

Ghost Mountain Family

The Marshal South Family

John Frain

Based on the book *The Ghost Mountain Chronicles* By Diana Lindsay

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“The Desert! If you hate it, you will fly from it and never wish to see its face again. If you love it, it will hold you and draw you as will no other land on earth.”

Marshal South

“The desert has gone a-begging for a word of praise these many years. It never had a sacred poet; it has in me only a lover ... This is a land of illusions and thin air. The vision is so cleared at times that the truth itself is deceptive.”

John Charles Van Dyke
The Desert (1901)

“The other Desert - *the real Desert* - is not for the eyes of the superficial observer, or the fearful soul or the cynic. It is a land, the character of which is hidden except to those who come with friendliness and understanding. To these the Desert offers rare gifts ... health-giving sunshine—a sky that is studded with diamonds—a breeze that bears no poison—a landscape of pastel colors such as no artist can duplicate—thorn-covered plants which during countless ages have clung tenaciously to life through heat and drought and wind and the depredations of thirsty animals, and yet each season send forth blossoms of exquisite coloring as a symbol of courage that has triumphed over terrifying obstacles. To those who come to the Desert with friendliness, it gives friendship; to those who come with courage, it gives new strength of character. Those seeking relaxation find release from the world of man-made troubles. For those seeking beauty, the Desert offers nature’s rarest artistry. This is the Desert that men and women learn to love.”^t

Randall Henderson
Desert Magazine
1937

“There is a romance about mining and the longer one stays in the game, the more romantic it becomes.”

Shady Myrick
Desert Prospector

Outline

1930

Marshal South and his wife drive their Model T Ford into Blair Valley, which was maintained by the Bureau of Land Management in the years before it became the Anza Borrego Desert State Park. Both Marshal and his wife Tanya were writers and artists and during the early days of the Great Depression had reached the end of their financial resources and go into the desert wilderness to establish a new home.

As Randall Henderson later wrote about their relocation to the desert (in the December 1945 issue of *Desert Magazine*) “They loaded their few belongings in their old car and turned their backs on the coast city (Oceanside) where they had lived. They followed a faint trail that led to the base of one of the mountains along the western rim of the Colorado desert of Southern California. If the Indians could live off the desert, so could they. And so they established a camp among the Juniper and Agave on the top of a mountain. At first they had only canvas for shelter, and it was necessary to carry their water up the steep rocky slopes from a spring at the base of this mountain.”

They name the mountain Ghost Mountain and over the next year, establish a primitive home on Ghost Mountain. The mountain was named by Tanya and Marshal South when they began their “great experiment” in primitive living, which was later (famously) chronicled in the pages of *Desert Magazine*. Nowhere in the pages of the magazine can a reader find background on the Souths. Their life, as far as the magazine was concerned, began when they commenced building their home, called Yaquitepec, on the waterless ridge of Ghost Mountain in Blair Valley.

For 17 years (from 1930 to 1947) poet, artist, and author Marshal South and his family lived on Ghost Mountain, a remote, waterless mountaintop that is today within California’s Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. Over a period of nine of those years, South chronicled his family’s controversial primitive lifestyle through popular monthly articles written for *Desert Magazine*.

“But the Book of Nature - the same one that the Indian studied so successfully - still is available free to all. And the Desert Edition of it, whose pages we on Ghost Mountain ruffle through every day by the aid of the wind and sunshine, always provides interesting items and food for thought.” Marshal South

1936

In June, Randall Henderson and McKenney take a weekend trip to the Santa Rosa Mountains. McKenney recalls that it was “one of the most memorable of the many exploring trips we took together. “We left the highway at Pinyon Flats and drove through a rough, narrow, and steep road to the top of the Santa Rosas, stopping at Steve Ragsdale’s cabin. We camped the night there. I’ve never seen the stars more brilliant nor felt the air more bracing. The next morning we walked eastward along the forested ridge, pausing often to marvel at the magnificent panorama of desert and mountains which stretched to the far horizons, north, east and south ... We talked again about starting a magazine, with growing enthusiasm. Our talk ranged from coldly realistic to flights of idealism, from problems of selling advertising space to the values of a poetry page.”

Randall tells McKenney, “Let’s sell the *Herald* (which the two were co-owners of) and I’ll dispose of the *Chronicle*, which will give us limited capital to get started.” McKenney agreed.

