

Willard sharpened his art in the desert

Wandering with gear became life for him

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By the middle of the 20th century, Stephen Willard had decided the desert was too crowded for his liking. There were altogether too many people and he was a bit shy. Willard had moved to the tiny village of Palm Springs as a newlywed back in 1921, when there had only been a handful of folks in town, and that was just fine. The majestic open spaces and stunning landscapes were perfectly suited to his pursuit of photography. And he didn't need a lot of people around in order to practice his craft.

He had been given his first camera at the age of fourteen by his father. Wandering in nature, with his photographic gear, became a way of life for him. He had exceptional skill in composition and a knack for the right exposure to emphasize the light, long before the advent of light meters. His photographs were highly dramatic, and quickly garnered the attention of prominent naturalists on the East Coast. His expansive images of the unseen desert were published in a magazine article entitled "The Land of the Purple Shadow" in 1916. "In Southern California, east and south from the Pass of San Gorgonio, in the great purple shadow of Mt. San Jacinto, there lives a wonderland of desert and mountain, canyon and mesa. It is surpassed by no desert land for subtle charm and fascination."

In search of the purple shadow, he traveled extensively. "In an early automobile he slogged through the desert sands with no roads, climbed mountains into the remote backcountry, carved an off-the-grid house and ranch out of the rocks in the Owens Valley, and roared around the countryside on his Indian motorcycle. He also...(went)... on arduous journeys to primitive areas of the

world like the Sahara and the Himalayas, deep into Mexico, and off to the Far East."

His sojourns were interrupted by WWI. He enlisted and served in France in the 319th Engineer Battalion, 8th Division as a photographer. After the war, he married and returned to the Southern California desert.

Drawn back to this land of subtle hues and lighting contrasts, he and his wife, Beatrice, settled in Palm Springs permanently in 1921, establishing a studio and gallery the following year. While Beatrice sold his photographs from this storefront for the ensuing quarter of a century, Stephen explored remote canyons and distant mountains on horseback with a pack mule, creating artful exposures. Willard's equipment was primitive and cumbersome, but he was particularly patient and persistent in his pursuit of the perfect picture.

So uniquely picturesque were his images, that Willard came to the attention of Curt Teich, the largest producer of postcards in the United States. Teich postcards were immensely popular, instantly recognizable, and featured classic scenes from American life in his pioneering offset color printing process. Willard's charming views of the village of Palm Springs contrasted beautifully with his stunning landscapes of wilderness so remote he may have been the first human ever to see it, and certainly to capture it on film.

Printing large images and adhering them to canvas, he began tinting the images with Rembrandt oil paints, reproducing the subtle pinks and light greens, evanescent blues and deep purples not captured by the camera's glass plates in gelatin silver. His colored pictures are pioneering paintings in what is now called mixed media.

Minerva Hamilton Hoyt engaged Willard to photograph Joshua Tree in her campaign to save it from destruction. No one knew the area better than Willard. He produced a series of gorgeous images, made into a picture book which



Stephen Willard is seen here with his equipment in the middle of the desert.

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY/SPECIAL TO THE DESERT SUN



This tinted photographic painting, entitled "Broken Ranges," is the cover of the new book on Stephen Willard, "Pursuit of the Purple Shadow."

Hoyt arranged to be delivered to President Franklin Roosevelt. Her photographic argument convinced Roosevelt. He accorded Joshua Tree National Monument status which ultimately resulted in the area becoming a National Park.

Seeking relief from the summer heat, the Willards began traveling the world to faraway locations in Asia and the Middle East, Japan and Mexico logging some 300,000 miles by 1942. They also began to visit the Sierra regularly and in 1924 established a studio and gallery in the

eastern Sierras that provided another majestic landscape scenery and unspoiled solitude. The couple would spend summers in the mountains and the winters on the desert for the next two decades. Willard's spectacular images were well respected by his better-known contemporaries Ansel Adams and Edward Weston for their artistic achievement. But as importantly now, they offer a valuable historic record of unspoiled nature.

In 1947, the crush of people in Palm Springs chased Stephen Willard away permanently. He sold his house and surrounding garden to Cactus Slim Moorten and his wife Patricia, who would make the garden glorious with exotic specimen plants and open it to a fascinated public. The Willards would spend the rest of their lives in the Sierras.

In 1999, their daughter, Dr. Beatrice Willard donated her father's life's work to the Palm Springs Desert Museum. The gift contained over 16,000 items included original glass and film negatives, vintage photographs, hand-colored lantern slides, photo-paintings, postcards, stereographs, cameras, lenses, equipment, and his personal papers and memorabilia including maps, traveling cases, correspondence, and publications.

The Willard studio and gallery in the Sierras persists today, inhabited by a lovely couple, Robert and Sue Joki, who are carrying on in the Willard tradition and preserving his legacy. Starting with an original forty-page monograph written by their friend Dick Westman, Joki has created the definitive book on Willard. Extensively illustrated, this important monograph contributes immensely not only to the history of the desert, but to the history of California and the West. "Stephen H. Willard, Pursuit of the Purple Shadow" is available at the Historical Society or on Amazon and is well worth the read. The book transports the reader around the globe and back in time to the spectacular natural world of Stephen Willard through his pictures.