"A Memorable Creation": The Life and Art of Effie Marquess Carmack

Noel A. Carmack

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq

Part of the Mormon Studies Commons, and the Religious Education Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol37/iss3/9

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in BYU Studies Quarterly by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen amatangelo@byu.edu.
“A Memorable Creation”: The Life and Art of Effie Marquess Carmack

A woman who could have surrendered to the barrages of adversity, Carmack challenged the inevitable, just kept going if the inevitable won, and created beauty in the meantime.

Noel A. Carmack

“Not that there has been anything very extraordinary or wonderful in [my life],” wrote Effie Lee Marquess Carmack, “but one thing sure, it is different from that of any other.”¹ Uncommon experiences, Effie’s modesty notwithstanding, breed uncommon people. After a happy childhood in Kentucky and conversion to the LDS Church, Effie endured a life of insecurity and change, illness, maternal anguish, and bitter grief. But aided by uncommon faith and by her art, she triumphed over adversity.

The Childhood of an Artist

Effie Lee Marquess was born on September 26, 1885, in Crofton, Christian County, Kentucky, the sixth child of Boanerges “Bo” Robert Marquess and John Susan Armstrong. The family lived in a log house that “was as crude and primitive as a home could be.”² They made a difficult living from a Black Patch tobacco farm near Hopkinsville, Kentucky. Some of their farmland was worn out and some eroded. One season, a flood took “the best part” of their crop and many of their livestock and chickens.³ Another year, Bo became despondent and ill from worry about meeting the mortgage payments and other needs after a series of crop failures, and even when the cash crops were good, he often received very little for them. But Effie recounted later, “We were used to financial calamities.”⁴

In spite of her humble circumstances, Effie remembered her childhood as one in which “no one . . . could have been happier than we were.”⁵ She described the winter evenings as “never dull”:

BYU Studies 37, no. 3 (1997-98) 101
My father played the fiddle and there was always a guitar or banjo for accompaniment, as most of the family could play either of them. Our father and mother had both been excellent dancers, and dancing in their day was really an art, and they took a delight in teaching it to us. The Lancers, the Minuet, the Virginia Reel, the Mazourka, the Polka, the Schottische, the Waltz, and the intricate changes of the quadrilles.

Often Lelia or Sadie [her sisters] would read a story aloud to an attentive audience, often we would have spelling matches, or have map questions from the geography book. And drawing pictures on a big old double slate was something that never lost its charm.6

The young Effie delighted in what she called her “enchanted woodland,”7 which included a plum thicket and field of wildflowers near a lush forest of dogwoods, white oak, and hickory. The forest floor was carpeted by moss beds and sassafras.8 “Even though we were poor, as far as money was concerned, and lived in a crude log hut,” she wrote, “we were rich in a few things, such as a fervent appreciation for the beauties of nature around us. We possessed a stretch of stream that was far more entertaining, as a playground, than the most expensive of parks.”9 With imagination, she entertained herself with what was available:

[Our house] abounded in all kinds of interesting things; the quilt piece box, where I could get cloth for doll clothes; the table drawers with pencils, letters and papers; the school books, slates, and pencils; the upstairs where grandmothers old spinning wheel and flax
The litter found under an old floor—"marbles of all sizes, buttons, pennies, china doll heads, arms and legs, tiny toy cups and saucers"—so thrilled her that even in her old age she claimed, "I'll never forget how excited I was."  

To the east, between Effie's home and her uncle Elijah Armstrong's dwelling, stood the house of Marion and Ailsee Moore, her nearest neighbors. She seldom entered the Moore home, but for the rest of her life, she remembered a painting she saw there:

One thing that charmed me, above all others (in that house) was a lifesized painting of a young girl, which stood on an easel in one corner of this room. It was the first hand painted portrait I had ever seen. It must have been good work, it certainly charmed me, and when I got a chance I gazed in awe and wonder to think that anyone could make a picture look as much like life as that one did.

She learned about art informally from her father: "Sometimes father would point out pictures in the cloud formations. A long level cloud, with one upright, made a perfect ship at sea, and, if you were going to paint those thunderheads, over there, you would need to put the halo of white light on the side next to the sun, with a soft gray on the shadow side." Such treasured moments with her father encouraged Effie's interest in art. "Did you ever paint, pappy?" she asked. "(I liked to call him pappy, it seemed like a sort of a pet name.) 'No, but your Uncle Curg has, and we've
talked about it lots of times. I’ve never had the time. Your mother could paint, if she ever had the time.”

The youthful artist was never discouraged by the lack of art materials. The unavailability of materials sometimes resulted in clever alternatives to conventional artist supplies. “When I was alone,” she remembered, “and no one to play with me, I would find certain places in the banks where there were great cracks where there was beautiful, moist, bluish white clay that was wonderful for modeling. Many long happy hours I have spent making horses, dogs, heads, pitchers, whole sets of dishes, and hundreds of marbles of all sizes.” A roll of toilet paper was also converted into art material: “Aunt Fannie gave me one roll, but it was never used for the purpose for which it was intended. It was used as tracing paper, to put over pretty pictures, and trace them. It was placed on the old wall plate of the attic at home with my other treasured possessions, chalk box and trinkets, and was kept for years, a roll of my favorite pictures traced carefully.” If sketch pads and standard painting surfaces were unavailable, she would use whatever materials she could find, including cardboard boxes and the reverse side of wallpaper or wrapping paper. To make brushes, she sometimes frayed the ends of matchsticks by chewing them.

