During the gold rush days, men perished within 50 feet of water at Tinajas Altas because they arrived there too exhausted to climb the precipitous rock wall where the natural tanks are located. This historic old watering place is in southern Arizona on Camino del Diablo, once a main artery of travel across the southwestern desert. Few travelers go there today—but it is a fascinating spot for those who like to explore the remote corners of the desert region.

Watering Place on the Devil's Highway

By RANDALL HENDERSON

"WE found 30 naked and poverty-stricken Indians who lived solely on roots, lizards and other wild foods," wrote Juan Matheo Manje, companion of Father Kino, at the time of his visit to Tinajas Altas.

The Indians were Papagos, and the time of Don Matheo's visit was nearly 250 years ago. The savages are gone from this place now—no one goes there today except an occasional camper or prospector.

But the nine natural tanks from which the Indians drew their water supply are still there—and the metates in which they ground their wild beans, and the crude symbols they sketched on the granite walls.

It was the mystery of these strange symbols that lured a party of six of us to Tinajas Altas in February this year.

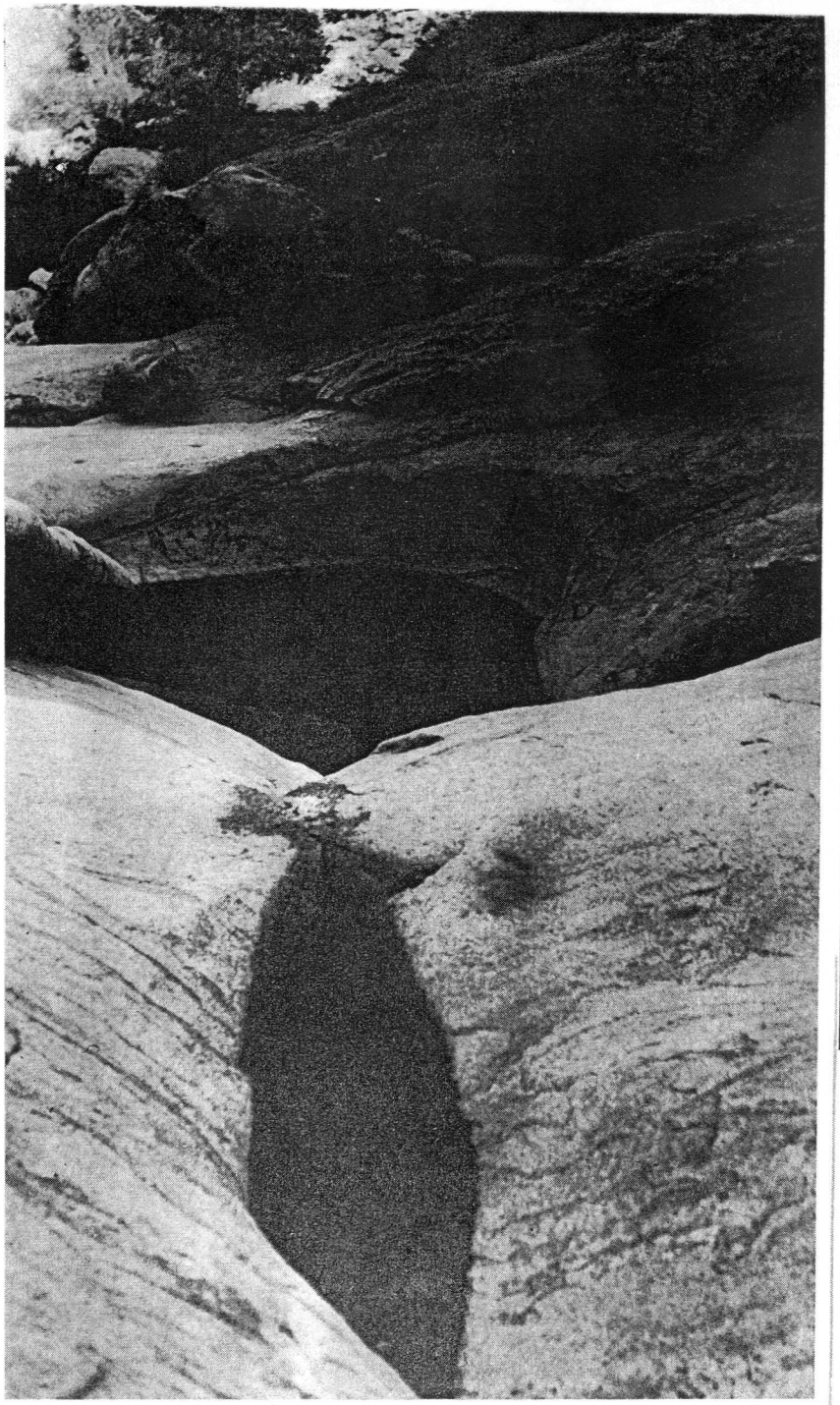
Every student of Southwestern history knows about Tinajas Altas—that ancient watering place along the Camino del Diablo in southern Arizona. The name is Spanish for High Tanks—and it describes them well. They are carved by water erosion in a granite canyon so steep that more than one human being has died of thirst at their base because he lacked the skill or the strength to climb to water 50 feet above.

