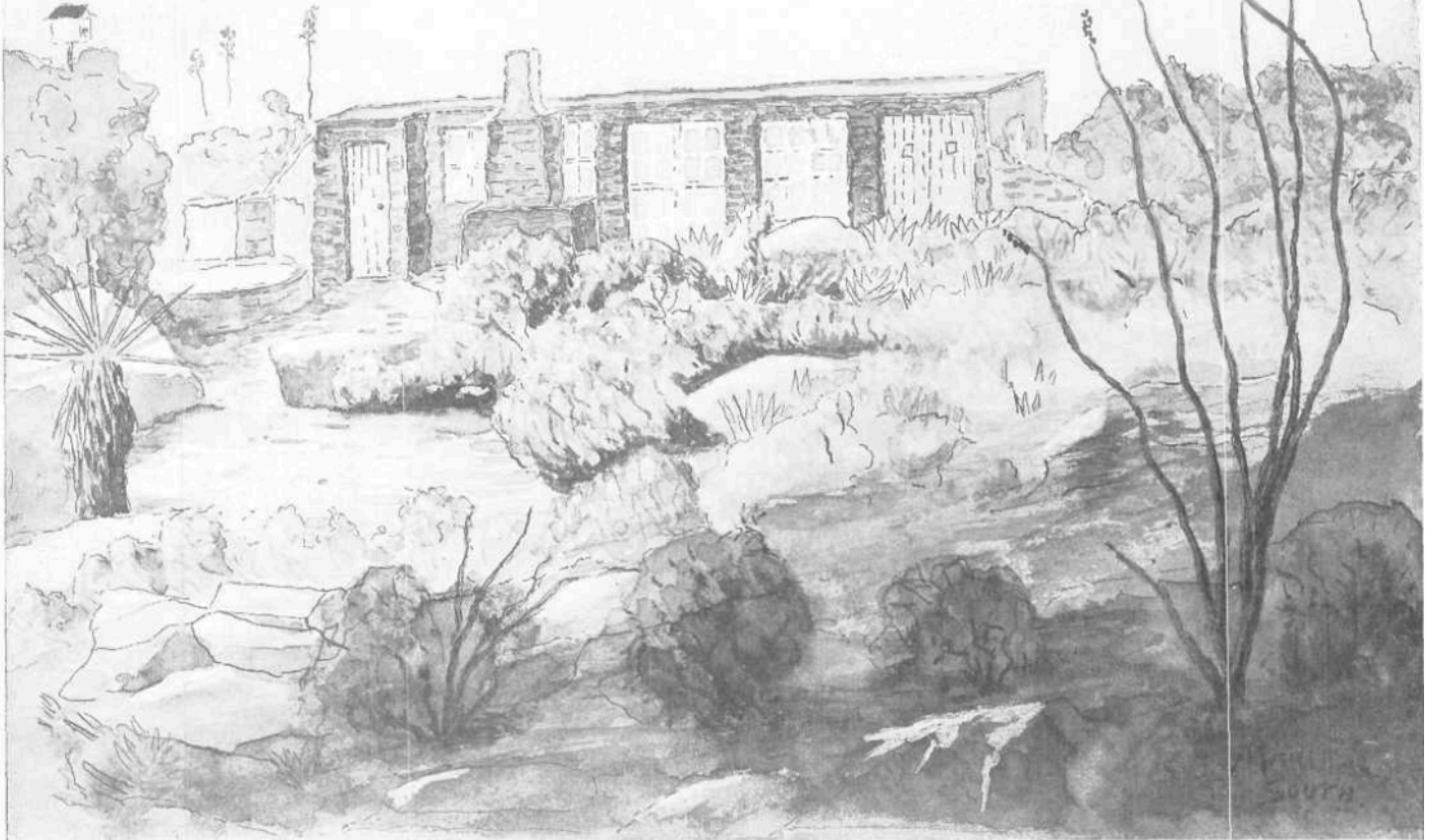


Announcing DESERT DIARY

By Marshal South
Desert Magazine – February 1940



When the early years of the depression brought financial disaster to Marshal South, he and his wife Tanya loaded their few belongings in an old car and turned their backs on the coast city where they lived.

They followed a trail that led out into the Southern California desert, and when the road ended at the base of a mountain along the western rim of the great Cahuilla basin they climbed to the summit – and that was their new home. Yaquitepec they called it.

There was neither shelter nor water on the top of Ghost mountain – but they built a crude camp of the materials at hand and carried their water from a spring at the base of the hill. During the first few months they virtually lived off the country-as did the Indians before them.

Today they are still living on Ghost mountain – but gradually through the years a substantial adobe cabin has been taking form. And now there are two little brown-skinned lads, Rider and Rudyard, who have never known aught but the clear air and freedom of a secluded desert mountain retreat.

Both Marshal and Tanya are writers. The story of their experience at Yaquitepec appeared in the Saturday Evening Post more than a year ago under the title of "Desert Refuge" and attracted widespread interest. Later it is to be published in book form.

During 1940 Marshal South will write for the *Desert Magazine*. His DESERT DIARY, starting in this issue, is to be a month by month story of an American family virtually living a Robinson Crusoe life on a desert mountain top within 200 miles of Hollywood.

January at Yaquitepec

By Marshal South

Desert Magazine – February 1940

THERE is always something tremendously exciting about beginning a New Year. Especially in the desert. Here at Yaquitepec we don't make "resolutions" – out in the brooding silences of the wastelands one doesn't need to bolster confidence with such trivial props. But every time January first rolls around we greet it with joy. It is the beginning of a new page; a page of some fascinating, illumined parchment. An ancient page, but to us, still unread. What will it hold? The desert is full of mystery and surprise. No two years are ever the same.

