

## ADVERTISING AND AN ACCIDENTAL CLASSIC: *ILLUSTRATED SKETCHES OF DEATH VALLEY*

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### ABSTRACT

*Illustrated Sketches of Death Valley* (1891) originated as a hastily-written series of journalistic sketches of our Western borax deserts. They were written on commission to supplement their author's income. Conceived as a means subtly to promote the borax industry, the *Sketches* in time won unintended recognition as a classic source for their subject. They also assumed unforeseen importance as an illustration of the role of advertising in America's changing economy

The idea of the West is one of the most prominent and durable features in the landscape of the American imagination. Even now, when we are accustomed to news of progress on the construction of an international space station, space shuttle launches, and mind-boggling new discoveries about the nature of the remote recesses of the cosmos, it remains vital. The conditions of urban, post-industrial life have made it less compelling than it was in an earlier era. Yet it still summons recollections of hopes for a fresh start in a New World. It stirs memories — all too often romanticized — of frontiersmen courageously pushing ahead and bringing civilization to a vast emptiness. Each generation of pioneers left its own contribution to our imagined West. So we may consult the records of those who pushed across the Appalachians into the Ohio Valley and the Old Southwest. We may journey with Meriwether Lewis, William Clark, and their Corps of Discovery to the Pacific shore, with Zebulon Pike to the sources of the Mississippi and the Arkansas, with Stephen Long across the Great Plains to the peak that now bears his name. We may read the journals of beaver trappers, Santa Fé traders, travelers on the Oregon trail, and '49rs and '59rs seeking gold in California and the Colorado Rockies. We can trace the paths of Latter Day Saints trekking up the Platte River Valley, across South Pass and southwestern Wyoming, and down Emigration Canyon into the valley of the Great Salt Lake to establish their Zion in the wilderness. We can also in our minds, if we wish, join a thin and irregular stream of souls braving fierce heats to trace faint trails in the searing deserts of the Southwest.<sup>1</sup>

John Randolph Spears' *Illustrated Sketches of Death Valley and Other Borax Deserts of the Pacific Coast* stands squarely in the tradition of these important accounts. This is ironic, for his book was an unintentional, even an accidental, classic. Spears did not aim, as we shall see, for it to rank among his more important works. In fact he and his family thought so little of it that it was unmentioned in a published sketch summarizing his life's accomplishments and in the obituaries reporting his death. Spears was not himself a pioneer, but a newspaper reporter and feature writer who redirected his au-

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thorial efforts shortly after reaching his mid-forties. He wrote *Illustrated Sketches* at the invitation of a friend and associate. He did so without any prior contact with, direct interest in, or special previous knowledge of his subject. He wrote it as a commissioned assignment, to augment his income. The book's purpose was nothing more nor less than to serve as a vehicle for advertising borax products. How it figured in Spears' career and in time earned respect as one of the essential sources for Mojave Desert and Death Valley history is a fascinating story.

Spears was born to Richard Cary and Louisa (Spear) Spears in Van Wert, Ohio, on April 21, 1850. By the time he was twelve years old he was working in the printing office of a country newspaper. During the Civil War years he quickly mastered all aspects of newspaper-making. In July, 1866, after the great conflict between the states had ended, he decided to pursue a maritime career and entered the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis. Although he ranked within the top third of his class, he concluded that he was not destined to be a naval officer and resigned after three years of study. He afterward returned to journalism.

By 1875 Spears was in East Aurora, New York, editing the *Advertiser*. Between 1876 and 1882 he edited the *Silver Creek Local*. After a stint as a reporter on the *Buffalo Express* he made his most important career move, accepting a post as a reporter on Charles Adams Dana's *New York Sun*. He remained with the *Sun* for fifteen years, earning praise from managing editor Chester Lord for helping to make it the "greatest newspaper ever printed." In addition to crafting regular news stories, Spears traveled widely to write special interest articles and series for the paper. His journeys took him to the Tennessee mountains, Arkansas, Greenland, Death Valley, Patagonia, Mexico, and Central America. The most-respected book of his life-time to result from his travels was *The Gold Diggings of Cape Horn. A Study of Life in Tierra del Fuego and Patagonia* (1895). In 1898 he abandoned newspaper journalism and turned exclusively to writing articles for magazines, and books. The latter ranged from at least one novel to historical studies of Anthony Wayne and David Farragut, the United States Navy, the Mississippi Valley, the American slave trade, the American merchant marine, and New England whalers. He also earned a reputation as an expert on yachting, publishing extensively on that subject in periodicals. Spears died in Utica, New York, on January 26, 1936, at the age of eighty-five, after a long struggle with heart disease. His wife, Celestia (Smiley) and sons Raymond S. and Eldridge A. Spears survived him.<sup>2</sup>

