

Marshal and Tanya South's 14-year stay in the Anza-Borrego Desert began in February 1932. They parked their Model T at the base of this 3,410-foot mountain, cleared the rocky soil and raised their tent.

These tasks left them exhausted but also, as Marshal wrote for Desert magazine, thrilled.

"'It's going to be home,' Tanya said huskily. 'It is home, already. I wonder why we didn't come here before?'"

Why? It's not hard to figure out. The Souths eventually moved into more spacious digs, an adobe home they dubbed Yaquitepec. A scant 200 feet below the mountain's summit, they enjoyed spectacular vistas. On a recent trek to Yaquitepec's ruins, you couldn't help but be stunned by the harsh beauty, but unnerved by what you couldn't see: no water or electricity, phone or mail service, supermarket or hospital.

In hindsight, the Souths look naive or let's admit it insane. But in the gloom of the Depression and World War II, these proto-ecologists shone as bright, if minor, celebrities. Marshal's Saturday Evening Post and Arizona Highways articles and Desert columns, infused with a back-to-nature mysticism, won a national following.

"I don't think anyone brings one closer to the desert and its wonders than he does," gushed a New Jersey fan.

"He has done something that many of us would like to do if we had the courage," claimed a California reader.

His bravery was never questioned. His judgment is another, more contentious, matter. In 1947, Tanya divorced Marshal, charging him with "extreme cruelty." He moved to Julian and died less than two years later, at the age of 62. She maintained a public silence on Yaquitepec until her death in 1997. She was 99.

She made a brief, if acid, exception when the state proposed to preserve Yaquitepec. Asked about life there, she commented that Marshal had been "a superb fiction writer."

Diana Lindsay admits that Marshal's journalism is as romantic as a Harlequin bodice-ripper. But these charming articles illuminate an odd chapter in Southern California history. Lindsay, a past president of the Anza-Borrego Foundation's board and president of El Cajon's Sunbelt Publications, plans to deliver them to a new audience. Sunbelt will publish a new collection of his writings by early 2005.

Lindsay is a stickler for accuracy, which makes her task all the tougher. In the tale of the Souths of Ghost Mountain, separating truth from fiction is as difficult as plucking needles from a cactus.

For **Marshal South** was an accomplished spinner of fiction, and his greatest fiction may have been a character named **Marshal South**.

Mystery man

Lindsay spent the late 1960s and early '70s researching Anza-Borrego for a thesis. Her studies yielded a master's degree from San Diego State, the seeds of several books and a lifelong fascination with the South family.

Tanya refused to speak with her, but Lindsay slowly earned the trust of the couple's three children. She interviewed other sources, dug up records, tramped the harsh land around Ghost Mountain. She learned plenty, but not the full story.

No one ever will.

"**Marshal South**" is a pseudonym, adopted in his teens. His name at birth is unknown.

He was born in 1889 in Australia.

Or, some insist, London.

His father was a sheep rancher (perhaps). His mother moved the boy to the United States in 1905 (or '06).

He abandoned his first wife, Margaret, three months before the birth of **Marshal South Jr.**

In 1920 at the Rosicrucian Fellowship in Oceanside, he met Tanya Lehrer, a Russian emigre who was working as a secretary. Three years later, they married.

Marshal's first published work, poems, appeared in newspapers during World War I. His verse often protested the horrors of war and the wickedness of cities. Years later, the same themes slipped into his prose, no matter what his purported subject.

His April 1940 dispatch from Yaquitepec is about cutting jerky, but ends with this passage: "Somewhere, away off in the world that calls itself 'civilized,' cannon foundries are roaring and men who preach 'brotherhood' are dropping bombs upon the homes of little children.

"Here, in the 'savage wilderness' of the 'merciless desert,' there is peace."

Readers ate it up. As Marshal and Tanya's offspring began to arrive Rider in 1934, Rudyard in '37 and Victoria in '40 strangers shipped boxes to the El Centro offices of Desert before each Christmas. They begged the publisher to forward the presents to the South kids. Each month, the magazine published adulatory letters.

"Will you kindly draw a rough sketch showing how I can reach Yaquitepec where **Marshal South** lives," one correspondent implored.

Randall Henderson, Desert's publisher, declined. "It is needless to say that his experiment would be impossible if Ghost Mountain became a popular mecca for visitors."

Despite Marshal's oft-stated intention to live off the land, though, he left Ghost Mountain regularly to buy basic supplies in Julian or to sample heartier fare elsewhere. In "Anza-Borrego A to Z," Lindsay cites Marjorie Reed, an artist who lived at the Banner Queen Ranch. Reed remembered the writer's frequent Sunday visits to the ranch, where he tried to "mooch" free dinners.

"**Marshal South** the romantic and **Marshal South** the person were two different stories," Reed said.

Far from Camelot

A cool wind blew across Blair Valley on a recent afternoon as Lindsay led a group of 20 up the side of Ghost Mountain. The hikers had mile's worth of switchbacks in front of them, weaving around a botanist's delight of succulents and cactuses. Lindsay noted that the Souths used cactus fruit and agave for food.

Charlie Lough, one of the hikers, laughed. The retired San Diegan has sampled roasted agave. "It's kind of like a cross between banana squash and a Brillo pad."

Except for a few detours, the group followed the Souths' path. In the first months after their move from Oceanside to Ghost Mountain in February 1932, they sought a less-exhausting route to their homestead. In vain. "There was no easy trail," Marshal concluded.

