

ESTHER HENDERSON & CHUCK ABBOTT

BY MATT JAFFE

THIS IS THE STORY OF THE DANCER AND THE COWBOY — a romance for the ages, set against the widescreen splendor of an untamed Arizona.

In a word, photographer Esther Henderson was plucky — good at pretty much anything she set out to do. But no single word could capture the character of her husband, Chuck Abbott, a man who spent his first 48 years seeking opportunity, from Hawaii to war-torn Europe, before finally finding the love of his life one day in Tucson.

They would go on to become the first couple of Arizona photography, traveling for weeks at a time on rugged, rutted roads, from stands of aspens in the San Francisco Peaks to expanses of sand verbenas in the desert dunes along the Colorado River. They were forever in search of that ephemeral moment when light could transform land into art.

“We took everything, every season, under every lighting condition, every direction, north, south, east and west,” Esther said.

In the parlance of romantic comedies, theirs was a “meet-cute,” that moment when a couple-to-be first encounter each other in an implausible or amusing manner. Not that Esther was in a laughing mood when Chuck first came calling.

She stood just 5 feet, 2 inches tall. Weighed barely a nickel over 100 pounds. But Esther could be plenty tough. And she wasn’t at all pleased when Tucson businessman Roy Drachman hired Abbott, an outsider from Palm Springs, to photograph for the Tucson Sunshine Climate Club, a booster organization.

Drachman had insisted to Esther that any work related to the club needed to be done locally. Now he had imported a photographer. From California, of all places. “She called on me and raised the devil about



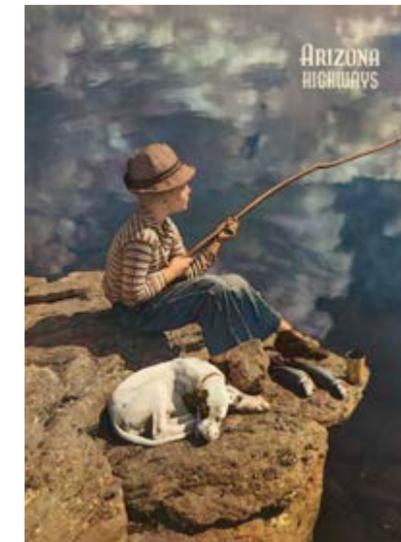
RIGHT: “To Miss Esther Henderson of Tucson are we again indebted for our Christmas cover,” Editor Raymond Carlson wrote in the December 1940 issue of *Arizona Highways*. “It was she, you will remember, who supplied the color study from which our cover of Christmas, 1939, was made ... San Xavier Mission. The subject of our cover this month is [the] San Francisco Peaks.”

OPPOSITE PAGE: Esther Henderson once joked that after meeting her future husband, Chuck Abbott, she decided that “it might be pretty nice to have a man carry the equipment and drive the car.”



“My wife once said to me that photography consisted of fifty percent Providence, fifty percent good equipment, fifty percent leg work and two percent brains. I replied that you could only have one hundred percent in a whole. ‘That’s what I mean,’ she said. ‘It takes more than the most to get a good picture.’”

— CHUCK ABBOTT



FAR LEFT: Esther titled this photo from the Tucson area *Moody Afternoon*, and it appeared in our January 1953 issue. "Autumn has passed and spring is yet to come," Esther wrote. "The hand of winter holds the season in a state of suspended animation."

LEFT: Chuck's photograph of a young boy fishing in a mountain stream graced our June 1945 cover. "Chuck Abbott has truly caught the Spirit of Young America in this delightful scene," Editor Bert Campbell wrote.

"Some of the most enchanting effects are seen before ten and after four. Exposure is more of a hazard but the gamble is worth it. Mornings are blue, evenings are red, and I see no reason for not capturing, if possible, those effects which to me are the most exciting."

— ESTHER HENDERSON

my having hired Chuck Abbott," Drachman recalled years later, in his memoir.

Weary of the controversy, he thought it might help if Chuck spoke with Esther to try to smooth things over, adding, "She's a nice girl. She's all alone."

BORN IN 1911, Esther grew up in Oak Park, Illinois, the stately Chicago suburb where Frank Lloyd Wright spent the early part of his career and Ernest Hemingway came of age. A self-made man who left school when he was just 9, her inventor father, Robert Carl Henderson, worked as an executive

at a major printing press company. After his wife's death, he retired and helped Esther with her budding dance career.

