



The Magnificent Marjorie Nuhn



THE MAGNIFICENT MARJORIE NUHN

by Robyn

Life is a mystery Everyone must stand alone.

—Madonna, "Like a Prayer"

The people who knew that family are all dead and gone; let's face it.

—Rosemary Beach in an interview with the author

There are a few still who can give reports of Marjorie, but they knew her as children, and Marjorie was the mysterious neighbor, the town's eccentric artist, their zany aunt. Her niece and nephew live to tell us she wore fancy clothes but preferred to be naked, her house was decorated in all shades of pink, she traveled and had a cat, Daisy Belle. She gave paintings as wedding presents, but then regretted it and took them back. She repeatedly told her brother-in-law he ought to redecorate.¹

Her niece said of her, "You had to understand her; that was the secret," but when asked how she herself understood Marjorie, she could only say that "Marj was very unique, artistic, quirky, outspoken, and she loved cats," an echo of the description given by all of Marjorie's living connections. Marjorie had a loving family who spoke and continue to speak positively of her—saying "outspoken" instead of "rude," "artistic and quirky" instead of "weird." But to understand someone is to know their emotions, their motives, to have some sense of what moves them. "She wasn't like anyone else in the family," Marjorie's niece also said. To be accepted is not the same as to be understood, and it is difficult to be understood when you are the only one around of your kind, unusual even among kin.

< *Virgin of Guadalupe*, 1944
Watercolor on paper
Gift of Ferner Nuhn

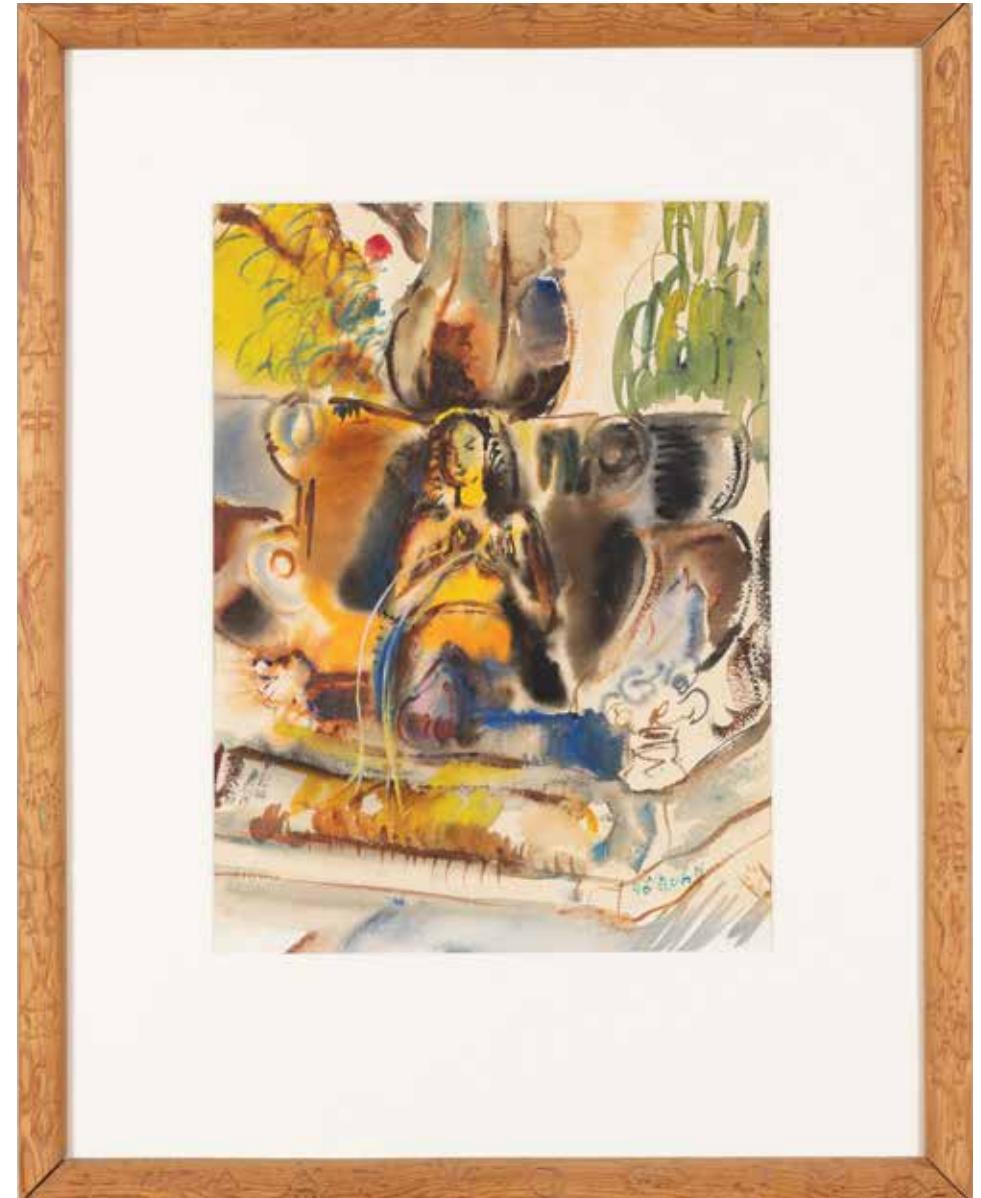
In past years many birth records were not filed at the time of birth as provided by statute, due to the neglect of those charged with the duty of filing said record.

