

A Strange Story About ... The House on Ghost Mountain

By Myrtle Teague

Desert Magazine – December 1967

WE were exploring Blair Valley in the Anza-Borrego desert when we paused to visit with a park ranger. "Had we ever heard of the Souths of Yaquitepec," he asked, "the family who wrote about their experiences in primitive living for *DESERT* Magazine back in the 1940s?"

It just happened that we had, having been long-time *DESERT* subscribers. For us, this was an exciting subject. The location of the adobe house on Ghost Mountain, built by Marshal and Tanya South and their children, had been a highly protected secret during the 15 years they occupied it. Often we had wondered just where it was.

Directing our eyes across the vast desert valley toward a rugged mountain that protruded high into a veil of gray clouds, the ranger said, "That's the place they called Ghost Mountain, but you can't see the house until you are within a few feet of it. When Anza-Borrego became a state park, the South property was included within its boundaries."



Marshal and Tanya South's home, Yaquitepec, on the summit of Ghost Mountain.

Always anxious for adventure, we unhooked our jeep from its tow bar, checked our directions on a topographic map and started across the valley. While winding through cacti, washes and uneven terrain, we maintained a watch for potsherds lying on the ground. Long ago a large Indian population lived in this valley and there is much evidence of their pottery making for those who look hard. Complete ollas may be hidden under overhanging rocks or washed up after rains from burial places in the sand.

As we drew near the base of the mountain, I wondered, incredulously, how anyone could have built a house up there. The sides of the mountain appeared endlessly high and utterly vertical. After parking our car, we searched for a trail that serpented faintly among granite boulders, rocky ridges and sharp mesal toward the summit. In places it gave out entirely, but we continued to climb until, exhausted, we all but crawled to the brow of the hill. And there it was! Elegant in simplicity, splendid in isolation, the adobe walls of Yaquitepec nestled among huge boulders in a natural setting. Their years of work, their mastery of frustration, their joy which came as a result of rewarding toil; all of the emotions that the South family had experienced were symbolized by these strong, vital adobe walls.

The cisterns the Souths had dug and cemented so as to hold each drop of precious rainfall now provided water for wildlife. The unique adobe oven in which Tanya baked whole grain, Indian bread stood unused. The house had deteriorated, but the timeless character of artful construction gave it a dignity that will never grow shabby. We stood on the edge of the precipice, drinking in the serenity of eroded mesas which stretched endlessly below, like gigantic mazes in relief. I began to wonder about this family who had succumbed to an overwhelming urge to get away from the confines of its time; to imagine its primitive life on this mountain island amid a sun-parched, sandy sea.

Born in England, Marshal South came to the United States when he was five years old. With his mother and brother he traveled widely and, when a young man, wrote a number of Western fiction books which were published in England. Tanya was a New Yorker. After graduating from Columbia University, she wrote poetry for various publications until she met and married Marshal. When the depression was at its peak, when business firms and banks were closing their doors, the Souths loaded their belongings into an old car and headed toward the desert in quest of a home.

Their search ended at the base of Ghost Mountain on the western rim of the Southern California desert. This seemed the perfect spot to build their new home. Water had to be packed up the steep mountain trail to make adobe bricks and supply other needs, but by working from sunup to sundown, the couple proved the desert a generous provider. Their sandals were made of yucca fibre, their pots and pans from native clay. In winter they carried firewood on their backs over many miles. Their only source of income was from the monthly articles Marshal wrote for *DESERT* Magazine.

During the years on Ghost Mountain, their third child was born, Victoria. The other two were sons Rider and Rudyard. Tanya supervised their academic studies while Marshal taught them the ways of nature and Man. The family lived at Yaquitepec until 1947 when, due to emotional conflicts which arose, perhaps, from too close an association in too small a world, the home broke up and Tanya obtained a divorce. She and the children then moved to San Diego; Marshal moved to Julian. In October, 1948, at the age of 62, Marshal died of a heart attack. At the time of his death, Rider was 14, Rudyard 10, and Victoria eight years of age.

Time has rolled onward. Now Yaquitepec stands on its isolated mountain top, abandoned and old. But the gentle winds that whisper around its adobe walls still remember the wonderful years of its past.

Editor's (Choral Pepper) note: On a recent trip to San Diego to visit with Tanya South, *DESERT's* editor met Victoria, now an attractive mother of five children. Rider, also is married and has a family, while Rudyard pursues academic achievements in engineering. Tanya is retired from a civil service position she held for many years.

She spoke of her *DESERT* friends and of their kindness in the past. She is happy, healthy, busy with a multitude of interests, and she looks younger today than she did in *DESERT* photos published 25 years ago. She described Marshal as a man far ahead of his time who lived and thought in the '40s as the hippies try to think and live today. C.P.