

Wilbur Jordan Smith

Wilbur, the middle child of Ethel Sloan Park and Paul Jordan Smith, was born in Chattanooga on October 14, 1906 (or the 15th, according to his birth certificate, or the 16th, according to the Social Security Death Index). His sister Isabel was born in 1905, his brother Ralph in 1908. Ethel and Paul divorced while the children were still quite young. This then scandalous behavior brought Paul's fledgling pastoral career to an end. Leaving Chicago for California, he soon remarried, as did Ethel. Dr. James P. ("Mr. Jim") Richardson, Ethel's new husband, ran the exclusive private prep school Proso in Houston, Texas. Wilbur, Isabel, and Ralph spent their growing years between their parents' homes in Houston and Claremont, California.

For a short while in the 1920s, Wilbur attended Pomona College in Los Angeles, but he left without graduating and spent the next several years at various jobs, which yielded wonderful stories he later told his sons: his jobs in the gold fields of Kern County, a brass foundry, and as a reporter for a food trade newspaper. During the Great Depression, he and his brother bet at horse races, rode the rails around the country looking for work, and occasionally landed the odd job: more stories for his children to wonder at. In 1932, Wilbur attended the Los Angeles Public Library's course in librarianship and received a degree with honors. The few jobs available in libraries at the time held no interest, however, so he turned the deep love for books he had inherited from his father to "scouting": prowling used bookstores for valuable books sufficiently underpriced to yield a profit from another dealer down the street. While not sufficient in itself to make a living, scouting was something he loved his life long.

In 1933, Wilbur agreed to help his friend Bert, whose marriage was on the rocks, by acting as the "witness" to a claim of Bert's infidelity (adultery being the only permitted justification for divorce in those days). To make sure their stories were straight, Wilbur agreed to meet Bert's estranged wife, Ninon MacKnight, on the steps of the Forty-Second Street Library in New York. In Ninon's words, "I ran up the steps to meet this man and fell in love with him on the spot." After the divorce, Wilbur and Ninon began a cautious courtship that culminated in their marriage on November 22, 1939. Or perhaps it was late October of that year, as a congratulatory letter from Wilbur's father would indicate: another mystery of dates. Ninon, an Australian-born illustrator of children's books, continued to work at her art and helped make ends meet.

In October, 1941, a first son, Paul, was born, followed by a second son, Ralph, in 1943. By this time, Wilbur's checkered career had brought him to work with an old Proso classmate, Howard Hughes (visit the Archives page to access his sister Isabel's biography, with a nice anecdote about "the aviator"). Wilbur worked on the Spruce Goose and other projects as a quality inspector, still scouting books on the side. For a few years after the war, he worked for MGM Studios as a researcher, but his reputation as a bibliophile was not unknown, and in 1947 he was tapped by Lawrence Clark Powell for a position at UCLA. Initially, Wilbur worked in Acquisitions, but in the early 1950s, with Larry Powell's strong encouragement, he became the first head of the Department of Special Collections. Finally, he was doing what he loved best: buying rare books and manuscripts and finding a home for them in the library. After so many years of struggling to find a career, he had found, without doubt, his true vocation.

The family soon outgrew Wilbur and Ninon's rented one-bedroom house. The post-war boom was on, and houses were becoming available in the San Fernando Valley. By cashing in their war bonds, Wilbur and his family were able to make the down payment on a house in Woodland Hills, where they moved in 1950. Later, after the boys had left home, they moved back to Westwood, making the commute much easier on Wilbur.

In 1965, tragedy struck the family when the youngest boy, Ralph, committed suicide. Ralph had been an extraordinarily gifted child from early on, teaching himself chemistry to the point where, at age 15, his parents were informed that the UCLA graduate chemistry program could not offer him anything because his knowledge was beyond that of the professors. He had then turned to the study of languages, mastering Russian, Ukrainian, and Bulgarian with ease, as well as classical Greek and Latin. But his was a deeply troubled psyche, and the advent of psychedelic drugs was ultimately his undoing. The effect of Ralph's death on Wilbur and Ninon was devastating.

A heart attack in 1970 forced Wilbur to consider retirement. Committed though he was to the growth of Special Collections, he had mixed feelings about this. He hated being an administrator, but he loved meeting with writers and collectors to persuade them to donate their collections to the library, and, of course, scouting. Throughout his career, he had met and become a friend with writers of all sorts: mystery writer Raymond Chandler, science fiction writer Ray Bradbury, diarist Anaïs Nin, novelist Lawrence Durrell, and a favorite, Henry Miller, whom he occasionally visited in Big Sur and later in Los Angeles. Under Wilbur's guidance, Special Collections had grown into one of the most remarkable rare book departments in the U.S.

When Wilbur retired, very little changed in his life except that he no longer had to be an administrator. Over the years, on book-buying trips around the country and in England, he had "salted away" in an obscure room in the UCLA library several boxes of books that needed to be catalogued and integrated into Special Collections. Now he could sleep late, go up to the University, spend a few hours with his books, and hang out with his cronies—librarians, professors, collectors, and dealers—all of which he described as "making a nuisance of myself." He continued to read rare book catalogues and recommend purchases to the library and to scout for underpriced rarities that the library didn't need but which they could buy and exchange with another library for something they did. Not once did he buy and sell for his own profit: his dedication to the UCLA library was absolute. The reading room in the department named after him is a fitting memorial to that dedication.

