A Feral Family Album

Marshal and Tanya South Followed an Impulse Decades Ago That's Once Again Familiar, Fleeing a Troubled World and Raising Three Children Far From Civilization. More Than 60 Years Later, Two of Their Kids Are Finally Ready to Talk About It.

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A MAN WHO HAS KEPT HIS SILENCE FOR HALF A CENTURY develops quite an aura of mystery. So I'm not sure what to expect as I drive through the New Mexico desert en route to meeting Rider South, eldest son of a family that actually did what so many people are talking about doing in these confused and troubled times—shucking civilization for a simpler life.

Over the decades, historians, writers and researchers have wanted to know what really happened to the family that went feral on a California mountain starting in 1932. The family members have refused to talk—until now. It's as if I'm the first anthropologist to interview Ishi, the renowned "last wild Indian in North America."

The two-lane road heads into high country and crosses miles of fenced rangeland until it eventually comes to Silver City, an old mining town 300 miles southwest of Santa Fe. Silver City has recently been taken over by retirees who fancy the place an economical alternative to its trendy neighbor. At the front door of a neat suburban home, I'm greeted by one such retiree.

Rider South is a loose-limbed 67-year-old dressed with understated flair—yellow polo shirt and khakis stuffed into black cowboy boots. After introducing me to his wife, Lucile, a former dance instructor at San Diego State University, South says, "You must be hungry," and proceeds to make quesadillas.

He sets out lunch on TV trays in a comfortable family room dominated by a monster TV screen. South's life revolves around television news and civic activities. He likes to talk about the resurfacing of the high school track and a new public playground.

What he does not especially like to talk about is his past. Outsiders only want to hear one version of it, or they want to assign blame. Still, South eventually leads me out to a cluttered garage and reaches up to a shelf. One after another, he brings down age-grimed pots hand-crafted of California clay. The earthen ollas lead our discussion back more than 60 years, to Ghost Mountain, a remote mountaintop 60 miles east of San Diego, where he and his two siblings were raised.

The South family's experiment ended after an impressively long run. There was an angry divorce accompanied by accusations of infidelity and neglect. The sun-browned children were cast out into civilization and would scarcely be heard from for decades.

Over the years, attempts to find out about their lives in the wild have been rebuffed with a brief comment or two from family members. When a state parks historian contacted Tanya South in 1983, the mother replied she wanted nothing to do with glorifying such a "stark, miserable existence." Out of respect for their mother, none of the children have discussed the experiment in public.

Tanya South died in 1997. It happened that when I called, two of the Ghost Mountain children, Rider and Victoria, were ready to tell their side of the story. Rudyard South, the younger of the two brothers, has changed his name and conveyed through Rider that he wants no part of revisiting that time and place.

Visitors to Anza-Borrego Desert State Park still make pilgrimages to Ghost Mountain to see the ruins of Marshal South's dream. The place is just as silent and lonely today as it was when the Souths lived there. You turn off a park road and drive three miles of jeep track to the base of a big hill. Trudging up the steep, mile-long path to the homestead, visitors can't help but think of the South kids, who once pounded this same snaky route barefoot in winter cold and 120-degree heat.

Nestled in a little wind-protected bowl atop the mountain is the crumbling framework of the South's adobe, where Marshal and Tanya South conducted a grand 15-year experiment in back-to-nature living. Marshal and Tanya found the homesite in 1932 when they were searching for a place to drop out of society and wait out the Depression. The Australian-born writer had made a living writing romantic novels of the American West. He eventually drifted to

Oceanside, where he met his Russian-born wife-to-be at the Rosicrucian Fellowship, an international association of Christian mystics dedicated to preaching and healing the sick.

The couple shared an interest in literature and metaphysics; Tanya wrote poems, read palms and believed in ghosts. She had been a student at Columbia University and worked as a secretary on Wall Street. But when she married Marshal in 1923, she was destined to leave her urban ways behind.