J. R. Spears came to write about Death Valley through the agency of a friend and fellow reporter at the *New York Sun*, Stephen Tyng Mather. Mather later earned renown as the first Director of the National Park Service. That, however, lay in the future. For the moment what mattered was that he was not only a member of one of New England's most distinguished families, but the son of a key figure in the borax industry. His father was Joseph Wakeman Mather, who had been a New York commission agent for the California borax industry from its origin in 1856. The elder Mather had for a half dozen years been allied with the dominant figure in the borax industry, Francis Marion "Borax" Smith, first as a principal stockholder in the Pacific Borax, Salt

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and Soda Company, formed in 1886. Since its incorporation in 1890 he had served as vice president of the Pacific Coast Borax Company. While important for his contacts with Eastern markets and sources of capital, J. W. was even more so as a resourceful marketer. This was critical. Borax output in the country had burgeoned. Between 1864, when the industry was in its infancy, and 1872, yearly production grew from a negligible figure to 1,000 short tons. In 1884 it passed 3,500 tons. By 1891 it was 6,690 tons. This increase outran industrial demand, which absorbed only about half of the constantly growing stream of white crystals. As a result, prices concurrently plummeted, from 50 cents a pound to 25 cents, to less than 10 cents, and finally to 7 ½ cents.<sup>3</sup>

Faced with this severe price depression, Frank Smith fashioned strategies that placed Pacific Coast Borax among the firms leading in the contemporary transformation of the national economy. These included concerted efforts to win tariff protection for borax products, formation of cartels to assign production quotas and stabilize markets, and a series of leveraged buyouts of competitors to strengthen his dominant position. For present purposes, a shift to industrial research and development, to increase demand through creation of new products for mass home consumption, and advertising to sell them, were even more pertinent. These measures gave Smith's company a conspicuous place in the emergence of a consumer economy. J. W. Mather performed a crucial role in efforts to create new consumer markets. A born promoter, he advertised aggressively despite Smith's opposition to the tactic and quadrupled sales of borax products for home use within a year of the founding of Pacific Coast Borax. Smith's behavior countered popular notions of the actions of monopolists. But maintaining profits by increasing sales as prices fell, rather than by curbing output and holding prices to artificially high levels, fit the actual norms of monopolistic competition.

J. W. brought Stephen into the firm shortly after its organization, initially as a part-time adviser. Steve promptly conceived a novel strategy to publicize borax as an item for household consumption. He proposed to abandon use of the Smith name and trademark. His plan was to highlight the story of the desert teamsters who used twenty-mule teams to haul trains, consisting of two huge, borax-laden freight wagons and a water wagon, the 166 forbidding miles across the Mojave Desert from Death Valley to Southern Pacific and Atlantic & Pacific (A. & P.) railroad connections respectively at Mojave Station and Daggett. These had been developed and put into use by William Tell Coleman, operator of the Harmony Borax Works in Death Valley, in the 1870s. Smith at first resisted, even though he had gained control of the Coleman properties after the latter became insolvent at the end of the 'eighties. "No," he said, with characteristic immodesty. "I cannot say I like the idea of the 'mule team' brand of borax. My name and that of the company should be in the foreground."<sup>4</sup> This is where J. R. Spears entered the picture.

Accepting Steve Mather's invitation, he traveled to California and Nevada to explore the borax mines and collect material for a series of nineteen stories for the *New York Sun*. These ran in 1891. They were so popular with the *Sun's* mass readership that

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they were collected and published, simultaneously in cloth and paperbound editions, as *Illustrated Sketches of Death Valley and Other Borax Deserts of the Pacific Coast* the following year. *The Nation*, January, 26, 1893, acknowledged receipt of a copy of the book, helping us to fix its date of appearance.<sup>5</sup> Its origin as a series of newspaper features and its design for a mass, popular audience assured that reviewers for contemporary literary periodicals would ignore it.

