

CHRISTMAS 2020



Greetings Friends and Family, Once again, it's that time of year when I have the pleasure of writing my Christmas Letter. But this letter will be significantly shorter than in years past for a reason we all know. Still, there were times this year when I was able to do some limited travel, as well as experience the pleasures of "staying at home"!

Last Christmas my sister Lynn joined us once again for the holidays, and I had planned a couple of short trips to San Diego and Palm Springs. Unfortunately, the trips had to be cancelled for a couple of reasons. First of all, Leslie injured her back a few days before the holiday while she was making Christmas baskets, so she was not able to travel. Secondly, just after Lynn arrived, two major storms hit southern California, dumping several inches of rain over the Christmas holiday. The thought of walking around San Diego in the heavy rain was not what I had in mind, so we opted to spend the holiday at home, which turned out to be just fine!

In mid-January I met up with my best friend from high school, whom I had not seen for more than 50 years! During that time, we had corresponded every Christmas holiday and also stayed in touch through the occasional letter. He and his wife were visiting one of their grandsons who was living near Phoenix, Arizona. So, I decided to join them in Scottsdale for a long overdue "reunion". We had arranged to meet for dinner at a nearby Italian restaurant, and as soon as I walked through the restaurant door, I recognized John immediately – it was like he had never aged. And he also recognized me right away, as if little had changed over the years. That evening we caught up on everything that had happened in our lives since high school days, as well as recalling the old times we spent together. It was truly a wonderful evening and one that I will never forget! At the end of the evening, as the restaurant was closing, we vowed to meet up again sometime in the future.

The next morning, I joined John and Ginny for breakfast at the Cracker Barrel restaurant near the hotel. We were joined by the wife of our best friend Steve who had passed away a few months earlier from pancreatic cancer. During our conversation, I learned of several other of our high school friends who had died recently, which is a sad reality we have to face as time moves on. John still manages the family farm in Illinois and came dressed to breakfast in his signature "bibs" (*bib denim overalls*), looking as if he had just come in from the fields. He told me that he wears his bibs just about everywhere, including to his lawyer's office and the bank - some things never change! We all enjoyed a real down home, "stick to your ribs" breakfast before it was time for me to begin my journey back to southern California.

On the way back home, I took many of the "blue highways", rather than staying on the boring Interstate. During the long 6-hour drive, I came upon several very interesting sights, one of which was a stop for gas in Lake Havasu City where there

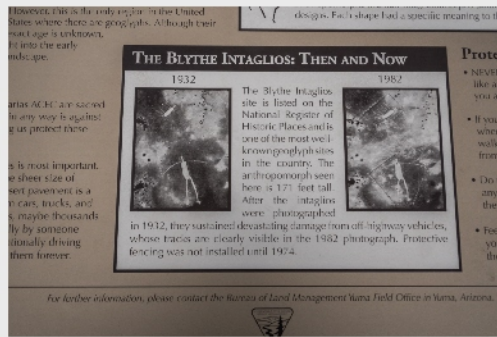


Historic Downtown Wickenburg

were at least 40 – 50 old VW vans parked nearby. I asked one of the drivers what was going on and learned they had just come from an annual convention of VW vans from every state in the union, as well as from Canada and Mexico. Apparently, over 500 VW vans had gathered in Lake Havasu City for the convention! That's when it dawned on me why I had seen so many of them on the highway coming into town. Further on down the road I came to the old west town of Wickenburg where a number of classic old western films were shot during the 1940's and 50's. As I walked around the historic district, little had changed from the 1800's, and a vintage steam locomotive sat at the old train station. The Union Pacific railroad still runs through town, but passenger service ceased in the late

1950's. By this time of day, it was getting pretty hot, so I stopped at "Mecca's Bar & Grill" for a couple of cold beers. The bar was packed with a local crowd watching the football games on TV. It was a pleasant rest stop and a very interesting time

listening to the local gossip!