Once she finished high school, they moved to New York City, where Esther was discovered by Gus Edwards, a vaudeville producer who also had discovered Groucho Marx, among others. Famous in his day, Edwards was enshrined in the Songwriters Hall of Fame for such hits as *By the Light of the Silvery Moon*, and Bing Crosby played a fictionalized version of him in the 1939 musical *The Star Maker*.

Edwards didn't exactly make Esther a star, but she earned a good living at the height of the Great Depression by working in

cabarets at upscale hotels and supper clubs, performing what she described as "toe dancing and ballet" and called "very flashy." She loved the life but had vowed to her father that she would find a new career by the time she turned 25. With that deadline looming, she looked in the Yellow Pages for inspiration and saw the listings for photographers.

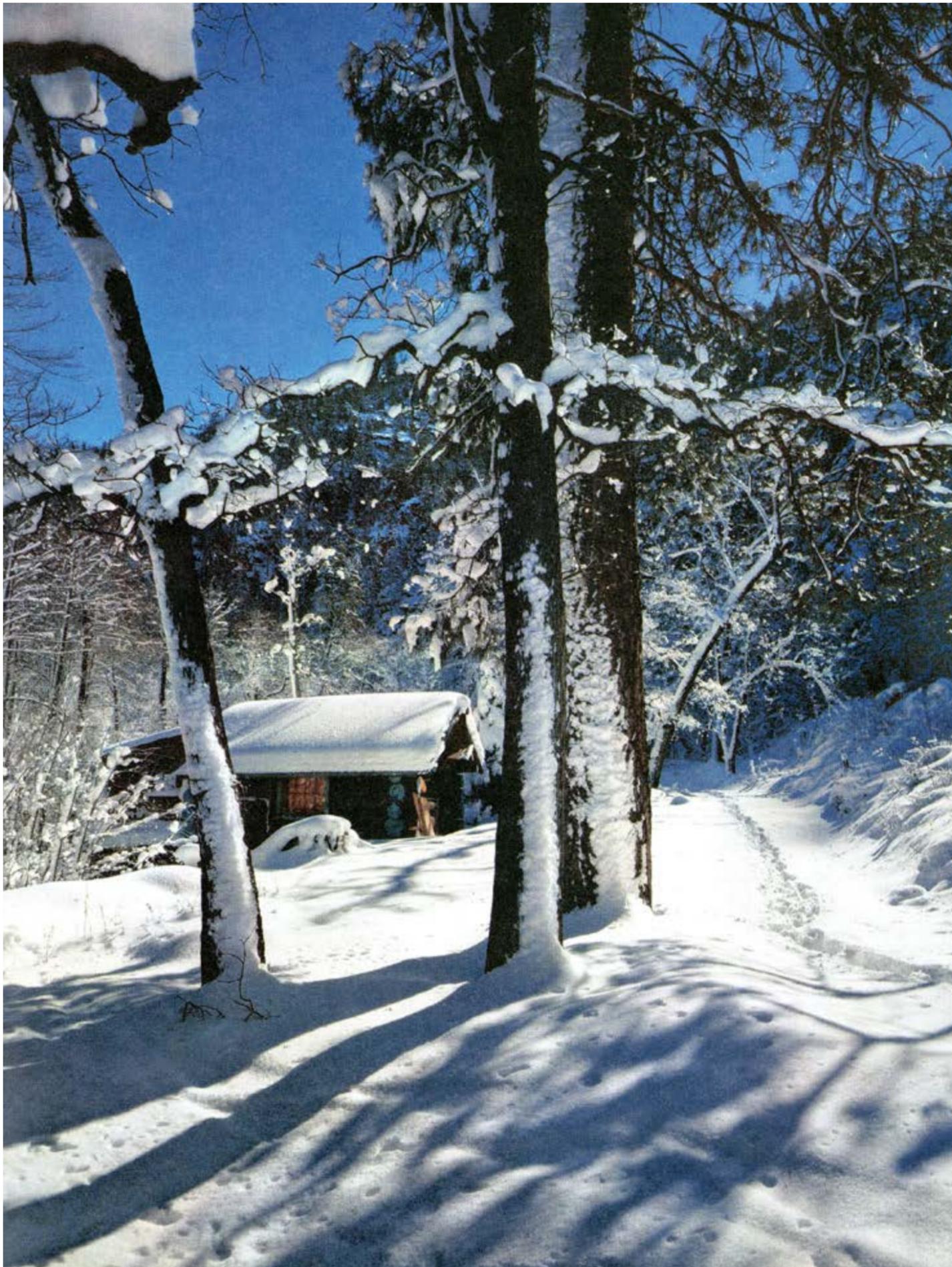
"When I came to photography," she said, "I thought, *Well, that deals with line and light, and that's something that I know something about, because that's what dancing is, you might say.*"

Dipping into her savings, a grand total of \$239 after seven years onstage, Esther enrolled in an intensive, three-month

commercial photography and portraiture program the very next day. She set up a darkroom in a hotel bathroom, and her father served as a model for thousands of photographs.