But this remoteness gave the couple the solitude they craved. When Yaquitepec was more or less finished two adobe rooms, reinforced with concrete and ringed by cisterns Tanya and Marshal scribbled. She wrote poems and an occasional article. He, columns and breathless adventure novels: "Flame of Terrible Fire," "Robbery Range," "The Curse of the Sightless Fish."

The couple and their children met nature in a natural state. On the trail to Yaquitepec, a sign warned hikers they were entering a "DESERT MOUNTAIN RETREAT" inhabited by nudists.

"Therefore If You Cannot Accept

"And Conform To, In Clean-minded Simplicity,

"This Natural Condition Of Life, We Ask In All Friendship,

"That You Come No Further, But Return By The Path You Came.

"The Peace Of The GREAT SPIRIT Be With You Always."

A box waited below the sign. Visitors proceeding to Yaquitepec were asked to deposit their garments.

In Marshal's articles, life in this wilderness was stripped of cares as well as clothing. His February 1940 Desert column strikes a typical idyllic note:

"'It will be a good year,' Tanya says confidently, as she proudly takes a huge tray of golden-brown whole wheat biscuits out of the great oven. 'Rudyard's 2 years old now, and Rider is 6. The garden is ready for spring and the cisterns are full. It will be a good, happy year for work and for writing.' And she sets aside her pan of biscuits to cool while she snatches up a pencil to scribble the first verse of a new poem. Fleeting inspiration must be promptly captured and she is a conscientious poet as well as a devout housewife.

"But she is a good prophet also. Yes, it will be a good year."

Some years may have been good, but none were easy. Food and water shortages bedeviled the Souths. Near Yaquitepec's ruins, we found the terraced remains of a turnip garden. Further downhill, Lindsay guided her charges to a mound of empty, rusting cans, most of which held the youngsters' concentrated milk.

"This wasn't Camelot," Lindsay said.

In 1942, frustrated by a persistent lack of water, the Souths packed their car and drove off. They spent a month in Utah and Arizona, seeking another primitive paradise, before returning.

"No place," Lindsay said, "seemed as perfect as this."

This perfection, though, was fragile. In 1945, they left again, when Navy bombers' flight paths were routed over their homestead. After several months in a cabin in nearby Storm Canyon, the Souths returned to find their modest home vandalized.

The marriage was also damaged. Marshal was often absent, driving off to visit ranches or towns. In Julian, he spent hours discussing literature with the librarian, Myrtle Botts.

Tanya was scared and lonely. Late in 1946, she trekked to the nearest road, flagged down a car and handed the motorist a note. Soon, a Red Cross team came to evacuate her and the children.

"It was madness, of course," Marshal wrote in 1943 of his desert retreat. "No civilized being would have deliberately sought such difficulties and hardship."

In the end, Tanya chose to be civilized.

Daring and strange

Sunshine, snow, wind and vandalism continue to erode these adobe walls. Standing in this rocky clearing, it's hard to imagine what life was like for the Souths.

In its heyday, Yaquitepec was portrayed by Marshal as a noble attempt to walk lightly and respectfully on the land. The divorce proceedings sullied Marshal's image, presenting him as an abusive spouse and oblivious father who abandoned his family in the wilderness to pursue his pleasures in town.

But Rider insists that his father never raised his hand against his mother, Lindsay noted. And it appears that Tanya's disenchantment with their Spartan life was gradual.

Since the 1940s, the Souths' story has been repackaged numerous times, for numerous purposes. It's an adventure tale, an arid and landlocked "Swiss Family Robinson." It's an environmental fable. It's a hymn to nature. But every version of the tale revolves around the fact that something daring and strange happened on this remote, parched homestead, something that still draws pilgrims.

"We'd never heard of the Souths before," said Cathy Holmberg, a Silver City, N.M., resident who followed Lindsay here with her husband, Mike. "But it's interesting."

Excerpts from the Desert magazine writings of Marshal and Tanya South

"It is hot these days. But not too hot. The human system is adaptive; it adjusts speedily to its environment."

-- **Marshal South**, August 1940

"No man is free, save he is free at heart.

"Free from the yoke of copying and leaning,

"Free from the need to play a worldly part

"Of rigorous convention, or of preening.

"True freedom is a spiritual thing,

"It means self-sufficiency of soul.

"And they who to some 'outer' form still cling,

"Are slaves to that and are not free at all."

-- "Freedom," Tanya South, April 1944

"One must have something of the poet or the artist or the dreamer to build his home upon a hilltop. Most men build theirs in holes and hollows. It is easier."

-- **Marshal South**, August 1948

"Human life is a fleeting thing. And after all it is not the physical that counts; nor the success or failure of earthly affairs. The thing which is enduring is something which cannot be seen, touched or measured by material standards. It is the spirit of a man. His ideal the inner light or urge by which he moves. Such a hidden light burns in every man and woman regardless of the valuation either for good or evil which the world places upon them. And as sure as he lives, each will in some manner in life, betray something of that secret inner nature that is the real self. In the ruins of his desert castle, Paul Sentenac has left his monument and his epitaph. He was one who dreamed dreams. He had something of the divine fire of the poet. The tumbled stones of his hilltop Gibraltar prove it."

-- **Marshal South**, in an August 1948 profile of Sentenac, another Anza-Borrego homesteader

CITATION (AGLC STYLE)

PETER ROWE, 'WRITE OR WRONG The legend of Ghost Mountain Ruins tell part of the tale of writer who glamorized family's isolation in Anza-Borrego', *The San Diego Union-Tribune* (online), 14 Mar 2004 E-1
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