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Wrightwood Roots



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Joshua Trees Once Consumed by Paper Mills

from

"Bits'N Pieces," pp 53 & 54

by

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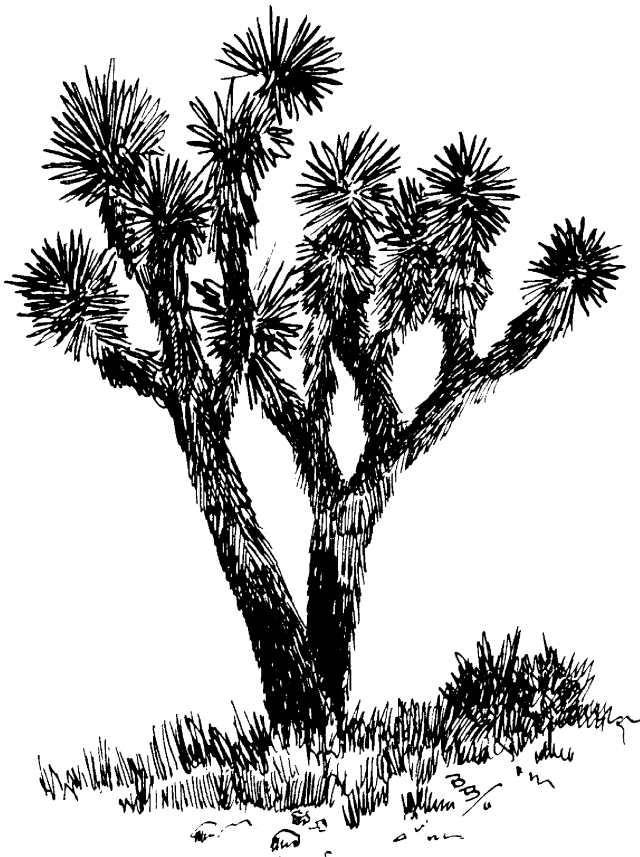
"Cactus" paper

white or brown paper.

"Cactus" paper, manufactured from a presumed unlimited supply of Mojave Desert Joshua trees was once shipped to England for newspaper use. East coast American presses also were clamoring for this publicized, strong, excellent quality

Judge Walker

In the 1880's, a San Francisco Bay area entrepreneur, reportedly a judge, debarked for England seeking funds to establish a Joshua paper mill in southern California's High Desert country. Judge Walker had discovered, he said, how to turn alleged "wasteland" cactus into usable paper and sought British money to finance his venture. In 1884, the Atlantic and Pacific Fiber Company of London, England, was formed electing English managers and a Los Angeles attorney.



British Pounds

Meanwhile, in San Jose, California, the Lick Paper Mill owners were scampering around getting control over other mills and expected to turn out Joshua paper exclusively. Production began when British pounds purchased 5,200 acres of Antelope Valley land, ripe with ancient Joshua's.

by Bill Bender

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Joshua Tree.



by Harvey Wilkins, Hesperian historian. m13257js.tif

These are the remains of the pulp mill used to crush Joshua trees for paper making.

Chinese Coolies

A small army of Chinese coolies were hired to trim the trees into two foot sections and haul them a dozen miles to the company pulp works.

Ravenna

Located in Soledad Canyon, near Ravenna, the modern name for “Old” Soledad City, a large wooden water wheel which once powered a mill used in crushing ore from gold, silver, and copper mines in the area, furnished the energy needed.

Pulp

Armed with steel cutting teeth, the mill’s non-stop, voracious appetite ate powerfully into the logs, shredding them into a starchy mush. This “pulp” was baled, placed on Southern Pacific Railroad cars and transported to Los Angeles Harbor, where it was loaded aboard London bound ships.

Discovery Was Overrated

Mildew occasionally occurred during the lengthy passage, causing profits to drop. The London Daily Telegraph and the London Journal published some newspapers made from High Desert trees, but the cost and inferior product resulted in the Fiber Company closing. Apparently, Judge Walker’s discovery was overrated.

66 Foot Joshua Tree

Shamefully, during this two-year commercial spree of denuding Antelope Valley of Joshua’s, the largest tree recorded, a towering six story (66 foot) giant, having a trunk five foot in diameter was ceremoniously hacked down.

Cloudburst Damaged Mill

Meryl Adams, author of the outstanding Soledad area book, “Heritage Happenings, tells of an 1886 local cloudburst severely damaging the mill with no efforts taken to repair the destruction.

Historian Tom Halle, residing several miles from the 112-year-old ruin, learned of the English company’s endeavors in 1955 while working at the McCarthy Ranch, where mill remains can still be found. Halle, volunteer protector of the site, guided this writer through a boulder and debris clogged stream bed leading to our finding pieces of the century old operation.

Mill in Sheep Creek Canyon

Frances Vinyard, a Mojave Desert aficionado since 1930, showed the author another pulp

mill site in a dry gully between Phelan and Wrightwood (mouth of Sheep Creek Canyon). She recalls visiting and finding evidence of its past life.

Battle Near Lucerne Valley

Perhaps this one-time mill was connected historically to a tale about an 1867 “white” and Indian battle near Lucerne Valley, California. The white men hid behind Joshuas firing rifles at their foe, who answered with flying arrows. Years later, in 1920, these trees were harvested and found almost worthless, due to the large number of bullets and arrow points embedded in them, causing the mill’s shredding teeth to break.

Evelyn Slack Gist

Evelyn Slack Gist, a writer for the Desert Magazine, now defunct, in 1952 sought out the ruins of the Ravenna Mill, abandoned in 1890. In a fine, documented story, she told of the book, “In Wildflowers of California,” written by Mary E. Parsons and published in 1913, telling of Joshua trees used in making paper

Mrs. Gist related finding additional data at the Congressional Library, Washington, D.C., and the Agricultural College in Corvallis, Oregon.

From Corvallis she secured an 1891 publication telling of an 1871 mill on the Colorado River using yucca stems and leaves to produce pulp. Twenty years later, work here was also stopped after only slight success.

The Gist article further told of finding in 1933, more on Joshua milling in “Western

Wildflowers,” by Charles Francis Saunders. In part, Saunders wrote, “The trees seemed to be of no value until someone thought of them as possible paper stock.”

Now, Yucca Trees Protected By Law

Today, Joshua buffs jealously guard these “Yucca” trees, which continue to titillate most with their grotesque beauty.

Thankfully, these rare, treasured and growing only on the western high desert oddities are now protected by strong laws and strict regulations.

Why?

This writer finds it strange that vast forests of Canadian and eastern trees, much closer to England, weren’t sought first for pulp purposes, and what tales Judge Walker must have told regarding Joshua trees to make the English invest large sums in the Mojave Desert, half the world away (the Panama Canal wasn’t built until 1914).

Good Paper??

One thing is sure - had Joshuas made good paper, there wouldn’t have been any left by now for this generation to wonder over. Please note: this book isn’t printed on Joshua paper.



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