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An Inspired Lady

By Mary Elaine Phillips

Photographs by Richard Ramirez



Marjorie Skeen

In the warp and woof of the tapestry that is Western Oklahoma, some of the brightest threads have been woven by Marjorie Brannon Skeen.

Born in Mt. Park, Oklahoma, Marjorie began her schooling in a traditional one-room school in the community of Shiloah. The Mullins Consolidated School came next when Marjorie's parents, George B. Brannon and Vera Sanford Brannon, sent her to the new school near Mt. Park, at the age of nine. It was there her creative talents had their first stirrings.

Marjorie was in fourth grade when she wrote her first poem. Her teacher, Miss Jennie Bills, assigned this creative task. Marjorie wrote on the subject of an experience of observing butterflies. Her theme was that of seeing a yellow butterfly one day and a black one the next. There were yellow spots on the black butterfly's wings, so she presumed it had fallen into black ink, she recalls.

When she advanced to high school in Carnegie, Marjorie began drawing so much in her textbooks that they became eagerly sought after by other students for the illustrations in the margins. Marjorie admits that she spent considerable time drawing but managed through the years to make the school's honor rolls.

On her graduation from Carnegie High in 1936, she entered Southwestern State College in Weatherford, forty miles from Carnegie. Being an energetic and very creative person, she immersed herself in campus life. She wrote a humor column called "Strokes from a Sagebrush" for the student newspaper.

She recalls two quotations from her column--"Professors should know that big oaks from little acorns grow and not be too discouraged with little nuts!" and "College girls who use cold cream at breakfast use vanishing cream at class time."

Those in authority must have recalled, at this time, the Biblical admonition "A merry heart doeth good like a medicine," as Marjorie was asked to serve on the campus Morale Committee.

Remembering with fondness professors at Southwestern who influenced her, Marjorie recalls her talented art teacher, Miss Myrle Kelly, who was very helpful and understanding.

Later, Richard Goetz of Oklahoma City guided her in polishing her skills as an artist and teacher. His teaching was a major influence in her life.

During her Southwestern years, Marjorie studied creative writing with Mrs. Edna Muldrow, after which Miss Elsie Shoemaker taught her journalism skills. She admits that all her instructors were great and positive influences on her life. Miss Shoemaker once left a note in her box that read, "Marjorie, you would make an A-1 reporter; all you need is a little self-inflicted discipline."

At a Mother's Day assembly, President Walter Isle had one of Marjorie's

poems read since she was too timid to read it herself.

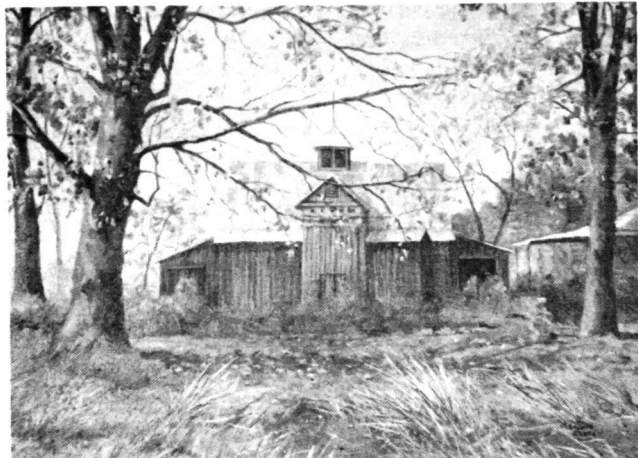
The appreciation shown for her poem by the audience gave her a special impetus to create more. She was grateful for their understanding of her feelings about life.

Marjorie never attempted in writing or painting to emulate anyone. Instead, she created from a need as a heart beats for a body to survive.

Following her college years in Weatherford, in 1939 Marjorie married J. B. Skeen, a resident of Carnegie. With Americans still in the throes of the Great Depression and John Steinbeck's GRAPES OF WRATH just off the press, the brave couple set forth to live on his one-dollar-a-day salary as a skilled mechanic.