From where the two men sat at the peak of the mountain, McKenney notes in *Desert Editor* “it seemed possible for us to toss pebbles into the barren desert cove which ten years later became known as Palm Desert. The area below had no special significance to Henderson at the time but in the August 1948 issue of *Desert Magazine* Henderson wrote that the spot that *Desert Magazine* came to be located had a sentimental interest to him. Henderson wrote in 1948 “It was during a trip on the ridge overlooking the Palm Desert cove that Wilson McKenney and I reached the final decision to launch *Desert Magazine*.”

But the Palm Desert location would have to wait. In November of 1937 at El Centro California, they began *Desert Magazine*, what some have called an icon of American Journalism. Although their pride and joy never received any major awards, it was priceless to generations of people who shared the same passion. This jewel was called *Desert Magazine*, and until 1958 (the magazine actually ran to 1985 under different ownerships) they shared their love of the desert with anyone who was willing to listen.

1937

Randall Henderson starts *Desert Magazine*. He gives the mission of the magazine in his first editorial titled “There Are Two Deserts” writing:

“ONE IS A GRIM desolate wasteland. It is the home of venomous reptiles and stinging insects, of vicious thorn-covered plants and trees, and of unbearable heat. This is the desert seen by the stranger speeding along the highway, impatient to be out of ‘this damnable country.’ It is the desert visualized by those children of luxury to whom any environment is unbearable which does not provide all of the comforts and services of a pampering civilization. It is a concept fostered by

fiction writers who dramatize the tragedies of the desert for the profit it will bring them. But the stranger and the uninitiated see only the mask. The other Desert—*the real Desert*—is not for the eyes of the superficial observer, or the fearful soul or the cynic. It is a land, the character of which is hidden except to those who come with friendliness and understanding. To these the Desert offers rare gifts: health-giving sunshine—a sky that is studded with diamonds—a breeze that bears no poison—a landscape of pastel colors such as no artist can duplicate—thorn-covered plants which during countless ages have clung tenaciously to life through heat and drought and wind and the depredations of thirsty animals, and yet each season send forth blossoms of exquisite coloring as a symbol of courage that has triumphed over terrifying obstacles. To those who come to the Desert with friendliness, it gives friendship; to those who come with courage, it gives new strength of character. Those seeking relaxation find release from the world of man-made troubles. For those seeking beauty, the Desert offers nature's rarest artistry. This is the Desert that men and women learn to love."

1939

Saturday Evening Post readers are introduced to Marshal South through his article "Desert Refuge."

First article by Marshal South in *Desert Magazine* titled "The Campbells of Vallecitos." As Randall Henderson writes in the December 1939 issue of *Desert Magazine* in the "Writers of the Desert" section of the magazine, "Marshal has promised there will be more stories from Yaquitepec for *Desert Magazine* readers in the future. Material from a writer who lives as close to the real desert as Marshal South will be welcomed by our readers." Over the next seven years (until 1947) South would become the most famous writer for the *Desert Magazine* with over 100 articles for the magazine.

South introduced hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people to the desert through his monthly columns. He had a very loyal following, deservedly so. South wrote with a lyric quality, painting word pictures as only a poet or artist could. He wrote with passion about the desert — its silence, beauty and natural history; its healthful qualities; its early inhabitants and their lifestyle.

1940

Marshall South writes his first column for *Desert Magazine* titled "January at Yaquitepec."

"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, 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.” Over the next eight years Marshal South would become the greatest contributor to *Desert Magazine*, authoring a total of 102 articles by 1948.

1945

In the July issue of *Desert Magazine*, appears the article “Desert Refuge” by Marshal South that is perhaps one of the most lyrically beautiful articles to ever appear in *Desert Magazine*. It is about a day trip where the South family followed the beckoning of the wind to find an Indian ruins among the rocks that were once home to Indians. Marshall called it the House Forgotten.

“The sun sparkled upon the mountains,” begins the article. “Against the gleam of the desert sky, flecked by a few lacy veils of white that had been flung aside by the waking dawn, the first blooms of the ocotillos swung in splashes of scarlet. Through the swaying junipers the desert wind walked, talking to itself and crooning snatches of forgotten songs as it plucked at the harp strings of the wire grass. ‘Come with me,’ whispered the wind. ‘Come with me and I will show you something. Come.’ “

The article talks about how the family “took a canteen of water and a little package of food and shut the door of Yaquitepec behind us and set out on the heels of the wind.” After awhile, they came upon the ruins in the boulders they came upon what Marshall called “House Forgotten.”

“It wasn’t much of a house,” he writes in the article. “Even when it had been occupied, it could never have been anything more than a crude shelter. But to someone, or some family, it had been home. And to any home, however crude, there always is an aura of sentiment.”

The article talks about how they spent the day exploring House Forgotten and then headed back home – to their own House Forgotten – in the evening.

