting trip in the Sheep Mountains to the northeast, and while stalking the bighorn on the rugged slopes, caught a glimpse of the country beyond. Immediately he succumbed to a spell of wanderlust, and set out to explore the strange land. Continuing his journey toward the great river, he finally reached the domain of the Moapa Indians, and there for the first time beheld a woman. To the enraptured outsider she appeared as the most gorgeous creature in all the world, possessing a strange yet

potent charm that caused his heart to beat faster than it had ever beaten before. Upon discovering that fully half of this tribe consisted of these wonderful beings, his amazement was unbounded. Post haste he returned to his people and told them of what he had seen. After hearing the strange tale, the tribal chief called a council which lasted for many days. Over and over the explorer described his findings to the sages and priests, who listened in silence, and then plied him with questions. Much discussion followed, which crystallized the opinion that fate had perpetrated a monumental outrage on the Charleston Indians by failing to provide them with their share of these lovely creatures.

Under the direction of the chief, who held his rank by reason of his prowess with bow and arrow and spear, an expedition was organized for the purpose of raiding the Moapas and carrying off their women. Marching across intervening desert and mountains, the invading warriors made their camp early one morning, and returned to their mountain fastness with all the Moapa women. Within a short time, a large force of Moapa warriors, bent on punishing the kidnappers and rescuing their womenfolk, assaulted the natural citadel of the Charleston Indians, and a mighty battle raged for many days. So evenly matched were the two armies, that neither could gain an advantage over the other. The fighting was sanguinary, and hundreds of warriors fell on both sides, until the rocky passes of the mountains were strewn with the dead and the dying. At last all the warriors of both forces had been killed; only the two opposing chiefs remained to carry on the fight.

High on the crest of the range is an upthrust rock that has the form of a gigantic tortoise with its head protruding from its shell. To this day the traveler can discern it from the east side of the mountains, outlined against the sky. The nose of this great stone reptile towers above the summit of the mountain, and from its point is a sheer drop of several hundred feet. Up the back of the tortoise scrambled the embattled chiefs, uttering headless of their surroundings. Locked in a deadly embrace, they staggered to the nose, reeled, and plunged to death on the jagged rocks far below.

Of the two great tribes, no male members remained alive—all had perished in the great conflict. Heartbroken, the women fasted for days, and prayed to the Great Spirit to restore the warriors to life. Impressed by their poignant grief, the Great Spirit finally granted their request, and the fighting men were resurrected in the form of bluebirds, which to this day inhabit the scene of their epic battle.

As one roams through the canyons of these mountains, finding occasional remains of aboriginal

tribes, this fantastic and impossible legend seems to have a touch of verisimilitude; for the primordial violence, broken only by the cry of birds or the whispering of zephyrs in the pines, seems to be haunted by the spirits of departed inhabitants—those strange people whose story remains a mystery to men of science who have sought to solve the riddle of their genesis and their fate.

By reason of the limestone that comprises a goodly portion of the geologic formations of this mountain range, it was peculiarly suited to settlement by primitive tribes. Through the ages, these great rock masses were subjected to a leaching process by rain water and seepage, that produced caverns which, in many cases, attained considerable depths. Indeed, some of them appear to have been carved by human agencies because of the striking architecture that appears in their pillars and columns. Within these caves have been discovered pottery, spearheads, arrowheads and other artifacts that proclaim their former use as human habitations.

On the eastern slope of the mountain near the delightful oasis of Indian Springs lies a great laminated mass in which layers of asphaltum, black in color, alternate with gray limestone. This strange formation gradually indicates the manner in which the foundations of the Charleston Range were laid in remote times when the region was submerged in an ancient sea.

