

**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

**Traveling America (XIII)
Joshua National Park, Mojave National Preserve**

Traveling America (XIII)¹ Report One: Joshua Tree National Park

March 25 -28, 2013

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter, once again on the highways and byways of America. For this report, I am on the byways with Reporterette (Holly) and dog Milli. I have once again avoided the Interstates for the two-lane routes. The way from Palm Springs, California, to Hayden, Idaho, is shown in Figure 1. This report concentrates on the California segments, as indicated with the green circle in Figure 1. The Nevada and Idaho segments will be covered in later reports, as will Death Valley in California.



Getting in and Getting Out

The roads along this part of California are easily navigable, but a driver must pay close attention to the signs. Here are some hints: From Interstate 10, exit 168N, which takes you directly into the Joshua Tree National Park. Follow this road north through the park onto Rt. 62. Turn right onto Rt. 62 and be on the lookout for a very small sign (without a route number) that says, “Amboy.” Turn left to drive to Amboy. At Amboy, take Rt. 66 east, also tricky: look for a sign that says, “Mojave National Preserve” (also no route number). At the Kelso village in the preserve, veer left at a Y intersection, which will take you north, out off the preserve, and onto Rt.127, which will then take you to the Nevada border, and the subject of a later report.

As I have mentioned in an earlier essay, it is not the intent of the “Traveling America” series to explore each area in detail. The *National Geographic Magazine* has far more resources and talent than I. My hope is these short essays will give you a feel for typical scenes along a

chosen route, provide hints on roads to take or to avoid, express opinions on local hotels and other places, and offer light comments.

One reason I am posting this report about a supposedly barren and uninteresting part of America, one with a reputation of sparse vegetation and ample sand, is to describe an area of great beauty. I was surprised by the stunning scenery: The tall, snow-covered mountains, the diversity of plant life, and the peace of travelling on two-lane highways. There are roads with hardly any traffic, and they are devoid of sixteen-wheelers. If you are not in a hurry, try it. You will not be disappointed.

Interstates

On a motor trip across the country, the future President Eisenhower became annoyed by having to pause for too many traffic lights at street intersections. It was not a problem of having too many traffic lights between intersections. It was a matter of having few intersections and no traffic lights, except within the cities. Ike came to believe a nation needed an efficient set of roads to move its army around. His model was Germany's Autobahn.

A well-known encounter with America's "roads" occurred in 1915. A filming company made a movie about traveling across the country. It was called the *Three-Mile Picture Show*. The title was not about the length of the trip. It reflected the length of the film. Figure 2 shows the company's convoy as it made its way through the arid terrain of the southwest. No traffic lights, no intersections, no roads. The trip lasted four months.

What a difference a century makes. Figure 3 shows a traffic exchange located in the Los Angeles area. The problem now, at least according to the railroad industry and several air carriers, is that America has too many roads. Car manufacturers, the trucking industry, and oil companies take the opposite view: One cannot have too much of a good thing. To these industries, that "good thing" is pavement.

Anyway, more on this subject later. Let's hit the small roads and avoid the interstates. In so doing, we encounter fading images of Americana.



Figure 2.
America's highways: 1915



Figure 3.
America's highways: 2013

Joshua Tree National Park

Our first stop was the Joshua Tree National Park. If you enter the park from the south, stop at the Cottonwood Visitor Center. From the north, stop at the Oasis Visitor Center or the Joshua Tree Visitor Center. All three centers have exhibits, books, and Park Service personnel to help visitors become acquainted with the park.

In the mid 1800s, Mormon settlers came across this part of the country. They named this plant the Joshua Tree because its shape reminded them of a story in the Bible in which Joshua raises his hand to the sky while praying. Figure 4 is a photo of a typical Joshua Tree. Joshua had a lot of hands.

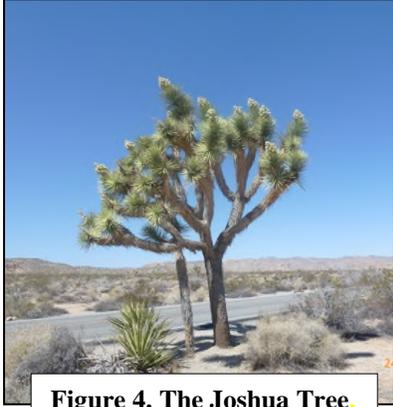


Figure 4. The Joshua Tree.