Conversion and Early Years in the LDS Church

When LDS missionaries entered the Hopkinsville area in 1897, the Marquess family was one of the first to accept their message: “Everything we heard and read fit in perfectly with Christ’s teachings.” The family’s conversion to the Church culminated many years of honoring Christian values and yearning for truth. Effie remembered that “although not contented with our homespun religion, we read the Bible and waited for a time when maybe the right religion would come along.” During a snowfall in mid-March 1898, a month after the baptism of her parents and older sisters Etta and Lelia, Effie entered the frigid waters of a nearby creek to be baptized. “The Elders brought a new way of life,” she wrote. Effie would always welcome Mormon missionaries at her hearth or table since it was they who brought the joy of the gospel message into her life.
Only a year after their baptism, “changes . . . [came] in quick succession.” Effie’s mother died of yellow fever. A month later, Effie’s sister Etta succumbed to typhoid fever. Effie’s two older brothers moved away. The family had to sell their farm. Her sister Sadie married, and her father took a new wife, a woman whom Effie addressed as “Miss Serena.” Although she grew to love Miss Serena through serving her, the relationship was not an intimate one. Increasingly, she turned to her married sisters Lelia and Sadie as confidantes and mother figures.

In 1901, the Marquess family—now reduced to Effie and her father, stepmother, and ten-year-old brother, Autie—moved to Franklin, Arizona, where they lived for a short time on the farm of Joseph Wilkins. Their stay in Arizona was pleasant, but her father’s longing for home hastened their return. He died a only a short while after the family had moved back to Kentucky.

In 1903, Effie married Henry Edgar Carmack, a capable, hard-working husband and father. Cecil, her first child, was born prematurely in 1905 after an accidental fall sent Effie into early labor. In the ensuing years, Effie bore seven more children, each experiencing physical challenges. She prayed for and nursed the children through mishaps, whooping cough, influenza, and a near drowning. Her youngest daughter, Bernice, whose physical and intellectual development was slow, required extra attention.

One incident involving Cecil particularly tested her endurance and faith. At the age of two, Cecil contracted pneumonia when the neighbor’s children took him out to play in a cold February rain. By late evening, he was feverish and short of breath. Some days later, after a considerable effort was made to clear his lungs and lower his temperature with medication, Cecil fell into a deep, unresponsive slumber. When the doctor could detect neither breathing nor a heartbeat after twenty minutes of close observation, Cecil was pronounced dead. Effie, however, refused to allow her baby’s life to slip away. Through the night and into the morning hours, she massaged her son’s cold, lifeless body with hot water and rubbing alcohol. She “longed for someone with the authority to administer to him.” Her husband, Edgar, as he was most commonly addressed, was not yet a member of the Church and could not give priesthood blessings. No elders who could administer to the baby were nearby. “Not wanting to leave a thing undone that might help,” she
later wrote, “I got a small bottle of olive oil, asked the Lord to bless and purify it, and to recognize a mother’s anointing and blessing on her child, and to bring him back to life.” In her prayer, she promised to raise her children to the best of her ability and to dedicate her life to teaching the gospel to all who would listen. During the hours she continued to work over her son, her “whole body and soul was a living, working prayer.” Just before midnight, a faint heartbeat could be heard, and shortly before dawn, Cecil became conscious and asked for something to eat. The boy regained all of his faculties, and within days, word traveled from the hills east of Crofton that the Carmack boy had risen from the dead. Friends who earlier had not responded to Effie’s attempts to teach the gospel became more interested.26

Not long after, on a “momentous day”27 in 1908, Edgar was baptized. In 1911, Edgar and Effie moved their family to the farm of Francis McDonald in Holladay, Utah. While there, Edgar found employment working for Joseph Andrus, putting up hay on Andrus’s ranch near Park City. While at home on the McDonald farm, Effie picked currants with McDonald’s seventeen-year-old son, Howard, who later became president of Brigham Young University (1945–51). After haying was done, Edgar took work in the canyon, assisting in the excavation of a waterline trench. At the end of September, when the work was finished, Edgar and some of the other men became chilled while returning home in an open truck bed during a cold rainstorm. Within a short time, he began complaining of inflammation and pain in his foot; this problem was followed by a severe case of rheumatic fever. For almost six months, Edgar lay sick and unable to work. One of his few activities during his rehabilitation came when he was sealed to Effie in the Salt Lake Temple with their children, Cecil, Violet, and infant son, Noel. When full recovery appeared less than hopeful, a recommendation that Edgar move to a lower altitude prompted them to move back to Kentucky, where he could resume his farming in a more healthful environment.28

**Struggles of a Young Mother**

But, as it turned out, conditions did not prove therapeutic. The years following their return from Utah were the darkest for
The young Carmack family. With the first three of their eight children, Effie and Henry Edgar posed for this portrait about 1912, when they lived in Utah. *Clockwise from left:* Effie, Cecil, Henry Edgar, Noel, and Violet.
Effie and her family. While Edgar was suffering from rheumatic heart disease, Effie contracted an unidentified debilitating illness that lingered through three pregnancies. Her symptoms were similar to those of consumption—coughing blood, continuous fatigue, and fever spells, all of which Effie believed were the result of a poor diet.29 During this time of illness, Effie gave birth to three more children. Two, Grace and Hazel, were born without complications, but the birth of her sixth child, Bernice, was difficult. The three girls were born in close succession, and Effie’s sickness inhibited her ability to manage day-to-day responsibilities in the home.30

Busy dealing with the demands of tobacco farming and with its fluctuating yields and returns, Edgar was unable to offer additional domestic support. He had entrusted his crop to an association of dark-fired tobacco planters but made little profit.31 By 1920, Kentucky leaf-crop prices would drop to their lowest point in ten years.32