Writing jobs were scarce during the Depression, so rather than struggle on in the city, the couple decided to pursue the sort of Wild West life Marshal often described in the pulp Westerns he wrote. "We were temperamental misfits and innate barbarians," South wrote in a 1939 article for the Saturday Evening Post. "We were not equal to the job of coping with modern high-power civilization."

The Souths weren't the first, or the last, family to move off the grid. Since Henry David Thoreau, Americans have embraced the back- to-nature fantasy. It has spawned books and movies, including Paul Theroux's "The Mosquito Coast," about a Marshal South-type patriarch who drags his brood to the jungles of Honduras.

Recent news bought to light other real-life cases of isolationist families. John "Rajohn Lord" Davis shielded his family from mainstream culture in a camouflaged desert compound near Twentynine Palms, an experiment that ended in tragedy. Facing charges of child abuse and murder, Davis hanged himself in a jail cell last March. In another case, the six children of JoAnn Dunn McGuckin—kids who also grew up without running water or society—holed up in a north Idaho house for five days in May and June until police coaxed them out.

In each case, the fate of the kids seems to somehow vindicate or condemn the parents' lifestyle.

Marshal and Tanya South had three children while living in the wilds, and Rider (named for adventure writer H. Rider Haggard), Rudyard (for Rudyard Kipling) and Victoria became guinea pigs in an effort to prove the superiority of a Thoreau-like existence.

Cut off from society, the family tried to imitate the lifestyle of early Indians. They gathered mesquite beans, dined on roasted mescal, did without electricity and running water and fashioned the clay pots Rider South now stashes in his garage. Marshal proudly claimed the family had "slipped from the skirts of civilization."

Every nail, bed frame and drop of water had to be hauled in 14 miles from a nearby ranch and carried up the steep trail, barefoot and often in brutal heat. Marshal, a skinny 140 pounds, designed a pack board of agave stalks that would allow him to carry 100-pound bags of cement and potatoes. He eventually constructed a system of cisterns and basins to capture rainwater, but the bulk of the family's water was transported up the mountain on a stretcher-type device. Bathing was a luxury, one the family soon abandoned.

Despite their reclusive ways, the Souths became nearly as well- known as modern sitcom stars. Marshal publicized the family's adventures in articles he wrote for the Saturday Evening Post and Arizona Highways, as well as seven years of monthly columns for a then-popular magazine called Desert, the Outside magazine of its day. Desert captivated a national audience hungry for tales of escape and adventure.

To bored housewives in Syracuse and men building dive bombers for World War II, a naked, tortoise-herding boy named Rider South came to symbolize jubilant freedom. Kids wanted to be Rider South. "I thought: 'Why can't I live like that and not have to go to school?' " recalls Robert Coody, a special collections librarian in Flagstaff, Ariz., who read Desert Magazine while growing up. "This is real learning and real living."

The details of survival on the mountain were dramatic enough, but the real literary possibilities of the project didn't become clear to Marshal until the kids were born. (Tanya traveled to an Oceanside hospital for the births.) Rider, Rudyard and Victoria quickly became the stars of the monthly columns, with their pets taking a close second billing: tortoises named Mojave, Don Antonio and Grandpa, burros Rhett and Scarlett. The kids were home-schooled by Tanya, and they carved bows and arrows with Marshal.

Included in each installment of the family's story were Marshal's diatribes on self-sufficiency, anti-materialism, nudism (wild animals accept a naked man better than a clothed one, he wrote) and the superior ways of the Cahuilla and Kumeyaay Indians who once lived on their hillside, leaving behind blackened agave-roasting pits.

In photos that accompanied the columns, the family looks remarkably like a lost tribe. The utopian patriarch, Marshal, wears only a loincloth and has his long iron-gray hair tied back with a strand of ribbon. Eldest son Rider,

tanned and scowling, wears his streaming red hair parted in the center and tied in two pigtails. Perhaps he was only squinting in the sun, but the scowl and his long, tangled mat of hair make him look fierce and inscrutable.

