



Artist of the Mojave

By Harold O. Weight

Sylvia and Slim Winslow call their desert-traveling pickup truck "Creampuff," but the name was applied in affectionate fellowship, not derision. The car proved long ago that a sturdy and adventurous heart beat under its smoothly streamlined hood and that firm metallic muscles underlie the creamy yellow enamel. For nearly ten years Creampuff has spun and clashed its way up desert washes and canyons, carrying the Winslows to rock collecting fields and to remote bits of desert beauty, which Sylvia sketches in oil and later spreads glowingly over larger canvases.

But Creampuff has had its moments of defeat. One such occurred in a lonely wash in the Mojave's Turtle Mountains not long ago. That wash had won Slim's interest when he was told that it could not possibly be navigated by a stock car. Slim was doing well until the wash narrowed and a rash of rocks spread across it. You have to keep going and make split-second decisions on that sort of trail - and sometimes you guess wrong. Seeing possible clear sailing beyond the rocky bar, Slim decided to go ahead. He explained his intentions to the car by increased pressure on the gas pedal. Creampuff was willing, but one of its springs was weak.



Sylvia makes sketches in the field, then returns to the Little Gallery at Bodfish to complete them in oils.

Then they were sitting in the wash with a broken spring, far from an acceptable desert road, farther from a paved one, and many, many miles from the nearest car-doctor.

Sylvia didn't tell Slim that he should have shown better sense, nor did she ask what was going to happen to them now. She grabbed her sketchbox and set up shop in the wash, where she proceeded to sketch the slanting sunlight on the smoke trees, and the shadowed walls of Mopah peak. And if she worried about coming darkness, it was because she was afraid there was not time to catch the light effects she wanted.

And Slim? He was busy digging through assorted duplicate parts and emergency repair materials that he always carries. He located an old spring clamp, tightened it down over the break and was ready to coax Creampuff off the rocks before Sylvia had finished sketching.

Between desert trips, the Winslows live on their Double S ranch in the mountains at Bodfish, California. Bodfish is in the Kern River canyon ten miles south of Kernville on the Walker's Pass-Bakersfield road. When I visited them at the ranch, there was a big landscape in oils called Desert Cathedral on the wall of the great living room there. Sylvia had painted it from the sketch made when Creampuff broke its spring. Creampuff showed artistic perception of a high order when it picked this place for a breakdown.

Sylvia Winslow is a comparative new-comer among painters of the desert, but her work is attracting increasing attention among artists. And her paintings have received emphatic approval from those who know the desert. She has been awarded honorable mention at shows at Los Angeles county museum and Santa Paula, and sold the first painting which she exhibited at the museum show. Her *Lure of the Desert*, bought as a memorial for two flyers, hangs in the N. O. T. S. officers club at Inyokern. Her wildflower painting was given the 1946 cultural award by the Kern County chamber of commerce. She belongs to the Society of Western Artists - formerly known as the Society for Sanity in Art - and has exhibited with them in the Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco.

Sylvia was born in Ireland, coming to this country with her mother when she was 18. In the Kern canyon country she met Slim. They have been married ten years and have a talented daughter Susan, eight years old. Sylvia had painted during most of her life, but chiefly for relaxation and amusement. After she saw the desert, the desire to paint became urgent. She thought: Oh, if I only had money to pay some famous artist to paint this scene! And finally she decided that she must try to do it herself.

The artist Harry Smith started her on her serious work about six years ago. He spent three months at the ranch at Bodfish, working in the studio with her. Beyond that, she is self-taught. She likes best to do desert landscapes, usually without figures. Desert painting without human figures is ageless and timeless, she feels. You can step into it and sense the wind and the warmth of the sun. But if someone is in the picture, you feel excluded.

The field of large desert landscapes was mainly occupied by men when Sylvia started. And she found she had to fight what she feels to be a natural feminine tendency to do work that is delicate in line and detail. Harry Smith kept at her. "Be big - daring in your painting," he insisted. And she thinks she is learning, slowly but surely, to put power into her work.

"You must really understand your scene geographically and botanically," she says, "and you must know the ethics of painting before you can go ahead with strong, powerful strokes. If you are uncertain about anything, it shows in your work - in the very strokes of your brush. You must know intimately the characteristics of greasewood and palo verde and smoke tree before you can suggest them in painting.

Once Joe Mason Reeves, the portrait painter, showed her sheet after sheet filled with drawings of the human skull viewed from every angle. "He could put power into his portrait painting," Sylvia said, "because his understructure was correct and he knew it was correct."

Sylvia finds her painting is changing and she changes technique with it, using different methods, trying, learning, but always working toward three ideals: Simple-strong-striking. She strives for a successful blend of good composition and the truth.

"Painting is a constant challenge, to man's ability to paint what he sees and to manufacture paints that will live up to the beautiful colors of nature. In painting you can go on learning until the end of your days - and only stagnate when you think that you have arrived - that you know it all. I'm never completely satisfied with my

work," she went on. "There is always something beyond my grasp and never, never enough time to do all I want to do and try all I want to try."

