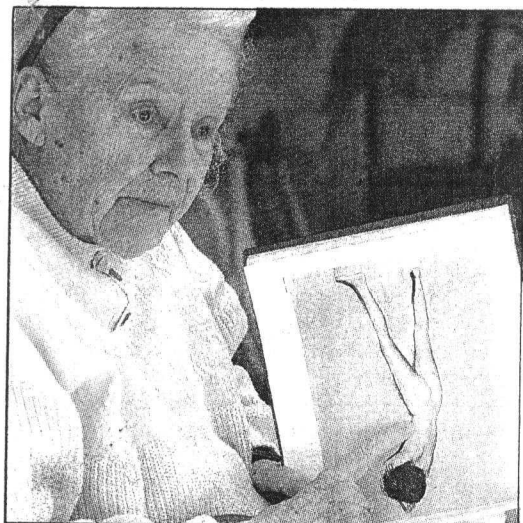


# The woman in the picture

Bio Wilson 11/25/09  
Beyond her fame as Edward Weston's nude model, Charis Wilson lived a full, three-dimensional life



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL FILE

Charis Wilson, former nude model and ex-wife of famed photographer Edward Weston, talks about her work as she looks through a book of Weston's photos of her as a young woman in this April 21, 1998 photo taken at her home in Santa Cruz.

By WALLACE BAINE

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Her name was often mispronounced — it's "Charis," rhymes with "Paris," but with a hard "K" sound at the beginning. Nor was she often recognized in public. But Charis Wilson, who died Friday at her home in Santa Cruz at the age of 95, carried a particularly potent and long-lasting brand of fame.

We knew her by her image.

Thanks to her long association with the fabled Carmel-based pho-

tographer Edward Weston, Wilson's nude body is one of the most iconic human images in the history of photography. From 1934, when the two first met, until the middle 1940s, Wilson served not only as Weston's model and later his wife, but his creative partner in what was one of the most productive periods of his long career.

"She didn't really think of herself as a muse, or an icon," said

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her daughter Rachel Harris. "She thought all that stuff was nonsense. They had a good, collaborative, working relationship. They both gained so much from that union."

Wilson was just 20 when she first met Weston (who was 48 at the time). The two married in 1939 and divorced seven years later, after which Wilson re-married and had two children. Weston died from complications of Parkinson's disease in 1958.

Wilson moved to Santa Cruz in 1969.

"She didn't feel that she was just a nude body," said writer Wendy Madar who collaborated with Wilson on her 1998 memoir "Through Another Lens: My Years with Edward Weston."

"Her identity was not wrapped up in being Edward Weston's wife and model. She was very much an intellectual and lived an active life of the mind to the end."

Indeed, Wilson emerged as a writer in her partnership with Weston when the two traveled the West as part of a Guggenheim Fellowship. The result was the seminal book "California and the West," in which Wilson contributed the text to accompany Weston's photographs.

Charis Wilson grew up in Carmel with deep literary roots. Her father, H.L. Wilson, was a well-regarded humor novelist in the early part of the century. Her grandmother and great-aunt, both of whom were influential figures in her early life, were also writers and figures on the San Francisco literary scene.

Once she met Weston, Wilson moved with him to Santa Monica where she pursued many artistic interests. At the time, Weston had had a checkered



EDWARD WESTON/CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Charis Wilson is perhaps one of the most famous nudes in modern photography. She was married to famed photographer Edward Weston in 1939 and posed for many of his fine-art nudes.

sexual history and had just returned from an extended period in Mexico where he counted among his friends and acquaintances Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo.

Over the next few years, Weston photographed Wilson in a number of different settings, nude and otherwise, exploring line and form with close-ups of Wilson's body. The most enduring images include a famous shot with the young model entwined in her own limbs, her face turned down away from the camera, and a series of shots of Wilson face down her body laid out on the sand dunes of Oceano in San Luis Obispo County.

While with Weston, Wilson was able to widen her experience in ways that would not have been possible otherwise, such as camping with Weston and fellow famed photographer Ansel Adams in Yosemite. In the midst of the Great Depression, Weston won

the prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship — Wilson is said to have written the application — and the couple set out across the West to document the period in photographs.

After divorcing Weston, Wilson married labor activist Noel Harris and raised two daughters in Humboldt County. Her oldest daughter was murdered in Scotland in 1967. After a divorce from Harris, she moved to Santa Cruz and lived close to her daughter Rachel for the rest of her life.

Rachel Harris said her mother had worked for years on a children's fantasy novel, and was deeply committed to Unitarianism.

"She had absolutely omniverous interests," said Harris who just finished up an ambitious revision of Wilson's memoir at the time of her mother's death. The new edition of "Through the Lens," is expected to be published in 2010.

## CHARIS WILSON

HOME: Santa Cruz

BORN: May 5, 1914

DIED: November 20, 2009

OCCUPATION: Model, artist, writer, activist. Best known as the model for many of photographer Edward Weston's most well-known images and the author of the book "California and the West." Also published a memoir, "Through the Lens: My Years with Edward Weston," (1998).

SERVICES: To be determined

Despite her fame, "I knew her as just Charis," said friend of 40 years and poet Joe Stroud, in whose house Wilson lived for the last years of her life, "She knew dozens of ribald limericks by heart, loved conversation, was a great story teller and deep listener, a person with a gracious empathetic imagination and absolutely generous of heart."

Her literary collaborator Madar said that Wilson enjoyed her status as a central figure in the life of Edward Weston, but never let it define her life.

"She never felt any resentment of being known as that," said Madar. "She was on the one hand very modest, but it wasn't false modesty. She knew the value of her contributions."

Harris said that her mother died surrounded by the animals that she loved, including a pet chicken named Emily.

"Every morning, she'd roll out in her wheelchair," said Rachel Harris, "look out the windows and just say, 'Oh God, how beautiful. Look at that sun!' It reminded me of that old New Yorker cartoon with the dog saying, 'Oh boy, the same old dog food again!' No one could experience the freshness of every single day like she could."