



CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF THE SPRING MOUNTAINS NATIONAL RECREATION AREA

American Indian Groups

Recent studies of the Great Basin region, which includes the Las Vegas and Pahrump Valleys, have begun to show that people may have lived in this area as far back as 12,000 to 13,000 years ago.



Paiute encampment 1903

When people first began to arrive here, the environment was far more wet and lush than the world we know today. Lakes, playas, and marshes all existed in the area and this abundance of water led to a much greater variety of plants and animals that the people who lived here used. As the environment of the Spring Mountains changed over time, a unique physical history developed that helped it evolve into the fascinating place it is today. As the water began to dry up around 10,000 years ago, the Spring Mountains became isolated from the Great Basin mountain ecosystems and slowly the mountains were surrounded by the drier Mojave Desert. As it became warmer and drier, the mountain range also became isolated biologically. The valley floors surrounding the range act as a barrier to most plant and animal migrations, and thus many of the plants and animals found here

today are either relic species or are new or evolved species found only to exist in this area.

As the physical environment changed, so did the ways that people lived and used the land. American Indian groups have had a continuous presence in Southern Nevada for thousands of years and believe that the Spring Mountains are where their people were created. Because of this, the mountains are considered to be sacred and very special to them. The groups that lived in this area include the Southern Paiute and Chemehuevi, but the area was also visited by the Colorado River Yuman of which the Mojave figure most prominently, as well as the Western Shoshone (most notably the Timbisha or Panamint group of Western Shoshone). Consideration of all these Native American groups is important since the people who lived in the area were very mobile, occupying large areas in their seasonal subsistence rounds and having large exchange networks.

Most activities were undertaken by individual families, but many families of the same band or group often gathered together for communal deer hunts, rabbit drives, and celebrations. Hunting and gathering was very important. Each season had its own set of activities. Spring was an especially busy time of gathering wild plants and hunting deer and rabbits. Late spring and early summer was the time for tilling and sowing farmlands with corn, squash, beans, pumpkins, and sunflowers. Plants, seeds, and roots were gathered throughout the summer and especially during the fall. Mesquite, screw beans, agave, and pine nuts are examples of very important plant foods. Pine nuts were the essential food stored for winter use. Women were mostly responsible for gathering plants, while the men hunted. Deer was the most important large game



Southern Paiute playing "stick game"

hunted, and the fall was the most important hunting season. Small game was hunted throughout the year; rabbits and rodents were significant. The Southern Paiute moved to the plateaus and mountains in the fall. Stronger and more substantial houses for the winter were also built in the fall. During the winter, a main activity was the manufacture of various implements such as baskets, cordage, and clothing. Winter was also the time for telling stories. Songs and dances were very meaningful, often ceremonial, and part of inter-band celebrations

Historic Period of the Euro-Americans



Las Vegas 1895

The Historical Period begins with the arrival of Euro-Americans in Southern Nevada. During the Spanish Exploration Period (AD 1500s –1700s) and Mexican Period (AD 1822 – 1846), Euro-Americans passed through the region but did not settle there. Much early history centers geographically on the Old Spanish Trail and the Las Vegas Springs. The springs of Las Vegas were very attractive to early passers-by. Traders, explorers, and emigrants regarded the Las Vegas Springs as one of the most welcome sights along the entire length of the Spanish Trail.

The first documented entry into the Las Vegas Valley was by Antonio Armijo in 1829, when Armijo and his caravan journeyed from Santa Fe, New Mexico and detoured into the Las Vegas Valley in efforts to trace a new route to the *Pueblo Nuestra Señora LaReina De Los Angeles*. It is thought that the group went to Cottonwood Springs and then over the Spring Mountains and into the Pahrump Valley. More exploration occurred between 1830 and 1844, when the area was visited by explorers Jedediah Smith, John Fremont, and Kit Carson. By 1852, the Spanish Trail had become a mail route, and in 1854, Congress legislated its development as a military road.

While small ranches or settlement existed in the area, the first large permanent Euro-American settlement of Las Vegas occurred on June 14, 1855 when Mormon Pioneers founded a town at the current location of the Mormon Fort in downtown Las Vegas. The Mormons gave the town the name of Bringham, after President William Bringham, who was the leader of the Mission. Prior to the arrival of the Mormons, however, the area was known as Las Vegas de Quintana, which means “the Meadow of Quintana,” after a Spanish landowner who had established a ranch in the area.

