

Nell Lounsberry Murbarger

At a glance:

Born: October 19, 1909, Fall River County,
South Dakota

Died: December 19, 1991, Lexington, Missouri

Burial: Costa Mesa, California, Harbor Lawn-
Mount Olive Memorial Park

Maiden Name: Nell H. Lounsberry

Race/nationality/ethnic background:
Caucasian

Married: Wilbur G. Murbarger, 1931-39
Ed Gueguen, lifelong friend

Children: none

**Primary city and county of residence and
work:**

Nevada, Utah, Arizona, parts of California

Major fields of work: Journalist, author,
historian, interviewer

Other role identities: Advocate for ghost town preservation, sea shell collector and seller



Nell Murbarger
From *Desert Magazine*, Sept. 1961

Prolific journalist chronicled Western ghost towns and mining camps

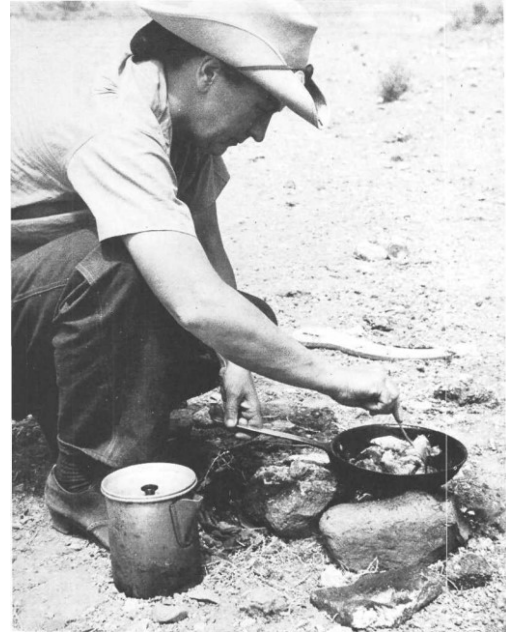
Nell Murbarger was a prolific journalist and author of Western history in the 1930s-1960s. She was best known for her interviews with the last remaining people living in ghost towns in the Great Basin. By 1963 she had published over 1,000 articles on the American West. Because she drove her own car, used it for camping and mostly drove on dirt roads, she became known as “The Roving Reporter.”

Nell Lounsberry was born October 19, 1909, in the Black Hills of South Dakota to Harry “Clem” and Bessie Nell White Lounsberry. Working toward a better life, the family moved to Newport Beach, California in 1923. All three of them spent their summers as “fruit tramps” picking crops in California until 1930 when they moved for the last time to Costa Mesa, California.

Nell was a Girl Scout in her youth. She is mentioned in an article about Girl Scouts studying birds, flowers and trees in an Orange County park in January 1927. She also traveled and camped with her parents to national parks for many years. This background helped her later in life when she spent her summers car-camping in the Great Basin. She was generally self-sufficient and often stayed in the ghost towns she was researching.



Nell's 1946 Mercury crossing the Black Rock Desert.
Desert Magazine, July 1951.



Nell cooking over a sagebrush fire.
Desert Magazine, July 1951.

The first article that Nell sold was when she was 13 years old. It was about a couple of wrens building a nest. She sold it to *Bird Lore Magazine* for \$2.00, for which she thought she was the richest girl in the United States.

Her brief marriage to W. Blake Murbarger, an amateur archaeologist, lasted from 1931 to 1939. He introduced Nell to pre-history and history and changed her life with the love of the past.

From 1936 to the end of World War II, Nell was a newspaper journalist and editor in California. She worked for the Costa Mesa *Globe-Herald* (1936-1939) and the Newport-Balboa *Press* (1940-1945). After that time Nell became a freelance writer. She built a 10x10-foot office of pine boards in her back yard where she kept her typewriter, library, and travel mementos.

Although Nell was never a permanent resident of Nevada, her contribution to Nevada history is immense. In 1946 she made her first tour of Nevada ghost towns. These became her specialty for interviews and photography. Nell submitted articles to over 125 different publications. A few of the magazines that published her work are *Arizona*

Highways, Desert Magazine, Old West, the Salt Lake Tribune, Sunset, True West, and Utah Historical Society Quarterly. However, it was the more than 75 articles about Nevada, Utah and Arizona mining camps and ghost towns in *Desert Magazine* that made Nell well-known. In 1979 Marion Ambrose compiled a list of Murbarger's articles in *Desert Magazine* on Nevada from 1937-1977, for the Nevada Historical Society. Nell often collaborated with map-maker Norton Allen for these stories. The articles were full of photographs she took on her summer trips to the Great Basin.