Only the most careful of readers might have inferred from Spears' final chapter, "CURIOUS FACTS ABOUT BORAX," that his entire book was a sustained advertisement. There they could discover that borax was a preservative for meat and milk, could be "applied to wounds as an antiseptic without producing any corrosive or dangerous effects, and is used for various kinds of sore throat successfully." It was a key ingredient in tooth powders, cosmetic powders, and powders to combat acne. It was employed in making porcelain, in dyes for printing fabrics, in soaps and cleansers, in shampoos, in fluxes for soldering, and "as a fire-proofing material" in plaster and paint. It was also "a fact, interesting to housekeepers, that the most effective insect destroyer" was "plain powdered borax." There were "in all more than fifty different uses of borax, but, because until within recent years it was a high-priced drug, instead of a cheap salt, the knowledge of its uses has not been widespread among ordinary people." Fortunately, rapidly rising output had resulted in a fall in price to "about 8 cents" a pound "in car-load lots, and the supply is such as to warrant the confidence that it will remain a cheap commodity in the future." If this language seems hyperbolic, it is, in fact, quite restrained when compared to panegyrics to borax that appeared in other promotional material!<sup>6</sup>

Nothing succeeds, as the saying goes, like success. Impressed with the popularity of *Illustrated Sketches*, Smith soon agreed to employ an illustration of the teams and wagons, with the "Twenty Mule Team Borax" label, as the company trade mark. Steve Mather joined Pacific Coast Borax full-time on January 1, 1893. Meanwhile, he expanded his promotional efforts. Besides paying for advertisements, he pioneered a broad range of uses of newspapers to stimulate retail sales. He planted letters purportedly from housewives, extolling borax, in papers. He targeted papers with syndicated features about the purported virtues of borax. He arranged to have coupons placed in borax boxes, promising a dollar to any consumer who published a letter to an editor about borax. Other coupons could be saved and exchanged for cheap merchandise. The results of these efforts so impressed Smith that he became a convert to advertising. In 1903 a twenty-mule team and rig appeared at the St. Louis World's Fair for daily exhibition. Not long afterward, shopkeepers who ordered twenty-five or more cases of one-pound household packages of "Twenty Mule Team Borax" or other company products could arrange for a traveling team and rig to visit their places of business. In short order Twenty Mule Team Borax became familiar across the United States as a multi-purpose cleanser and laundry sweetener.<sup>7</sup>

Recourse to the twenty mule theme and the role of *Illustrated Sketches of Death Valley* in that effort were notable for several reasons. Whether or not Charles Adams

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Dana recognized the *Sketches* for what they were is not known. He probably did not. He is credited with having introduced the human interest feature to newspapers and may well have regarded them as a fine example of the genre. Dana fervently believed that advertising was a waste of valuable space. He hoped one day to eliminate it and let sales support his paper. Given these views, it is ironic that the series appeared in his *Sun*. There is more. Dana still favored the old pre-Civil War ideology that regarded all gainfully employed working people as bound by a harmony of interests. *Illustrated Sketches*, however, was part of a new tendency in advertising to nourish a consumer, rather than a producer, mentality.<sup>8</sup> In particular, the *Sketches* are a classic example of a successful early attempt to stimulate consumer brand loyalty. Finally, the Harmony Borax Works had ceased operations in 1888, after Coleman began to mine recently-discovered ore deposits. These were far from Death Valley. They lay at the head of Mule Canyon in the Calico Mountains close to the silver mining camp of Calico, about fifteen miles northeast of modern Barstow. Two of the teams and rigs were still in use in 1891, but they now traveled the twenty-two mile round trip between the new center of borax mining, Borate, in the Calicos, and the A. & P. siding at Daggett. Thence ores were shipped to Alameda, California, for refining. In fact, the twenty-mule teams and rigs were last used at Calico. The Calico mines far outstripped the Harmony Works in importance. For a decade preceding 1907, they accounted for almost half the output of the world. It did not matter. A 332-mile round trip from Death Valley, despite the crucial role the Calico mines played in giving Smith global preeminence in the industry, seemed in 1891 to hold far greater possibilities for attractive story telling than did the still relatively undeveloped mines at Borate in the Calicos. Even so, in the hands of a hack writer or a reporter lacking in intelligence and scruples, *Illustrated Sketches* might have fallen entirely from view. As it was, the book became a rarity by the mid-twentieth century. By the 1990s, fine condition, cloth bound copies commanded as much as \$500 from collectors of western Americana.<sup>9</sup>

