



# THE MUSEUM OF WESTERN FILM HISTORY

## Alabama Hills – Movie History & Geology

It didn't take long after the invention of moving pictures for the Hollywood studios to discover spectacular filming locations within a few hours' drive to the north, enabling directors and their production units to use the Lone Pine and Eastern Sierra area to represent the American West. The first documented motion picture filmed entirely on location at Lone Pine was *The Round-Up* (1920), a silent Western starring Fatty Arbuckle, introducing audiences to the weirdly eroded, jumbled rocks of the Alabama Hills backed by the snowcapped peaks of the Sierra Nevada Mountains.



Over the years, Lone Pine has played host to all of the Hollywood studios and hundreds of the industry's best known directors, William Wyler, William Wellman, John Ford, George Stevens, Jon Favreau and Quentin Tarantino among them. The list of actors who worked in the area is extensive and includes John Wayne, Bing Crosby, Humphrey Bogart, Barbara Stanwyck, Jeff Bridges, Jamie Foxx, Spencer Tracy, Cary Grant, Gregory Peck, Randolph Scott, Audie Murphy and Robert Downey, Jr., to name a few.

The Alabama Hills appeared in hundreds of movies and TV shows beginning in the 1920s and continuing to now, mostly Westerns – although they stood in for India, the Middle East, the Gobi Desert, China and even Africa in two Tarzan films. Sci-fi producers have found the Alabama Hills “out of this world,” for movies like *Star Trek V*, *Star Trek: Generations* and television series *Deep Space 9*. They also serve as the perfect backdrop for *Gladiator*, *Tremors* and *Dinosaur*. Countless documentaries and product commercials for TV have used the area's unique rock formations and valleys as a palette for their products. Most parts of the Alabama Hills are public land administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The BLM Bishop Field Office issues about 30 to 40 film permits a year for movies, TV shows, commercials and still photo shoots in the Alabama Hills. BLM representatives monitor, during and after filming, to make sure this fantastic place stays as wild and beautiful as ever.

Western TV shows peaked in the late 1950s, with 26 series produced for prime time. The Alabama Hills were home to many of these series' episodes including *Have Gun Will Travel*, *The Gene Autry Show*, *Annie Oakley*, *Bonanza*, *The Lone Ranger and Hopalong Cassidy*. The pace of movie making slowed after the 1950s as the Western genre became less popular, however studios still come to film here. More recently, Lone Pine has been the location for several key scenes in the feature films *Iron Man*, *Django Unchained*, and *The Lone Ranger*.



## Geology



Both the Alabama Hills and the Sierra Nevada Mountains resulted from a cataclysmic uplifting of the earth's crust about 100 million years ago. Millennia of wind, snow, and wind-blown sand have shaped the unusual rounded formations seen in the Alabama Hills. In contrast, the Sierras were weathered by the continual freezing and thawing so typical at higher altitudes.

The rounded contours of the Alabama Hills contrast with the sharp ridges of the Sierra Nevada Mountains to the west. Though this might suggest that they formed from a different orogeny, the Alabama Hills are the same age as the nearby Sierras. The difference in wear can be accounted for by different patterns of erosion.

Mount Whitney, the highest peak in the contiguous United States, towers nearly ten thousand feet above this low range, which itself is 1,500 feet (460 m) above the floor of Owens Valley. However, gravity surveys indicate that the Owens Valley is filled with about 10,000 feet (3,000 m) of sediment and that the Alabama Hills are the tip of a very steep escarpment that may have been created by the many earthquakes similar to the 1872 Lone Pine earthquake, which, in a single event, caused a vertical displacement of 15 to 20 feet.

There are two main types of rock exposed in the Alabama Hills. One is a drab orange weathered, metamorphosed volcanic rock that is 150 to 200 million years old. The other type of rock exposed here is 82 to 85 million-year-old biotite monzogranite, which weathers to large potato-shaped boulders, many of which stand on end due to spheroidal weathering acting on many nearly vertical joints in the rock.

Dozens of natural arches are among the main attractions at the Alabama Hills and can be accessed by a short hikes from Whitney Portal Road, the Movie Flat Road and Horseshoe Meadows Road. Among the notable features of the area are [Mobius Arch](#), [Lathe Arch](#) and the [Eye of Alabama](#).