Just across the border, not far beyond the Colorado River, was a strange archeological site just west of Blythe, California called "The Intaglios". They are known as "Geoglyphs", one of which is an "anthropomorph" (171-foot human like form) carved into the desert centuries ago by the local Native Americans. The area is now protected by the Bureau of Land Management. Farther west, I came upon the remains of the abandoned



Mojave Desert near Blythe



Wyatt Earp's House in Vidal

town of Vidal, California. Most of the buildings were in a serious state of disrepair, but one old house had been partially restored. I discovered it was once home to Wyatt Earp during his later days in California where he spent the last winters of his life, working claims of gold and copper he found nearby. Meanwhile, the Arizona and California Railroad continues to make its way through Vidal on the route from its connection with BNSF in Cadiz, California to Phoenix, Arizona. From Vidal it was another couple of hours through the Mojave Desert to Redlands and back home.

In mid-February I took the train into downtown Los Angeles on a bright, sunny day to take photos of the "El Pueblo Historic District" where Los Angeles was founded in 1781 by Spanish missionaries. Today the area is known for "Olvera Street", where

many of the famous Mexican restaurants and shops are located, as well as adjacent "Chinatown". As I walked through the area, lots of families were out enjoying the warm sunshine and the lively market scene. Then I walked south down Spring Street to the "Grand Central Market", a huge old building dating from the early 1900's where dozens of restaurants and shops were crowded with people enjoying the Sunday afternoon. During the early 1900's, many large Victorian mansions sat on top of Bunker Hill, just north of the market. Today they are all gone and replaced by high-rise apartments and skyscraper office buildings. Strolling through the market was a cornucopia of sights, sounds, and smells that challenged the senses at every turn – a delightful side of downtown that many people never see. As I continued south toward "LA Live" and Staples Center, I noticed at least a dozen new high-rise



Grand Central Market

buildings under construction, several of which were destined to be new hotels. Outside Staples Center I encountered a group of young people dancing to the sounds of the latest "K-Pop" songs. Meanwhile, a large crowd stood in line waiting to buy K-Pop merchandise before a K-Pop concert that night at Staples Center. A couple of blocks east of the Convention Center I came upon a film being shot in an old Victorian building. Nearby was a large parking lot filled with vintage



Vintage cars for filming

cars and trucks being used in the film. I couldn't resist taking a few photos of them. As it was getting late in the afternoon, I headed toward Union Station to catch the train back to San Bernardino. Along the way I passed a beautiful botanical garden in Grand Park where I took some photos of the lovely flowers and fountains. And so ended my Sunday in downtown LA! In late February, I took a day trip to the Whitewater Nature Preserve in the San Bernardino Mountains just north of San Geronimo Pass. The colors of the trees



K-Pop dancers - Staples Center

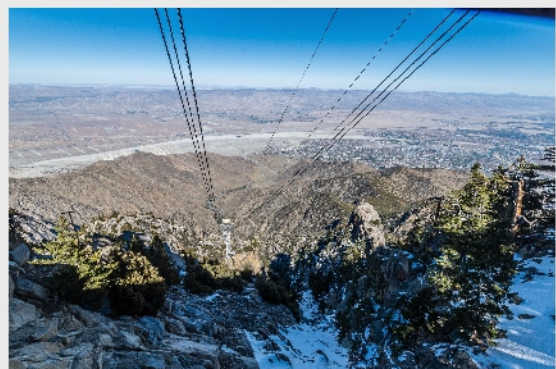


surrounding a small lake were spectacular in the bright sunshine. The Whitewater River flows through the preserve on its way to the Coachella Valley. The preserve is also a wildlife sanctuary that is home to a wide range of animals from desert species to Bighorn Sheep and Mountain Lion that roam the high mountain slopes. The area is now part of the 154,000 acre (62,325 hectares) "Sand to Snow National Monument"



managed by the US Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management. The monument incorporates an incredible range of ecosystems, from Sonoran Desert in the Coachella Valley (elevation 300 feet) up to Alpine Tundra on the summit of San Geronio Peak (elevation over 11,000 feet / 3354 meters) – a remarkable part of southern California!