That Spears' volume did not enjoy but a brief moment of notoriety and then disappear entirely from sight was the result of several factors. Happily, a few private collections, research libraries, and the files of the Pacific Coast Borax Company held copies. Historians of the desert in time discovered and came to appreciate them. It was a master stroke to select Spears for the task at hand. Desert historian Harold O. Weight in the 1950s aptly referred to him as "Death Valley's first trained reporter."<sup>10</sup> Moreover, he was a knowledgeable traveler and an acute observer. He had a keen ear for a good story. Even when succumbing to the temptation to embellish, he held to the ideal of accuracy. Many of the individuals who had pioneered the borax industry in the Mojave Desert were still alive and were happy to share their recollections with an able interviewer. A delay of even a few years would have thinned their ranks appreciably, resulting in the loss of much first-hand testimony. Add to these the perfection of a technology capable of printing passable reproductions of photographs, as illustrations, and Spears' facility with a camera, and all of the ingredients necessary to produce a potential classic were readily at hand. Our author seized them. Without purposing to

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do so, he dashed off a book that in time won recognition among a devoted band of scholars and desert history buffs as a masterpiece and an indispensable source for the history of the borax industry and the Death Valley region. Elva Ivan Edwards accorded *Illustrated Sketches of Death Valley* one of the longest entries, an entire page, in his comprehensive and authoritative bibliography, *The Enduring Desert*. Edwards wrote that Spears favored:

his readers with an intimate word-picture of Death Valley as it appeared in 1891. It will be noted that his book precedes the [William Lewis ]Manly [*Death Valley in '49*]<sup>11</sup> by two years. *Illustrated Sketches* is noted for its early photographs in almost the same degree as for its textual content. It is conceivable that these may be the first pictures ever published — perhaps ever taken — of the Death Valley region. Maximum importance attaches to them. . . . It [the book] is as adequate and as dependable a commentary on Death Valley and the Mojave Desert today as it was in that day — years ago — when Spears wrote it. It is Death Valley's number two book; and it will probably continue to remain so. Certainly no desert collection even merits the name without a copy of Spears.<sup>12</sup>

A turn to the pages of *Illustrated Sketches* readily shows why it is so important a volume. Spears drew his readers in at the outset, with a preface entitled “A FAIR WARNING.” There he wrote briefly of how the book had come to be, going on to say, tantalizingly, that the borax desert region of the Pacific Coast was “a land of myths and mirages”; “the abiding place of a novel race of Arabs [white American denizens of the desert]”; that it “had originated an entirely unique species of tramp [the prospector]” and more. He hoped that readers would find these subjects and others to be interesting.<sup>13</sup>

The opening chapter, “THE STORY OF DEATH VALLEY,” cast a wider net. Spears quite correctly characterized the scores of articles and even the leading historical account previously published on the subject as “imaginative” and “unsatisfactory.” “The history of Death Valley,” he continued with a disingenuous phrase calculated to entice and disarm his readers, “is found only in tradition. As I gathered it, here it is . . . .”<sup>14</sup> The remainder of this, and the following, sketches set in print much material for the first time. They granted many tales a narrative form that became, in time, fixed. They also established a historical framework for considering the evolution of the borax industry.

So it is that on the first page of the first sketch we read of the extremes of climate, geography, and geology typifying Death Valley. We continue through a rehearsal of the awful experiences of the 1849 emigrant party that gave “Death Valley its name.”<sup>15</sup> In ensuing sections we encounter wind-driven, boiling brown dust storms, the desert equivalents of Dakota blizzards. We meet Aaron and Rosie Winters, who in the 1880s were eking out a living at Ash Meadows, the next depression east of Death Valley. One evening a stranger stopped by their cabin and the conversation turned to borax. Before

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leaving the next morning, the visitor had explained how one could test minerals for the presence of borax by pouring some chemicals over them and lighting them afire. A green flame indicated that borax was present. Remembering some likely deposits in a marsh close to Furnace Creek, the Winters traveled to Death Valley and collected some of the material. After dark Aaron poured the chemicals over it and struck a match to it. "She burns green, Rosie! We're rich, by —," said Aaron in an exclamation made famous by repetition in countless later reports of the incident.<sup>16</sup>

Equally familiar is Spears' first-telling of the discovery of borates at what came to be known as Searles Lake, by John G. Searles. Likewise was his description of the eight-mile wagon trail hacked through jagged salt crystals in Death Valley. Familiar, too, too, his treatment of the origins of the twenty-mule teams, the wagons they hauled, and how the teams and trains were managed. One can scarcely read an account of freighting on the desert without finding Spears' description of the huge borax wagons:

The hind wheel was seven feet in diameter, and its [steel] tire was eight inches wide and an inch thick. The forward wheel was five feet in diameter, with a tire like that on the rear wheel. The hubs were eighteen inches in diameter by twenty-two inches long. The spokes were made of split oak, 5½ inches long at the butt, and four inches wide at the point. The felloes were made double . . . . The wagon beds were sixteen feet long, four feet wide, and six feet deep. The tread of the wagon — the width across the wheels — was six feet. Each wagon weighed 7,800 pounds, and the cost of the lot [of ten wagons] was about \$9,000, or \$900 each.