By the time Esther completed the program, both father and daughter were ready for a change. The previous summer, they had vacationed in Minnesota, where he still owned a fishing shack — a true shack, Esther recalled, with no electricity or running water. They savored their time in nature after never having seen any trees, except in Central Park.

Years later, in New York, Henderson looked down from her Times Square hotel room and saw a huge crowd gathered



“That’s the trouble with this picture business — there is so little satisfaction in it! You are always beset with the haunting thought that every picture could be improved, if not by you, then by someone, sometime. So you end up traveling in a circle, periodically returning to do a better, or at least a different, interpretation of the subject. Perfection, of course, is the goal.”

— CHUCK ABBOTT

for a concert by Frank Sinatra (“Some punk kid,” her father remarked) at the Paramount Theatre. “And I thought, *I must be crazy, because the world goes on outside and has so much more to do than just what I’m doing,*” she said.

Raised in the flatlands of the Midwest, Esther had always craved easy access to mountains, those caterpillar-like squiggles that first caught her attention as a young girl when she studied the maps in her *Frye’s Complete Geography* atlas.

In 1934, Esther and her father plotted their next move and, following Horace Greeley’s famous adage, decided to go west. There were extended stops, first in Norfolk, Virginia, and then in San Antonio, where Esther worked in a darkroom to gain experience. The roads were horrible, paved entirely with “three-sided stones,” according to Esther. It rained constantly before the Hendersons arrived in Douglas, Arizona, where the sun was shining on New Year’s Eve in 1934. They stayed the night at the landmark Gadsden Hotel before arriving in Tucson on the very first day of 1935.

In Tucson, Henderson checked out the photographic competition before deciding to stay.

They can use a good one, and I’m good, she recalled thinking. “You know, innovative and good. ... To gain experience, I took everybody’s picture — the mailman, the milk delivery man, whoever came to the door in the neighborhood that I knew — just to get experience, so that when I really opened up a business, I wouldn’t fall on my face.”

Esther’s reputation quickly grew. The first year she operated her portrait studio, Raymond Carlson, the now-legendary editor of *Arizona Highways*, stopped in looking for scenic shots as the magazine transitioned from its literal focus on Arizona highways themselves to the places those roads could lead. Esther’s inventory was limited. But she began to shoot more landscapes, and her photos became the first that Carlson bought for the magazine.

Esther worked in the studio during the week, then spent weekends exploring, hauling gear that weighed nearly half as much she did, including her precious 5x7 Deardorff view camera.

“I came to the Southwest as a greenhorn photographer newly



You've Got to Go Back to Get the Good Ones (above), a story and portfolio by Chuck, was published in our September 1955 issue. The story discussed his and Esther's approach to photographing Arizona, and the portfolio included *Cabin in the Snow* (opposite page), a shot of a summer cabin in Oak Creek Canyon in January.

embarking on a studio career,” she wrote in *My Southwest*, a 1968 *Arizona Highways* retrospective of her work. “It didn’t take long to find that I had already made the first mistake: choosing a business that would keep me in a darkroom after I had come to a land of sunlight.”

CHUCK ABBOTT TOOK HIS OWN LONG, bumpy road to Tucson. His peripatetic life began in the Michigan lumber town of Cambro in 1892, but he spent most of his childhood in Portland, Oregon, after coming west by covered wagon as a young boy. Chuck worked for two years on a pineapple plantation in Hawaii before serving during World War I with the Army’s 23rd Engineer Battalion in France and Germany.

Chuck carried a camera with him throughout the war and as he explored Europe after the armistice. He photographed the destruction of the Battle of Verdun, as well as dead German soldiers and such notables as General John J. “Black Jack” Pershing while making pictures of an assortment of historic sites, including the home of Joan of Arc, 12th century churches and Roman baths. He sold sets of war prints in Germany and France and also captured events during the German Revolution of 1918 and ’19 before finally returning to the U.S. in 1921.

