



Located four miles upstream from Downieville on Highway 49, the Shady Flat mine was never as productive as some of the bigger mines above Downieville, it was still good for some colorful stories and and even more colorful people, including Frank “Pancho” Willmarth. Pancho made his home studio at Shady Flat, the building of which is still standing today although vacant. His obituary in the Mountain Messenger gives some background on this iconic figure who made Sierra County his home:

“Frank Willmarth, Sierra County’s most famous and beloved artist, has died at the great age of 96 years plus.

As “Pancho”, a name given him in the 1930s by other artisans on Old Los Angeles’ Olvera Street, Frank had a long and luminous career as a caricature artist. At his studios and traveling around the country, he drew presidents and movie stars, prices and sports heroes, and scores of thousands of ordinary folks. Most will remember him for the moments they posed on his hot seat, unable to see what he was drawing on paper, and wondering why their watching friends and family were laughing so hard. Frank was a born entertainer who wanted to make people happy. He could quickly judge the sensitivity of his subjects, and he drew them accordingly. He took off pounds, smoothed wrinkles, and made dull lives seem fun. Frank carried his positive outlook and ready quips into the rest of his life. He was a generous man who brightened the lives of almost all he met.

He was born Francis Glennon Willmarth in Barrington, Illinois, on January 10, 1906, the oldest of three children by his rancher/sportsman father and stage actress mother. His parents separated while the children were quite young, and he grew up in challenging circumstances in St. Louis, Los Angeles, and

Bruneau, Idaho. He was restless by nature and began criss-crossing the country in a Model T Ford as a salesman and sign painter while in his mid-teens. After two years studying journalism at U. of Missouri, Frank married Gertrude Saltzman of Mount Ayr, Iowa, and moved with her to Los Angeles. There he studied at Art Center while Gertrude worked to support them as a biochemist. During WWII he sketched servicemen free for the Hollywood USO and at veterans hospitals and at the homes of Bob Hope and Tyrone Power to raise money for war bonds.

In 1946, the family, by then expanded by four children, moved to a cabin at historic Shady Flat, near Downieville in Sierra County, where “Pancho” established a studio and bonded quickly with the locals, as was his way. He sketched at his home studio, local resorts, clubs in Reno, and began sketching at conventions, at fairs, private parties, fraternity and sorority houses and the like. He also sketched locally to raise funds for good causes such as the PTA, the Fire Department, the county’s State Fair booth and the Methodist Church— for which the Sierra County Board of Supervisors officially honored him in 1996.

The family rented a house in Berkeley when the kids began college, thus beginning another interesting chapter in Willmarth’s career – as an artist for the San Francisco Press Club. When the children had finished college, “Pancho” and Gertrude moved back to Sierra County, where “Pancho” began writing humorous columns for The Mountain Messenger and reopened his studio at Shady Flat. Troubles with the U.S. Forest Service over the cabin lease caused the couple to purchase an old farmhouse in the country near Lincoln although much time was still spent at Shady Flat. After Gertrude died in 1986, Frank married MaryBeth Meyer, with who he shared a dozen happy years.”