At the beginning of March, I spent a couple of days in Palm Springs during the annual Esri Business Partner Conference to meet up with some of my international colleagues. Since the Covid-19 virus pandemic had recently been identified in California, the attendance at the conference was less than a third of what it would have been normally. As a result, a great many of my international friends did not attend. However, I was able to share dinner at "Fisherman's Market" with my friends from Dubai and the Netherlands. I stayed at the Hyatt hotel downtown and had a great room, with beautiful views overlooking the mountains and the city's oldest golf course. The hotel also had a "Sunset Hour" reception in



the lobby for the few guests who were staying in the hotel. According to the hotel staff, a large number of reservations had been cancelled at the last minute due to the concerns surrounding the Covid-19 virus. Earlier in the day, I took the tramway up to the San Jacinto State Park where there was still quite a bit of snow on the ground at the Mountain Station (elevation 8,516 feet / 2595 meters). The views of the Coachella valley below were



View of Coachella Valley below

awesome, as well as a view of the Salton Sea over 50 miles (80 km) away!

Before returning to the valley, I had a couple of cold beers in the "Lookout Lounge" overlooking the valley 8,000 feet below (2440 meters). The tramway is one of the longest in the world and ascends through 5 distinct ecological zones that represent the Sonoran Desert, all the way to the Arctic tundra – like taking a trip from Mexico to Alaska!

The next morning, I left Palm Springs for a real estate photo shoot in Indio. The property was in a gated community where the security was exceptionally tight. But eventually the security guard accepted my explanation and I was permitted to enter. On my way back from the shoot, I stopped just outside of Palm Springs to join a tour of the giant



windmills that cover a large part of the surrounding desert. The tour began with a presentation about how the windmills work, their construction, and the importance of wind power these days. It was absolutely fascinating, especially when we were told that wind power not only generates a significant amount of electrical energy in the country but is also responsible for creating tens of thousands of new jobs! Following the presentation, we climbed aboard a small bus that took us into one of the largest "windmill farms" to get a closeup view of the giant structures. The largest of the new windmills use a GE 1.5-Megawatt turbine with three 116 ft blades atop a 212-foot high tower, for a total height of 328 feet (100 meters)! It's a spectacular sight to stand at the base of the tower and stare up at the giant blades spinning in the air! The turbine on top of the tower is often larger than the size of an RV and generates electrical power through a series of gears that speed up the rotation of the blades by a factor

of 50 times. The wind farms around Palm Springs are all located in an area known as the San Geronio Pass, one of the windiest places in the country. So, generating wind power here is one of the best places anywhere and provides a substantial amount of the electricity used in the Coachella Valley. Later that evening, I visited the "La Quinta Brewing Co." in downtown Palm Springs for a couple of their "Even Par IPA" before heading to my favorite Thai restaurant "Thai Smile". The order of "Masa Ma Curry with Pork" was superb, though the portion was much more than I could finish, so leftovers went home with me. Along with a cold bottle of Singha beer, it was a delicious dinner.

The next morning, I left Palm Springs for another real estate photo shoot in Apple Valley, a small community in the high desert northwest of Palm Springs. It was a long 95-mile drive through fog and light rain as a storm system began to roll in from the Pacific. Luckily, by the time I arrived at the property, the fog and light rain ended, and a bit of sunshine appeared. Later, as I drove back home over the Cajon Pass, I once again encountered the fog and light rain that was to last for a few more days.

As with the rest of the country, I spent most of the next nine months, "staying at home". About the only times I left the house were to shop at the grocery store, the drug store, the gas station, or to go hiking. I spent many afternoons hiking in the hills above San Timoteo Canyon, a great place to practice "social distancing" since I rarely saw