In New York, Chuck parlayed income from his war photography into a Fifth Avenue exotic-bird shop he operated with a friend from Germany. Back then, he was no cowboy. Chuck



Portrait of a Storm, Esther's shot of rain at the Grand Canyon, occupied two pages of our December 1951 issue. "A storm in the desert land is a thing of beauty if one can forget one's fear of the storm," Editor Raymond Carlson wrote in an accompanying essay.

"While driving, we often pass parked shutter-clickers who are apparently clicking away at the worst angle under the poorest lighting conditions. They are usually using good equipment and bad judgment."

— ESTHER HENDERSON

married a New York socialite and donned spats and a straw hat while carrying a cane through the streets of Manhattan. The bird shop prospered for a while, but as the economy in Germany collapsed, so did the business.

Chuck took his wife and young daughter to Florida, where he opened Abbott's Joint, a dance hall and casino along the coast. Then, in 1928, the Category 5 Okeechobee hurricane, one of the deadliest natural disasters in U.S. history, destroyed the building — and, with it, Chuck's marriage.

From Florida, Chuck moved to California, where his sister lived, and he owned a coffee and pie shop in Carmel for five years, until famed hotelier Nellie Coffman, owner of the Desert Inn resort in Palm Springs, hired him. In the desert, Chuck led combination horseback rides and barbecues, during which he would cook over open fires and regale hotel guests with songs and tales of the Old West.

He briefly married another socialite, this one from San Francisco, but dedicated more time to photography as his pictures won acclaim during exhibitions at the inn's gallery. The "Cowboy Photographer" was born. And around 1940, Drachman lured Chuck to Tucson.

CHUCK, TALL AND RANGY in his cowboy boots and Stetson, went over to the house and studio that Esther's father had built on a lot thick with caliche on Speedway Boulevard. Late one morning, as Esther worked in the darkroom, her secretary knocked and said Chuck was waiting out front. Esther wouldn't have it: "You tell him I don't want to see him, and this is Christmas rush and I'm busy — no time."

Soon, Esther began to have second thoughts and called Chuck to invite him back. "So, he came over, and when I opened the door and I saw him ... Chuck had white hair very early in life, and was so nice-looking. I thought: *Gee, look at what a nut I was. Wouldn't even talk to him! Wouldn't even see him!*"

“While I am taking a shot, my husband is scouting another. If pressed for time he takes meter readings while I change lenses. We divide up the equipment for portage, and on long hikes that means this individual, at least, is still breathing on reaching the location! My husband carries the film bag, I, the tripod, the oldest boy, the camera, and the littlest, the lunch. Cooperative endeavor, we believe, is more than a system for taking pictures efficiently — it is a good road for all families to travel.”

— ESTHER HENDERSON



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:

Esther's words, sketches and photographs formed *My Southwest*, a piece in the January 1968 issue of *Arizona Highways*.

A determined juniper clings to sandstone in the Navajo Nation's Mystery Valley, as photographed by Esther for our January 1953 issue.

The couple's sons, Carl (standing) and Mark, frequently accompanied Chuck and Esther on their trips around the Southwest. *Arizona Historical Society*

Esther poured highballs, and when she offered to freshen Chuck's drink, he declined. “So, I wasn't able to get him drunk,” she said.

The next weekend, they packed their cameras and a picnic for a day of desert photography. It was the start of a beautiful friendship, creative partnership and romance.

Esther's father had recently died, and Esther was 30, late for a woman to remain single in those days. She was ready for marriage and thought of practical considerations as well, explaining, “It might be pretty nice to have a man carry the equipment and drive the car.” A few months after they met, Esther, no shrinking violet, proposed to Chuck — at 48 a good 18 years her senior.

During a photo trip in the summer of 1941, the couple stopped in Holbrook to get married. A Navajo County justice of the peace performed the ceremony, with two state highway patrol officers serving as witnesses. Esther had packed a gray silk dress for the occasion, but because the couple planned to go back out into the field for more photography after the wedding, she ended up wearing her jeans with a new blue shirt she bought for \$1 at Babbitt Brothers Trading Co. The newlyweds

crossed the street to toast their marriage with chocolate sodas at a drugstore before spending their wedding night camping next to a gravel dump outside Fort Defiance, along the New Mexico border.

If that doesn't sound especially romantic, consider Esther's account, written more than 40 years later: “I still remember the starlight, which I had thought was the figment of an author's imagination. But on that moonless night, far from any city illumination, the billions of stars gave off enough light to see the nearby hills like a black silhouette against a dark blue velvet sky.”

