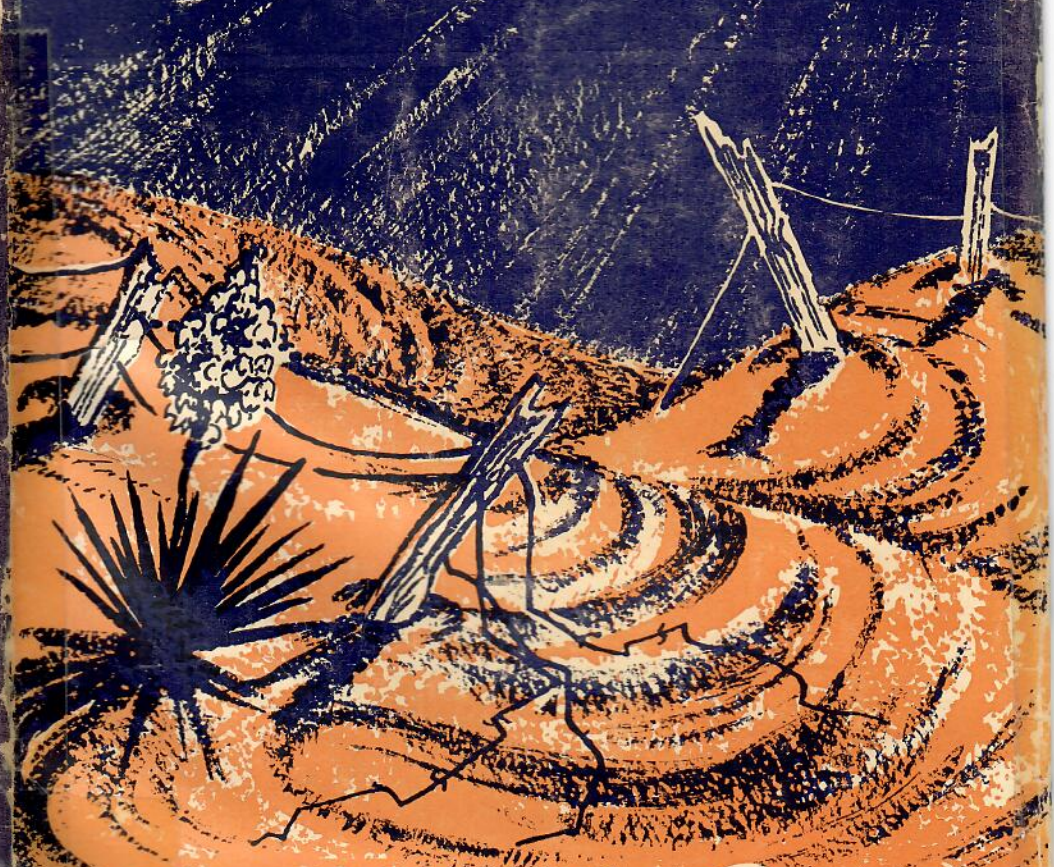


Daxto

*My Life on the Mojave*

# *My Life on the Mojave*



antage

*June Le Mertz Paxton*





*About  
the  
Author*

Born near Newton, Kansas, to Joshua and Adelaide LeMert, both of whom had Mohawk Indian blood, June LeMert attended schools there. After her marriage to Edward Seymour Paxton, she lived in Newton, Chanute, and Wichita, until his business took him to Los Angeles. When ill-health dictated that she seek the high altitude and dry climate of the Mojave, she went there, expecting to remain for a year. She has never left the desert, and her husband, daughters, and friends came to love it as much as she.

In the seclusion of her desert home Mrs. Paxton began to write stories and poems inspired by the new, enchanting environment in which she found herself. Over the years her writings have appeared in *Desert Trail*, *Desert* magazine, *Ghost Town News*, *Desert Spotlight*, the *Banning Live Wire*, and elsewhere, and a philosophy column appeared in the *Joshua Journal*, later called the *Desert Journal*. For seven years she wrote the special poem for the Easter Sunrise Service held at the Oasis of Mara at Twentynine Palms. She is also author of a book of poems, *Desert Peace*.



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VANTAGE PRESS, INC. 120 West 31st Street, New York 1

To Mr. and Mrs. George Colago, Jr.;

may the desert be no kind  
to you as it has  
been to me.

Sincerely

Gene E. Mart Paxton

1957

x



*My Life  
on the Mojave*





*Evening Shadows*

Shadow time—and the sun sets  
Behind flames in the western sky;





*Desert Peace*

So still, yet the stillness has a voice,  
... "Courage and peace," the desert speaks.

*My Life  
on the Mojave*

BY

JUNE LEMERT PAXTON



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*To Edward*

FIRST EDITION

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## FOREWORD

Many desert lovers and seekers after the reflective life who have followed my columns and feature stories for over fifteen years as they appeared in local publications have entreated me to collect these efforts in a book. Although this volume is not a collection, I hope it will satisfy their entreaty, since I have used freely material from my earlier writings wherever it would contribute to the changing desert scene.

A satisfying number of good folks, too, have enjoyed my poems, published variously throughout my life in Yucca Valley. I hope that they will welcome the inclusion of several in this narrative and that new readers will gain from these verses a deeper feeling for the riches of the desert.

But this volume is primarily an answer to those enthusiastic people who have insisted on my writing the story of my experiences on the High Desert—a story which began in the early thirties, when the Greater Morongo Basin was in the final stages of its frontier existence. Now, in the middle fifties, though the quail, rabbits, bobcats, and coyotes still come to my cabin, I can hear the sound of bulldozers clearing away the chaparral at Warren's Well to make a landing strip for the planes of the newer residents. As I listen to these unusual sounds, I realize, though reluctantly, that modern patterns of life are supplanting the simple "frontier" existence that it was my privilege to share when first I came to the desert.



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### *Desert Peace*

So calm, yet the calmness has a depth  
 And a height with an endless span  
 That reaches till it finds the good—  
 The good in the soul of man.

So still, yet the stillness has a voice,  
 And in soft, low tones it seeks  
 To ease the fearful, restless soul—  
 "Courage and peace," the desert speaks.



## Chapter 1

### MY INTRODUCTION TO YUCCA VALLEY

After World War I the Greater Morongo Basin in the Mojave Desert was sprinkled with the homesteads of veterans seeking to regain their health in a higher altitude and a drier climate. Previous to their coming, several tribes of Indians—the Morongos being the chief—lived here, together with not a few prospectors who had developed good paying mines around Twentynine Palms. Twentynine Palms, named after the native Washingtonia palms at that place, is forty miles from the junction of the 29 Palms Road with U.S. Highway 99, and at that time was at the end of as many miles of sand and rock, a road that fairly jolted the bolts from one's car. The first ten miles of the 29 Palms Road, after it leaves Highway 99, take one through Devil's Garden (not a misnomer in hot weather) and on up through the winding Morongo Canyon. The next thirty miles cross the high desert region, which is officially divided into three valleys: Morongo, Yucca, and Twentynine Palms.

In the center of Yucca Valley, on the gentle slope of the San Bernardino Mountains, a homestead called the White House Ranch had been taken up by one of the few non-veterans in the area. John Dee Redwine, a Texas boy who had moved to California with his parents and two sisters, had filed in the early thirties on one hundred and sixty acres north and east of Warren's Well. By the time John was well started on his homestead, however, his father



suddenly passed over, a misfortune which deprived John of his chief financial support. When it looked as if he might not be able to continue on his land, his mother thought of the Paxtons. The Paxton family, comprising the author, her husband Edward, and two daughters, Evelyn and Adelaide, had moved from Kansas to Hollywood at the same time that the Redwine family had gone to Los Angeles. Since the families had mutual relatives, they met and became friends. It was quite natural that John's mother should appeal to us, knowing that I needed a high desert climate and that Edward could furnish the funds to keep things going on John's homestead. The arrangement seemed reasonable and worth a trial, we decided—a trial that has lasted twenty-five years.

By the time I arrived in Yucca Valley, John had already built, with the help of his father, a two-room shack. It is with no disrespect that I call it a "shack," for it compared favorably with the homes of most of the early settlers here. The frame house was made of one-by-twelve-inch boards, boards on which the knotholes had been carefully covered with the ends of tin cans. The floors were safe, if not even. The roofing was corrugated tin, which attracted the heat during the day, and at evening, while cooling off, made crackling noises. When the wind was blowing hard, the tin would effect drum-like sounds—sometimes soft and again much more emphatic! But the companionable feeling of the rains striking the metal roof was cozy and welcome. Many windows allowed the sunshine to stream in unhindered, while the breezes found their own special ways of creeping into the house—though "creeping" is too mild a term for their efforts at times.

A rock foundation had been laid part of the way on each side of the building, but there were wide gaps through which small desert animals could seek refuge under the house. There often came the rabbits, bobcats, squirrels, tortoises, and, at times, the nice-to-look-at white-striped skunks. These shared the acquaintance of a small white dog, Spot, a

dozen white hens, and Old Kate, the burro. Old Kate proved to be an essential part of the animal ménage.

A small porch on the east gave a friendly approach to the shack; and a few yards away, over the drive, was an arch bearing the hopeful sign, "White House Ranch." As a shelter from the changing desert seasons, the house was barely adequate; but when one realized how many loads of material had been laboriously hauled the one hundred and thirty miles from Los Angeles to make this desert retreat, he agreed that the place deserved deep respect and John much credit for his efforts. Besides the little shack, the place boasted a comparable one-car garage, a worked-over but reliable old red truck, a two-seated "chick sale," and a small, make-shift hen house.

And so it was in this setting, and in God's hands, that I sought to make a physical and mental return to health!

## Chapter 2

### A NEW LIFE IN A STRANGE COUNTRY

The desert summer had already settled down in earnest when I came to the two-room shack to seek health and thereby to enable John financially to continue his home-stead. I had never known a desert. Going through one on a train a few times was the extent of my acquaintance with the cactus country. But then I was ill, almost too ill to mind just where I was or what I had left behind. Although the isolated place seemed frightfully lonely, I felt safe; for the boy John, whom I had known almost ten years, was dependable, kind, and quiet—quiet in a slow, Texas-like way.

In the front room of our shack was a bed, a rocker, and a seat made by framing an auto cushion. There was one



dresser, which we shared. My suitcase rested on the auto seat and served as my clothes closet and a receptacle for necessary items. Of the other room John curtained off one end for his bed, leaving the remaining portion for the four-hole cookstove, a table, an old-fashioned cupboard, and a bench on which sat the water pail, washbowl, and soap dish. John kept the house neat and clean and did the cooking. Having cooked for the local cattle ranchers at their roundups, he knew, besides plain cooking, the art of making the famous sour-dough hot cakes, Dutch-oven biscuits, and jerked-meat dishes.

Edward came up from Hollywood every other week end. While he could bring enough staples to carry over to his next visit, the amount of fresh fruits and vegetables had to be limited, since the desert cooler did not sufficiently preserve the food. We could order supplementary supplies from the mail carrier by paying a nominal price for the service, as this was a Star Route and Mr. Benito made the round trip from Twentynine Palms to Banning each weekday.

One of the first things I had to learn on the desert was to conserve the supply of water. Putting two large barrels on the back of the old red truck, John would, as a rule, haul the water from the schoolhouse about four miles to the west. He could get the water at Warren's Well, the nearby cattle ranch, but the barrels filled faster at the schoolhouse. In order to have the luxury of several house plants in the windows, I kept them growing by using the water left after cleaning the vegetables. A daily sponge bath was the rule, with an occasional homemade shower in the garage. While taking the shower I stood in a washtub so that the run-off water could be used for scrubbing the porches or other outside needs.

This was the time of the great financial depression, and so it happened that frequently the local men who were physically able were given a few days work on the W.P.A. I can never forget my first day alone. John was given a

job working several miles from the shack on the 29 Palms Highway. The long hot afternoon was almost over, and I was trying to take a nap, but Spot kept up a relentless barking. I went out into the yard to ascertain the cause of his uneasiness and saw a huge tan cat! No wonder Spot was barking—the cat was several times as large as he and budged not an inch despite Spot's commotion.

When I saw the situation, I said, "Shoo, shoo, kitty! Go home!" After I had suggested this several times, the big cat walked away a number of yards and turned to look at me. His big eyes seemed to hold only wonderment, which I attributed to my being a newcomer to the place. I went back into the house, thinking the incident closed, but had to repeat the routine several times before the visitor was finally discouraged. When John returned from work, he informed me that the intruder was a bobcat and that it was fortunate I had not tried to be more friendly. A few days later we trapped the cat, but by that time he was hungry and vicious and had to be shot.

One thing that I especially missed away from the city was a lawn—a well-kept lawn with brilliantly colored flowers always in bloom along the walks. Up here, instead of grass, there are just miles and miles of sand. It is not the fine, wind-blown type, since it is mainly decomposed gravel, but always there is that sameness of color. Here, too, when the spring flower season is over, the sage and other low shrubs take on much of the same drab look and seem to wonder whether "to die or not to die." However, there is always the assurance that, when the rains come, the whole desert will perk up and live again!

I learned—as everyone who comes to the desert does—that the nights are so clear that millions of stars seem to come right down within arms' reach. And I learned of the quietness—a quietness that at times was almost an aching stillness. In my own home in Hollywood I often did not get to sleep until the milkman was making his early round; but here I fell asleep so early that, by three or four o'clock, I



was wide awake again. It might have been the call of a lone coyote that had wakened me, or the tramp, tramp of the restless burro on the gravel outside my window. What a difference I found in this new life! But it was a restful difference at that!

Our social activities were interesting, though unlike anything I had known in the city. One of John's cowboy friends, Bob Lee, often came during the long summer evenings, bringing his guitar. Both of the boys sang such songs as "Red River Valley," "She'll Be Coming 'Round the Mountain," "I Got No Use for the Women," and "Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie." Then John would recite his favorite poems: "The Wreck of the Hesperus," and "The Face on the Barroom Floor." Jim and Emma Dever, quarter-Cherokee Indians, lived at Warren's Well Ranch and often invited all the valley folks to a dance in their roomy adobe home. Both the square and old-time rounds were given full sway. It was always a friendly, uncritical gathering, and each felt free to give to the familiar steps his own interpretation. Occasionally there was drinking outside, but it never led to any serious rowdyism.

During the summer my little family came as often as they could to see us; and at times John's mother or one of his sisters would pay us a visit. Soon John was calling Edward and me "Pa" and "Ma," but he referred to his own father very often, as he still missed his "dad."

By the time the summer ended, I felt as if I had been initiated into the life of the cactus and the sage, the bobcats and the coyotes! But the most impressive fact to me was that, scattered sparsely over the valley, there were people much less fortunate than I. It was then that I began to realize that life in a strange country could be both an opportunity and a challenge!

