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On Wednesday, August 3rd. we were very happy to have with us Professor H.L. Mason of California who delighted us with an intriguing account of the 'Desert Life of America'.

Professor Mason was concerned more particularly with the South-Western deserts of North America. Comparing them with those of Africa, he said many authorities regarded the American type as the younger. It was characteristic of African deserts that their vegetation contained representatives of a very large number of different plant families, which had with the slow passage of time developed specialised desert forms. In the North American deserts on the other hand this was not so, it was rather that one particular family the Cactaceae had developed drought resisting characteristics to an extraordinary extent in many different ways among its numerous genera. The lecturer went on to point out that there were two distinct types of plants in the South-Western deserts, the first those perennial residents whose special devices for water storage, protection against loss of water through evaporation and whose remarkably extensive root systems enabled them to withstand the desert rigours regardless of the passing seasons.

The second type, less bizarre but more lovely, consisted of the innumerable annuals that sprang into a swift glory of colour during the brief flowering time, only to as quickly disappear leaving no visible trace. In answer to questions the speaker said that the flowering spring in the desert was brief, being never more than two months, but in addition there was a "second spring" later in the year. The first spring came early in the year, when winds driving down from Alaska swept in from the Pacific Coast bringing rains which changed the desert into a garden. Later in the year rain-bearing monsoon

winds bore up from the Gulf of Mexico and another springtime glowed and blossomed. It was to be noted that plants inevitably flourished either in one springtime or the other - they could never be induced to change over under natural conditions. They mature either following the winter or following the summer.

Not only season but also situation determined vegetation. The Professor emphasised that the deserts differed from place to place, and sand dunes, sheltered gullies, rocky cliffs etc. all produced their own characteristic plant population.

Following the introductory talk the lecturer treated us to a fascinating collection of slides. We saw those gaunt grotesque things that give such strangeness to the desert landscape, - the Joshua Tree (Yucca brevifolia) the only member of the genus to form a trunk and branches, and then a number of remarkable cacti, the giant Carnegiea pruvianus, a columnar type with erect branches, of which the Professor showed us a giant specimen he judged forty feet high. Then there was the famous Organ Pipe Cactus (Lemaireocereus marginata) and those quaint barrel-shaped arrangements, remarkable for their spines their symmetry and their beautiful flowers, and also some fine species of Prickly Pear (Opuntia spp.)

We were all interested to see the Creosote Bush (Larrea divaricata) with its yellow flowers. It is often found growing in association with that extra-ordinary plant the Ocotillo (Fouquieria splendens) whose brilliant red flowers spring flame-like from the ends of the tall stem, which in season grows small leaves with such amazing rapidity. Admittedly they are shed with almost equal rapidity, but to compensate it sometimes produces a second crop. Though it is a plant of the semi-desert, not the true desert, we were greatly interested to see that famous small tree, the mesquite (Prosopis juliflora) a member of the pea family. It was shown in full bloom adorned with innumerable tassels of pale yellow flowers.

Remarking again on the 'local' character of some desert plants, we were shown a fine specimen of that magnificent palm, Washingtonia filifera complete with a beautiful 'skirt' of dead brown fronds drooping nearly to the ground. We also saw a fine shot taken in a Date Palm plantation. The Professor questioned the economic value of this introduced palm.

We then considered the plants that retracted under ground after their swift flowering and fruiting season, and we admired a great number of very beautiful annuals, many of which in a good year come up in vast quantities.

"But" cautioned the lecturer, "don't imagine if you see a fine show one year, you'll find it in the same place next year."

These lovely flowers are apparently quite unpredictable, appearing and disappearing in a most remarkable way to the lasting

vexation of photographers. We saw acres of Californian poppies beautiful larkspurs, penstemons, a delightful patch of zinnias with graceful white flowers, both less flamboyant and less stiff than those of our Auckland gardens. There was the gracious Globe Mallow with its pale red flowers, a lovely white buttercup, the big purple-headed clover, the pale gold brittle bush (Encelia), a very lovely species of evening primrose, some delicate bluebells, a white scrambling convolvulus, the desert aster and other 'daisies' large and ornamental. We saw too the sand verbena (Abronia - a genus of the marvel-of-Peru family Nyctaginaceae, so it is not a true verbena), the graceful Calochortum kennedyi and other beautiful species of desert lilies and many other enchanting relatives of familiar garden flowers.

In some cases we were shown not only a mass of blooms but also enlargements of the individual flowers.

Finally we saw great collections of tumbleweeds massed in the shelter of tall rocks on the arid shores of Pyramid Lake. I was immediately reminded of collections of seed-heads of Spinifex hirsutus pausing in the shelter of rocks on our own West Coast - though with the tumbleweeds it is the whole plant not just the seed head that wanders on its wind-blown way.

In conclusion, our lecturer showed some striking slides of desert landscapes taken in morning and evening light. An interesting discussion followed and we all felt we had travelled far and fast amidst a very remarkable vegetation.

The meeting concluded with a very hearty vote of thanks to the speaker.

On The Pukeamaru Range

by R.D. Cresswell

Travellers along the East Coast Highway on the Te Araroa-Cape Runaway section will have noticed a bush-clad range with one or two waterfalls visible from the road. This is the Pukeamaru Range whose highest point is Trig J 3,232 feet.

On October 28th 1958, Messrs. R.A. and R.D. Cresswell and G.M. Powell left the road at the Karakatuwhero road sign. After motoring up the River Valley of that name for about five miles, we struck a ford which marks the end of the all-weather road. The car parked, we collected rucksacks and waded through the river. A short walk over undulating sheep country landed us at a stream just below a fine waterfall. Here Peperomia urvilleana grows pendant with