

# Emil & Edna



*The Mystery of 'Nude in Tall Grasses' or:  
How a Big Sur Cultural Relic Ended Up in a Prunedale Yard Sale*

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**By Joe Livernois**

**She is arranged** in a classic pose: left arm crossed behind her neck, head bowed reverently to her right. She is beautiful. Sensual. Nude. She seems to be sitting along a stream bed, among the tall reeds, and she is framed as a timeless Venus birthed in black and white.

I discovered the photograph at a yard sale off Castroville Boulevard in Prunedale late one Saturday afternoon about 20 years ago. The sale featured lots of household stuff, but also quite a few loose and random pieces of artwork, allegedly rescued from a

storage locker maintained by a local community college instructor, though even the ownership of the locker was vague.

The style looked familiar: an innocent black-and-white nude in a wild setting.

It was signed “Edna Bullock.”

I knew of Edna Bullock. While true that I am only vaguely aware of the lives and times of famous local photographers, I knew Edna’s memorable story. She had been a school teacher while her husband, Wynn Bullock, developed a portfolio of mind-blowing photographs during his storied career. Along with Ansel Adams, the Westons and others, Wynn was a leading figure in the golden era of distinguished fine-art photographers on the Central Coast, a movement known as the Monterey Legacy. And when Wynn died, in 1975, his widow picked up a camera and created her own mind-blowing work, emerging as a renowned photographer in her own right.

I checked the back of the framed 11-by-11-inch photograph I found at the Prunedale yard sale. The name of the photo was “Nude in Tall Grasses” and it was dated “1987/89.”

But it was another inscription on the back, written in pencil, that blew me away:

*For Emil  
on his 88th birthday  
with love,  
Edna*

I also knew of Emil White. There is much to be said about White, a Big Sur rascal of legend and lore, but the first thing that comes to mind is his libido and his expertise in the art of seduction. A headline above one of his obituaries declared he “lived for the ladies until his dying day.” Another obituary writer said that “Emil existed unabashedly for women. He loved them in the flesh and in the abstract.” It was all school-boy misogyny, bad behavior and serial sexual escapades with Emil White, the sort of boys-will-be-boys behavior that isn’t always tolerated these days. Most important, Emil White was author Henry Miller’s best friend; together they molded the Big Sur mystique that endures to this day.

I didn’t know the particulars of the photo I found in Prunedale, but I knew the names and the reputations. Some quick research showed that White had turned 88 on April 10, 1989, less than four months before his death. Edna Bullock must have been there, at his final party, and “Nude in Tall Grasses” must have been a gift.

The photograph is fine art, but it’s also a significant footnote in the cultural-historical fabric of the region, with a threadline that connects some of the most interesting characters to roam Big Sur: Edna Bullock, Henry Miller, Emil White. As a relic, the photograph represents the intersection of art, culture, myth, mysticism, madness and sex that established the Big Sur aura. So what was it doing in a pile of bad student art, leaning against a folding table at a random yard sale in Prunedale?

“How much do you want for it?” I asked the woman at the sale.

“Five dollars,” she answered.

“Do you know what this is?”

“Doesn’t matter,” she said. “I just need to get rid of all this stuff.”

It was late in the day and she was obviously desperate to sell off what she could. I might have negotiated the price down to a dollar if I wanted.

I wanted to tell her that this particular photograph — this “Nude in Tall Grasses” — encapsulates a whirl of local lore and history that connects the lives of so many people who created the Big Sur mystique. It is a *ki*, the spiritual object that animates the essence of a time and place that no longer exists.

But I could tell she wasn’t interested in all that. I handed her a ten-dollar bill, told her to keep the change. I’ve had the photograph in my office ever since.

“This is such an artist-rich area you never know just what you’ll find, or where you’ll find it,” John Rexine told me not long ago. Rexine is the director of collections and exhibitions at the [Monterey Museum of Art](#), which houses more than 430 Edna Bullock photographs.

He said the pedigree of “Nude in Tall Grasses” is intriguing. “The inscription alone certainly makes yours archivally significant,” he said. “I’d be curious to know how it landed in a Prunedale garage.”

So would I.

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**Emil White is one of the more intriguing figures** of a certain era of Big Sur characters. An immigrant with a voracious appetite for women, White had been obsessed with Henry Miller after reading “[The Cosmological Eye](#),” the first book of Miller’s not banned in the United States. White had committed entire passages to memory, and he had introduced Miller’s work to a small group of artists and intellectuals during readings and discussions in Chicago, where he was living at the time.

