

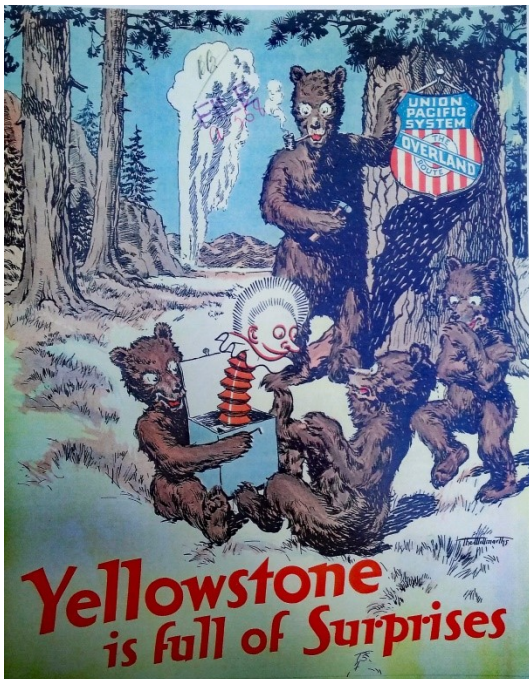
William Andrew Willmarth and the Willmarths of Omaha, Nebraska

By Robert A. Nisbet Jr.
2020

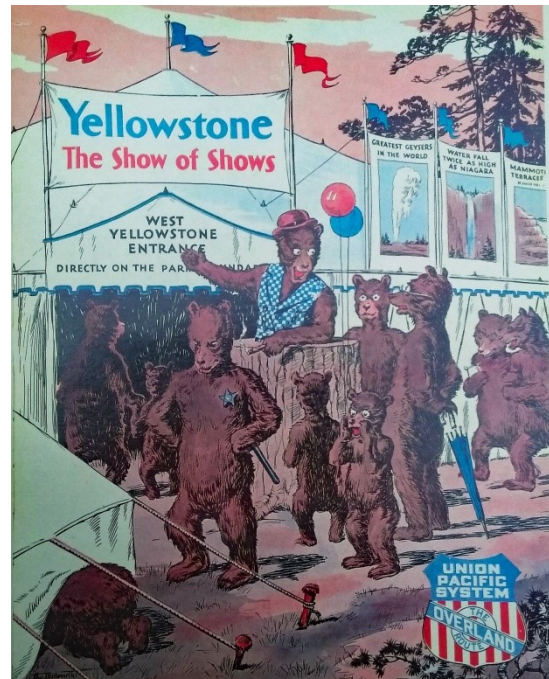
William was born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1898, the son of Philip and Allie Willmarth. Department of Veterans Affairs records shows he served in the military from February 1918 until July 1919, possibly in the Merchant Marine. By 1920 the family moved to Omaha, Nebraska, where Philip managed the Holland Furnace Company and sons William and his older brother Kenneth were salesmen. In 1921 the Omaha city directory listed William as a commercial artist and his brother Kenneth as working at Advertising Art Studios. Where they received their art training is unknown.

William and Julia Morrison were married in April 1923. In 1926 he won second prize in a national contest for the best poster for Citizens' Military Training Camps. In 1928 and 1929, several members of the Willmarth family were listed in the Omaha city directory as "The Willmarths" artists, including father Philip, and sons Kenneth, William, and John. The father served as a bookkeeper. William and Kenneth would endure as The Willmarth artists.

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.



