Exhibit Opens May 11

Artist Willard Page created his niche on-the-road West

by Sharlot Hall Museum

‘Go West!’ was his idea. With his wife Ethel, he went on-the-road in their ‘mobile’ home, going from town to town showcasing his wares in the early 1900s.

Willard Page brought hustle and a clever marketing scheme that blended his artistic talent with a novel production style and his passion for capturing the American West’s natural beauty.

The couple, originally from northeastern Kansas, found work traveling and performing with the Redpath-Horner Lyceum, where Ethel played the piano and sang ballads, and where Willard was sketching, painting and lecturing on stage. He sketched and painted so quickly as he spoke, Willard was called a “lightning artist,” highly popular and entertaining.

The Chautauqua circuit not only brought culture and entertainment to thousands of people in small towns across the country, it provided an opportunity to venture throughout the West. When the popularity of the circuit faded, the Pages moved to Boulder, Colorado, where Willard painted small landscapes to sell to tourists.

He built a wide easel where he could paint in an assembly-line style, quickly producing tiny, souvenir paintings that would fit in a suitcase. Before long, Willard built a camper shell on a Dodge chassis and, with the homemade RV, the couple toured New Mexico, Arizona and California.

Willard painted as they traveled the Southwest road. He painted hundreds of small landscapes featuring adobe villages, desert landscapes, mountains and brooks of the high country. Their travels included the Painted Desert, the Catalinas of Tucson, the Grand Canyon, the Sequoias of California, and the Grand Tetons. Shops bought paintings in batches. A 5”x7” painting as 90 cents, while larger paintings cost more: $6 for an 11”x14” and $20 for a 16”x20”. On the depot platforms, one could pick up a ‘fresh’ oil for a couple of bucks.

Willard Page art, almost a century later, continues to capture the charm and excitement of discovery. His simple strokes capture the natural beauty, and his creative, production-line approach piqued many a weary train traveler’s sense of value and keepsake as a visual souvenir of their travels.

About 45 of his paintings will be on exhibit at Sharlot Hall Museum beginning Saturday, May 11. The many pieces reflect the couples’ decades of travel on the Southwest Road, from Sabino Canyon and Catalina Mountains, to the high country of Colorado, the vistas of the Grand Canyon, and all Arizona.