The Joshua Tree is not a tree. It is a member of the Yucca family. Its trunk is made of thousands of small fibers, which gives it great strength. The early settlers used the trunk for fence posts.

The Joshua Yucca has no annual growth rings, which makes it difficult to determine its age. Nonetheless, tree scientists tell us some of these plants live for thousands of years. I went online to try to find how they know this interesting fact. I could not find an answer. If you know, I would appreciate an email.

You will find it worth your while to stay a while in this park. It has many camping sites, old ranches, mines, and dams that can be visited to gain a sense of the past. Leave your motors! Ample bike trails are there for the taking. Of course, if you are not up to peddling, alternatives are welcomed in the park, as seen in the right photo of Figure 5.



Figure 5. Biking it.

One intriguing aspect of the terrain is shown in Figure 6. A park service guide in a visitor's center told me these rocks are called monzogranite. Imagine this: Even before the Jews and Arabs claimed that all those boulders in Jerusalem had been deposited there exclusively for one of them---but not both of them---in other parts of the world, other boulders were being deposited in a more secular way. (I got that off my chest.)

Millions of years ago, magma caused these rocks to be uplifted. As they neared earth's surface, cracks formed to create separate parts of the once intact bolder. The ascent of the pieces varied. Eventually, surface soil eroded, exposing the unusual formations seen in Figure 6.

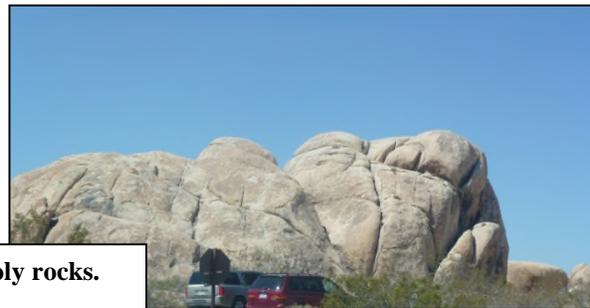


Figure 6. Non-holy rocks.

As you make your way through this part of America, either south to north, or north to south, try to keep in mind how the landscape changes, It changes gradually, but it is easy to notice if you are attuned. Roadside markers are placed at specific points to bring this fact to your attention, one shown in Figure 7.



**Figure 7.
Changing
Deserts.**

When I was growing up on the high plains of southeast New Mexico, I paid a lot of attention to the animals on the ranch and around our country town. I was a big fan of frogs, salamanders, and snakes ...or what my learned friends tell me are of the class *Reptilia*.

Flora? I could take it or leave it. I paid little attention to plant life, as I thought trees were the only self-respecting plant worthy of my attention. A tree could be climbed. A mesquite bush, a Yucca plant, or a cactus could not. Nor could the Joshua Tree, but this plant did not grow in New Mexico.

My interest in fish was very close to zero. Out of sight out of mind. The only live fish I saw as a child were catfish swimming around in mud tanks on the ranch.

I am happy to report my respect for flora has undergone a 180-degree change: desert flora is stunning.

Take a look at the three pictures on the following page. They are of the Cholla Cacti, a plant found throughout the Joshua Tree National Park. I have shown a sequence from the general to the detailed.

I like theme parks. I like to visit King's Dominion, Six Flags, and Disney venues, especially with children in tow. I morph into one of those little bodies and minds, as we take in our adventure together.

But given a choice, I prefer natural Cacti to mechanical boat cruises through artificial jungles in Anaheim, California. Someday, my younger readers, I hope the same can be said for you. If you end up later in life not appreciating the free gifts of nature and pay for cheap imitations, I fear those Tilt-a-Whirls at theme parks will do no more than make your life even dizzier.

It's time for us to move onto another leg of Traveling America (XIII).