The extremely rugged character of these mountains interposes a barrier difficult of passage to many of its charming locales; yet several roads formerly used in logging operations make it possible for the motorist to penetrate into regions of exquisite scenic beauty. One of these branches from the Las Vegas-Beatty road near Indian Springs and leads to the site of an old sawmill at the northeastern end of the range. Another leaves the same road about thirty miles from Las Vegas, follows the bottom of Lee Canyon to the remains of another sawmill, and thence to the McWilliams Ranch, at an altitude of 6300 feet, where vistas of surpassing grandeur are found. The most accessible section of the mountains, and by far the most magnificent from a scenic standpoint, is reached by an excellent road through Kyle Canyon, which permits the use of high gear for a major portion of the distance from the main highway, a matter of twenty-two miles. This road, by which one ascends 5000 feet, is characterized by a remarkable series of transitions from a purely desert environment, through the juniper and pinon belts, to the realm where the stately pine holds sway. Here is found one of the most surprising and paradoxical enigmas of the arid Sagebrush State. The traveler who debouches from the highway and points the nose of his car toward the jagged skyline to the west has no hint of the arboreal paradise hidden in the chasm-riven fastness of those mountains.

Adjacent to this route are several examples of elemental action on stone, which often produces fantastic results. High above the road, towers a mass of conglomerate, the apex of which has been worn there to a few bearing a striking resemblance to a huge fowl. Only a few years ago a protuberant point of rock formed a perfect bench, which has weathered away. Long ago the pioneer travelers who passed through Kyle Canyon christened it "Chicken Rock," an appellation well suited to this interesting freak of nature. A few hundred yards south of Chicken Rock is another example of erosion, more spectacular in character, that illustrates the great versatility of this remarkable tool of Nature that has fashioned many of the outstanding scenic wonders of the world. Between two separate valleys is a narrow passage through the living rock, carved by rushing waters laden with sand and small stones. From a distance the cliff appears to be a perfect barrier, and the narrow gateway seen upon approaching gives no hint of the valley lying beyond.

Just below the pine belt is a terrible example of the ruin frequently wrought by human visitors—a large area of pinon timber that has been swept by fire. Several square miles have been so completely devastated that it appears as though an infernal blight had been cast over a portion of this once fair valley, depriving it of

all forms of life—an impression that is belied only by an occasional bird or chipmunk. Yet this dreary scene heightens the dramatic effect of the final entry into the magnificent pine forest a short distance beyond.

