

## MARTA BECKET

### At A Glance:

**Born:** August 9, 1924, New York City

**Died:** January 30, 2017, Death Valley Junction, California

**Maiden Name:** Martha Beckett

**Race/nationality/ethnic background:** Caucasian

**Married:**

Thomas Brandon Williams, m: 1962-1983

Tom Willet, soulmate, 1983-2005

**Children:** none

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

Death Valley Junction, Inyo County, California

**Major fields of work:** Dance-mime, ballerina, composer, painter, choreographer, costume designer



**Marta Becket, 1988**  
From *To Dance on Sands*

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### Dancer's career spanned extremes from New York to California desert

One of the most creative artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century started her career as a painter, composer and dancer in New York City, later migrating to the remote Amargosa Valley Opera House in Death Valley Junction, California, near Las Vegas, Nevada.

Marta grew up in New York City and experienced the art scene there, from the Corps de Ballet at the famous Radio City Music Hall and Broadway musicals. Later, on a trip out West with her husband, she discovered and became the heart of the Amargosa Opera House in the desert, carrying out extensive repairs to the dilapidated building and painting murals of diverse audiences, setting the stage for her 44 years of performances in the theater.

Marta Becket was named Martha Becket when she was born in Manhattan, New York City, to Henry T. and Helen Neidig Becket on August 9, 1924. Her parents were both in the newspaper business. Henry was a reporter for the *New York Post* for 44 years, and Helena was the editor of the Woman's Page for the *Cincinnati Post* using the pen names "Vera Vane" and "Mrs. Evans" before she married. Helen was also in theater. She was known as "Helen Coralesk" in the "Ziegfeld Folies" and other musical comedies.

Marta's name change came about because of a misspelling in the program for *Show Boat* in 1946.

"Upon opening the program, I noticed my name was spelled Marta Becket. "That's me." I realized. "That was me all along, and now the truth is uncovered in the playbill." From then on, I was Marta Becket. This change did something for me. I was now the person I felt I really was ... I always disliked the name Martha. I suddenly was happy with myself."

Marta's early years are described in the biography included with her collection of papers at University of California, Los Angeles, written by Lilace Hatayama.



**Marta Becket, 1953**  
*Buffalo Courier Express*

"At the age of 12, after her parents' divorce, she returned with her mother to New York where she studied interpretive dance with Ingaborg Tarrup and ballet with Mme. Dorothy Duval. During the Depression, she dropped out of high school to begin a full-time dance career. She danced in nightclubs, army and navy hospitals and theater restaurants, became a member of the corps de ballet at Radio City Music Hall and then performed in the 1946 revival of *Showboat*. Becket also modeled for fashion magazines and did freelance art work. She then won a role in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* and performed at the Alvin Theatre during its year long run which ended in 1951. Her next musical role was in *Wonderful Town* with Rosalind Russell which opened at the Wintergarden Theatre in 1953 for another year long run.

With a successful ballerina dance-mime career growing in New York, Marta began her solo performances. Marta had already created her life-long techniques when she was in her 30's.

"This solo performer, who by the use of masques and changes in costume portrays several characters, is an expert needlewoman and has, with the help of her mother, created all her own costumes. In addition, she has designed and executed her own scenic backdrops. Many of these have been done with applique work on silk." *The Rockland County Journal-News*, 1957.

Marta had a complex relationship with her mother. They were always together. Her mother was needy and dependent on Marta for companionship. Henry Becket, her father, was mostly estranged from them because Helen kept moving and hiding from him. He was a critical person and was not supportive of Marta's need to be a performer. Marta and Helen lived a life of poverty for most of their years together.

Helen was addicted to the stock market and spent her life speculating. When Marta was younger, Helen would use Marta's income for investments. When Marta found out she

told her mother not to take any more of her money. Helen never again took Marta's income. Even then, they found a way to survive in the arts world.

Marta tells a very personal story in her book *To Dance on Sands*. She lays bare the life she had before coming to Amargosa and makes it clear why she was very happy in the desert.

“Mother's constant chatter on the train helped me realize, I'm lonelier when I'm with someone. When I'm alone, my mind is free for plans for projects. I'm not like other dancers. I don't need the parties, the boyfriends, not the social life. I like people out front, on the other side of the footlights. When the show is over, they go home, leaving me alone with my best friend, myself. I may be a dancer, but I have the temperament of a painter who must work alone for hours. Solitude is my fuel.”

Marta met Tom Williams in New York when they were watching the circus elephants walk through New York from Madison Square Garden to the railroad yards. They dated for three years and were married in 1962. Marta was his second wife. They moved to a loft where Marta could paint and dance.