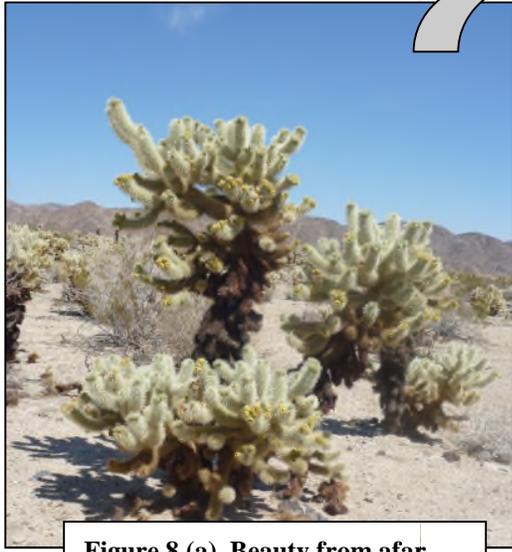


Figure 8 (a). Beauty from afar.

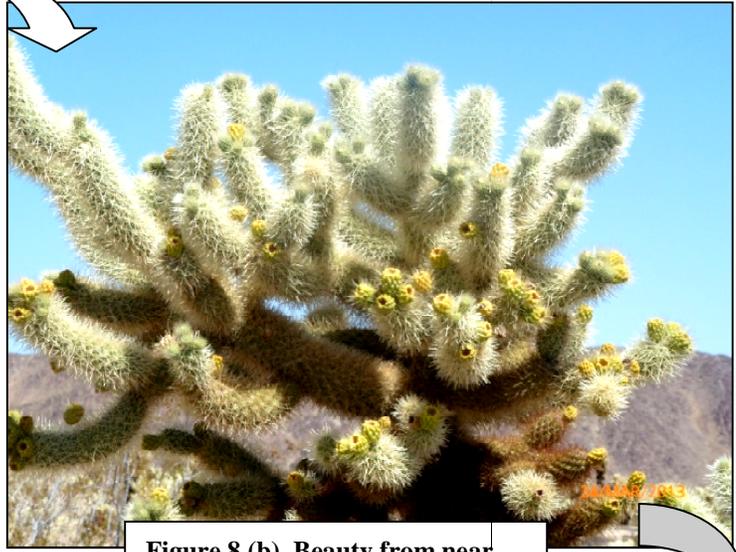


Figure 8 (b). Beauty from near.



Figure 8 (c). Beauty up-close.

To close this part of the report, I borrowed two photos, one from the National Park



Figure 9. At sunset.

Service Web site and the other from their visitors' handout. Figure 9 shows the Joshua Tree profiled in front of a sunset.

All of us have seen similar photos. The Redwood, the Oak, the Elm, they pose majestically on the front and center of the most magnificent stage in the world, that of nature.

These icons and images give us great pleasure. And for this magnificent piece of fauna shown to the left, tree scientists and tree psychologists are busy writing dissertations trying to explain the infatuation we humans have with the Joshua Tree. Its name is used in many religious songs and pop music.

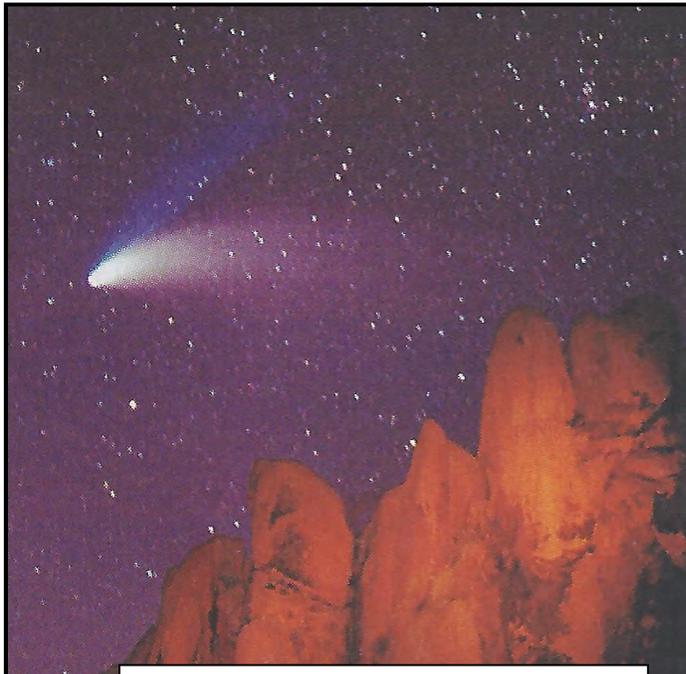


Figure 10. A comet through the cosmos.