Probably "the largest wagons ever used," these immense vehicles were "completely successful." Each could contain ten tons of borax, or half the capacity of a railroad freight car.<sup>17</sup>

*Illustrated Sketches* anticipated subsequent histories with its recapitulation of Dr. John A. Veatch's account of his role as discoverer of borax in America, in Tehama County, California, in 1856, and the expansion of the industry to Clear Lake and then to marshes in Nevada. Many later writers followed his lead in characterizing marsh borax mining of the mineral ulexite, or "cottonball." This was formed through precipitation and crystallization of minerals in briny desert marshes. They also repeated his treatment of the chemical and industrial processes through which ores became refined borax. They rehearsed his summary history of uses of and trade in borax since Roman times. In doing so they often emulated him even to the extent of omitting, as he had, reference to the isolation, in 1808 by Sir Humphrey Davy, of boron as one of the chemical elements. Numbers employed his interpretive framework. This highlighted the significance of the development of the ores in the Calico Mountains. Crude borates there, called colemanite, differed in chemical composition from ulexite.<sup>18</sup> The beginning of their commercial exploitation marked a turn in the industry from a marsh to a deep rock mining phase.

They also told, told again, and retold, stories that figured in *Illustrated Sketches*. Spears' review of the short and violent lives of abandoned desert and adjacent moun-

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tain mining camps such as Columbus, Belleville, and Panamint helped familiarize stories of ghost towns as a genre. His brief of the arrival of Francis Marion Smith in Nevada, Smith's career as a wood hauler, and his discovery and development of borax at Teel's Marsh in Esmeralda County is the model for all later considerations. So, too, is Spears' discussion of the chemical processing and the milling of ores. No Mojave Desert history worthy of the name omits the story of a swamper's brutal murder of a teamster in Daggett, by smashing in his skull with a wagon spoke, and the subsequent hanging of the culprit from a conveniently nearby telephone pole. Likewise, the robbery of the payroll of Calico's Run Over Mine by Harry Dodson in 1889, and the tracking and shooting of the fugitive by Tecopa John and mine superintendent James W. Patterson (136-137) have become staples of regional history. Even the final sketch with its obvious promotional purposes has set a pattern. No treatment of the development of the borax industry is complete without some reference to, and preferably some quotation from, early promotional material such as Spears wrote.

None of the foregoing is intended to imply that Spears was not a man of his times, nor that his book was free of flaws. The story of the naming of Death Valley that he retold has since been discredited. The native inhabitants of the region were not Piutes, but Tumbisha Shoshone. He had to use available, inaccurate estimates of the height of Telescope Peak, and of the depth of Death Valley, which we now know to be 11,049 and -282 feet.<sup>19</sup> Some readers today might find his references to Euro-American denizens of the desert as "Arabs" disparaging. His references to Indian squaws and bucks, colorful and even droll to his contemporaries, offend the sensibilities of readers at the end of the twentieth century. We have referred above to his omission of the discovery of boron and of the importance of twenty mule teaming at the Calico mines years after the Harmony works had ceased operations. We can add that his is unlike many first-hand accounts in that he rarely discloses his own emotions directly. This defect, if defect it be, must be tempered by recognition that he conveys them as a skilled reporter would — by careful crafting of the story line and choice of words to create emotional effect through the medium of narrative itself. Taken altogether, the qualities of *Illustrated Sketches* are such that if it gains a wide readership it will become, through its capacities to amuse, inform, and instruct, a popular as well as a specialists' classic.

The Pacific Coast Borax Company in 1907 closed its mines in the Calico Mountains, their ores exhausted. Frank Smith had prepared for this eventuality. Already, his firm had completed a railroad to connect a new mine near Death Valley with the Atlantic & Pacific. When ore extraction shifted to the Lila C. Mine, in 1907, the ambitiously-named Tonopah & Tidewater Railroad was ready to handle its traffic. Workingmen dismantled Borate, in the Calicos, salvaging as many building materials as possible. Smith's mountain-top house was moved to Ludlow, where the T. & T. R. R. connected with the A. & P., far out in the desert.<sup>20</sup> Rails and ties for the Daggett & Borate Rail Road, which had replaced the last twenty mule teams and rigs in 1898, were taken up for reuse. The calcining mill erected at a site called Marion, at the eastern end of Calico Dry Lake, met the same fate. When ores played out at the Lila C.