“The desert was waking to the cool of the evening. Under the buttes and out from the deep gorges the shadow dancers were already shaking their sable mantles. A long way off an investigative coyote lifted his quavering note. The ravens were flopping homeward, flying heavily and commenting upon our progress with sardonic ‘wauks.’ A stubby tailed rock python, his glassy blue metallic length half out from the protection of a mescal clump, watched us as we passed and flickered a speculative tongue. Down a tiny, well worn chipmunk trail, an old brown

tarantula moved, while from beneath a gnarled juniper a soft-eyed little antelope squirrel sat up from its meal of berries and squatted erect upon its haunches, watching like a friendly elf in a fur coat, the procession of queer two-legged beings that tramped past.”

Then, as Marshal South writes in his article, “Our friend the wind overtook us” from “coming back to spend the night wandering on the ridges and playing his harp among the rocks and junipers.”

“Well,” said the wind as South writes, “didn’t I promise to show you something?” And the wind then laughed. “You know, someday someone is going to discover the ruins of your house. And find bits of pottery and speculate learnedly upon it and decide that you were creatures of a very primitive order.”

Back at their crude home that night on top of Ghost Mountain, Marshal South remembers what the wind has said to him. “As I barred the shutters and tied down the covers of the water barrels, I knew that the wind was right. Someday, someone will come and speculate and search amidst the ruins of Yaquitepec. And will exclaim over the pottery chips and the few thin relics of another House Forgotten.”

It was a premonition of what was soon to come. In a year, the family would exit their primitive House Forgotten and file for divorce. And, a few years later, Marshal South would be dead.

1948

Marshal South dies in a trailer in Julian, California on October 22, 1948 of heart failure and is buried in an unmarked grave in El Cajon. Marshal wrote Henderson and told him that he was “very weak, but if a cure is possible the desert will do it.” He told Henderson that he was working on two new articles. A month later, on October 22, he died. He was 59 years old. *Desert Magazine* announces Marshal’s death in the December 1948 issue, which included his last published story. Henderson’s final comments are particularly apt in understanding South:

“He was a dreamer — an impractical visionary according to the standards of our time, but what a drab world it would be without the dreamers. Marshal’s tragedy was that he tried too hard to fulfill his dream. He would not compromise. And that is fatal in a civilization where life is a never-ending compromise between the things we would like to do and the obligations imposed by the social and economic organization of which we are a part.”

“Marshal wanted to live a natural life...so he moved out to Ghost Mountain to be as close to Nature as possible. If he had been a hermit that would have worked

very well. But Marshal was not a hermit by nature. He wanted to raise a family — and impose upon his family his own unconventional way of life.”

“Therein lay the weakness of his philosophy. He despised the rules and taboos of the society he had left behind, and immediately set up a new and even more restrictive code for his own household. And therein lies the explanation of the break in the South family life...

“Marshal’s magazine stories were popular because of the beautiful prose with which he expressed the dreams which are more or less in the hearts of all imaginative people. Those of us who knew him well, felt for him the respect that is always due a man with the courage of his convictions. We’ll miss his stories of the desert trails. We will remember him for the artistry with which he expressed ideals we all share. ”

Marshal’s wife Tanya raised the children, who all grew up to lead very successful lives. She continues writing her poetry for *Desert Magazine* until Henderson stepped down as editor in 1959. Her name is found on 202 poems in the magazine.

However, a different perspective is given on Marshal South by western historian Peter Wild in his book Marshall South of Yaquitepec. Wild sees South as the type of icon that readers of *Desert Magazine* needed to as well as a force for promotion of the magazine that Randall Henderson needed. As Wild writes in his book, “He was popular in his day because he held out a romance easily digestible and coming with the immediate sugar rush of yearned-for treacle. In short, Marshall South offered simple answers in the midst of tumultuous times.” And, Wild notes, that “In a parallel life, the man who peached peace, love, and gentleness towards the earth and all its creatures also was cranking out lurid pulp fiction, tales laced with violence, particularly with abuse to women.”

As Wild notes towards the end of his book, “Despite all of the overwhelming evidence contrary to the popular image Marshall South projected, he continues to have thousands of admirers ... who, I suspect, base their adoration of the man far more on what they enjoy imagining him to have been than on an informed understanding of his life and writings.”

1949

Tanya South writes “A Sequel to Ghost Mountain” for the April 1949 issue of *Desert Magazine*, telling readers how well the children are doing since they left the mountain. The below note offers such a contrast to the beginning article of Marshal South in *Desert Magazine* in 1940 when he began reporting their primitive lifestyle away from civilization on Ghost Mountain.