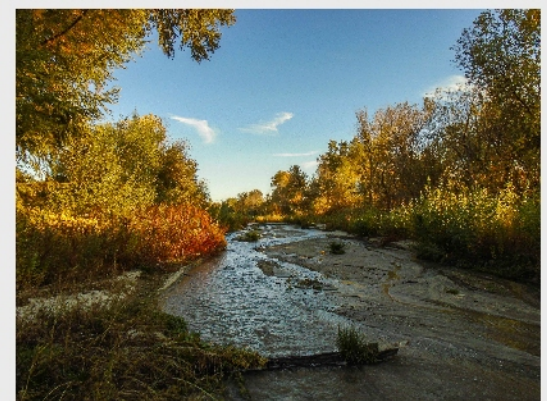
San Timoteo Canyon

anyone else. I always carried my camera and was rewarded with some beautiful photos. One of my favorite places to hike was along San Timoteo Creek in the Redlands Conservancy. It was always very peaceful and relaxing to sit by the creek, listening to the water flowing and watching the many birds and other wildlife that make the canyon their home. Among the animals I saw were red-tailed hawk, quail, rabbit, coyote, rough-nosed lizard, and even a large Peacock, which had to have escaped from someone's farm since they are obviously not native to southern California. On a recent hike, I was very surprised to see a large deer (4-point buck) dash across the road just 20 feet away! The canyon is also home to a small herd of wild Burros, and although I often saw their tracks and heard their "braying" in the distance, I never actually saw them. Besides all the wildlife, another feature of the canyon is a main line of the Union Pacific Railroad. More than two dozen huge freight trains pass through the canyon every day on their way from Los Angeles to Yuma, Arizona. Some of these trains are over 3 miles (5 km) long and can have up to 5 or 6 locomotives. The eastbound trains have to negotiate a 2% grade up the canyon, which slows them down to 15 – 20 mph. Traffic on the highway crossing the railroad tracks often has to wait up to 15 minutes for one train to pass! But I find it fascinating to watch the huge trains roar by as I sit beside the creek. I think I'll continue to hike in the canyon and along the creek even after the pandemic is over.

Another location where I love to go hiking is a place known as "Sullivan's Curve" near the junction of Interstate 15 and Highway 138. The mountains surrounding it are some very interesting shapes and are called the "Mormon Rocks". The name derives from the fact that the old "Mormon Trail" passed through the Cajon Pass and an historical monument now stands near the site. Sullivan's Curve refers to a huge S-shaped curve that allows freight trains to gain a significant amount of elevation needed to negotiate the 4200-foot (1300 meter) summit of Cajon Pass. There are four parallel sets of railroad tracks that handle over 100 BNSF and Union Pacific freight trains on average every day! I



Red-Tailed Hawk



San Timoteo Creek



Sullivan's Curve

found a couple of spots along the Pacific Crest Trail where there are spectacular views of the freight trains, as well as the surrounding San Bernardino mountains. To reach Sullivan's Curve requires a 4-wheel drive vehicle to travel over the rough dirt roads, but the drive is well worth the effort. Over the past year I've photographed dozens of trains, and I never get tired of watching the huge locomotives climbing the steep grade at full power, pulling long trains that are often over 3 miles (5 km) in length. There can be up to 9 or 10 locomotives on some of the longest trains. It's quite a sight to see for anyone interested in trains, and it's a favorite spot for train buffs!



Sullivan's Curve

At the beginning of the year, I had planned to attend a number of conferences and events, all of which were either cancelled, postponed until next year, or turned into "virtual events". Among them were the Scottish Highland Games in Long Beach, West Coast School of Photography in San Diego, the Esri User Conference in San Diego, Photoshop World in Las Vegas, Adobe MAX Conference in Los Angeles, and the Seaside Highland Games in Ventura. Needless to say, it was a quiet year from that perspective. Every year I plan a trip to celebrate my birthday in September, and this year I had



Casita - La Casa del Zorro resort

made reservations at one of my favorite places, "La Casa del Zorro" resort in Borrego Springs. The name of the resort in Spanish means "The House of the Fox", and it's a gorgeous place with old adobe "casitas" situated among tall palm trees. And although the county allowed dining outside, it still didn't have the same feeling as I had experienced in times past. Just two days before I was scheduled to check in at the resort, southern California was hit by a serious heat wave, so that when I arrived at the resort, temperatures were well over 120 degrees (50 C)! Luckily my casita

had a very welcome air

conditioner that functioned virtually 24 hours a day! I spent a lot of time relaxing in my casita and catching up on much of the reading I had forgone over the past few months. On the way back home, I stopped to take photos of the Salton Sea and the huge farms of date palms near the small town of Mecca. Though it had been a scorching time in the desert, I enjoyed the peace and relaxation of the nearly empty resort and look forward to another trip next year when the pandemic is over, hopefully.