Our party assembled at Wellton, Arizona, for the trek down the east side of the Gila range to these historic tanks. Joe E. King came from Yuma, John Brownell from Brawley, California, Wilson McEuen, Charles Sones and the writer from El Centro. Rollie B. (Curly) Cornell, whose big-tired desert car was to provide transportation for sidetrips into the uncharted desert region along the Mexican border, was waiting for us at Wellton.

All of us except Brownell had visited Tinajas Altas previously—but we were eager to return. Such a place has an insatiable fascination for those who like to follow the rough trails into remote sections of the desert region.

Leaving Highway 80 at Wellton, we followed the sandy wash which leads off to the south. A mile beyond the town the road climbs out of the arroyo and the remainder of the 27-mile journey to the *tinajas* is along a hard trail—hard but slow. It is one of those washboard roads that is tedious only to those who find it difficult to readjust themselves to 10-mile-an-hour travel.

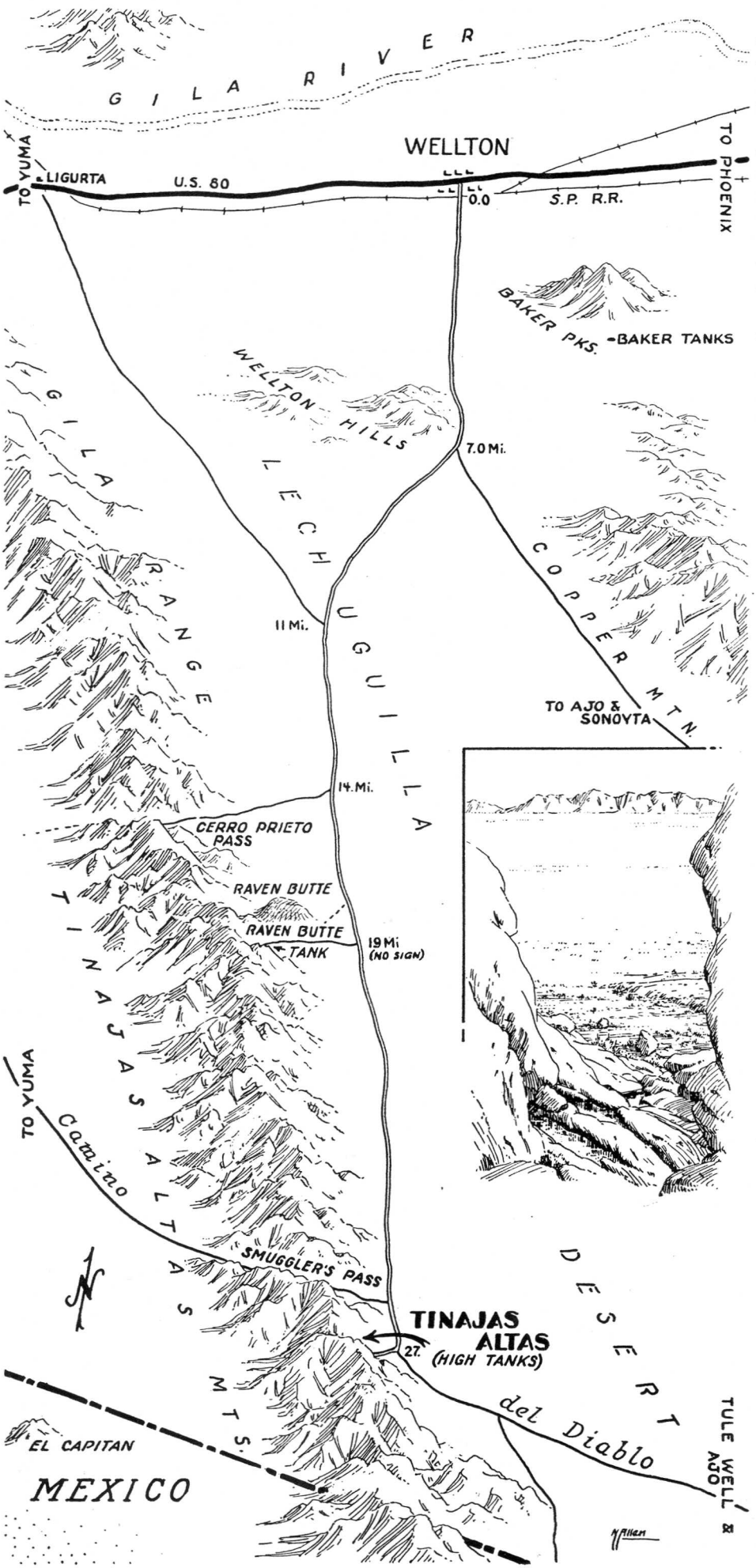
Such roads are good discipline for 20th century humans. When you can learn to bounce along at a snail's pace over innumerable cross-washes, and like it, you have overcome one of the biggest obstacles to the average person's enjoyment of the desert.



Two of the nine natural tanks at Tinajas Altas are shown in this picture.

Old Mother Nature has provided many interesting things to observe along this High Tanks road. The jagged skyline of the Gila range parallels the route on the west and the Cabeza Prieta mountains are on the east. You are crossing the Lechugilla desert where giant saguaro cacti dominate a landscape of luxuriant Lower Sonoran plant life. Salmon mallow was in blossom as we made the trip south. Many of these "wild hollyhocks" of the desert were three feet in height with blossoms at every joint.

Our first night's camp was to be at Raven butte tanks. You'll recognize Raven butte as you travel south along this road. It is a pyramid of black basaltic rock, with the top of the pyramid sliced off. It stands out in bold relief against the cream-colored granite of the Gilas on the west side of the



highway. Raven butte guards the entrance to a peaceful little cove in the main range —and that cove is one of the most delightful camping spots I have found on the desert.

There are natural tanks back in the canyon, but it is a rocky climb to reach them. They are dry part of the year, so it is best to carry your own water supply if you are going to Raven butte. There is ample firewood in the arroyo, and the cove is well sheltered by flanking ridges, and Raven butte.

We took a shortcut into the cove—and got stuck in the sand. That is the penalty the desert imposes on those who try to hurry. But we had plenty of manpower for the two cars which needed help—and the exertion sharpened our appetites for the barbecued steaks which were to come later in the evening.

In justice to Curly Cornell and his ancient sand dune scooter I want to make clear that he took the wash in high gear —and then came back to help push our streamlined models out of trouble. The automotive engineers turn out beautiful cars these days—but they are about as useful on a desert trail as a pair of skiis at a dinner dance.