### Chapter 3

#### FILLING IN THE PICTURE

#### *A Letter to my Daughters in Hollywood, California*

Yucca Valley, California  
July 6, 1932

Dearest Evelyn and Adelaide,

Now that I have been here a few weeks, I will try to give you a more detailed account of the place. As you, too, well know, your father is anything but favorably impressed, and I could just hear him saying to you girls when he returned home, "You have never been in such a God-forsaken country in your life! How anyone could file on a homestead, much less try to live there, is beyond me! The twenty-three miles of rocky road after one leaves Highway 99 are a nightmare! The only happy person in all that country must be the chiropractor in Devil's Garden, who could make a good living by resetting the disjointed vertebrae of hapless travelers!"

Your dad's reactions are not hard for us to understand. There is very little outside his home which is of any interest to him, so breaking up our family circle, even for a short time, makes a difficult situation. But, girls, the place has its nice features in spite of its remoteness from civilization. The valley, from this point, somewhat resembles an elongated pie tin, with the San Bernardino and Little San Bernardino Mountains fluting the outer rim. To the southwest, high above the lower ridges, is Mount San Jacinto. This towering peak we see from our yard, as well as Mount



San Gorgonio to the west. Both crests, I hear, are often covered with snow far into the summer.

There is also more shrubbery around here than one would expect to find on a desert, and the sand is a gravelly sort, with real sand dunes only here and there. The closest dune hides our place from Warren's Well, which is a little to the south and west; the ranch house is within walking distance if one does not mind crawling under the barbed-wire fences or encountering the strange-faced cattle that stare, unfriendly, at him.

And that reminds me! Please send up a pair of jeans and walking shoes. Oh, yes, and several boy-size shirts for blouses. The thorny bushes tear at my garments, and the wind at times has no regard for a lady's skirt. Bring your own hiking clothes when you come, because the mountains that rim us on the north are just back of the shack, and you will enjoy the climb to the topmost peak. From the top one can see for miles and miles over the valley.<sup>4</sup>

The Joshua trees, named by the early Mormons, are numerous; in fact, all about us are groves of these weird-looking trees. I have also learned the names of many odd local shrubs, such as Spanish Dagger, creosote, catsclaw, juniper, and varieties of the sage and cactus.

Some days a stray burro loiters around to keep Old Kate company, and we will try to have them both here when you come, so that you can take a ride. You will enjoy the picnic-style suppers that John prepares out of doors these warm evenings. He has made a little tin stove on which, over a scrapwood fire, he warms left-over food and heats the water for dish washing. Our Spot is tiny, yet he barks at, and chases away, the cattle when they roam too near the house. He does not seem to mind Old Kate. I can imagine that up here one learns to make friends with every creature, furred or feathered.

Sometimes I go with John to Matty's little store about three miles to the west, and then on to Tom Heard's home—stead where we can buy buttermilk. The Heards have lived

here since about 1913. Late one afternoon we went through an old sandy riverbed to see Bill McClung. I think Bill is a bachelor; he lives alone. There must be springs up there, because the little house is surrounded by trees, and he has a pond where huge frogs jump in and out of the water and croak horribly! John thinks that if he takes me around the valley I will be less homesick.

In the mornings, after I have had a wonderful sleep and the sun comes in bright and early, I am on top of the world. When the afternoon stretches out into a long day, however, I often feel not so sure of my venture in this almost unknown country. At such times all of this experience seems to be a part of a weird play, and I, who have come upon the scene, cannot remember my cue, much less the lines!

I am very eager to have you girls come to see this place and am hoping that you both will be good sports; that will be a great help to your lovin'.

Mother

*A Letter to Mrs. Carl Pearson in Rushville, Illinois*

Yucca Valley, California  
August 7, 1932

Dear Sister Lulu,

Just as I dated this letter I was reminded that it is Virginia's birthday; please give her a big hug from Aunt June. No wonder you were mystified to receive a card from me saying that, for the present, my address is White-Water, California. Since there is no post office in Yucca Valley, the mail comes from White-Water, which is not much more than a wide space in the road on Highway 99, just east of Banning. That office takes charge of the incoming mail, while the small Twentynine Palms office does the same for the outgoing mail.

It may tax your credulity, dear, but already I feel certain that I have come to the right location to regain my



health. The dry desert air and 3,400 foot elevation make an ideal combination. Little by little I am learning, however, that this is pioneering in the true sense of the word. God knows it is almost like going into seclusion! With the exception of John, I see nary a soul for days at a time. There is no other house in sight.

About six miles across the valley, against the southern ridge of these mountains, live Julia and Jeff Overbay with their little daughter Onie. During the war Jeff was stationed at Honolulu, where he met Julia, who is part Hawaiian. Sometimes on a dark night I think I can see a little glow from their lamp, and it is a comforting sight! We meet them occasionally at the schoolhouse, where they too get their water supply, or at the dance, where Onie looks so tiny dancing with her mother. There are several houses somewhat closer than the Overbays', but since there are knolls here and there over the landscape these homes are not in sight.

The earliest settlers in this valley were, I hear, the Morongo Indians. Then, later, miners played an active part in the sparse development, especially around Twentynine Palms, where rich deposits of gold, iron, silver, manganese, and tungsten have been worked. But the real settlement is being done by veterans of the World War who, failing to find health elsewhere, were sent up here by their doctors.

Already I have traveled about some in our open-air taxi. The old red truck is efficient, although far from being a pleasure car! We pad the seat where the springs are bare; and when the wind blows vigorously through the unglassed windows, I tie on my old Panama hat. Hats should be worn, too, I hear, when one is exposed long to the hot sun.

When I tell you how we do the family laundry, you will think that you have heard everything! About five miles from here to the west and south are two old watering troughs called "The Tanks" that fill from a nearby spring. The troughs, I understand, were set up years ago by "Chuck" Warren, a freighter and cattleman, who also dug the

original well on his homestead, still known as Warren's Well. It is to this place we go with all of our washing paraphernalia and clothes. John builds a wood fire under the washtub and boiler, which he fills with water from the trough. The soap is homemade. Here he does a good job of washing and rinsing the clothes while I help spread them out to dry on the many large shrubs which surround the place. The last time we were there, John saw a herd of cattle coming for a drink just after we had hung out the white clothes. We hurried to the nearest shelter and stayed out of sight until, after having quenched their thirst, the cattle ambled on their way. A few pieces of the unwashed dark clothing and the improvised washroom were a little the worse for their intrusion, but no serious damage was done.

The clothes dry very quickly in this brilliant sun; we then fold them neatly and cart them back to the shack. Since there is very little ironing done, the towels and bed linen smell fresh and tangy from drying over the bushes, and John has a knack of folding and rolling up our jeans and shirts so that they look very presentable when worn. Truly, I am learning that when one is in Rome, he does as the Romans!

Yesterday we had tortoise soup for dinner. There seems to be an art in preparing this dish, and it tastes good—almost like an assortment of chicken, turkey, crab, and other meats. Here on the desert these plodding creatures are called, not turtle, but tortoise. When the weather gets cold, I will learn to shoot the young cotton-tails so as to augment our meat supply; already I am learning how to use a 22 rifle and a four-ten shotgun in case any more intruders appear, the rattler being the chief among them all!

I know that back in Rushville you enjoy seeing the motion pictures which you project in your theater for the townspeople; you would miss them here. However, Sis, out in the open we have a different type of movie every night. It is surprising to learn how many more wonders there



Now if the moon woos Venus  
Just once in every year,  
How can he hope to hold her  
Without a qualm or fear?

A Letter to Mrs. Jeff Fisher in Wichita, Kansas

Yucca Valley, California,  
September 20, 1932

Dear Osa,

Instead of a postal card, this time I plan to write a real letter, and you deserve as much. I have been here more than three months; the summer, which has proven helpful, with very little discomfort, will soon be over, after which the fall and winter months will further test the feasibility of this desert experiment.

Edward comes faithfully every other week end, but he is still far from being happy over our divided family. He says that he would rather die in civilization than grow old in seclusion. And he laments that our little Buick coupe will lose every bolt while jolting over these rough roads. It is true that along the sandy places one chooses his rut and stays in it, but on the stony stretches, if he tries to avoid a rock on the left of the car, he hits a like one on the right. Jeff will agree with Edward, I am sure, though I tell him that some day there will be good paved roads all the way here. To this he replies, "I will have white whiskers clear to the ground before that ever happens."

But, seriously, old Pal, this would not be a bad place for your Jeff to live. Oh, I know you will say, "Just because you are plumb daffy, don't expect us to follow suit!" But, Osa, you will come! Something tells me that in the not-too-distant future you will move to California and come for a while to the desert! You could do much worse! You and I have lived very near each other since we were small children; it is not in the cards for us to break that record! Do you remember back in our high-school days when

are in the heavens than most city-dwellers suspect. Seeing them night after night, and watching their course over the trackless sky, one begins to feel a neighborliness, almost a kinship, with each one. In his season Mars comes up red and audacious over the eastern ridge and moves boldly along his course. And Jupiter, that master planet, gives the world a nightly spectacle; while Venus, the evening star, often comes up early and rocks in her little moon cradle!

No sooner does the sun bed down behind San Geronio than the afterglow paints every stray cloud in lovely hues. And then, just before darkness comes on, a beautiful wide sash in pinks and blues drapes itself above the horizon entirely across the eastern sky. Yes, Lulu, the Great Spirit Father conducts this nightly "movie," and each one of his children is welcome to watch and enjoy!

Figuratively speaking, I wish I could be "up in the clouds" like this always, but at times I am not so optimistic as I pretend to be. When I get in a low mood, however, I try to think of the hardships and heartaches that our pioneer parents endured while homesteading their land back in Kansas just after the Civil War, and I am ashamed of my weakness. I am ashamed and try harder to make the comeback to normal health that I owe to myself and to my family! So, little sister, out here under a Joshua tree still sits your lovin'

Juney Joy

#### Presumption

Just as the day was fading  
And night was drawing nigh,  
The crescent moon kissed Venus  
As he passed her in the sky.



we went with two farmer boys to a square dance twelve miles from home? My! We thought we were carrying on terrible, and so did some of the neighbors. Well, after all these years I am again going to dances. Now I am only a wallflower, but it is the valley's big social event, and I enjoy meeting the people there. Johnnie Kee, a young homesteader in the Pipes Canyon, brings his family down to the dances. Just to watch his pleasure and enthusiasm in calling the square dances, or to observe his nimble feet while doing them, is equal to a big bottle of tonic. This is truly a great "melting pot"; here there is no class distinction; here one's background carries very little, if any, prestige!

In answer to your principle question, Osa, I will say that we do not try to raise any vegetables. The water is "super"—good, cold mountain water—but the wells are far apart. Moreover, there would be four chipmunks and six field mice to every green sprig that ventured through the ground, not to mention the numerous rabbits. The best I can say for the place at present is that it is a wonderful health resort. I believe it is considered the third most arid place in the world. Any other recommendation would be misleading and unfair. There is very little work by which a man can make a living, especially if he has a family to support. This is unfortunate for those people who are desperately in need of this type of climate. The Depression is hurting almost every one. The veterans are receiving very little help from the government, so each one must rely on his own labor to build and maintain his home. Any help that he extends to a neighbor is given with no thought of pay—with only a happy feeling of having been of service.

Yesterday while helping Margie Taylor and her husband tear down a building, John uncovered an immense hive of bees; we will have wild honey to use for months! Now I feel somewhat repaid for the number of bee stings I have endured while getting food from our home-made desert cooler. The bees are attracted to the tray of water

and delay their departure in hopes of getting into the food.

Edward happens to be here as I write this letter, and I asked him whether he would like to send some message to Jeff; immediately he replied with a grin, "Yes, tell him that I have just found out that when the fellows say they can't raise h— with a shotgun, they are talking about this desert country." But seriously, Osa, remote and lonely as this place is, it has many virtues. There is something restful here. At night one needs no sedative to fall asleep nor an eye opener in the morning to awake refreshed and happy! Here the natural violet rays are so strong that glass-ware left in the sun will take on a lovely violet color; in time it will turn a deep purple! Here Mother Nature is both a beneficent doctor and an untiring nurse. I would be most ungrateful were I to neglect saying that!

In trying to analyze my feelings about this place, wondering how I can be at all contented, it seems that perhaps I have slipped back several generations and, like my old Mohawk ancestors, am beginning to love the freedom of the open spaces and the feel of the earth-throb under my feet. The worship of the Great Spirit Father seems always in the heart, and the presence of guardian angels is something tangible—something real! When the full moon slips up over the eastern ridge of the mountains, making dark patches of the chaparral, and I smell the pungent odor of the greasewood, I can almost see silent figures moving among the bushes!

Yes, when one has lived here long enough, the feel of the desert might get into his blood! And it may be getting your long-time pal,

Juney Joy



*Desert Spirit*

You hold me closely in your arms,  
 Nor deign to let me free;  
 Or, else, perhaps, some Hidden Power  
 The which I cannot see  
 Inspires a longing for this place  
 And draws my soul to thee.

## Chapter 4

## FALL DAYS CAN BE FUN DAYS

Just give me a day in the fall of the year  
 In hills where pine trees grow;

And I'll spend that day in rich content  
 And a peace that the world does not know.

It was October when John stated that we should be getting in our winter's supply of wood. When cold weather really set in, he said, there would be snow in the Little San Bernardino Range to the south, where he planned to get the major portion of it. The fall season was perfect. The summer heat had passed. The winds went elsewhere for their daily exercise. It was ideal picnic weather, and we enjoyed to the utmost our excursions for wood. Going up the grade, the old red truck rattled along, winding in and out through a sandy canyon; and, after we had gathered a maximum load of wood, we could coast practically the entire seven or eight miles back home. Always we took along the "cowboy" coffee pot and our lunch, besides, of course, a waterbag. Taking a full waterbag is a number-one lesson to those who travel in the desert off the regular highways.

There seemed to be no end of good wood available. Over a period of years the lightning had killed scores of pine trees! These John sawed down and often cut into stove

lengths right on the scene; or he would pile the heavy lengths into the truck to saw when the weather became colder. At times we did not go the entire way into the hills but scouted the lower areas for what we called "petrified" Joshua tree knots. The wood was not really petrified, but portions of the tree, after a period of years, had become extremely hard and would burn like anthracite coal; the rest of the tree was pithy and of no practical value as firewood. Washed-out roots of willow trees bordered the ravines through which we traveled; these roots made good fuel for a quick fire.