“We have pleasant comfort in a light, airy four-room apartment on the summit of a steep hill. Our pooch, the frisky Ginger, is a definitive personality in our household, and our four large tortoises are now waking up from their long sleep. I passed a Civil Service examination. To date, I am tapping typewriter keys. God has been very bountiful with love and mercy, and fruits thereof. Adios, good friends, and warmest regards!”

1958

The Anza-Borrego Desert State Park acquires the old Ghost Mountain property of the Souths called Yaquitepec. Curious desert explorers begin hiking the trail up to the primitive old home, off San Diego County Highway S-2, to view the ruins. Invariably they ask themselves why someone would have chosen to live in such a dry desolate area with small children for all of those years?

A one-mile-long steep trail from the southern edge of Blair Valley, in Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, leads up to the site on a flat just below the top of the mountain. The skeletal remains of the house still stand: a rusted bed frame, the base of a large adobe oven, the frame for an arched doorway, and the many cement and barrel cisterns that once caught the seasonal rainfall, the only water available other than what was hauled up the trail.

1997

Tanya South, widow of Marshal South, dies on May 31, just months short of her 100th birthday. After the grand experiment in primitive living on Ghost Mountain, she maintained her privacy after all the children were grown and gone. She never granted an interview. She never lost her anger toward Marshal and always cherished her Rosicrucian books. Her daughter Victoria said, “Her focus was very much inward and her faith sustained her, even if she didn’t show it to others.”

The City of Palm Desert opens Desert Willow Golf Resort in an effort to increase tourism and revenue to the City. It is located on Country Club Drive and directly north of the JW Marriott Desert Springs Golf Resort.

NOTES

Marshal South & The Ghost Mountain Chronicles – Diana Lindsay

<http://www.amazon.com/Marshal-South-Ghost-Mountain-Chronicles/dp/0932653669>

For 17 years, from 1930 to 1947, poet, artist, and author Marshal South and his family lived on Ghost Mountain—a remote, waterless mountaintop that is today within California’s Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. Over a period of nine of those years, South chronicled his family’s controversial primitive lifestyle through popular monthly articles written for *Desert Magazine*. The articles reflected his passion for the desert while praising its early inhabitants and their lifestyle. Drawing on his poetic skills, South wrote vivid word pictures about the desert—its beauty and natural history—as well as their daily life at Yaquitepec, creating both a very loyal and supportive readership and naysayers who objected to his philosophy and lifestyle. After years of silence Rider South, the eldest of the three children who were raised on Ghost Mountain, and his wife Lucile feel it is time to tell the story and to set the record straight. The book includes their own memories plus all of Marshal South’s *Desert Magazine* articles and many never-before-published photographs of the family.

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<http://www.ghostmountainmovie.com>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJe7T36AcXA&feature=youtu.be>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZLupTugS7OQ>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjXI89k7atA>

* * *

Dispatches From Ghost Mountain
John Fraim

Desert aficionados know the importance of *Desert Magazine* in introducing Americans to the desert. However, less well known are the contributors to *Desert Magazine* who gave the magazine its unique quality. Of course, one of the major contributors was *Desert Magazine*’s founder Randall Henderson whose desert advocacy was a direct counterpart of John Muir’s high Sierra advocacy. Henderson’s philosophy and essays on the desert

became a staple of almost every issue of the magazine and served as a context that cultivated regular contributors to the magazine.

Much of the Henderson philosophy towards the desert was influenced by his expeditions in the desert as well as the unique characters who populated the desert in these years. Unlike the pioneers who were forced across the desert as part of their western migration, this was a group of people who made a conscious decision to give up the luxuries that twentieth century America offered and live solitary lives in the vast open spaces of the desert.

It was an ultra-eccentric group of characters. There was the former Hollywood set designer Harry Oliver who first visited Borrego Valley in 1916 and began adopting his Desert Rat persona that would later become the popular *Desert Rat Scrapbook* in the 1940s. There were the members of Pegleg Smith Liar's Club founded by Oliver and "Desert" Steve Ragsdale made up of Los Angeles desert enthusiasts and Anza-Borrego area homesteaders. There was Steve Ragsdale an itinerant preacher and cotton farmer from Arkansas, who founded the town of Desert Center when his car broke down in 1915 on a trip between Phoenix and Los Angeles near a place called Gruendyke's Well.

Randall Henderson's *Desert Magazine* was full of both the spirit and writings of these early desert inhabitants. It offered a type of symbolic "campfire" for them to gather around each month and share their discoveries of living in this strange, isolated new part of America. Certainly their stories were meant for the growing readership of *Desert Magazine*. But in many ways, their stories were really meant for each other, the group of contributors to *Desert Magazine*.

