

California's Alabama Hills

by
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*The Alabama Hills
with the
Sierra Nevada
range for a
backdrop.
Color photo by
David Muench,
Santa Barbara,
California.*

JUST WEST of Lone Pine, California, a series of hills parallel both Highway 395 and the Sierra Nevada for some ten miles. To the casual tourist driving along the highway these hills seem an unnecessary obstruction to his view of the abrupt Sierra escarpment, the barren sand-and-gravel-strewn hillsides blocking his view of the more spectacular granite faces and canyons of the mountains. Occasionally, the more adventurous traveler leaves the highway via one of the dusty side roads and is rewarded by a view of one of the most curious geological anomalies of this planet—the Alabama Hills.

Eighty million years ago a mass of molten granite began to force its way from the bowels of the earth up through the

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existing stone. As it reached the surface, it cooled and hardened in the shape of great granite bubbles. Hidden from the highway by the hills, this land is riddled with thousands of gigantic stone monsters, carved and smoothed by the winds of millions of years.

This was hallowed ground to the ancient Paiute, who inhabited eastern California. It is said that Pot-sa-ga-wah, youthful spirits, messengers from Inyo, the abode of the Great Spirit, still congregate here amidst the unearthly granite sculpture and can be seen by the adept. In 1965 publicity pictures were taken for a concert series being held in a natural amphitheatre in the area known as Pot-sa-ga-wah Gardens. When the photographs were developed, light-forms suggesting ghost-like auras were discovered among the rocks.

Today, you can station yourself comfortably atop a rock and sit quietly, as if listening for a horn to honk in Los Angeles two-hundred miles away. With such concentration you may become aware of the "entities" which some have found to inhabit the surrounding rocks.

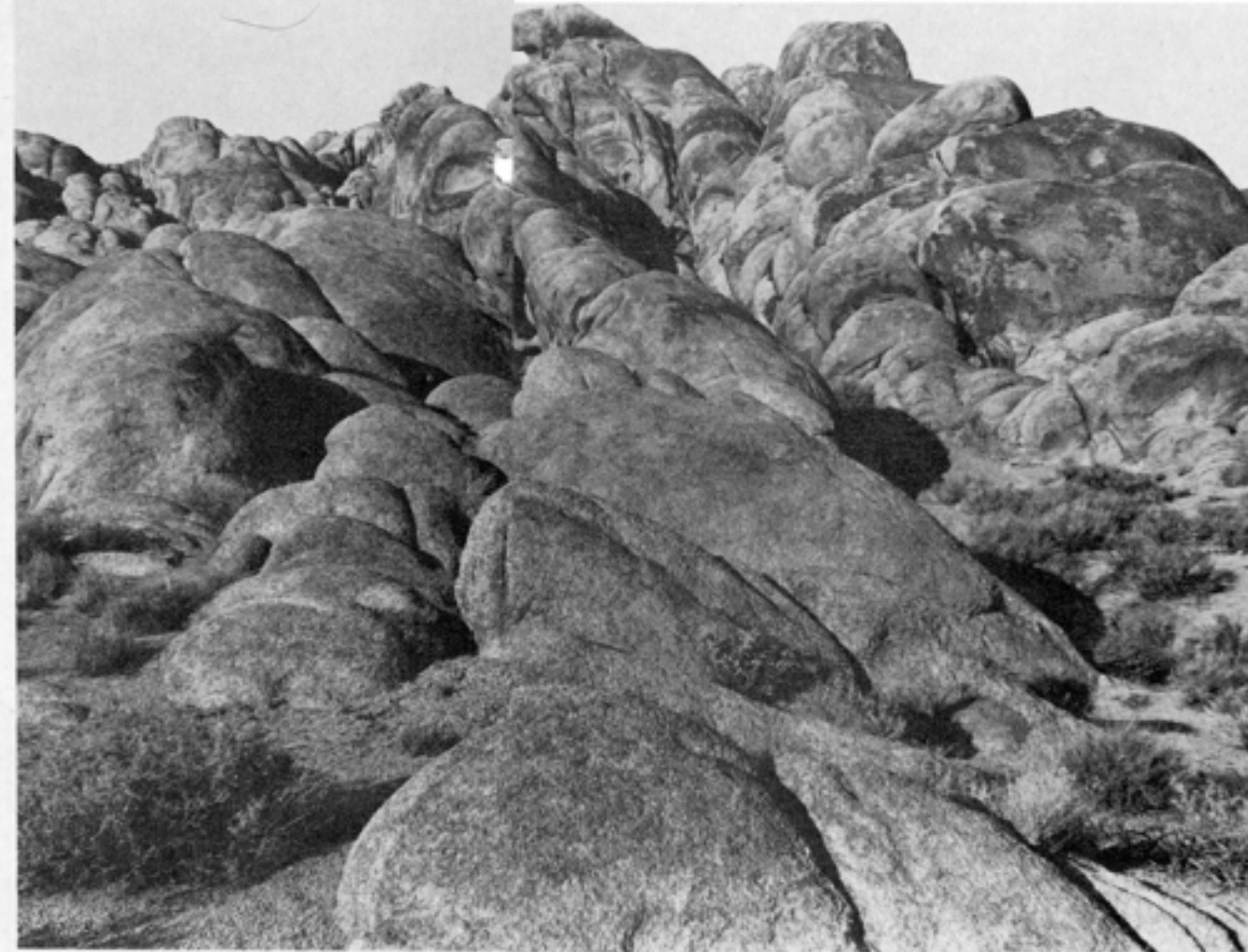
Over a century ago, after gold was discovered in the Sierra far north of here, men of the Confederacy came to these hills

seeking wealth and refuge from the scourge of war which racked their homeland. They named this place the "Alabama Hills" after their Confederate gunboat as a memorial to the struggle they had left behind. Union sympathizers retaliated by naming one of their mines "Old Abe" and by dubbing the nearest Sierra pass "Kearsarge."

Scattered throughout the Alabamas are the remains of a once productive mining district—mine shafts with quartz tailings spilling from their mouths and picturesque old miners' shacks heaped about with middens of old bottles and rusted tin cans. Hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of gold and silver were brought to the surface in days when men were hardier and the metal more precious. Most of these claims have been abandoned. A few have been kept up out of nostalgia by people willing to do the one hundred dollars worth of assessment work required each year under the mining laws.

Nearly all of the land in the Alabama Hills is under the supervision of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), much of it having been declared public recreation land in 1969. A few thousand expensive acres at the southern end of the Alabamas are under private ownership and have been the scene of haphazard residential development over the last decade.

Movie fans will recognize the Alabamas, for they formed the scenic back-



Left:
Eighty million
years ago,
great granite
bubbles rose
to the
earth's surface.

Below:
Strange
entities
seem to
inhabit
the hills.

drop for many movies. William "Hopalong Cassidy" Boyd made so many movies locally that he built and lived in a cabin here. The cabin still stands along the Tuttle Creek Road which winds out of Lone Pine through the southern Ala-

bamas. Many films, including "Gunga Din," have been shot in the Movie Flats area. This area can be reached by turning north onto Movie Road off the Whitney Portal Road about two miles west of Lone Pine.

A road maintained by Inyo County winds through the most scenic sections of the hills. It connects Movie Road and Moffet Ranch Road, which turns off Highway 395 about six miles north of Lone Pine (at mile marker No. 63). Many jeep roads lead off the county road and through the exotic rock formations.

Nothing beats a moonlight hike through the Alabama Hills, when the rocks become a three-dimensional Rorschach to test anyone's fantasies. □