When the day was exceptionally warm and John was scouting up and down the washes for the best location to bring out the wood, I would spread an old quilt over a bed of pine needles and lie down to rest. While lying quietly, I became interested in the bird calls and tried in various ways to induce the creatures to come closer so that I might see their size and coloring. At times a squirrel would scamper out on a long arm of the overhanging branches and nibble at a morsel of food—perhaps a nut from a piñon pine. I usually saved scraps of wilted vegetables to put out in order to induce the little animals to come near me. When a rabbit came within smelling distance, he usually would stop dead still; he would stop and sniff—sniff—until he located the bait. Hop by hop, little by little, he came nearer until his appetite overcame his timidity. Having reveled in the unusual diet, he would scamper on without so much as a "thank you!"

A pair of buzzards often circled high overhead, lowering and lowering their flight until they came quite upon me. I had seen these huge birds swoop down on a dead rabbit by the roadside or an unfortunate cow that had succumbed at the base of a lone Joshua tree, so their pause in flight gave me a peculiar feeling. At one time I called to them, "Move on! You are a little premature in anticipating this carcass; I assure you I am very much alive!"

On a trip after a rainstorm we would get out, here and



there, to clear away rocks and debris that had washed down from the higher slopes on both sides of the desert road. On each of these excursions we picked up from a granite ledge a few rocks which John used to fill in the foundation of our little home; this helped greatly to make the house warmer. About that time my family brought up a used but useful carpet for the living-room. In this room John set up a one-lid, heavy tin heating stove which kept the place comfortably warm and also kept a pot boiling when we allowed the kitchen fire to die out. When Edward surprised me with a warm robe, felt slippers, and wool blankets, I felt equipped for a siege of cold weather.

The fall was long, and quiet, and lovely. Most of the low shrubs and plants are deciduous, but the yuccas, including the Joshua and Spanish Dagger, are evergreens, and their appearance changes very little as colder weather comes on. The creosote—better known as greasewood—is also evergreen, giving color to the landscape throughout the year. The catsclaw, however, sheds every vestige of foliage when cold weather arrives and dons not a leaf in the spring until fully assured that warm weather is here to stay!

The numerous trips into the hills, the interest in getting ready for winter, the quiet and restfulness of the valley—each of these helped to give me a new outlook on life. And I surely needed that mental tonic because there were times when the separation from my family seemed too hard to take. But somehow I always resolved stubbornly to go on and make a complete success of the trying venture.

One night a cold wind from the north ruthlessly blustered into our valley and announced that winter was here!

At night when the desert falls asleep

And the toils of the world lose their sting,

I rejoice to know that God hovers near

With each loved one under His wing.

## Chapter 5

### THE FIRST WINTER

Practically all the winter days were filled with sunshine. Occasionally we were blessed with a nice rain which, several times, turned into snow at our 3,400 foot elevation; but this snow seldom extended as far east as Twentynine Palms, which has an altitude of approximately 1,760 feet. There would be weeks with no wind to speak of; then again there would be nights when it howled around the little shack, shaking every window and door. Sometimes I became nervous and peered out into the darkness as if to see the extent of the storm. Towards morning the sound of the wind would become lower and lower—soft and intermittent. Perhaps I was more aware of the storm because there were no other sounds—no radios, no streetcars, no tooting of auto horns, no sirens wailing down the avenue.

Each morning the glowing sun would come up enthusiastically over Dead Indian Mountain. The profile of this old chief is formed by a portion of the ridge to the east and south of us. All day he can plainly be seen there resting on his back; but only in the evening, when the setting sun reflects the light at a certain angle, can the squaw be noticed lying right by his side! The sun was John's alarm clock; to him a sunrise meant that it was time to build the fires and cook a hearty breakfast. His reputation for making sourdough hotcakes and cowboy coffee had been well earned. Fresh eggs, with the slab-bacon which Edward brought from the packing house near Colton, completed the meal.



As soon as we had the home in order, it was time to go for the mail. And the mail was an important event in our day! Our rural mailbox was a half-mile down the lane that ran straight from our front door to the 29 Palms Highway. This was a nice walk, especially on cold days, when we put on extra warm clothing and walked briskly for the exercise. Although it might have been only imagination, it seemed that when John was with me the cattle would move along minding their own affairs; but when I was alone, a few at a time would stop and look me over. Their poker faces revealed nothing, but before they moved away a creepy feeling would go up and down my spine.

Some days when there was practically no work to be done and we felt the need of outside interests, we went to see several of the neighbors. John liked to visit the cowboy, "Doc" Crawford, in Morongo, and Pete Royal, whose family lived far back in an isolated cove in that same valley. On our way home we would stop to see the Harrells, who lived on their homestead across the road from Matty's little grocery store. The Harrells had come from Texas and called their place "The Lone Star Ranch." They had taken their homestead instructions most literally and cleared off their entire 140 acres. Practically every Joshua tree on the place had been uprooted, and with a rake they had cleared away every vestige of shrubbery.

Accommodations in our small quarters were limited; consequently we had very few house guests during the winter months. Since I could not have my daughters with me often, I tried going back home with their father now and then for a short stay. But these visits were discouraging. Apparently, as long as I remained on the desert I was making great strides towards health; but seldom did I hold up more than a day or so in the lower altitude. After each of these trials I was happy to return to the place where I enjoyed not all the comforts of a real home but the blessings that can come only with physical well being.

During the long winter evenings John and I would do light reading or play some simple card game together. Although he learned quickly both from observation and work, he had not had the advantages of much formal schooling, and so it was during that part of our leisure time that I undertook to teach him some of the things in which he was interested. All went well until we got into the subject of geography. When I brought up the point of the earth's being round I ran into trouble. John informed me that during his schooldays several of the teachers had tried to make him believe that the earth was round, but to no avail! Always his answer was, "No, sir-ee; if you had been raised in Texas as I was, you would know that the earth is flat!" And that was that! To demonstrate more clearly to him, I bought a globe. Over and over I explained in detail about the earth's turning on its axis while at the same time it was revolving around the sun; but John never changed his mind one iota; he had seen too much of Texas to be convinced otherwise.

It seemed natural to me to resume the role of mothering someone outside our immediate family. When Adelaide was three years old we had taken into our home her Cousin Geraldine, a little Paxton girl seven months older than she. Geraldine had recently lost her father. A few years later my older sister passed over, leaving an eleven-year-old boy. Since his father, a railroad man, could not often be with Virgil, he was welcomed into the homes of several aunts until he had finished high school. The three sets of children, all near the same age, got along remarkably well! They were kept so busy with schoolwork, home duties, Sunday school, and their music lessons, with small social activities over the week end, that there was no idle time. I am sure that this was good discipline for our own two girls because they shared with their cousins not only their home but also the love and affection of their parents. Although John was older than any of our "adopted" family, he still needed someone



near to take an interest in his welfare. The cousins had called us "Uncle" Ed and "Aunt" June; John called us "Pa" and "Ma" Paxton.

## Chapter 6

### TRACKS IN THE SAND

The best-built home in the valley at the time was that of Jimmie Widdifield and Joe Wagner several miles to the east and south of us. Jimmie had been a captain in the marine corps; but because of an injury he built a house on the desert to which he could return later to make his home. The lower half of the French-style house as well as the two-car garage was built of massive stones. Everything was well planned, not only for artistic effect but also for convenience and permanence.

Joe, a former member of the French Legion, was the husky one of the two men and did the heavy work as well as look after Jimmie. One day the two went to San Bernardino to do some shopping; I understood that, when it was time to return, Joe could not locate Jimmie and drove back without him. San Bernardino is seventy miles from here, and travelers coming this way were few and far between. Just how long it took Jimmie to arrive home or how weary he was I never learned, because the following morning everyone in the valley was shocked to hear that Jimmie Widdifield was dead! He had been a quiet, refined man, and the neighbors loved and respected him; naturally we were grieved at the turn of events. At a time like that, one hears many versions of a story. *What had really happened? Why had it happened?* On one fact everyone did agree—while Jimmie was sitting on his front steps,

the contents of a shotgun had completely blown off his head!

Joe stayed on the place for a while and then, for lack of a livelihood here in the valley, went down below to work. Sam Naves, a railroad friend of Edward, planned to buy the place, so John and I promised to go over occasionally to see that nothing had been molested. We had dropped by a number of times after Joe left, always finding everything in good order. One summer day, however, as we drove up, we knew at a glance that someone had broken into the place. Cement was spilled along the drive from a sack that, with several others, had been stored in the garage. Upon closer observation we knew that not only the cement but many good tools, materials to finish the house, and other valuable things had been taken. The house had also been entered and robbed.

John was a close observer and a natural-born tracker. In just a few moments he decided that the trespassers had been there three times. He pointed out in detail the designs on the tire prints and insisted that I make a mental picture of each impression. "We'll track them down, Ma, and put an end to some of this pilfering." For four years, we had been told, the sheriff's office in San Bernardino had been trying to account for the many thefts up this way, especially that of expensive equipment taken from various mines.

The tracks on the first three sandy miles leading from the house to the 29 Palms Highway were not difficult to follow; that was the logical way they would go. But when we reached that junction we had to be most careful. Did the car we were trying to follow go east or west on the main road? Or did it cross the highway and head off into the more isolated country to the north? Yes, it had gone north! Our supply of gasoline did not warrant risking a long drive up that way, as the settlers were far apart and there would be no place to get even one gallon of gasoline. We decided it would be best to go back the four miles



to Matty's store, where we could fill our tank and get an extra supply of water as a precaution in case we developed car trouble.

As we left the highway and turned north again, our quest was on in earnest! The early afternoon was getting hot and hotter. On a stretch of unusually sandy road we could discern the telltale marks, but over a harder surface they would entirely disappear! At such places we got out of our car and, on hands and knees, peered along every foot of ground until we rediscovered our clue. As elsewhere in the valley, prospectors, cattlemen, and homesteaders had made trails leading at various angles all through that region, and the car trail was not easy to follow.

Finally we could see that we were going in the general direction of Surprise Springs. We knew several people who lived over that way but were sure they knew nothing about the thievery. While we were discussing that phase of the situation, an almost obliterated trail showed up and turned to the right, making an acute angle to the road on which we were. Since we knew no one in that direction, we began to get excited! To what destination was the trail leading us? And were we heading for trouble? I was not overly brave, and yet there was something challenging in the risk! At last, at the most lonely spot that anyone ever saw, the trail ended before an abandoned—or apparently abandoned—shack. The place was desolate! Shades were pulled entirely over the windows! My stomach began to develop a sinking emptiness! I looked at John, who seemed calm and unperturbed, and decided I was unduly nervous.

Getting out of the car, we began a Sherlock Holmes investigation. Walking cautiously and speaking quietly in that utter solitude created an eerie atmosphere. Through worn places in the shades and the not fully covered cellar windows we could see that the building was being used as a cache for innumerable pieces of mine machinery, car parts, pipe, and other salable equipment. Well, that was that! It seemed evident that no one was living there; and

since we were sure we had correctly traced Joe's belongings to this place, we were eager to get away! At least to get back where we felt safer!

There was still some time before dark, so we stopped to tell Jimmie and Rae Hankins of our sleuthing expedition. Jimmie, a nerve-sick World-War-I veteran, had, with his wife Rae, taken up a homestead several miles to the east of the White House Ranch. Their home, about one-half mile from the highway, was completely hidden by the small knolls which surrounded it. Yes, Jimmie knew where the place was, having seen it a number of times while riding the range. "But I'll bet you my homestead," he said, "that you are wrong about that loot."

However, they promised not to spread the news until we had telephoned to Joe Wagner in Los Angeles and notified the local constable, Jack Cones. Jack, in turn, told the San Bernardino officers who, although they appeared skeptical, came to see us.

There was enough evidence available to warrant an arrest and trial, which was held out of doors at the Donnell Hotel on the 29 Palms Highway near that village. Most of the Wagner and Widdifield things were easy to identify. Having had the same initials, the men had had a stencil made with a tiny "W." With this stencil they had marked many of their belongings, but the inconspicuous identification had been entirely overlooked by the thieves. The man who was responsible for taking most of the things confessed at the trial that he had made three trips to the place and had also broken into the house.

Of course we did not take Jimmie Hankins up on his bet; it was bad enough for him to have to believe the evidence. And John and I received no blue ribbons from the law-enforcement officers of San Bernardino. We decided, too, that tracking down robbers was out of the line of our civic duty and could easily cause hard feelings among erstwhile friends!



with pines, rise abruptly from the canyon floor but leave room on either side of the old river bed for ranch buildings. Quite a way up the northern slope a small spring was discovered which, later, was developed into an abundant supply of clear, cold water. For convenience the Kittridges pitched their tent as near the spring as possible, and Dot carried the water down the hill in pails. Kitt continued with his work in the city, while Dot and little Bobette made their new home in the mountain wildness.

To reach Dot's retreat we would drive five miles up the Old Woman's Well Road, now the Victorville Highway, to the Windmill, then turn to the left. This road led through an age-old volcanic region and into the bed of an ancient river which emerged from Pipes Canyon. Once in the canyon, the road took to the sidewall of the pass, though it crossed in several places the dry wash which, in rainy weather, became a small, swiftly flowing stream. At several places one drove through lush vegetation and, in season, a profusion of wild flowers.

About four miles before we reached the Kittridge home-stand, which they named "Echo Bend," we passed the home of Pete Lager and John Olsen, two Swedes who owned and operated for a time an onyx mine further up the canyon. On one of our trips Edward, Evelyn, and I succeeded in hoisting into our pickup truck a huge cube of onyx that had fallen from one of the loads hauled out by the miners.

It was always an adventure to spend a week with Dorothy. All of the meals were cooked in the open. The wire-mesh-enclosed cooler that hung from the long arm of a tree kept the food safe from insects and lurking animals. During the day we would climb the mountains to learn what was on the other side. We gathered white rocks to outline the confines of the camp. We would sit quietly for hours by the spring, waiting for quail and other birds to come for their daily drink; their varying habits interested us. We were amused, too, by the inquiring and startled

## Chapter 7

### A NEW HORIZON FOR DOT

In the early days of my desert experience, I entertained a house-guest whose visit was the beginning of a long adventure for her, one in which I had a share. Among our near neighbors in Hollywood was Dorothy Kittridge, with her husband "Kitt" and six-year-old daughter Bobette. Commerce blood ran strong in her veins, and she loved the desert with all of its freedom and natural wildness. At her earliest opportunity she came to spend a week with John and me. The three of us roamed up and down the valleys, looked into grassy places in the mountains in search of springs, picked up interesting rocks, traced footprints made by wild animals, and occasionally found a pair of deer horns. It had been a bad year for the cattle, and all over the open range we saw their bones bleaching in the scathing sun. From pure curiosity we would peer into broken-down and abandoned shacks.