Wilbur and Ninon lived a quiet, gentle life until fall, 1988, when Wilbur suffered a massive stroke that left him partially paralyzed. The following summer, Paul, with his wife Nancy, moved to Westwood to help Ninon look after Wilbur until his death in March, 1992.

A sketch of Ninon's life follows on the next page.

Ninon Jordan Smith

Ninon Galloway MacKnight was born in Sydney, Australia, on April 5, 1908, one of the six children of Harold MacKnight, a wool broker, and Bertha Fanning, an opera singer. Sydney society being rather repressive, Ninon showed signs of restlessness early on. By age 11, she had begun publishing verse in *Australian Young Folks*. A gifted natural artist, she won a competition at age 12, and her sketch of Sydney Harbor was printed on the front page of the Sydney Morning Herald. Girl's schooling in Australia at that time fell into three categories: languages, art, and homemaking. Ninon chose art, and was trained by some of the best-known Australian and English watercolorists of the day. By 15, she was a regular illustrator for four major Sydney newspaper Sunday supplements, drawing children, elves, fairies, animals, cartoons, as well as publishing poems and stories. Here's a sample of her work at age 16:



At the same time, unbeknownst to her family, she was doing cartoons and sketches for what was considered at the time a “naughty” men’s magazine, basing her work on American cartoons of flappers. The naughtiest part about them was the depiction of legs bare to about an inch above the knee: permissible for children, but for grown-ups? Shocking!

Harold died when Ninon was only 18. He left the bulk of his estate to his wife, but each child was to receive a portion at age 21. When Ninon came of age in 1929, she combined what she had earned from her drawings with her inheritance and fled Australia for Canada, following her boyfriend Bert, whom she met and married in Montreal. Their plans to emigrate to the U.S. were thwarted when Bert, traveling on an expired passport, was denied entry. Ninon continued on her own, with plans to meet again in New York. They did, but the marriage was not a success, and eventually they decided to divorce. Adultery was the only ground acceptable in New York at that time, so, like many honorable men, Bert took the blame on himself and arranged for a “witness” to testify to a fictitious infidelity. Ninon, now living alone, agreed to meet the supposed witness, Bert’s friend Wilbur Jordan Smith (son of Ethel Sloan Park and Paul Jordan Smith), on the steps of the New York Public Library. When they met, Ninon took one look at Wilbur and fell in love with him immediately. After the divorce, a long and delicate courtship culminated in marriage in 1939. Ninon adopted her new husband’s middle and last names, becoming Ninon Jordan Smith.

All this time, Ninon had pursued her career as a watercolor artist and illustrator, doing greeting cards and children’s books. Her income picked up when she discovered that greeting card publishers paid “by the head,” that is, by the number of faces on a card. So she painted a lot of well-populated Christmas parties! Wilbur and Ninon’s first son Paul, born in 1941, grew up at his mother’s easel, learning to hold a pose for her drawings for longer and longer times, and also

learning to draw “somewhat.” From an early age, though, Paul wanted to write. His brother Ralph, born in 1943, showed signs of intellectual brilliance in early childhood, mastering chemistry and, later, a variety of Slavic and Classical languages. He was eventually able to merge these skills, translating obscure Russian scientific papers in bioelectronics for UCLA.

The family’s move to the San Fernando Valley in 1950 provided space not only for the boys but for Ninon’s “studio,” which was what one or another room became during the day. Ninon continued her career throughout the 40s, 50s, and 60s, eventually withdrawing from illustration to focus on landscape painting. Son Ralph’s suicide in March, 1965 was a terrible blow from which she recovered only partly after many years had passed. In the fall, she and Wilbur made an extended visit to Australia: her third visit since leaving in 1929, his first ever.

Ninon continued to paint and sketch throughout her remaining years, though increasingly frail and challenged by severe deterioration of her right shoulder. In summer, 1989, Paul and his wife Nancy moved to Los Angeles to help care for Wilbur after his stroke the previous fall. Shortly after Wilbur’s death in 1992, Ninon suffered congestive heart failure, but recovered sufficiently to remain at home and continue to paint and garden. After Paul and Nancy separated in 1995, Paul moved to Seattle, and in June, 1996, Ninon phoned him to say, simply, “Find a house and buy it; I want to move up there.” This she did in October, 1996, but two years later she took a fall from which she never completely recovered. Her last two years were spent in hospitals and assisted living homes, with frequent visits from Paul. At one point, she asked him to illustrate “The House That Jack Built” for a friend’s grandchild. Paul had difficulty with the dog being tossed by the cow with the crumpled horn—the cow was fine, but the dog was awful. Ninon, her right arm nearly immobilized, took the pad and drew a lively sketch of a dog sailing through the air upside down.

In the assisted living home, a new and wonderful friendship blossomed between Ninon and Paul’s dance partner, Janet Jensen, also a painter. Paul had bought Janet’s watercolor painting of a yellow iris for his mother, and when Ninon saw it she said, “I must meet this woman. Bring her here at once!” Paul did, and the two immediately became friends. By this time, Ninon was quite deaf, but she and Jan understood each other to such a degree that they could carry on long “conversations,” Jan writing a few words on a notepad, and Ninon answering in a strong, clear voice. Two weeks before her death, Ninon told Jan, “I want to make a pact with you: I will teach you everything I know if you will teach me everything you know.” The joy of this pact, though never fully realized, held Ninon’s and Jan’s interest until Ninon’s death on October 4, 2000.

For a view of the painting that Paul bought for his mother and which inspired her friendship with Janet, visit <http://jensenartworks.com/fine-art-prints.html> and click on the yellow iris.