Most of Sylvia's work is in oil - including the small field sketches. She uses crayons when sunset lights are fading so rapidly that it is the only way of capturing them. In the field she will complete as many as five or six sketches a day. The sketches are taken back to Bodfish and Sylvia makes the big landscapes from them and from notes she takes while sketching.

Sylvia has found an interesting field in the painting of landscapes to order. An officer and his wife who had been stationed in the desert wrote from a greener, moister climate for a painting "that shows far distances, desert mountains with evening colors on them, shadows at sundown, white sand, mesquite, sage and a trace of old road." Most important were the desert mountains and sunset colors to bang back their desert years at Inyokern.

A cattleman in the country back of Randsburg wanted a picture of Pilot Knob as he and his family had seen it so many times just as sunrise colors struck it. Sylvia sketched it from many angles before she found the scene as they remembered it. A pioneer woman of Kernville wanted a painting of a little meadow at the foot of Piute mountain where she had lived as a child. The Winslows reached the spot, using an eroded wagon road that had never known an automobile. When they tried to pull out, the road was so steep that it was necessary to fill the back of Creampuff with, rocks to give the rear wheels traction.

The Winslow's Double S ranch, in a canyon above Bodfish, is a fine example of what two talented hard working people can do when they want to build a home. Bodfish, named for an early prospector, George Bodfish, was a mining camp in the gold boom days of the '80's, and nearby Havilah once was Kern county seat.

Originally the Winslows planned to run cattle on their 640 acres. Shortly after they were married, fire burned their mountain cabin and destroyed their possessions. Money being saved for stock had to go into immediate living expenses and construction of shelter before winter dosed in.

They decided that if they must build, they were going to put up the kind of home they had been planning. Slim dug and Sylvia collected rocks in an old four-wheel trailer, hauled them in and filled the foundations. They found that the chosen site, which had looked so level, was four feet lower at one end than at the oilier.

The walls were of adobe, and Slim worked with the crew that built them in ten days. Then the massive roof beams were put in place and Slim and Sylvia took over, completing construction, plumbing and finishing. Winter found them with only one small room roofed and livable. There were no outer doors, and horses wandered in and out of the living room. But spring came, the cement floor was poured, and building completed.

Sylvia declares that their architect was Us & Company. That is true of almost everything in their charming house. Sylvia designed the furniture, Slim built it, and Sylvia painted it. They built doors and latches. Tables are of kegs with wagon wheel tops. The woodbin is an old wooden ore bucket. The andirons are made of mine picks and mine rails. A huge mine bellows has been converted into a magazine stand. Door handles are bent mule shoes. Old branding irons make wall decorations. Animal hides are on the floor.

"The living room must be big," Slim insisted when plans were made." All my life I've felt cramped in little rooms." The living room is big and friendly and Western. The adobe walls are a wonderful grey-brown, the beamed ceiling stained darkly.

"In the city, where you are ruled by money, you couldn't have a room like this unless you were very rich," Sylvia said. "Here in the hills you can expand as greatly as you dare - it's up to you, your ability and your ingenuity. You can have as big a home as you are willing to build - as big a garden as you are willing to work."

The Winslows are just completing the Little Gallery, another building project, this time constructed of concrete blocks. In addition to exhibits of her own work, Sylvia plans shows for other artists in the gallery, and the building houses her studio and living quarters for visiting artists. Sylvia, Slim and Susan are celebrating arrival of electric light and power on the ranch and becoming used to having light whenever you want to snap a switch. Now they will be able to install sawing and polishing equipment for the collection of agate, jasper, wood, nodules and geodes, which all three have been collecting.



Sylvia, Susan and Slim in a corner of their ranch house at the Double S.

Slim is an excellent carpenter and, besides running the ranch, he builds all the frames for Sylvia's pictures. Slim, by the way, was an early member of the Screen Actor's Guild. Many Western pictures are filmed at Kernville, and before his back was injured in a fall, Slim rode in them.

Sylvia, besides painting, has lectured widely, and is conducting an art class two days a week for aspiring artists of the area. One of her pupils is a woman of 70. "She always felt she should be a painter," Sylvia explained. "This was her first chance to find out." But Sylvia's favorite student is a woman who stays several weeks, doing the cooking and housework in exchange for instruction.

People tell Sylvia that she should move to a city where there would be a better chance to display her paintings and make contact with possible buyers. But she is certain that people who love painting will come to Bodfish. In and around her Little Gallery she plans to create a bit of the desert-cacti, rocks, and shrubs - so the desert landscapes will be shown in the right atmosphere.

She feels it was the desert, which really taught her to paint - that it would not be well to go too far away from the country she loves.

"All that you need to know is there if you can observe and understand it," she says. "And the more you go out into it, the more you understand it."