

## CLIFF SEGERBLOM

*A judge whose art has seen a lot of juries, this Boulder City artist is an important chronicler of his state's past.*

*By Mary F. Whalen*

**H**is paintings and photographs speak of the value of things, of history, tradition, and the passage of time. That is why Cliff Segerblom is often called a chronicler of the landscape, architecture, and life style of the vanishing Nevada that is off the beaten path. For more than 50 years Segerblom has captured the fading frontier with his paintings of such scenes as a rusting auto in Rhyolite, or plaster falling from an old, adobe-red theater in Caliente. His work has traveled widely, too, having been exhibited in the Metropolitan Museum and the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

"I like to record what I see," says Segerblom, who at 73 is also a retired

Boulder City justice of the peace and municipal judge. "I do practically all my paintings on location, which is the best way of remembering my enjoyment of a landscape or the architecture of the disintegrating old mining towns."

Originally from California, Segerblom majored in art in the '30s at the University of Nevada in Reno, where he enrolled on a football scholarship. After college he found his way to southern Nevada. His wife, Gene Wines Segerblom, was a Nevada native and had family in Boulder City. When Cliff and Gene visited her rela-

tives there in 1938, he was offered photography work with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, which led him to become one of the premier photographers of man's greatest project, Hoover Dam.

"It was really just public-relations photography for the government," says the modest Segerblom. "But they did teach me how to develop film from the large, old 8x10 camera. And photographers came from all over the country to photograph the project. I met Alfred Eisenstadt and Margaret Bourke-White of *Life*, and Ansel Adams from Yosemite. It was something. They all wanted to use my dark-room to load film and take test strips—and I was only 24." He later became the chief photographer for "the Bureau."



*"Eldorado-Goldfield" (above)*

WATERCOLOR

"The site was at Goldfield but the wagon was in Nelson."

*"Last Picture Show, Caliente" (right)*

ACRYLIC

"A friend's uncle used to run the theater. The words on the marquee are of the last picture when it closed."

*"Boulder Canyon, Lake Mead"*

(opposite page)

ACRYLIC

"I've been doing a lot of paintings in this style—very popular. The site is where Boulder Dam was supposed to be built."



Segerblom's work on Hoover Dam led to another assignment in Central America. From 1941 to 1947 he documented a major project on the Panama Canal. When the Third Locks Project finally died, it was back to Boulder City and work as a free-lance photographer. He took assignments with the Las Vegas visitors authority and often photographed entertainers and celebrities. Some of those photos ended up in the glossy, black-and-white pages of *Life Magazine*.

"Remember, back in the early 1950s Elvis Presley was an unknown," Segerblom says. "Nobody knew who he was. But I was supposed to photograph his first Las Vegas performance at the old Last Frontier. Nobody was



*Segerblom's 26-foot sailboat, Plum Duff, is named after a sailor's dessert pudding.*

sure how he would go over, so Elvis' people had rigged things so that Elvis' girlfriend would jump up out of the audience and faint when he sang 'Blue Suede Shoes.'

"Then there was Mae West. I remember riding up in the elevator with her once after a performance. There was another guy in the elevator—a 'stringer' for *Life*. He was smoking a cigar and Mae stopped the elevator and asked him to get out. She didn't like cigars.

"I also covered the first topless skating show at the old Thunderbird," Segerblom continues. "Back then, there was a big controversy in town about the topless shows. Nobody could decide if they were going to be



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bad for Vegas or not. Then it was learned that right across the street from the Thunderbird, Sally Rand, the famous fan dancer, was appearing at the

"He just came home one day and said, 'Guess who's going to be the next justice of the peace?' And we all fainted."

Silver Slipper. That really blew the lid off things," he grins. "I tried to get one shot of her as she flipped up her fan, but that didn't work."

He also recalls the day in 1969 when he received a phone call from the government. "I could either go to Alaska with the Coast Guard to record something there, or I could go to the South Pacific to record the splashdown of the Apollo 12 in a painting," he recalls. He took the latter assignment.