The monthly columns became the most popular item in Desert Magazine and inspired floods of mail from wartime readers who wished they had the courage to do what the Souths were doing. Mary E. McVicker wrote of the family in 1943: "Their spirit is a flickering candle flame, a tiny beacon of reassurance in a confused and troubled world."

Yet there were dissenters who said the Souths were wrong to deprive their children of society—the same argument that comes up today whenever survivalists, hippies or polygamists such as Utah's Tom Green family (recently in the news when Green was convicted of bigamy) attempt a break from the mainstream. True, the South kids knew how to make sandals from the fibers of the yucca plant. But what about choosing sides for softball? What would become of them once they left the mountain?

"You are gratifying your own selfish desire to make and dominate your own little world," wrote Susan Groene in an open letter to Marshal South, printed in Desert's October 1944 issue. "Your family will be sacrificed on the altar of your fetishism."

Groene's forebodings seemed particularly prescient in the winter of 1947, 15 years after Marshal and Tanya first came upon the agave- dotted clearing on the mountain. There were rumors that Marshal was having an affair with Myrtle Botts, the librarian in Julian, which, at 21 miles away, was the closest town to the Souths. Though longtime Julian residents still swear there was an affair, Bott's daughter, Jeri Wright, denies it. "Marshal South was a kind and wonderful man," says the 85-year-old San Diego resident. "My whole family liked him very much. Even my Grandma loved him."

Still, the wild family from Ghost Mountain made its first public appearance in a San Diego courtroom in 1947. The occasion: a divorce proceeding.

Rider was then 13, Rudyard was 9 and Victoria 7. "The South family presented a strange appearance in the austere courtroom," a reporter noted. The kids were as skittish as rabbits—and why not, they had never gone to school or lived among people.

Tanya South told the judge that she and her children were often stranded in the desert when her husband took off in their 1929 Model A Ford—their only connection with the outside world. Based on Tanya's complaints, the judge granted a divorce and gave her custody of the children. He ordered Marshal to pay $25 a month in child support, a big chunk of the total $40 a month he made writing his magazine column.

Marshal South moved to Julian, dying of heart failure the following year at age 62. He was buried there in an unmarked grave.

All these years later, Rider still has plenty of red in his swept- back hair, and he has retained his trademark scowl and ironic shrug. With his planed face full of dramatic lines, he could pass for an Indian. (His father took advantage of his angular features to hint that he might have Native American ancestry.)

Filling in what happened after the family left Ghost Mountain, Rider says his mother moved the kids to Carlsbad. They lived on welfare for several years. One of Tanya's first items of business was to get the children haircuts, an occasion noted in the San Diego newspapers. Tanya got a job cleaning the movie theater in Carlsbad, and Rider eventually took a paper route to help support the family. They had never had much in the way of material goods on the mountain, but only now—living in town—did they feel poor.

Going to school was "a shock," Rider says. Academically the South children were up to par, but other kids found them peculiar. "We were sort of scared of everybody," Rider says. At 18, Rider apprenticed at the North Island Naval Air Station in San Diego and never left. He spent 35 years installing gas tanks in Navy planes.

Most of his fellow mechanics never knew they were tightening bolts alongside a former wild child from Ghost Mountain. All of his adult life, Rider avoided telling people about his unconventional childhood. His sister, Victoria Morgan, now 61 and a retired software engineer in Kent, Wash., confirmed in a phone interview that she, too, never discussed her wilderness childhood. If pressed about their history, Rider and Victoria would just say vaguely that they grew up in San Diego County.

Early on, Rider and Victoria got into the habit of keeping quiet because everyone seemed to want to hear only one

version of the story—the Swiss Family Robinson version promulgated by their father. Their mother, Tanya, was particularly stung by the one- sided tale, so much so that she once wrote her own account. According to Victoria, Tanya's version didn't sell because "it was tinged with bitterness." Victoria told her mother that if she toned it down, people would want to hear her story. Angry and despairing, Tanya destroyed the manuscript.