CHUCK MOVED into Esther's house on Speedway, and the couple began building a life together. But when the United States entered World War II, Esther's business went through a transition. More and more families started coming to her studio to have portraits made of sons who would soon go off to war.

Meanwhile, Esther and Chuck had sons of their own: first Carl in 1943, then Mark in 1947. For a time during the war, Esther closed her studio and the couple bought a farm near the ruins of Fort Lowell. In an age before helicopter parenting, they crafted a boat cradle for Carl and anchored it to the bank of a stream while they harvested eggplants, potatoes and tomatoes in their nearby fields.

The couple still took photo trips — that is, when they had enough gasoline during the years of fuel rationing. In 1942, they visited the White Mountain Apache Tribe's land and made some of the most significant photos of their careers. If somewhat idealized, these images captured aspects of the still-traditional life of the tribe: residents constructing *gowas*, or traditional dwellings made of tree limbs; babies carried in cradleboards; and children, alongside a river, pouring water into vessels borne by a donkey. Chuck's photo of billowing clouds over the 700-year-old Kinishba Ruins still appears on the cover of the visitor guide to this National Historic Landmark.

After the war, Esther reopened her studio, and in 1947, the couple launched the Photocenter — a color lab and studio, with



an art gallery dedicated to what they called “Arizoniana” — in a strip of buildings Chuck built along the 2300 block of East Broadway Boulevard. Between a young family and a new business, getting out to shoot became more challenging.

“I found that owning one's own business has its price,” Esther wrote in 1968. “One is never ‘free.’ I found that freedom of the freelance photographer has its price: One is never ‘secure.’ I found the Southwest has its price: a never-ending search to more accurately translate its majesty into human terms.”

Carl and Mark accompanied their parents on trips, and the family worked as a team. The boys helped out where they could, carrying cameras and light gear, as their parents searched for pictures. Behind the wheel of a succession of vehicles, including a classic Ford “woodie” and later a Ford Ranch Wagon with “Chuck Abbott Illustrative Photography” stenciled in script on the door, Chuck handled the driving as Esther directed them to prime locations. Their pictures filled *Arizona Highways*: Esther's shot of a cowboy and his horse gazing down from Maricopa Point graced the cover of a 1954 issue on the Grand Canyon, with Chuck's photo of a rainbow arcing over Zoroaster Temple on the inside front cover. It took four years for Chuck to capture a slope of poppies rising up to meet a ruddy promontory in Cochise County, while Esther turned a pair of tire ruts, filled by recent rains, into a mirror that reflected nearby saguaros and the snow-covered Santa Catalina Mountains in the distance.

Carl, now 76, says, “My mother had the ambition, really. She

“Another concomitance of photography is the reviewing of the files, a costly but necessary diversion, wherein we hope to add more than we subtract. That is, replace old shots with new and better ones. Sometimes we are aghast to see again what we thought at the time represented our best effort.”

— CHUCK ABBOTT

was the go-getter, in a way. My father went along. Especially on the photography side: He would drive, and she would decide where the pictures would be, because she had more of the talent for photography, where his talent was more in business and real estate. He wasn't particularly artistic, I guess you'd say. The business was what interested him.”

In the 1950s, Esther started writing and photographing *Way Out West With Esther Henderson*, a weekly feature for the *Tucson Citizen*, and the family headed off on extended drives into the American West during the boys' vacations. It was the Golden Age of road trips — a time before air-conditioned cars, when Arizona was wild, open country.

Esther recalled driving 8 mph up Yarnell Hill toward Prescott on a road she described as “some wayward burro's reverie.” Carl befriended a Navajo boy named Benny No-Goats at Monument Valley (“I can't talk Indian and he can't talk English much, so we don't have no arguments”), and Esther photographed a storefront, with no store behind it, in a pre-tourism Tombstone. Up in the high country, the Abbotts whipped up their own version of ice cream by mixing vanilla, cream and sugar into snow, and the family camped by streams where the boys fished with crooked poles crafted from branches found in the woods.

Esther rejoiced when, after years of tents and bedrolls, the couple bought a 19-foot, two-toned Aljoa trailer, complete with a bathroom. Long before the advent of digital photography, the family didn't travel light. Esther wrote: “All our clothes and living materials are in the trailer, which leaves the car free for cameras, two hand cameras, six lenses for the large cameras, 50 plate holders, 1,000 sheets of color film (two bucks a sheet), tripods and flash equipment, two suitcases full of hats and shirts for models, and fishing, tenting, camping and cooking gear for picture props. We never have time to pursue these activities ourselves — we just photograph ourselves and others in the role of vacationers!”