Inevitably Dot became interested in making a home on the desert. Since her husband was a veteran, a homestead seemed a logical venture, as she would be required to live on it only nine months to acquire the patent, whereas three years were required for non-veterans. After some searching she and Kitt filed on 160 acres in Pipes Canyon, about eighteen miles to the west and north of "The Joshuas." The elevation there is about 5,000 feet.

Dot had wanted a place of natural beauty, wild and remote, and she found just that. The mountains, covered



looks of little animals who found that strangers had invaded their sanctuary. Tracks of larger animals led us on and on in an attempt to discover their hideouts.

When the carefree day was over, the blackness of night came in with an almost alarming swiftness. Darkness came with a chill in the air and an uncanny quiet that evoked in each of us an inner chilliness. The flap door of the tent, which seemed superfluous during the daylight hours, now took on new significance, and there were times when we wondered about its adequacy. During the night the dog would tremble violently, his short hair fairly standing on end, as he sensed the nearness of a wild animal. To keep up our courage, we often would sing to the accompaniment of Dot's guitar; but there were more frightening moments when we would pound on the dishpan to frighten away a mountain lion. A peek from the tent into the darkness would reveal only a pair of uncannily shining eyes, but the next morning the footprints confirmed our assumption of the big cat's presence.

Two people cannot be together for long, living as close to nature as did Dot and I, without realizing that, unfortunately, most of us spend our days hiding behind a self-made mask of pretense. Is it our civilization that discourages one from revealing his true nature—his innate desire to do things that are bigger and better; his longing to express, rather than repress, his spiritual qualities? In any case, during the many days of our companionship at Echo Bend, Dorothy and I dropped our unnatural city acquaintanceship and acquired, instead, a sincere and lasting friendship.

On one of Edward's regular trips he brought Dot's brother, Jimmie Arnold, to the White House Ranch for a week's vacation. Jimmie, then in his early teens, was a Texas boy but was spending some time with his sister in Hollywood. Since John was helping the cattlemen away from home at the time, I was glad to have Jimmie for com-

pany. On first seeing him, one was aware that life had not always been kind to Jimmie; a tubercular condition, I understood, had destroyed several vertebrae in his neck so that his head rested almost on the shoulders. In a very short time, however, one was impressed only by his sunny disposition, his wit, and his intelligence.

One day Jimmie and I were roaming the higher hills in search of Indian arrowheads and other artifacts. As usual, we carried our rifles. Jimmie's gun, held together with bailing wire, was the worse for wear and lacked much in the way of reliability. As we sat down to rest in the shade of a huge rock, the gun discharged and the shell took off the toe of Jimmie's shoes. We were grateful for having escaped a worse injury and immediately thanked the Spirit Father for our good fortune.

Late that afternoon we returned to the shack tired and hungry—almost too weary to prepare our evening meal, which we cooked over the grate of our out-of-door, make-shift stove. Jimmie, especially, was exhausted and went to his open-air cot almost before dark. In this valley the air grows cool as soon as the sun sinks behind the mountains to the west; and when the stars cluster about in friendly fashion just over one's head, all weariness in mind and body begins to slip away—away into nothingness. But before Jimmie fell asleep he called to me in all sincerity, "Mrs. Paxton, I'm so tired! Do you think it will be all right if I just say, 'Ditto, ditto, Lord!' to the prayer I said last night?" I assured him that our Great Spirit would understand, and he dropped off to sleep, to rest for the next day's activities!

It is interesting to know that Jimmie, now a successful minister, still remembers the night he was too weary to say his prayers.



A long-tailed lizard, with nary a sigh,  
Lazed in the sun just blinking an eye.  
He was tired of hustle, fed up with scurry,  
So he lounged in the sun and forgot every worry.

## Chapter 8

### MATTERS OF MEAT

An addition to our animal family had been expected for days. John had been careful that no one take a ride on Old Kate. Yes, Old Kate was getting special privileges and attention, and one morning we were rewarded by a lively, sturdy burro. Naming anything is always a momentous occasion, so we made the most of the affair by christening the little fellow "Yucca." A yucca has its strong points and an unyielding nature, so the name seemed to stick. Evelyn and Adelaide and John's sister Evalee each had to have her picture taken holding Yucca, and Yucca rather enjoyed the attention.

Now it was time for the fall roundup, and John was away for several days at a time doing the cooking for the cattlemen. The herds were brought in from Barker Tank, Quail Springs, Black Rock, Coyote Hole, and other grazing areas and corralled at nearby Warren's Well. Cowboys shouting at the cattle, calves bawling for their mothers, and the mothers frantic to get with their calves made an unusual and disturbing element in our otherwise quiet neighborhood. We women would sometimes join the men spectators and, sitting on the rail fences, watch the rodeo-like procedure. I was relieved to learn that the little calves hollered more from fear than from pain while they were being branded.

While at the roundup I saw, for the first time, small pieces of beef strung like beads on rows and rows of cord and stretched out in the sun to dehydrate. This "jerked"

meat—as the cowboys call it—would add greatly to their winter's meat supply.

A tall, stalwart Indian seemed to take charge of the barbecue pit and, after the excitement of the day, served meat sandwiches and cowboy coffee. Almost every one stayed on for the dance in the long adobe house which ended the day's activities.

Again the winter's supply of wood had been gathered; again we tried to make the little shack more comfortable for the coming weather. Since the single thickness of the vertical boards which comprised our walls, outer as well as inner, was not sufficient defense against the cold winds that often struck angrily against them, we lined the inside walls with building-paper. And to insure against unexpected delays in getting our supplies, Edward brought us more staples to store away.

One morning John told me that a friend who had killed and dressed a deer was putting it in our garage. Deer season was over, I knew, but since many of the pioneers were hard pressed to buy food, they saw nothing morally wrong in a local man's supplying his family with deer meat, even against the law, especially if he had obtained permission to shoot it on the landowner's premises. Since I had not gone to the city for some time and had an opportunity to ride down, I wanted to try to be with my family on Thanksgiving Day. The cowboy who owned the meat urged me to take quite a piece to supply a roast for the family; this I did.

Never before had I prepared venison, and, having heard that it was difficult to do so successfully, I was pleasantly surprised by the results! The meat was tender and delicious, so much so that I wanted to share some of it with the neighbors. The Jake Beckers, on the south, declared they had never tasted better venison. Mrs. Albert Souleck, on the north, had a houseguest from Ohio whose father was an old-timer at getting his quota in deer season. As a rule, the



at Christmas. It is fun having company here when the days are warm, but in severe weather this little place is far too limited for more than one guest.

John reinforced all the knotholes in the outer walls with larger pieces of tin, as you suggested, and we are keeping a good fire in the small woodstove; yet during the night ice often forms on the bucket of drinking water in the kitchen. Right now the wind moans around the shack; at times a wild gust bangs at the doors and windows, shaking them mercilessly! A coyote was barking near the door last night, and as I looked out, the sand glittered like snow in the moonlight. By Christmas we may have real snow. The schoolchildren will enjoy that, even though it may remain on the ground only a few hours. Inside, the rooms are warm, even cozy, and the stacks of wood at the back door insure against any lack of fuel.

The veteran who is not very well and lives over towards Surprise Springs was here this morning. His name, in case you have forgotten, is Jimmie Boldman. While here he inveigled me into playing a game of checkers with him. Before I knew what was happening, his kings had overpowered all my little men. He whitewashed me completely! After he left, John revealed that Jimmie is a real expert at the game.

Friday night John and I went to the Christmas party at the schoolhouse. The children on the program did well. Sam and Robert Stacey, Tom Creig, Bill and Allen Bobo, Pete and Jess Royal were all on good behavior; for the time being, their feud was forgotten. Onie Overbay and Corine King, the only girls, looked pretty in their new dresses. Santa Claus (I think he was D.F. Geil of Morongo Inn) gave each one present a gift. I received a guest towel edged in pink crocheting, which, I surmise, was made by Julia Overbay. Each adult took a gift marked "for her" or "for him."

In order to get more fully into the Christmas spirit and to make a little money, a few of the valley women are

guest told me, she did not care for the meat; but this roast, completely free from a wild taste, was far more delicious than any she had ever eaten. She wanted my recipe to take home with her. I was somewhat overwhelmed by their extravagant praise of the roast because, as I said, I had never prepared deer meat.

A few days after I was back at the shack, Dot Kittridge came to see me. I began bragging to her of the reputation I had acquired in the city from my Thanksgiving roast. "June, June," she said, "don't tell me you were that gullible! You little silly, that was young beef!"

She then explained that she heard, by the "grapevine route," how the cowboy had taken advantage of a stray calf and, after dressing it in the hills, had hidden most of the meat in the garage nearest to the slaying. Of course we both knew that, under the circumstances, the wisest thing to do was to continue being dumb. It *could* have been dear meat! Fortunately, by the time I returned to the shack all of the meat had disappeared and no mention was ever made of it again!

## Chapter 9

### A LETTER TO EDWARD

Yucca Valley, California  
December 17, 1933

Dear Daddy,

It does not seem possible that there are now only a few days until you will be making your biweekly trip to our valley and will be looking for the enclosed shopping list. This time most of the things will be for John, as I have decided to go down home with you to be with the girls



making beautiful wreaths, using local evergreens as a background. Some of the blue juniper berries are touched up with mercurochrome to give a festive effect. I plan to buy several of them to take down to our Hollywood neighbors.

Besides the regular list of food, Daddy, please bring some extras for John's Christmas, including a wool blanket. The Hankins are having him up to share their dinner, and I hope his mother will come for a few days, also. One can get very lonely here, especially when he knows that others are having family gatherings.

Matty, down at the little store, looks more frail these days. That place is so cold and drafty! I hope we can get him a warm coat, as I see him shiver when he steps out of doors to serve gasoline to the customers. Again, I hear that the woman and little boy who live in the canyon opposite the Claud Guinans have not enough food; Myrta, at the trading post, told me that the boy could not attend school because he had nothing to put inside his lunch pail! We will be happier at our family Christmas, dear, if we have tried to share with the less fortunate in this valley.

I'm glad that you brought John his favorite "store-bought" cigarettes; when we are out in company, they are more convenient than those messy ones he rolls! On your last trip when I said, "I sure thank the Spirit Father for all of these nice things," you came back with, "You'd better thank me!" And so I do thank you, Dad, over and over again! And this next trip you will not be going back without "The Mrs."

(Yes, Sir, I've heard you refer to me that way many times!)

## Chapter 10

### A GOOD OMEN

While I was in the city with the family, we discussed the advisability of building a larger cabin. It had been arranged between John and Edward that, when John got the patent to the one hundred and sixty acres of land, he, having preferred the upper eighty, would take that, and we the lower. The upper eighty joined that of the lower at the halfway point from north to south and commanded a more extensive view over the valley.

There was no question about the fact that our present living quarters were inadequate, especially since, as time went on, it became more clear that I would have to live on the desert indefinitely. Edward, however, was not resigned to the idea of my making a permanent home up here. To a certain extent, it was a question of family expenses. The Depression was well under way, and the Santa Fe Railroad Company, with which he had been associated for many years, had cut down the working hours and days in an attempt to keep all of their men employed. On the other hand, the expense of my separate maintenance was offset by the absence of doctor bills. I believe, all in all, the prospect of a divided family was my husband's most serious objection. We decided to let the matter rest until spring. . . .

It was the last day of the year, and John was happy to see us return, as he had been alone over Christmas. Since he was expecting us, he had prepared an early supper of fried rabbit, hot biscuits, and the big granite pot full of



steaming coffee. All the way from the city there had been a slow, drizzling rain, so the tiny home seemed especially cozy inside. Perhaps the smell of the cooking was partly responsible for the homelike feeling that we both experienced as we entered the door; even Edward seemed to take on a relaxed, easy mood; I could sense a more satisfied, philosophical attitude than was usual in him.

Supper was over, and outside it was getting dark. Now only a cold, damp wind was blowing as John opened the kitchen door to throw out the dishwater. "Come quick! There goes a wolf!" he said excitedly to us. And sure enough, we were just in time to see a gray wolf darting away from the door, running swiftly out into the brush and the darkness!

During the night it began to rain again and continued very hard until about ten o'clock the next morning; when the clouds scattered, there was the sun—and a rainbow. I wish I were able to paint a word picture of that rainbow, there in the clear desert air. One end was right in our yard—not many feet away, near a large Joshua tree! Never before had I been near the end of a rainbow, yet there it was—so close and so real! It hung majestically—uncanny in its nearness—displaying each stripe distinctly and with a definite color, like fresh paint. It seemed to have a texture—a texture like a drapery of soft, transparent velvet!

Edward and John were standing in the yard with me, fascinated by the beautiful scene. It was as if one were afraid to speak for fear the vision would vanish! As the phenomenon finally faded from sight, I turned to Edward and said, "Daddy, on New Year's Eve the wolf flees from our door; and now, on New Year's morning, here is this glorious rainbow. Isn't that a blessed omen?"

Now my husband was a very practical man, so he replied: "I'm not so sure about the omen, but it makes a darn good story!"

## Chapter 11

### TO BUILD A HOUSE

I doubt that any two people were ever imbued with more enthusiasm than John and I when Edward gave his consent to our planning a larger cabin. We did not know from what source it would come. Some place in the Bible we had read, however, that God commanded the people to dig ditches so that there would be places to store the rain for which they were praying. Building the cabin was to be like that—an act of faith! We started by drawing the house plans. There was not much blueprint required, because the walls were to be made of one-by-twelve boards, with the seams covered with bats. The fireplace and foundation were to be well built with heavy rocks.

On one of Edward's trips he and John dug the trenches in which to place the foundation rocks. Fortunately, John had the reliable old red truck, which would carry about two tons. Having scouted over most of the valley, we knew just where we could locate each particular type of rock needed. The big granite ledge about eight miles up in the mountains to the south would afford the greatest amount. Here again we used very little gasoline, since, as in getting the wood, we drove up the mountains empty and coasted practically all the way home.

Our summer was an especially happy one. Each member of my family was inducted into the service whenever he came to the desert. It was a real picnic season, and we tried to put as much pleasure into the work as possible! Load after load of heavy rock was hauled, even enough for



a one-room basement that John thought would be worth the additional effort. Next, we needed the lumber to start the framework of the structure; we needed lumber, and we needed the money to pay for it.

