

GUIDE TO THE PROVIDENCE MOUNTAINS STATE RECREATION AREA
PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION

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Park History

Providence Mountains State Recreation Area contains roughly 5,890 acres of natural, cultural, and historical resources. Located in east San Bernardino County, the park is nestled within the borders of the Mojave National Preserve, contains the Providence Mountains, and is approximately 56 miles west of the city of Needles. The park is accessible by car via Essex Road.

The Mohave tribe resided in the area containing the present-day park for thousands of years prior to its displacement by the Chemehuevi tribe, a branch of the Southern Paiute, roughly 500 years ago. Originally hailing from the present-day state of Arizona, the Chemehuevi were nomadic hunter-gatherers who quickly acclimated to their new desert surroundings. They grew adept at hunting game and finding water, nuts, and edible plants in the often inhospitable Mojave Desert. The historic centerpiece of the modern-day park, the caverns provided shelter, food-storage space, and ceremonial settings for the relative newcomers. Themselves displaced by Euro Americans in the 1860s, today the Chemehuevi live and work in the cities of Twentynine Palms, Banning, and Indio.

The Spanish first encountered the area en route to the San Gabriel Mission in 1776. The next white travelers were Euro Americans, led by famed trapper Jedediah Smith, who arrived 50 years later. Many more came in the years following California statehood. In charge of the Arkansas-to-Los Angeles leg of the Pacific Railroad Survey in the mid-1850s, Lieutenant Amiel Weeks Whipple was soon followed into the Mojave Desert by Edward F. Beale, who established Beale Wagon Road along the 35th Parallel by 1860. By 1865, the Mojave Indian Trail, used for centuries by indigenous travelers, had been commandeered by the U.S. military, renamed "Mojave Road," and was outfitted with camps of soldiers providing protection for postal carriers and other American travelers.

Beginning in the 1860s, prospectors began to flood into the area in search of minerals—silver, lead, gold, and copper—embedded in the Providence Mountain range, so called by the Americans for its proximity to abundant water supplies. Local miners prospered most greatly between 1870 and 1893, a period when the federal government purchased silver ore at high prices. In 1883, the Southern Pacific Railroad established a route through the eastern Mojave Desert, granting local mining interests access to national markets. However, after the turn of the twentieth century, when the U.S. stopped purchasing silver in bulk quantities, the industry quickly declined. By 1907, a year of economic recession, major mining investments ceased entirely.

In the 1920s and early 1930s, individuals occasionally attempted prospecting in the abandoned mines. One such would-be silver miner, Jesse E. "Jack" Mitchell, was so impressed by his 1929 visit to the Providence Mountains (specifically "Crystal" or "Providence" caverns) that he returned and struck a claim the following year. But Jack Mitchell and his wife Ida, whose Los Angeles-based real estate business went bankrupt during the Great Depression, soon grew more interested in the terrain's potential for

tourism than for mining (**Figure 1**). In order to maintain his claim's validity according to mining law, Mitchell demonstrated ongoing progress by building tunnels, shipping ore, and filing patents on the claims. Meanwhile, the Mitchells built four buildings—still standing in the present-day park—out of native local stones to accommodate visitors' lodging needs, installed pipes for transporting water, and led guided tours through "Mitchell Caverns" (**Figures 2-4**).



Figure 1. Jack and Ida Mitchell, ca. 1945. Catalog # 090-34095.



Figure 2. Park Headquarters, ca. 1945. Catalog # 090-34101.



Figure 3. Dome residence with Jack and Ida Mitchell, ca. 1945. Catalog # 090-34098.

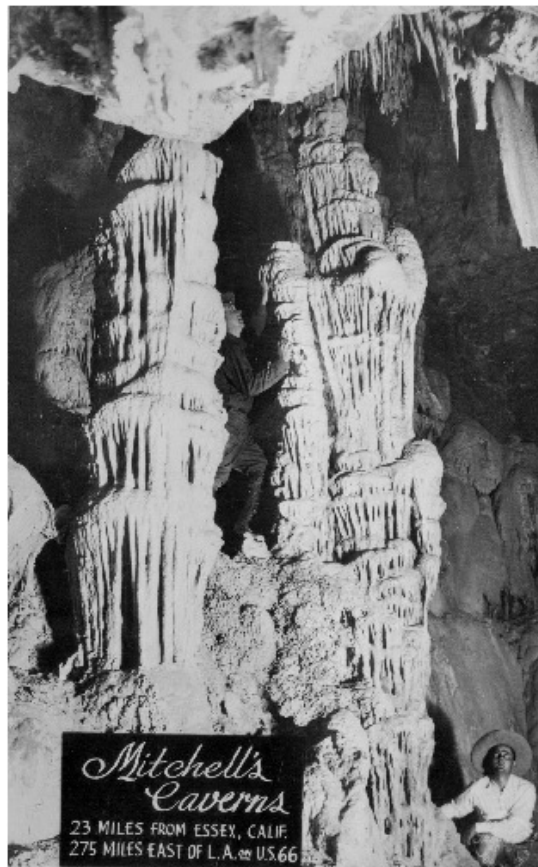


Figure 4. "Mitchell's Caverns" postcard, ca. 1940. Catalog # 090-34108.