Union Pacific brochure April 20, 1930



Union Pacific brochure May 26, 1930

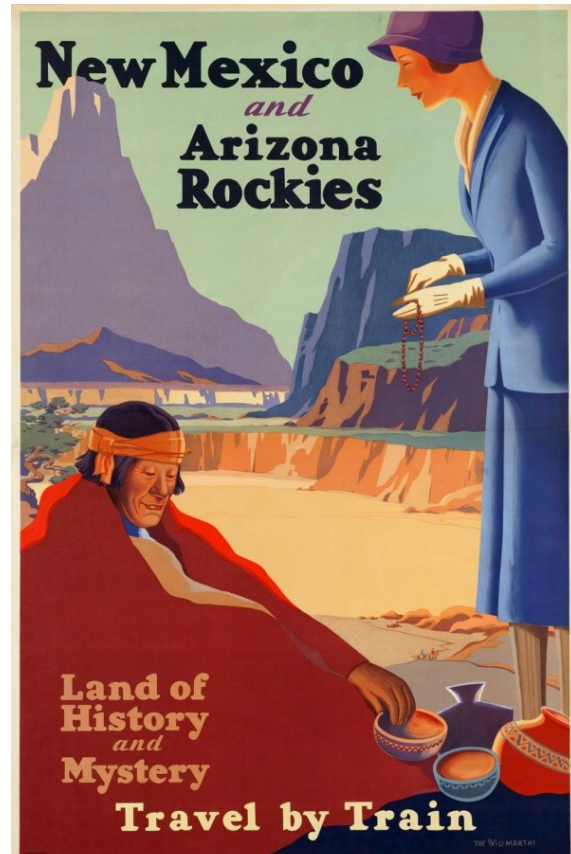
In 1932 many railroads, including twelve in the west, held a poster contest to portray the beauty of the west and encourage summer travel. Many well-known artists were entered, and over fifty drawings were submitted. A committee of advertising agents of the Union Pacific, Southern Pacific, Northern Pacific, Santa Fe, and Burlington railroads made the judging in Chicago. William entered two water-color sketches *Visit the Pacific Northwest Wonderland* and *New Mexico and Arizona Rockies*, which were chosen among the first five winners. These “Western Beauty” or “Travel by Train” winning posters became part of Union Pacific’s promotion, and were displayed all over the east.



William Willmarth with his New Mexico and Arizona Rockies Poster

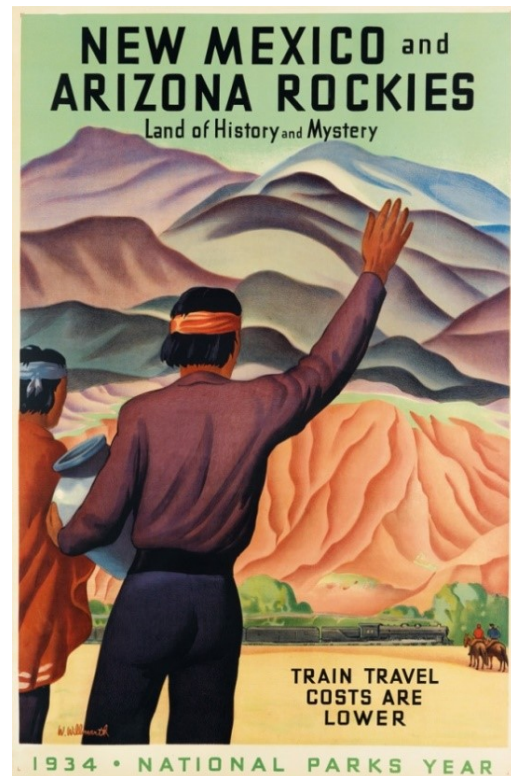


William Willmarth Western Beauty poster

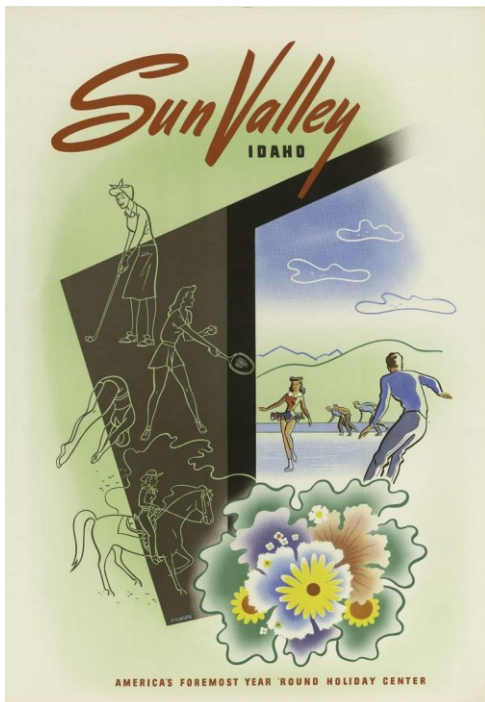


William Willmarth Western Beauty poster

President Franklin Roosevelt supported his head of the Department of the Interior, Harold Ickes, in naming 1934 as “National Parks Year”. He stated, “There is nothing so American as our national parks.” Both Ickes and Roosevelt thought that park travel would “prime the pump” of the economy during the depression. Several posters were commissioned for the occasion, including a *New Mexico and Arizona Rockies* poster painted by William. A set of 10 National Parks stamps were issued in that year to honor the parks.