The newlyweds rented a two-bedroom house in Carnegie for twelve dollars a month. The house was only partially furnished, providing Marjorie a good excuse to haunt local used-furniture stores for gems to give their love nest a "Skeen Decorator's" touch.

Marjorie recalls with fondness their first pieces of antique furniture: "When I found a piece of furniture I could afford, I would buy it and strip it down to its natural state. Then I hand rubbed each piece lovingly. I love the



"Arkansas Aristocrat"

soft glow of natural wood. Its patina fascinates me. Desks are my weakness. We have seven in our house now."

Employment for women outside the home in 1940 was mostly nonexistent. But Marjorie was energetic, and she began teaching. Her first pupil was Dorothy Queen Ivins. She wanted so much to take art lessons that Marjorie let her dust the furniture to pay the twenty-five cents a lesson. Soon Marjorie acquired another art student, Robert Mize, a grade-school student, whose grandmother paid for his lessons. Robert had health problems; therefore, he was unable to participate in strenuous activities with his peers. Marjorie enjoyed teaching her young students.

Eventually, students from as far away as Ardmore and more than a dozen other towns, came to Carnegie for her expert instruction.

Marjorie said, "When my reputation as an art instructor gained more recognition, I had as many as twenty-four students in my classes at one time."

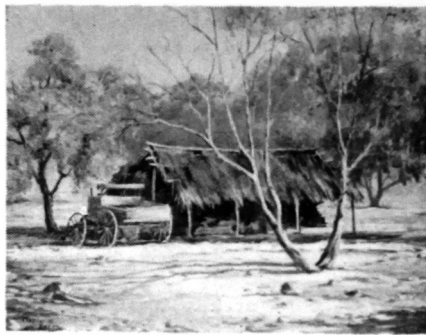
During those years, the Skeens had children growing up. Kent was born in 1941. Later came Gary Jon, Toni Danielle, and Connie Jill to care for.

The children grew to have creative talents in woodworking, mechanical drawing, and needlework--but only as hobbies. They learned to appreciate their mother's fondness for antiques and their restoration. They often took note of her developing talents and reputation in the arts. This helped them to appreciate and develop a discriminating eye for art and writing.

Before long, J. B. acquired his own garage, which afforded them more income. Marjorie continued to collect antiques of several varieties. Eventually, she had more than enough to furnish their home, so she converted the carport to a shop to house her antiques and art-supply business.

Her husband, with his wry sense of humor still intact from Marjorie's affliction of "collectivitis," once said, "I never know when I get home whether I will find the same furniture or not. Marjorie is a good salesman!"

As early as her high-school days, Marjorie was an achiever in writing. In the 1930's, the OKLAHOMAN and TIMES newspaper editor was brave enough to publish poetry. There was a section titled "Today's Best Poem." Marjorie's poems were chosen five out of six times.



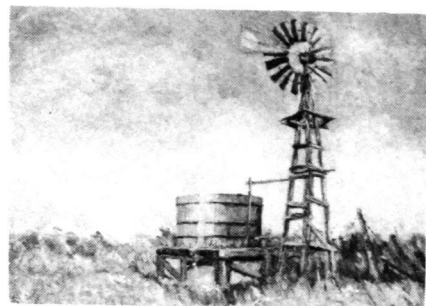
"The Green Wagon"

"I don't know whether anyone in the family was particularly impressed, but it was a great boost to my morale and definitely encouragement enough to keep me trying," Marjorie said.

Since that modest beginning, this artist, writer, teacher, businesswoman, wife, and mother combination has earned more honors than can be enumerated here. To name only a few is permissible. A contest sponsored by World of Poetry of Sacramento, California, resulted in Marjorie's winning a silver award for a poem titled "Nuclear Russian Roulette." An awards banquet was scheduled in the Orlando World Center of Florida, where Vincent Price was to read her poem and present the award.

Marjorie recalled, "I was not financially able and entirely too timid to attend the ceremonies, so I sent my regrets." Later, she won a Fifth Place award for a poem titled "An Old Love Calls" sponsored by the same publication.