At quite a distance from here a man owed me a debt of such long standing that I had all but given up hopes of being paid any part of it. At this time I kept feeling an urge to ask him for just two hundred dollars, explaining the present need. My family was surely surprised when the check arrived! At that time two hundred dollars did wonders in getting our lumber and windows! Edward went to a Los Angeles wrecking company and bought practically all the material for the walls, windows, and floors.

My brother Ralph of Pasadena, a real desert enthusiast, came up and worked whenever his own job permitted his absence, both to help me and to enjoy a change in the big open country. Always it seemed that, whenever we reached a place where we were not sure how to proceed, someone who did know came along not only to show us but to help us. And Ralph was a good carpenter. . . .

By early October the heavy rock work had been done, with the exception of the upper part of the fireplace and the porch floors. The colorful stones we needed for the porches were just a few miles to the north and east. One day, after John and I had eaten our lunch, he urged, "Just one more load, Ma, and that job will be over"; he wanted to start immediately, although the early afternoon was still hot.

The roads were rough, and some of our tires were getting thin. We had planned on giving the truck an entire going-over very soon, as the heavy hauling was almost over. We were in high spirits and had gone about three miles to the east of home when there was a terrific explosion! Of course, our first thought was of a tire. Pulling over to the side of the road, John said, "What a blowout!" As he shut off the ignition, he leaned over on the steering wheel and cried out, "My God, Ma, I've been shot!" We did not

know at the time, nor could we stop to speculate, what had caused the double-barreled shotgun to go off. I could see that the back of the seat where John sat was covered with bits of flesh; and, looking at his left shoulder, I realized that it might mean a life-and-death struggle for him. While he was still conscious, I knew that I must act quickly and wisely. With the old carpet that covered the springs of the seat, I made a mat for him to lie on and helped him down into the shade of the truck.

It was a momentous decision to make! How could I go for help, realizing that he might pass over before I returned? Yet how could I stand there and hope for someone, on that seldom traveled road, to come by? It took a wizard to start that truck, and I had never driven anything like it; so, saying a prayer for John's protection, I started running. I could not see the Hankins' home, but by cutting across the desert shrubbery the distance would be less than a mile. When I was upon a knoll, I would shout for help; but when I was down in a ravine, I would try to save my energy to make the next knoll. As I reached the last ridge, I later learned, Jimmie told his wife that he could hear a child screaming. Their visitor then remarked that he had heard a gunshot and wondered why anyone would be hunting at that time of day. Thinking quickly, they decided that there had been an accident; and, throwing an old mattress in the back of their pick-up truck, they headed for the highway. As soon as they reached higher ground, they could see me.

When we reached John he was bleeding profusely but was still conscious. What may seem incredible to many people is the fact that, in my absence, the only person to come by was the first-aid man for the W.P.A. The men then improvised an ambulance, and the first-aid man, leaving his car by the roadside, sat on one side of John while I sat on the other. Jimmie was still a nervous wreck from the war and this excitement was not good for him, yet he drove his truck to Warren's Well where, fortunately, Jim Dever, the



like questions had to be answered while, all the time, the boy was in critical need of a doctor's care!

Later, Jack Cones, our local constable, told us that he had found the shotgun on the ground where we had hit a rough place in the road. He explained that the jolt had jarred the gun from John's left side, where it was standing; it had then struck the battery, which was bolted to the running board. This had caused the explosion, he said, as neither trigger had been pulled when he had picked up the gun.

Miracles still happen, because in six weeks John was back home with us, and we were very grateful—grateful to the Spirit Father for His healing care, and to everyone who so ably had come to our assistance. To all of them John owed his life!

The wind is a sculptor  
And with firm, deft hand  
He carves rippling wavelets  
In oceans of sand.

## Chapter 12

### A LETTER TO MY OLDEST SISTER IN LOS ANGELES

Yucca Valley, California  
November 14, 1934

Dear Emma,

So much has happened since you last visited the valley that I am eager for you to come back and see the progress we have made on our new cabin. John has returned from

cowboy, was at home. From there Jim took over the responsibility of getting us to the doctor.

Riding forty miles to Banning over rough desert roads was not easy even for a well person, but for John every jolt was torture! Jim drove as carefully as possible, but he had to make time. Every minute counted! The first-aid man kept a lighted cigarette at John's mouth, trying to keep his mind off his physical condition, while I held rolls of gauze at the gaping hole in his side.

Through Devil's Garden a sandstorm was raging! At times it almost blinded us! My clothes, a pair of jeans and a boy's shirt, were soaked in blood, and the clinging sand gave them an uncomfortable stucco-like feeling. John and the first-aid man fared no better! I could not help thinking that, under stress, one acquires an unaccountable endurance!

The next twenty miles after we reached U.S. Highway 99 were made with less discomfort. At Banning the doctor's care was only temporary, as we still had thirty miles to go to reach a hospital in San Bernardino. A deep chill crept in with the late afternoon. I noticed that John was shivering, and my teeth were chattering so that I could scarcely talk. Having seen Emma, our driver's wife, hand him a quilt as he got into the truck, I called to him to toss it back to us. I'm sure that helped to keep out the cold, but by that time I doubt if even a feather bed could have quieted my shaking body.

Of course, there must be rules and regulations concerning a patient's entering a hospital, but I was ready to be tied by the time the nurse got through filling in all those seemingly senseless forms. Because our post office was in White-Water, she insisted that we lived in Riverside County! Finally, I convinced her that we did not live at White-Water—that was just our post-office address—and that we lived in San Bernardino County. "What was John's father's name?" "Where was his mother born?" And other



the hospital and is doing nicely. The left arm, which the doctors doubted he would be able to use again, will be all right, it seems.

Osa and Jeff finally arrived in California and came to the desert! Jeff's doctor told him he should get out of Kansas before another winter. One doctor advised him to try San Bernardino, so after staying with us for a while, they plan to locate there permanently. Right now Jeff is helping with the fireplace, inside and out. On the inside we have used native rock right up to the ceiling. Above the mantle is an attractive, half-moon-shaped frame and mirror that brother Ralph brought to us from a wealthy home being dismantled in Pasadena. The boys kept carving down the scrolled frame until it exactly fits inside the rim of an old wagon wheel. On this iron rim rest the rocks.

We are going to enjoy that fireplace! Edward is having a crane made so that we can swing it over the burning logs and do much of our cooking there in cold weather. The old-time three-legged iron pot that you are giving us will make a perfect kettle in which to simmer a beef stew or, perhaps, to cook a hen with noodle soup!

You will like our rock porch, Sis, with its pillars of natural pine that we brought down from the higher mountains. They do much to keep the place looking rustic and cabin-like. The two top steps of the front porch and many rocks in the lower part of the chimney are of onyx. These we were able to get from an onyx mine several miles above Dot's homestead.

The doors of the bathroom, the clothes closets, and the two bed rooms are what we call "barn doors," made of one-by-twelve-inch boards with crosspieces. To open them we use cowhide latchstrings and will drape them with Mexican serapes. Each of the two clothes closets is large enough to hold a chest of drawers; and one could, if necessary, use either for a dressing-room. The knobs on all of the cupboard doors are spools saved from sewing thread; the same device is used on the bathroom cabinets. I have been extravagant

in the number of built-in features, but something tells me that this will have to be my home for many years to come. The bathroom is ready for the equipment when circumstances permit. In the meantime we shall be using the out-of-door "chick sale," making the well-known path leading to its door.

The cabin may not be ready to move into before early spring, when we shall ask John to live with us. Since we plan to continue our support of him, keeping up one place will be less expensive. His little shack will make a convenient guest house; there are none to be found in the valley.

Sis, you and your Florence would both be happy living up here. You have lived on a desert and learned to love it. Our sister, Phoebe Alcinda and family, you remember, not only became reconciled but soon were happy when the railroad company transferred them to Needles, California. The Indians there became very fond of the little redhead, Virgil Lauck! It seems that our family feels more at ease in the freedom of open spaces and the absence of conventional society. To quote my friend, Fullen Artrip, "It may be a curse to have a white man's skin and the blood of an Indian!" In the World War, Fullen was in the air service, and during an encounter lost an eye. He and his wife Louise, both quarter-Cherokee, live far up beyond Tip Top Mountain.

I must close this letter and get up to the cabin; it is my part of the job to measure and saw the bats that we use to cover the cracks on the inside walls. I nail most of them in place, too, although I hit my thumb about as often as I do the nails.

But now, love to each member of your family from  
Juney Joy



mahogany set. There was a tall dresser, with three spacious drawers and five smaller ones; this was topped by a large, oval French beveled mirror. A companion vanity, with four well-placed drawers and exactly the same size mirror as the dresser, sat by its side. A three-drawer night stand, a chair, and a metal bed of matching color were in the set. A writing desk of the same beautiful material was included. All of the pieces were finished on the inside almost as nicely as on the outside! I was thrilled at the thought of having them in my room. They were both lovely and practical!

As a starter, I bid ten dollars. Some one raised it to fifteen! Soon it reached twenty-five dollars! I thought of that plain unfinished furniture costing twenty-seven dollars, so I boldly spoke up, "Twenty-seven dollars!" "Twenty-seven—twenty-seven—," the auctioneer called again and again, but there was no more response. Pointing his cane at me he said, "Lady, that entire set is yours for just twenty-seven dollars!"

Edward was proud and happy over my good luck, and we were eager to get home to tell the girls. Before we left, however, I bought three beautiful two-foot-square French beveled mirrors for just fifty cents apiece; these we placed in the bathroom, rear bedroom, and dinette. Perhaps it was just beginner's luck; or might it not have been that one of my guardian angels also attended that auction sale?

### *Moving into the Cabin*

The winter was over by the time the built-in features of the new cabin were ready, as Edward did those on his bi-weekly trips and took pride in doing a neat job. Even after we had finally moved, there were many things to be done before we could really feel settled. But it was wonderful having plenty of room—a place for everything! No longer would I have to shove my suitcase under the bed when company came so that we could use the auto-seat daven-

### Chapter 13

#### "LADY, THE FURNITURE IS YOURS"

When completed, the cabin was of ample size, but we had no furniture for several of the rooms; my bedroom needed everything. While down in the city for a few days to do some shopping, I priced unpainted furniture. I knew of nothing less expensive. A chest of drawers, a vanity, and a bedstead would cost twenty-seven dollars, I found; but there would still be paint to buy and at least one mirror. I was not well pleased with the idea and decided to talk the matter over with the family.

Early that evening I heard over the radio of a big furniture auction being conducted in a warehouse not far from our home. The entire furnishings of the old Alexander Hotel, once one of the outstanding hotels in Los Angeles, were being sold. I was interested—almost excited! When I asked Edward whether we could go over to the auction, he replied, "My dear wife, the cost of that furniture will be entirely over our heads! Why pay such a price to furnish a desert cabin?"

The weather was more conducive to sitting in a comfortable chair enjoying a magazine; but, never having been to an auction, I persuaded Edward to take me. The crowd was very slim, perhaps because of the drizzling rain. We found our way to the floor on which the auction was being conducted. I had the privilege of examining the pieces in which I was interested before they were put up for bidding. The many bedroom suites were practically alike, but some were in better condition than others. I chose a lovely red



port; no longer would we have to scramble to get our beds made lest an early caller see the place looking untidy; and no longer would we have to wait until the weather was favorable before we could invite a guest to spend the night.

John's favorite color was blue, so we decorated his room accordingly. From the Joe Wagner sale we bought a walnut library table, and from a catalogue house we got three fire-side chairs for one dollar each. The latter came ready to be assembled, and I stained them to match the library table. Their wide arms made a convenient space for trays, in lieu of a coffee table. John covered the seats of the chairs with tanned cowhides. The white hide with black markings was my favorite.

Edward brought up the four-shelved bamboo bookcase that was used when the children were in grade school; each one had had a shelf so that there would be no wild scrambling at the last minute for his or her books! This with two footstools that Virgil had made while in junior high and a large woven tray made by Adelaide at that time gave me an at-home-feeling—little things that, sentimentally, linked the present to the past! At a five-and-ten-cent store we bought a service for twelve of green pottery dishes and the same number of silver-plated flatware. Since we had the major furnishings, it was fun collecting all the small articles that we needed!

Outfitting the dinette was simple. With the built-in cupboards there was nothing needed but the table and chairs. A favorite dropleaf table that formerly belonged to Grandfather Paxton found a ready home. With only two straight chairs on hand, John made a bench for the two opposite sides, and we painted the entire set a sage green.

Many times we thought of the ditches we had dug on faith and of how, step by step, in a natural but unexpected order, our dream cabin had become a reality, a structure built on a rock foundation!

## Chapter 14

### NAMING OUR NEW HOME

Once established in our own home, we wanted to give it a suitable name. As usual, I talked over the matter with the Spirit Father. I told Him that we wanted a name that would be appropriate and, at the same time, would meet the approval of all the family. John had expressed displeasure with the use of a Spanish name; he preferred a good American word.

For days the expression, "God led me to it," came again and again into my mind. I waited for another suggestion, but none came. Finally, I explained to the Father that a title or name that length would be mighty awkward to put on our stationery or to use as a directional sign. Gradually, I began to get the name "Joshuas." Over this I was puzzled. I had been so certain that the expression, "God led me to it" came as a direct suggestion; and now to switch to the word "Joshua" was a bit disconcerting!

In a few days Evelyn came up, and I talked over the name development with her. "The Joshuas" at once met with her favor, and we decided on that name for the entire acreage. For several reasons it seemed that it was the ideal name. In the first place, this land is located almost centrally in the great grove of Joshua trees which extends about five miles to the west and the same distance to the east. Furthermore, as far as we could ascertain, there was no place at that time in this Greater Morongo Valley to which the name "Joshua" had been applied.

In the third place, my father's given name was Joshua.



Joshua Le Mert was a real pioneer: Immediately after the Civil War he was among a group of young veterans who went West and took up homesteads in central Kansas. There they endured many hardships and heartaches in developing the virgin soil that later became rich farmlands of that part of the state.

Returning to the city with Evelyn for a few days, I was very much surprised to be greeted by Adelaide with the following recital: "You should have heard a lecture that I attended this afternoon. The man talked about the Joshua trees and said that they were given that name by the early Mormons who came West seeking the Promised Land. Their leader, he said, upon seeing the weird trees with outstretched arms had exclaimed, 'God has led us to it; we will call the trees the *Joshuas*.'" So that was the answer to my apparently contradictory inspirations!

Long ago my earthly father passed over to the spirit plane, but I am sure that he is still interested in his "little tribe" and helpful in locating them where once again they can enjoy the freedom of an open country and the peace derived from acquainting themselves with nature.

In the early days the Mormons, they tell,  
Were seeking a peaceful place to dwell.

Said the weird-shaped trees to the Mormon band,  
"Right here you have found the promised land."

