

White Sands – 1938

Narrator: Snow white sands of gypsum, windblown into dunes of enchanting beauty, comprise one of the most interesting units in our system of national monuments and parks. Among the newest of the national monuments, White Sands is located in southern New Mexico, about twelve miles southwest of the town of Alamogordo, less than one hundred miles north of El Paso, Texas, and within easy reach of five national parks.

In this unique American Sahara, automobiles replace the camel as ships of the desert. Quite a change from olden times, or when the Spanish explorers journeyed through this country, they called it the "Journey of Death." Here comes a modern ship of the desert, and it's towing a surfboard, riding the waves of sand as you would water. One good thing, you can't drown if you go overboard!

These dunes and their adjacent alkaline flats comprise an area of 367 square miles, about a hundred of which are in the monument area. The dunes are unique in that the sand is snow white. It's composed of nearly pure gypsum, calcium sulfate to the chemist, just plain plaster of paris to most everyone else.

Scientists tell us that this gypsum was originally deposited on the floor of an ancient sea, which covered this area long before the dinosaur roamed. Later the region was elevated; seeping water dissolved the gypsum, and brought it back to the surface in solution. Here the water evaporated, leaving a white gypsum crust that readily crumbles into sand. Wind sweeps the flats clear of loose material, leaving behind consolidated materials as fantastically shaped erosional remnants.

For a distance of about one quarter of a mile, the pale, grey-green desert plant life invades the domain of the conquering sands. Inside this line, the dune flanks are as destitute of vegetation as are the polar snows. But here on the border line, we encounter strange woody plants of the desert, and see the beauty of the yucca. This useful plant furnishes the Indians of the desert with many necessities: clothing, shoes, soap, twine, needle and thread, even food and medicine.

Pushed constantly by westerly winds, these dunes, ten to forty feet high, are moving ever eastward. Some have already moved eighteen miles. Over the north and south, they merge into yellowish quartz sands, but here abreast the gypsum source, they sprawl like enormous piles of white sugar.

Do you prefer lump sugar? Well the gypsum crystals found where the dunes begin are just about that size. Or perhaps the granulated is more to your liking. There's a good imitation on the windward slopes of the dunes. The finer particles have been sifted out by the wind and blown over the top.

It's easy for cars to speed along on the hard-crusting windward slopes of the dunes, but if you come up and over the top, then you sink to the hubs. Excuse my dust please! This is not an example of proper desert driving; it only demonstrates the fineness of the sand. Along the eastern edge of the dunes, the sand is so fine that when in motion you get the illusion of crystal clear water running over the surface.

Natural gypsum sand, taken from outside the monument area, is used locally for making souvenir statues and for all household purposes to which plaster of paris is applied. But in the officially protected area, the National Park Service preserves undisturbed and unexploited by man the pristine beauty of nature's modeling for the enjoyment and education of nature loving America.

In these enchanting ripple patterns, as in the ripples on bodies of water, we observe evidence of the dune building force: the wind. This is a surprise – more ripples, but of a very different kind! Real fishing, on a real lake, right on the edge of the desert sands. And real fish are biting. Uh-oh that one got away! Better luck next time. Well there's another bite, and this one didn't get away – a sportsman's paradise.

This land of boldly painted and fantastic mirages is not yet done with its startling surprises. These girls, how much they seem appeared in the desert! Every step is confident and sure; they know just where they're going. Here's the surprise: they had better know, for every one of them is blind. They are students at the New Mexico State School for the Blind.

By this time, we're ready for anything. We've seen sand as fine and white as talcum powder, that's marched with the wind for eighteen miles up hill and down dale, that looks like running spring water as it moves ever eastward. We've seen nature's winnower, the wind, sift the fine grains from the course with uncanny thoroughness. We've seen surfboard riders, breasting rippled waves of white sand forty feet high. And we've seen real fish pulled out of a desert lake. And now these girls, brave and real, not mere shadows on the sands; they too sense the desert glory, but it is our great additional privilege to see.

Yet all these wonders hardly prepare us for the riotous beauty of the desert sunset. Beyond the purpling San Andres Mountains, the sun sinks in a blaze of red and golden flame. Evening clouds that wreath the mountaintops are printed in breathtaking colors, far beyond the power of the artist's brush. In delicate pastel shades, the white sands mirror the staggering canvas of the evening sky. A brooding solitude comes over the desert, a mood of peace, and space, and silence. To the visitor comes a deep sense of reverence, of inspiration and of a great experience. Night falls gently, a new and eerie charm pervades the glowing dunes. A million stars with undreamed brilliance come out to blaze and flash, until another new and even more colorful dawn comes to usher in the pageantry of another day on the desert.