

## Voices of Dixon: Gayle fulwyler Smith

From the book  
**Voices of Dixon:**  
**Oral Histories from the Embudo Valley**  
Interviews and Editing by Harvey Frauenglass  
(ISBN: 978-1-62050-226-6)  
© 2012 by David Rigsby

All rights reserved.  
This document is intended for educational purposes only.  
Any commercial use of this document is strictly prohibited without  
written permission from the publisher.  
Publisher: David Rigsby, P.O. Box 44, Embudo, NM 87531

-----  
**Gayle fulwyler Smith**  
(b. 1938)  
Artist  
Interviewed April 2, 2011

### Growing Up Outdoors

My name is Alice Gayle Tucker fulwyler Smith Frauenglass and that's kind of my history in a nutshell. I was born and raised in Idaho. Idaho didn't have a lot of people when I was born. I seem to remember hearing that there was something like 20,000 people in the whole state. I don't know whether that's true or not. My family was primarily Mormon, my mom and everybody on that side of the family, so they were big, close families. My dad's background was Quaker, although he didn't really practice that. However, he was a very quiet man.

If my dad had a religion, it was the outdoors. His big interests were hunting and fishing. I was the oldest of five. He would take me with him. He wanted a hunting and fishing buddy so I learned to shoot a pistol and a rifle when I was fairly young. I loved going hunting with him. I loved being in the mountains. Often in the

summer he would just take a camera. He had an old 8mm movie camera and he took pictures of the mountain goats and the mountain sheep and deer and elk--whatever he saw. And boy, we walked! I learned I could keep on going no matter how tired I was or how my feet hurt or how long the trail was, and that experience has helped me get through many difficult times. And I appreciated the majesty of the country that we walked in, the mountains and the forests and the sage-covered hills.

I started drawing fairly early, with pencils and papers and whatever tools I had. I remember once I went to West Yellowstone to babysit the two daughters of our physician and his wife. In the fireplace of their cabin there was some charcoal and I discovered that was an interesting thing to draw with. I would go out of my way, then, to find sticks of charcoal. (Later I learned you could buy them in a store all nicely shaped into sticks.) I'd come home from trips with my dad and try to paint some of what I had seen. Watercolor was fast and fairly clean. I don't even remember where I got the first paints that I had. I didn't do a lot of that growing up because as the oldest of five I had a lot of responsibilities and work to do, and in the summers and after school as I grew older I had paying jobs. I liked to read and I liked to walk; so if I had extra time, not that I had a lot of extra time, I read a lot. And I had close friends.

All those names come from having been married three times. My first husband was a friend from high school. We were married fairly young; I was just out of high school and he was two years older, already in college. For a while, I worked so he could continue to study for his bachelor's degree. Later he went on to get his PhD. We didn't have our first child till a couple of years after we were married. We were married for 14 years and it was good. I think we were too young; I think we just grew apart. We had three children and they are wonderful people. I have a daughter and two sons and from my children only one grandchild, but with Harvey and his family there are several more. My second husband was also a scientist; we were married for about four years and that didn't work

## Voices of Dixon: Gayle fulwyler Smith

out. I was working up at the Lab as an illustrator and met Harvey during that time. Actually he had a friend who was a matchmaker and at first I said, "I don't want to meet anybody, I'm fine." But he moved in down the street and I kind of got to know him and we are still here thirty years later. Sometimes. Barely.

### First Art Course

My grandmother gave me an important gift around the time I graduated from high school: the "Famous Artist's Course, a four year correspondence course in commercial art. I worked hard to fit the assignments in between working and keeping house as a wife and a mother. One of the things I learned was to see through forms, to see that all shapes could be reduced to cylinders, squares, triangles and cones. We used these shapes as a basis to draw everything, including people, so one got a good sense of seeing through things, seeing around things, seeing things in the context of the space that they are in. I used these techniques in the various assignments I mailed in for critique. I remember once I was supposed to paint a girl bathing a dog; maybe that was my choice. I completed the course and got a certificate.

