

"An entertaining journey with real soul and substance."
—THOMAS E. SHERIDAN, author of *Arizona: A History*

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

A History in 100 Stories



GREGORY MCNAMEE

GREGORY MCNAMEE

**THE UNIVERSITY OF
ARIZONA**

A History in 100 Stories



SENTINEL
PEAK

DEFINING OUR REGION

The Southwest Center

IN 1964, Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart issued a famous threshold test for the definition of obscenity. He said, “I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it.”

That’s pretty much the way it is with the Southwest. We don’t exactly know where it is, but we know it when we see it—dust, mountains, cacti, enchiladas, all the things that define our region. Indeed, the noted librarian and collector of southwestern literature Lawrence Clark Powell echoes Justice Stewart on that note: “The Southwest,” he wrote, “has many hearts, synchronized by configuration and color. Even though we cannot define and delimit the Southwest to the satisfaction of all its lovers, we all know when we have reached it.”

We know, but questions remain. Do we include Oklahoma? How much of Colorado? Where in Texas does the South end and the Southwest begin? Does Los Angeles count?

These are all questions that concern the scholars from many disciplines and institutions who gather at the Southwest Center, a kind of intellectual clearinghouse for every sort of exploration of our region—and fittingly, for the Southwest has for millennia been a crossroads of cultures, languages, crops, trade, customs, and ideas. Its diverse ethnic and social makeup lends the Southwest a distinct identity, different from every other place in the United States and the world.

It was in recognition of its unique nature that the Southwest Center was first conceived at a convenio held, again fittingly, at Mission San Xavier del Bac in 1978. President John Schaefer



The heart of the Sonoran Desert along the U.S.-Mexico border near Tule Well.
Photograph by Gregory McNamee.

and field historian Bunny Fontana planned an institution that would be on the freewheeling side of things, not tightly tied to any one academic home at the University but instead welcoming to scholars and students in every discipline, from anthropology to zoology.

It took eight years to pull together the funding for the Southwest Center, but finally, in 1986, it was inaugurated. It soon came under the direction of Joseph C. Wilder, a philosopher by both training and disposition. Joe built a powerful network of advisors, contributors, and researchers that looked far beyond the borders of wherever the Southwest lies, with representatives from universities all over Mexico and Latin America as well as Europe, to say nothing of dozens of institutions within this country and Native nations of the greater Southwest, which includes northwestern Mexico. Soon the Southwest Center was abuzz with conferences on politics, literature, photography, plant geography, linguistics, ecology, folklore, intellectual history, architecture . . . well, the list goes on, and it's a long one.

No single academic discipline or approach can encompass all that there is to know about this place, and so practitioners of these diverse disciplines appreciate the many realms of knowledge and many approaches that are needed in order to comprehend it. The Southwest Center has thus become both a leader of regional research and a hub for multidisciplinary, collaborative projects. Among these have been studies of Yaqui Indian ethnopoetics, a large-scale ecological survey of the forbidding Camino del Diablo region of southwestern Arizona, histories of the cultures of northern Mexico, and ethnobotanical studies among Native cultures throughout the Southwest. The Southwest Center has sponsored the creation and development of photographic, manuscript, and oral history archives, and its efforts have been central in numerous historic preservation projects involving the architecture of the region.

One arm of the Southwest Center's mission is to publish exemplary work of scholarship that also, along with those conferences, reaches out to the broader public. To this end, the Southwest Center publishes the influential quarterly *Journal of the Southwest*, as well as award-winning books such as Eileen Oktavec's *Answered Prayers: Miracles and Milagros Along the Border*, Charles Bowden and Jack W. Dykinga's *The Sonoran Desert*, Cathy Moser

Marlett's *Shells on a Desert Shore: Mollusks in the Seri World*, and Bill Broyles and Michael P. Berman's *Sunshot: Peril and Wonder in the Gran Desierto*, among several dozen other titles.

Five decades on, now under the direction of Jeffrey Banister, the Southwest Center stands at the heart of studies about our region, hard to define though it might be. It also coordinates an undergraduate minor program in Southwestern studies, training new generations of scholars to take the multifaceted knowledge of our home far into the future.