

The Nature Man

Mysteries Locked In San Andres

By ART HALLORAN

THE isolated mountain ranges of the American Southwest have been veiled in mystery for hundreds of years. As Europeans swept from the East Coast to the shining Pacific these dry ranges were bypassed. They were refuges for game and Indians. Outlaws hid in their box canyons. Treasures taken from westward trekking pioneers were cached in these castellated sierras.

Here is the story of one of these, the San Andres Mountain of southern New Mexico. These mountains are about 75 miles long and less than 6 miles wide. They extend north from San Augustine Pass northeast of Las Cruces. They form the western back drop for the White Sands National Monument near Alamogordo, N. M.

Today they are within the White Sands Missile Range. They also include the San Andres National Wildlife Refuge, which was created in 1941 to preserve a very few Desert Bighorn sheep that had sought these steep and inhospitable

mountains as a final home away from an encroaching civilization.

Persistent legends tell of early Spanish gold at the southern end of the range near the present town of Organ. As late as 1859 these mountains were little known. Old maps call the range Sierra de Caballo or Sierra Soledad. The San Andres Mountains, named in honor of Saint Andrew the Apostle by early Spanish settlers at the tiny village of Las Padillas, form the western edge of the Tularosa Basin.

Early day Mexicans secured salt in this basin. In the spring a small party would be sent to this isolated plain to dry out salt blocks. In the fall a caravan of heavy wooden-wheeled oxcarts would arrive. Loaded with salt, the slow-moving expedition would return to Old Mexico. Old carreta tracks between the mountains and the White Sands National Monument have been found. These long wavy lines show that the wooden wheels were worn on their axles. Rains washed mountain silt

into the ruts, and the sun baked the mud a different color, making the old tracks easy to find. One of these



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cart complete with cottonwood wheels can be seen today at the nearby National Monument.

The old salt trail did not follow the mountains closely. The salt seekers wanted time to prepare for raiding Apaches who would come screaming from the hills to kill and plunder. As late as the 1850s and 1860s there were numerous clashes in the San Andres region between local militia and Indians.

Today, as you sit in quiet, flower-scented patios the old folks recall in soft-spoken Spanish their pioneer ancestors who wrested this country from

the Indians. Bitter feuds developed. The echoes of these life and death struggles can still be heard.

Local people whisper of old mountain legends, yet to be proved but fascinating. There is the story of a bronze church bell cached in a cave under a brush-screened ledge. The bell is said to have been hidden from raiding Apaches. It has never tolled the faithful to evening services. Then there is the legends of Spanish armor in a long forgotten cave. Who knows?

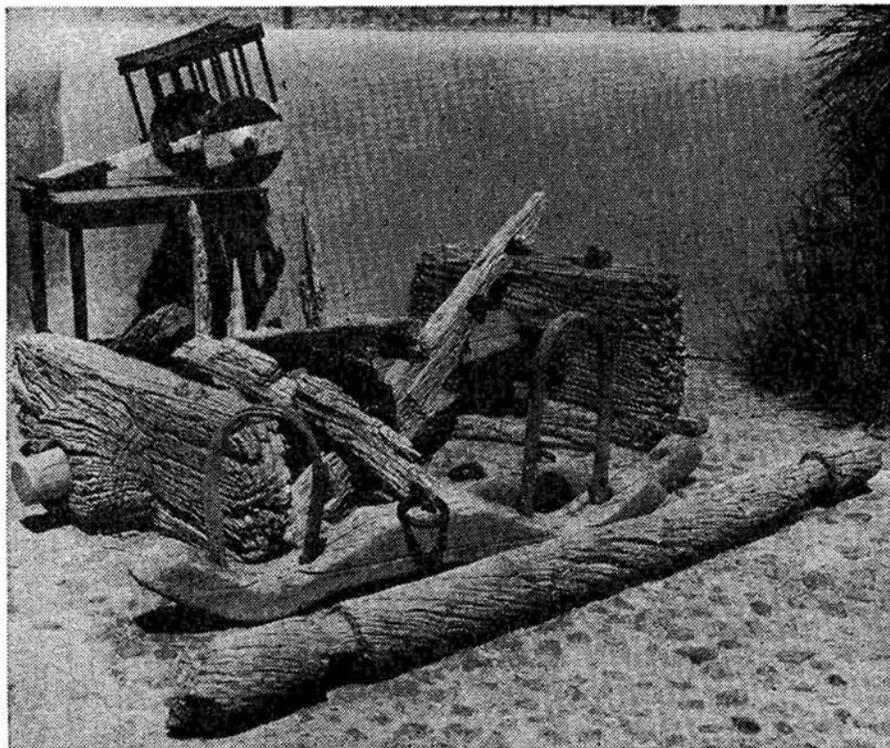
Old Indian campsites and mescal pits (where cactus hearts were baked for food) show that Apaches and perhaps others before them hunted in the San Andres Mountains. Spoons and ladles made from mountain sheep horns hint that tribesmen came to the mountains in search of bighorns. Under protection, these majestic native sheep have been saved from extinction.

In the 1880s cattlemen moved into the San Andres Mountains. One of the first operators, the Wildy outfit, ran black cattle in the southern reaches. These hardy beasts grazed all the way to the top—they did not see people very often. Eugene Manlove Rhodes wrote of the early day rawhide-tough San Andres ranchers.

Prospectors also roamed these hills. Little is known of these men. They ate venison and sheep and kept to themselves. In the early 1900s a lead mine and mill were constructed in San Andres Canyon. Woodcutters from Las Cruces were hired to cut cedars in nearby San Andrecito Canyon and haul them to the mill.

During the early 1900s, naturalist J. H. Gaut collected birds and mammals in the San Andres Mountains. He reported bears in the range. The bears are gone but mountain lions can still be found. During the 1920s, biologist J. Stokley Ligon located the San Andres sheep and brought this remnant band to the attention of those who wished to save the bighorn as a precious heritage of living history.

If you pass this way on vacation, look at the towering mountains west of the White Sands National Monument and ponder the mysteries still locked in their canyons.



This old carreta (ox cart) was found on the White Sands National Monument in 1936. It had been uncovered by the wind. The remnants are on display at White Sands National Monument headquarters near Alamogordo, N. M. The ox yoke was added to make the display more complete. The model shows an assembled, wooden wheeled cart. (National Park Service Photo)