

## Gratitude for Your Interest and Support

It has been a little more than a year since the *Gunnar Widforss Catalogue Raisonné* was published. Since then I have added numerous new records for paintings to the catalogue and have been able to establish excellent documentation of provenance for a number of works previously catalogued. More than four hundred people have registered to use the catalogue. Thank-you for your interest. I know that Gunnar would be amazed and grateful for the interest in his work.

As this is the season of giving – If you are enjoying the catalogue please consider making a donation to help support this project. [You can visit this Go Fund Me campaign and easily make a donation.](#) Donations of any amount are gratefully acknowledged and will directly support ongoing research, updates to the Gunnar Widforss Catalogue Raisonné, and publication of the monograph. With your support, Gunnar's legacy will continue to grow.

This year, the newsletter is a little different. I'm sharing an excerpt from one of the chapters from the manuscript for the forthcoming monograph on Gunnar Widforss.

---

## "Painter of the National Parks," 1925–1927

As 1925 opened, Gunnar Widforss' exhibition at the National Gallery of Art closed. While the exhibition did little for his bank account, he left knowing that he was held in high regard by Stephen Mather and other National Park Service leaders. The exhibition solidified his reputation and recognition as the Painter of the National Parks and, with an eye towards Stephen Mather's goals, helped focus the desired attention to the national parks.

Widforss traveled to Philadelphia and New York where he hoped to establish relationships with galleries. As he was largely unknown outside of California, most galleries were not interested in his work. Though, he later related to friends, that he had two galleries in New York interested in his work and another in Philadelphia. Despite his optimism, the relationships with the galleries didn't seem to pan out.

From New York, Widforss returned to Grand Canyon and early February found him in its depths at Phantom Ranch. Phantom Ranch was opened in 1922

by the Santa Fe Railroad (SFRR) as an inner-canyon accomodation for overnight mule trips from the South Rim. The ranch would become a regular winter destination for Widforss in the coming years, perhaps due in part to the availability of moonshine whiskey made by manager Tom Moore. Widforss wrote to his friend Carl Häggart,

*This Grand Canyon is something unique to paint: deep, wide, and long, all the possibilities for atmospheric effects. One needs to be careful with drawing. Long and difficult to learn but fascinating. One day I will learn to see it well, and then I can probably paint it well also. I hope that happens soon. No painter has been recognized as a good Grand Canyon painter since Moran, now about 90 years old. I think I may be next—but I will never be the skilled painter that Moran is. He is a wizard...<sup>1</sup>*



*Phantom Ranch, Grand Canyon, 1925, Watercolor on paper, 24 x 21 in. (61 x 53.3 cm). GWCR 190.*

Before leaving Grand Canyon for California in March, Widforss produced a number of paintings for the SFRR. *Phantom Ranch, Grand Canyon* is a remarkable record of the site made only a couple of years after the initial phase of construction. Widforss recorded not only the ranch buildings, but also the diminutive size of the cottonwood trees that today tower above the buildings, creating a verdant oasis in the location that regularly records temperatures exceeding 100°F during the summer months. *Bright Angel Canyon*, is another remarkable painting that Widforss made during his stay at





Phantom Ranch. Painted approximately a quarter mile up Bright Angel Canyon from the Colorado River, the painting is characterized by intensely rich color and texture befitting the ancient Vishnu Schist (the deepest and oldest rock layer in the Canyon) depicted in the middle-ground. The paintings confirm Widforss' continuing interest in painting inner-canyon subjects, which none of his contemporaries were doing on a regular basis. Although William Robinson Leigh did spend a month painting below the rim in 1911, which he recounted in a wonderful article for *Out West* magazine, it was a unique experience for him.<sup>2</sup>



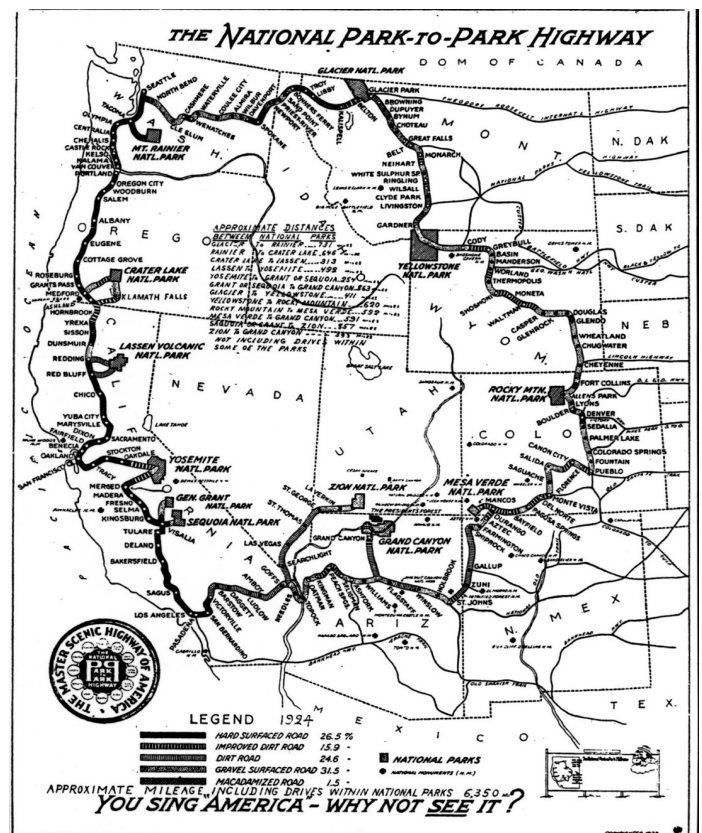
*Bright Angel Canyon*, 1925, Watercolor on board, 17 x 19 5/8 in. (43.2 x 49.8 cm). GWCR 223.