The button-nosed boys — fair-haired, freckled, and clad in cowboy boots and dungarees mended with knee patches — doubled as models for their parents. In one memorable shot, they sit upon a split-log fence, with Mark gazing lovingly up at Carl as the latter puffs out his cheeks to blow the seeds off a dandelion.

Sometimes, Esther turned the newspaper feature over to her sons, whom she asked to keep diaries of their travels. In

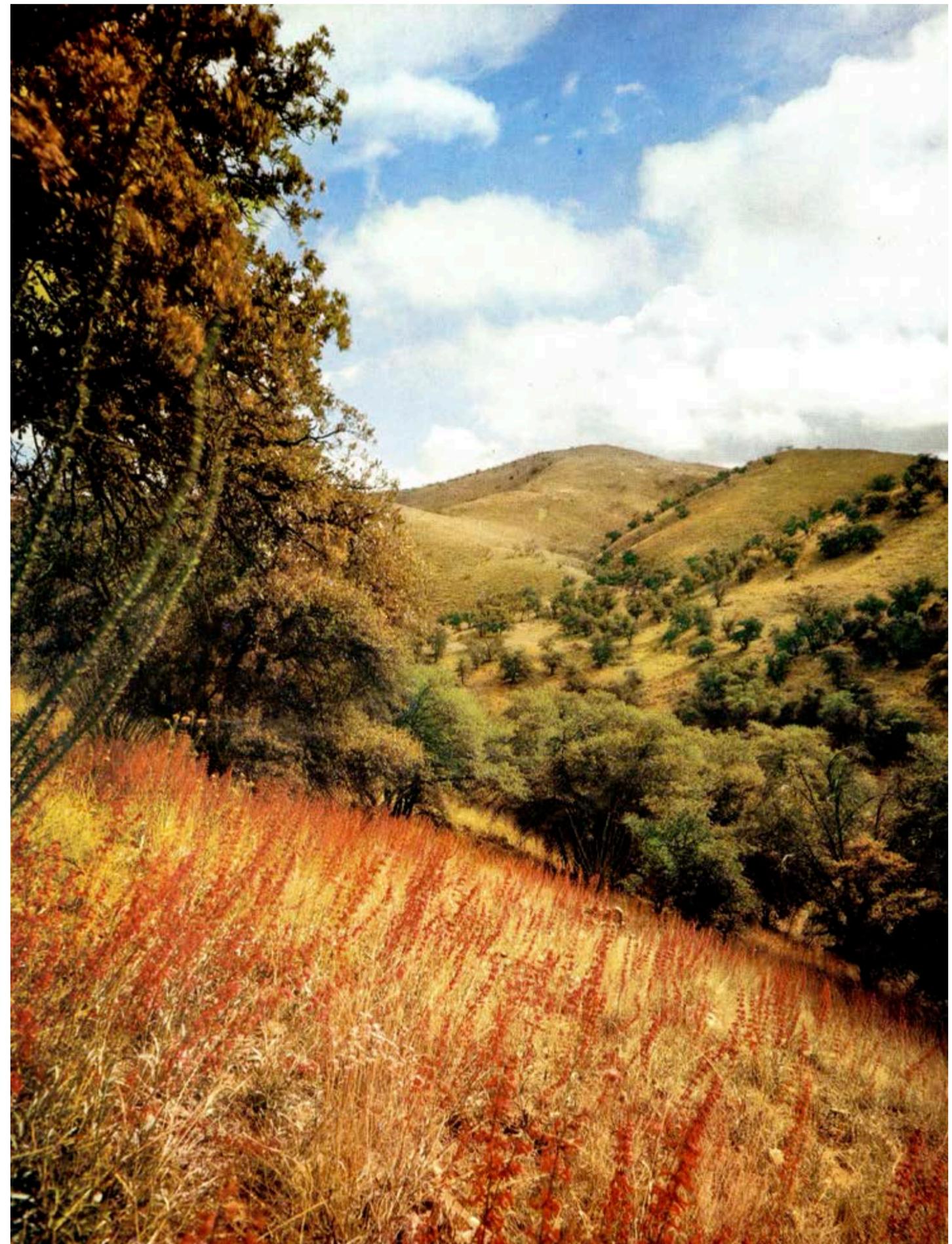


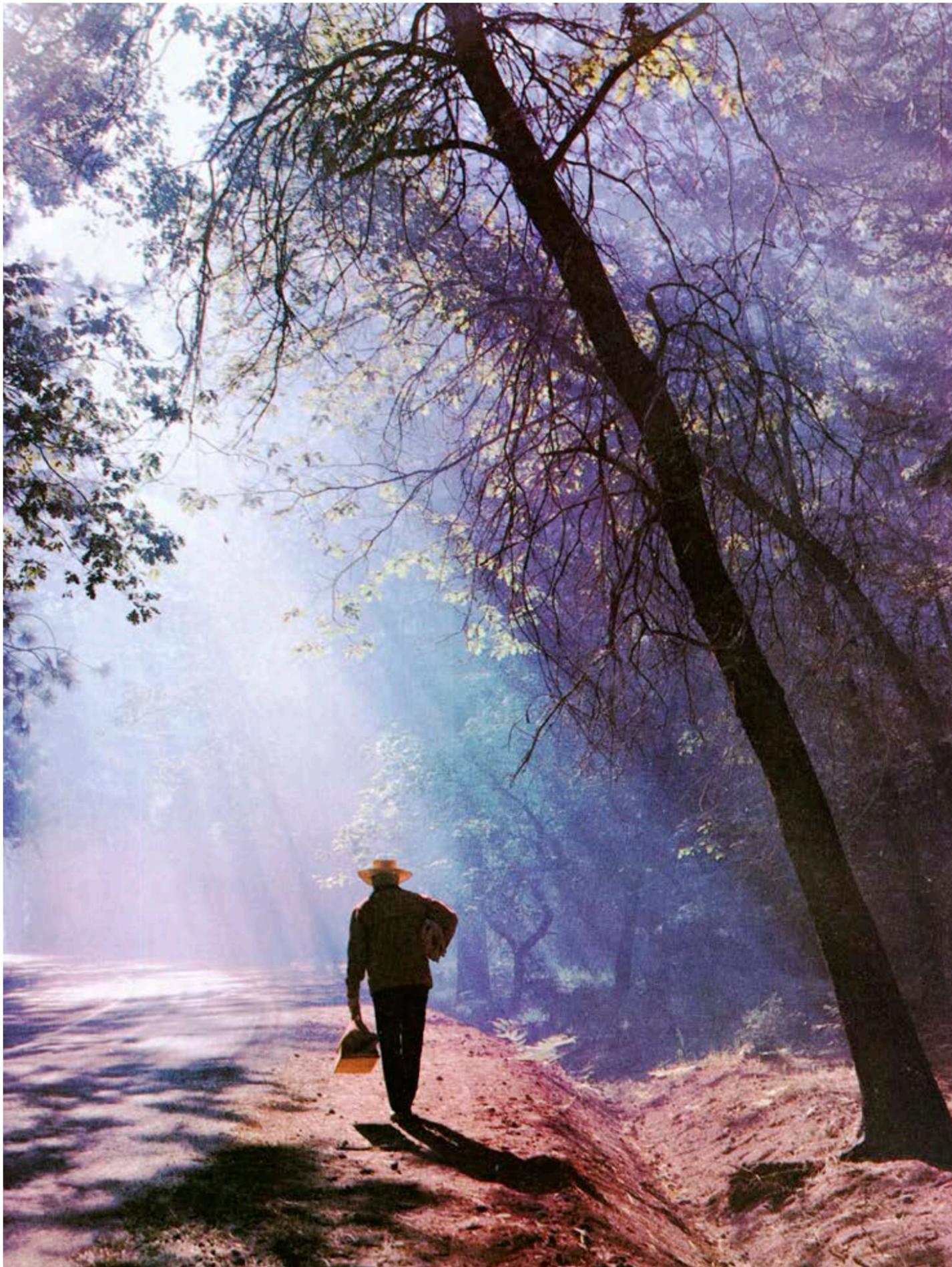
ABOVE: One of Esther's *Way Out West* columns focused on Chiricahua National Monument, and the accompanying photo likely shows Chuck and the boys at the site. *Arizona Historical Society*

RIGHT: *Dance of the Penstemons*, a Chuck photo that ran in our December 1952 issue, shows a varied landscape near the Southern Arizona ghost town of Ruby.

September 1955, Carl wrote, “We can't wait to go away, and then, after a couple of months, we can't hardly wait to get back. But not Mom and Pop. They would never come home — if they could.”