Often asked why she traveled to Nevada; Nell wrote the following in her 1961 *Desert Magazine* article "My Nevada!"

"Who can explain why he is *that way* about a certain person – or state? Certainly, my liking for Nevada is not a matter of scenery, or climate, or friends, or freedom, or any single thing on which I can put a finger. It's just a *good*, deep down, over-all feeling – like that which comes when you step across the threshold of your own home after a harrowing day. You remove your tight shoes, loosen your clothing, bathe your face in cold water, lie back in your favorite easy chair, and close your eyes."

"That's how I feel when I return to Nevada – as though I have come home where there's no need to pretend I'm rich, or virtuous, or young, or clever, or anything I am not. Even my faults and failures no longer seem very important, for Nevada is almost as tolerant and forgiving as my own mother."

"Ranging my eyes over Nevada's terrifying immensity of broken mountains and purple-shadowed gorges, her vastness of sage and sun and sky and infinite space, I want to throw back my shoulders and stand tall, and shout into the teeth of the high-country wind, "This is my land! *I have come home.*"

It may be difficult finding her articles in publications because in her early career she often used a pen name. Some of these names were Dean Conrad, Dale Conroy, Greta Joens, and Costa Mesa Slim. These mostly male names may have helped her get the articles published in the 1940s-1960s. Regardless of her byline, she was very successful. She claimed to have published over 1,000 articles on the American West by 1963.

Nell began compiling these magazine articles into books starting in 1956. Her first book, *Ghosts of the Glory Trail*, is about ghost towns in Nevada and Utah. This was the book that is credited with sparking public interest in visiting mining camps and ghost towns.

Her second book, *Sovereigns of the Sage*, about the men and women who live in the ghost towns of Nevada and Utah, came out in 1958. Nell's specialty was to travel to a mostly empty town and ask to meet the oldest person in town who had lived there the longest. These interviews are shared in her book chapters and often have photographs she took of the people to whom she talked.

Nell describes the lure of Nevada in this quote from Paher's book *Nevadans*.

"Spanning the state's hills and valleys are thousands of miles of roads ranging from wide, paved boulevards, to twisting byways better suited to saddles than to sedans. Every bend of the road extends an invitation to see what is beyond; every valley is hemmed by mountains; every mountain has another side. Along these roads and trails are thousands of places waiting to be explored."

For her work in researching, photographing, and publishing about the American West, Nell Murbarger received several awards.

- 1954 National Presswomen's Award for the best interview with a woman: Josie Pearl of Humboldt County
- 1955 American Association for State and Local History Award of Merit
- 1956 National Federation of Press Women - Best nonfiction book – *Ghosts of the Glory Trail*
- 1956 California Association of Press Women:
 - First Place: story on Fairview in *Desert Magazine*
 - First Place: story on opal miners in *Desert Magazine*
 - First Place: picture of Rhyolite Bank Building in *True West Magazine*
- 1956 National Federation of Press Women"
 - Second Place: story on Fairview in *Desert Magazine*
 - First Place: picture of Rhyolite Bank Building in *True West Magazine*
- 1996 Nevada Writers Hall of Fame

Her last book about the American West is *Ghosts of the Adobe Walls*, about ghost towns and their inhabitants, focused on Arizona, was published in 1964.

When Nell was not hunting mining camps and ghost towns, she lived in Costa Mesa, California with her parents, Clem and Bessie Lounsberry. Nell was an active community member. She and her mother were involved with the Scare Crow Carnival for its entire four-year run from 1938 to 1941. "The idea was to build a scarecrow depicting some person either in the town or well known." This was a tourist event to slow down traffic on the way to the beach.

The beach was another big part of Nell and Bessie's lives. They started collecting shells in 1924. They began with a sales counter in their living room. They mostly sold starfish. A few years later they were selling sea shells and starfish to stores. They began importing warm water shells from around the world. Finally, they opened the West Coast Curio Company in Costa Mesa. In 1973 they had 2,500 different species.

