Postcards from Mecca

You probably know about Thelma and Louise, but have you heard of Lula and Susie? In 1929, Lula traveled from her home in Chattanooga, Tennessee to the Californian desert. She was glad to get away from the restrictions placed on southern women and hoped the desert air might aid her health. She stayed with family and helped her cousin Susie in the post office.

Where Lula could be reserved, Susie always had a cheerful smile. She loved the outdoors. Even childhood polio, which left her with a leg brace, couldn’t keep her from exuberant exploration. In 1916, when Susie was 16 years old, her family moved from Los Angeles to just south of Mecca at the east end of the Coachella Valley. With her father’s support, she started taking their Model T out for her explorations, capturing her discoveries on film. Ten years later, she beat out male contenders for the Mecca postmaster position. Back then Mecca was a supply stop for prospectors and desert rats. Everyone needed to collect their mail, making the post office one of the most popular places in town.

Together Susie and Lula set out for adventure. They traveled by Model T, burro, and foot into the Chuckwalla Mountains and by the shores of the newly formed Salton Sea which was created when an irrigation canal flowing from the Colorado River to the Imperial Valley was breached. They camped out at a cabin in Corn Springs, an oasis with palm trees and nearly 600 petroglyphs carved into rock. They took pictures for their own pleasure which they turned into postcards and sold at the post office.

While other photographers focused purely on the landscape in their postcards, Susie and Lula’s images showcased the hard-to-get-to, off-the-beaten-road places. They also captured the local people of the area. They photographed gold seekers and cowboys, and gained access to public works projects and took pictures of the laborers employed there.

Eventually, Lula and Susie each married and went their separate ways. After Susie passed in 1988, her estate, including a cache of postcards and photographs, was handed to a county administrator who tossed everything into the trash. Ron May, an archaeologist and historian, working in the same building as the administrator, was notified and spent the afternoon digging through the dumpster, trying to save the collection.

Today these postcards and images are a lasting legacy of the desert that runs along Interstate 10. Even today, many people, maybe even you, have driven through without much thought to the surroundings. When the Museum is able to reopen, you can explore the desert with Susie and Lula through our latest exhibition from Exhibit Envoy, Postcards from Mecca, from early May through August 22.

We’ll also augment the show with a sampling of A.O. Carpenter images from the Museum’s collections. Unlike Susie and Lula, A.O., who was Grace Hudson’s father, traveled by himself throughout Mendocino County, taking people’s portraits to earn an income. But just like Susie and Lula, he captured the landscapes, industries, and people, preserving a record of these places that we can enjoy and learn from today.

— Alyssa Boge, Curator
Eyeing Our Reopening

With vaccines now rolling out and COVID metrics in Mendocino County trending in a good direction, there is a real possibility that the Museum may be able to reopen as we enter springtime. The initial opening will come with limitations, such as no more than 25% of normal visitor capacity. We’ll gladly take that as a win. With reopening in mind, we’ll begin installing the traveling exhibition Postcards from Mecca (discussed on page 1 of this Sunletter) at the end of April. For the past few months, we’ve also been in the process of organizing two exhibitions of our own. The first of these, scheduled for a September opening, will commemorate the 30th anniversary of An Association of 3: Liden, Magruder & Knight, which was the first Museum exhibition not about Grace Hudson or the Carpenter family. The show will reflect on each of these three artists’ careers, and will include new work by Tom Liden and Mac Magruder. Wayne Knight, as many of you know, sadly passed away in 2009, during the H1N1 swine flu epidemic. Just as any business that is currently receiving customers, when the Museum opens again, we will abide by COVID safety protocols. I was not at all surprised when I learned of a recent study by the Berlin Institute of Technology evaluating risk factors of different indoor activities. Museums at 30% capacity and with visitors wearing masks were rated the safest place one could be in public, topping public transportation, supermarkets, restaurants, sporting events, multi-person offices, and secondary schools. Which is all to say that you should feel pretty safe in returning to the Grace Hudson Museum.

Finally, just a word about upcoming Museum programs. We’ve only listed three events on page 4, but there are many others we are currently working on. This includes one associated with our current online exhibition, Yosemite People, which we are hosting through April 11, and others tied to Postcards from Mecca. Please, please, please visit our website and social media pages frequently to learn about new virtual and in-person programs as they are confirmed. And make sure we have your email address so we can include you in e-blasts about new programs and activities.

— David Burton, Director
Minding the Shop

Dear Friends,

Community support for the Museum and Sun House in 2020 and the first months of 2021 has been truly phenomenal, and we recognize and are grateful to those who have made donations, renewed their memberships, and become new members since COVID forced our closure. The contributor list in this issue of the Sunletter truly warms our hearts.

I know some of you have been eager for news about the Gift Shop that has remained closed along with the Museum. When we do reopen, Marian Scalmanini, our excellent manager of many years, will not be returning. Through these many months of uncertainty—almost a year now—we could not ask her to wait indefinitely. Marian will be missed, and we thank her profusely for her many years of service to the Shop, Museum, and Guild.