At the doctor’s admonition, Edgar did try to alleviate Effie’s burdens by doing laundry and light housework. But with his first effort, he found that extra chores were overtaxing and hired a young woman named Lola Jones to take over. The doctor had also recommended that Effie do something enjoyable but not laborious. Edgar said she would enjoy writing or painting if she had time. “Dr. Lovell,” Effie remembered, “told him that he had better let me do it, as it would be far better to have a mother doing easy things I enjoyed than not to have any mother at all.” Thus about 1915, while Effie had help, she took up painting again. “I had done lots of little things,” she wrote. “I knew that I could paint, if only I had [the] time and the material.”33 Her friend and neighbor Bernice Allington had been a helpful art tutor while they lived in Utah, and with some help from her longtime friend Bernice Pollard Walker, she received some additional instruction in watercolor painting. “I was interested in painting, and enjoyed it, and was surprised that it was so easy for me, and I tackled hard subjects.”34 Most of these works consisted of candid watercolor sketches of her children, neighbors, aunts and uncles, one of which was awarded a red ribbon at the 1915 Christian County fair.35 With her childhood past-time regained, Effie found a sense of healing and peace of mind.
And yet, ill health, Edgar's unpredictable income, and the care of eight children (by this time, David and Harold had been added to the family) weighed heavily upon Effie. Her most painful challenge came so suddenly and so tragically it would outweigh anything she had previously faced. In the spring of 1923, just two days after Easter Sunday, her two eldest sons, Cecil and Noel, were burning saw briers and grass in the fields prior to plowing. In another part of the clearing, near an embankment, her four-year-old son, Harry (Harold), was playing stick horses in the tall sage grass with his brother, David, who was celebrating his sixth birthday. Without warning, a sudden change in wind direction sent the blaze into the grass where the two boys were playing. Before Harry could outrun the flames, they overtook him, burning through his long underwear and thick overalls. By the time Cecil and Noel responded to David's cries for help, the fire had consumed nearly all of Harry's skin. For the next few hours, until he took his final breath, Effie remained near her little boy's blackened body. This time, unlike the night of Cecil's miraculous revival, nothing Effie could do would bring back Harry's life.  

Harry's death was the most traumatic of Effie's confrontations with affliction; she was forever changed by the experience. Although she learned to adapt to the loss, she never fully recovered her emotional and physical well-being. Her intense grief triggered a number of bodily ailments, including severe facial eczema and a pain in her heart that, according to Effie, plagued her "continually." Reminded of the sufferings of Job, Effie tried to remain patient, consoling herself with scriptures. "Sometimes," she said, "I felt like I was getting more than my share, but I never felt rebellious nor did I blame the Lord for my affliction."  

In the midst of physical infirmities, Effie's ability to cope was made more difficult by daily reminders of Harry. In addition, like many bereaved parents, Effie and Edgar were unable to communicate their feelings of loss, a lack of sharing that further impaired their capacity to adjust and find comfort.  

Although Effie bore no guilt or feelings of responsibility for Harry's death, losing her role as his mortal mother seemed to haunt her in later years. The intimate relationship between mother and child became a recurring theme in Effie's painted subjects,
often appearing as the Madonna and Christ child or the familiar image of a Navajo mother with a papoose. Her *Madonna* after Roberto Feruzzi’s painting is one example of these gravitations toward images of nurturing. The supplicating expression of Feruzzi’s *Madonna* is a presage of Mary’s lamenting over her son’s death. Effie’s use of the image suggests that her feelings of maternal bereavement were near the surface and that she, like Mary, had felt the sword that would pierce through her soul (Luke 2:35).  

**Turning to Art**

Harry’s death seems to mark pivotal changes in Effie’s life. In February 1924, Effie and Edgar moved their family to Joseph City, a small Mormon settlement on the Little Colorado River in northern Arizona.  

Their first residence in Joseph City was a house tent that her brother John and son Cecil, who had both been living in the area, prepared for them before they arrived. Effie wasted no time finding her place in front of easel and canvas. Years later, she remembered that it was during this time she received a visit by a most unexpected individual:

> Mother’s Day was coming up, and someone had asked me to paint a picture of a mother for a program. I was working on it when I realized that someone was standing in the tent door [in] back of me and watching me. I looked around, and at first I was sure that I knew the fellow, his face looked so familiar. He had on a khaki suit, and stood there waiting for his companion who had gone for some milk (John had a grocery). He told me that he and I should go into business together, that he could do the writing and I could do the illustrating. Just then his companion came and they left. A few minutes later I remembered who he was, it was Zane Gray [sic]. I had seen pictures of him. They were camped out by Valley Hills, and he was getting material for a book he was writing (I found out later).  

Such approval gave her the self-confidence and optimism to continue producing works of art, unhampered by her transitory living situation. By 1927, Edgar was successfully running a dairy and delivery route between Joseph City and Winslow. Shortly thereafter, they took up permanent residence in Winslow, where Effie cultivated her talent with even greater energy. “After we had been in Arizona a long time, I went back to Kentucky, and I was astonished to see many of the water colors that I had done in the
homes of friends and kinfolks. They were about as good as the oil colors that I did later.\textsuperscript{44} When she was not teaching lessons in Sunday School, the Mutual Improvement Association, or the Relief Society, Effie was busy teaching art lessons in the evenings to the children at the local elementary school:

I would choose a subject (we took easy landscapes first) and draw it with charcoal on a big sheet of drawing paper fastened on the blackboard with masking tape. First, the horizontal line, then a quick checking: the tallest trees will come to here, our water to here; then put in the sky first, beginning at upper left hand corner; deeper blue [sic] at top, gradually growing dimmer till there was no blue where it joined the land; far off objects dim, closer objects clearer. Near objects bright colors.\textsuperscript{45}

As an integral part of her assignments, she emphasized the importance of drawing from observation: "I had them draw from nature—a small picture of a tree and rocks, or a sunset sky, or whatever they chose to do."\textsuperscript{46} As the popularity of her art lessons increased, the adult teachers began to receive instruction as well. Although she enjoyed the association with her adult peers, Effie valued even more the children's excitement and joy of learning.\textsuperscript{47}

The events surrounding Effie's artistic reawakening are consistent with those of other folk artists, most typically women, who, according to a recent study, use their art "to help overcome a stressful life experience."\textsuperscript{48} Illness, trauma, and personal loss are significant motivations for engaging in creative activity.\textsuperscript{49} Effie's art may have been, in many respects, a cathartic response to tragic events, one of her few consoling outlets for bereavement.\textsuperscript{50} Perhaps for Effie, art meant a therapeutic assurance that out of ugliness she could express beauty, out of tragedy she could express hope.

