



COURTESY WILMETH ARCHIVES

Leather & Lace

Mary Jane, Marie, Sabre, and Minnie and a corner of Gila River history. By Stephen L. Wilmeth

“Most men are imbeciles when it comes to women. The notion that you can keep an entire gender down, [and] subservient is patently ridiculous.”—Theodore Roosevelt

So, the stage was set to either defend or object to the statement of a then future president. Generalities withstanding, the only recourse is to consider those women of the past who made such an impact on everyday life. They were the societal framework that kept everything together and, in this case, matrons of the American West, and more specifically, ladies of the Gila Valley of Grant County, N.M. Too few of them will ever be remembered in print and as the art of verbal history is eliminated from our society the losses of insight surrounding that epoch of history will be permanent. Each was special.

Marie Jane Woodrow

Mary Jane was the first and perhaps only true spiritual mentor of one little boy’s life. She was patient; she was a simplistic communicator of such stature that even a three-year-old could understand her; and, in the eyes of that little boy, she was the prettiest lady ever. Her mark was permanent. It is amazing that all these years later her memory returns from time to time to be associated with judgment decisions.

Like all the ladies in this article, she is gone now. She and husband Otho were coming home from a roping, and she was killed in a car accident. She was a darling to all, and in that regard set a stage and occupies a special corner of Gila River history...a place that others joined.

Marie (Brock) McCauley

The lasting image of Marie is a continuum of being booted and spurred.



COURTESY WOODROW FAMILY ARCHIVES

ABOVE: Mary Jane Woodrow was a darling to all. Her mark was permanent. Mary Jane’s family still carries on the tradition and lives on the ranch north of Cliff just south of the mouth of Mogollon Creek. BELOW: Marie McCauley is best remembered as being booted and spurred. Her legacy, though, wasn’t just being horseback. Flowers and trees she planted at remote locations on the ranch southwest of Cliff remain in her memory to this day.



COURTESY MCCAULEY FAMILY ARCHIVES

She was raised at the Brock place down at Gold Gulch and Thompson Canyon. She grew up horseback. There is a story about when she met her future husband, Tom McCauley. He was from the Gila River north from the Brocks, where his folks migrated from Arkansas in 1900. He was present one day when Marie was at the corral fiddling with a colt. Easing up to the fence where he could get a better vantage point, he watched her.

There is no evidence he said much to her until she got to the point of mounting the colt, which promptly broke in half and pitched around the corral. She nearly had him ridden when he threw her off. She hit the ground hard and sat there in the dust and the dirt trying to regain her senses and get some air. Tom was in the corral helping her up and offering his opinion as to why she was thrown. He said, “Let me ride the little horse and show you how.”

He got him caught, pulled the cinch, pulled his head around and stepped on. The horse stood there, likely to the point Tom would have suggested his presence alone had subdued the bronc. But then the colt exploded around the corral bucking while Tom tried to get his form matched with his demeanor. He didn’t quite make the circle Marie had ridden when he, too, was bucked off hard.

As he sat there in the dust and the dirt trying to get his senses, Marie got to him and eventually helped him to his feet. She suggested he go sit in the shade while she showed him how to ride the horse. He did and she did, too. She had the horse trotting around the corral when she finally pulled him up and stepped off. By then Tom had his hat tipped back and was probably thinking that girl was quite a cowboy! The fact is she was. She was a superb rancher too. They would get married, put together a big swath of country, and

remain inseparable partners for over 60 years.

Her influence was clearly abundant. For example, at their remote Ash Creek camp there were fruit trees, shrubs, and flowers. That was very “uncowboylike.” Marie watered whenever she was there, packing heavy buckets to everything. She packed fish to similarly remote tanks just for her satisfaction (on one of those forays, clanking panniers spooked her horse and she was hurt badly in the ensuing wreck). Her grandsons could tell you if she actually fished, but most folks never had a clue she would find pleasure in fishing. She worked every day.

Her legacy is one of starting with a little and growing it into a reputable ranch. She and Tom probably never took a vacation. Each day began before sunrise. Through it all, that big smile, a high-pitched crackling voice (and laugh), chaps, boots, spurs, and an old crumpled brown felt hat contributed to her memories.

She was a force of constant motion and, as such, set a stage and occupies a corner of Gila River history...a place that others joined.

Sabre (Smith) Wilmeth

Sabre entered the realm of her eventual husband, Albert, after being assessed “the prettiest girl he’d ever seen.” She was born in Missouri in 1900 and came to New Mexico in 1916 as the opening salvos of WWII were reaching American lives. She was not a cowgirl, but she lived her entire adult life making cowboy life bearable and meaningful. She was the consummate ranch wife, stretching budgets, creating elegance where rocks, dirt, and sun dominated, and spreading grace into every corner of her expansive family.

Her life had few trinkets. The things she indulged in were, in part, distant contact and memories with her years before New Mexico. She loved to fish, although she got to go far too few times. She indulged in the art of raising African violets. She read every book that came to her post office box in Cliff from *Reader’s Digest*. She never learned to drive (having orchestrated a minor head-on collision at the steel bridge above Riverside attempting to learn). She never wore jeans, and she obsessed with care of her skin and those around her in battling harsh New Mexico sunlight. She cheated only in playing cards!