—Marjorie Nuhn's birth certificate, created when she was 44 years old

“Marjorie is not happy.” This sentence, found near the beginning of Ferner Nuhn's 40-page unpublished memoir of his sister Marjorie, sets up Ferner's theme of Marjorie's interior life—one that the memoir implies was darker than one might guess if they looked at her watercolor paintings, which have been described, over the years, as “a riot in color,”² as having an “explosive vitality,”³ and simply, “Bang!”⁴ Throughout the memoir, Ferner weaves in Marjorie's two-year stay at the Independence State Mental Hospital, the abortion she was given along with a tubectomy of which she did not approve and may not even have had explained to her, the death of her cat, and the loss of first her sight due to cataracts, then her home when she was moved to the Cedar Falls Health Care Center at the age of 84. Marjorie, Ferner would have us understand, was not *entirely* the animate version of her paintings. Like all humans, she was more complex.⁵

Marjorie painted and presented a record of her loves—light and color, landscapes and ceremonies, beauty of the mundane and sacred. If she made a record of her losses, it is in her diaries. But these have themselves been lost or else safeguarded so that we are bereft of her own words, her own account of events, both external and internal. Marjorie's thoughts, beliefs, and feelings about her circumstances and herself have been pared down to second-hand accounts, like Ferner's, and thirteen phrases and sentences lifted from her diaries and quoted in Ferner's memoir. Sentences about money, “Down to 10¢!” Sentences about art, “Adrian told me to do some water colors and to forget all else.” About love, “Dear God—make the men I like good and all the world. Adrian, Howard, Ben, Hiram, David, Ed Rowan.” One about her relationship with her mother, “We fight like cats.” And one describing a photograph of herself, “The eyes have it.”⁶

El Fuente de la Parque Central >
(Antigua, Guatemala), 1946
Watercolor on paper
Gift from Ferner Nuhn



Women have no wilderness in them, They are provident instead.

—Louise Bogan, “Women”

Marjorie Nuhn was exceptional; she had wilderness in her. She loved but did not marry. She traveled alone or with only her cat. She called herself a naturist,⁷ a term that, today, carries two definitions that both apply: she saw evidence of the spiritual in the natural world, and she walked around her home and back yard nude.



Sunset Atalaya Hill, 1940
Watercolor
Gift from Ferner Nuhn

Marjorie loved color, especially red.⁸ Born and raised in a state whose natural tapestry is moderate, she traveled—to Arizona, Mexico, Guatemala—and she brought their colors back with her and made of her home a cathedral—part refuge, part castle. Her niece and nephew describe the house as having “a red roof and yellow siding...the sidewalks redone in pink. Even her garage floor was painted in bright colors.” In the living room, there was a baby grand though Marjorie couldn’t play it. On one wall, to the left of several God’s eyes arranged in the shape of a cross, was a mirror framed in pink wood in the shape of an eye.⁹



La Cruza (San Miguel Allende, Mexico), 1944
Watercolor on paper
Gift from Ferner Nuhn

“The eyes have it,” Marjorie wrote. The eyes hold beauty, not only their own shape and color, but that which they see and interpret. The divine expressed tangibly—in nature, in art—is experienced through our vision. Eyes closed, we could grasp blindly—touch without understanding what we feel. Vision shows us that what we hold, and what holds us, is not crude or grotesque or even dull; it is vibrant. Beauty is an expression of life. “She wanted color and things that she thought were beautiful around her at all times,” Marjorie’s nephew said. “And she also had dramatic hats and clothes. Everything about it was connected to what the world should look like in her eyes.”