Of all the eccentrics who came to the *Desert Magazine* "campfire" in these years, none was greater than a former Australian named Marshall South. Leaving Oceanside, California in the early 30s, he moved to the Anza-Borrego desert with his wife and three children where the family lived a primitive lifestyle on top of a mountain called Ghost Mountain where they lived from 1930 to 1947.

From Ghost Mountain, Marshall South began his famous "dispatches" to *Desert Magazine*. They began in 1940 and ended in 1947 and numbered over a hundred articles. While there was much interesting writing in *Desert Magazine* during these years, it is not claiming too much to say that none was as interesting as that of Marshall South. A novelist with many books written before his first dispatch to the magazine, South provided a mixture of fiction and reality. Yet it was almost impossible for any fiction to trump the reality of everyday life on Ghost Mountain.

In a sense, the families' adventures in primitive living on Ghost Mountain constituted a fantasmagoria of a novel in progress. And readers of *Desert Magazine* were like an early version of an audience for a regular television series. They got to know the family, the two boys and the girl. The wife who was a poet herself. They experienced the changes in seasons on Ghost Mountain, the daily chores of getting water and food, of getting warmth in the winter and coolness in the hot summers.

While the writing of Marshall South was more often than not spectacular, it was perhaps what South symbolized to America at the time that made his “dispatches” column in *Desert Magazine* so influential. Just as the great desert writer John Charles Van Dyke came along in the early years of the twentieth century when America had a fantasy of abandoning the material benefits that a quick, unfettered industrialization had brought to America, so too Marshall South provided a needed fantasy for America after the Depression in the 1930s and the world war of 1940s. Later, the fantasy of primitive escapism embodied by Marshall South would crystalize in the Beatniks of the 1950s and the Hippies of the 1960s. But Marshall arrived long before these large-scale cultural movements in America.

The articles of Marshall South for *Desert Magazine* are preserved online and his story is told in the magnificent collection of South writings by Diana Lindsay called *The Ghost Mountain Chronicles*. It would not be going too far to say that while Randall Henderson was a key person in forging a new philosophy and appreciation of the desert in the first half of the twentieth century, Marshall South put a type of “face” onto Randall’s desert philosophy and gave it a personality. Admittedly, it was a strange personality but it was a personality America needed and even welcomed at the time.

* * *

A Feral Family Album

Marshal and Tanya South Followed an Impulse Decades Ago that’s Once Again Familiar, Fleeing a Troubled World and Raising three Children Far From Civilization. More than 60 Years Later, Two of their Kids Are Finally Ready to Talk About It.

Los Angeles Times Magazine, Jan 6, 2002 by Ann Japenga

A MAN WHO HAS KEPT HIS SILENCE FOR HALF A CENTURY develops quite an aura of mystery. So I’m not sure what to expect as I drive through the New Mexico desert en route to meeting Rider South, eldest son of a family that actually did what so many people are talking about doing in these confused and troubled times— shucking civilization for a simpler life.

Over the decades, historians, writers and researchers have wanted to know what really happened to the family that went feral on a California mountain starting in 1932. ☐ family members have refused to talk—until now. It’s as if I’m the first anthropologist to interview Ishi, the renowned “last wild Indian in North America.”

☐e two-lane road heads into high country and crosses miles of fenced rangeland until it eventually comes to Silver City, an old mining town 300 miles southwest of Santa Fe. Silver City has recently been taken over by retirees who fancy the place an economical

alternative to its trendy neighbor. At the front door of a neat suburban home, I'm greeted by one such retiree.

Rider South is a loose-limbed 67-year-old dressed with understated flair—yellow polo shirt and khakis stuffed into black cowboy boots. After introducing me to his wife, Lucile, a former dance instructor at San Diego State University, South says, “You must be hungry,” and proceeds to make quesadillas.

He sets out lunch on TV trays in a comfortable family room dominated by a monster TV screen. South's life revolves around television news and civic activities. He likes to talk about the resurfacing of the high school track and a new public playground.

What he does not especially like to talk about is his past. Outsiders only want to hear one version of it, or they want to assign blame. Still, South eventually leads me out to a cluttered garage and reaches up to a shelf. One after another, he brings down age-grimed pots hand-crafted of California clay. The earthen ollas lead our discussion back more than 60 years, to Ghost Mountain, a remote mountaintop 60 miles east of San Diego, where he and his two siblings were raised.

The South family's experiment ended after an impressively long run. There was an angry divorce accompanied by accusations of infidelity and neglect. The sun-browned children were cast out into civilization and would scarcely be heard from for decades.

