

Stephen Willard

Stephen Willard (1894-1965) is one of the Southwest's premier landscape photographers. His choice of subjects, sense of composition and knowledge of contrast combine to make his images valuable not only as permanent records of the desert environment but artistic masterpieces as well.

Born in Earlville, Illinois in 1894, Willard moved just two years later with his parents to Corona, California. It was here in Southern California that Willard was to have access to the multitude of environments that would later challenge his photographic talents. At the age of 16 Willard's father presented him with his first camera and he began taking pictures immediately. Landscapes always interested him, and in the next few years he would travel to the mountains and desert to hone his photographic skills.

In 1922 Willard and his wife of one year, Beatrice, moved to Palm Springs from Los Angeles. Willard sold his photographs through the Desert Inn Gallery in Palm Springs and at the Palm Canyon Trading Post managed by his wife. In 1935 Willard had his own studio built on what is today Moorton's Botanical Garden on South Palm Canyon Drive. Discouraged by the increasing development in the Coachella Valley and the gradual loss of his favorite photographic haunts, the Willards moved to the Owens Valley in the Great Basin Desert in 1947. Stephen died there in 1965.

Although Willard probably sold more photographs during his time than many other desert landscape photographers, he remains largely unknown today. This situation is now changing with the gift of his life's work to the Palm Springs Desert Museum. In 1999/2000 his daughter, Dr. Beatrice Willard, donated her father's photographic prints, negatives and photo-paintings to the Museum—one of the largest artistic collections ever to be received.