The Guild's Gift Shop Committee has already begun re-imagining the role a new manager, and will be ready to start a search as we get closer to knowing exactly when the Museum and Shop will be able to open again. We'll also be contacting the Shop's dedicated and indispensable volunteer staff, in the hopes that many will be able and want to return. Over the next few months, the Committee will be busy replenishing our stock of customer favorites, as well as books and gifts that align with the mission and purpose of the Museum and aren't commonly available from other local merchants. Book orders, now and always, can be placed through the Gift Shop page on the Museum website.

One additional change must be noted. Long-time Sun House Guild Board Member Karen Moon has retired. We will all miss her expertise and positive energy, and her pragmatic approach to the many events and projects she has taken on over the years. Thank you, Karen, so very much! We now look ahead, excited about finding new ways of supporting the activities of the Museum, both virtual and onsite. — Toni Wheeler, Sun House Guild President

Heartfelt Thanks to the Following Donors

Suzanne Abel, in honor of Sherrie Smith-Ferri
Lynda & Don Coursey, Endowment
Colleen & Rick Henderson, Wild Gardens paver
William Stewart, in honor of Sherrie Smith-Ferri
Nelson & Jane Weller, Director's Discretionary Fund
Bruce & Cassandra Andich
Deanna Apfel
Susan Baird Kanaan
Judi Berdis
Bob Brewer
Linda Corwin Burris
Donna Callander
Bonnie & Jared Carter
Scott Claypool
Sharon Collins
Elizabeth Crook
Marguerite McCown Crown
Cuples Construction
Vergilia Paasche Dakin
Diane Daubeneck
Lee Parker
Neil & Andrea Davis
Michael Dickey
Dennis & Christine Dill
Dobie Edmunds & Thomas King
Sandra Erickson & Danielle Elins
Nancy Ferreira
Laura Fogg
Suzan Fcon
Lisa Frost
Dennis & Susan Fujita
George & Robyn Gibbs
Katherine Gibbs Gengoux
Matia Gilarin
Kathleen Gordon-Burke
Mary Gustafson
Arlene Hartin
Laurence & Patricia Hartley
Howie Hawkes & Mary Ann Landis
Patti Hendricks
Charles Hochberg
Charlene Holbrook
Carol Ann Hulsmann
Douglas & Marilyn Johnson
Joyce Jordan
Charles Kennard
Janet King
Roy Krausen
Betty Lacy
Lucienne Lanson
Debbie Lucchesi-Harrison
Wanda & Charles Mannon
Watters Martin
Nancy Messinger
Leah Middleton
John & Karen Moon
Ann Moorman & Dean Arnold
Lani Nagy
David Nelson & Judith Fuente
June Oster
jeff preston
Charlotte & David Rapport
Carol Rector
Schuyler Richardson
Patricia Ris
Robert & LaRee Rogers
Kathleen Scavone
Jim Schee
Marianne Schonfisch
Sharon Shapiro
Susan Sparrow
William Stewart
Marge Thatcher
Cheryl Thompson
Kelly Thorn
Gail & Ronald Unzelman
Leona Walden
Josephine Ward Wiley
Nelson & Jane Weller
Ilse Winters
Dennis & Madelyn Yeo

New Supporter Memberships

Kristana Arp

New Guild Memberships

Sophia Habl Mitchell
Kyle Kirkley
Rebecca Simons
Upcoming Programs

Additional information on these and other Museum programs can be found on the Museum’s web site at gracehudsonmuseum.org.

Saturday, March 20, 10:00 a.m.–3:00 p.m. ♦ Outdoor in person
Wild Gardens in Springtime
See what’s in bloom in the Wild Gardens! Learn from our knowledgeable native plant gardeners, experience miner’s lettuce, and discover Native American tools and toys with docent Little Bear. Please note: masks must be worn, social distancing maintained, and visitation limited to 45 people at a time.

Thursday, March 25, 6:00 p.m.–7:00 p.m. ♦ Virtual program
Carleton Watkins, Picturing Yosemite
Join us for a virtual illustrated presentation by writer, historian, and art critic Tyler Green, as he discusses seminal 19th century photographer Carleton Watkins and his images of Yosemite. Green authored the award-winning book, Carleton Watkins: Making the West American. Access the virtual program link by going to the home page of the Museum’s website and locating the program announcement.

Thursday, April 22, 3:00 p.m.–4:00 p.m. ♦ Virtual program
Inside the Hart Gallery: The Art of Grace Hudson
Former Grace Hudson Museum curator Karen Holmes returns to lead a virtual tour of Grace Hudson’s famous oil paintings and works in other media. Some were added to the Hart Gallery shortly before COVID restrictions began. Access the virtual program link by going to the home page of the Museum’s website and locating the program announcement.