

# The Gunnar Widforss Catalogue Raisonné Project

January 2013

2012 has been a very exciting and productive year. I have been able to work with a great range of primary materials, especially correspondence between Gunnar Widforss and his close friends and patrons, giving me greater insight into his personality, his travels, and his business. I have also been able to add eighty-two new original paintings to the catalogue raisonné along with a large number of reproductions and other related materials. Perhaps most exciting of all, I have been able to begin assessing Widforss' place within the greater community of Swedish-American artists of his generation.

## Sound Business Practices and Mystery Trees - Yosemite and Sequoia National Parks

During August and early September I spent four weeks conducting research in a variety of institutions in central and northern California. Two of the most fun and productive stops were in Yosemite and Sequoia National Parks. In Yosemite National Park I was honoured to give a presentation as part of the National Park Service program "Yosemite Forum." With gracious thanks to Linda Eade, Librarian, and Archivist Gwen Barrow, I was able to find a good deal of useful information in the Yosemite National Park Library and the park archives. One of the greatest things that Gwen found for me was a memo describing the business arrangements between Gunnar and the Yosemite Park and Curry Company. The memo specified that he would supply three paintings a month in exchange for room and board, and a place to park his car in the company garage.

From Yosemite I travelled south to Sequoia National Park where I gave three lectures, including one for the Park Service staff. Until my visit to Sequoia National Park this summer I had been mystified by my inability to verify that Gunnar had painted in Sequoia or King's Canyon National Parks. Neither park is mentioned in the brief summaries of the letters that I currently have access to. However, given their close proximity to Yosemite and the wealth of rich subject matter from alpine vistas to giant Sequoias it seemed to me inconceivable that he wouldn't have visited the two parks.

Following my presentation for the park staff at Sequoia/Kings Canyon, Museum Curator Ward



*Sequoias*, no date, 29 x 23 3/4 inches (74 x 60 cm). The small group of trees near the "House Group." Courtesy private collector.

Eldridge told me he thought one of the paintings of a small group of Sequoias that I showed the audience might in fact be a group of trees called the "House Group," located within the larger Giant Forest grove.

The following day my daughter, Mira, and I set off for a walk through the Giant Forest to visit the House Group. After about a twenty minute walk in a light mist we approached the House Group. It turned out that the group of trees in the painting wasn't the House Group. The painting depicts another, unnamed small group approximately 100 yards west of the House Group on the trail! Because of Gunnar's meticulous draftsmanship the painting is an almost exact representation of the group of trees and verifies little has changed in eighty-five years. He had removed two or three trees in the painting in order to open up the composition a bit and aside from that the depiction was spot on – clear visual proof that he had spent some time painting in Sequoia National Park.

If you are interested, you can view a map of the location of the trees on the web site at [www.gunnarwidforss.org/images/SequoiaGiantForestMap.jpg](http://www.gunnarwidforss.org/images/SequoiaGiantForestMap.jpg)



## Friends and Patrons

One of the things that helped Gunnar Widforss make a living painting landscapes in America, particularly after 1929, was his friendship with a number of important men in the National Park Service and conservation groups.

After I left Sequoia National Park I travelled north to Davis where I visited and worked in the University of California Davis' Special Collections Library and its Mike and Margaret B. Harrison Western Research Center Collection. The Harrisons are notable for (among other things) assembling a private library of more than 21,000 volumes on western American history that they housed and made available to scholars in the living room of their house before donating the collection to UC Davis in 2006. Mike Harrison worked for the Park Service at Grand Canyon and was a close friend of Gunnar's. Mike's first wife, Elizabeth Hegemann, wrote the Southwestern classic *Navajo Trading Days*. I was able to glean a great deal of important information from correspondence to Harrison from Widforss between the years 1927 to 1933. Harrison also had six paintings by Gunnar that I photographed and added to the catalogue. You may recall the photograph of a painting done by Gunnar of Monument Valley that I included in the first newsletter. I was very excited to find that Mike Harrison had a very similar painting of the same view painted from the same location, and it's much nicer!