**Themes, Style, and Exhibitions**

Effie's early efforts in painting certainly fall in line with a long tradition of American folk artists. Folk art, often defined analogously with primitive, self-taught, or outsider art, is generally produced by individuals who are untrained and have had little or no familiarity with formal art theory. The most important criterion, however, is that folk art emerges out of the artist's cultural environment. It is created out of distinctive regional, ethnic, and cultural
patterns, which reveal the artist’s sense of place and personal identity. In the same sense that colloquial communication often emphasizes a distinct geographic relationship between a community and its inhabitants, folk artists are closely tied to the places or subjects represented in their art.

The underlying themes of folk life, place, and religion in Effie’s art follow those of other self-taught Cumberland artists who created personal visual statements. Effie’s early drawings and watercolors often portrayed physical surroundings, farm life, and informal impressions of family and neighbors. She illustrated her privately published work of autobiographical poetry, _Backward Glances_, with scenes of Kentucky folk life to illustrate her childhood memories of worming the tobacco, milking cows, soap-making, carding, and spinning. Otherwise, she wrote, “many things will soon be forgotten if they are not put down by someone that cherishes the memory of them.” One of these paintings, _Milking Time_ (colorplate 1), typifies the simple warmth and beauty of her early primitives. The evening sky, shrouded by clouds, the house with its warmly lit windows, and the mother and child silhouetted by the soft, glowing moonlight—all imbue the painting with the quiet intimacy Effie felt when, as a child, she walked hand in hand with her beloved mother.

An oval-shaped landscape (colorplate 2), probably painted sometime during her early years in Winslow, also exemplifies her art’s close association with the scenes of her Kentucky youth. Here she depicts the old log cabin and farmstead of her childhood home near Hopkinsville. Her arrangement of background foliage and minor figures is reminiscent of English landscapes, imparting not only a feeling of immense space, but also a reverence for the scenes of her early period of development. With a remarkable awareness of atmospheric perspective and native color, this painting leads one to believe that Effie chose to remember her rural Kentucky surroundings as beauty untouched by erosion, infertile ground, or tragedy. The central figure in the foreground, although primitively rendered and undefined, gives the painting a unifying symmetry, as if to focus on the yeoman’s dominion over his earthly inhabittance.
After the move to Arizona, Effie was markedly influenced by the popular images of the desert and Native American peoples found on postcards and in travel magazines such as *Arizona Highways*, *Progressive Arizona*, *Desert Magazine*, and *Westways*. However, Effie’s reliance on commercial photographs helped mature her knowledge of formal principles of composition, and as her interests shifted toward subjects outside her own personal experience, her work took on attributes more consistent with studio traditions than folk genres. It is certainly apparent from her work and her method of teaching that she was keenly aware of established creative devices and techniques. What she had begun as a needed diversion became a lifelong endeavor to improve her artistic talent through participation in community art organizations and peer-group discussions.56

Effie’s interest in New Testament subjects inspired a number of religious paintings. Again, she was influenced by commercially produced images—the Protestant art popular from the 1920s to the 1940s.57 One of her paintings is a version of a widely marketed image of a seated Jesus contemplating the city of Jerusalem, which is bathed in moonlit. Effie’s three extant versions of this painting vary little from the reproduction. Her favorite gospel subjects seem to be Christ at the Sea of Galilee, the nativity, and Christ with his Apostles. Conspicuously few in number are Latter-day Saint subjects—the now-familiar scenes of pioneer subjects, Book of Mormon narratives, and instructional illustrations at that time being virtually unknown, for the Church relied heavily upon stock New Testament prints available from commercial suppliers of Protestant Biblical images. In addition to relying on popular sources of inspiration, Effie may have drawn upon her Protestant upbringing, one common to rural Americans.58
A high point in Effie's creative experience came during the summer of 1936, when she had the pleasure of accompanying a tour group of artists over the Mormon pioneer trail. Her daughter Hazel, who was at that time a missionary in the East Central States Mission, had read a prospectus of the tour in the Deseret News and, with Noel’s assistance, had conspired to send her mother on the trip by providing money for tuition and travel expenses. Headed by Brigham Young University art professor B. F. Larsen and his wife, Geneva, the group of fifteen artists traveled by bus to important pioneer sites and landmarks, documenting the historic route through sketches, paintings, and photographs.59 (For three of Effie’s paintings that resulted from this tour, see colorplates 3–5.) The two-week art tour was an emotional peak that Effie would speak of fondly throughout her remaining years. Always grateful to Hazel and Noel for providing the means for her to participate in the tour, she later wrote, “It was one of the most wonderful experiences of my life.”60 During the successful traveling exhibition of the group's work, shown throughout Utah and Idaho, Effie wrote to B. F. Larsen, expressing the hope that they could all get together again, “I experience a happy thrill when I think of a reunion of our group.”61

Although relatively unpublicized, the reunion took place, and the group, including Effie, would indeed make a tour to New Mexico the following summer. This trip included visits to pueblo sites on the Rio Grande near Albuquerque and Santa Fe, where the group sketched and painted weathering Zuni and Navajo adobes. On the Arizona side of the border, the artists painted scenes at Navajo National Monument, such as the ancient cave dwellings of Beta-takin and Keet Seel.62 These two tours under Larsen’s supervision were probably the closest Effie came to academic art instruction.

Once introduced to Native American dwellings, Effie frequently returned to the subject, painting Navajo and Hopi sites of the nearby Four Corners region and others in Arizona’s Coconino, Navajo, and Apache Counties. Some paintings were of the ruins of Walpi and Wupatki.