The two of them met randomly on a Michigan Avenue sidewalk, White said, during an interview in 1980. “Are you Henry Miller?” White asked, “And right away we embraced. Right away he could sense I was no ordinary friend.” When Miller moved to Partington Ridge in Big Sur in 1944, White followed him a few months later.

Henry and Emil forged a lifelong friendship based on art, literature, table tennis and a mutual appetite for females. Together they fashioned a lingering mystique for Big Sur, a fascination that’s been romanticized, annotated, analyzed and exaggerated, but never repeated.

Miller would dedicate “[Big Sur and The Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch](#)” to White. He devoted an entire chapter to White in a memoir called “[My Bike & Other Friends](#),” in

which he describes his friend as an unabashed woman-chaser. Miller admitted he was jealous of White's "harem."

"His only vice was women," Miller wrote, "but they cost him nothing ... He was living like a pasha."

Miller described White's home as a "halfway house for transitory females." His friend was compassionate and considerate and had a knack for quick work, Miller wrote. You would bring your wife or girlfriend to his place, and under some pretext he and the woman would soon be out in the garden looking at the petunias and the next thing you know he'd be hugging and kissing her, Miller wrote, with tones of admiration. "He would pat one's ass so lovingly that even if she were a duchess she would not be offended," Miller wrote. "It was all part of his worshipful, respectful attitude. Then he'd move in for the kill and an afternoon might turn into a week."

This was all half a century ago, a time when "boys would be boys," and the men-boys dominated the rap and got away with bad behavior while the women remained mostly anonymous. I wasn't there so I can't attest to the level of debauchery and the nature of the free-love relationships, but from what I've read and heard it feels like the sort of conduct that might, in the enlightenment of today's culture, result in civil action and public censure, at the least.

In "[My Life and Times](#)," an autobiography, Miller called White "my closest friend," the only friend he ever trusted. White had lived an adventurous life before coming to America — or at least he told a good story about his childhood in Hungary. According to the story or lore, as conveyed by Henry Miller, White had been sentenced for execution at the age of 17 because of his involvement in revolutionary activities in Hungary and had "escaped by a miracle."

He came to the U.S., and lived the good life in Big Sur. A two-page photograph that accompanied the section about Emil in "My Life and Times" depicts White leaning his head against the right cheek of a woman's bare ass, his hands around the fleshy part below the derriere. "This is Emil caught in a characteristic pose," according to the caption, presumably written by Henry Miller. "I can't imagine why he looks sad. He always loved the feminine touch."

White was even more direct about his attraction to women: "If I pet a soft tush the day is golden," he told friends.

Rumor of libertine excesses followed Henry Miller throughout his life. Some of it was true — the women, the wives, the wine — though White would insist that Miller never overindulged. White would say that Miller was "really one of the happiest men in the world, and if it wasn't for the troubles he had with his wives, he would have always existed on a high plane." (In that regard, they were typical males, blaming the women in their lives for the unhappiness in their souls.)

Still, much of the alleged excesses might have been projections assumed by polite society shocked by Miller's work. His "[Tropic of Cancer](#)," published in 1934, remains one of the most banned books in America for its "candid sexuality." It wasn't until the

mid-'60s before the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that "Tropic of Cancer" could be sold in this country.

Miller and White were often cited as cautionary tales. In 1947, Harper's Magazine published a weird exposé that supposedly uncovered the nihilistic lifestyle of Miller and his Big Sur bohemians in a story headlined "The New Cult of Sex and Anarchy."

Others piled on. Soon after Harper's published its screed, the San Francisco Examiner ran its own front-page story about the Big Sur scene with a headline that screamed "Group Establishes Cult of Hatred in Carmel Mountains."

The story described a "doctrine of doom" that prevailed in Big Sur, a doom that threatened the moral fabric of society. Emil White is described by the Examiner as an artist who "paints surrealistic symbols from the dreams of his pillar-to-post past ... gloomy, self-analytical paintings, some of which have sold for \$50 each."

Not that Big Sur was looking for publicity, but news of sex and anarchy was greeted with enthusiasm among a great number of San Francisco Bay Area beatniks, poets and musicians. Throw in the mystic beauty of the place, its detachment from society, the potential to mix nihilism with existentialism, and suddenly Big Sur was on the groove map.