My first experience working in art was in Alabama. My husband was in ROTC in college. When he graduated he went into the Army as a second lieutenant and for two years he was stationed at Fort McClelland. I worked for the Army on the base as an illustrator. I remember doing cartoons of the Twelve General Orders. That was fun, and the officers liked them and used them for a long time. In the officers' club they wanted a painting over the bar and so I did a painting of a nude. Unfortunately she looked a lot like Jackie Kennedy. I got a lot of ribbing for that.

After we moved to Los Alamos, I started taking classes at the Los Alamos branch of University of New Mexico. I took literature classes and psychology and several classes in anthropology, I liked them all and especially loved the literature. I remember the first time I brought home a bunch of books. I think it was from a Nobel Prize

winning literature class. I had this pile of books and I remember thinking it was just a treasure because when I was growing up so often I heard "we don't have time to read right now, we have this ironing to do (or this other to do)". I was in seventh heaven with that pile of books and it was my assignment to read them! There is so much to learn from the great novels--history, psychology, human relationships, all kinds of ideas; I loved that stuff.

### Academic Art Courses

After we lived in Los Alamos for a while, Mack went to Denver to get his PhD. We lived in Denver for two years. I took classes at Denver University and the University of Colorado, some literature but also art courses, and those were very interesting. They were quite different from the Famous Artist's Course I had taken because this was in the 60's during the time of some of the pop art and the op art and big canvases by Mondrian. The painting teacher that I had also did work in metal. She would plan a piece and then have someone construct it for her. When I first went into her painting class, and she wanted examples of what we could do; with mine she just kind of shook her head. She said, "See the apple, draw the apple, paint the apple red." I would go home from that class a lot of times and just cry. She gave me a brush to draw with and a stick with ink so that I wouldn't get too "tight;" that was going in the opposite direction from that illustrator background that I had had. By the end of the time that I spent with her, though, she really liked what I was doing. I remember her saying, "You're getting damned good, you know!"

Then I took an oil painting class from her too and did big flat figures that she liked a lot. My introduction to the drawing instructor was the opposite of the introduction to the painting instructor. He said, "You can already draw; what are you doing in here?" But he was very helpful. He said, "I have a friend who has a gallery in Cherry Creek and I think you should take him some of these drawings." He also looked at some of the paintings I was doing and he encouraged me to take those to his friend, too. I did that and the

gallery sold them all.

#### Watercolors in Los Alamos

I haven't done those kinds of paintings since and I don't have any pictures of them. It was sort of the mood of Denver. There was a painter, Will Barnett, who did graceful, realistic paintings with flat colors. I liked his work and it influenced what I was doing at that time. When we came back to Los Alamos I drew and painted my children and did landscapes whenever I could get out. I appreciated watercolor because it's easy to carry. I would just take water and paper and the colors and sit on a rock.

Another thing that I always enjoyed when I was growing up was being able to get out by myself. Even though I loved my family, there seemed to be a lot of us and I always liked the chance to get away. We had hills behind the house and when I had some time I would go up in the hills and just walk. I remember my mother saying to my dad, "oh you shouldn't let her go up there, anything could happen". Dad would say "it's good for her, let her go". And I'm really grateful that he did that, because that was important to me; the times that I spent with him, when we were out in the wilderness and it was quiet. Hunting, whether you are hunting with a gun or hunting with a camera, you have to be quiet so I have always kept that feeling of liking to be by myself and painting. As I get older that changes a little; I like company more, painting with other painters. But it is not always possible to schedule that. When I was in Los Alamos a sculptor friend encouraged me to enter the New Mexico Arts and Crafts Fair in Albuquerque. We both got juried in and shared a booth. Then I just kept entering and getting in. I did that show, which is held at the State Fair Grounds in June, and usually the Southwest Arts and Crafts show in November. Besides these big juried fairs, I did other juried shows. The art shows were stimulating and I met a lot of people, both artists and people who bought my paintings. Some have become good friends. And I started entering competitions.