One of my most anticipated meetings in September was with Roger and Johanna Hall. They are respectively the son and grand-daughter of Ansel Hall. Ansel Hall was an important early leader in the National Park Service and one of Widforss' closest friends and greatest patrons. He was an important figure who connects together much of Widforss' activity in the United States. It was Ansel Hall who commissioned Widforss to produce the illustrations for Hall's beautiful reprinted edition of Harold Symmes' *Songs of Yosemite*. I spent

a wonderful day with Roger and Johanna talking about Ansel and photographing their Widforss paintings.

This year I traced letters to and from Ansel Hall to three other important friends and patrons of Gunnar's: John C. Merriam, Newton Drury and Fritiof Fryxell. Merriam and Drury were both founding board members of the Save the Redwoods League (SRL). Newton Drury would go on to become the Director of the National Park Service from (1940 - 1951). At the Library of Congress I found a good deal of valuable correspondence between Merriam, Ansel Hall and Newton Drury. In addition to serving as a board member for the SRL John C. Merriam was the President of the Carnegie Foundation. Among the many endeavours that the Carnegie Foundation supported they provided partial funding for the Yavapai Observation Station and Museum at Yavapai Point at Grand Canyon constructed in 1928. Gunnar Widforss consulted with Ansel Hall and George Collins on some of the interpretative design elements for the museum.

## The Redwood Empire

There is a long history of trees as subjects in the history of Swedish painting and it's safe to say that Gunnar loved painting trees more than any other subject. He once said "How can you paint the Redwoods? They are too high, too tremendous, too wonderful?" California art critics wrote more than once that Gunnar was one of the few artists capable of painting Redwood trees. In the 1920s he would regularly visit the stands of Redwoods in Humboldt County in Northern California for weeks on end to paint the trees.

Sunday, July 12th.- 8:15 P.M., leave San Francisco  
via Northwestern Pacific Railroad.

Monday, July 13th.- 6:51 A.M., arrive at Scotia.  
Spend day studying Bull Creek and Dyerville areas;  
spend night at Scotia Hotel. (If time allows, a  
short side trip should be made to visit the Red-  
woods at Camp Grant, about three miles from South  
Fork on the main Eel River). (Mr. Gunnar Widforss,  
the well-known painter, is making studies of the  
Redwoods in the Dyerville-Bull Creek region - has  
been staying at the Schnelling Hotel, McKee's, near  
Dyerville.)

Excerpt from a letter from Newton P. Drury to John C. Merriam, July 11, 1925.







In July 1925 Newton Drury wrote a letter to John C. Merriam with a proposed itinerary for their visits to various stands of Redwood Trees in Northern California. As you can see in Drury's notes to Merriam (above) he suggested that they pay a visit to Gunnar who had been working in the area since early July. Widforss donated the use of at least one of his Redwoods paintings for use as a greeting card printed by Save the Redwoods League.

Widforss was acquainted with the prominent Swedish-American geologist Fritiof Fryxell of Augustana College who purchased one of his Yosemite paintings and later donated the work to the Augustana College Art Museum. He also organized an exhibition of Widforss' paintings at Augustana College in 1938. Their relationship directly, or indirectly, associates Widforss with the other Swedish-American artists with whom Fryxell was familiar and supported.



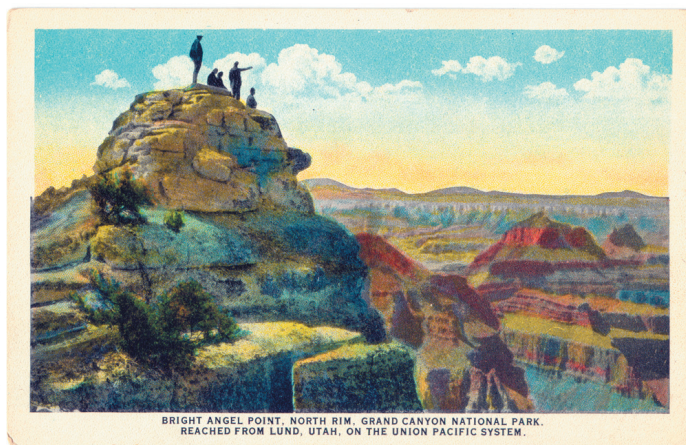
Life in Yosemite Valley in 1924. Gunnar and a friend.