"These articles brought a lot of people looking for this so-called cult of sex," White told a reporter some years later. "And some people came looking to join."

Among the pilgrims were the San Francisco beat boys — Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder. Jack Kerouac was always supposed to drop in, but he dropped out and did his own Big Sur angst. Otherwise, the Bay Area characters seemed disappointed by what they experienced when they got to Big Sur for an audience with Miller, White said. By then Miller had all but quit alcohol.

The local media seemed to laugh it all off. A writer named Joseph Schoeninger journeyed down the South Coast looking for sex and cultish behavior, and he came up empty. The "communistic' cult either never existed or it was composed only of mild-mannered, aging Henry Miller," he reported for the Monterey Peninsula Herald.

Emil White was among Henry Miller's greatest boosters, explaining to anyone who would listen that the Miller mystique wasn't all orgies and debauchery. Miller was a disciplined writer, of course, and he also liked to paint.

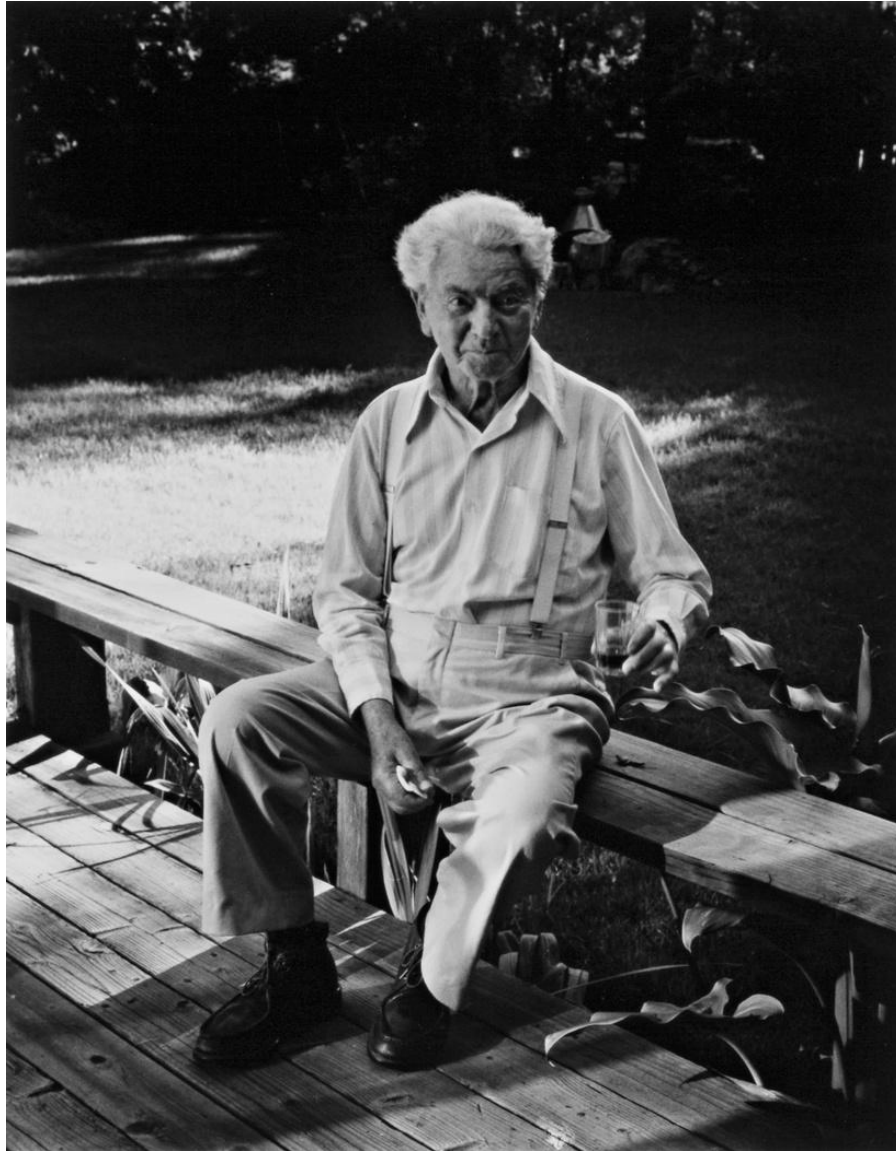
He also loved the ordinary sport of pingpong, and the two of them spent hours hitting the ball back and forth. There is, in fact, a photograph floating about cyberspace that depicts Henry Miller, fully clothed and with a paddle in his hand, awaiting the serve of a naked blond across the table.