There is no feast quite as delicious as a tender steak broiled over the coals of an ironwood fire and then sandwiched into a big bun. There are few dishes to wash after such a meal—and that is an added argument in favor of the steaks.

But it is not necessary to get stuck in the sand to reach Raven butte cove. If we had continued down the Wellton-Tinajas road another mile—to a point 19 miles from Wellton, where a faint trail leads off to the right we would have had no difficulty. This junction is marked only by a small ironwood peg in the ground.

As we lounged on our bedrolls that evening one of the campers suggested the Desert Quiz would make good entertainment. I brought out a copy of the March number of the Desert Magazine and soon the campers were scribbling answers in their notebooks by the flickering light of the campfire. We had three "Sand Dune Sages" in the party—with Wilson McEuen at the top with a score of 18.

Later, as we sat around the fire Joe King told us about a deep dark cave somewhere up on the side of the mountain. He had discovered the cave on a previous trip, but lacked a flashlight to explore it. He thought there might be Indian artifacts in the cavern.

Early next morning we took a faint trail that followed the gentle-sloping bajada toward the canyon entrance. A number of elephant trees grew on the side hills along the way. California's elephant trees have been widely publicised following their rediscovery three years ago

—but the species has been known over wide areas in Arizona for many years. They grow the entire length of the Gila range and may be seen from Highway 80 in Telegraph pass, between Yuma and Wellton.

We scrambled over a jumble of boulders as we reached the mouth of the canyon, and came suddenly to a cave whose walls were adorned with ancient pictographs. Among them is one that will give Southwestern historians something to puzzle over. In red pigment is the perfect outline of a cross, with a date that appears to be 1731 near it. The cross is unmistakable—the date not so clear. Apparently the same pigment was used for these inscriptions as for certain Indian pictographs which appear on the same rock.

The date 1731 falls between the period when Father Kino was exploring this area, and the time a century later when the intrepid padre Garces was following these desert trails. I do not question the authenticity of these markings — their weathered condition is proof of their age. Who put them there? And when? *Quien sabe!* Your guess is as good as mine.