Like her counterparts herein, she was a tireless worker. In succeeding generations, that was not always understood. However, unlike her contemporaries, few people now understand the difficulty of living through



MCKINLEY ARTWORK - HANGING TREE GRAPHICS

Sabre Wilmeth was never a cowgirl, but she was a wonderful ranch wife. Keeping her family together was her lasting goal. Her three offspring may well have been the first of all Cliff siblings to graduate from college.

BELOW: The women of the Gila River had influences beyond their home ranges. Here 32 head of 1,458-pound finished Hereford steers sourced from their ranches sold on the Chicago market in August 1918 for a then-record price of \$18.85 per hundredweight.

times of shortages, no services, and continuing frontier development.

Gardening was also her obsession. When she lived on the Mangus, she had two plots, one in the yard and another down at the cor-

ral where manure was the only fertilizer used. The latter held the most vivid memories of her. She would have a big bonnet on with long sleeves, stockings, and gloves. She was there in the mornings hoeing her melon patch with authority.

That hoe could be a deadly instrument too. Encountering a rattlesnake, she would wade in swinging that hoe with deadly consequences. Few people are known to laugh while killing snakes, but if there was a miss she was known to laugh at her marksmanship.

She lived for holidays—or, more specifically, family gatherings. At Christmas or Thanksgiving her house would be jam-packed with her tribe. That little board-and-batten house would burst at the seams with everybody. Kids were free to do whatever they wanted: shooting, riding horses, wading in the creek, throwing rocks...anything that seemed important at the moment was free rein. It was a kid’s paradise.

If there was a highlight above all others, it came down to three things. She kept that family together single-handedly. Unlike today’s families, she was a force to be reckoned with in making sure everybody was present and accounted for. Secondly, her three offspring were, if not the first, among the first of all upper Gila River children of that day to attend and successfully finish college. Lastly, she demonstrated to all that death should not



COURTESY WILMETH FAMILY ARCHIVES

be feared, but faced and embraced. She was absolutely in control of her emotions and her message to each of us on the last day we paraded one at a time to her deathbed to say goodbye.

She was a force of connectivity, and, as such, set the stage and occupies a corner of Gila River history...a place that others joined.

Minnie (Allison) Rice

Minnie was the truest model of leather and lace. In the Ma Rice diaries, there were few entries that described Minnie's presence without her husband, Blue. They were together in every facet of life. They were another ranch couple which started with some and grew that some into a legacy that was passed to another generation (which is being proven rarer every year).

All those more than 60 years of marriage were lived on Sacaton Mesa under the grandeur of the Mogollons. The house along the banks of Sacaton Creek was a reflection of Minnie. Stepping out the door one was engulfed in the bigness and magnificence of that setting. To an outsider, it could be harsh and intimidating. To a child of that land, though, it was home, sanctuary, and cherished. Stepping into the house was a brightness of white almost in defiance of the dirt and the rocks and the windy points of outside.

It sparkled. Illuminated only with kerosene lamps, the paint was white, the cabinets and table were white, the ironed bedding combinations were white, the handmade doilies were white, and the appliances were white. It was Minnie's adherence to an ambience of femininity that couldn't be stripped from her life because that outside was much different. It was there she was as good a cow-boy as anybody. Her frailty and her gentleness belied her ability to perform very difficult ranch tasks.

Minnie's entire outward appearance belied a ferocious spirit. She spoke so softly you had to listen intently to hear her, and yet,

when she spoke her words demanded attention. She was one of those rare people who just made you better by being in her presence. She was also one of those rarest of people who could spread kindness and yet whip you like a pup just with her words. Too many young fellows learned the hard way that it was much preferable to take a physical whipping than to have her discipline you by standing right under your nose and hurl those velvet-covered words at you.

If you were lucky enough to be in her thoughts and to receive a letter from her, it was always with that blue ink and perfect script. Her written words were as wise in counsel as her spoken ones.

She was hugely respected. There is a story of a nearest neighbor daughter who grew up to be Miss Rodeo America in the early '60s.



COURTESY RICE FAMILY ARCHIVES

Minnie Rice was the epitome of leather and lace. She was a cowgirl by choice and necessity, and a lady of dignity by nature. She just made you better when you were in her presence.

Her daddy thought she was getting a bit of a big head in all that glamor and told her at one point that if she couldn't take time and share a cup of coffee and one of those fabulous Minnie biscuits, just don't come home. That's what he thought of Minnie. And for those of us who felt her love (including that neighbor daughter), the feeling was mutual.

It was Blue, though, who shared her life, their life, to the extent

few demonstrate. Where you saw one, you'd likely see the other. Working cattle horseback together was akin to witnessing the dancing of a waltz they were reputed to love when they were courting.

Thrift was always their byline. Mention was made one day of them splurging after selling a load of calves. They bought a case of Cokes!

She was an angel and as such, set the stage and occupies a corner of Gila River history...a place that others once joined. ■

Stephen L. Wilmeth is a rancher from southern New Mexico. "These women and those like them were the true moral ambassadors of the 20th century. They are missed, and what they did for all of society is seldom being duplicated."