By 1962, Miller had tired of the wastrels and desperate kooks who knocked on his door hoping to fly in his orbit. Henry Miller retreated to a new home in Pacific Palisades.

Emil White stayed and did what he could to keep Miller's legacy alive on the South Coast. In 1981, a year after Miller died, White transformed his Big Sur cabin into a

shrine to his author friend, calling it the Henry Miller Memorial Library. White died in 1989 of Parkinson's. Travelers still come to the cabin to soak in the Miller-White vibe.

"Nude in Tall Grasses" evidently had a home there for a while. But then it disappeared and ended up at a Prunedale yard sale.



Edna Bullock, *Emil White*, 1987 or '88 © 1987/2022 Bullock Family Photography LLC. All rights reserved.

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**Barbara Bullock-Wilson**, the daughter of Wynn and Edna Bullock, isn't certain when her family first crossed paths with Henry Miller and Emil White. But they had formed a bond — they mixed professional and social pursuits — and they remained close until their deaths.

More than 30 years after White's departure from the mortal coitus, Barbara Bullock-Wilson still remembers the "twinkle in Emil's eyes" and the whimsy in his character. "Emil just loved people," she told me. "Yes, he loved women, but he loved everyone."

The family adored and trusted White. "He was a good and interesting friend," Barbara told me. "Emil opened the doors to many people in Big Sur, including Henry Miller, artist Bob Nash, and Sandy Justice, the caretaker of the Jaime de Angulo ranch at the top of Partington Ridge where Dad made several ionic images. Dad took many photos for Emil's Big Sur guide, and after Mom became a photographer, Emil happily offered her the use of the Library grounds for her photo workshops."

Barbara said her mother never worried about Wynn's relationships with his female models. "But if dad came home smelling of garlic and wine, she knew he'd spent the day with Emil." Her mother worried about Wynn's drive home through the coastal fog after having a bit of wine. "That, and contending with his pungent breath," Barbara said.

White was a one-man Big Sur chamber of commerce, and supported himself by selling his personal artwork and copies of promotional magazines he published that extolled the beauty and the characters of Big Sur. Those publications were filled with fawning stories written by his friend Henry Miller, and they were illustrated with photographs taken by Wynn Bullock.

Miller even wrote a profile about Wynn Bullock for the Big Sur magazine, declaring that the photographer was a "dreamer divinely possessed." Another Henry Miller story, called "Children of the Earth," is illustrated with a haunting black-and-white photograph of Barbara, her small body crouched in a field of clover under a dark-canopied forest.

Edna Bullock was born and raised in the conservative rural community of Hollister; her father was chief of police and her mother was a seamstress. She dreamed of becoming a professional dancer but her family persuaded her not to pursue the life of an entertainer.

She attended UCLA and UC Berkeley, and she taught physical education at Fresno High School until she married Wynn, a former concert singer and a budding photographer. She quit her job and became a full-time housewife and mother, raising two daughters, Barbara and Lynne, and a stepdaughter, Mimi.

Edna returned to the classroom after 15 years at home and after the family settled in Monterey. She retired as an educator to care for her ailing husband, who died in 1975.

A year later, she launched her own career in photography. She was 61 years old at the time and she was audacious enough to think she could develop her own eye behind the lens.

Soon after Wynn's death, Edna traveled to Arkansas to visit her son-in-law's family. She brought along a Nikon F camera that Wynn had given her as a memento just before he died. While there, she quietly shot photos of family and landscapes. One of them depicts an older woman, a grandmother, in a print dress. It is a dramatic shot,

reminiscent of Dust Bowl anguish. Edna Bullock liked the photograph so much that she was inspired to plunge headlong into the art.

She enrolled in a beginning photography class at Monterey Peninsula College. Henry Gilpin, the teacher and one of Wynn Bullock's contemporaries, couldn't believe her when she walked into his classroom and stated her intentions.

"I assured him I didn't know anything about the processing of film," she said, in her recorded memories. "He finally accepted the idea of me as a student, and he proved to be a marvelous teacher." Circulating with Wynn all those years, she got to know photographers like Ansel Adams and Morley Baer, and they happily encouraged her in her new career.

"I had inherited a darkroom, camera equipment and supplies," she said. "For more than 30 years I had been immersed in the world of photography. My own needs to be artistically creative were strong."