I doubt Brigham Young and his Mormons would have raised their hands to this tree if they knew it was a Yucca. And how could all those songs about Joshua Trees make their way to the top ten lists if the songs were about Joshua Yuccas? It does not matter. Beauty, whatever it is called, speaks for itself.

We close this segment with the picture in Figure 10. It shows the Hale-Bopp comet making its way over rock formations in the Joshua Tree National Park.

Let's imagine we have camped out near these rocks. We are sitting around our campfire getting ready to turn in for the night when a campmate exclaims, "Look up there!"

No more words are needed.

Traveling America (XIII) Report Two: Bypassing Americana

March 25 -28, 2013

Many years ago, I read a book titled *Blue Highways*. It is an autobiographical book written by William Least Heat-Moon. From his name, I had assumed Mr. Heat-Moon was of Native American Indian descent.

Personally, I prefer the names Native American Indians bestow on their children to those we Non-Native American, Semi-Foreigners use. I could have been named He Who Resembles A Running Bear Black or something equally adventurous. Instead, I'm tagged with Uyless Delton Black. As a child, I went by my initials, U.D.

So, I did have an Indian-style name given to me by my superior classmates: Under Dog. Or, because I was small for my age: Under Developed.

However, all is not lost on us Former Natives Of Other Lands. We often acquire sidebar names from our friends and loved ones as we go through life, and they learn about our personalities. My squaw calls me He Who Sleeps A Lot Like A Dog.

What would be your handle? Ask your mate, friend, children, and others. I promise an interesting conversation will follow.

Anyway, I googled the book's title and discovered the publication date was 1976, and Mr. Heat-Moon was born William Trogdon. His name change brought forth recollections of my wanting to name our son something different. I opted for Coal Black, which was vetoed by Ms. Black. Golden Black was vetoed. Pitch Black was vetoed, eventually bringing an end to the two-person caucus.

Blue Highways is about the writer driving the back roads of America. That's one aspect of this *Traveling America* series. With this in mind, take a look at the map in Figure 1 of Report One to locate Amboy, California. The name Amboy identifies not much more than a nearly abandoned stop in the road, as seen in Figure 11. It was not always the way you see it in the photo. It was settled as early as 1858 as a passing point for travelers. Later, the National Old Trails Road passed through Amboy, then Route 66. At this time, the town had a post office, a church, a school, motel, café, and residences.

As the Interstate system came west, I-40 sealed Amboy's fate, as well as a segment of Route 66. Figure 12 shows I-40 passing several miles north of Amboy.² Why would anyone want to divert their travels to a town that was of the same ilk as thousands of other towns? Especially, if the town had no fast food chains. Who would want to eat food from a genuine short-order cook, when an assembly line of non-cooks could package-up a hamburger in less than half the time it would take using the old method to produce the sandwich? Fast food is called fast food for a reason.



Figure 11. Hello Amboy.

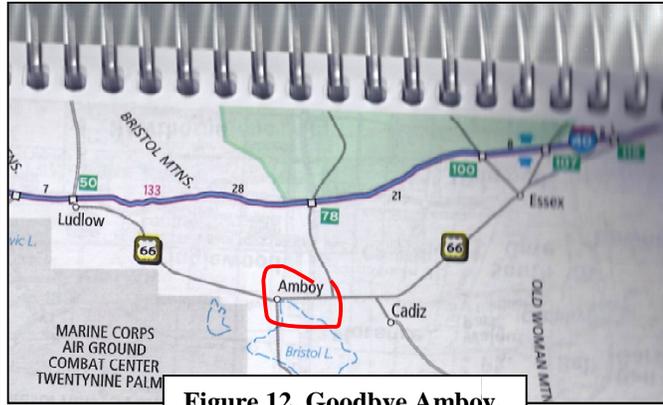


Figure 12. Goodbye Amboy.