She confesses that a pat on the head on her own home turf is really more satisfying. This reward she has also received. Because of her energetic community efforts for things cultural in Carnegie, the first Arts and Crafts Show was held in 1981. It is now an annual event.



"Mill by the Sea"

Carnegie residents, past and present students of Marjorie Brannon Skeen's, with the cooperation of the Carnegie Chamber of Commerce, presented Marjorie with a plaque inscribed "For thirty-three years of service to the Carnegie community."

Marjorie is a charter member of the Oklahoma Museum of Art, which was organized in 1957 in Oklahoma City with thirty-seven members. This helped take the arts out into a broader area of our state. Her first exhibit in Oklahoma City was a watercolor titled "On the Road to Gotebo," depicting a duck in a barnyard after a spring shower.

This artist has won many First, Second, Third, and Honorable Mention awards as well as numerous purchase awards in Oklahoma and elsewhere. She has had over thirty one-man shows. Her paintings hang in public buildings and in private collections throughout many states.



"Arkansas Aristocrat #2"

She is listed in WHO'S WHO IN INTERNATIONAL POETRY with works in national publications, anthologies, and state publications. She has won the Zoe Tilghman Memorial Award; the Donor's Award; the Jennie Harris Oliver Award twice; and numerous other awards through the Poetry Society of Oklahoma.

She credits good teachers with whom she has studied, self-discipline, and a firm belief that God helps her in all things for her success.

Marjorie admits to some "warts" on her character. For example, she confesses, "I'm not a very well-organized person. The good Lord just put so much feeling into me that it has to come out. When I become inspired, I work fast. I am impatient with reworking, so I do little after the first draft is

out of my system. It is like abstaining from food when on a diet; I am famished, and I gorge on painting or writing. This makes up for periods when I cannot pick up brush or pen.

"I would like to say this habit doesn't give me a guilty conscience as I ignore my housework, but eventually I cannot produce because it enslaves me. I do not maintain a work schedule. I work when the SPELL is on!"

She thought when the children had left for "lives of their own," she would have more time, but not so; she realizes that with time she has lost some stamina. It takes her longer to do less. Her husband, for the most part, is wheelchair-bound. He is her constant companion in her home studio where she works at an antique easel. Her set of art brushes stands in an heirloom pitcher on an antique table.

In retrospect, Marjorie is proud of her students in art and of their accomplishments. Her first student, Dorothy Queen Ivins, then a high-school student, has now distinguished herself in many fields of art. She won awards in fashion illustration in the Oklahoma City Art Directors' Club. Later, she placed third in the 1986 international competition of Art Instruction Schools

of Minneapolis. This honor was followed by her becoming the Director of "The Fashion Group," a group of executive women in the fashion industry, of Oklahoma City, for two years. She attended their meetings in New York and Paris. Dorothy has owned her own advertising studio in Oklahoma City since 1964.

Even though Dorothy studied at Oklahoma City University and had instruction in portrait painting from Laverne Walker, she says of her early association with Marjorie, her first teacher, "I feel that Marjorie sowed the seeds of creativity in my fertile brain, and I went on to water and harvest my artistic crop. My time under her instruction will always be one of my fondest memories."

At the request and insistence of her former students, Marjorie has had a very informative book on her teaching techniques published. The Preface to the book reads in part:

"It is at the insistence of my students that I am compiling these notes. They are merely pen point tips, little buds of information and inspiration, imparted to them over more than thirty years of teaching.

"My hopes are that these tiny buds

will blossom into full flower, and painting suggestions from these will become one of life's best arranged bouquets, gathered from my garden of thoughts on color, composition, inspiration, texture, originality, and all the components that make a work of art."

In the final weaving of her life's tapestry, Marjorie Brannon Skeen perhaps sums up her life in this, her latest poem.

INVENTORY

In my search
For talents and careers
I've tried a great number:
Poet, artist
Antique lady,
Museum curator
Teacher,
Lover, wife
Mother, and
Grandmother;
Now here I sit
With my magnifying
Glass,
No longer trying
To find myself,
But wondering
Where I went. ■

MARY ELAINE PHILLIPS, who is both a writer and an artist, lives in Durant.



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