But Effie’s fascination with communal earthen structures was not confined to the Colorado Plateau. A number of her paintings feature mission architecture and Spanish provincial churches along Sonora’s west coast highway and California’s Highway 101.63 For
example, the painting *Tzin Tzun Tzan* (colorplate 6) depicts an adobe village built by the Tascaran Indians of Mexico. In this painting, the viewer looks down the length of a paved stone street, bordered by a walled villa on the right and the shaded side of a simple, tile-roofed structure on the left. Aside from the mass of trees in the distance, the viewer’s eye is drawn to the open bell tower raised above the wall and the partially hidden figure standing in the gateway below. In that era, the unpretentious charm of this painting was considered worthy of merit; in 1939, when American self-taught painters and regionalists were gaining national recognition, Effie entered the painting in the New York World’s Fair, hobby division, and won second place.  

Another venue for making her talent known was provided by an engagement to exhibit her work at the Bruchman Curio Store in Winslow. The store’s owner, R. M. Bruchman, had generously provided financial support for one of Edgar’s catastrophic medical expenses, and Effie sold her work there as remuneration. After she repaid her debt, she continued to exhibit her work there for a number of years.

Over the next two decades, Effie repeatedly returned to topics inspired by the Arizona landscape. Her works reveal an enthusiasm for such subjects as the towering red-rock buttes of Monument Valley, the rainbow sands of the Painted Desert, and the windswept landscape of the Arizona Strip. Two examples of these works are a scene based on Josef Muench’s photograph of a mule train winding down the Bright Angel Trail in the Grand Canyon and an image of Emery Falls, Lake Mead (see front cover). Effie painted the latter scene with the grandiosity of romantic visionaries, much like the work of Thomas Moran and Albert Bierstadt. The towering rock walls appear to reach heavenward, as if this is a place of worship. Here, Effie departs from photographic realism, dramatizing the cascade with heightened escarpments and the altered placement of rocky crags.

Effie applied her paint sparingly on prepared canvas board or on the untempered but lightly sanded side of masonite board. If these materials were not readily available, she often used paneling, Celotex, or plywood as a practical painting surface. Ultimately, whatever she found least expensive or close at hand sufficed. To Effie, permanence was not as important as the artistic outcome.
Effie Carmack, ca. 1965. Behind Effie is her painting of a mule train in the Grand Canyon, a scene based on a photograph by Josef Muench. Courtesy Atascadero News.
By the late 1930s, she was familiar with the applied techniques of brushwork and color mixing, her preference being a subdued palette. On one occasion, she commented that she had never used very brilliant colors in her paintings: “I like to reproduce the natural colors as I see them, and I liked [sic] the results.”68

Evidently, other observers liked the results as well. About 1942, sometime after she began exhibiting at the curio store, an unidentified man representing the Southwest Museum in Los Angeles examined Effie’s display with considerable interest. Visiting the Carmack home next, he told Effie that surely the institution’s curator would like to exhibit her paintings since they were compatible with the museum’s collection illustrating Native American life. A short time later, Effie received a letter from the museum requesting about twenty-five paintings for a scheduled exhibition. To fill the museum’s order, Effie completed more than two dozen oils depicting all facets of Navajo and Hopi culture. These proved salient to the exhibit’s theme. Reportedly, during the exhibition, curator Mr. Harrington noted that Effie’s paintings were “the best coloring of Indian life he had ever had in his museum.”69

An example from this exhibition, The Evolution of a Navajo Rug (colorplate 7), is presented as a didactic narrative, showing the process of creating a blanket, from wool shearing, dying, carding, and spinning to weaving on the loom. While the oil does not present a story per se, the visual sequence echoes the manner of WPA muralists70 who depicted pioneer narratives. What the painting lacks in anatomical accuracy, it gains in the purposeful poses of the Navajo woman, each pose bespeaking the competence of a culture. The woman’s quiet dignity, her careful grooming, and her concentration reflect the artist’s respect for a fellow artist. The setting is given a spacious beauty, lovingly seen through the woman’s eyes as part of her estate. The homemade loom and sleeping child remind us that this woman makes space and time to create.71

Later Years in California

In the spring of 1946, Effie and Edgar moved to Atascadero, California, so that they could be near their children and Edgar could convalesce in California’s lower altitude and fresh coastal air. Effie felt some grief at leaving her well-established home of more
than twenty years and her longtime friends such as the Bushmans, the Simmonses, the Holts, and the Wakefields. She would also miss the warmth and solitude of her self-built studio, a building she described as a "shanty" with a fireplace.  

Yet she was as resilient and eager to excel as before. Two months after relocating, she was introduced as "a new artist in Atascadero" at the Music and Arts Fellowship, where she "delighted her audience with an exhibit of some of her historical paintings, including a pony express station and the Pioneer Trail in Wyoming, old Indian ruins in Arizona, with the portrait of an old Indian in northern Arizona, and an ancient church in Old Mexico." Four months later, in January 1947, Effie held her first formal exhibition at Atascadero's Carlton Hotel. After this successful public showing, Effie and several other local artists, including Frances Joslin and Al Johnson, sparked the idea of an art club. On April 2, 1948, the Atascadero Art Club was organized with Johnson as president. Soon the organization became an important component of Atascadero's community activities, sponsoring monthly workshops and art festivals on the central coast. Effie was always an active supporter of the group in the years that followed. Fellow art club members remembered her as a natural artist and musician, an "outstanding member of the Art Club."  

By this time, however, the consequences of Edgar's poor health required that she find employment. At the urging of her old friend Bernice Walker, Effie began performing in Knotts Berry Farm stage shows. Clothed in dresses from a bygone era, she played guitar and sang with other former Southerners. As a result of these performances, she not only gained a source of income but also received considerable attention for the repertoire of folk songs she had learned as a child. Impressed by her collection of songs, the popular country-western entertainer Tennessee Ernie Ford—with whom Effie had the occasion to perform—once reportedly asked, "Where in the world did you get them?" even though she had learned them only a "spittin' distance" from where he had lived.  