The good old leader agreed it was,  
So they called the trees the *Joshuas*!

## Chapter 15

### OUR FIRST NEIGHBOR

John and I had moved into the new cabin. The little shack stood empty. Only occasionally did we house friends there for a few days at a time. This was the situation when my niece, Thelma Le Mert, of Pasadena, wrote to ask us if we would consider renting the place for one year to her school chum, Doleta Parks. Doleta needed only one more year of college to get her degree but had experienced a serious recurrence of a long-standing case of asthma which necessitated her leaving school. This experience would have been disappointing to any boy or girl, but to Doleta, it seems, it was more than that. Her spirit, for a time, was crushed. Having learned from Thelma about my living here in the High Desert, and the progress toward health that I was making, she wrote to find out whether we would be willing for her to live in the little shack, the home from which John and I had recently moved. She would have to live alone, as her mother was the breadwinner and could not be with her. Feeling acutely the financial strain of her doctor bills on her parents, she had a desperate determination to get well.

John and I talked over the contents of Thelma's letter. While we had frequently heard that this climate was beneficial for many asthmatic victims, neither of us knew much about the illness. We both realized—perhaps I more than he—that it would be a responsibility to look after a lone neighbor—a young lady who was, at times, critically ill. It seemed, though, that I was destined to assume again the



role of "mothering" someone who, for a while, needed that attention.

In March, 1936, Doleta became our neighbor. She was quite small and frail, but she certainly made up for that in real courage. Her one driving ambition was to finish school and become a teacher. She wanted to be self-supporting and enjoy life like a normal, healthy girl. Since we had left the shack furnished, it was adequate and comfortable for one person. Even when her father came up for several days at a time, the two managed quite well.

Almost immediately Doleta began to sleep better; with more sleep, her general health improved. John and I kept several good milk goats, and Doleta, who was allergic to cow's milk, joined us in consuming a generous amount of that milk.

For several months the trudge from her place up to ours—a distance of about five hundred feet—was an achievement; but in time she made the trip several times a day. Our early suppers were often a get-together affair: "You bring that and we will furnish this." As Doleta began to feel stronger, she went with us to haul the water, to gather the wood on picnic excursions, to do the laundry at The Tanks, or just to scout about the valley. She seemed never to get homesick nor discouraged.

#### *Our Better Self*

Deep down within each one is a vision,

A Something better and brighter that seems  
To long for release, long for expression,

Long to be something more than mere dreams!

## Chapter 16

### A SHORT-LIVED SUNDAY SCHOOL

Up and down the Morongo and Yucca Valleys, a distance of about twenty miles, there had been no Sunday school for the children to attend. Shortly after we moved into our new cabin, an organization was completed, and Mrs. "Doc" Crawford of Morongo Valley came to ask if I would take charge of the adult class. The meetings were to be held in the one-room schoolhouse in Yucca Valley. Because of the limited space, Mrs. Crawford had planned on having just three classes: a primary, taught by Barbara Hicks, a lovely young girl of Morongo Valley; a middle class, composed mostly of half-grown boys, under the instruction of an early-day homesteader's wife; and my adult class.

Before I came to the desert, I had been not merely advised but ordered by a reputable specialist to refrain from joining an organization. But now, rather than seem disinterested or uncooperative, since I had discussed my health problems with no one, I accepted the responsibility of teaching the class.

As a girl in Kansas I had been reared in the Christian church. I doubt that there had been any deep thought over the choice, but of the five churches on our side of the railroad tracks, that one seemed to be sanctioned by our parents and selected by our playmates. When my own children were old enough to attend Sunday school, I took them there and often filled a vacancy caused by an absent teacher. Because of this early experience in religious education, I hoped to be of some help in the new organization.



The attendance grew. People came from these valleys and the surrounding hills. Parents who had never been interested in church came and brought their children. There was a piano in the schoolhouse and also one in the Wallace Stacey home; Mrs. Stacey played for us as we practiced the old familiar hymns one night each week.

The Sunday school had been functioning well for a few months when I received in the mail one morning a very surprising letter. It was from the woman who was teaching the middle-class group. The contents of the letter ran like this:

Dear Mrs. Paxton:

Sometimes I listen to what you are saying to your class and I never hear you tell them about hell-fire and damnation. Some day you will find out. There is a woman visiting the Harrell home who will take your place next Sunday.

And she signed her name.

Barbara Hicks was visiting us when I received the letter, and she was greatly grieved over its contents. In my heart I felt no resentment. Was it not what I deserved for deliberately breaking the doctor's orders? Then, too, the woman was really sincere in her belief. She had no personal feeling in the matter; she might even have liked me, but from her viewpoint I was a teacher responsible for the souls of all those adults and I was failing to warn them. To her, the important Bible teachings were of hell-fire. That was her belief, and she felt that to express it was her duty!

My viewpoint had been that, since this was a community organization, and since the men and women in the class had come from various parts of the country and from different denominations, it was in my teaching to find a common ground on which we could meet and, to a reasonable extent, agree. The practical application of the Gospels, it seemed, was in presenting the Christlike quali-

ties; peace and understanding, tolerance and charity, brotherly love and good will. On this spiritual background I felt that no one's religious faith or creed could be offended.

The next Sunday I attended the class as a student. To have stayed away would have given the impression of resentment or defeat; neither feeling was true! The superintendent, Mrs. Crawford, wanted an explanation, and Barbara told her about the letter. She tried to persuade me to keep the class, but by that time my course was clear. I knew that if I was to be of any public service, I would have to have a different channel of expression.

I deeply regretted that this episode terminated our first Sunday school. Several of the World-War veterans told me that they had had experienced plenty of hell-fire in service, and were up here to forget it, not to hear about it every Sunday morning! Most of the members of the middle-class group did not approve of my being dismissed; and the little ones, who dearly loved their teacher, could not go without their parents. Truly it was an unhappy and unfortunate turn of events that delayed the establishment of a Sunday school in this valley for many years!

## Chapter 17

### THE CLOUDBURST

It was mid-summer; but since we were going to furnish wood for Doleta, John and I planned to begin early to build our winter supply by getting a few loads at a time when we were in a picnic mood. On a pleasant day, when clouds were scattered here and there, we knew that the higher altitude where we found our wood would be cool and restful. One very promising morning we headed the old truck towards the southern rim. Doleta, who by that time usually



went with us, had other chores that day, a circumstance which for her proved fortunate. Going several miles farther up the mountain than usual, we found on a westerly slope an unexplored area. The wood was so plentiful that it took us no time to get our load, so we scouted around for a while, hoping to find the discarded horns of mountain sheep for our collection. Already we had polished and mounted several pairs of cow horns and one set of deer antlers.

Lunch was over, and we were putting some interesting rocks in the truck when John, observing the cloud formation, remarked that he didn't like its looks and thought it best to start back home immediately. We coasted down the grade about two miles and had entered an old river bed when the storm, in all its wildness, struck us. The cab of the truck had a top, but there was no glass in the windshield or the sides. The rain came down in sheets, and the wind lashed it madly against us! Still coasting, we stood up to protect our faces. To be heard above the fury of the storm, we had to shout to each other! The question uppermost in our minds was whether we should keep going, running into we knew not what, or try to make it on foot to higher ground.

Foamy water swirled about us. The old truck bounced over debris washed down from the mountain sides; at times it leaped over obstacles. By then we knew there was nothing we could do but go on! The maddening wind would have taken our breath so completely that climbing through gushing water and over sliding rocks was out of the question. Already our cold, soggy clothes were clinging to our bodies!

The stream bed was getting deeper. The roar of the thunder grew more deafening! Streaks of jagged lightning leaped from one cliff to another! I looked at John's face, and it was grim. By that I knew that he thought our case was a desperate one, almost hopeless! With all the voice that I could muster, I shouted in his ear, "PRAY!" A slight grin relaxed his tension. It might have given him courage to

think that I believed that we still had a chance, or he might have been reminded of a recent razing he had given me about my childlike faith in talking over my problems with the Spirit Father.

We were going downhill but still had several miles to cover before we could leave the river bed. Although the storm did not diminish, the old truck never gave up its steady momentum. John could brace himself at the wheel, but a sudden swerving of the truck would throw me over; at times I almost fell from the cab! At a sickening flash of lightning or a sharp crack of thunder, John would look reassuringly at me, knowing I was always terrified during an electric storm!

At last we were nearing the 29 Palms Highway. To take our regular trail from there was not feasible; but by going somewhat to the west, we ran out of the path of the rushing current. Hoarse from shouting, and drenched and beaten by the wind-lashed water, we amazed Doleta as we stopped by her place to tell her about our experience. It was difficult for her to realize the extent of the storm, as there had been only a light shower on our hillside. For more than an hour we three sat on our front porch, listening to the roar and watching the powerful flow of water as it came down from the mountains from which we had just escaped.

A few days later, when we went back to the same place to get another load, we discovered that had we remained on the spot where we were gathering wood that fateful afternoon, we would have been safe, as the ground in the higher mountains showed no indication of even a light shower.



previous ones) had homesteaded in 1922 on the 29 Palms Highway across the road from Matty's store. While the home was just a little shack, the yard was meticulously clean and well kept. Almost every passerby would stop, sooner or later, to inspect the interesting cactus garden and the display of glassware which had been tinted a deep lavender by the natural violet rays of the sun. But now the wife Alla had passed over, and Harrell was about to take another helpmate.

Somehow, when one referred to "Old Man Harrell," he wasn't necessarily speaking of the man's age; it was more as if one had said, "You know that man, Harrell; sort of a character he is!" In nice weather he usually sat in the shade by the side of the house, and when he saw anyone that he liked drive to the store, he would amble across the road and chat a while. If you happened to be one of the many he did *not* like, you were not kept guessing! If, in his mind, you had had any part in offending him, you were lucky to get off with a mere "tongue lashing"; at times the situation took on a more serious aspect.

One day when Harrell saw me drive up across the way, he came over to tell me about his promised bride. As his old car had collapsed, the bride-to-be was coming bag and baggage from Banning on the bus, so he told me. His enthusiasm was high as he described his Texas find. He took for granted that I knew that he had learned of her through a beloved column in a newspaper. They had already, it seemed, exchanged through the mail descriptions of their best qualities, and he proudly told me that his choice was young, red-haired, and a former schoolteacher.

At last she arrived, they were married, and I was to write the story for *The Desert Trail*. Almost before I could rap on the door, Harrell came out, beaming his pleasure at the prospect of being interviewed. While observing the amenities of my errand, I could see—yes, it was true that her hair was red—a brilliant red! How many shades lay underneath, I could not fathom! And her age—well, at least

## THE MAIL-ORDER BRIDE

Until now there had been no newspaper in the entire valley, so we considered it a mark of progress when Bill Underhill of Twentynine Palms launched his weekly paper, *The Desert Trail*, in April, 1935. Bill was a World-War veteran who had homesteaded in 1928; and, like the other pioneers, he was working hard to make that village a pleasant place in which to live.

The paper was one month old when Bill came to my cabin to induce me to send in news items and join the staff of writers. Though somewhat dubious of my ability as a columnist, I yet wished to be of some service in the community, so I accepted the offer. At first I used only my initials J.L.P. under the column, as I wanted to be a little more sure of myself before sailing out under my full name.

More and more people were coming to the valley. Interest in the place as one having a healthful climate was growing. What one's neighbors were doing, who visited whom, and what was being done to further the civic and social interests in the community soon became very important to a resident, and reading his country newspaper was the best way for him to get an at-home feeling and become a part of his surroundings. The big metropolitan papers were delivered here each weekday; but for the little, personal, heart-warming items, we read our local paper, *The Desert Trail*.

One of my first assignments was to write up the wedding of Walter Harrell and his mail-order bride. Mr. Harrell and his late wife (I understood that there had been several



she had once been young! I did not get the opportunity to talk to her long, but I gathered from her conversation that she was entertaining visions of their selling his land and leaving the desert behind. On the surface it was a fair match, but I was sure that the new Mrs. Harrell was in for a big disappointment. I knew that Harrell had had many wonderful offers for his homestead but would never sell any part of it. She would have to be content, like the last wife, to live in the little two-room shack *sans* a single comfort.

What went on behind the scenes during the next two weeks I do not know, but one day Harrell again sauntered across the road to tell me that his Texas bride had picked up her bag and baggage and had taken the bus back to Banning!

I'm a harmless native

Just out for a whirl;

I'm an old sand-devil

Taking a twirl.

## Chapter 19

### MORE NEIGHBORS

During the summer of 1936, we heard that the Metropolitan Water Company, which was laying a pipeline from Boulder Dam to Los Angeles, had finished the section through Devil's Garden and was going to sell, for two hundred dollars apiece, the buildings that housed the workers. Almost simultaneously, Ernest Swihart and his wife Ida, who had been teachers in our valley school the past winter, suggested that we build a cabin so that they could use it

in time for the coming fall term. Edward liked the idea of our having more near neighbors, and he also thought the price of \$200 a bargain for all the material we would be able to get from one of the aqueduct buildings. The lumber was good and, by then, well seasoned; and the windows were, for the most part, large and in good condition.

My brother Ralph and Edward laid off a week from their work to help John dismantle the building. Doleta and I helped by taking the men's lunch to them and by carting back the smaller pieces. Jeff Overbay did the heavy hauling. Doleta's father had been a carpenter during his working years, and he, with the help of John and Ralph, built the house. Ernest, the prospective tenant, wanted especially to have a fireplace and a long, open porch. Later we enclosed the porch to make a sunroom. A sunroom on the south is practical and a real comfort during the entire year. In the coldest weather here, the sun beaming in at the windows warms the room so that there is no need of other heat. In the summer the sun obligingly travels to the north, giving way to the prevailing southwest breeze.

By rushing the work somewhat, we had the new cabin ready for the Swiharts before the fall semester began. The winter passed quickly. It was an unusual and pleasant experience for John and me to be within calling distance of a neighbor. The three homes were situated much like the points of a triangle, with ours being the upper point. While the distance was too far from one cabin to another to carry on an out-of-door conversation, still one could, if the other party raised his voice, get the gist of the message.

During the weekdays the Swiharts were in school most of the daylight hours; on Saturday they hauled their supply of wood and did their housework. Ida, young and pretty, taught the music and the lower grades, while her husband did the janitor work, taught the upper classes, and took over the boys' playground period. Ernest kept good discipline, and although there had been a feud among the older boys, his "football" physique, as well as his genial



disposition, demanded respect. Doleta, John, and I took great interest in all the school affairs. At times we served as judges in contests among the pupils.