As part of the business Nell made buying trips to Portugal, Spain, the Mediterranean, West Africa, Fiji Island, Tonga, Samoa and Tahiti. The Lounsberrys perfected a method for preserving starfish that retained their color. Customers included Knott's Berry Farm and Disneyland, and their specimens were displayed as far away as Ohio State University



Nell and Bessie stayed in this pickup camper during their 1961 trip to Mexico.

Photo from *Nevada State Journal*,
11 Feb 1962.

and the Smithsonian. Their West Coast Curio Company became the largest business of its kind in the United States.

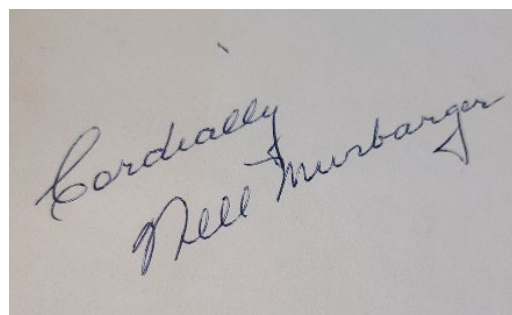
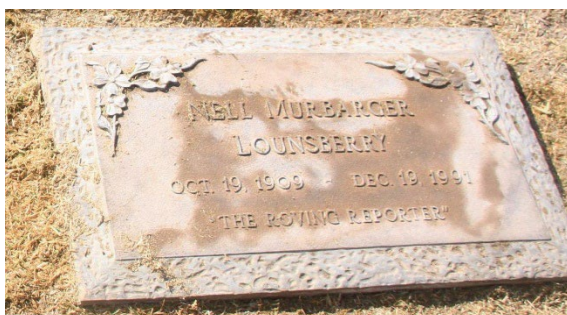
The two women made hundreds of trips to “Old Mexico” exploring and collecting shells. In 1961 they made a 30,000-mile trip into 28 Mexican states to jungles and isolated places. This was the topic of another book for Nell, titled *30,000 Miles in Mexico*.

Nell mentioned in her 1961 “My Nevada” *Desert Magazine* article, that when she was finished with the items she had collected during her many trips, she would donate the items to the appropriate places. She was true to her words. Both the Costa Mesa Historical Society and the Nevada Historical Society have large

collections of items Nell donated to them. Summaries of the Nell Murbarger collection holdings of these Societies can be read by clicking the links above.

In the 1980s, Stanley Paher, Nevada historic researcher, purchased 11,400 photographs from Nell, which were prints, with negatives, and captions. Over 600 of these photos are in Paher’s *Nevada Illustrated Atlas*, the companion to *Nevada Ghost Towns and Mining Camps*. Paher had first met Nell when he was 19 years old. He had purchased her first book in 1956, the year it came out. He knew her and Ed until she moved to Missouri. He called her a “kind” person.

Nell Murbarger had a lifelong friend who lived on her property in his own house for many years. Ed Gueguen was with Nell to the end of her life and cared for her as her Parkinson’s Disease progressed. In 1989 they moved to Lexington, Missouri, where Ed had a family home and relatives. Nell died on December 19, 1991, in Lexington. Her remains were returned to Costa Mesa where she is buried beside her mother at the Harbor Lawn-Mount Olive Memorial Park.



Books by Nell Murbarger.

- 1956 *Ghosts of the Glory Trail: Intimate glimpses into the past and present of 275 western ghosttowns*. Desert Magazine Press.
- 1958 *Sovereigns of the Sage: True stories of people and places in the great sagebrush kingdom of the Western United States*. Desert Magazine Press
- 1961 *30,000 miles in Mexico: Adventures of two women and a pickup-camper in twenty-eight Mexican states*. Desert Magazine Press.
- 1964 *Ghosts of the Adobe Walls: Human interest and historical highlights from 400 ghost haunts of old Arizona*. Westernlore Press.

Researched and written by Mona Reno

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Ancestry.com Year: 1940; Census Place: *Newport Beach, Orange, California*; Roll: *m-t0627-00273*; Page: *10A*; Enumeration District: *30-55* [Nell Lounsberry]

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