Fortunately, through the efforts of western folklorists Austin and Alta Fife, many of these important folk songs were recorded for the Library of Congress between 1947 and 1952. Later, when Austin Fife was teaching in France, he featured Effie on a Voice of America radio broadcast.
Despite the encouragement she garnered from these performances, Effie always returned to painting, family, and church service as her primary sources of gratification. After Edgar's death in 1952, she became actively engaged in art club activities and self-motivated missionary work. Seldom did a day pass that she wasn't painting in her studio, attending an art club workshop, or preparing work for the club's annual art show. Never too busy for a visit from the missionaries, she sometimes hosted them to a meal or a cottage meeting in her parlor. On Sunday evenings, she entertained grandchildren and great-grandchildren with songs sung to the strum of her guitar and the sounds of corn popping in the fireplace. As a crowning achievement, she was one of five women nominated as California's Mother of the Year for 1971.79

Effie Carmack, ca. 1968. Seated in her studio, Effie displays the guitar with which she accompanied herself as she sang the folk songs learned in her youth. Courtesy Atascadero News.
The Vision of a Life

Credit her parents for the high honors she received, Effie was deeply grateful for her inauspicious, but noble, upbringing. Her high regard for ancestors is expressed in the following lines from *Backward Glances*:

And now since I've studied the problem profoundly
And searched out the sources from which we descend,
I see many whys and can guess many wherefores,
To show why our lives take some definite trend.
Our Marquess forefathers were lovers of music,
And lovers of beauty, religion and art.
And though we were raised in a patch of tobacco
These things in our beings still held a rich part.80

Until encroaching age and then her death in 1974 forced her to surrender her brush, she carried on this heritage.81

Effie’s paintings have not been gathered into a single major collection. Family and friends have a few samples of her work. Many pieces are likely still hanging on the walls of aging residents of Winslow and Atascadero. Reportedly, a number of religious works were painted for Latter-day Saint church buildings in the Arizona towns of Globe, Phoenix, St. Johns, Holbrook, Winslow, and Taylor. Others were completed for LDS churches in St. George, Utah; Overton, Nevada; and Hollyfield, North Carolina.82

Like other self-taught or outsider artists, Effie was driven by a compulsion to declare the vision of her life experience. Although her works contain some popular subjects, they also stand as the personal statements of an extraordinary woman—a person who faced trials with fortitude, good humor, and creativity. Effie Carmack was indeed a “memorable creation.”83 If not for their artistic merits, her works deserve recognition for their association with the exceptional individual by whom they were created.

Noel A. Carmack is a great-grandson of Effie M. Carmack. He holds an MFA degree in drawing from Utah State University and serves as Preservation Librarian at USU’s Merrill Library. He wishes to dedicate this essay to Effie, who has, on many occasions, been a silent but motivating presence beside him at his drawing easel. “It was her prolific talent,” he recalls, “that many years ago caused a little boy to marvel.” He wishes to thank Marian Hart, Susan Beatie, and Olive Doellstedt of the Atascadero Art Association (formerly the Atascadero Art Club) for providing

https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol37/iss3/9
information about Effie; Otilia Carmack for assistance in providing dates; and Elder John K. Carmack, Hazel Carmack Bushman, and Itha Carmack for providing photographs and clippings.

NOTES

1Effie Marquess Carmack, Down Memory Lane: The Autobiography of Effie Marquess Carmack (Atascadero, Calif.: Atascadero News Press, 1973), 1. A new edition of Effie’s autobiography, edited by Karen Lynn Davidson, will be published by Utah State University Press as part of the series on the life writings of frontier women. The author wishes to thank Mrs. Davidson for her invaluable comments and suggestions during the writing of this article.

2Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 1, 2. Vital dates are from copies of family group sheets in my possession.

3Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 13.

4Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 4, 11, 13. Boanerges Marquess (1848–1903) and John Susan Armstrong (1853–1899) had seven children: Martha Etta (1871–1899), Lelia Jane (1872–1970), James Elmo (1874–1958), Margaret Alzada (1877–1971), John Robert (1880–1982), Effie Lee (1885–1974), and Charles Autie (1891–1932). The Black Patch was a tobacco-farming region covering western Kentucky and northwestern Tennessee. The region’s farmers grew a dark, olive-colored variety of tobacco, distinct from the varieties of other areas, that was cured in smoke-filled barns. Hence, the region was called the Black Patch.

5Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 5.

6Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 5.

7Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 3.

8Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 3; see also 4, 15–17.

9Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 15; see also 16.

10Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 8.

11Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 22; underline in original.

12Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 27.

13Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 89–90.

14Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 4; see also “Springtime,” in Effie Marquess Carmack, Backward Glances: An Autobiography in Rhyme (n.p., n.d.), 9, lines 45–52.

15Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 8.

16“Mrs. Carmack Speaker at Art Club Meeting,” Atascadero News, May 16, 1957, 2; Diane Gustafsen Goff, “My Most Unforgettable Character” [a personal essay on Effie Carmack’s life], in Down Memory Lane, 237.

17Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 185. Evidently, the people of the mission’s Kentucky Conference were softened to hear the elders’ message. In April 1897, the senior elder, Alvin Ipson, of Bear River City, Utah, reported from Liberty, Kentucky, that twenty-six people had been baptized and that the missionaries were “hospitably received and entertained.” See Andrew Jenson, Journal
History of the Church, April 22, 1897, 4, Archives Division, Historical Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, microfilm copy in Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah; Alvin Ipsen to Editor, “Returned Missionary,” Deseret Evening News, December 31, 1898, 15.