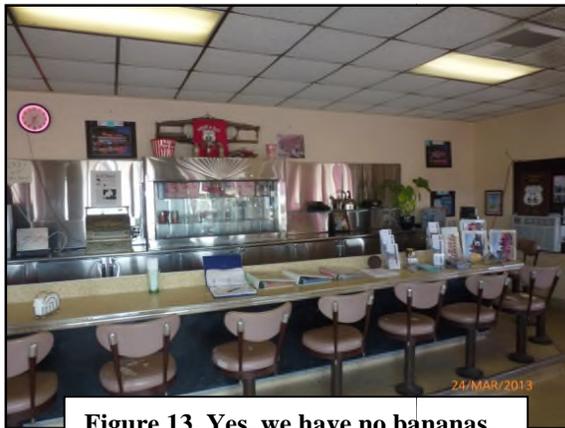


Figure 13. Yes, we have no bananas.

The service station at Amboy housed a small café, as seen in Figure 13. Just like the old times: stools, counters, milk dispenser...no customers, no short order cooks, no food. It was closed. The space was a tiny museum, reflecting a Route 66 café of days gone by. We had passed by Amboy on our way from Las Vegas (see the Rod Stewart report). I recognized the man behind the cashier counter as the son of the owner of the closed café, as well as the proprietor of two closed gas pumps, one shown here:



We struck up a conversation:

- Reporter, “We talked a couple months ago about your having a pretty good gas business during snowbird season.
(When Canadians come south for the winter, and go north for the summer.)
- Gas station person, “Don’t recall, but yeah, we keep prices low so the vans will stop off. Motorists often stop to use the rest rooms, and we sell gas and cokes to them.”
- “The café back there looks inviting.”
- “Most of our customers that come by have their own kitchens. Why drop by here and lose an hour or so just to eat? They can serve up a meal while getting where they are going.”
- “I see...A new meaning to fast food.”
- “I suppose so.”
- “See you next fall.”
- “Thanks for your business.”

After paying for the gas, I said goodbye to the Amboy man and headed for our car. My staff was seated, patiently waiting for me. They are accustomed to my diversions, and I thank them for their forbearance.



Nearby were several bikers. I started to walk over to talk with them, but decided Reporterette and dog Milli had waited long enough. Just before I turned around toward my car, I noticed an unusual building across the highway, shown with the red arrow in Figure 14.

Figure 14. Bikers and a building.

Walking across the highway, I saw that the building (Figure 15) was either a church or an abstract piece of art, rendered to symbolize the failings and falling of the Catholic Church. Another essay will express my views on the pedophile cover up, written from the objective viewpoint of a Southern Baptist, so I'll keep us on an upbeat for now.



Figure15. Symbol of disrepair?

- I returned to my gas station cashier acquaintance, "That church across the road. ...It is a church?"
- "Of course! What else? My dad tried to fix the steeple, but the roof is rotting, so he left it alone."
- "Could be taken as a piece of art."
- "Can't say, but the roof is rotting. That's the problem."

We left Amboy, a bit sad the café was closed. That it offered no food, even fast food, while a few miles north, I-40 stores were filled with the cornucopia of America's breadbasket...eh, make that sugarbasket.

And to take a short, somewhat serious diversion, I am in the camp that hopes alongside a McDonald's we can preserve an Amboy café here and there. Alongside a Holiday Inn, that there will be options for staying in a motel in which each room might have, gasp! different furniture. Alongside America's increasing homogenization, there will be places that maintain their diversity...if only for a change of pace, while we morph our lives and the objects around us into indistinguishable carbon copies.

Just outside of Amboy, we found ourselves once again enjoying the visual reinforcements of Mother Nature. A natural rock formation shown in Figure 16 became a common sight all way to the Mojave National Preserve.

