

# New Life on Ghost Mountain

By Ernie Cowan

*Desert Magazine* – April 1977



*Framed by an arched doorway, a Blazer member rakes debris.*

Their destination - Ghost Mountain, a lonely, wind-swept desert peak in the southern corner of California's largest state park.

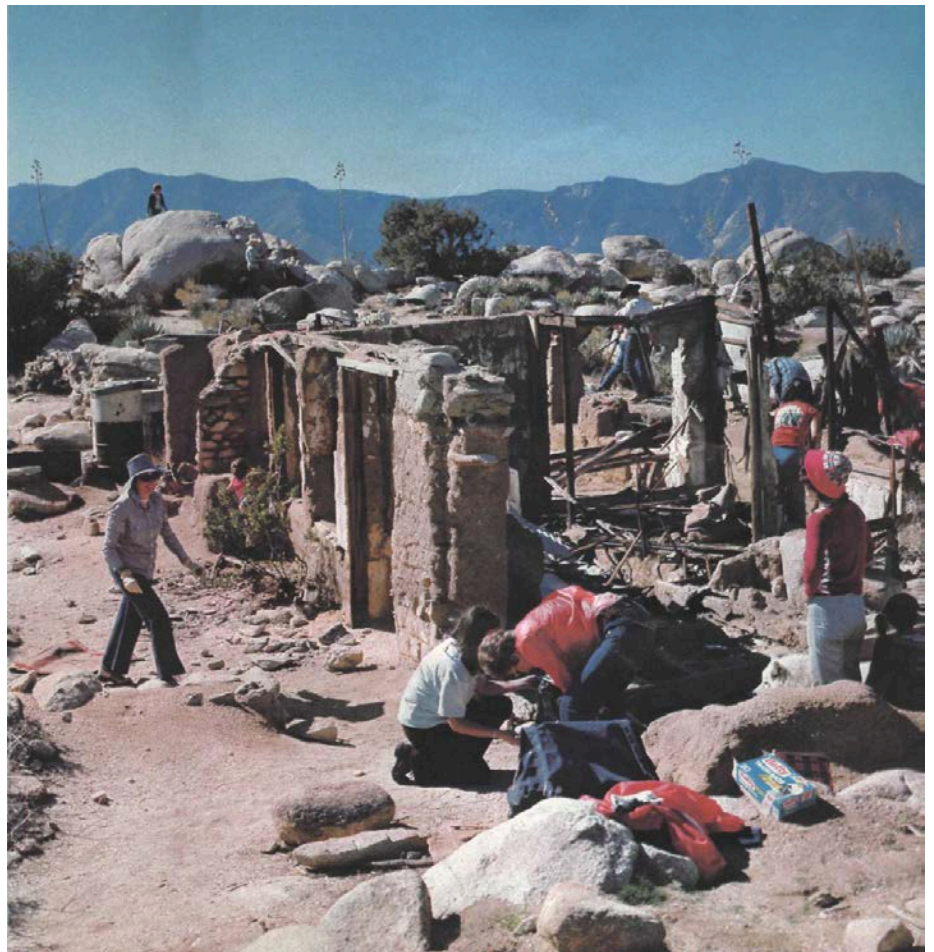
Their mission - to clean up the crumbling ruins once called home by a modern family who lived a pioneer life for 15 years on the mountaintop.

Known as Yaquitepec, these ruins are what remain of the unusual story of a family seeking closer contact with the earth and its creatures. Yaquitepec, or "home of the Yaqui Tribe," was named by Marshal South, a man who sought life as the Yaqui Indians had lived in this arid environment.

THEY HAD to walk to get there, but that didn't stop a group of dedicated off-roaders from doing their part to help preserve a fascinating bit of desert history.

The Orange County Chapter of Associated Blazers of Southern California - rounded up 57 of its members and made two trips into a remote corner of Anza-Borrego Desert State Park to do their part for conservation.

They could only drive part of the way. The last mile was a steep climb along a rough, rocky trail. But this didn't deter them from hauling up more than 300 pounds of building materials and cement and bringing down almost that much debris.



*With the tin roof removed, the partial walls presented a challenge to put them in a state of "arrested decay."*

South and his wife, Tanya, came to Ghost Mountain in 1932, turning aside a comfortable life in the city for a life of struggle in the harsh, arid desert. During the next 15 years, Marshal and Tanya would build their

home and their family at Yaquitepec. Three children would be born to the couple, and raised as children of the wilderness, learning the ways of survival in their remote location.