Over the years, attempts to find out about their lives in the wild have been rebuffed with a brief comment or two from family members. When a state parks historian contacted Tanya South in 1983, the mother replied she wanted nothing to do with glorifying such a “stark, miserable existence.” Out of respect for their mother, none of the children have discussed the experiment in public.

Tanya South died in 1997. It happened that when I called, two of the Ghost Mountain children, Rider and Victoria, were ready to tell their side of the story. Rudyard South, the younger of the two brothers, has changed his name and conveyed through Rider that he wants no part of revisiting that time and place.

Visitors to Anza-Borrego Desert State Park still make pilgrimages to Ghost Mountain to see the ruins of Marshal South's dream. The place is just as silent and lonely today as it was when the Souths lived there. You turn off a park road and drive three miles of jeep track to the base of a big hill. Trudging up the steep, mile-long path to the homestead, visitors can't help but think of the South kids, who once pounded this same snaky route barefoot in winter cold and 120-degree heat.

Nestled in a little wind-protected bowl atop the mountain is the crumbling framework of the South's adobe, where Marshal and Tanya South conducted a grand 15-year experiment in back-to-nature living. Marshal and Tanya found the homesite in 1932 when they were searching for a place to drop out of society and wait out the Depression.

□e Australian-born writer had made a living writing romantic novels of the American West. He eventually drifted to

Oceanside, where he met his Russian-born wife-to-be at the Rosicrucian Fellowship, an international association of Christian mystics dedicated to preaching and healing the sick.

□e couple shared an interest in literature and metaphysics; Tanya wrote poems, read palms and believed in ghosts. She had been a student at Columbia University and worked as a secretary on Wall Street. But when she married Marshal in 1923, she was destined to leave her urban ways behind.

Writing jobs were scarce during the Depression, so rather than struggle on in the city, the couple decided to pursue the sort of Wild West life Marshal often described in the pulp Westerns he wrote. “We were temperamental misfits and innate barbarians,” South wrote in a 1939 article for the *Saturday Evening Post*. “We were not equal to the job of coping with modern high-power civilization.”

□e Souths weren’t the first, or the last, family to move off the grid. Since Henry David □oreau, Americans have embraced the back- to-nature fantasy. It has spawned books and movies, including Paul □eroux’s “□e Mosquito Coast,” about a Marshal South-type patriarch who drags his brood to the jungles of Honduras.

Recent news sought to light other real-life cases of isolationist families. John “Rajohn Lord” Davis shielded his family from mainstream culture in a camouflaged desert compound near Twentynine Palms, an experiment that ended in tragedy. Facing charges of child abuse and murder, Davis hanged himself in a jail cell last March. In another case, the six children of JoAnn Dunn McGuckin—kids who also grew up without running water or society—holed up in a north Idaho house for five days in May and June until police coaxed them out.

In each case, the fate of the kids seems to somehow vindicate or condemn the parents’ lifestyle.

Marshal and Tanya South had three children while living in the wilds, and Rider (named for adventure writer H. Rider Haggard), Rudyard (for Rudyard Kipling) and Victoria became guinea pigs in an effort to prove the superiority of a □oreau-like existence.

Cut off from society, the family tried to imitate the lifestyle of early Indians. □ey gathered mesquite beans, dined on roasted mescal, did without electricity and running water and fashioned the clay pots Rider South now stashes in his garage. Marshal proudly claimed the family had “slipped from the skirts of civilization.”

Every nail, bed frame and drop of water had to be hauled in 14 miles from a nearby ranch and carried up the steep trail, barefoot and often in brutal heat. Marshal, a skinny 140 pounds, designed a pack board of agave stalks that would allow him to carry 100-pound bags of cement and potatoes. He eventually constructed a system of cisterns and basins to

capture rainwater, but the bulk of the family's water was transported up the mountain on a stretcher-type device. Bathing was a luxury, one the family soon abandoned.

Despite their reclusive ways, the Souths became nearly as well-known as modern sitcom stars. Marshal publicized the family's adventures in articles he wrote for the Saturday Evening Post and Arizona Highways, as well as seven years of monthly columns for a then-popular magazine called Desert, the Outside magazine of its day. Desert captivated a national audience hungry for tales of escape and adventure.

To bored housewives in Syracuse and men building dive bombers for World War II, a naked, tortoise-herding boy named Rider South came to symbolize jubilant freedom. Kids wanted to be Rider South. "I thought: 'Why can't I live like that and not have to go to school?'" recalls Robert Coody, a special collections librarian in Flagstaff, Ariz., who read Desert Magazine while growing up. "This is real learning and real living."