Salton Sea beach



Persimmon Pie

It wasn't long before Thanksgiving arrived, but it wasn't quite like the holiday of the past. But I went ahead and cooked a traditional Thanksgiving dinner of rosemary and thyme roasted turkey, garlic mashed potatoes and gravy, baked acorn squash, sautéed brussels sprouts with bacon, cranberry and orange salad, and a persimmon pie. It was just Leslie and me at the dinner table that day, but we celebrated it with a glass of wine. Needless to say, there were plenty of delicious leftovers that we enjoyed for the next several days.

Here's hoping we can return to a Thanksgiving dinner with friends & family next year!

And the same goes for this upcoming Christmas holiday. Unfortunately, my sister Lynn will not be joining us this year, for the first time in many years. But she was not comfortable with the idea of travelling across the country and I certainly didn't blame her. I had planned a couple of short trips around southern California for the three of us, but those plans had to be cancelled, especially since the Governor has recently prohibited any "leisure" travel in most of the state. So, we will not be spending a couple of days in a lovely villa overlooking the vineyards at the South Coast Winery and Resort in the Temecula Wine country. That will have to wait until next Christmas! In the meantime, I put up the Christmas lights, as well as the traditional Christmas tree in an attempt to revive the spirit of the holiday season. And this year, virtually all of my Christmas gift shopping has been online and with the help of Santa and his UPS/FEDEX trucks, instead of his reindeer!

As for other things that happened during the year, here is a short summary.

- After several weeks of rewriting my book *"Travels with King Kong – Overland across Africa"*, it was published in June as the "second edition". I incorporated a lot more content from my original journal of the trip, as well as adding many more photos. So, the book became almost twice the number of pages as in the original edition. Also, the size of the second edition is the standard 6" x 9", rather than the original 8 ½" x 11", which makes it look better, especially in the hard cover version. It became available on Amazon and Barnes & Noble not long after it was published. A couple of months later, I was invited to do two radio interviews, one for the CBS National Radio network and the other for Apple iTunes Radio network, which turned out to be a fun experience. (you can listen to them on my website www.jimh325.net/books Now we just need to wait for someone in Hollywood to decide to make a film or TV series! (not very likely, but one never knows)
- My real estate photography business was going quite well at the beginning of the year, but as soon as the middle of March rolled around, the pandemic shut down a significant portion of the real estate market. However, a few months later in July, business picked up a bit as real estate agents saw the advantage of advertising home sales through 3D virtual tours posted online, since social distancing restrictions prohibited in-person "open houses". So, beginning in July I got the chance to start doing 3D virtual tours for a couple of national real estate marketing companies. One in particular, a company based in Nashville, got a contract to do 3D virtual tours of public schools that were planning to renovate their buildings. From that contract I had several jobs around the Los Angeles area, as well as the Coachella Valley. Then in September, I was assigned to do a 3D virtual tour of a small art gallery in downtown LA. It was a most interesting job where the gallery owners wanted to offer a virtual tour of the artwork in their gallery online so that people wouldn't have to travel in person to see the pieces being exhibited. The virtual tour proved to be so popular that I've gone back twice again to photograph new exhibits in the gallery. Here is a link to the latest 3D virtual tour of the gallery. I hope you enjoy "walking" through the gallery! (Use your mouse/cursor)

<https://tinyurl.com/ycufax2j>

Then in October and November, the Nashville company negotiated a nationwide contract with "Bright Horizons Corporation" that manages daycare centers around the country. I spent several days photographing their facilities in Los Angeles, San Diego, Orange County, and Santa Barbara. It was a fun experience to see how the centers had developed very imaginative and stimulating curriculums for all age groups from infants to children of kindergarten age. At every one of the facilities I was very impressed by how dedicated were the staff and the fact that they genuinely cared for the children!

