

# Charleston Mountains Described as One of Nature's Grandest Paradoxes

## CALLED A YOSEMITE IN THE SAGEBRUSH

In a magnificent amphitheatre of towering cliffs, hidden in a dense forest of noble pines and gleaming aspens, is Charleston Park, one of the most delightful natural mountain resorts in the west.

Lying at an altitude of 7,500 feet with the wooded slopes of Mt. Charleston with its snow filled canyons rising nearly 5,000 feet above it, the climate, even in the hottest months, is cool and pleasant. When the surrounding valleys are filled with the heat of a desert summer, Charleston Park is bathed with coolness of autumn. Leaving Las Vegas on a summer afternoon, an hour's drive compels one to seek a coat or sweater off comfort.

For fifteen years the Park has been operated by the owner, Senator E. W. Griffith. Recently a deal was made by him whereby the entire property is to be sold to a syndicate headed by H. E. and R. D. Miller, brothers, who plan a campaign of development which will require ultimately the expenditure of \$1,000,000.

Included in their plan is an improved highway costing \$30,000; a water system; a sewer system; electric lights and telephones; a high class resort hotel with lodges and all the refinements known to such mountain resorts.

The Age is pleased to reprint, by permission, the following from Touring Topics, which is so true in atmosphere and so delightful in style that we commend it to our readers as an important addition to the lore of the Charleston Mountains.

By PHILIP JOHNSTON  
In TOURING TOPICS  
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A hermit kingdom where stately conifers 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 lie far beyond the horizon, dim 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 chief interest from the fact that it is so completely incongruous to its surroundings, so exotic is its locale, contrasting as it does with sombre tones of the land which encloses it. Drought and perennial thirst rule its immediate environs, yet its highest eminence, like that of Charleston Peak, is the home of eternal snow.

Since 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 abysmal wooded 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 sawed 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 lie 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 stage.

Came then the auspicious days of mining, when timber was in great demand. Other sawmills were erected and contributed much to the prosperity that followed. But in time these were abandoned, and the mountains no longer echoed the stroke of the woodman's axe and the ribald song of the pioneer. Save for an occasional lumberer or nature lover, the forests were unvisited and reverted to the primordial silence that held way 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 borne a reputation for sterility, and it is a matter of great wonder, even 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.

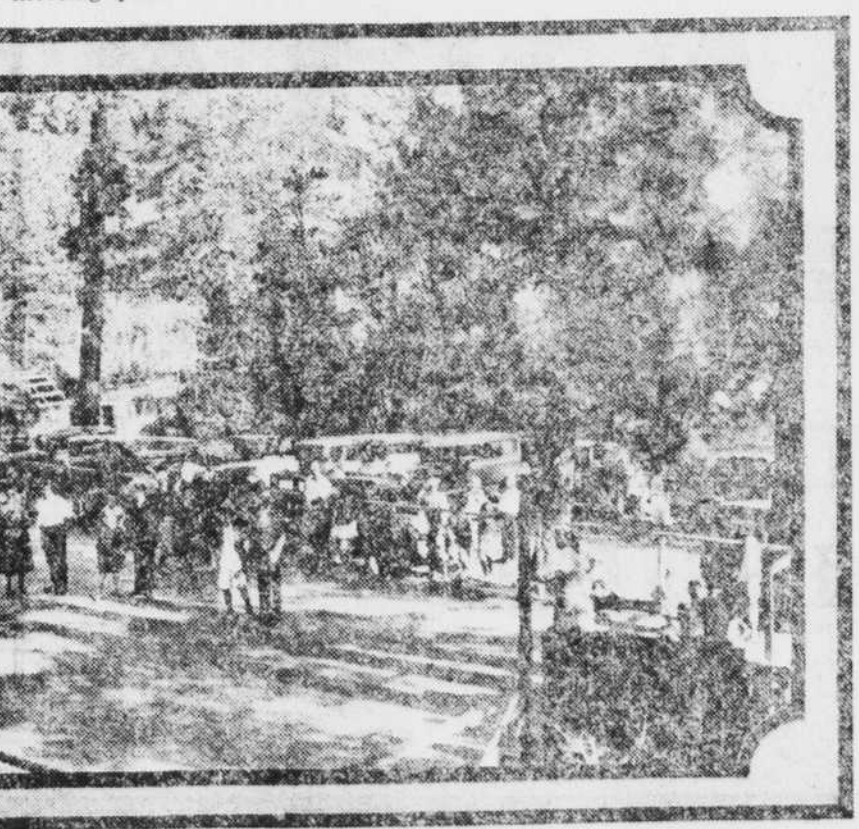
The Charleston Mountains consist of a single ridge forty miles long. Its western slope is gradual, but the eastern side is extremely



Slopes of Summer snow banking the face of Cathedral Rock, Charleston Park. Snow remains in sheltered places entirely through the summer.

grants were passing through. The author was impressed with the dominant abundance of birds in the thickets of mountain mahogany. In the pine belt and in the edge of the yellow pine belt occur islands of almost pure stands of rank growing mountain mahogany; veritable trees are there, often with several stems twelve inches in diameter and fifteen to eighteen 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 Kaibab. 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 the meeting place of birds from sim-



Dance Floor among the pines at Charleston Park. The Valley heat never penetrates to this sheltered mountain valley lying at 7,500 feet altitude.

lar 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

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 deep-seated, 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 articles 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 limestone mass, in which layers of asphaltum, black in color, alternate with gray limestone. This strange formation graphically 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 made 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 8,500 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 route, by which one ascends 5,000 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 detaches 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 were carried on during the vermillion age, the apex of which has been weathered to a form bearing a striking resemblance to a huge fowl. Only a few years ago a protruberant point of rock formed a perfect peak, which was weathered away. Long ago the pioneer travelers who passed through Kyle Canyon 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 blue belt is a terrific 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, 11,910 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 tremendous distances 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 rims of Death Valley. In the background the mighty Nevada describes a jagged 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 in another succession of ridges and valleys that melt into the blue periphery of a far distant skyline. To the northeast, a portion of Utah is visible, its rugged terrain softened by the alluring 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.



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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. Eventually 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 climbed the embattled chiefs, utterly heedless 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 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 silence, broken only by the cry of