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and then other new mines in the vicinity, production left the Death Valley region for the last time. Its center moved to the immense deposits of borates adjacent to the present site of Edwards Air Force Base, at Kramer (now Boron).<sup>21</sup>

If the borax company had pursued customary practice, it would have disassembled facilities at Death Valley for use at some other location. These were extensive. One of the most important was the Death Valley Railroad. This line, completed in 1914, provided a crucial new link. It ran twenty miles from the Ryan branch (connecting with the Lila C. Mine) of the T. & T. near Death Valley Junction to more recently opened mines in the Greenwater Mountains.<sup>22</sup> Ryan harbored employees' dormitories. At the Junction there was a small civic center. In Death Valley proper lay the Greenland Ranch, an emerald oasis gleaming in the searing desert sun. Many years earlier, it had furnished rest, provisions, and fodder for harvesters of cottonball, and their teams. A crew there still maintained pastures, fields, and orchards.

When it shifted mining to Kramer, Pacific Coast Borax did not abandon Death Valley. It hung on to the ranch. It left scores of old tunnel entrances pocking hill and mountain sides, heaps of tailings, and the foundations of dismantled buildings. But it left many structures intact, lending, in time, an aspect of romantic decay to the scene. It did not remove the railroad. The mines no longer disgorged ores, but the management of the company had new plans for Death Valley. It was to generate fresh profits as a tourist center.

Conversion from mining to tourism proceeded swiftly. The Greenland Ranch passed through a transformation to become the Furnace Creek Ranch. Nearby, teams of artisans constructed the Furnace Creek Inn and Resort. The civic center at Death Valley Junction was reincarnated as the Amargosa Hotel. The dormitories at Ryan, remodeled, became the Death Valley View Hotel. Built to transport mining supplies and ores, the T. & T. R. R. now hauled tourists to enjoy the weirdly beautiful scenery, play golf, swim, and rusticate luxuriously. Relocation to the Inn of one of the old twenty mule team rigs added to the appeal, reinforcing memories of the association of the valley with borax mining and life on the menacing trail over which wagons had long ago lumbered. The creation of Death Valley National Monument, in 1933, with the energetic promotion of Pacific Coast Borax, amplified these recollections.<sup>23</sup>

The process of fixing the image of the borax industry that had first won wide currency through an advertising campaign in the 1890s culminated between the 1930s and the 1980s. Two main currents were evident. One was the rediscovery of Spears by historians and others who wrote about the Mojave Desert and Death Valley. Harold O. Weight's *Twenty Mule Team Days in Death Valley* (1955) was an important example of such a work. Also of note was Russ Leadabrand, *A Guide to the Mojave Desert of California* (1966). Other memorable titles include George Herbert Hildebrand, *Borax Pioneer: Francis Marion Smith* (1982) and Norman J. Travis and E. J. Cocks, *The Tincal Trail: A History of Borax* (1984).<sup>24</sup>

Activities of the Pacific Coast Borax /United States Borax and Chemical Company propelled the second current. True to form, the company continued to exploit the now

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familiar twenty mule theme. It arranged for publication in 1951 of *The Story of Pacific Coast Borax Company*. This brief corporate history also depended in part on the work of Spears, lending it heightened prominence. *The Tincal Trail*, mentioned immediately above, also enjoyed support from the company and made important use of Spears' book. Vastly more influential in fixing popular conceptions of the associations linking Death Valley, twenty mule rigs, and borax were the hundreds of episodes on radio and television — at least 558, the series under various titles — of “Death Valley Days.” These were comparably important in reinforcing consumer product identification. Many of the tales recounted in “Death Valley Days” resonated with materials from or inspired by *Illustrated Sketches of Death Valley*. Stories first published in 1891 as a central feature of an advertising campaign came to light again, with other, similar stories, in another, similar advertising campaign. The medium had changed, from print to radio, and then to television. The message was the same.<sup>25</sup> We had, in a sense, come full circle. In doing so we encountered again John Randolph Spears and the enduring legacy that he left with his accidental classic. We continue to do so whenever we explore the origins of our borax industry and its singular roots in the desert Southwest and Death Valley. It is an intriguing footnote to this fascinating story that a starring role in “Death Valley Days” might also have contributed to growing public recognition that helped in time to propel Ronald Reagan to the governorship of California and the presidency of the United States.