AS MUCH AS THEY LOVED ARIZONA, Esther and Chuck began thinking about a move in the early 1960s. They finally got fed up with the dryness and summer heat. Carl says: “I always liked the desert and wanted them to stay longer in places like Moab [in Utah] and Monument Valley. But they





“My first outdoor assignment took me to Prescott and Oak Creek Canyon. Then, for the first time, I realized how the elevations of Arizona determine the climate and how, within a short distance, they transform the landscape into a completely different scene and season; where the highlands resemble Canadian valleys and the architecture conforms to the climatic demands of the region.”

— ESTHER HENDERSON

would go where there was lots of rain and forest.” The couple once spent 19 days in a Northwest rainforest, trying to get a shot.

Chuck and Esther first bought a ranch in Ouray, Colorado, then moved to Santa Cruz, along California’s Monterey Bay. Chuck had retired by then, and with their money still tied up in the unsold ranch, he told Esther they couldn’t buy a house. Even so, the Abbotts went out with a real estate agent, asking to see “the cheapest, worst place in town,” as Esther described it.

She thought one neighborhood was “a dump” until they went inside a Victorian house with beautiful wooden details. Chuck decided to put in a lowball offer of \$15,000, figuring that the sellers, who were asking \$18,500, would never accept it. “They did take it!” Esther said. “Suddenly, we had a house.”

“They kind of would always bite off more than they could chew on the business side of things,” Carl says. “But they made a success of whatever they jumped into.”

The family settled in Santa Cruz in 1963 and quickly got involved in the community. Chuck renovated the Victorian, and the couple then bought the neighboring house and the one next to that before eventually rehabilitating a line of dilapidated row houses across the street. Victorians had fallen totally out of fashion, but Chuck and Esther felt the style was integral to Santa Cruz’s identity. Mixing metaphors, the local newspaper said of the couple, “They make ‘Cinderellas’ out of ugly ducklings,” and Chuck and Esther would go on to fix up numerous buildings around town, always guided by Chuck’s motto: “Beauty is good business.” He added, “We are great believers in preserving atmosphere in the form of old trees, old buildings and old homes.”

Living in Santa Cruz, Chuck traded his Stetson for a straw hat and became a familiar presence around town. In an attempt to rally the city and merchants to support a downtown improvement plan, Chuck and Esther used their vast inventory of photos of towns and cities around the country in a slideshow that illustrated the potential aesthetic and business benefits of beautification.

Chuck played such an instrumental role in the creation of downtown Santa Cruz’s pedestrian-oriented Pacific Garden Mall that he became known as the “Father of the Mall.” And in 1972, the city established Abbott Square, a downtown plaza where the Abbott Family Band — a bluegrass quartet featuring Carl; his wife, Leslie; and their sons, Luke and Kyle — has performed in recent years.

But another Santa Cruz landmark bearing the Abbott name carries an even deeper meaning for the family. On February 28, 1965, a few days after she and Chuck were honored for their preservation and restoration work, Esther watched as their younger son, Mark, headed out to go bodysurfing. It was a sunny Sunday after the gloom of an extended winter storm.

Mark had come to love the ocean, certainly more than school, and he spent many days fishing from the Santa Cruz Wharf and bodysurfing off Pleasure Point. Chuck said his son had become “one of the top bodysurfers on the California coast.” But Mark drowned that day in heavy surf still churning from the passing storm. “He was an excellent swimmer,” Chuck said, “but old-timers tell me that the undertow here that day was the worst they could remember.”

A month earlier, when Mark turned 18, Esther and Chuck had bought him a life insurance policy, and they used that money to build the Mark Abbott Memorial Lighthouse overlooking Steamer Lane, one of the country’s iconic surf spots. Today, the building houses a surfing museum where Mark’s ashes are interred.

In 1973, Esther would lose Chuck, too. But she lived another 35 years, never wasting a day. She taught Sunday school and volunteered with the Salvation Army and a food bank. She painted, gardened and played jazz piano in a local senior band.

Esther once said she felt like she had lived 10 lifetimes in her 97 years. But looking back, she said, the best times were those days out on the road in Arizona as she and Chuck worked together, forever helping each other in their mutual quest for the next great picture.

“I’m waiting for everything to be perfect,” she recalled, “and Chuck would say, ‘Take it, take it, take it!’” **AH**

“This is Everyman,” Esther wrote of *Into Tomorrow*, a photo published on *Arizona Highways*’ inside back cover in January 1968. “He has embarked on a long journey to an unknown destination; he carries his own burden and he is essentially alone.”