I would also like to share with you some passages from a wonderful travel book titled *"Someone – Somewhere: Encounters with People and Places"*, written by a friend and former Esri colleague, Roman Pryjomko. His writing is very insightful and full of extraordinary experiences. Here are a few examples that I hope you'll enjoy reading as much as I did.

- In a Native American parable, an elder of the tribe expresses the truth about us in simpler terms. *"Inside me there are two dogs, one evil and one good. The evil dog and good dog fight all the time. Which dog wins? The one I*

feed the most."

- *"Coming events cast their shadows before"* (Doris Lessing, *Shikasta* – 1979)

- [Roman in South Africa - 1992] *"I was reminded of the words of President John F. Kennedy when he stated that anyone standing in the way of peaceful change makes bloody revolution inevitable."*

- [Roman in Russia – early 1990's] An astute observation from a Russian colleague: *"When you negotiate with Russians, remember that it is a wrestling match. Often, the outcome has been predetermined but you must still go through the motions knowing when and how to fall and give away the advantage, only to pick it up later. It is a strategic game, not a fight, and to win requires being able to convince the other side they have won even though you have everything you want!"*

- [Roman] At the end of his book: *"Indeed, everything passes, only the memories remain."*

And finally, here are a few more observations, quotes, and experiences from this year.

- [Redlands 1/15/20] While having a beer at the Eureka Burger Bar and Grill: TV program about the cathedral on the campus of the University of Notre Dame showed a view of its beautiful, massive pipe organ, one of the largest in the world. Meanwhile, the closed captioning read *"...in Notre Dame cathedral is and Oregon..."*!! So much for the accuracy of closed captioning technology.

- [Redlands 1/17/20] While having a beer at Eureka Burger: I saw a young man pushing an elderly lady seated in a walker to a bright shiny new black Corvette parked in the handicapped spot. He helped her out of the walker and into the "driver's seat"! Then he sat next to her as the passenger. And the whole time I watched them, I thought she would be the passenger!

- [Riverside 1/27/20] Sign on the side of an egg farm truck: *"If you wanted eggs any fresher, we'd have to give you the bird!"*

- [Redlands 2/13/20] As I walked up to the second floor of Romano's Chicago Pizzeria and passed by one of the banquet rooms, I spotted a birthday cake in the shape of a helicopter. A card placed next to it gave "instructions" for cutting the cake. (take off the rotor and tail section before cutting the cake!)

- [Santa Clarita 2/21/20] While I was parked at the William S. Hart Ranch county park: A man in the car parked next to me began putting on a bra and stuffing it with tissues – weird!

- [Upland 3/14/20] Observation while having a beer at J.D. Allison's Bar and Grill: Several "well-endowed" women carrying their cell phones in their bra! And I wondered, what happens when the phone rings and it's set to "vibrate"?

In conclusion, here are some classic quotes from the book "Darwin Awards III" – definitely words to live (or die) by!

- You don't need a parachute to skydive. You only need a parachute to skydive twice!

- In the ongoing battle between airplanes and the ground, the ground has yet to lose!

- You can lead a man to knowledge, but you can't make him think.

- If at first you don't succeed, then skydiving is not for you!

- Gravity – More than a good idea, it's the law

- Reincarnation – Let's you keep trying until you get it right!

- Dumb – one sandwich short of a picnic

- A fool and his life are soon parted

- He was treated for his injuries and counseled on the use of his most important safety tool – his brain!

- Everyone starts life with a bag full of luck and an empty bag of experience – the trick is to fill your experience bag before your luck runs out.

- Learn from the mistakes of others. You won't live long enough to make them all yourself!

- Forget the old adage about learning from your own mistakes. It's much safer and more interesting to learn from the mistakes of others!

And so ends my Christmas Letter for the year 2020, with the hope that you all have a safe holiday and a happy new year, for the Lord knows we really need a new year!