*[T]he core of woman’s condition [is] that she is internally divided. ...
[T]aught that she is Sleeping Beauty, waiting to be awakened,...
she also knows that she is "always already" awake.*
—Rae Armantrout, “Feminist Poetics and the Meaning of Clarity”

“I, who worship beauty!” Marjorie defines herself with these words in Ferner’s memoir, wherein we see a woman who chafes against her practical mother; who at around the age of 20, spends two years institutionalized for depression; who after becoming pregnant out of wedlock, has a tubectomy paternalistically forced on her, denying her a future as a parent. A woman who goes to school for teaching, though “[she] was not cut out for... [a] conventional pattern in life,” but who takes some art classes while in teacher training and there—at the age of 26—begins to create the expression of Marjorie Nuhn that was evident to the family and neighbors that live to describe her; the expression of herself that she honed studying first at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts and the School of Chicago Art Institute, then at the Stone City Art Colony;¹⁰ the expression of herself that she recorded and shared in paintings now on display in museums and the walls of the homes of relatives, and many of which are held by the Hearst Center for the Arts. Most have been lost. Out of 161 paintings, about 50 are accounted for.¹¹ The others may or may not be intact somewhere.

Marjorie told one newspaper reporter that she “painted objects as they’re seen inside the spirit.”¹² She took her ideal and made it real. This is how we worship the divine; we imitate it, we create. Marjorie praised the beauty of the body by revealing it, celebrated color with elaborate outfits and big hats, fingernails painted green or polka dot or many shades of pink,¹³ like her home, her altar to her vision of the world. There is that which is tangible, then there is Marjorie’s adoration of it, then there is the tangible expression of that adoration. This imitation of the cycle of Life is continued by us, as viewers, with our own ability to admire and to be changed by what we come to know, to let it inspire us.



Mountain Peak (Laguna Beach, California), 1934–36
Watercolor on paper
Gift from Ferner Nuhn

Rejoice with those who rejoice.

—Romans 12:15

The illusion of infinite imitation created by two mirrors reflecting each other—this is Marjorie “gazing into the colored pools” at Yellowstone National Park while painting them, Marjorie in her large hat and the water with its rainbow brim—the two reflecting each other first on the visible surface, then deeper. These bodies of water are home to bacteria that, under the stress of extreme temperatures and sunlight, produce photosynthetic pigments that reflect different wavelengths of light, rimming the ultramarine pools in green, yellow, orange, red or all of these, in layers, a reflection of light and evidence of life. In photographs, these pools appear opaque, saturated with color that, in person and up close, is diluted, the water itself being greater part of the visual experience. This is not a trick of photo editing. An untouched selfie will show the same opacity of brochure photos.



Painted Pots (Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming), 1964
Watercolor on paper
Gift from Ferner Nuhn



Perhaps, regardless of one's skill with perspective, a single image cannot accurately depict depth. If in all the images of an entity, we see only that which is most vibrant, then multiple images give us multiple perspectives of the same aspect, taken out of context—a truth, but a partial one. The depths that surround and support that single attribute, be they calm or troubled, remain unseen. In his memoir of Marjorie, Ferner includes a poem by Louise Bogan that he found among Marjorie's things. "Be strong to look on / my heart," the poem says, "I tell you that / it is a ravaged, / terrible place." This poem being "[c]opied out and saved [by her]," Ferner notes, "evidently echoed feelings that lay deep in her own experience."¹⁶

"Mourn with those who mourn," is the second half of Romans 12:15, quoted above. But Marjorie did not mourn. In her choice to travel, in her home décor, in and out of her clothes, and in her paintings, Marjorie Nuhn rejoiced. Tempted though we may be to mourn the loss of whatever records reveal her depths, we must join her in praise. Let this be a record: Marjorie Anna Nuhn was, in all of her public expressions, magnificent. If her spirit was half as deep as it was bright, she must have been magnanimous—generous in her capacity to feel. Halleluiah!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robyn (MA, Linguistics) is a Cedar Rapids poet living with her husband, three sons and three cats. Her work has been published in *The Journal of Compressed Creative Arts*, *Rust + Moth*, and *SmokeLong Quarterly*. She can be contacted at robyngrothwrites@gmail.com.