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, as were other artists. They produced several Sun Valley maps, one of which was a saddle horse trail map.



Sun Valley Willmarth Posters signed Willmarth

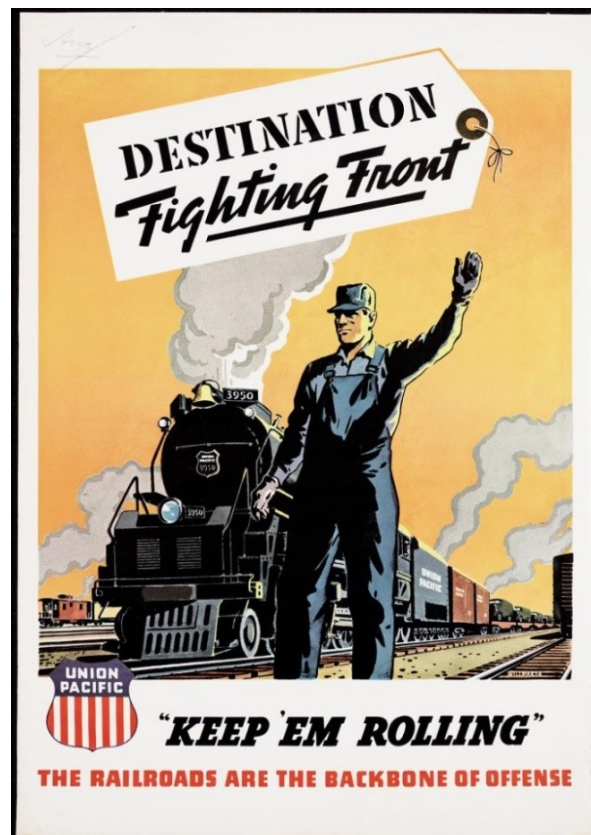
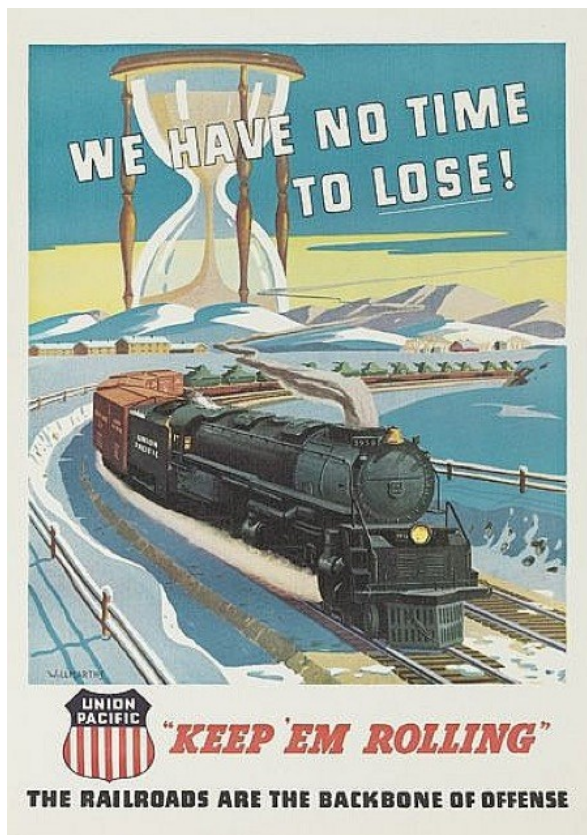
The Willmarths displayed art at the Five States art exhibit in Omaha during the late 1930s. In 1938 William submitted three water-colors and an oil painting. His brother Kenneth submitted two oil paintings, one of which, *Fairy Tales*, won first honorable mention in portraiture. At the 1939 show, William won second prize for his oil painting, *Farm Scene*, and won first in water-color for his *Spring*. William painted in water-colors and oil, while Kenneth did not paint water-colors. Kenneth was known for painting portraits, which William did not.