### Notes

1. Classic treatments of the West as symbol include Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (New York: Vintage Books, 1957) and Jan Willem Schulte Nordholt, *The Myth of the West: America as the Last Empire*. Translated by Herbert H. Rowen (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995). See also Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

2. Quotation from obituary in *New York Times*, January 26, 1936. Also see *Utica* [New York] *Observer-Dispatch*, January 25, 1936; biographical sketch, “SPEARS, John Randolph,” *The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (New York: James T. White & Company, 1899), 9:162; naval academy record, Beverly Lyall, Archives Technician, Nimitz Library, United States Naval Academy, personal letter to the author, 26 April, 1999. For the *Sun*, Janet E. Steele, *The Sun Shines for All* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1993). Books: *The American Slave Trade: An Account of its Origin, Growth, and Suppression* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900); *Anthony Wayne, Sometimes Called "Mad Anthony"* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1903); *Captain Nathaniel Brown Palmer, An Old-time Sailor of the Sea* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1922); *The Corbin Game Park* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution *Annual Report*, 1891); *David Farragut* (Philadelphia: G. W. Jacobs & Company, 1905); *The Fugitive: A Tale of Adventure in the Days of Clipper Ships and Slavers* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899); *The History of Our Navy from its Origin to the Present Day, 1775-1897* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1897-1899); in collaboration with Arthur H. Clark, *A History of the Mississippi Valley, From its Discovery to the End of Foreign Domination* (New York: A. S. Clark, 1903); *A History of the United States Navy* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908); *Master Mariners* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1912); *Our Navy in the War With Spain* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1898); *The Port of Missing Ships and Other Stories of the Sea* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1897); *A Short History of the American Navy* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907); *The Story of the American Merchant Marine* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1910); *The Story of the New England Whalers* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1908).

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3. United States Geological Survey, *Mineral Resources of the United States, 1915*, Part II, "Nonmetals," (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1917), 1,017; Douglas Steeples, *Treasure from the Painted Hills: A History of Calico, California, 1882-1907* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1999), 50-52.
4. Quotation, Norman J. Travis and E. J. Cocks, *The Tincal Trail: A History of Borax* (London: Harrap Limited, 1984), 45.
5. "Books of the Week," *The Nation*, 56 (January 26, 1893), 73.
6. See, for example, Borax Producers of the Pacific Coast, *Borax Products of the Pacific Coast: Facts and Figures Regarding Borax* (N. P., September 1, 1893); and Travis and Cocks, *Tincal Trail*, passim. All quotations are from John Randolph Spears, *Illustrated Sketches of Death Valley and Other Borax Deserts of the Pacific Coast* (Chicago: Rand, McNally Company, 1892), 224, 226.
7. For background, Travis and Cocks, *Tincal Trail*; Norman J. Travis and Carl L. Randolph, *United States Borax and Chemical Corporation: The First Hundred Years* (New York: The Newcomen Society in North America, 1973). The use of coupons generally redeemable for inferior goods even injected a new definition into the American language, "borax," meaning cheap merchandise.
8. Steele, *The Sun Shines for All*, and \_\_\_\_, "The 19<sup>th</sup> Century World versus the Sun: Promoting Consumption (Rather than the Working Man)," *Journalism Quarterly*, 67 (Autumn, 1990), 592-600; Stewart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of Consumer Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976); Thomas S. Cochran, "Media as Business: A Brief History," *Journal of Communication*, 25 (Autumn, 1975), 155-165; Charles J. Rosebault, *When Dana was the Sun* (New York: R. M. MacBride and Co., 1931); and Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 136-150.
9. By 1999, used book dealers were asking up to \$500 for fine-condition cloth bound copies of *Illustrated Sketches*.
10. Quotation concerning Weight, Elva Ivan Edwards, *The Enduring Desert: A Descriptive Bibliography* (Los Angeles: The Ward Ritchie Press, 1969), 227.
11. William Lewis Manly, *Death Valley in '49* (San Jose: Pacific Tree & Vine Co., 1894); authoritative version, edited by Milo Milton Quaife (Chicago: The Lakeside Press, R. R. Donnelly & Sons Company, 1927).
12. Edwards, *Enduring Desert*, quoted 227.
13. Spears, *Illustrated Sketches*, 7.
14. *Ibid.*, 15.
15. *Ibid.*, 16.
16. *Ibid.*, 59.
17. *Ibid.*, 89.
18. Named for German chemist Georg Ulex, who first determined its chemical composition, ulexite was sodium calcium pentaborate octahydrate (NaCaB<sub>6</sub>O<sub>9</sub>.8H<sub>2</sub>O). The Calico deposits were designated colemanite for William T. Coleman, who bought them up shortly after their discovery. Much more difficult to refine than ulexite, colemanite was calcium hexaborate pentahydrate (Ca<sub>2</sub>B<sub>6</sub>O<sub>11</sub>.5H<sub>2</sub>O). See John A. Veatch, *Report of . . . to the Borax Company of California* (San Francisco: Whitten, Towne & Co., 1857); \_\_\_\_, "Discovery of Borax in California," in J. Ross Browne, Ed., *Report of the Mineral Resources of the States and Territories West of the Rocky Mountains* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1867), 179-187; Steeples, *Treasure from the Painted Hills*, 35-63.
19. For a summary, Richard E. Lingengelter, *Death Valley & The Amargosa: Land of Illusions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 3-6, 473-474; United States Geological Survey, *Bennett's Well, Furnace Creek, and Telescope Peak Quadrangles*, 15 Minute Series (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1951). For the Shoshone, David H. Thomas, Lorann S. A. Pendleton, and Stephen C. Cappanari, "Western Shoshone [Ethnology]," in Warren De. Avezedo, *Handbook of North American Indians, 11: Great Basin* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1986), 264-283; Lingengelter, *Death Valley & The Amargosa*, 11.
20. For early Mojave Desert history, and Borate, see: Clifford Walker, "Life and Adventure Along the Mojave River Trail," *San Bernardino Valley Museum Association Quarterly*, 44 (Fall, 1967), 1-31; Robert E. Reynolds, "A Walk Through Borate," *ibid.* [New Series] 44 (Winter, 1997), 107; Gordon Chappell, "The Mining Camp of Borate and the Borate & Daggett Railroad 1890-1907: An Interlude in the Borate Mining of the Death Valley Region," *Proceedings Fourth Death Valley Conference on History and Prehistory* (Death Valley, CA: Death Valley Natural History Association, 1995) 114-144.
21. Travis and Cocks, *Tincal Trail*, and Anonymous [Ruth Woodman and Ann Rosener], *The Story of the*

