

HISTORY

Shumway discovered, recorded elfin forests

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Found throughout the Southwest, elfin forests are complete woodlands, but in miniature; all the trees, underbrush and forest floor ferns scaled down to a size “quite comfortable for an elf.” Also called dwarf forests, or pygmy forests, their trees are diminutive. Found at high elevations in tropical areas but also temperate coastal lands an elfin forest features short, gnarled trees heavily draped with epiphytes, and a forest floor thickly cushioned by moss and ferns.

Delightfully and surprisingly, there is an elfin forest almost 4,000 feet up in the San Jacinto Mountains atop the Palms to Pines Scenic Byway, part of the 640 acres discovered by Nina Paul Shumway and her husband, Stephen, on one of their rambles in the mountains on foot and on horseback. Entranced by the tiny trees insistently clinging to the inhospitable mountain, the Shumways homesteaded those 640 acres and made the desert and its surrounding mountains their home and passion for the rest of their lives.

Her father, William L. Paul, had been largely responsible for the development of the commercial date industry in the Coachella Valley, and she found herself deeply committed to the whole place and its history.

She arrived at the desert in 1909 from the Midwest and had a natural affinity for the barren landscape.

She began exploring it in myriad ways, chronicling her discoveries and elucidating its mysteries in three major books, the first of which was “Your Desert and Mine.”

Perched high above the desert sands in the Elfin Forest, the Shumways built themselves a retreat from the burning desert summers below.

They named it “The Tors” – for the rocky outcropping where they settled. Described by The Desert Sun in the early 1960s as “Seeming to grow right out of the rocky landscape, the cabin nestles against a huge rearing of boulders that seem at once to protect it and threaten to overpower it.”

“The original structure ... was placed on the only piece of flat ground; to add a large living room, den and entranceway,



The Tors. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

it was necessary to blast out great sections of the rock.”

The protuberance of rock soared beside the cabin continuing inside to form one side of the den, planted with ferns and greenery to create a living wall. “The windows of the living room open out over a sheer drop upon a never-ending and ever-changing panorama of mountains and desert.”

Great hand-hewn beams supported the ceiling, and an impressive fireplace graced the main room where “underfoot is a floor made of huge sandstone slabs from the bed of an ancient sea, found by the Shumways in a valley on the way to Imperial.”

Down a rocky pathway a short distance from the main cabin was a bedroom only partially walled, open on the eastern side to the expanse of the desert below and on the western side to the sheer mountainside. The Desert Sun quoted Shumway herself describing the spot, “Every morning I am awakened by the rising sun and at night it’s like sleeping in the arms of the sky.”

Once a week from June to October, Shumway would come down from her mountain aerie “for her mail and sup-

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Steve and Nina Shumway at The Tors.

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Shumway collected Indian artifacts found on her many explorations and brought them home to her unusual abode. She had an uncanny knack for finding out lost caches of Indian implements, many unique and priceless. “Her most important find was a complete, not-even-chipped set of five pieces in the Harper Flat country near Fish Creek. No one has duplicated such a significant discover and today the five pieces – a big and smaller olla, a large cooking pot and

a smaller one, and a serving plate – are lined up across the mantel of her great stone fireplace.” She donated her precious artifacts to the Palm Springs Desert Museum, now the Palm Springs Art Museum.

Shumway became famous in the valley and beyond for her books, written while ensconced at The Tors. The Desert Sun in 1962 noted, “She is a composite of all the incredibly intrepid women who beat their way Westward along the unmarked covered-wagon trail across the plains and mountains of this vast America. She is strong and fearless, gentle and imaginative, ageless and forever young and delicately attuned to the beauty and magic of all outdoors.”

The dust jacket of “Your Desert and Mine” describes her spirit, her “intense emotional response to every phase of this strange and enthralling adventure called Life...” The newspaper concluded that “woven into that intense emotional response is a passionate and timeless love affair with the California desert. It has molded her way of life, her community activities, her avocation, and her artistic responses.”

Shumway got started writing through a suggestion of her friend Jane Walker, the longtime Indio librarian. Walker reportedly said, “People are always asking at the library for a book on this area and its history, why don’t you write one?” Shumway proved equal to the task, capturing the glorious, pristine landscape in her pages.

For decades, from the mountaintop she watched the desert below, the desert she knew so intimately, disappear to development. She understood, “for it is the tragedy of the pioneer that ‘each man kills the thing he loves.’ And implicit in the very measure of his success are the throngs that trample its grave.”

Happily, The Tors is not trampled, as it is not open to the public. A rare glimpse of it may be had at the Desert Hot Springs Historical Society’s January’s Soup Supper on Jan. 19 which will feature a presentation by historian blogger Ellen Lloyd Trover. Tickets available at www.dhshistoricalsociety.org.

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