Second in oil goes to W. A. Willmarth's "Farm Scene," south of Council Bluffs.

Farm Scene black & white news reproduction

During World War II, the Union Pacific Railroad created a series of "Keep 'Em Rolling" war posters. At least twenty-six posters were created with four signed Willmarths and two Willmarth. Some of the posters were also turned into Cinderella stamps, not issued for postal purposes.



World War II Union Pacific Willmarth posters

As World War II was ending the Union Pacific sponsored a national “Your America” radio show, which featured stories of Americans at war and at work. To go along with the show, the United Pacific commissioned the Willmarths to create eleven paintings, one for each western state served by the railroad. The paintings were made into posters promoting the radio show and ran as magazine ads in 1945. The eleven paintings and a U.S. route map were featured in a 1946 calendar and were made into postcards. Each artwork was signed Willmarth.



Your America Wyoming



Your America Nebraska



Your America Oregon

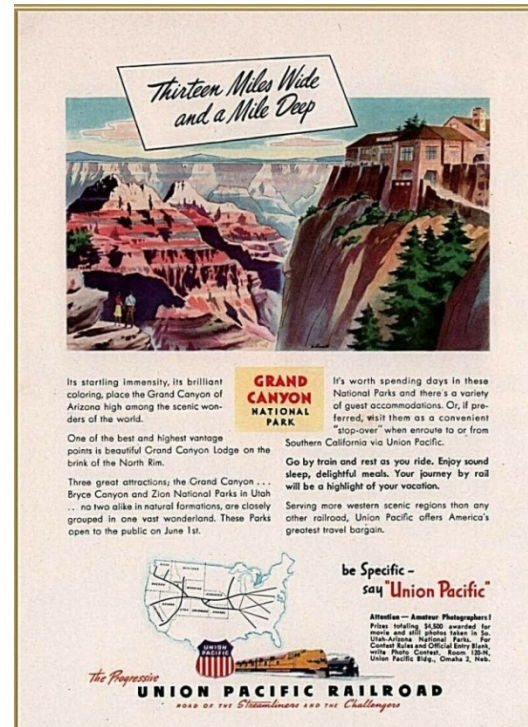


Your America Colorado

A 1946 Union Pacific advertising series featured Willmarth water-color art for Yellowstone National Park, Zion National Park, Grand Canyon National Park, Colorado, the Pacific Northwest, Dude Ranches, with mention of Utah and Arizona parks. The ads touted “The Progressive Union Pacific Railroad,” and appeared in Cosmopolitan, New Yorker, American, and others. The Union Pacific printed a colorful “Adventure in Western Wonderlands” brochure around this time which included a Willmarth route map on one side.