I also took workshops from people whose work I admired. One was Charles Reid; I took two or three workshops from him. I took workshops with Robert E. Woods and Millard Sheets, both of whom have passed on. Sheets was a colorist and his work was opaque rather than translucent like more traditional water colors. I took workshops with other artists, and I learned something from all of them.

Then I started teaching. And, through teaching I was always learning. I had to consider the questions I might be asked and be prepared to answer them. If I were going to do a demonstration, I usually planned and painted that out before hand, or at least have good ideas about what I was going to do. I taught for many years; then there came a time when I just got tired of it.

Later I worked for Los Alamos Lab as an illustrator. That's where I guess that commercial art stood me in some good stead but it wasn't interesting work for the most part. It was mostly graphic art, black and white line drawing, charts and things. The one fun thing I did was go out and paint a watercolor of some buildings and the big Omega bridge over Omega canyon and they used that on the cover of their publicity publication and the papers which they presented for at least three years. Once I did a portrait, a memorial portrait of somebody for a magazine that they were putting out. I did cartoons too. That was certainly more fun than graphs.

Finally I wanted to leave Los Alamos. I had been there twenty-three years. I had taken a writing workshop with Stan Crawford and went to a party at his house in Dixon. Holly Haas, whom I had met at an art fair, was at the party and she happened to have that building in the front for rent. I was working half time in the illustrator's job, as much as I wanted to work at that. So I made a small apartment in my house to live in half the week and rented out the rest of it. Then I had a studio in Dixon part-time. I went out in the car and did lots of little drawings and paintings in my sketchbook, mainly the adobe houses and the hills and fields of pastoral northern New Mexico.

That lasted for about a year. Then I finally sold my house, quit the

Lab, and Harvey and I moved to Las Cruces. I did some teaching in Las Cruces--drawing and watercolor, and I got involved in the art community down there. At one point Holly called from Dixon and said there was an orchard with an old farmhouse next to this bar she was buying; we ought to come up and look at it. We did that, and we bought the farm.

#### Doing the Studio Tour

When we came here I did want to do the Studio Tour and see how that would be. Many people already knew me and knew my work--people I had met at arts and crafts fairs and friends and patrons from Los Alamos and Santa Fe, so these were on my mailing list. For many years I continued doing the arts and crafts shows. I enjoyed them but the fairs are hard to do. You have to haul all your stuff and watercolors have glass, which breaks, so everything has to be carefully packed. Then you have to build a booth. And you have to drive long distances to get there. I went to Amarillo and Lubbock, and El Paso, even Midland, Texas. I went to Park City, Utah, and into Arizona once, Tempe. A few years ago, however, I just got tired.

The Studio Tour was a lot easier because people come here. But of course there's a lot of preparation—really cleaning my house because we open the whole house during the Studio Tour. I have paintings upstairs in the living room and down in the studio and gallery. And really cleaning outside, which includes our drive and the road all the way to the highway.

One thing I thought about while we were talking the other day was that in some ways counting so much on the studio tour has good points and not so good points. When I was doing shows I was out there, meeting new people, talking with other artists. If I forgot about or didn't know about a competition coming up, someone would remind me. Now with the studio tour I've put all my eggs in one basket. Part of it, too, is that I was in some galleries, but they began to take 50%, some of them, so I didn't do as many of them. People

need to know who you are; that's important.

#### Traveling and Painting

Something else that I wish I'd been able to do more in my life is travel and paint. Money has always been a concern, however; I never felt easy about just taking off to go paint. But when I have gone any place, it has been just wonderful. I went to Mexico with Celeste and Sarita many times and always did painting and sketching and kept journals. I went to Bolivia with my daughter about 10 years ago. We were in La Paz and in Sucre, for about 3 weeks. I did a lot of sketching and took a lot of photographs. I've begun to paint more from my photographs for several years now. I'd rather not, but sometimes I need that information and that's the only way to have it.