By June, Widforss was in northern California to paint giant redwood trees. On July 13th, he was visited by Newton Drury and John C. Merriam.<sup>3</sup> Both men were founding members of the Save the Redwoods League. Merriam was also the president of the Carnegie Foundation and Drury would go on to become the director of the National Park Service in 1940. The two men sought to enlist Widforss in much the same way that Stephen Mather had, to provide artwork for their campaign to save the diminishing groves of redwoods from complete eradication by timber companies. That fall, a San Francisco businessman and supporter of the effort purchased three of Widforss' redwood paintings and donated them to the League.<sup>4</sup>

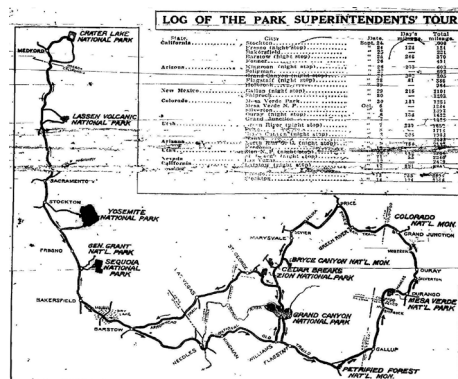
October found Widforss back in the Southwest and working at a new location for him, Mesa Verde National Park. His visit coincided with the annual conference of the national park superintendents. The superintendents gathered annually to discuss their experiences, programs, future initiatives, and how to best serve their constituents.



One of the highlights of the conference was the return trip, referred to in news media as the Park Superintendent's Caravan Tour. Superintendents had convened, by car, at Mesa Verde from as far away as Mount Rainier, Crater Lake, and Yellowstone. On the return trip, with Widforss riding with Ansel Hall, the caravan visited the San Juan Mountains of southwestern Colorado, Bryce, Zion, and Grand Canyon's North Rim before returning to California. The route of the caravan reflects the ambitiously imagined National Park-to-Park Highway, a grand circle route that Mather and Albright had hoped would become a standard route for visitors to visit all of the western national parks, reflecting their belief in the coming importance of automobile travel to the parks.<sup>5</sup>



The National Park-to-Park Highway.



Route of the 1926 Pacific Caravan.<sup>6</sup>







*Mesa Verde-Cliff Palace*, c.1925, Watercolor on paper, 13 x 10 in. (33 x 25.4 cm). The Museum of Northern Arizona, Flagstaff, Arizona, C1619. GWCR 92.

#### In the news in 1925:

- Adolf Hitler published *Mein Kampf*
- The Scopes Trial: A Tennessee teacher is charged prosecuted for teaching evolution
- F. Scott Fitzgerald published *The Great Gatsby*

In January 1926, Widforss was busy preparing for two exhibitions. The first, at the Stendahl Gallery in Los Angeles, was with the painter Ferdinand Burgdorff, also known for his Southwestern landscape paintings. Each man was represented by five works. A brief review in the Los Angeles Times remarked that,

*The two artists are so radically different in method and temperament that this happy juxtaposition of their works, all small paintings, offers the art lover an excellent opportunity for comparisons that are by no means odious. ... Burgdorff is the poet, Widforss the consummate and meticulous craftsman. ... All his subjects in this little collection come from Grand Canyon, and, in spite of his method—perhaps because of it—he invariably achieves bigness of effect.*<sup>7</sup>

Opening at the end of January at the Brooklyn Museum of Art was the first exhibition of the recently organized Scandinavian Artists of America. Widforss exhibited: *Monterey Cypresses*, *December Day in the Yosemite*, *Grand Canyon. Arizona*, and *Brahma Temple, Grand Canyon*.<sup>8</sup>

One of the biggest news stories in the United States in 1926 was the visit of Swedish Crown Prince, Gustavus Adolphus and his wife, Princess Louise. Newspapers across the country were abuzz with stories about the royal couple's month-long excursion across the country that included visits to many of the national parks, with Stephen Mather serving as their guide. After visiting Chicago, the royal couple visited Yellowstone where they spent five days. From there, they traveled to Bryce Canyon, Cedar Breaks, Zion, Grand Canyon, and Mesa Verde before heading to California and Yosemite.