Tanya felt Marshal was idolized, his Ghost Mountain scheme idealized—while she was vilified for breaking up the grand experiment. "People thought Father was a hero and she was the villain for taking us away from that life," Rider says. "Later everyone would say how wonderful it must have been to live with that wonderful Marshal South. That really made her mad.

"The reality of it was vastly different than Father portrayed it," Rider adds. "Did you see the movie 'Castaway'? That was sort of like our life. It's like we were there on an island with these coconuts. We didn't have any friends. We got sunburned every day." He shrugs and offers a half-smile to let you know he can laugh at it all now.

The photos readers adored—such as the one showing Rider standing on a boulder with a feather in his hair, practicing with a bow and arrow—were posed. The garden where they supposedly grew their own food was the size of a sofa. "Father wrote stories about how we lived off the land, but you can't live off rock," Rider says. "If you've been up there, you know there was nothing to eat. It sounds romantic to say we had century plant roasts every spring. But it was essentially a picnic out there. Our food came from town." Visitors to Ghost Mountain can still find a large dump of rusted cans behind a boulder.

Despite his tone of wry disdain, Rider says his father was not intentionally duping the public. He believed in the values he espoused; he just couldn't pull off a total back-to-the-land existence. "He believed it," Rider says. "But he could talk it more than he could do it." Where reality fell short of the ideal, the writer embellished.

All this time, people have assumed that what went wrong on Ghost Mountain was the experiment itself—the back-to-nature life was just too punishing. But if their lives were not as idyllic as Marshal South painted them, the children say they weren't that bad either. Both Rider and Victoria say they were never hungry or thirsty, and they got to do things—such as staging tortoise races—that other kids didn't.

Hearing the Ghost Mountain children tell it, the real problem was not the experiment. It was the marriage. "Right from the start, my parents' marriage was not a great marriage," says Victoria. "He [Marshal] wasn't a responsible person from the start, so they went out there where he could be even less responsible."

The experiment left its mark on rider south in quirky ways. he never developed a liking for music or sports. Due to early deprivations, he can't bring himself to turn off the shower until the last drop of hot water is drained from the tank. The limited dining opportunities on "the hill," as Rider calls Ghost Mountain, also left him with a taste for odd food combinations—frozen peas with chocolate syrup and pie with guacamole.

But these are minor eccentricities, and not what I drove all the way to Silver City to discover. What I and others have really wanted to know all these years was: How did the wild children turn out? Do their lives vindicate their father's dream?

By most measures, the brood raised on Ghost Mountain is a success. They're financially secure; they have families of their own (Rider has two grown sons from a former marriage) and the families are close. On the caring and kindness scale, too, the kids have prospered. Rider South sends birthday cards to people he's only met once, and he thinks nothing of driving across several states to comfort a friend in trouble.

But if the kids are a testament to their raising, they are not exactly the sort of testament Marshal South wished to create. His aim was to spring his children from the snares of civilization— "the factory," as he called it. But Rider went to work in an aircraft factory and stayed there most of his adult life. One of his proudest possessions is a plaque awarded for five years of service without ever missing a day of work.

His idea of freedom is a paid-off house and car and a government pension. Without a trace of his shrug, he says: "Life is pretty good. This is about as good as it's going to get."

And while Marshal South was, in essence, a tree-hugger, Rider is a Republican who supports oil drilling in the Arctic and says environmentalism just isn't pragmatic. As for primitive living and wilderness adventure, "Rider doesn't even like to barbecue," says his wife.

Victoria, too, was left with few sentimental notions about the simple life. “I have no use for the desert,” she says. “None whatsoever.”

It seems too pat to say that what one generation rejects the next embraces—but there it is. Marshal and Tanya South chose the wilderness over town, clay pots over Tupperware. Rider South stores those handmade pots in his suburban garage and makes lunch on a Taco Bell Quesadilla Maker.