

THE RUIN ON GHOST MOUNTAIN

Written in a trailer in the desert on March 4, 1999

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"There's a mountain not far from here where, many years ago, a man lived with his wife and children. He was a writer of some kind."

My interest was piqued. This sounded a little familiar. "Do you know his name?" I asked.

"Hmmm, no. I could look it up."

"Would you recognize it if you heard it?"

"Maybe."

"Was it Marshal South?"

"That sounds familiar." She opened a tour book, ruffled through a few pages, and said, "Yes. Marshal South."

I was visiting the Anza-Borrego Desert wilderness in California, not far from the Mexican border. Some friends of mine had told me of the wonders of this particular desolate area, and then had invited me to join them for a couple of days there in their motor home. On our first morning, we were talking over the breakfast table after the dishes had been cleared, planning our escapades for the day. I asked if we could make the Marshal South home our first stop. As it was only a few miles away, my hosts agreed.

Locking and leaving the motor home, we piled into the four-wheel drive Suzuki and found state road S-2. Six miles south of where it leaves Scissors Crossing at Little Pass, we turned onto a dirt road. Putting the Suzuki into four-wheel drive mode, we surged onward over corrugated roadway until we came, about two miles farther, to a dead end. A trail one mile long began there, leading to the top of Ghost Mountain and the site of the ruined abode built by author Marshal South and his wife Tanya.

Marshal South, described in our various tour guides as "interesting," "audacious," and "eccentric," loved life in the desert, and his writings—magazine articles, poetry, and novels—are set in the stark southwest. His novels were published in England 1935-1944, during the years he was living on Ghost Mountain. They bore the intriguing titles of *Child of Fire*, *Flame of Terrible Valley*, *Gunsight*, *Juanita of the Border Country*, *The Curse of the Sightless Fish*, *Gold of the Gods*, *Robbery Range*, and *Tiburón: The Isle of the Shark*.

The Souths settled on the top of Ghost Mountain in February 1932. With his income markedly reduced in the early years of the Depression, Marshal and his wife Tanya decided to live off the land much like the early Indians. The setting and their way of life would provide unequalled inspiration for his writing. They lived there for sixteen years and raised three children, who were born during their sojourn on the mountaintop. With their own hands, they built an adobe home, which they called Yaquitepec (a word in an Indian dialect which means "Ghost Mountain"), and an ingenious system for collecting rain water in the arid desert region. They grew much of their own food. A monthly trip to Julian, a beautiful village about twenty miles away and dating from

the gold mining days, enabled them to procure the few necessities they couldn't provide for themselves. Everything they bought had to be carried along the trail to the top of Ghost Mountain.

I began to follow the same trail. I was equipped with my official X Bar X Boys cowboy hat with stampede string (which I needed in the strong breeze), my official Sandy Allen camera, my official Hardy Boys binoculars (see the orange endpapers), my official Troy Nesbit canteen, and my official Aunt Gertrude jacket ("Land sakes, you'll die of exposure!"). Although the trail is only one mile long, I found it a bit of a challenge. It has several switchbacks as it rises steeply, quickly. The last two hundred yards cause the hiker to breathe very deeply indeed, with several areas where the trail consists of stones laid like stairs, and just as steep. As I wheezed over these chunks of flecked granite, I wondered if they had been placed by Marshal South.

The hike is well worth the effort, though the site was abandoned a little more than half a century ago. The hill is studded with boulders, and features stands of ocotillo and barrel cactus, clumps of agave and yucca, and scattered but plentiful creosote bushes. After stepping along for about half an hour, I came upon the ruins of the Souths' home. It is rapidly eroding into the desert, but much still remains. The adobe walls were about two to three feet high, and the primary frames of the building stood at odd angles, dark and fiercely weathered. The bolts that held them together were rusted the color of very strong tea. A bed frame the same color, with a few springs, was situated inside the main room. Several cisterns were open to the sky to collect the rainwater. All were dry. A few feet away was a small pool I could imagine being used for bathing. The cisterns and pool were lined with a smooth layer of concrete about two inches thick, moderately cracked but still showing signs of the care with which it had been installed.

"Here is where much of Marshal South's picturesque and popular writing took form," I reflected. I saw no evidence of a table where a typewriter may have been set—or of any other furniture besides the bed. "I wonder if he wrote in longhand," I thought. Fifty years can take a lot away from an abandoned home, even on the top of an isolated mountain. The view, however, both to east and west, was of rare beauty and far distance.

Marshal South's monthly columns in *Desert Magazine* described what one guide book calls "his experiment in primitive living." South became familiar with several of the local personalities, including descendants of Indians who had lived in the area for generations. With them he investigated isolated sites, including an emerald mine known to the Indians and worked by them in the last century, but whose primitive diggings are now covered with tons of rock after an earthquake. Nonetheless, South claimed to have found one perfect emerald there.

Just a mile or two from Ghost Mountain is an old wagon track from the nineteenth century, the first all-weather passage into southern California. Marshal South wrote these words about this historic site, which he could see in the spectacular view from Yaquitepec:

There's a valley I know in the wastelands
Where, down through the greasewood and sage,
Like a dim, ghostly thread from the years that have fled,
Stretch the tracks of the Overland Stage.

Lone, ghostly and dim in the starlight;
Grey, desolate and pale in the dawn,
Blurred by heat-waves at noon—still, o'er mesa and dune
Wind the track of the wheels that have gone.

Old coaches whose wheels long have mouldered,
Old stage-teams whose hoofs long are dust;
Still, faint and age-greied, wind the old wheel-ruts made
By tires long since crumbled to rust.

And down where the silence lies deepest—
 Like a lone, crumbling bead on a thread—
 In the mesquite-grown sands the old stage-station stands,
 Hushed with memories—and ghosts of the dead.

The desert rays wake not its brooding,
 But oft 'neath the star-powered sky,
 Round the walls on dark nights there move dim, ghostly lights,
 As once more the old stages sweep by.

And again, across dune, wash and mesa,
 As the dead years turn back on their page,
 Pass the dim, racing teams from a ghost-world of dreams,
 Down the tracks of the Overland Stage.

After the second World War, the Depression was over and life was better. Or perhaps it just got too hard for Tanya after living on a mountaintop for sixteen years. In about 1948, she left Yaquitepec, and Marshal abandoned the home to the elements. No more novels came after those years. The words Marshal South crafted on the top of Ghost Mountain can now apply to the ruin on its top.

Lone, ghostly and dim in the starlight;
 Grey, desolate and pale in the dawn,
 Blurred by heat-waves at noon ...

It is easier to win the *Reader's Digest* sweepstakes than to find the novels of Marshal South, but his columns in the *Desert Magazine* can be located in some libraries. And the ruin on Ghost Mountain has its visitors. There were many footprints in the dust besides mine, I am glad to say.