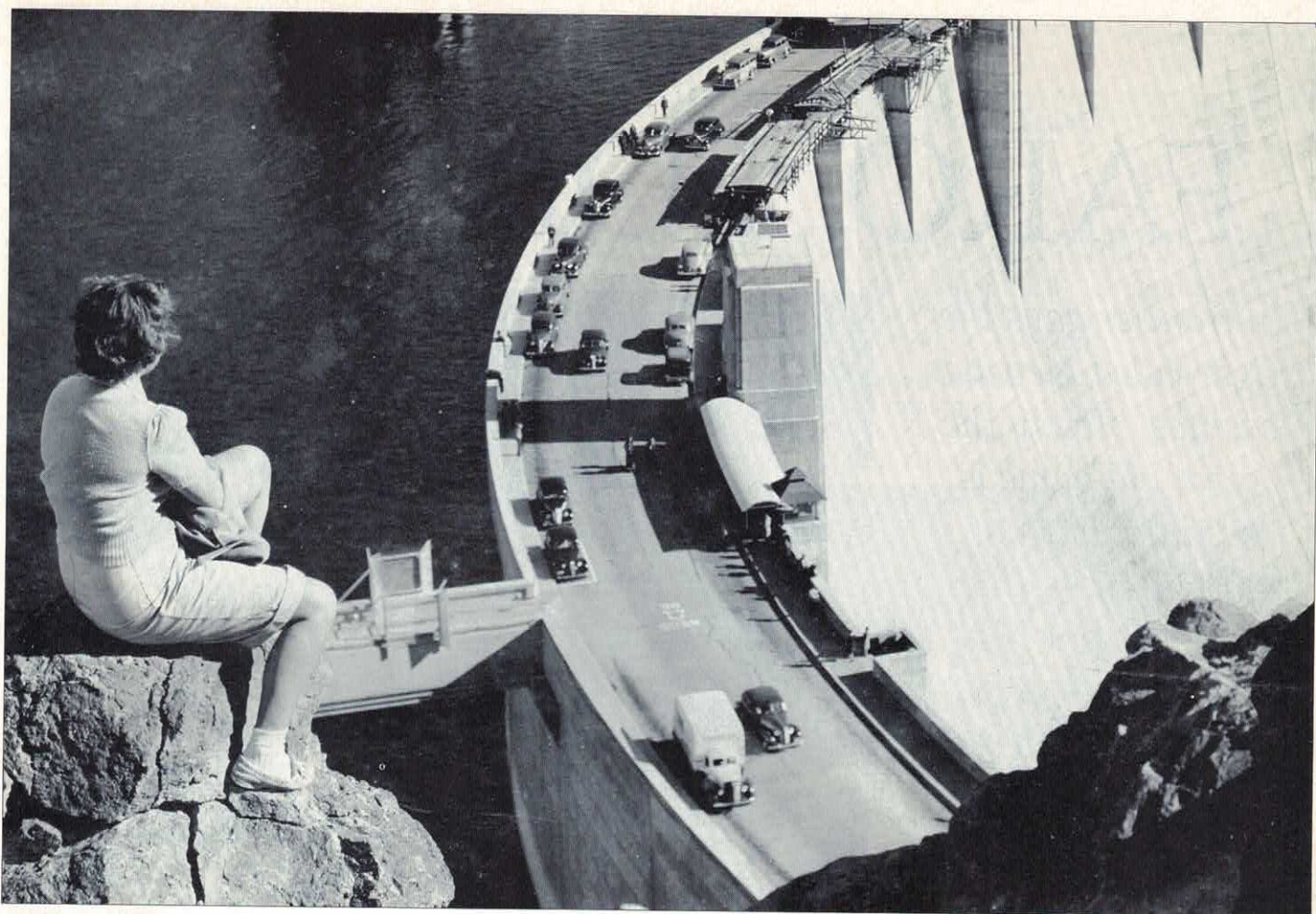
"There was a low cloud ceiling that day, and there were three helicopters circling the aircraft carrier, the *U.S.S. Hornet*, giving descending footage of the capsule through loudspeakers. Then, all of a sudden, it just popped out of the clouds. You knew you were watching a historic event. It was a tremendous sight."

Back in the early days of the University of Nevada-Las Vegas, Segerblom taught photography at night for four years. Then he set up an on-campus photography department and continued teaching for another decade. He also taught art and led students on painting expeditions on the Colorado River.

Besides enjoying a long career standing before an easel or squinting behind a camera, Segerblom has also spent many years sitting on the bench. In 1964 Boulder City officials asked him if he would fill in as justice of the peace until the next election.

"He just came home one day," says Gene, "and he said, 'Guess who's going to be the next justice of the peace?' And we said, 'Who?' And he said, 'Me.' And we all fainted." But Segerblom then won the election and kept his position for the next 20 years.

"I married about 40 people a year,



*Segerblom posed future wife Gene for a Kodak ad of Hoover Dam (above). He also captured the dam when its floodgates first spilled water in 1941 (right).*

plus a lot of our friends and both our children," says Segerblom. "Then after about 20 years, I was asked to be a municipal judge for three years. I attended the National Judicial College in Reno every year, so I finally learned how to be a real judge. Otherwise, there wasn't much to it."

Among other achievements, Segerblom has received the 1984 Governor's Arts Award for Visual Art and the Professional Achievement Award presented by UNR's alumni association in 1986. He has served on the State Park Advisory Commission for 16 years and is currently its chairman. Last year he was honored by the Nevada Department of Museums and History for his artistic contributions to the state.

Those are notable honors for a fellow who once dropped by to see his wife's relatives and that big new dam. ▽

*Mary F. Whalen is a Las Vegas writer. She previously wrote about Cliff Segerblom in The Nevadan Today, the Sunday magazine of the Las Vegas Review-Journal.*