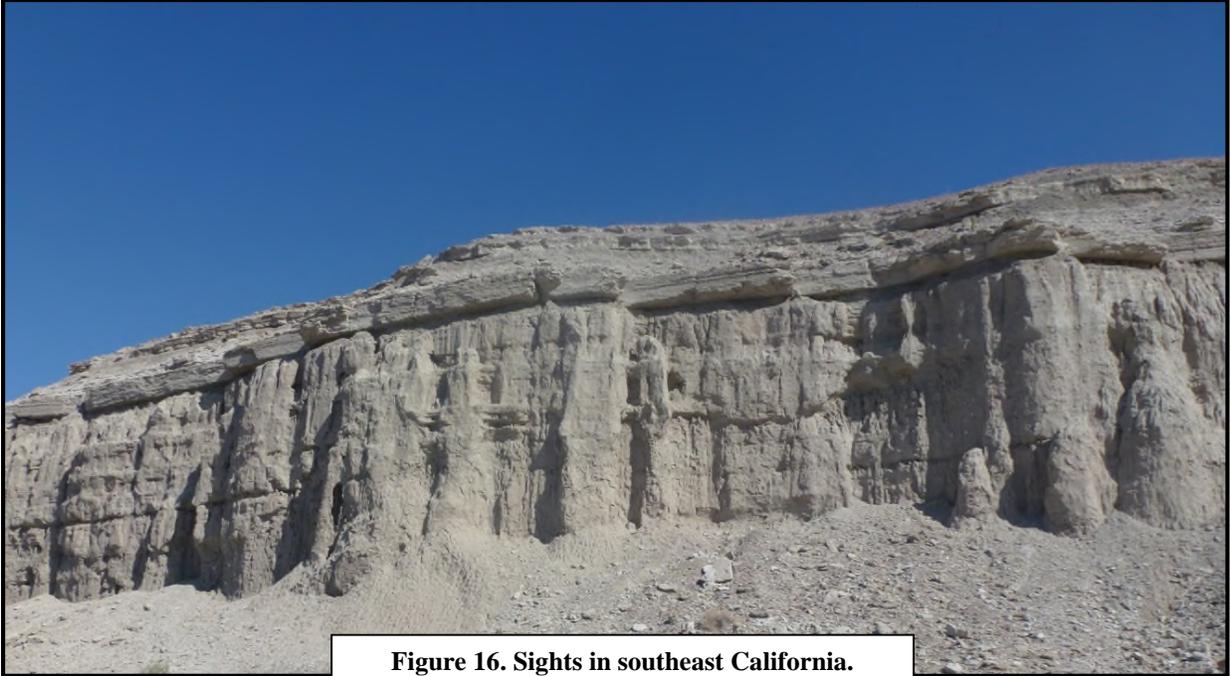


Figure 16. Sights in southeast California.

Traveling America (XIII) Report Three: Mojave National Preserve³

March 25 -28, 2013

Leaving Amboy, we took Route 66 east and looked for a sign directing us to the Mojave National preserve. We found it just after we passed under I-40.

The Mojave National Preserve is huge. It is the third largest member of the National Park System in the contiguous United States. It encompasses 1.6 million acres. The National Park Service tells us: "While you won't be able to experience it all in a single visit, taking the time to plan ahead will ensure a safe and rewarding adventure." As I drove and walked through this land, I imagined what it must have been like for Native Americans who lived in the area. Park guides and literature tell us they ate mesquite and roasted plant blooms, hunted rabbits, lizards, snakes, and turtles.

With some minor intrusions from very hearty settlers, these people had the place pretty much to their own until⁴

...gold fever struck California. The General Mining Law of 1872 permitted individuals to stake a claim on an area of land where a mineral deposit was discovered. Copper, iron, gold and silver mines rapidly became established in the Mojave. In 1883, on the eastern side of the Providence Mountains, silver was discovered in the Bonanza King Mine. In the 1940s, the Kaiser Steel Company extracted more than two million tons of iron ore from the Vulcan Mine, which was used in the construction of the Liberty ships during World War II.

