

Kenneth Lisle Willmarth Biography
by Robert A. Nisbet Jr.
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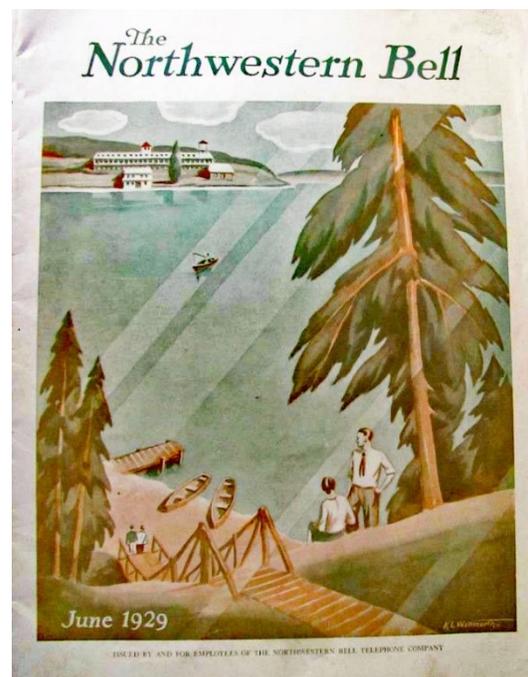
Kenneth Lisle Willmarth was born into the large family of Philip and Allie Willmarth on May 25, 1889. The 1910 census shows him working in a hat and cap store along with his father. He married Isabel F. Chamberlain on May 15, 1911, when he was 22, and she was 19. When he registered for World War I in 1917, he listed his occupation as manager of a retail hat store. He was tall and slender, measuring 5' 11".

The Willmarth family lived in Chicago until around 1920, when they moved to Omaha, Nebraska. Philip, Allie, and seven children are listed in Omaha on the 1920 Census. Kenneth and Isabel also lived in Omaha with their daughter Elizabeth born in about 1912. Philip was the branch manager of a furnace company, and Kenneth and his younger brother William A. (b. 1898) were salesmen. On May 26, 1921, Kenneth and Isabel had a second child, Kenneth Lyle Willmarth Jr.

In 1921 the Omaha city directory listed Kenneth as working at Advertising Art Studios and his brother William as a commercial artist. Where they received their art training is unknown. During 1923 Kenneth worked for Thiem & Willmarth, which was probably a collaboration with artist Charles Thiem. The 1923 directory lists brother William as a commercial artist. By 1925 the artist brothers joined forces to form The Willmarths, which also included their brother John H. in the endeavor. The 1929 Omaha directory shows father Philip joining the Willmarths as a bookkeeper, and John H. no longer in the business, listed separately as a painter. William and Kenneth would endure as The Willmarth artists.



Kenneth L. Willmarth undated



1929 commercial art signed K.L. Willmarth

William and Kenneth began to work for the Union Pacific Railroad headquartered in Omaha in 1930 when they designed the covers for two Yellowstone National Park Union Pacific brochures. These two are signed The Willmarths, and they sign no other Union Pacific Yellowstone brochures printed from 1923-1960.

In 1932 brother William had two entries depicting the beauty of the west selected in a contest sponsored by twelve western railroads. The following year daughter Elizabeth (Betty) married R. Raymond Russell, although it appears the marriage was not long-lasting as she married Leonard S. Schmitz in 1937. Father Philip was the office manager of The Willmarths in 1934. A news article mentions Kenneth golfing in a contest in 1935. Kenneth made contributions to the design of Chessie Cat, a brand design of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad in the 1930s.

In what was called the first destination winter resort in the U.S., W. Averell Harriman, Chairman of the Union Pacific Railroad, developed the Sun Valley Resort in Idaho, beginning in 1936. The Willmarths were enlisted to create several promotional posters for the resort.

Both Willmarth brothers entered the annual Five States Omaha exhibit in 1938. Kenneth entered two oil paintings and won first honorable mention in portraiture with *Fairy Tales*. William entered one oil painting and three watercolors. In April 1939, Kenneth was featured in a one-man show at the Joslyn Memorial art museum in Omaha. An article describing the exhibit called Kenneth one of Omaha's leading commercial artists. It described his portraits of Horace B. Northcott and a man in *Morning Newspaper* as "excellent psychological studies of definitely dissimilar types." The reviewer liked Kenneth's use of color, stating, "Willmarth sometimes keeps his colors monotonously warm, relies mostly on light and shade to tell the story." He liked Kenneth's portraits of men better than women, speculating that women were harder to paint.



Fairy Tales



Morning Newspaper

Kenneth and Isabel were aviculturists (bird breeders) at their home on south Seventy-eighth street in Omaha in 1943. Adjacent to their home was a fully equipped aviary with 50 or 60 birds. When they could not afford to heat the aviary, a guest room in their house was prepared for the birds. The birds would chirp loudly out of large cages that lined the walls.

Bird species included white zebra finches, black-hooded nuns from India, "singing nuns" from Africa, sky-blue and green parakeets, and colorful Lady Gouldian finch. Two brother and sister cockatiels, "Runt" and "Toots" were the Willmarths' special pets and had the run of the house much of the time. The male, "Runt," was taught to say Hello and whistle "Yankee Doodle." The two birds would eat at the table and drink coffee, Coca-cola, highballs, and milk. Kenneth became interested in collecting birds while visiting California in 1940.



Betty Schmitz and Kenneth Jr. in 1945

Kenneth and Isabel met with their son Kenneth Jr. and daughter Betty in Omaha in 1945 (see photo at right). Betty was living in Chicago after her marriage, and Kenneth Jr. had recently received his pilot wings at Luke Field, Arizona, and was a flight officer. Betty and her husband had two children, Billy and Stevie at this time. At some time after this, Kenneth Jr. married Darlene Wilson.

The Willmarths made many "Keep 'Em Rolling" posters during World War II for the Union Pacific Railroad. They also made eleven Your America artworks to promote the railroad's radio show, for a 1946 Union Pacific calendar, and were made into postcards.

Kenneth and William exhibited paintings in a show at the Joslyn Memorial in 1947. They were listed in the Omaha directory as The Willmarths, commercial artists, in 1949, along with R.J. Rampacek and were joined by Kenneth's son Kenneth Jr. in 1953. The Willmarths appear to have contributed art to Union Pacific ads into the mid-1950s.

In October 1960, the Omaha Women's Club announced a program of leading Omaha artists to be exhibited in the coming months. The work of Kenneth, Kenneth Jr., William, and Ruby Rampacek would be displayed in March 1961. By December 1960, Kenneth and Isabel moved to Eustis, Florida and friends visited them there. In May of 1971, Kenneth and Isabel celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary with a reception at the Eustis Country and Golf Club and a family dinner at their home. Guests included the families of their son and daughter. Kenneth's art was included in a large art show at the Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha in October 1971.



Portrait of Isabel Chamberlain Willmarth
by her husband Kenneth Willmarth



Ken and Isabel at Sewall's Point, Florida, 1970

Kenneth died in Eustis on April 4, 1975. He was interred at the Emmanuel Episcopal Church cemetery in Greenwood, Virginia. His wife Isabel would pass away in 1979. Daughter Elizabeth would live to age one hundred and died in 2012. Kenneth Jr. died in 2016.



Kenneth Lisle Willmarth oil painting of Garth Road, Virginia

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