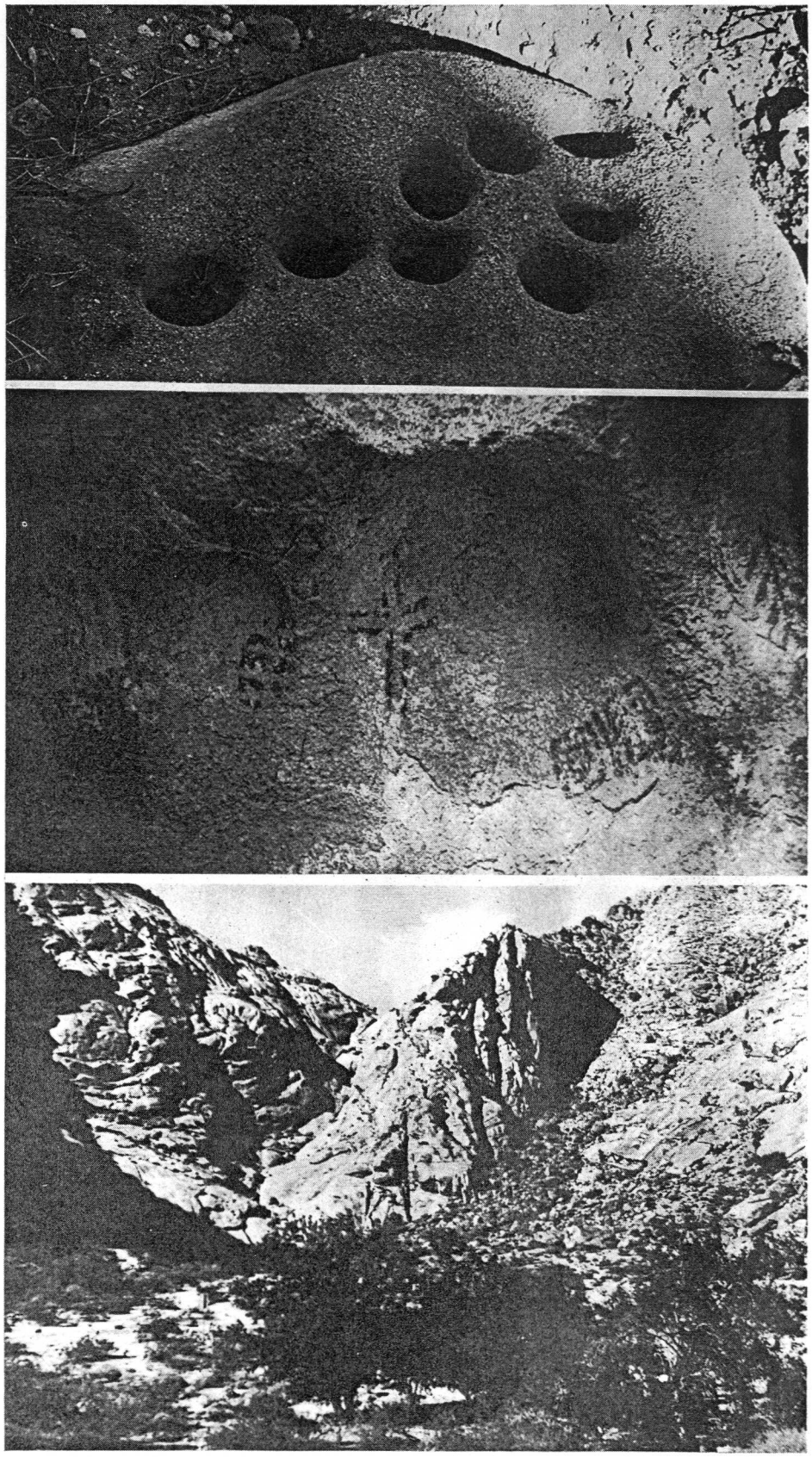
Deeper in the rock cavern we found petroglyphs, evidently of a more ancient period, and pictographs in black pigment. The well known symbols of the desert Indians were there—the lizard, the sun, the scorpion—all well preserved.

While I was exploring among the rocks Joe King with a flashlight crawled back into the dark cave he had mentioned the previous evening. Then from back in the depths of the cavern I heard a snort of disgust. Joe had found a chewing gum wrapper in the place where he was sure an Indian olla would be concealed. Such are the disillusionments of exploring close to the beaten roads.

In boulders near the inscriptions we found evidence that this place had been a more or less permanent habitat of aborigines. Scores of metates, some of them ground deep in the granite slabs, were seen. Evidently the water supply at this place was more abundant in ancient times than today.

We wanted to remain at Raven butte cove for the entire weekend. But the goal of our trip was Tinajas Altas, and it was necessary to be on our way by mid-morning.

As a side excursion that day we planned a trip to the edge of the sand dunes which extend from the Arizona border far down into Sonora, around the head of the Gulf of California. We wanted to follow the route taken by Carl Lumholtz, author of New Trails in Mexico, through Smuggler's pass and thence across the Yuma desert as far as the sand dunes. It is an unmarked trail, but we had the Lumholtz map, and our compasses—and



Top—Grinding mill of the prehistoric Indians. More than 200 mortars of various depths are found at Tinajas Altas.

Center—This cross with the date 1731 is painted in red pigment near the tanks in Raven butte cove.

Bottom—Tinajas Altas cove. The tanks are in the precipitous ravine in the center of the picture.

we had Curly Cornell's car. Without those balloon tires such a journey would have been impossible.

We left the Tinajas Altas road a half mile north of the tanks, and followed a dim pair of ruts into the gap between the southern end of the Gila range, and the northern tip of the Tinajas Altas mountains. When the going became rough, we parked our two tenderfoot models, and the six of us piled into the desert car.