Marta and Thomas went to a psychic in New York prior to a tour. An amazing prediction came of that visit.

“You will be leaving New York in a very short time. You will be moving to a very rural place, far away from here. I see a large letter “A.” You will be doing the most satisfying work of your life in this place.”

In a few years they purchased a van for carrying all Marta's scenery and props on tour. Next, they bought a travel trailer to have a place to live in on tour. On one of those trips, in 1967, they had to fix a flat tire in Death Valley Junction. Marta remembered they had been there in 1964 and went exploring in the town. When she looked in a hole in a door at the back of Corkhill Hall, she knew she was home.

In a 1969 *Troy Record*, the couple said:

“Together they have traveled more than 250,000 miles, through every continental state but Georgia, by station wagon, truck and trailer. One morning you wake up and realize you can drive from Miami to Seattle without a map ... You can't build anything moving around. For the first time in my life, I feel I'm building something.”

The Amargosa Opera House was originally built from 1923-1925 by the Pacific Coast Borax Company as a company town, with a hotel, a theater, and an office complex. This Spanish Colonial Revival town, built by architect Alexander Hamilton McCulloch, declined in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

Thomas described the newly named Amargosa Opera House as “the onetime movie theater-church-social hall-funeral parlor.” In the beginning, Marta and Thomas rented the theater. It was in disrepair with holes in the ceiling and badly warped floors. They began remodeling the hall into the opera house. Marta painted the walls and ceiling with *trompe l'oeil* murals that transformed the place into a European-style opera house.

These 3-D-like paintings include an audience of nobility, bullfighters, American Indians and nuns.

When supporters of Marta became concerned about the preservation of the building and the murals, they formed the Amargosa Opera House, Inc. with the help of the Trust for Public Lands. They bought the Opera House and later through the corporation, and a loan, they bought the entire town. Through the efforts of Becket and Williams, the Amargosa Opera House and Hotel were named to the National Register of Historic Places in 1981.

In an interview, Marta mentioned that she and her husband fought often. Thomas was jealous of Marta's talents and that she spent all time in the opera house at the expense of their marriage. He worked at the Ash Meadows brothel as a bartender and began an affair with a woman who lived near them in Death Valley Junction. Marta and Thomas divorced in 1983.



**Marta Becket at Amargosa Opera House**  
Photo from *To Dance on Sands*.

Marta's mother Helen Becket had moved to Las Vegas when Thomas and Marta moved to Death Valley Junction. She died in Las Vegas, Nevada, November 25, 1984, and is buried in Death Valley Junction Cemetery.

Tom Willet, known as "Wilget" had been hired as a maintenance man for the town. He was very happy there. He became her partner in dance-mime and was the Master of Ceremonies for two decades. Marta and Tom lived in different houses and they were never married. He died of a stroke in 2005 and is buried in the Death Valley Junction Cemetery. Marta called Wilget her soul mate.

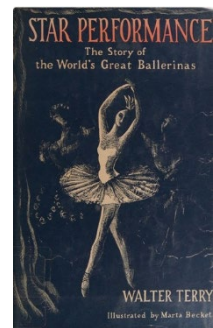
With her debut performance in February 1968 and her final performance in February 2012, at age 87, Marta Becket imagined, choreographed, made costumes, painted the theater, and performed for 44 years.

Following her death on January 30, 2017, at age 92, Marta's ashes were spread over the Opera House property with wildflower seeds. She had told friends that she wanted to become a dust devil over Death Valley Junction.

### Illustrations in Publications

1954 *Balanchine's Complete Stories of the Great Ballets*. Doubleday Publishers, Garden City, New York. [Marta's illustrations](#) can be seen in a Disneyland video of this book on YouTube.

1954 *Star Performance. The story of the world's great ballerinas*. Walter Terry. Doubleday Publishers, Garden City, New York.



### Works Published by Marta Becket

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1998 *Marta Becket. A Theatrical Portrait Before the Amargosa Opera House*. The Amargosa Opera House, Death Valley Junction, California.

*Marta Becket. A Theatrical Portrait: The Artist, The Performers, and her Amargosa Opera House*.

*The Amargosa Opera House Presents Marta Becket in a Program of Dance-Mime. 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 1968-1993*.

2006 *To Dance on Sands. The Life and Art of Death Valley's Marta Becket*. Stephens Press, Las Vegas, Nevada.

**Researched and Written by Mona Reno, 2026.**

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"Marta Becket 1924-2017. She Was Lone Dancer in Remote Opera House." *The Idaho Statesman* (Boise, Idaho), 2 Feb 2017, p.C7. [photos]

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