We entered the preserve to once again take in scenes that left us...with the exception of dog Milli...congratulating ourselves for avoiding the interstate highways. The preserve is one of 1.6 million acres of solitude, courtesy of America's citizens--and what should be a revered American institution: The National Park Service. When you come across a person wearing this hat,



you have come across a treasured national resource.

During my trips through Joshua Tree and Mojave, I asked these graciously civil "civil servants" how the sequester was affecting their work.⁵ They responded that the cuts had not yet trickled down to them. But they knew some of their programs would have to be curtailed or eliminated. I asked (these conversations are paraphrased, taken from my notes):

- "Programs? I don't understand."
- National Park Service person, "We conduct walks and lectures (using Mojave as this example, as I did not write-down the Joshua Tree tours). Here is a list," as she handed me an itinerary.
- I asked, "If these programs are cut down...or eliminated, what will happen to the rangers who do all this work?"

- “We don’t know, sir.” Fittingly, she avoided getting into politics.

I will offer an answer to, “What will happen?” When the sequester hits Joshua and Mojave, their program cuts will mean cutting the rangers from their jobs: Years of training, years of caring for and nurturing our parks, years of taxpayers’ dollars down: Down the drain of politics because our so-called national leaders are afraid to lead.

I’ll move on. The “Traveling America” series tries to avoid politics. But I ask you at least to go on-line to Amazon or Barnes and Noble to look at the preface to my *The Nearly Perfect Storm*. It is devoted to the discussion of America’s broken political system, at least broken in comparison to forty years ago.

I apologize, somewhat, for my diversion. So, back on the road to one of the marvels of this part of the country, as advertised by a modest sign, seen in Figure 16.



Figure 16 A modest sign, advertising a wonder.

On frequent occasions (thankfully), we come across geographical wonders in this vast country. From an admittedly limited, but not totally circumscribed experience, I think one of these wonders is the Kelso Dunes. To a layman, they make no ecological sense. As seen in Figure 17, they seem to be plant-deprived, barren intruders into a vast land of fecund plants, flowers, and yuccas.

A Typical National Park Service Program

Fridays

Rock Spring Ranger Hike 3:00 pm

Join a park ranger for a one-mile walk and imagine life on the East Mojave frontier. Meet at the Rock House parking lot. Bring water (none available at the site) and dress for the weather.

Saturdays

Dunes Walk 11:00 a.m.

Meet at the Kelso Dunes Trailhead

Hike to the base of one of the largest and most extensive sand dune fields in the United States. Learn about the geologic forces that created Kelso Dunes and the mysterious booming sounds they make. Explore the unique adaptations of the plants and animals that call the dunes home. This easy 1/2 mile hike (one-way) will take 30-45 minutes. Please bring water and dress for the weather.

Petroglyphs: Rocks that Talk 3:00 p.m.

Meet at Hole-in-the-Wall Information Center

For thousands of years the Mojave Desert has been home to diverse cultures. The artifacts they left behind are both beautiful and mysterious. Discover how previous cultures survived in this harsh desert climate and the meanings of the rock art they left behind. This easy 1/4-mile walk (one-way) will take about one hour.

Evening Program - Various topics 7:00 p.m. (Programs are at 7:30 beginning March 23)

Hole-in-the-Wall Information Center

Gather behind the visitor center at the amphitheater and munch on some popcorn (provided) while a ranger talks of special places in this lovely, lonely desert. Meet inside if the weather is poor.

Sundays

Coffee with a Ranger 8:30 a.m.

Hole-in-the-Wall Information Center

Do you have specific questions or would you just like to chat with a ranger? Bring your own mug and share conversation and coffee with Ranger Greg.

Geology of the Mojave 9:00 a.m.

Hole-in-the-Wall Information Center

Hole-in-the-Wall's seemingly tranquil landscape has not always been this way. Great geologic forces have altered this area both subtly and abruptly. Discover the meaning behind the name and what carved the dramatic slot canyon that lies within it. This easy walk takes about an hour



Figure 17. The Kelso Dunes.