The trip that day was an adventure not to be forgotten. We plunged in and out of arroyos, we skimmed the tops of sand dunes. Twice during the day we came upon international boundary markers—which leads me to suspect we were over the Mexican border part of the time. But there were no customs officers to tell us where we should or should not go—and since we had nothing to smuggle either into or out of Mexico it made little difference.

The Lumholtz party crossed the dunes to a black butte which he called El Capitan. He and his party traveled on horses. I wouldn't believe that an automobile could follow such a route—until I rode with Curly. And now I wouldn't be afraid to tackle the Sahara desert—or Pike's peak—with Cornell and his ancient contraption. He took us 25 miles cross country and back to Tinajas Altas without a push. But I wouldn't recommend the trip for a civilized automobile.

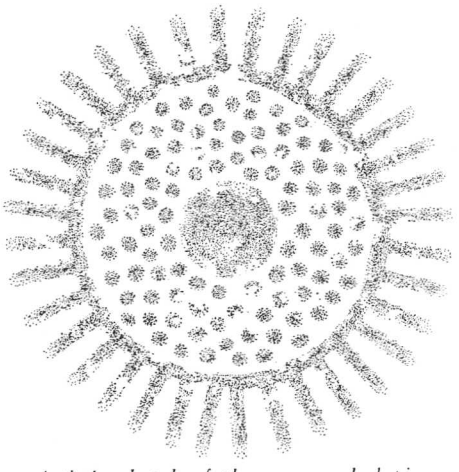
We returned to Tinajas Altas before dark. That night we cooked and ate our corned beef hash in a desert cove that has known more tragedy perhaps than any other watering place in the arid Southwest.

There are nine tanks, carved out of the granite at irregular intervals in a precipitous dike that rises 350 feet above the floor of the desert. They are so deep and so well sheltered from the sun that water is found in all or some of them throughout the year.

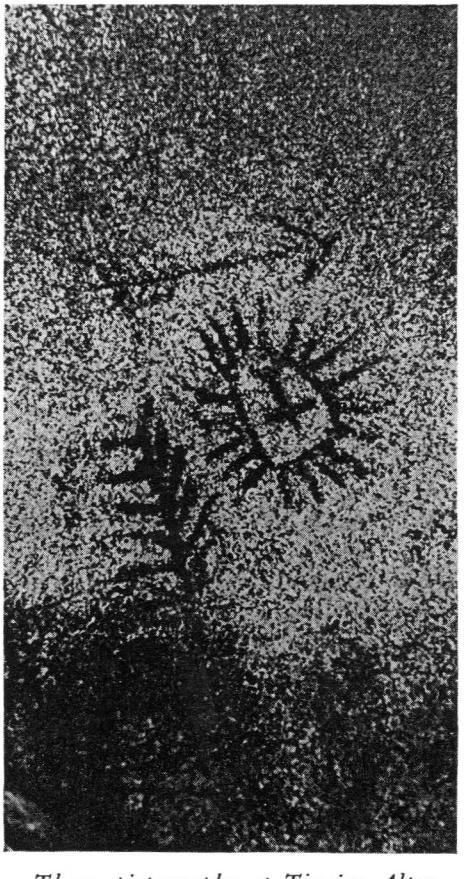
Eighty years ago when the Devil's Highway was the main route of travel for thousands of Mexican gold-seekers bound for California, these tanks supplied drinking water for large caravans of men and horses. The lower tank, which was the only one that could be reached by livestock, was nearly always empty. Then it was necessary for the prospectors and emigrants and adventurers who came this way to climb 50 feet up the steep face of granite and dip water from tanks 2 and 3 and run it down the natural granite trough to No. 1.

Today, so few travelers visit this place that there is nearly always water at the bottom, although it contains so much sand it often is necessary to dig a seepage pit to obtain a supply.