Marjorie Nuhn - 1941 - Santa Fe, NM

END NOTES

- ¹ Oral interviews conducted by the author in May of 2020 with Gail Lewellan, Rosemary Beach, George Bergeman, and Barbara Camamo.
- ² Mary Ann Sanders, “Many Subjects Colorfully Featured in Iowa Honorary Art Exhibit at Cedar Falls,” *Waterloo Daily Courier*, March 28, 1941, 6.
- ³ Maxine Thorson, “Reviewer Rates Nuhn Show As ‘Most Exciting,’” *Daily Record* 46, no. 299, December 16, 1946.
- ⁴ Don Freeman, “Iowa Artist Explains Her Water Colors,” *Dubuque Telegraph Herald*, October 21, 1945, 13.
- ⁵ Ferner’s Nuhn’s memoir of his sister, titled *Passion for Beauty: Marjorie Nuhn: Water Colorist* (1985) to be published by Final Thursday Press in cooperation with the Hearst Center for the Arts in spring 2021. Given as a gift to the Hearst in 1986.
- ⁶ Nuhn, 2, 8, 15, 17, 23.
- ⁷ Nuhn, 9, 15, 25–26, 29.
- ⁸ Nuhn, 13, 29–33.
- ⁹ Photograph provided by George Bergeman.
- ¹⁰ Nuhn, 1, 15, 20–21.
- ¹¹ Hearst Center for the Arts, in conversation with the author.
- ¹² Freeman, newspaper article.
- ¹³ Clarissa Bergeman, interview with the author, May 2020.
- ¹⁴ Nuhn, 9.
- ¹⁵ Natasha Geiling, “The Science Behind Yellowstone’s Rainbow Hot Spring: The Grand Prismatic Spring Might Seem Photoshopped, but There’s Very Real Science Beneath Its Vibrant Colors,” *Smithsonianmag.com*, last modified May 12, 2016, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/science-behind-yellowstones-rainbow-hot-spring-180950483/>.
- ¹⁶ Nuhn, 24–25.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Armantrout, Rae. *Collected Prose*. California: Singing Horse Press, 2007.

Birth certificate for Marjorie Nuhn. October 31, 1898. File number 169556. Iowa, Black Hawk County, Birth Certificates, Bureau of Vital Statistics. Iowa Department of Public Health, Waterloo. *Ancestry.com*.

Bogan, Louise. *The Blue Estuaries*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1968.

Freeman, Don. “Iowa Artist Explains Her Water Colors,” *Dubuque Telegraph Herald*, October 21, 1945.