Harvey and I went to Europe about six years ago. We spent two weeks among the medieval buildings and churches and in the narrow streets of Nuremberg and the farming villages around it, then about a week in Bern (including an excursion to the Jungfrau and the Eiger), and then over a week in Paris. I sketched Notre Dame in plein air in December, and sketched an art student copying a painting in the Louvre. Besides painting and photographing, I loved visiting museums in Bavaria and Bern, and, especially, in Paris.

Many years ago Mack and I went to London and to Spain and I did a lot of drawing and painting. I just carried the sketchbook around and I still have all my sketchbooks. And then cities in the United States, in a lot of the states by car. In New York and Connecticut. I love painting the ocean and I love painting boats.

For years I've driven up to Idaho to visit my family a couple of times a year. Through northern New Mexico, Colorado, and Utah the landscape has vivid colors and strong formations, especially the desert in southern Utah and around Ghost Ranch and Abiqui Dam in New Mexico. I have painted in the red rocks and the canyon lands around Moab many times. In all seasons so there is always something I want to paint or to photograph on those drives.

I realized a long time ago that a lot of what painting is about for

## Voices of Dixon: Gayle Fulwyler Smith

me is being there. That's why I am less happy about photographing what I want to paint later. When you sit there for a while and you are drawing it or painting it, all of your senses are open to whatever that is. You see it and you feel what the air is like and the light changing and whatever noise there is--water, birds. So that all becomes a part of what you are painting.

When Harvey and I were in Oregon for four weeks, it rained for 21 days. We swapped houses with a friend in Yachats. She had a comfortable little house about four blocks from the ocean. We had driven up in an Astrovan and we could drive the van close to the cliffs, the cliffs along the ocean, and I'd just sit there and watch the waves come in and watch the ocean there and think how do I do this? How do you do this?! And about that time I remember we were reading a book by Anne LaMott, "Bird by Bird" and what she said was just look at one bird at a time. So I thought, OK, one wave at a time and I ended up doing a series and I was very pleased. They really looked like ocean and felt like ocean and I sold them all as a piece shortly after we got home. But just the experience of the ocean, wherever it is, either in Mexico or on the West Coast or on the East Coast, is wonderful.

### I Guess This Is Home

I remember when we first came up here and saw this place I just fell in love with it. Coming to this place reminded me in many ways of coming home to Idaho, and especially to my grandparents' farm in Twin Falls. I spent days and sometimes a week or two or three there in the summer. My grandfather had three horses, Babe and Queenie, who pulled the farm equipment through the fields, and a riding horse, Tony. He had a few cows for milking. They had chickens for both eggs and eating. Some of my favorite memories are of being on that farm. My grandmother (Mya) kept a garden, both for vegetables and flowers. I remember her propagating rose bushes by burying one end of a rose branch under a quart fruit jar. In her kitchen, I watched (and helped I hope) her bake cookies and pies and bread. I was aware of

her skimming the thick cream off the top of the milk buckets granddad brought in from milking the cows. She churned some into butter which she shaped in a wooden butter mold that I still have. She had pull-out bins in the kitchen for flour, sugar and brown sugar. I loved the brown sugar. I remember once coaxing for it until she finally said, "Go ahead. Make yourself sick." And I did.

So many of my memories come from that farm. I think I thought I was getting some of my childhood back when we moved here. I had always wanted a horse. Now I could have one. We boarded another one, so essentially I had two. We had goats and a sheep for awhile. We had ducks and chickens and geese, guineas and even peacocks, and always dogs and cats. I have talked to a bobcat (and photographed it) and a bear outside my back door. I have seen rattlesnakes and coyotes (with whom I have a love/hate relationship; they've killed my ducks and geese and chickens and cats. But they live here.) And on our walks up toward the mesa behind the house we have seen tracks of elk and mountain lions. I learned quickly that there is a huge difference between being an indulged child for a few weeks a year on my grandparents' farm and having a farm of my own.

We've lived in Dixon for thirty years now. I did not really know or understand much about the variety of people and cultures and ideas that I would find here. I've come to appreciate the diversity very much. I think Dixon is a unique community. For the most part people work together to accomplish things. There is much energy here and also a timelessness about this valley and this land. I guess it is home.