

Bio-A

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Re-living Mrs. Abbott

Why Esther Henderson Abbott left a legacy that Santa Cruz may never forget

BY GREG ARCHER

Not long after Esther Henderson Abbott passed away at the age of 97 in her downtown Santa Cruz home on August 22, I couldn't help but sift through my files. Esther was one of the first people I interviewed when I arrived here in Santa Cruz in 2000. I felt there was something in her story, her history, that I needed to see again. As I read over the transcriptions from our interviews, I quickly realized that her story was something that needed to be shared again. Not just because she died but because of the way she lived.

Born in Oak Park, Ill., in 1911, Abbott went on to study music in New York City. Prohibition had faded in 1933, and she managed to land several gigs singing and dancing at supper clubs, and in hotel dinner shows.

"It was quite a lovely thing," she told GT in 2000. "You lie around all day, and at night, you sing and dance. My dad once said to me, 'You've got some life. When you're through, what have you got? You haven't got anything. You haven't earned enough money to mean anything.'"

"Well, he was right. After seven years, I only had about \$300."

Esther quit show business when she was 25. In an effort to find work, she went to the first place she could think of: the phonebook. "I looked into the phonebook and thought, 'Now, what could I get into?' I came to the photography section and I realized, 'I could do that.'"

She enrolled in photography school at the New York Institute the very next day. Three months later, after having graduated, she set up a darkroom in her bathroom so that she could, in her words, "Make all my mistakes—I must have photographed my father, 5,000 times."

Eventually, father and daughter traveled west, enduring treacherous landscapes and country backroads until they arrived in the charming little town of Douglas, Ariz. It was there, Esther noted in our interview, that she saw her first Arizona sunrise—an impressionable spectacle of rich, burnt oranges and a wild array of violet hues bursting above regal mountain ranges. Of the Southwest, she once said it was "A never-ending search to more accurately translate its majesty into human terms."

But the west was good to Esther and she to it. She worked diligently as a photographer, capturing numerous shots of natural Arizona, until, one day, fate came knocking—literally. She answered the door and found newly appointed Arizona Highways editor Raymond Carlson standing there. He asked her if she wanted a job. Curiously, Esther met her husband Chuck, the same way she met the





BEST SHOTS Esther Henderson Abbott, circa 1950, in Arizona.

Arizona Highways editor—by answering the door. “Always answer the doorbell,” she mused, “you never know what editor or husband will be on your doorstep.”

Esther and Chuck married in 1941. Together, they worked to produce several dozens of noteworthy photography pieces for Arizona Highways. Many critics believed that it was Esther’s work that helped put the now-famous magazine on the map. Her detailed spreads of the Grand Canyon, Mission San Xavier, Oak Creek Canyon, and other scenic, notable Arizona landmarks, seemed to capture their deeper nuances. At the time, few photographers were able to create such detailed spectacles.

But it didn’t come without a great deal of sweat. The Abbotts often lugged around 40 pounds of equipment—a 5 by 7 Deardorff View Camera, a floating action tripod, seemingly endless rolls of film—with them as they traversed up and down countless mountain ranges.

“It was heavy,” Esther noted, “but that’s what makes me as tough as I am today.”

Esther, by the way, was barely five feet tall.

Her photography eventually hit Saturday Evening Post and other well known magazines. She had found success.

Esther and Chuck eventually relocated to Santa Cruz in the ‘60s. There were 22 stores on Pacific Avenue at the time but the couple quickly noticed that the exterior of certain businesses could “look better” if they were “dressed up” a bit. Esther and Chuck had, after all, traveled all over the country and knew what downtowns could look like if they were given some attention.

She said in our GT interview that she and Chuck felt downtown merchants should take pride in their stores. So, the duo