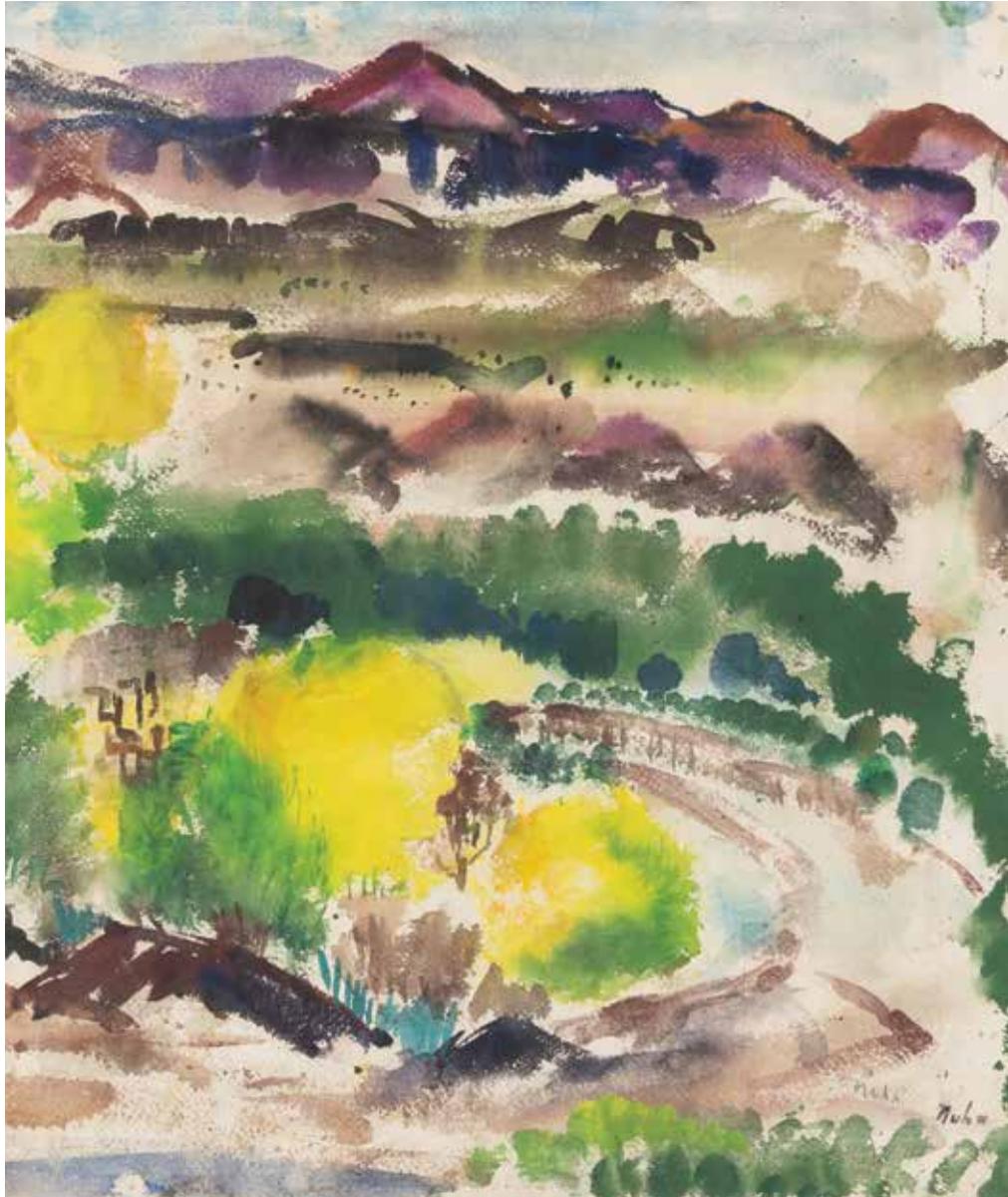
Geiling, Natasha. “The Science Behind Yellowstone’s Rainbow Hot Spring: The Grand Prismatic Spring Might Seem Photoshopped, but There’s Very Real Science Beneath Its Vibrant Colors,” *Smithsonianmag.com*. Last modified May 12, 2016. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/science-behind-yellowstones-rainbow-hot-spring-180950483/>.

Madonna. “Like a Prayer.” *Spotify*, 5:42. 1988. https://open.spotify.com/album/48AGkmM7iO4jrELRnNZGPV?highlight=spotify:track:2v7ywbUzCgcVo_hHaKUcacV.

Nuhn, Ferner. *Passion for Beauty: Marjorie Nuhn: Water Colorist*. 1986.

Sanders, Mary Ann. “Many Subjects Colorfully Featured in Iowa Honorary Art Exhibit at Cedar Falls,” *Waterloo Daily Courier*, March 28, 1941.

Thorson, Maxine. “Reviewer Rates Nuhn Show As ‘Most Exciting,’” *Daily Record* 46, no. 299, December 16, 1946.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the fall of 2017, only a handful of weeks after I began working at the Hearst Center, Emily Drennan, our Curator/Registrar, brought a printed copy of Ferner Nuhn's memoir to my office and left it on my desk with a note, asking me to give it a read. I remember packing it in my bag and taking it home. Later that evening I sat at the kitchen table and read the first few pages. I was absorbed. I wanted to drop everything to begin looking into archives for more information about this artist, born and raised in Cedar Falls, who studied at Stone City and the Chicago Art Institute, who traveled alone across the country to paint, who followed inspiration south to Mexico and Guatemala, who lived in an unexpected way and appeared, from her brother's description, to embrace life in a way few did, both then and now.