*This is how Yaquitepec appeared before the preservation project began. The old cistern for water storage can be seen on the left.*

Although the South family existence was remote from the world in distance and style, it was not remote in understanding. For several years, starting in 1940, South would send a story each month to Desert Magazine. Tanya, a teacher, would also submit poems to the magazine for publication. The articles by South were often a strong statement of his wilderness philosophy in addition to an account of events at Yaquitepec. And the sensitive poetry of Tanya South gave one insight into a woman at peace with the wilderness and in love with her Cod.

Randall Handerson, the late editor, publisher and founder of Desert Magazine, visited the Souths on occasion and wrote about their primitive desert life.

When they came to the mountain, "they had no shelter but a tarpaulin. But there they have remained, and through the years have been able to collect enough rain water to build a modest adobe cottage," Henderson wrote.

Indeed, their wilderness life was becoming more comfortable. Their white-washed adobe home contained several rooms, a fireplace heating system, adobe oven, and tin roof that not only sheltered the family from the rain, but acted as a collector for rainwater and drained it into huge tar-lined storage tanks.

Except for a few occasional trips into Julian or Escondido for needed supplies, the family lived a primitive life. Their clothing often consisted of breech cloth and sandals. Their food was mostly what they could collect in the wild or grow in small terraced gardens around their home.

The days at Yaquitepec were filled with making candles, gathering firewood or food, teaching children, milking their two goats, making pottery or adding to their house.



*Two husky members carry the roof for the memorial plaque up the mountainside.*

The Souths left the mountain for good in 1947; a year later, Marshal died. The reason the family left is not clear, and Tanya, who still lives in San Diego, does not wish to talk about her years on the 3,000-foot desert peak.



So, since 1947, the humble little South cottage has begun to return to the soil.

According to Bud Getty, manager of the half-million-acre Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, the ruins were nothing more than an opportunity for vandalism for many hikers to the mountain top.

"Because the ruins could not be called historic in nature, there were no funds available for restoration," Getty said.

It was this plight of Yaquitepec, mentioned in a May 1975 Desert Magazine article, that spurred the Associated Blazers into action. According to the past President Tom Hartman, members of the off-road vehicle group decided Yaquitepec would be a worthwhile project.

"Since there wasn't much the state could do, we decided we'd do what we could to at least preserve a little bit of this interesting story," Hartman said.

His group spent their first weekend on Ghost Mountain removing the dangerous old roof and cleaning the area of debris. Then they returned to put up plaques showing a picture of the original South home, a plot plan of the area, a brief history of Yaquitepec and a picture of Marshal South.

For their efforts, members of the Blazers club received a special conservation award from the California Off-Road Vehicle Association (CORYA).

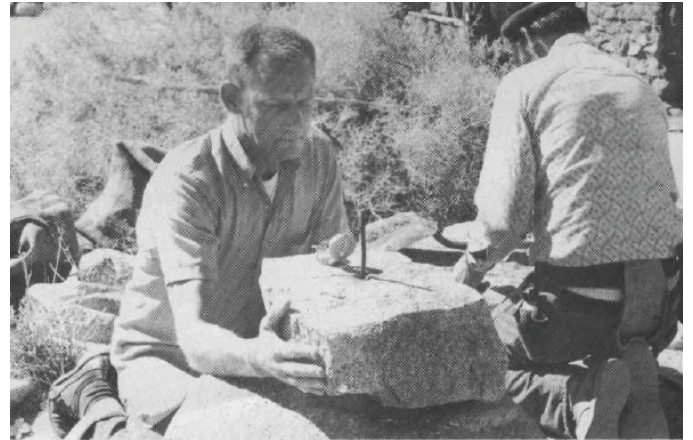
Park Manager Getty said the work done by the Blazers group will do a lot to preserve the history of the area.

"Now hikers to Yaquitepec can learn a little of the history of the area, and perhaps respect the ruins a little more," said Getty.

Although funds for further restoration are still limited, he hopes soon to have money for some trail maintenance to the mountain top.

"Those tremendous rains we had last fall just about wiped out the trail," he said.

The Yaquitepec project shows what can be done by a few interested people. About \$200 out-of-pocket dollars were spent on the project, but what accomplished the job was the thousands of children, woman and man hours that went into the task of putting a little life back onto Ghost Mountain.



*Marshall South's old sundial gets cemented on a new base.*



*Good old American ingenuity came to the fore when it was necessary to transport long-handled tools. Lashed together, they became a lot easier to maneuver.*





*Everything for the day's needs, supplies, food and water, had to be carried up the trail. Here a group begins the climb while the base camp, with their multi-purpose Blazers, appears in the background.*



*View from near the summit of Ghost Mountain looking back at Yaquitepec in the near center of the photo.*

Photo courtesy of Ray DeLea - 2014