One cold morning in early spring Ernest found that the oil burner which heated the schoolroom was not behaving well. Perhaps it was the weather that prompted him to tell the bus driver to return the children to their homes. Or could it have been a premonition? He brought Ida back to the cabin; and as he was about to return to the schoolhouse, he noticed a pillar of smoke in that direction. He called to tell us of his misgivings and rushed back to find that the stove had exploded and the one-room school was a mass of flames. The students' vacation was not long, however, as the classes were held for the remainder of the semester in various homes.

After the guest cabin had been completed there remained enough building material for a sizeable cabin. Edward gave it to John so that he might build a place to house his friends or relatives whenever they came up for a few days. About that time, too, his mother talked seriously of wanting to live on his acreage, so he thought he should provide a place for her. He would have liked to stay with us, and yet felt that his duty was to his mother. The divergent loyalties made him very unhappy and restless.

But the construction of his place got under way. In the mornings, as soon as the goats were milked and the firewood brought in, John would climb the hill to the spot where he was putting up his cabin. When it was far enough along to have a wood fire in the stove, I prepared a lunch for him to take along, which, with the pot of coffee he kept brewing, made the day pass more pleasantly. When the place was finally finished, we gave John the furniture he had enjoyed so much in his room in our cabin.

## Chapter 20

### A MIRACULOUS ESCAPE

It happened in early spring. In the living-room I had a low fire burning in the open grate, and in the kitchen a stew simmering slowly on the back of the wood range. Not having heard a car drive up, I was surprised to see Henry Brown, a distant neighbor, opening the front door. As a rule, Henry was a quiet, sober, likable man, but I had heard his friends say that, when he mixed his wine and whiskey, he really went on a rampage! As I looked up from my book, I saw that he had been drinking, but quickly decided to ignore the fact until he could state his errand and be on his way.

He half-staggered over to the davenport and, as he sat down, said, "Put down that book and come over here!" As I looked in his eyes, I realized what his friends had meant and I was afraid! Trying to evolve a plan of escape, I pretended to continue reading. "Put down that book and come over here!" he said more emphatically, and then I knew that the last thing that I wanted to do was to "come over here!" Remarking that I would first have to put some wood in the range, I got up and went to the kitchen. He could hear the back door open, so I said something about getting in more wood.

The guest cabin was the nearest house, but the teachers were in school and John's new home was too far up the hill for me to run to it. Doleta's father had come up from Pasadena for the week, and although he was quite elderly, he still would be a great help if I could reach their place.



Once outside, I started running. When I got about one-third of the way, Henry caught up with me. Grabbing both of my wrists, he began pulling me back to the cabin. I dug my heels into the sand, which helped some, but he was the stronger. Seeing that this method was failing, I began screaming for help, which only infuriated him the more, while a wind from the southwest carried my voice away so that no one could hear me.

Henry would have none of that screaming, so he released my wrists and grabbed me by the throat. As he did so, he said, "I'm killing you, and I'm killing you right now!" It was easy to believe him! My throat began aching and I could not cry for help, so I mentally screamed to the Spirit Father, "Save me!"

You who are skeptical will not believe me when I tell you that I actually heard a Voice saying, "Throw up both arms and duck your head!" As I obeyed the instructions, Henry released the hold on my throat and, again grabbing each wrist, jerked violently backwards. As he did this, my slip-on sweater was pulled up over my head, and he fell heavily on the ground!

That was my opportunity! That was my deliverance! Just as I reached the back door of the little shack, Doleta's father stepped out to get some water. Seeing my excitement, he held the door open for me and reached for his shotgun. As he kept his aim on Henry, who had regained his feet, the three of us made our escape. Good neighbors took us into their homes, and we had a consultation with the local officer. I could make of this a longer story but will add only that in a few days we were all back in our respective homes, trying to carry on as though the unfortunate incident had never occurred.

After Doleta's father left, she spent much time at my cabin and soon came to live with me. Thinking that we might need protection again, her father bought her a revolver, and we learned to use it! Since we were both here

for the benefit of our health, and were minding our own affairs, we had no intention of being intimidated!

## Chapter 21

### TWO DESERT RATS

The second phase of usefulness of the little "White House" seemed to be at an end. Doleta, having made her home there for fifteen months, took the room in our cabin which John had recently vacated. This being accomplished, it seemed logical that he should move the little white shack onto his own acreage. His new house stood in plain view from our front porch, and he placed the old one so that we could, by looking through a small canyon, see it also. Our idea was that, in case of an emergency, either of us could hang out a large white towel that could be seen from the other's home.

Doleta and I managed together nicely. We kept enough hens to supply fresh eggs or an occasional stew. We even learned to take care of several of the goats, which assured a ready supply of good milk. Upon the arrival of each little kid, we gave it the name of some type of cactus or desert shrub. There is no small animal, I believe, that is alert so quickly as a baby goat. Usually, the kids come in pairs; and in just a few hours they are romping and chasing each other much like little children at their out-of-door games. Kittens and young puppies are dullards for many weeks after birth, but not so the frisky kids. At times the mother would steal up into the hills to have her babies. In the evening, when feeding time came, she would often leave them hidden behind heavy shrubbery and then forget where she had left them. At such times Doleta and I had to pacify an excited



nanny who kept urging us on over rocks and crevices until we found her little ones.

It was to Frank and Anna Bull that we owed many pleasant days scouting over the desert on rock-hunting expeditions. Frank didn't mind taking his well-seasoned car over the rockiest of uncharted roads. The Bulls had homesteaded in an out-of-the-way spot among juniper, scrub oak, and pines at a location which had, by coincidence, already been named Bull Springs. Invariably, Frank would take the guests out into his yard to show them on the sky line of the surrounding mountains an elephant, a goat, a castle, the profile of George Washington, or some other definite likeness in the rocks. About his yard, a yard that was always kept scrupulously clean, were tidily arranged shards of Indian pottery, beautiful stones, Indian metates, ollas, and arrows.

Often Doleta and I searched for rocks by ourselves. We had heard that there were unusual specimens near Giant Rock, so one day, as much through curiosity to see the hermit who lived there as through interest in rocks, we drove over. As the crow flies, Giant Rock is about ten miles from my cabin, but the one lonely road that led to it required about twenty miles of driving. This rock, allegedly twenty-three thousand tons in weight, greatly resembles a huge egg standing slantwise, with the smaller end buried in the ground.

We understood that the fifty-nine-year-old Frank Critzer who was living there was just a "squatter," and that for fear of losing the place he seemed never to leave it. For living quarters he had excavated several rooms under the boulder; it was said that the temperature in these rooms is so even winter and summer that neither heat nor air-conditioning is required. Having heard that Frank Critzer expected his guests to bring food, we had made provision for that phase of the visit. We found him courteous and cooperative, for he directed us to the various types of rock and, before we left, posed for several pictures with us.

Later, from a Banning newspaper, we learned that the law-enforcement officers of San Bernardino had had Critzer under surveillance for some time. He was suspected, so said the paper, of aiding smugglers of narcotics and foreigners to make illegal entry into this country. This could easily have been accomplished, as he had improved the already natural airstrip leading to the place so that very large planes could land. A camouflaged hangar had been discovered in the crevice of boulders, the paper stated, besides a radio receiving set that was capable of getting police calls as far away as Florida.

It is possible that Frank Critzer suspected that the law would one day catch up with him. He appeared always to be on his guard. At any rate, he was a man of mystery, and the reason why he determined never to be taken alive may always remain unknown. One morning, while working in my garden, I heard—and felt—a blast. Soon I learned that, in the presence of three Banning officers who had gone there, he had touched off several sticks of dynamite concealed under his shirt, blowing himself to bits.

Of course, on the various occasions when Doleta and I had visited the recluse, he knew us to be just what we were—two harmless desert rats!

## Chapter 22

### SPRING MAGIC

Those who are new to the desert—to its starkness and its loneliness—often need time to learn to endure, much less embrace, its strangeness. The desert is mystifying to many because it can be impersonally cruel or personally comforting, depending entirely on one's approach to its habits.



Love it, and it will give back in kind; resist it, and it will turn and rend you.

If the newcomer is looking for drabness, it is always in evidence. But if he sees beyond the dull gray-green of the plants and shrubbery, he can thrill to the deep blue of the sky, to the fleecy white of the straying clouds that pass across the heavens, and to the purple hazes that hover over the mountains. The unprejudiced newcomer will certainly open wide his lungs to the clean air and sense the healing power of the violet rays.

After the chill of the winter, spring finally comes; and the long drabness gives way to the miracle of the desert. The seemingly lifeless sands become acres of tiny white, yellow, and purple flower carpets. So countless are these little buttonhole bouquets and unbelievably perfect corals that one walks in awe over the changed ground. He walks in awe lest he might harm these precious, dainty visitors that the infrequent rains and desert sunshine have brought to delight, for a time, every lover of nature.

Perhaps I can paint a few word pictures of some of our most common wild flowers. A field of purple verbenas as it suddenly comes into view is a scene to excite every traveler; and when those purples blend with myriad types of yellow flowers, their combined beauty is indescribable. An especially rich display of wild flowers that I remember seeing was a mixture of verbenas and white evening primroses that entirely covered miles of sand dunes.

One of the earliest blooming, and perhaps the loveliest, of the spring flowers is the desert lily, which is not unlike the greenhouse variety that we enjoy at Easter. The snow-white flowers adorn a stalk which rises a foot or more from a group of sparse, low-spreading leaves. I doubt that any plant has the courage to grow among more humble surroundings. I have seen an entire field of them glowing in the sun on the side of an otherwise barren malapi hill. Doleta and I ran across an especially long bed of these sacred-looking lilies just beyond an ancient lake bed where,

ignoring the volcanic rocks through which they had to grow, they held up their lovely faces to behold their Creator.

The length and breadth of Devil's Garden yearly reveals a spring display of attractive encelias. This hardy, low-growing shrub is gray-green, while the flower, equally sturdy, is a striking yellow. Was it Shakespeare who said, "A man may smile and smile and be a villain?" So in spring does Devil's Garden put on a smile and cause one to forget the coming blistering rays of the sun or the sand driven by relentless winds!

The California poppy needs no introduction; its fields of pale yellow to deep golden are known the world over. For several months during the early summer the rich yellow of the poppy contrasts with the brilliant hue of the blue Canterbury bell in sheltered canyons back of my cabin. Within the enclosure, I have encouraged the poppy and Canterbury bell to mingle with primroses, marigolds, desert asters, verbenas, apricot mallow, scarlet bugler, and various types of sage blooms.

While these flowers are fading away, the wild senna comes into blossom. This gray-green shrub grows several feet high, with yellow flowers much like lovely lace. In our two-acre enclosure I have counted more than one hundred and fifty of these shrubs in bloom at one time, and the effect is very striking! The bloom of the bladder sage appears in early May; it is distinctive for the many small purple flowers of the pea variety which later change into little balloons of the same color. These balloons soon become colorless and brittle so that in the breeze they rattle much like a snake warning; I have been unnecessarily startled many times when walking through a group of bladder sage. I came across a veritable grove of them while following a cattle trail from Warren's Well to the spring at Black Rock in search of a picture for one of the magazines. Wild bees were taking advantage of the many blossoms, and, since I had fared badly in a former encounter with a bee colony, I showed deep respect for their numbers and their energy.



The desert willow, with its orchid-like flowers, and the hardy catsclaw, wearing little yellow plumes, are often in bloom at the same time and can be seen along the washes and small canyons. About June, when the other plants and shrubs have lost their color, the smoke tree surprises the traveler with royal-blue flowers on its gray branches. But beware of the innocent look of the smoke tree, for, like the catsclaw, it carries an armor of protecting thorns. Incidentally, the spiked ends of a branch of smoke tree dotted with small, colorful gumdrops and draped with silver tinsel make a very pretty Christmas tree for table or mantel. To support it sturdily, I insert it in a sand-filled can which is easily covered with silver paper. The tree can be carried over from year to year by changing the gumdrops as they become faded.

Among the pictures of the desert wild flowers I should not neglect to place the exquisite blooms of the cactus family. Among the best known in this locale are the strawberry hedgehog with purple-to-pink blooms; the more golden red of the prickly pear; and the grizzly bear, or "old woman of the desert." The "old woman" has long, white matted hairy spines whose blooms are usually a creamy white that turn pinkish the second day. Then there are the dainty yellow blooms of the porcupine, and the teddy bear's soft green blossoms. The beaver tail, similar to the prickly pear in the shape of its leaf, often displays as many as one hundred to two hundred pink flowers on one plant. I counted that many buds last spring on a healthy specimen in our hills. The fishhook cacti in this valley are a silver over green and about the size of a medium potato standing on end. In blooming season the crown of this thorny plant is encircled with a wreath of dainty pink blossoms much like the ones a lady uses to trim her sailor hat. This little plant is difficult to find, as it prefers to hide under other shrubbery.

The blooms on the Easter lily cactus—not to be confused with the desert lily—are quite similar to those of the night-blooming cereus and are, I believe, as exquisite. The

cover page of the April, 1948, *Desert Magazine* displays this beautiful white flower. For the picture my friend Harry Vroman photographed one of a group of plants in our flower bed. Unlike the other cacti that I have mentioned, this group, to my knowledge, is not found in a wild state locally. Although they thrive in this soil, they are sensitive to severely cold weather. In an issue of *Arizona Highways Magazine* I noticed they are called night-blooming hedgehog, which is an appropriate name. Of the larger cacti, the most common varieties are the barrel, clustered barrel, pencil, and the wicked cholla (pronounced *Choy-ä*). The almost transparent charreuse of the cholla flower somewhat mitigates the mischief this cactus is guilty of doing to the unsuspecting passerby.

Each spring Doleta and I enjoyed hiking back into our hills to gather bouquets of flowers for the cabin. No sooner would we start than the pesky goats would follow and, in no time, be running ahead of us. They had a knack of discovering a particularly attractive clump of flowers just a few feet beyond; and as they eagerly devoured them, they would turn and look back complacently as if they had, in some way, done us a great favor!

Years later, on a Sunday morning, I walked with one of my Los Angeles friends into our backyard hills after spring had wrought its magic. Betty Grobemier liked to hike and was interested, moreover, in being just quiet and away from people. I took along a paper bag in case I should find some wild-flower seed, while Betty carried a light shovel that would serve as a walking stick or otherwise come in handy.

After climbing up and over huge rocks that line the knolls, we came at length into a small, narrow canyon. An amazing array of wild asters and Canterbury bells lay before us. "Betty, this is one of my favorite chapels," I said, "and here we will lie down in the clean, warm sand; for a while, at least, you can make believe that you haven't a care in the world."