When the royal couple arrived in Yosemite Valley on July 25th, Mather introduced them to Widforss who would spend the next two days with them and serve as their translator. The crown prince remarked that Widforss spoke Swedish with an American accent, which probably got a good laugh. Stephen Mather had purchased one of Widforss' finest paintings of the canyon, *Grand Canyon from the North Rim*, to present to the prince and princess as a gift. The painting now resides in the National Museum on Stockholm. Grace Watkins, who ran the El Tovar art gallery, wrote to her mother, "The Crown Prince and Princess came and it was a big day. The Swedish flags were floating all over the place – they were very nice, both of them. Mr. Mather – Supt of National Parks bought a (Widforss) (the Swedish artist) *you know* it was \$250 and presented it to them."<sup>9</sup> Why did Miss Watkins place such emphasis on Widforss? We'll soon find out.



Crown Prince Gustavus of Sweden on the ladder, Crown Princess Louise of Sweden above him in striped dress, with Jesse Nusbaum on his haunches and the rest of the royal party at Cliff Palace, Mesa Verde. National Park Service Photo Archives.







*Grand Canyon from the North Rim*, 1924, Watercolor, 21 1/2 x 27 5/8 in. (54.5 x 70 cm). Swedish National Museum, Stockholm. GWCR 438.



*Grand Canyon*, 1927, Watercolor on paper, 28 1/2 x 38 1/2 in. (72.4 x 97.8 cm). American Museum of Western Art, Anschutz Collection, Denver, Colorado. GWCR 622.

In December, 1926, Widforss set out for Palm Springs where he spent several weeks working. For Christmas, he asked his friend Albert DeRome (who worked for a confectionary company in San Francisco) to send a box of his chocolates to Grace Watkins at the El Tovar Art Gallery. He said nothing other than that, but was there a budding romance with Miss Watkins?

#### In the news in 1926:

- A.A. Milne published *Winnie-the-Pooh*
- The first public demonstration of a television
- Robert Goddard launched his first liquid-fueled rocket
- Henry Ford initiated the 40-hour week for Ford employees

Back in California, Widforss wrote to Häggart that, despite the beautiful light in the desert, he didn't produce any work that he was happy with and he was cold the whole time. Though, he praised the light and sculptural trees of the coast.

*I don't know a place on earth that is so beautiful in all kinds of light. Monterey Cypressess — painterly trees. Monterey Pines, also beautiful trees, like our pines [in Sweden]. Here there are sand dunes with trees twisted by the wind, cliffs along the coast, water, mountains. But I look back at the result of the year's work, and I feel sure that I have made good progress. So says also DeRome. I don't think that in a technical sense I am painting better, I've frankly tried to forget about technique and instead try to capture feeling — deep — in my paintings. I hope something comes from that. I think trees are the most important images in my paintings and one gets pleasure out of painting trees more than other things.<sup>10</sup>*

Springtime found Widforss at the South Rim of Grand Canyon where he executed one of his finest paintings of the Canyon, *Grand Canyon*, for the SFRR. On the morning of May 22nd, he read the news of Charles Lindbergh's successful landing the previous night in Paris. Lindbergh, the son of a Swedish immigrant, had successfully crossed the Atlantic Ocean in a single-engine plane, the Spirit of St. Louis, on May 20 and 21st. In doing so, Lindbergh won the \$25,000 Orteig Prize offered by New York hotelier Raymond Orteig for the first nonstop transatlantic flight between New York City and Paris. The news of Lindbergh's success was printed and made available at the El Tovar front desk along with the daily stock market reports. Deeply proud that a young Swedish-American had made the successful flight Widforss shouted to his friends "He made it, he made it!"<sup>11</sup>

#### Notes:

1. Letter from Gunnar Widforss to Carl Erik Häggart, March 20, 1925.
2. Leigh, William Robinson. "Impressions of an Artist While Camping in the Grand Canyon of the Colorado, Arizona." *Out West*, June 1911.
3. Letter from Newton Drury to John C. Merriam, July 11, 1925.
4. Letter from Newton Drury to John C. Merriam, September 15, 1925.
5. Reynolds, G. E. "The Park Superintendents Tour," *Yosemite Nature Notes*, November 30, 1925.
6. Ibid.
7. Anderson, Antony. "Canyon and Desert by Two Painters," *Los Angeles Times*, January 31, 1926.
8. *Catalogue of an Exhibition of Paintings and Sculpture by Scandinavian American Artists*. New York: Brooklyn Museum, 1926.
9. Letter from Grace Watkins to her mother, Lettie Watkins, July 18, 1926.
10. Letter from Gunnar Widforss to Carl Erik Häggart, January 26, 1927.
11. Hegemann, Elizabeth Compton. *Navajo Trading Days*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1963. Page 34.