And New Year's Day is always an event. Perhaps it is because it draws added lustre from the recent memories of Christmas trees and the mysterious visit of Santa Claus. Yes, Santa comes to Yaquitepec. Silently, in the dead of night, his gold-belled reindeer speed between the swaying wands of the ocotillos and the tall, dry stalks of the mescals and whisk his gift-laden sleigh to the summit of Ghost mountain. And always, when the old saint comes to stuff the stockings of the two little tousledheads who dream on expectantly, he finds a decked Christmas tree awaiting him. The Christmas trees of Yaquitepec are carefully cut branches of berry-laden mountain juniper. They are never large – for we are jealously careful of our desert junipers. But what they lack in size they make up in beauty. The white clusters of berries glisten against the dark, bunched green of the tiny branches. And the silver star that does duty every year at the tree tip sparkles in rivalry with the shimmering, hung streamers of tinsel.

The little desert mice, which scamper trustfully and unmolested in the darkness of our enclosed porch, explore timidly the rustling crepe paper and greenery piled about the base of this strange, glittering spectacle. And I am sure that the old Saint, as he busies himself at his task of filling the two big stockings hung before the old adobe stove, must pause often to glance at the gay tree and to smile and chuckle. Yes, Christmas is a glad time at Yaquitepec.



Tanya gives Rider and Rudyard a lesson in the art of weaving baskets from the shredded fiber of mescal which grows plentifully on Ghost mountain.

And New Year is somehow a joyous finale of the glad season. A wind-up and a beginning. And it doesn't matter much whether the wind is yelling down from the glittering, white-capped summits of the Laguna range and chasing snowflakes like clouds of ghostly moths across the bleak granite rocks of our mountain crest or whether the desert sun spreads a summer-like sparkle over all the stretching leagues of wilderness. New Year's day is a happy day just the same. The youngsters, eager in the joy of a lot of new tools and possessions, are full of plans. Rider, desert-minded and ever concerned with the water question, is usually full of ideas concerning the digging of cisterns. Or perhaps with the manufacture of a whole lot of new adobe bricks. Rudyard, with all the imitative enthusiasm of two whole years, follows eagerly in big brother's lead. He is fond of tools, too. One of his cherished possessions is an old wooden mallet . . . "wooda hammah," which he wields lustily upon anything conveniently at hand. And prying into Rider's toolbox and helping himself to punches and hammers and saws and nails, is his favorite indoor sport.

"Don't you get lonely, away up here on the mountain?" visitors ask sympathetically at times. And they stare when we laugh at them. Lonely! How is it possible to be lonely in the desert? There are no two days the same. Always, on the mighty canvas of the sky and the stretching leagues of the wasteland, the Great Spirit is painting new pictures. And constantly, through the tiny thoroughfares and trails of our world of mescals and rocks our wild creatures hurry. The flowers have gone now and the chill of winter is in the air. But life goes on just the same.

Coyotes range their beats with nightly regularity. We have been officially placed upon the coyote highway system and almost every night they come to sniff about our cisterns and to nose over the ash dump in search of possible cats. And sometimes grey foxes wander in on friendly calls. The snakes have holed up and the lizards are mostly all hid out. But owls come and sit on the corner of our *ramada* at night and regale us with woeful discourse. And the white-footed mice are always with us. There is something amiable and companionable about a white-footed mouse. Long experience with us has given them confidence. They slip in and out in the evenings like cheery little grey gnomes; squatting on the edge of the great adobe stove and nibbling tidbits, held daintily in their forepaws, while their big, beady, black eyes watch us attentively.

We have our birds too, though not the population of spring and summer. But quail whistle at times from the distance of the rocks and shrikes chatter advice from the summits of dead mescal stalks. The world moves on slowly but surely towards spring. The new grass is green in sheltered nooks and, already, some of the early fishhook cacti are putting out their flowers. The fishhooks are temperamental. If they feel like it they will flower, in defiance of seasons or regulations.

The house is bigger this year than it was last. Yaquitepec grows slowly. Almost everything in the desert grows slowly; and, like all the rest, our housegrowth is controlled chiefly by water. When there is water in plenty there is adobe mud for walls. And when the cisterns are low, building necessarily has to stop. But the heavy walls are slowly replacing all the temporary ones. And we have: a new window on the desert this year through which the winter stars can shine by night and through which, each dawn, we can watch the winter sun come up, red and swollen like the gilded dome of some great mosque, across a dim horizon that is studded by the phantom shapes of the Arizona mountains.

We like to sit in our window seats at dawn and sunset. It is then that the desert is most beautiful. The old sea bed, where once rolled the headwaters of the Vermilion sea, is still a ghostly memory of its former state. And a memory not too dim, either. At dawn all the hollows of the badlands swim with misty haze that startlingly suggests water. And when sunset flings the long blue shadow of Coyote peak far out across the dry

reaches the effect is breath taking. There they are again, all those ancient bays and winding gulfs and lagoons. And beyond them the purple grey of the great sea. It is not an illusion that is part of our own make-up.

Recently we had a visitor, a young scientist from the east whose pet study is desert insects. He sat with us one evening and gazed out over the lowland desert, and marveled. "It's a real sea," he said in puzzled bewilderment. "Why, I can see the play of the wind on the water, and the streaks of tide-rips!" Truly mystery broods in the desert. It is not hard, gazing out across the phantom bottoms, to give credence to the story of the ancient Spanish galleon that legend has it lies rotting parched timbers somewhere amidst the sand dunes.

Desert mystery – and a new year in the dawning. "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 is two years old now, and Rider is six. 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 inspirations must be promptly captured – and she is a conscientious poet as well as a desert housewife.

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