

# Incorporating Human Histories into Geologic Field Trips

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## Abstract

Incorporating human histories into a geologic curriculum can deepen and contextualize students' connections with field trip sites. This presentation will discuss, for example, the implementation of such histories from Death Valley and the greater Mojave Desert region of California, a regular field trip location for the Bryn Mawr College Geology Department, using three case studies of marginalized perspectives: 1) Indigenous populations of the Timbisha Shoshone, 2) White female suffragette explorers, and 3) African American homesteaders. These narratives are often less explored, more seldom known, and deserving of amplification. This presentation uses primary texts detailing the lived experiences of each of the three narratives in relationship to Mojave and Death Valley landscapes.

## Introduction

This project examined the human history of geographic locations associated with the Bryn Mawr College Mineral Collection with the goal of expanding the collection's information and bibliography, such as mining towns or countries which yielded many collection samples. The human histories of these locations can be incorporated into the Mineral Collection display cases in Park Science Building, future geologic or mineralogic courses, and geology student's field trip education and explorations. California's Death Valley National Park and Mojave regions were selected as a discussion example for this presentation due to their status as both a common destination for Bryn Mawr College's annual Geology Department field trip and a source for collection samples. This presentation will specifically discuss the implementation of the human histories of Death Valley and Mojave regions into field trip curriculums.

## Methods

This project explored the human histories of numerous locations connected to the Bryn Mawr College Geology Department and Mineral Collection. The initial search was broad and exploratory, investigating any interesting or significant humans, such as indigenous peoples, travelers, mining populations, researchers, geologists, etc. and compiling a broad bibliography of texts. The Death Valley region stood out, and was subsequently selected for presentation, due to its geologic significance, strong relationship to the Bryn Mawr College Geology Department, and its wealth of differing human histories. It soon became clear that many of the significant or unique narratives from the Death Valley region were marginalized perspectives, and from those, three case studies were selected for discussion in this presentation. This offers a range of written experiences with the same land that Bryn Mawr geology majors visit.

## 1) Indigenous populations of the Timbisha Shoshone

The Timbisha Shoshone, like many Indigenous populations, have a unique relationship with their homeland of Death Valley. While often thought of as extremely hot, dry, unlivable, and untouchable, Death Valley is a "place about life" (in the words of elder Pauline Esteves [Fig. 1a]) for the Timbisha Shoshone. They have lived in Death Valley for over a thousand years, migrating seasonally to accommodate the extreme temperatures. As the area gained both population and popularity, driven mostly by mining desires, the Timbisha Shoshone lost more and more of their land, including spiritual places and locations that bore food and water (Ref. 2).

- The Timbisha Shoshone gained federal recognition in 1983
- In 1994, Death Valley and the whole of Timbisha Land became a National Park.
- The 2001 Timbisha Shoshone Homeland Act gave the tribe some of their ancestral land back within the confines of Death Valley National Park and with the purpose of coexistence (Ref. 4). This act was passed due to thorough and persistent activism led by Timbisha elder Pauline Esteves.

## 2) White female suffragette explorers

A select few American suffragettes have traveled or spent time in the Mojave desert region and documented their travels. Almost parallel themes can be found in their writing - simultaneous exploration of the land, of the self, and of freedom. One of those suffragettes was Cleveland-based Edna Brush Perkins (Fig. 1b) who thoroughly and vividly documented her 1920 expedition into Death Valley in her travel memoir "The White Heart of Mojave." For Perkins, Death Valley became an escape from democracy. She found a "different kind of freedom from that about which we had been preaching" (Ref. 3).

## 3) African American homesteaders

Majority of Mojave homesteaders in the early decades of the 1900s were white families, however for African American homesteaders, about twenty-four families, a freedom from the oppression of civilization was advertised through an opportunity to farm the Mojave Desert for three years in exchange for land ownership (Fig. 2). Families settled in Lanfair Valley, currently the Mojave National Preserve, just south of Death Valley. While the families succeeded in farming for the duration of three years, this success was relatively short lived - many moved to other farms or away from farming completely. The town population dwindled by the early 1930s (Ref. 1). It is important to note that stories of African American experiences in the Mojave region were much more difficult to find. This is a demographic whose stories are either documented less, discussed less, or both.

## Discussion

It is important to not only recognize the gravity of these stories, but to also build them into several realms of the field trip discussion. There are many opportunities for adding these place-based human histories into courses and trips, including, but not limited to: adding select sites to field trips that involve significant human history (e.g. sites of significance to the Timbisha Shoshone history, visiting historic homesteading sites), elaborating on the history of pre-included sites (e.g. adding Edna Brush Perkins written experience with certain sites as a partner to the geologic discussion), including human history in field trip prep, and allowing built-in time for students' reflection of their own experience with the land.

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## Case Studies – Death Valley, CA



Fig. 1 (A-C). Images of the discussed individuals. A) Photograph of Timbisha elder and activist Pauline Esteves. Source: KCET. B) Photograph of Cleveland suffragette Edna Brush Perkins. Source: California State Library. C) Photograph of a Mojave homesteader Richard W. Hodnett. Source: LA Westerners.



Fig. 2. This 1910 advertisement ran in many Los Angeles newspapers to attract African American families to Mojave homesteading. Source: Daily Bulletin.



Fig. 3. Death Valley National Park, Zabriskie Point. Source: Dan Sedran, Shutterstock.

## Conclusion

Structuring human histories into geologic field trips creates a stronger and more three-dimensional understanding of the land, as well as helps to bridge the gap between geology and the humanities.

## References

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