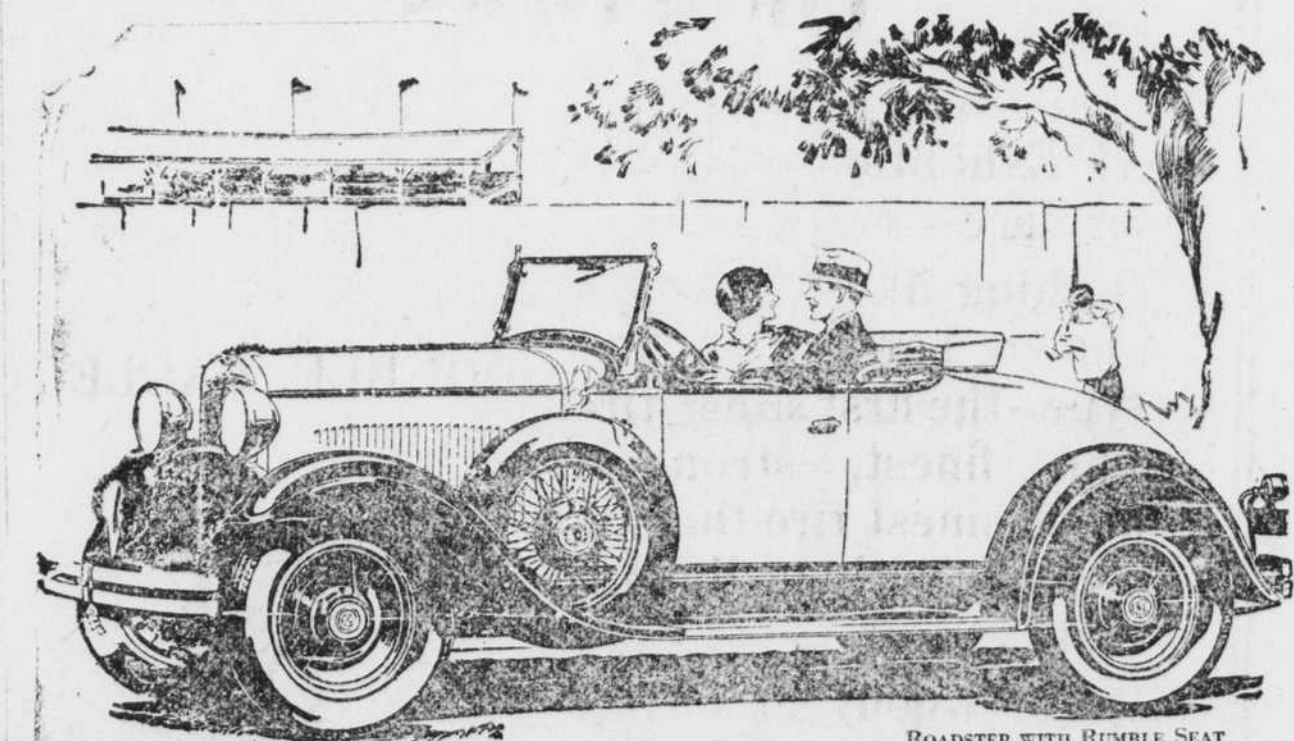
Kyle Canyon ends in a huge amphitheater bounded by the apex of the range, which culminates in the majestic snow-clad crown of Charleston Peak, 11,510 feet in altitude. Few mountainous regions in all the Western States offer vistas of such surpassing grandeur—pine-clad slopes merging into naked cliffs that rise to breath-taking heights, and then give way to more pine-clad slopes. Strange feelings are stirred in the breast of one who views the glories of this isolated scenic marvel, which has been called "The Yosemite of Nevada" and "The Switzerland of the West"—appellations which are by no means entirely unwarranted exaggerations.

Charleston Peak has long been a mecca for mountaineers who desire an excursion far from the beaten trails of tourist travel. Its very remoteness in a vast stretch of desert makes it supreme as a point from which to view the States, extending into four States, can be viewed. Like a huge relief map, the surrounding country can be studied in detail. Its remarkable topographic features standing out in sharp distinctness through a pristine atmosphere. To the west rise the Funeral Mountains backed by the lofty Panamints, which form the rock-bound rim of Death Valley. In the background the mighty Sierra Nevada describes a level horizon. To the east a succession of desert mountains and valleys billow away on a descending gradient, at the bottom of which flows the turbulent Colorado bounded by picturesque Fortification Mountain. Beyond, in the State of Arizona, the gradient ascends to other mountain ridges and valleys, then elm into the blue periphery of a far distant skyline. To the northeast, a portion of Utah is visible in the rugged terrain softened by the alighting haze of distance.

Unique is the Charleston Range, majestic in its wilderness-bound isolation. Vieing in scenic grandeur with the most beautiful of our mountains, its most potent appeal lies in the utter incongruity of its environment, and in the teeming flora and fauna that makes it so completely different from the surrounding wasteland.

DAZZLING DASH RECORD IS SET BY SCHOOL GIRL

CHESTER, S. C., May 2. (AP)—Suzanne Lucas, Chester high school girl, is looming as a candidate for a berth on the 1932 American Olympic team. This dashing dasher, or dasherette, is busy clipping seconds off high school track records. At the South Carolina state-track meet recently she did the 75-yard dash in 8.4-5 seconds to set a new record for American high school girls. Miss Lucas equalled the high school record in the 50-yard event, at a county track meet when she stepped off the distance in 6.1-5, to break the state record.



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