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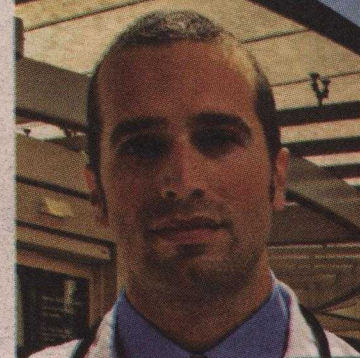
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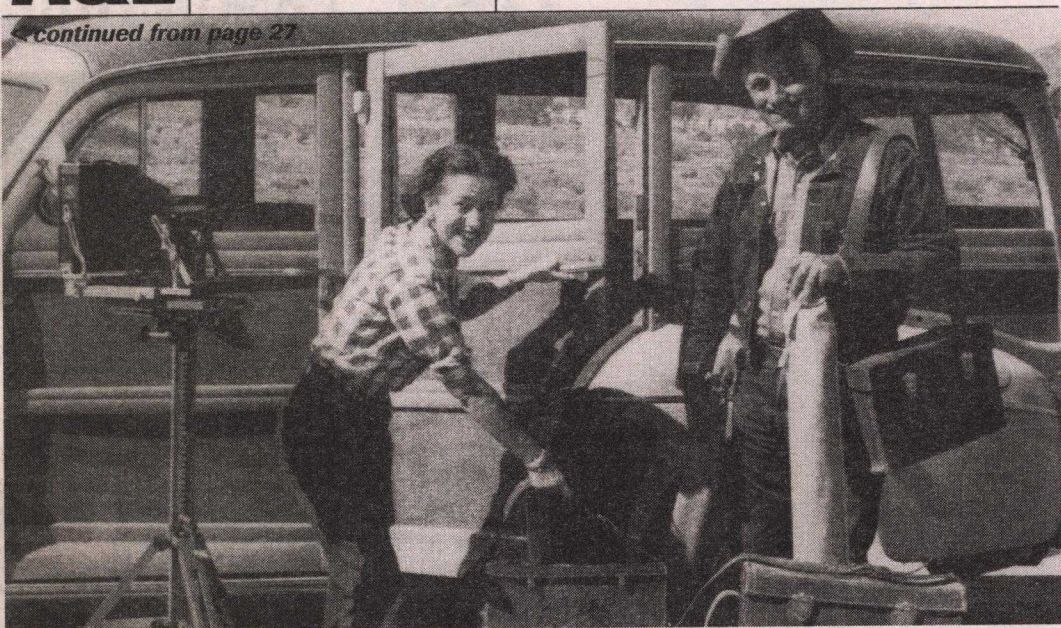
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A&E IN MEMORIAM

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SCRAPBOOK (Top) Esther and Chuck Abbott lug camera equipment in Arizona in the '60s. (Left) The Abbotts with sons Mark (far left) and Carl. (Right) A shot of Leslie and Chuck Abbott, with sons Luke and Kyle, with Esther, this decade.

created a way for the merchants to consider doing just that. They held a series of public meetings in which they presented a slide show featuring thousands of pictures and ideas. Not long afterward, the storefronts were refurbished, paving the way for what became known as Pacific Garden Mall.

"It was really Chuck's project," Abbott noted of her husband, who died in the '70s. "It became the perfect opportunity for this community. There was really no planning here. People would tear down old buildings and there were trees going every which way. Chuck had a vision."

The couple became known as the "father and mother" of what is now a burgeoning downtown district. Their original slides can be seen in UC Santa Cruz's McHenry Library's exhibit dubbed Private Rehabilitation of Downtown (PROD).

While they were at it ... the Abbotts went one step further. They purchased a series of run-down Victorians on Lincoln Street that were about to be demolished. They are now known as The Abbott Row Victorians and a city landmark.

They couple had two sons, Carl and Mark. In 1965, Mark died in surfing accident. He was 18. Not long after, the Abbotts wanted to create a positive experience around the incident. They decided to erect the Mark Abbott Memorial Lighthouse along Westcliff Drive, to honor their son. Now one of Santa Cruz's most picturesque icon, it boasts a surf museum inside. Meanwhile, the legendary surfer statue, situated a few hundred yards away, is yet another contribution the Abbotts made to the community.

But Esther would offer her open hands in more arenas. She taught Sunday school for more than 40 years at the Salvation Army, where she also oversaw the organization of the food pantry. She'd fill food bags weekly almost to her death.

She also dipped back into her musical roots, having launched the first hand-held bell choir at the Army's chapel. Then there were all those years playing piano for the Sunday services. She also played piano at convalescent homes at least twice a week for many years.

"Contributing your time is effective; it's useful," she told me. "If you're going to live a life where you say, 'I am going to do whatever I want anytime I want,' well, sooner or later ... it's not a healthy way to live—not mentally or physically. It's important to take action and get involved. That, in itself, is a healthy thing to do, even if you fall on your face doing it."

"I often think, that if Chuck came back, and we did it all over again, it wouldn't be the same because the world has changed; the attitude is different. It's the 'I don't give a hoot for anybody but myself attitude.' People want to be left out having any demand of their time. They're too busy. But what are they really busy doing?"

Esther is survived by her older son, Carl, his wife, Leslie, and their two sons, Luke and Kyle. In fact, the entire family can be seen performing bluegrass music locally. They've dubbed themselves, "The Abbott Family Band."

As I was finishing scanning my notes on Esther, I couldn't help but think that, much like she had done, it would be wise to document some soft of portrait of her. She did, after all, leave behind hundreds of memories. That, and some real humility. I couldn't help but note Esther's response to one of my first inquiries: Did she mind if I interviewed her for a story? "Oh," she said, shaking her head, "I can't imagine why anybody would want to know about me. Me? Of all people!"

A memorial for Esther Henderson Abbott will be held at 2 p.m. Friday, Sept. 26, at the Salvation Army Chapel, 721 Laurel St., Santa Cruz. For more information, call 426-8365.