The details of survival on the mountain were dramatic enough, but the real literary possibilities of the project didn't become clear to Marshal until the kids were born. (Tanya traveled to an Oceanside hospital for the births.) Rider, Rudyard and Victoria quickly became the stars of the monthly columns, with their pets taking a close second billing: tortoises named Mojave, Don Antonio and Grandpa, burros Rhett and Scarlett. The kids were home-schooled by Tanya, and they carved bows and arrows with Marshal.

Included in each installment of the family's story were Marshal's diatribes on self-sufficiency, anti-materialism, nudism (wild animals accept a naked man better than a clothed one, he wrote) and the superior ways of the Cahuilla and Kumeyaay Indians who once lived on their hillside, leaving behind blackened agave-roasting pits.

In photos that accompanied the columns, the family looks remarkably like a lost tribe. The utopian patriarch, Marshal, wears only a loincloth and has his long iron-gray hair tied back with a strand of ribbon. Eldest son Rider,

tanned and scowling, wears his streaming red hair parted in the center and tied in two pigtailed. Perhaps he was only squinting in the sun, but the scowl and his long, tangled mat of hair make him look fierce and inscrutable.

The monthly columns became the most popular item in Desert Magazine and inspired floods of mail from wartime readers who wished they had the courage to do what the Souths were doing. Mary E. McVicker wrote of the family in 1943: "Their spirit is a flickering candle flame, a tiny beacon of reassurance in a confused and troubled world."

Yet there were dissenters who said the Souths were wrong to deprive their children of society—the same argument that comes up today whenever survivalists, hippies or polygamists such as Utah's Tom Green family (recently in the news when Green was convicted of bigamy) attempt a break from the mainstream. True, the South kids knew how to make sandals from the fibers of the yucca plant. But what about choosing sides for softball? What would become of them once they left the mountain?

“You are gratifying your own selfish desire to make and dominate your own little world,” wrote Susan Groene in an open letter to Marshal South, printed in *Desert*’s October 1944 issue. “Your family will be sacrificed on the altar of your fetishism.”

Groene’s forebodings seemed particularly prescient in the winter of 1947, 15 years after Marshal and Tanya first came upon the agave-dotted clearing on the mountain. There were rumors that Marshal was having an affair with Myrtle Botts, the librarian in Julian, which, at 21 miles away, was the closest town to the Souths. Though longtime Julian residents still swear there was an affair, Bott’s daughter, Jeri Wright, denies it. “Marshal South was a kind and wonderful man,” says the 85-year-old San Diego resident. “My whole family liked him very much. Even my Grandma loved him.”

Still, the wild family from Ghost Mountain made its first public appearance in a San Diego courtroom in 1947. The occasion: a divorce proceeding.

Rider was then 13, Rudyard was 9 and Victoria 7. “The South family presented a strange appearance in the austere courtroom,” a reporter noted. The kids were as skittish as rabbits—and why not, they had never gone to school or lived among people.

Tanya South told the judge that she and her children were often stranded in the desert when her husband took off in their 1929 Model A Ford—their only connection with the outside world. Based on Tanya’s complaints, the judge granted a divorce and gave her custody of the children. He ordered Marshal to pay \$25 a month in child support, a big chunk of the total \$40 a month he made writing his magazine column.

Marshal South moved to Julian, dying of heart failure the following year at age 62. He was buried there in an unmarked grave.

All these years later, Rider still has plenty of red in his swept-back hair, and he has retained his trademark scowl and ironic shrug. With his planed face full of dramatic lines, he could pass for an Indian. (His father took advantage of his angular features to hint that he might have Native American ancestry.)

Filling in what happened after the family left Ghost Mountain, Rider says his mother moved the kids to Carlsbad. They lived on welfare for several years. One of Tanya’s first items of business was to get the children haircuts, an occasion noted in the San Diego newspapers. Tanya got a job cleaning the movie theater in Carlsbad, and Rider eventually took a paper route to help support the family. They had never had much in the way of material goods on the mountain, but only now—living in town—did they feel poor.

Going to school was “a shock,” Rider says. Academically the South children were up to par, but other kids found them peculiar. “We were sort of scared of everybody,” Rider says. At 18, Rider apprenticed at the North Island Naval Air Station in San Diego and never left. He spent 35 years installing gas tanks in Navy planes.

Most of his fellow mechanics never knew they were tightening bolts alongside a former wild child from Ghost Mountain. All of his adult life, Rider avoided telling people about his unconventional childhood. His sister, Victoria Morgan, now 61 and a retired software engineer in Kent, Wash., confirmed in a phone interview that she, too, never discussed her wilderness childhood. If pressed about their history, Rider and Victoria would just say vaguely that they grew up in San Diego County.