I'd like to thank Robyn Groth for her beautiful essay, published as part of this brochure in conjunction with the exhibition. I am excited to share that we are working with Robyn, as well as Barbara Lounsberry and Jim O'Loughlin, on a formal publication of Ferner's memoir. The volume will be published by Final Thursday Press and will include high quality reproductions of Marjorie's work, essays by Barbara and Robyn, and the unedited memoir of Marjorie's life by her brother, Ferner Nuhn. When Ferner left the memoir to the Hearst Center in 1985, he included a note asking that we publish it at some time in the future. We are happy to be able to do so now.

The publication will be available in mid-2021. I'd like to thank the Cedar Falls Community Foundation Diamond Arts and History Fund and Friends of the Hearst for support in making the publication possible. I'd like to recognize Rich Sanders of Sanders Photographics for digitizing our collection of Marjorie's works, and Darrell Taylor of the University of Northern Iowa Gallery of Art for loaning works from the university collection to our digitization project.

Heather Skeens
Cedar Falls Cultural Programs Supervisor
Hearst Center for the Arts
August 2020

< **Untitled (between Sante Fe and Taos, New Mexico)**, no date
Watercolor on paper
Gift from Helen Lett in memory of her mother, Ms. Grance Kingman

IDENTIFYING A MARJORIE NUHN

We hope you will consider reaching out if you have a work by Marjorie in your collection; we would like to document it with a photograph. Or, maybe you will see one when out antiquing, or at a friend's home, or at an area business. As we work to continue to build our collection of Marjorie's work, we hope to also build a greater understanding of Marjorie as an important regionalist woman artist, and we welcome your help.

The easiest way to identify a work by Marjorie Nuhn is through her signature. Marjorie almost always signed her work, but she didn't always do it in the same way. She used her last name, Nuhn. Sometimes the name was painted in all capital letters; other times only the first letter was capitalized. She also used her initials. Marjorie Anna Nuhn becomes MAN or man. Whether her last name or initials were used, they could be painted in print or script. If the date was recorded, she used two or four numbers, either as 1942 or 42. If you look closely, you may notice the date or the name recorded twice.

Generally, the works are bright. The colors are vibrant and brush strokes are bold and loose. The artist would often prepare watercolor paints herself by hand-crushing pigments together with other ingredients such as gum arabic solution. The pigments are often highly saturated in appearance. Some areas are so thick they are opaque and may be cracking. Her substrates, cold press or rough paper, tend not to be bright white and can be discolored, making the unpainted surfaces appear almost tan or brown.

Cedar Falls scenes depict houses in neighborhoods near downtown. These house portraits are painted from the street with surrounding trees and sky. Marjorie spent the summers of 1932 and 1933 at Grant Wood's Stone City Art Colony near Anamosa, Iowa, where she painted outdoors alongside other artists. Works from that time may have a more subdued color palette.

Most common are works depicting hilly or mountainous landscapes in the American Southwest where the artist traveled and lived for a period of her life. These works are often large, sometimes spanning a full sheet of watercolor paper (22"x30") and rich with greens, purples, blues, and yellows. City and countryside scenes of Mexico are lush, full of architectural details, sidewalks and storefronts, fountains, or even headstones in cemeteries. Marjorie spent time painting outdoors in Yellowstone National Park. Her paintings from those visits are hypnotic depictions of hot springs that include a rainbow of washes and details.

Emily Drennan
Curater/Registrar
Hearst Center for the Arts
August 2020



Beauty Pool (Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming), 1969
Watercolor on paper
Gift from Ferner Nuhn



the **hearst**



thehearst.org
304 west seerley boulevard
cedar falls, iowa 50613
319.273.8641

Produced in conjunction with the exhibition *Marjorie Nuhn*
on view at the Hearst Center for the Arts, Cedar Falls, Iowa
September 3 through October 11, 2020

Front cover: Photograph, from the personal album
of the artist, "Marj. of the Southwest" (undated)