Capt. Gaillard of the U. S. boundary survey recorded the story of three exhausted prospectors who reached the tanks, found the lower one dry, and perished at the foot of the dike. Their bodies were found a few days later with fingers worn to the bone in their dying efforts to scale the rocks to the upper tanks. An ancient graveyard on the desert near the cove once contained 63 graves —mute evidence of the tragedies enacted here. Vandals have excavated most of these burial places, and nothing remains to mark the old cemetery today except pits in the sand.



Artist's sketch of the sun symbol pictograph found on the ceiling of a narrow horizontal cleft near tanks two and three at Tinajas Altas.



These pictographs at Tinajas Altas are difficult to identify as to time and significance. Evidently they were placed there in a comparatively recent period.

In more recent times a cable has been installed to help visitors climb to the second and third tanks. A signboard at the campground in the cove advises travelers that tanks 1, 2 and 3 may be reached from below, but that those desiring to reach the upper ones should detour up a talus slope on the north side and view them from above. An experienced rock climber may ascend the smooth rock face, but it is a hazardous undertaking for the unskilled.

These natural tanks first entered the pages of history when Father Kino recorded his visit here in 1699. Before his time countless generations of Indians lived here. More than 200 metates may be counted in the boulders around the cove today, some of them 12 or 15 inches in depth. It takes many years of grinding to create a 12-inch mortar in such granite as is found here.

Father Garces and other padres of the Jesuit and Franciscan periods probably came this way during their missionary treks among the Papago Indians. Capt. Juan Bautista de Anza followed the Devil's Highway on his first visit to California, but obtained water at Poso de en Medio seven miles northeast of Tinajas, and did not visit the High Tanks.

During the gold rush days the Camino del Diablo was a main artery of travel for Mexican fortune-hunters and it is estimated that at the peak of this period 5,000 travelers stopped at Tinajas Altas in one year.

As the Anglo-American gradually supplanted the Mexican in the settlement of the Southwest, travel over the Devil's Highway diminished, and when the southern transcontinental railroad was completed the Camino del Diablo became little more than a memory. There is still a passable trail along this route, but American motorists who visit Tinajas Altas seldom venture into the waterless region beyond.

In a wind-eroded cavity near our camping place I found an excellent pictograph of the shield and cross which was the emblem of the crusaders in the middle ages. There is no date but it quite evidently is the handiwork of a visitor in comparatively recent times.

Indian pictographs and petroglyphs may be seen on several rocks in the vicinity. Most interesting of all the glyphs found at Tinajas Altas is the sun symbol painted on the ceiling of a narrow horizontal cleft in the rock near the second and third tanks.

Joe King called my attention to it after we had climbed with the help of the

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cable to the granite where these upper tanks are located.

"If you will lie down and slide into that narrow slit in the rock," he told me, "you will see something worth while."

I followed his instructions, squirming on my back into the low-hung cave. Six or eight feet back into the cavity I suddenly discovered the design in blue pigment directly over my nose. After I became accustomed to the darkness I saw other pictographs in the narrow cavern, but none to compare with this ancient symbol of the sun.

Those Indians who dwelled here 250 years ago may have been naked and poverty-stricken as Don Manje describes them—but there was one among them who was an artist. The symmetry and the coloring of the design and the surprising location make it one of the most noteworthy of all the ancient Indian symbols found in the Southwest. The Indian who painted it must have lain there for many hours working close above his face, with his feet dangling precariously over a 50-foot precipice.

I would recommend the Tinajas Altas trip for those who have acquired a philosophical acceptance of 10-mile-an-hour roads. You can camp in the well-sheltered cove at Raven butte tanks, or you can unroll your sleeping bag beneath an ancient ironwood tree in the peaceful solitude of Tinajas Altas.

There are neither tax collectors nor stop-an-go signals on the Lechugilla desert. It is the kind of place that makes poets want to write poetry — and the others wish they could.