The light breeze swept softly across us. A hummingbird whirred back and forth, dipping its tiny bill into each flower. From a distant juniper tree came the plaintive chirp of a bird. All else was quiet—so quiet that one could actually feel the presence of the Great Spirit! So peaceful that the vibrations from the sand and the surroundings rocks soothed one into ease and forgetfulness!

When we left that hidden retreat, where but few people had ever been, we wended our way silently down through the chaparral to the cabin, each feeling that conversation was out of order; we wanted to hold and nourish the peace and quiet that we had found in that canyon-chapel.

Miss Willow put on her gown today

All covered with orchids, petite;

But she took time to say, in a very nice way,

"Miss Catsclaw, your plumes are elite."

## Chapter 23

### A YEAR OF ACCOMPLISHMENT

At last the village of Twentynine Palms celebrated the most significant event in its history—the completion of the last stretch of pavement that connected it with U. S. Highway 99 at a point just east of White Water. No longer was this desert road a veritable nightmare to travelers. The high centers, gullies, rock obstructions, and sandy washes gave way to a smoothly surfaced road. Travelers were then easily able to reach and enjoy the nearby Joshua Tree National Monument. This preserve was created by Presidential proclamation in 1936.

Improved roads meant the influx of many new residents

to the valley. While the 160-acre homestead sites were no longer available, there still remained thousands of acres of railroad land for sale. The Southern Pacific owned alternate sections, I believe, with an occasional one reserved for school purposes.

With the advent of improved road conditions, Edward, like many others, also caught the desert fever. At first he tried not to betray his gradual change of heart, but from time to time I would read items in the railroad magazine in which he praised this valley and recited its merits in superlative terms. One issue went so far as to refer to him as "the mayor of Yucca Valley." His railroad cronies began coming not only from Los Angeles but from Newton and Wichita, Kansas. I believe he let down the last barrier of his prejudice, however, when, instead of entertaining his cousins, Katherine Paxton McClelland and her sister Adele Johnson, at the Hollywood home, he brought them up to show off our cabin and the eighty acres of cacti. Yes, in spite of his former intense dislike of the desert, Edward had finally succumbed to its lures. He only grinned when I reminded him that the pavement had been completed before he "had white whiskers to the ground"—a development in which he had once pessimistically refused to believe.

By this time Doleta and I were getting stronger and eager to make some progress intellectually as well as physically. Doleta took up a correspondence course in mineralogy and renewed her interest in botany. I had been associated with *Desert Trail* for more than four years and found the work a refreshing outlet. When Randall Henderson launched *Desert Magazine*, now internationally known, and invited me to join the staff of regular contributors, I was happy to have additional work of that nature. Mine was a small part, but in a block called "Creed of the Desert" I was to bring out some bit of nature study or interesting philosophy of desert life. "People" were not to be included. The more than ten years during which I was closely associated with *Desert* were filled with interest. Wherever I went, driving or walk-



ing, I was alert for usable material for the "Creed." It was fun watching the habits of little desert creatures; markings in the sand took on new significance; the characteristics of plant life became more evident.

About that time I began writing also for *Terminal Island Topics*, published weekly for the inmates of a Federal correctional institution. This contact brought deep satisfaction and reward through the sincere appreciation of the readers. My contributions were solely for the purpose of injecting some spiritual philosophy into the dull and humdrum lives of the inmates. The capable editor, an inmate, under whom I served, did much to encourage and help me in my undertaking.

Since childhood I had always had a yen to write verse. However, any mother who has a flock of children to raise and who must do all her work knows there is seldom time to settle down long enough to do any creative writing. I had had no training in poetry—or in any type of writing, for that matter—but now I was blessed with sufficient time, seclusion, peace, and quiet to express my innermost feelings. Although the poems that I began to write were simple in style, they brought a ready response from the reading public; and when they were read over the air from time to time, I felt abundantly repaid for my effort. Many people wrote asking whether I had published a book; others came to my cabin seeking me. To reward these kind people somewhat for their interest I had a collection of poems printed on cards for bookmarks. On each card there was one poem, and above the verse a water-color sketch of a desert scene. Making those bookmarks filled many odd moments, as I gave away several thousand of them.

Whenever an errand took Doleta and me to Twentynine Palms, we would drop by to see Michael Brady. The picture of the Dutch Boy Painter which adorns the cans of a prominent brand of paint is that Michael when he was about eight years old. At the time of our meeting he had come from

New York to Twentynine Palms in the hope of improving his health. Many older readers have enjoyed following the "Famous Funnies" comic strip, which he syndicated for national and international papers. (Actually Michael was not Dutch but a staunch Irish Catholic.) Suffering much from a bad heart and an asthmatic condition, he found it difficult to keep at his work; however, work seemed necessary, as he had himself and his three school-age children to support.

At times he asked me to read his script to get my reaction—was it or was it not funny? How I ever avoided telling him that I was not familiar with the characters that lived in his pictures, I do not know. Since I could not let him down, I always told him, and I am sure it was true that they were really mirth-provoking.

Since my column in *Desert Trail* had never had an illustration, it was Michael who made the pen-and-ink sketch of our cabin which the editor used for a cut at the top of the article. I thought it clever the way he depicted the smoke wreaths coming from the fireplace chimney to spell the caption, "Lowly Philosophy."

To take advantage of any extra time that I might have had, I enrolled in a correspondence course in metaphysics. This project further necessitated my learning how to type. When Edward brought up the new typewriter, Adelaide came with him. I had insisted that the girls take typing in school; and later they were gratified to find it very convenient in their work. Now here was Adelaide with a book of rules and exercises; she insisted that I begin, not with the hunt-and-peck method, but with the correct touch system. Having given me my first two lessons, she put me on my own resources. At times I have regretted rearing the children to do their work so meticulously; as they grow older they expect the same standard from me, and the shoe does not always fit so well on the other foot!



(In the city) I'm surrounded by comforts and luxuries plenty; my time is all taken, I find; I'm busy with phone calls, solicitors, tradesmen, and numerous errands to mind! The darkness comes on, but it takes its toll, for the gay crowds have only begun; the radio blares and the auto declares the young folk are out for some fun. . . .

But now something happens; I can not define it—a vagueness, a longing, it seems—a Something that's bigger and better within me—a soft crying need of my dreams; an urge to be free in body and soul—the call of the primitive races; at last I must own that nothing atones for the joy of the great open spaces. . . .

Since I've diagnosed the case, there is no time to waste; I'm sure I want never to leave her, for I have, I've found out, without any doubt, a case of the old DESERT FEVER!

#### *Night and Morn*

While I was away from the valley for several weeks, I missed, more than anything else, the early morning sunshine streaming in at my cabin windows. And, after the day was gone, the almost soundless peace of the night. . . . So many of our blessings we take for granted and, until we are deprived of them, do not realize how much they mean to us.

Great Spirit Father, the early morn breaks bright and clear; and as the sun, Thy presence dear, shines down upon Thy waiting child; keep me like the morn—calm and mild. Night falls so softly o'er the land; still in the night I need Thy hand. I need Thee, God, both morn and night; keep me, Thy child, within Thy sight!

#### *Cherish Good Memories*

Lately the air in my cabin is permeated with the fragrance of white honeysuckle blossoms. I'm partial to this lovely vine; it is one of the few things that I have carried

## Chapter 24

### AT THE CROSSROADS

Perhaps there were unconscious reasons for crowding so much work into my days; perhaps I was trying to leave no time for looking backward. There were nights that still tempted me strongly to give up the progress that I had made towards better health and return to my family. In fact, I did try it many times, but after a few days spent in the city I knew that I could never again, physically or mentally, fit into that confining pattern. I did not need to justify my staying on here—to me that was right; but in doing so, I wanted to plan my days to make each one worthwhile—worthwhile in as wide a scope as possible until Edward could retire and come to live in our desert home. Already he was beginning to count on that!

If I share now with the reader some of the "Lowly Philosophy" columns that I wrote during that period, they will portray, I believe, my wavering decisions about returning to the city and, on the other hand, the spirit of the desert which so strongly held me here.

#### *Desert Fever*

I'm packing my grips; I'm closing my doors; I'm leaving this desert behind: the days are too lonely, night time too still; my speed slows down, so I find. Why tarry here longer, since health I've regained? Why linger amid the vast space? I'll hie to the city; I'll join in the din; I'll resume my former mad pace.



over from my past life. When I first brought it to the desert, I despaired of raising it, for the goats shared my fondness for that bit of green twig. Soon I discovered that if I wanted it to grow and bloom, I would have to protect it. A sturdy fence was the solution to that problem.

There are some things from the past that I would not want to carry over: those days when the poison vine of fear and lack draped itself over the threshold of the little home; and those nights when the pestilent creeper of sickness and anxiety clung wantonly to each unguarded support. Perhaps, in my unawareness, I nurtured those vines; perhaps my faith in their awesome power was greater than my faith in God's protecting goodness.

But now the white honeysuckle vine outside my cabin window fills my heart with gladness. It is both a symbol and a challenge! It is a symbol of lovely memories that I can, if I will, carry over from time to time and from place to place. And it is a challenge; for if I cherish and wisely protect those memories, guarding them tenderly, they will bloom again without fail—bloom though I dwell in a buzzing city or along a desert trail

#### *My Friend Comes Nightly*

Outside my cabin the night has settled deep and black, but as I sit in front of the log fire I enjoy the presence of the blaze as though it were a human friend—glowing, frank, and unpretentious! This friend's innermost thoughts can be read, for there is neither fraud nor concealment there. And, lifelike, it displays emotion and feeling; for, see, the blaze flares high, rich and festive in its orange-red robe!

Time passes and the flame no longer acts wildly, for its dancing mood is over. Now it settles down, calm and composed, while twinkling little lights, in various shades of blue, dart here and there, timid and decorous. Still glowing, the log softly falls apart, leaving the residue of a once flamboyant life.

I'll be sorry when the nights are no longer cold enough to invite my friend, the Glowing Fire. Each night during the long winter I have enjoyed its companionship and sprightly dances. And then at prayer time my mood, like that of the flame, settles down in silent acquiescence and I ask the Great One that I may live a similar life—frank, glowing, and unpretentious!

#### *Nature Has Charms*

It is not often that I roam or care to leave my cabin home; yet now and then my roving strain will lure me to move on again—move on and on; but soon I find the hectic life is not my kind. I do not like the world's mad pace; it seems to be a living race of going, getting, noise, and strife; I much prefer the simple life.

My city neighbors say to me they do not see how it can be that in a cabin I can stay in a lonely desert far away. But I am sure they do not know how very homesick I can grow for space and stillness, calm and rest—nature's charms that I love best. Nor can they realize there's a part of me not civilized. I need the sun, the space, the sage, and sand; it's the place for me—I am part of this land!

I love to watch the break of dawn and listen to the wild birds' song; and, as I go up the winding trail, watch the leaping jack and the cottontail. And when at last the day grows late, a dove calls softly to her mate; then in the stillness I can hear the coyote's wail and the quail quite near. When the moon and the stars come out to play, I join in the game; it's part of my day!

#### *The Moon, an Artist*

I saw you, moon, come creeping in; it was two o'clock or more. I watched you use the silver paint, making patterns on the floor. Often, when you come so late, you find me fast



asleep; why can't you be a friendly moon and earlier hours keep?

But I will love you when you come—quite full—or half—or thin—and watch for silver paintings rare when you your course begin!

### *We Are Both Free, You Know*

This is a story about a woodpecker—or perhaps I should say *two* woodpeckers. For several months this lively, colorful pair have worked fast and furious on the seedpods which now hang in clusters on the Joshua tree by my cabin. How early in the morning this ambitious pair start to work, I do not know; but about six o'clock, one of them flies over to the porch and begins a rapid rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat-tat on the bark of one of the supporting pillars. It sounds exactly as if someone had slipped up quietly and given a warning, excited rap on my bedroom door.

After he has awakened me, this sly trespasser goes back to his pod-picking job and, as far as he is concerned, seems to forget the incident. But not I. Each morning I am startled, and each morning I feel like wringing that disturber's neck. It must be that he resents the fact that my habits in life do not conform to his energetic program; he seems to want to run his show and, apparently, mine also.

Now, little bird-neighbor, I like you and want very much that we should be friends. I admire your quaintly striped garb and your little red hat. I respect your ambitious habits and am not too concerned with your monotonous rat-a-tat-tat. But upon each other we surely have no claim; so you regulate your affairs, please, and I'll do the same!

### *The Door to the Mind\**

Our secret thoughts are vagrant things;  
They stay a moment, then, with myriad wings,  
Escape unnoticed, and fly away;  
But back they come another day.

And these thoughts, true to the old formula, attract like helpers from their kith and kin and bring them back—often to our chagrin. Since our thoughts are about the only things over which we have control, we should make of them an engrossing game, with the privilege of holding to, or eliminating, the same.

I am sorry that I did not learn this years ago. It would have meant much to me and to those with whom I came in contact. As I look back over the past I can see that my well-intended efforts were often of little value, because I nullified them with negative thinking. I have since learned that my thoughts not only control my measure of happiness today, but they seem to be the doorkeeper to my subjective mind and thereby control my physical condition.

Everyone is seeking happiness—happiness not only for himself but enough to share with his neighbor. This is his privilege and duty. But happiness comes from a disciplined mind; it requires sincerity of purpose and will power, and, like any other game, it must be played consistently and continually to keep in good form.

Years ago, the wise man Solomon urged his followers to "keep the heart [thoughts] with all diligence, for out of it are the issues [manifestations] of life." Can any man, today, speak wiser words?

\* "The Door to the Mind" and "A Candle Versus a Spotlight" first appeared in *Terminal Island Topics*, the Federal Prison magazine.  
J. L. P.





*About  
the  
Author*

Born near Newton, Kansas, to Joshua and Adelaide LeMert, both of whom had Mohawk Indian blood, June LeMert attended schools there. After her marriage to Edward Seymour Paxton, she lived in Newton, Chanute, and Wichita, until his business took him to Los Angeles. When ill-health dictated that she seek the high altitude and dry climate of the Mojave, she went there, expecting to remain for a year. She has never left the desert, and her husband, daughters, and friends came to love it as much as she.

In the seclusion of her desert home Mrs. Paxton began to write stories and poems inspired by the new, enchanting environment in which she found herself. Over the years her writings have appeared in *Desert Trail*, *Desert* magazine, *Ghost Town News*, *Desert Spotlight*, the *Banning Live Wire*, and elsewhere, and a philosophy column appeared in the *Joshua Journal*, later called the *Desert Journal*. For seven years she wrote the special poem for the Easter Sunrise Service held at the Oasis of Mara at Twentynine Palms. She is also author of a book of poems, *Desert Peace*.



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