As more people moved into the area hoping to get rich by either mining or ranching, small communities began springing up in the surrounding area. Kyle, Lee, and Clark Canyons were the most important timber resource areas. Several sawmills, including Twin (at Sawmill Spring), Clark, and Kyle Sawmills, supplied lumber to Las Vegas, Pahrump, Amargosa, and Mesquite Valleys and to mining camps at Tonopah, Beatty, Rhyolite, Johnnie, Stirling, and Potosi. Mining was a very important part of the Spring Mountains history. Many small mining operations were located throughout the mountains, the oldest being the Potosi mine, which was the first hard rock mine in Nevada.



Kiel Sawmill



Moffards Sawmill



Entrance to Kyle Campground 1934

Recreation Development

Recreation also began to play an important role in the Spring Mountains early on, and in 1906, the Charleston Forest Reserve (149,165 acres) was established through Presidential Proclamation to deal with the southern portion of the mountain range. In 1907, the Vegas National Forest, which included the northern portion of the Spring Mountains and Sheep Mountain Range (a total of 195,840 acres), was created. The Reserve and the Forest were then combined into the Moapa National Forest in 1909. The Moapa National Forest was then combined with the Toiyabe National Forest in 1915. In 1916, the Moapa Division was transferred from the Toiyabe to the Dixie National Forest, and in 1918, the Sheep Mountain Unit and a large portion of the Charleston Mountain unit was eliminated. Several more changes occurred over the next few years until in 1993, Congress designated the district as the Spring Mountains National Recreation Area, one of only 16 such areas in the country.



Early campers



CCC Wading Pool at Kyle Campground



Flag raising ceremony at CCC Camp at Mt. Charleston 1935

The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) was very instrumental in helping to develop the Spring Mountains. Many of the recreational facilities that are still in use today were built by the CCC including many of the roads and campgrounds located in both Lee and Kyle Canyons. The CCC was initiated during the Great Depression in 1933 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to help revive the languishing economy. The plan put half a million unemployed young men ranging from 18 to 25 years old to work in forests, parks, and range lands. The program lasted until the United States involvement in World War II.

The CCC started their work in the Spring Mountains in 1933 when they moved into Kyle Canyon and Deer Creek in 1933. During their half-year stay in the Mountains (the winters were too severe), the CCC men would construct public campgrounds, roads, trails, and waterlines. They also built most of the administrative buildings that exist on the mountain today. The Kyle Canyon Water System was completed by the CCC camp in 1940, as was the Fox Canyon Trailer camp in 1942.



CCC constructing Harris Springs Road

The Works Progress Administration, or WPA (renamed in 1939 to Works Project Administration), came into existence in 1935 and was also part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. It provided jobs to millions of unemployed individuals. The program employed Americans for eight years, and the Spring Mountains benefited from their labor. The Spring Mountains WPA camp was in Lee Canyon, and a notable project was construction of the Harris Spring Road, considered significant for both its scenic value and its role in fire protection. Even President Roosevelt and his wife took an inspection tour of Harris Road's construction in the fall of 1935, although the work was later stopped "in favor of the more important work to be done in Lee Canyon". Other projects include the cutting

of timber that had been damaged by pine bark beetles in the Spring Mountains in 1935, construction work on a Children's Camp in Lee Canyon in 1936, construction of the Lee Canyon Guard Station completed in 1942, and construction of a large portion of the Lee Canyon-Clark Canyon road until the start of World War II.

Recreation activities in the Spring Mountains increased dramatically with the construction of Hoover Dam and the growing population of Las Vegas. The Forest Service began issuing special use permits in 1935 for summer homes in Rainbow Canyon. The following year, the Forest Service constructed the first ski facilities in southern Nevada, just north of a lodge on Mt. Charleston. Forest Supervisor Alonzo Briggs realized this was just the beginning. In 1939 he wrote, "We may expect 10 to 15 thousand recreationists to use the area each year. Winter sports are developing rapidly and Lee Canyon rather than Kyle Canyon will be the center of these sports activities."



Kyle Ranger Station 1940

A new user of the district arrived with America's entry into World War II. In June of 1941, the Army Air Corps (AAC) established the Las Vegas Army Gunnery School near the city. To counteract the oppressive heat of Las Vegas, the AAC used the former CCC camp adjacent to the Kyle Canyon Ranger Station as a rest camp for trainees. The AAC used the camp, known as "Camp Charleston," for the duration of the war and abandoned it sometime after October 1946. The school, renamed Nellis Air Force Base, was reactivated in 1949 to train fighter pilots heading to Korea.

Conclusion

Throughout history, the Spring Mountains have played a pivotal role in how people have lived and worked in this area. Originally they were seen as an unending supply of resources, but today it is recognized that the resources will only last as long as we protect them.