In the 1940s, Ida Mitchell petitioned the California Division of Beaches and Parks to incorporate Mitchell Caverns into the state park system. After Jack Mitchell died in 1954, the State purchased the 628-acre property, which included the buildings as well as the caverns, and classified it a state park. The following year, it was reclassified a

state reserve and incorporated into the Providence Mountains State Recreation Area as the internal unit, Mitchell Caverns Natural Preserve, in 1972.

Prior to the park's indefinite closure in 2011, California State Parks, having coordinated with the Mojave Desert Interpretive Association, maintained numerous natural, cultural, and historic resources at Providence Mountains State Recreation Area. In addition to El Pakiva and Tecopa caves (the only limestone caverns in the state park system) and the Mitchell's original buildings, the park also includes numerous ruins from the historic mining era, Chemehuevi archaeological remains, and vast expanses of scenic desert full of drought-resistant vegetation and rare animal species, including Niptus beetles that are only found in the caverns (**Figures 5-7**). Since its closure, the park has fallen victim to vandalism and theft. As of September 2016, it remains closed, but is slated to reopen at an as-yet-unspecified date.



Figure 5. Mitchell Caverns, April 8, 2009. Catalog # 090-P63201.



Figure 6. Park Headquarters, April 8, 2009. Catalog # 090-P63157.



Figure 7. Providence Mountains, April 8, 2009. Catalog # 090-P63168.

Scope and Content

The Providence Mountains State Recreation Area Photographic Collection spans the years 1936-2016, with the bulk of the collection covering the years 1940-1945, 1955-1980, 1991-1992, 2009, and 2016. There is a total of 755 cataloged images including 253 photographic prints, scans, and negatives, 295 35mm slides, and 207 born-digital images. Photographs originated primarily from California State Parks staff and Jack and Ida Mitchell's donated collection.

The collection mainly depicts Mitchell Caverns. Interior views of Tecopa and El Pakiva caves feature various geological formations, including limestone stalactites, stalagmites, flowstone, popcorn, drapes, cave coral, cave shields, curtains, columns, calcite crystals, soda straw formations, cave ribbons, and cave spaghetti. Interior images also feature stairways, walkways with hand railings, and lighting fixtures as well as park rangers conducting tours for visitors. Exterior views depict the caverns' entrances and exits.

The collection also documents the park's many non-cavernous features in numerous desert views. Features include Providence Mountains, park campgrounds, the desert landscape, and a bounty of desert vegetation such as various species of cacti and flowers, creosote bushes, yucca, and Joshua trees. Also documented are Chemehuevi cultural artifacts, bighorn petroglyphs, and a birthing rock, all located near Wild Horse Mesa.

The collection also includes depictions of several buildings, structures, and objects, both historic and introduced by California State Parks. Subjects include the Mitchells' stone-constructed residence converted into park headquarters as well as other stone buildings built by Jack Mitchell; the Mary Beale Memorial Plaque, commemorating the life of the Mojave Desert-based naturalist as well as the nature trail that also honors

her memory; the remnants of a nineteenth-century wagon; road, highway, and park signage; and the ruins of the area's most prosperous historic silver mine, Bonanza King Mine, as well as the ruins of the mining community that emerged alongside it, the former town of Providence.

The collection additionally documents construction projects at the park. Projects include the 1960 construction of a concrete-block reservoir water tank and the Deferred Maintenance Program, conducted circa 1998 to 1999.

Also included are images donated by the Mitchells. This collection includes portraits and candid shots of Jack and Ida Mitchell, promotional postcards of the park manufactured during their tenure, and documentation of the buildings that they constructed.

Related Collection

Providence Mountains State Recreation Area Collection, California State Parks Archives.

Catalog Subject Search Terms

Aerial view
Bighorn
Birthing Rock
Bonanza King Mine
Building(s)
Cactus
Calcite crystals
Campground
Cave
Cave coral
Cave shield
Chemehuevi Indians
Column
Coral pipes
Creosote Bush
Crystal Springs

Mary Beale Memorial
Mitchell Caverns
Mojave Desert
Mountain(s)
Nature Trail
Petroglyph(s)
Popcorn
Portrait
Postcard

Curtains
Deferred Maintenance Program
Desert view
Drapes
El Pakiva Cave
Entrance
Flowstone
Geological formation(s)
Group
Headquarters
Ida Mitchell
Interior
Jack Mitchell
Landscape view
Limestone

Providence Mountains
Ranger(s)
Rock formation(s)
Sign(s)
Soda straw formation(s)
Stalactite(s)
Stalagmite(s)
Structure(s)
Tecopa Cave
Tour

Visitor Center
Wagon

Wild Horse Mesa
Yucca