Early on, Rider and Victoria got into the habit of keeping quiet because everyone seemed to want to hear only one

version of the story—the Swiss Family Robinson version promulgated by their father. Their mother, Tanya, was particularly stung by the one-sided tale, so much so that she once wrote her own account. According to Victoria, Tanya’s version didn’t sell because “it was tinged with bitterness.” Victoria told her mother that if she toned it down, people would want to hear her story. Angry and despairing, Tanya destroyed the manuscript.

Tanya felt Marshal was idolized, his Ghost Mountain scheme idealized—while she was vilified for breaking up the grand experiment. “People thought Father was a hero and she was the villain for taking us away from that life,” Rider says. “Later everyone would say how wonderful it must have been to live with that wonderful Marshal South. That really made her mad.

“The reality of it was vastly different than Father portrayed it,” Rider adds. “Did you see the movie ‘Castaway’? That was sort of like our life. It’s like we were there on an island with these coconuts. We didn’t have any friends. We got sunburned every day.” He shrugs and offers a half-smile to let you know he can laugh at it all now.

The photos readers adored—such as the one showing Rider standing on a boulder with a feather in his hair, practicing with a bow and arrow—were posed. The garden where they supposedly grew their own food was the size of a sofa. “Father wrote stories about how we lived off the land, but you can’t live off rock,” Rider says. “If you’ve been up there, you know there was nothing to eat. It sounds romantic to say we had century plant roasts every spring. But it was essentially a picnic out there. Our food came from town.” Visitors to Ghost Mountain can still find a large dump of rusted cans behind a boulder.

Despite his tone of wry disdain, Rider says his father was not intentionally duping the public. He believed in the values he espoused; he just couldn’t pull off a total back-to-the-land existence. “He believed it,” Rider says. “But he could talk it more than he could do it.” Where reality fell short of the ideal, the writer embellished.

All this time, people have assumed that what went wrong on Ghost Mountain was the experiment itself—the back-to-nature life was just too punishing. But if their lives were not as idyllic as Marshal South painted them, the children say they weren’t that bad either. Both Rider and Victoria say they were never hungry or thirsty, and they got to do things—such as staging tortoise races—that other kids didn’t.

Hearing the Ghost Mountain children tell it, the real problem was not the experiment. It was the marriage. “Right from the start, my parents’ marriage was not a great marriage,” says Victoria. “He [Marshal] wasn’t a responsible person from the start, so they went out there where he could be even less responsible.”

The experiment left its mark on Rider south in quirky ways. He never developed a liking for music or sports. Due to early deprivations, he can’t bring himself to turn off the shower until the last drop of hot water is drained from the tank. The limited dining opportunities on “the hill,” as Rider calls Ghost Mountain, also left him with a taste for odd food combinations—frozen peas with chocolate syrup and pie with guacamole.

But these are minor eccentricities, and not what I drove all the way to Silver City to discover. What I and others have really wanted to know all these years was: How did the wild children turn out? Do their lives vindicate their father’s dream?

By most measures, the brood raised on Ghost Mountain is a success. They’re financially secure; they have families of their own (Rider has two grown sons from a former marriage) and the families are close. On the caring and kindness scale, too, the kids have prospered. Rider South sends birthday cards to people he’s only met once, and he thinks nothing of driving across several states to comfort a friend in trouble.

But if the kids are a testament to their raising, they are not exactly the sort of testament Marshal South wished to create. His aim was to spring his children from the snares of civilization— “the factory,” as he called it. But Rider went to work in an aircraft factory and stayed there most of his adult life. One of his proudest possessions is a plaque awarded for five years of service without ever missing a day of work.

His idea of freedom is a paid-off house and car and a government pension. Without a trace of his shrug, he says: “Life is pretty good. This is about as good as it’s going to get.”

And while Marshal South was, in essence, a tree-hugger, Rider is a Republican who supports oil drilling in the Arctic and says environmentalism just isn’t pragmatic. As for primitive living and wilderness adventure, “Rider doesn’t even like to barbecue,” says his wife.

Victoria, too, was left with few sentimental notions about the simple life. “I have no use for the desert,” she says. “None whatsoever.”

It seems too pat to say that what one generation rejects the next embraces—but there it is. Marshal and Tanya South chose the wilderness over town, clay pots over Tupperware. Rider South stores those handmade pots in his suburban garage and makes lunch on a Taco Bell Quesadilla Maker.