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*Pacific Coast Borax Company: Division of Borax Consolidated, Limited* (N. P.: Borax Consolidated, Limited, 1951), summarize general operations.

22. For the railroad see Gordon Chapell, "By Rail to the Rim of Death Valley: Construction of the Death Valley Railroad," *Journal of the West*, 31 (January, 1992), 10-20.

23. Of particular interest is H[arrison]. P[reston]. Gower, *Fifty Years in Death Valley: Memories of a Borax Man* (N. P. [San Bernardino?]: Published by the Death Valley '49rs, 1969), 10-11, 26-27, 107-109, and passim.

24. Harold O. Weight, *Twenty Mule Team Days in Death Valley* (Twenty-Nine Palms: The Calico Press, 1955); Russ Leadabrand, *A Guidebook to the Mojave Desert of California* (Los Angeles: The Ward Ritchie Press, 1966); George Herbert Hildebrand, *Borax Pioneer: Francis Marion Smith* (San Diego: Howell-North Books, 1982); Travis and Cocks, *Tincal Trail*.

25. [Woodman and Rosener], *The Story of the Pacific Coast Borax Company*; Ruth C. Woodman, "The History of the Pacific Coast Borax Company" (unpublished manuscript, 1969, in Ruth Woodman Papers, Department of Special Collections, Library, University of Oregon. Also Ruth C. Woodman, Harold E. Noble, Homer McCoy, John K. Butler, Robert S. Samuels, Joe Tiffenbach, Dorrell McGowan, Elsa K. Jensen, "Death Valley Days [series title varies, 1930-1975]. Syndicated series, produced 1951-1975, 558 episodes, released in fall, 1951; North Hollywood, Filmaster Productions, 1959-1975. Also in Ruth Woodman Papers, Special Collections, Library, University of Oregon.

Home consumption of Twenty Mule Team Borax lost relative importance during and after the 1960s. A turn from cloth to disposable paper diapers, which required neither sweetening nor laundering, played a role. Meanwhile, industrial applications of boron compounds expanded. Popular recollections associating twenty mule teams and Death Valley with borax, indeed popular awareness of borax, faded as advertising pursued new priorities.

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