## An Unexpected Find

Of course, one of the great joys of this project is in the unexpected things that turn up.

When Gunnar worked on the North Rim of Grand Canyon from 1923 – 1927 (before the completion of Grand Canyon Lodge) he would stay at the Wylie Wayside Camp operated by Thomas and Elizabeth McKee (daughter and so-in-law of William T. Wylie). It's interesting to note that the Wylie camp was also the home of plucky little Brighty the Burro of Maguerite Henry's classic children's book, an early influence on my interest in Grand Canyon.



Union Pacific Postcard showing Gunnar Widforss, left, and the McKee family at Bright Angel Point, circa 1924.

While corresponding with the McKee's granddaughter she shared a family photo with me that showed Gunnar along with Thomas McKee and his family, standing at Bright Angel Point on the rim. It turns out that, previously unknown to me, a postcard was printed from that photograph by the Union Pacific Railway. I accidentally ran across one of these on ebay and was able to acquire it! That's Gunnar on the tip of the rock.

## A Few Other Notes

Between March and November I presented nine lectures for a variety of audiences, all of whom were fascinated with Widforss' story and his paintings. In addition to giving talks in Yosemite, Sequoia and Zion National Parks I also enjoyed meeting the members and giving talks for the Scandinavian Cultural Center of Santa Cruz, and Svea Lodge of San Jose. While in Washington DC I was honoured to be able to give a talk on Widforss for the cartographic art and design staff of the National Geographic Society. That was a highlight for me!







One of the most important things that I have been able to do this year is to begin placing Widforss in the context of other early twentieth century Swedish-American artists. Although he lived in remote locations where he painted, Widforss participated in many exhibitions featuring other Swedish-American artists at the Chicago Art Institute and the Brooklyn Museum of Art. I'm excited about further investigating Widforss' place in the larger community of Swedish-American artists, and his relationship with other patrons in the United States as well as those in Sweden who supported the ex-patriot artists.

During the summer of 2013 I plan to visit Sweden to meet members of Gunnar's family. I hope to locate and have translated his voluminous letters, and to photograph and catalog the many paintings that I anticipate finding. I'll also visit a number of Swedish museums and galleries to do research. I am very excited to meet his family to walk in his homeland.

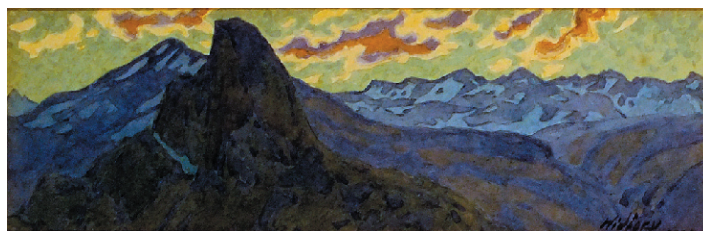


Above, *Aspens, North Rim*, no date, watercolor on paper, 19 x 24 1/2 inches (48 x 62 cm). Courtesy private collector. Right, *California Redwoods*, c. 1925, watercolor on paper, 25 1/2 x 20 inches (64.8 x 50.8 cm). Courtesy private collector.

Gunnar really did love to paint trees and as these two works illustrate he was a master. He didn't shy away from difficult subjects, he relished the challenges. In a letter written to Mike Harrison on June of 1931 from the North Rim of Grand Canyon he wrote, "*Today I expect to finish my first picture [of Grand Canyon] from here. However, one or two more canyon pictures will probably be all – until I see that they sell. Because there are most wonderful groups of aspens here. And they fascinate me much more than the Canyon.*" The painting of the Redwoods on the right was sadly destroyed in the great Oakland Fire of 1991.



My work this year has been extremely productive and for this I thank the Barbro Osher Pro Suecia Foundation and the Swedish-American Historical Society. It means a lot to me to be able to bring recognition to an important Swedish-American artist with the generous support and the vision of Swedish-American foundations.



*Half Dome From Glacier Point*, c. 1924, watercolor on paper, 2 x 6 inches (5.1 x 15.2 cm). Courtesy of Roger Hall.

As always - if you happen across any paintings or other materials pertaining to Gunnar Widforss or his friends and patrons please contact me.

Best wishes for the coming year.

Alan Petersen