PHOTO GALLERY



Whitewater Nature Preserve



Wickenburg, Arizona



Old Wickenburg Railroad Station



Waiting for the train in Wickenburg - 1875



Vidal, California



El Pueblo Historic District - Los Angeles



Church of Our Lady Queen of Angels - Los Angeles



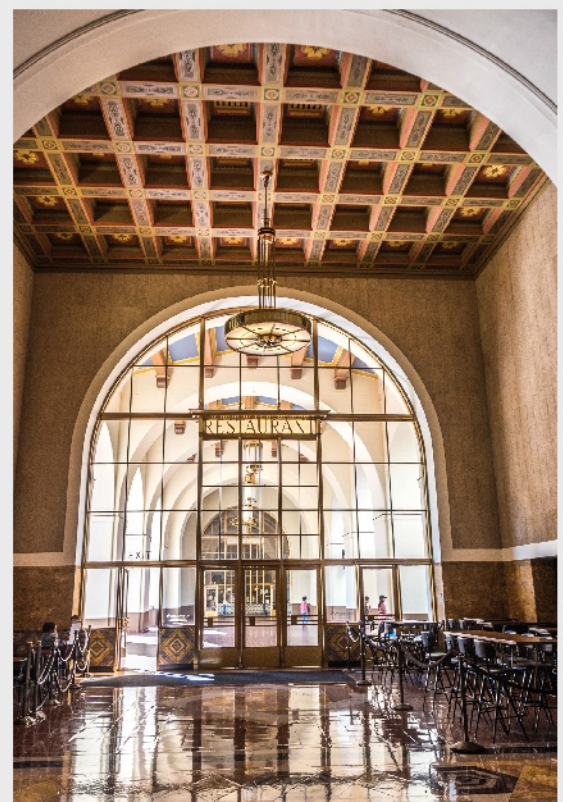
Los Angeles City Hall



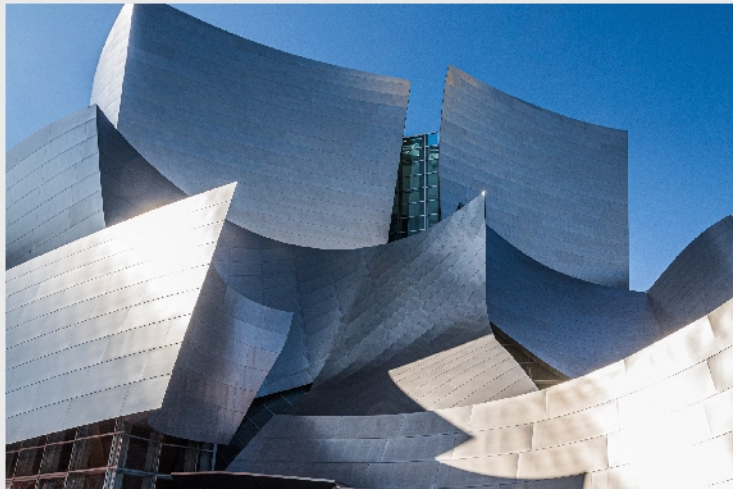
"Angel's Flight" - Downtown LA



Grand Central Market - Los Angeles



Los Angeles Union Station



Disney Concert Hall - Los Angeles



Mt San Jacinto State Park and Wilderness



Historic Mural - Old Town Banning, California



Thousand Palms Nature Preserve



Thousand Palms Nature Preserve - Coachella Valley, California



Union Pacific train of Marine Corps tanks going to Yuma Proving Grounds, Arizona (Mt San Jacinto in background)