Here are excerpts from National Park Service brochures and Wikipedia:

Kelso Dunes is the largest field of eolian sand deposits (deposits created by wind) in the Mojave Desert. The dune field covers 45 square miles (120 km²) and includes migrating dunes, vegetation-stabilized dunes, sand sheets, and sand ramps. The tallest dunes rise up to 650 feet (200 m) above the surrounding terrain.



Figure 18. Elements of Monuments.

The photo in Figure 17 does not convey how unusual this area is. Figure 18, also from Wikipedia, is a detailed view of the “sand” that makes up the dunes. Not all “sand dunes” are made of sand. These are composed mostly of light-colored quartz and feldspar. Geologists think these small particles likely eroded from the granite-like igneous rock of the San Bernardino Mountains, located to the southwest of the dunes. This material is often used by humans to build monuments. For the Kelso Dunes, the monument was made by Mother Nature.

In our haste to meet some deadlines at home, we did not explore the dunes in any detail, only taking it in from the car. I will correct this mistake the next time I make my snowbird trip south.

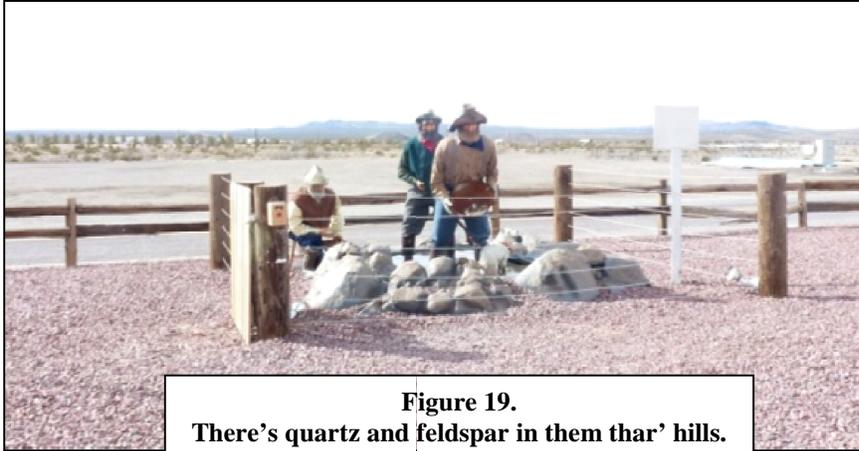


Figure 19.
There's quartz and feldspar in them thar' hills.

We would have liked to have stayed longer at this preserve, but it was time to move on, as we had business to attend to in Idaho. As we left the area, we came across other sights to remember. One shown in Figure 19, a nifty diorama, reflects the history of this part of the southwest. Mining was a big factor in its settlement.

We took route 127 out of the preserve and headed northward toward Nevada. The two-lane highway passes The Death Valley National Park to the west, the subject of another "Traveling America" story, if I have a chance to visit it before I kick the bucket.

Even a semi-comatose driver will not mistake entering the state of Nevada. I have entered the state from several different highways. Without exception, hugging the border between Nevada and the state just exited is a building housing some kind of gambling game (usually slot machines, sometimes a sparsely populated card game). Almost as numerous are signs advertising another game of amusement, shown in Figure 20.



The advertised house of fun is likely no longer fun, or for that matter a house. The sign advertising the brothel stands in front of an abandoned building, A house of supposed ill-repute, but one that silently tells of past pleasures and fond memories...we can hope, for both man and woman.

Figure 20. Times present and times past.

Thanks for traveling with me.



¹ Sources of figures are from this writer, Wikipedia, and National Park Service Brochures: Figures 1, 5, 6, 8, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 19, 20 from Uyless Black. Figures 4, 7, National Park Service, Figures 2, 3, 9, 10, 17, 18, Wikipedia.

² Thanks to Rand McNally.

³ We first visited Mojave several months earlier. I have taken the liberty of combining the first trip with this motor trek to Idaho. The dates for the visits are two. My recitations of the visits are one, accurately recorded, but altered in the time continuum.

⁴ "Mojave National Preserve," Wikipedia.

⁵ The arbitrary cutting of funds, courtesy of a President and Congress who suffer from ideological arrogance, resulting in legislative atrophy.