18 Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 24.
19 Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 185.
20 For example, see Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 96, 97–98 and 130, where Effie names several missionaries and explains why she treasures their memories.
21 Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 96.
22 “Death of Sister Marquess,” Latter Day Saints Southern Star 1 (February 25, 1899): 99; “Among the Elders,” Latter Day Saints Southern Star 1 (March 25, 1899): 136; Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 83–84. As early as February 1897, the region of the Southern States Mission had experienced a horrible outbreak of yellow fever: “Many of the Elders were somewhat hindered in their work by the great amount of sickness existing throughout the mission. In many sections scarcely a family could be found free from sickness. The angel of death seemed extraordinarily busy, still the Elders enjoyed good health.” See “History of the Southern States Mission,” Latter Day Saints Southern Star 2 (May 19, 1900): 197.
23 Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 98.
24 Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 92, 94–95, 102, 107–8. The foreword to Backward Glances contains this dedication: “I wrote it to send to my sister, Lelia Marquess Ferrell, For Mother’s Day, as she had been like a mother to me after the death of our mother in 1899.”
26 Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 117–18.
27 Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 187.
28 Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 187–88.
29 Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 125–27.
30 Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 125–28.
32 These turbulent cycles of depression in the Kentucky tobacco market are discussed in Campbell, The Politics of Despair, 152–54; and William F. Axton, Tobacco and Kentucky (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1975), 82–105. See also John Goodrum Miller, The Black Patch War (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1936); James O. Nall, The Tobacco Night Riders of
The Life and Art of Effie Marquess Carmack


33Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 126.
34Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 126-27, 128.
36This narrative is taken from Effie’s own poignant account in Down Memory Lane, 135-37.
38Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 138.
40Roberto Feruzzi’s painting appeared on the cover of the December 1953 issue of Relief Society Magazine. The location of Effie’s version is presently unknown to the author.
41Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 141, 143, 145, 188; “Joseph City Notes,” Winslow Mail, October 3, 1924, 4.
42Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 140. Zane Grey (1875-1939) wrote adventure tales set in the West. It is not clear that Zane Grey was in the Joseph City area in the spring of 1924. However, Grey had been in the Flagstaff area during the fall of 1923 investigating sites for a film adaptation of his novel Call of the Canyon. “Filming of Famous Grey Novels,” Coconino Sun, September 12, 1923, 1; “Filming of Famous Grey Novels to Carry Fame of Our Scenery over World,” Coconino Sun, September 14, 1923, 1. See also Candace C. Kant, Zane Grey’s Arizona (Flagstaff, Ariz.: Northland Press, 1984), 27, 38, 140-41; and Gary Topping, “Zane Grey in Zion: An Examination of His Supposed Anti-Mormonism,” BYU Studies 18 (1978): 483-90; and Graham St. John Stott, “Zane Grey and James Simpson Emmett,” BYU Studies 18 (1978): 491-503.

Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 127.

Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 143.

Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 143.


“Characteristics of Folk Art: A Study Presented at the American Psychological Association Conference,” Folk Art Finder 5 (September 1984): 2, 4. According to Roger Manley, “Outsider artists’ life stories frequently reveal traumatic events that threw them onto their own resources and triggered responses that led to art making: the loss of a job through illness, injury, or retirement; the death of a spouse or elderly parent; religious doubt; social ostracism; imprisonment. These events precipitate their transformation from ‘ordinary’ farmers, loggers, or textile workers into artists as well.” Roger Manley, Signs and Wonders: Outsider Art inside North Carolina (Raleigh: North Carolina Museum of Art, 1989), 9. See also Rosa Esman Gallery, Outsiders: Art beyond the Norms (New York: Rosa Esman Gallery, 1986), wherein it refers to these events as times of “intense psychic crisis.” Outsiders, 1.


See, for example, Barbara Allen, “The Genealogical Landscape and the Southern Sense of Place,” in Sense of Place: American Regional Cultures, ed.
The Life and Art of Effie Marquess Carmack


54Effie felt that raising such a harmful crop was “foolish” and resulted in little good for humans. She often recalled vividly the “gruelling [sic], backbreaking” process of stripping, suckering, worming, and curing the tobacco in preparation for sale. Carmack, *Down Memory Lane*, 67–68; Carmack, “Tobacco,” in *Backward Glances*, 20–24. The lore of tobacco cultivation is wonderfully treated in Charles S. Guthrie, “Tobacco: Cash Crop of the Cumberland Valley,” *Kentucky Folklore Record* 14 (1968): 38–43; and Suzanne M. Hall, “Working the Black Patch: Tobacco Farming Traditions, 1890–1930,” *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 89 (summer 1991): 266–86.


57This painting was reproduced on the cover of the April 1958 issue of *The Instructor* and may have been the source for Effie’s versions. The original was probably the work of German-born artist Bernhard Plockhorst (1825–1907). It was one of many Plockhorst and Heinrich Hofmann paintings reproduced and sold by Perry Pictures. See Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 240; and Colleen McDannell, “Marketing Jesus: Warner Press and the Art of Warner Sallman,” in *Icons of American Protestantism: The Art of Warner Sallman*, ed. David Morgan (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 114–16, including figure 3.4. Effie’s versions are in the possession of Willard Schlink of Mesa, Arizona, and Itha Carmack and Bonnie Porter of Atascadero, California.

58I am indebted to Dr. Colleen McDannell of the University of Utah for this insight.

59“Local Woman with 17 Artists Making University Tours,” *Winslow Mail*, June 12, 1936, 1; “Winslow Woman Is Member of Artist Group Making Tour,” *Winslow Mail*, August 14, 1936, 1. See also H. R. Merrill, “While Yet the Old Trail
Lasts," Deseret News [Church Section], February 22, 1936, 1, 8; and Carlton Culmsec, “Spiritual Significance of an Art Tour,” Deseret News [Church Section], August 15, 1936, 1, 8. For more background on the tour, see Noel A. Carmack, “The Yellow Ochre Club: B. F. Larsen and the Pioneer Trail Art Tour, 1936,” Utah Historical Quarterly 65 (spring 1997): 134-54. Seventeen of Effie’s art-tour paintings are in the possession of her grandson and LDS Church General Authority John K. Carmack, Salt Lake City.

60Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 161-62.

61Effie M. Carmack to B. F. Larsen, December 29, 1936, B. F. Larsen Collection, Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

62Artist Tells Rotary of New Mexico Tour,” Winslow Mail, August 13, 1937, 8; Goff, “My Most Unforgettable Character,” in Down Memory Lane, 238. A painting of San Ildefonso, New Mexico, is in the possession of John K. Carmack, Salt Lake City; a painting of Betatakin is in the possession of Itha Carmack, Atascadero, California.

63A painting based on a popular image of San Juan Capistrano is in the possession of Marina Weatherhead, Prescott Valley, Arizona.

64Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 156-57. Correspondence in the files of the Department of Contemporary Art, New York World’s Fair, did not, unfortunately, disclose the outcome of Effie’s entry. E. Marquess Carmack to “Mr. Cahill,” New York World’s Fair Commission, ca. May 18, 1938; and (unsigned) Assistant to the Director, Department of Contemporary Art, to E. Marquess Carmack, June 2, 1938, Box #53, New York World’s Fair Collection, 1939-1940, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library; photographs in my possession. For discussions of the World’s Fair, see Magazine of Art 32 (May 1939); and Art Digest 13 (July 1, 1939): 12-13, 25.

65Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 170.


67The author has been unable to find the source of inspiration for this painting. It can, however, be compared to a black-and-white photograph published in Desert Magazine 3 (December 1939): 24.

68Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 163.

69Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 156. Unfortunately, a thorough search of the official Southwest Museum publication, The Masterkey, did not disclose any references to Effie’s exhibition.

70Artists were paid during the New Deal era with funds from the Work Projects Administration to paint murals for public buildings.

71This painting is now in the possession of her anthropologist grandson, Robert M. Carmack, Albany, New York. A similar version is in the possession of Itha Carmack, Atascadero, California.

72Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 170; see also, Effie M. Carmack, “The Long Road from Winslow, Arizona to Atascadero [a travel diary in rhyme, April 1946];” copy of typescript in my possession.

The Life and Art of Effie Marquess Carmack


76 Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 175–76; Bill Barton, “The Latchstring Is Always Out to the Fellowmen of Effie Carmack,” Deseret News [Church Section], January 15, 1966, 5.

77 The recordings are dated December 26 and 27, 1948; July 8, 1949; September 5, 1949; and March 26, 1951. Without underestimating the value of their pioneering fieldwork, I feel that the Fifes misclassified Effie’s repertoire, grouping them among those of “Mormon inspiration,” rather than of Kentucky or Scots Highland origins. See Austin E. Fife and Alta S. Fife, “Folk Songs of Mormon Inspiration,” Western Folklife 6 (January 1947): 42–52; and “Collectors and Collections,” Western Folklife 7 (July 1948): 299–301.

78 Carmack, Down Memory Lane, 88–89; Alta Fife, conversations with author, July 26, 1991, and November 14, 1996. See also “Oxy Educator Collects Mormon Folk Material,” Los Angeles Times [San Gabriel Valley edition], October 9, 1949, 19. Copies of the Fife recordings were sent to the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress for preservation, while subsequent copies of the tapes were sold commercially. The original field recordings are housed in the Fife Folklore Archives at Utah State University, Logan, Utah. In an uncharacteristically critical review of Austin and Alta Fife’s classification of the Mormon folksong collection, folklorist Thomas E. Cheney wrote:

One singer, Effie Cormack [sic], furnished the Fifes with many significant folk songs. Mrs. Cormack, a resident of California and a Mormon convert, came from the South. The songs she has in her memory all came out of her own South, and, as one would expect, many of them reflect the traditions of that area with its racial, geographical, and local heritage. Mrs. Cormack’s songs have not been sung in Mormon society enough to become Mormon thought or expression. To consider them Mormon folk song would be as ridiculous as calling ‘Yankee Doodle’ a Russian song because it was sung by a former American who became a Communist.


Barre Brashear, “County Art Show Sketches,” (San Luis Obispo, Calif.) 
*Telegram-Tribune*, February 19, 1952, 1. The largest collection of Effie’s 
paintings is in the possession of John K. Carmack, Salt Lake City, Utah. 
Several paintings are among the families of Effie’s daughters: Grace Bushman, Hazel 
Bushman (formerly Bruchman), and Violet Mattice. Some are owned by families 
of her deceased sons: Cecil E. Carmack, Noel E. Carmack, and David E. Carmack. 
Of the many other scattered holdings, a few paintings are reportedly in the Barry 
Goldwater Collection.

“A memorable creation” is a characterization by Joyce Carol Oates of Harriette 
Simpson Arnow’s protagonist in *The Dollmaker*, a fictional novel of 
a woman from Kentucky. Arnow’s character, Gertie Nevels, is described as “an ‘artist,’ but a primitive, untheorizing, inarticulate artist. . . . She is both an ordinary human being and an extraordinary human being, a memorable creation, so 
real that one cannot question her existence.” Joyce Carol Oates, “Joyce Carol 
Oates on Harriette Arnow’s *The Dollmaker*,” in *Rediscoveries*, ed. David Madden 
Plate 2. Untitled. Oil on plywood panel, n.d. 17 1/2" x 38 3/8". Courtesy Noel Carmack.
Plate 3. Devil's Gate, Wyoming. Oil on board, 1936, 11 1/2" x 16". Courtesy John K. Carmack.
Plate 4. West from Temple Hill, Nauvoo. Oil on board, 1936. 15" x 22 1/2". Courtesy John K. Carmack.
Plate 5. *First Home of the Prophet in Nauvoo (back view).* Oil on board, 1936. 23" x 17". Courtesy John K. Carmack.