Wild Larkspur - San Timoteo Canyon



Tarantula - San Timoteo Canyon



California Morning Glory - San Timoteo Creek



Purple Poppies - San Timoteo Canyon



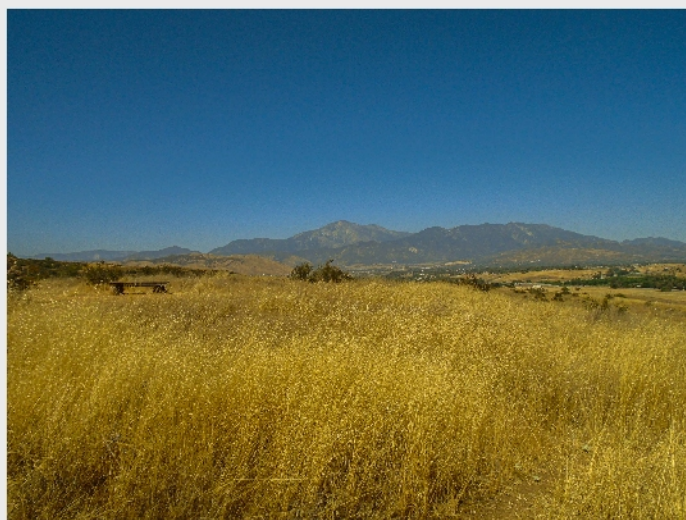
Northbound BNSF Freight Train at Mormon Rocks



Native American sculpture by Carlos Bricceda
Borrego Springs, California



Adobe Casita - La Casa del Zorro Resort - Borrego Springs



Redlands Conservancy and San Bernardino Mts



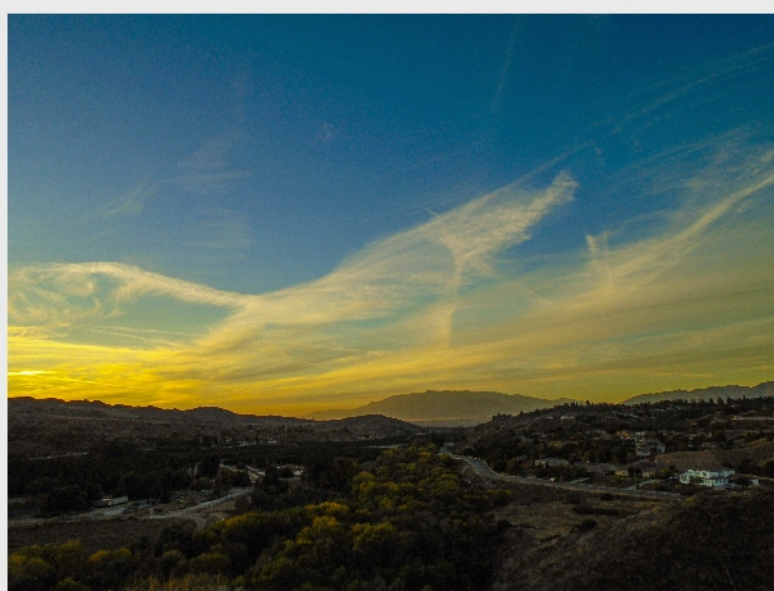
San Bernardino Mountains following a November snowstorm



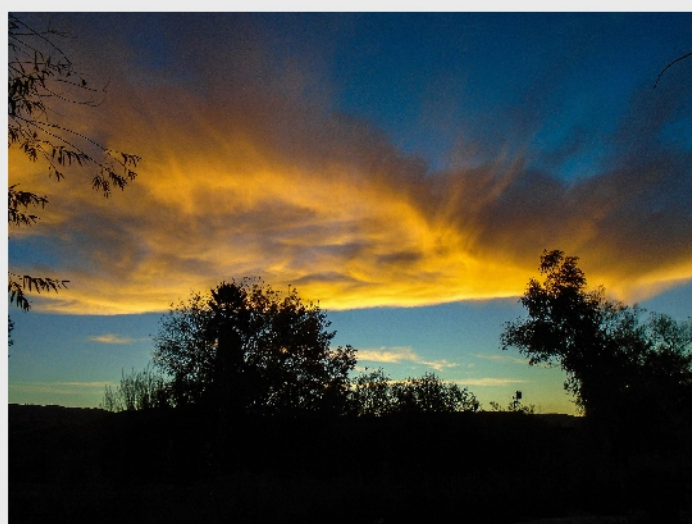
Yucaipa Ridge Fire smoke seen from San Timoteo Creek



Old Windmill - San Timoteo Creekside Trail



Sunset - San Timoteo Creekside Trail



Sunset - San Timoteo Creek



San Timoteo Canyon Viewpoint



HAPPY HOLIDAYS