Much of her work are studies of stark nudes enveloped in nature — like "Nude in Tall Grasses." Many of them are provocative, stark and artful full-frontal representations of both the male and the female forms. They were certainly not the work one would expect from a woman in her mid-60s, a former home economics teacher.

She released a book, called "Edna's Nudes," on her 80th birthday, in 1995. She had been a dancer, always graceful, and she had developed an appreciation for the human form.

"Our society's reluctance to portray the male nude in any form except as a muscle man ... bothers me and I want to help rectify that," she said in a film about her work, co-produced by daughter Barbara. "I like being able to show a man at ease with his body in an outdoor setting."

In the end, Edna Bullock's images were displayed in more than 100 individual and group exhibitions throughout the world. Some of her photography is included in the permanent collections of institutions like Biblioteque Nationale, the National Museum of Modern art in Kyoto, the Monterey Museum of Art and the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona.

"Reflecting her character, her work is intuitive, direct, zesty, graceful (she saw with a dancer's eye), and touched with humor," according to Lumiere, a publication devoted to fine photography.

"Edna was an important part of her husband's story for 32 years. As a woman who began a new career at age 61, she created an inspiring story totally her own."

Adds Rexine: "It's really quite remarkable to me that she never pursued photography while Wynn was alive yet was obviously involved in and paying close attention to his process."

She absorbed an artistic sensibility and developed an eye "through her ties to the tight-knit photography community here," Rexine said, "so that when she finally did decide to pick up the camera and pursue her own vision the work matured so rapidly



and energetically. She experimented, taking her photography in directions that Wynn never tread and making it her own (the everyday world, male nudes, collage, color, etc.).”



Kurt Fishback, *Edna Bullock in Home Studio*, 1980 © 1980/2022 Kurt Fishback. All right reserved.

**Despite its beauty** and its historical context, I've never displayed "Nude in Tall Grasses" in a prominent place in the house. As pure art, it is a classic black-and-white image representational of the genre among photographers of Edna Bullock's era. As a footnote to local history, it's a prized possession. At least it is to me.

I stumbled upon the photograph in Prunedale and I took it home with me, but I've always known it doesn't belong to me. It's not mine to keep and it's not mine to sell. It belongs in a museum. It belongs to Barbara Bullock. It belongs in the Henry Miller Memorial Library. It belongs to Emil White's children. The photo has a story that doesn't involve me.

I started to research the journey of "Nude in Tall Grasses" only recently. I probably should have done it earlier. Too many people have disappeared or died since the deaths of Emil White and Edna Bullock. I may never learn how the photograph found its way to Prunedale, but the photograph unleashed my fascination for the Bullocks, Emil White and Henry Miller.

The photograph feels like an artifact. I just don't know what to do with it.

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**By the time of his 88th birthday**, on April 10, 1989, Emil White was in the throes of a Parkinson's diagnosis that would end his life later that year, on July 20. His estranged son Stefan arrived at Emil's Big Sur cabin during the old man's final seven months. The idea was to help care for Emil and possibly to patch up their relationship.

Stefan White recently sat for a [podcast with Magnus Toren](#), director of the Henry Miller Memorial Library, and talked about the rocky relationship he had with his father. As a child, Stefan's mother had fled Big Sur with the kids and got as far away from Emil as possible. They ended up in Australia. Emil traveled once to Australia for a visit, but it didn't work out well at all. Stefan now lives in Austria. His spiritual journey brought him to [Prem Rawat](#).

While tending to his father, Stefan blended into the Big Sur vibe the best he could, meeting his father's bohemian friends. But those final months around the cabin were chaotic, Stefan White told me during an email interview. "I can't criticize the chaos of that time," he admitted. "I was most certainly a part of it."

Stefan White left the cabin for periods of time to work on a documentary in support of Native American activist Leonard Peltier in San Francisco, and he left Emil to caregivers and "comers and goers" who weren't always honest. Stefan recalls somebody "borrowed" Emil's car and let it go up in flames before he could return it.

"I've often self-criticized my care for Emil over the last seven months of his life," Stefan wrote, "but on deeper reflection I know that I acted to the very best of my ability at the time. We had some wonderful moving times together and did the best we could to patch our torn relationship."

Weakened by Parkinson's, Emil White still hosted visitors to his home for his birthday. As per usual, the party included lots of music, lots of dancing women and lots of what one of the celebrants called "spicy drummers."