Yellowstone Willmarth art

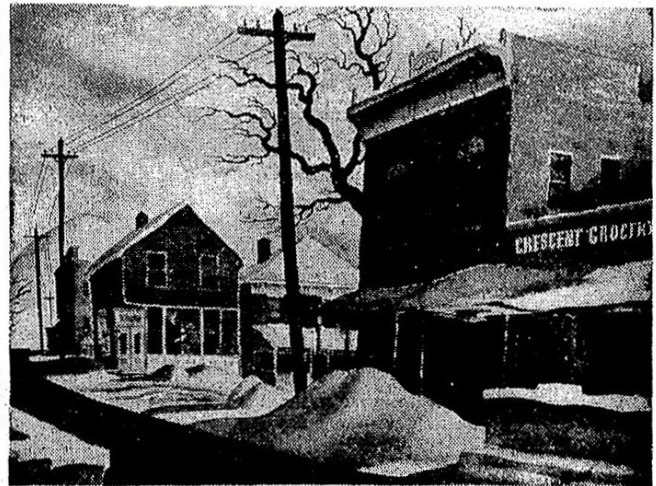


1946 Grand Canyon Willmarth art



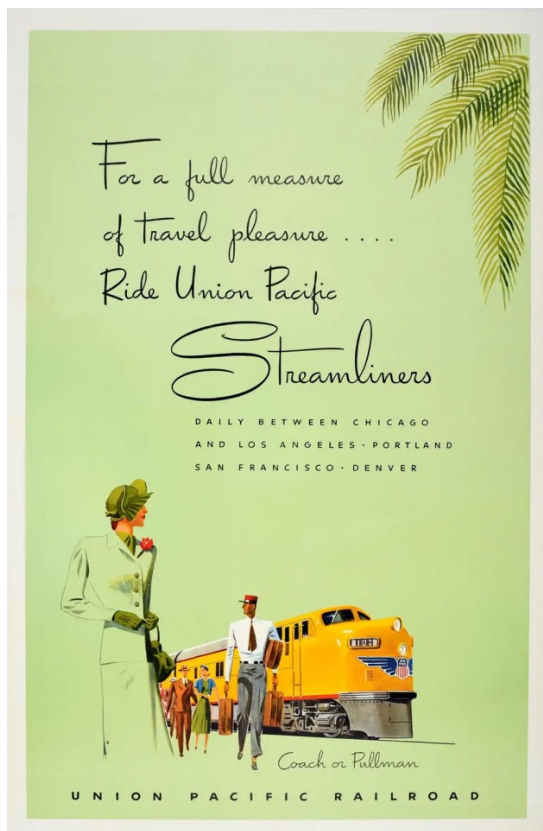
Western Wonderlands Willmarth map

In 1947 William submitted his *Crescent City* water-color to the Six States Exhibit in Omaha. That same year he and Kenneth were featured in an art exhibit at the Joslyn Memorial in Omaha. William won second prize for his oil painting *Red, White and Blue* at an Associated Artists of Omaha exhibit in 1948.



Crescent City black and white reproduction

From 1948 to 1950 the Willmarths produced a number of Streamliner magazine ads for the Union Pacific Railroad. These ads “emphasized the trains rather than the destinations. Each ad consisted of a beautifully rendered yellow streamliner and another graphic symbolizing the theme of the ad (“economy,” “charm,” “style,” “pleasure”), on a solid-, usually pastel-colored background.¹” While unsigned multiple sources suggest the Willmarths were the artists.



Two Streamliner ads from 1948-1950

A 1953 Omaha city directory lists Kenneth L., Kenneth L. Jr., William A. and R. J. Rampacek working as The Willmarths, commercial artists, at that time. It appears that the Willmarths contributed art to Union Pacific ads until the mid-1950s when their artwork was mixed in with photography.

By 1958 William and his wife Julia moved to Tucson, Arizona, likely exiting from the commercial art business. By 1960 Kenneth and his wife Isabel retired to Eustis, Florida, where they celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary in 1971, and Kenneth passed away in 1975. He was survived by Isabel, his son Kenneth L Willmarth Jr., and daughter Elizabeth. Kenneth Jr. was also a commercial artist in Omaha and passed away in 2016.



Lodge on the north rim of the Grand Canyon water-color circa 1950
by William Willmarth, courtesy of Christine Erkman

William's wife Julia passed away on November 12, 1968, leaving three daughters and two sons. William remarried Barbara Henderson on September 17, 1969, and commenced an 8100-mile motor trip. They golfed together at the Tucson 49er Country Club. Barbara won several city golf championships. Golfing was a lifetime hobby that William practiced in Omaha in the 1930s.

William kept a summer cabin at Sioux Narrows, Lake of the Woods, Ontario Canada. He spent time there in the 1950s and 1960s.

William enjoyed making art in retirement. In 1961 he exhibited mosaics at a Tucson craft fair. In 1975 William won the Tucson “color the bus” contest to find a new color scheme for the city buses. 76 buses would be painted with his design, which he submitted “for the fun of it”.

William died October 3, 1984, in Tucson, Arizona, and is buried in the East Lawn Palms Cemetery and Mortuary. He was survived by his wife Barbara, three daughters and two sons.

Notes

1) Randal O’Toole alias Train Lover, Streamliner Memories, 2013.
<http://streamlinermemories.info/?p=2673>, accessed June 27, 2020.

Many thanks to Randal O’Toole for his web site Streamliner Memories for Willmarth history and art online.

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