Barbara Bullock-Wilson was there, and so was her mother. Memories of the day have faded over time, but Barbara remembers seeing Emil in a chair, in his kitchen, greeting visitors with that twinkle in his eye. She said she doesn't remember Edna's gift to Emil that day; she doesn't remember "Nude in Tall Grasses." But she does recall a happy day.

Stefan White said he believes he met Edna Bullock at that final birthday party. "She probably mentioned that she was soon to do a nude photography workshop at the library and I probably volunteered to be a model, as I'd done that over many years," Stefan wrote. He joined a couple of other models for the session; Edna produced several stunning photographs from that day, including an image of Stefan sprawled over the exposed roots of an ancient tree.

Stefan White treasured those photographs, but they've since disappeared "when my daughter and a friend ... went on a moral rampage and destroyed the postcards and photos of nudes I posted to a board in my rumple room."

Stefan doesn't recall seeing "Nude in Tall Grasses." And he was not involved in "divesting Emil's possessions" after his father died. A lot of people came and went during that time. Stuff disappeared. Administration of the property was sketchy, as were many of the people given access.

By agreement Stefan left the cabin so it could be turned over to the Big Sur Land Trust. The Henry Miller Memorial Library ultimately became an independent nonprofit, following Emil White's expectation for the property: to "promote and enhance the scholarly research and worldwide enjoyment of Henry Miller's literary and artistic works."



Edna Bullock, *Stefan and Roots*, 1989 © 1989/2022 Bullock Family Photography LLC. All rights reserved.

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**I asked the Prunedale woman** who took my ten-dollar bill where it all came from, all these random oils, watercolors and "Nude in Tall Grasses." But she was vague about it; something about how the art was found with a bunch of other junk in a storage locker she had cleaned out. I didn't think to ask if she'd obtained it all in an auction, or if she had been related to this "college art instructor." Years later, my wife Loma remembered

that she knew one of the two women running the garage sale. She recently found the woman on Facebook, sent her a message, but hasn't heard back.

Barbara Bullock-Wilson recalls that the caretaker first assigned to carry on the Miller legacy at the Henry Miller Memorial Library antagonized many of White's old friends. Under his guidance, the place was a disorganized mess. Items Emil White had collected vanished. She said she wouldn't be surprised if it turned out he had taken "Nude in Tall Grasses" for himself.

I'm afraid the mystery of how such an incredible relic of a bygone era ended up in Prunedale might never be solved. But I would like to get the print to its rightful owner.

After listening to Toren's podcast interview earlier this year, it occurred to me that Stefan White should have "Nude in Tall Grasses." The gift was meant for Emil White, and Stefan is his son. I would like to give it to him. I ran the idea past Barbara Bullock-Wilson, who oversees a vast collection of the Bullock Family art, and she agreed Stefan should probably get it if he wants it.

I extended the offer to Stefan White. He appreciated the gesture but he said the photo belongs elsewhere. "I think Edna's archives would be a better place for it than buried in my collection of family memorabilia," he said.

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**Not long after Emil White's death** in 1989, a gathering of the tribe showed up at the cabin for an afternoon of celebration in his memory. The event was festive, of course, with the requisite music and public memorials, including Stefan's sweet farewell to his father. The memorial was very much like his birthday party, except with more speeches and Emil wasn't there.

It featured at least one belly dancer, a lot of laughter and many winking acknowledgements of Emil's reputation as a lady's man. Much of the memorial is recorded in a crude film produced by Joe Kishton called "[St. Emil Joins Henry Miller.](#)"

Near the end of Kishton's movie, Edna Bullock appears on the stage. "All I can say is that wherever he is now," she said, "I hope he has as many women around him as he did in his life."

And maybe one of them is a woman in tall grasses.

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***The fate of the Bullocks' photographs:*** *In addition to the many hundreds of photographs by Edna and Wynn Bullock currently in museums and archives, Barbara Bullock-Wilson has accumulated more than 900 photographs and established the Bullock Family Photography Archive LLC. Her goal is to sell the collection for safekeeping — and at a discounted price — to UC Santa Cruz. Bob Sadler, a fine photographer and member of the Bullock archive's advisory council, [explains the intent for the collection here.](#)*

**Footnote:** After learning that Stefan White lost his prints of Edna Bullock's photographs of him after his daughter's "moral rampage," Barbara Bullock-Wilson sent him digital copies of the photographs. Barbara said he was "thrilled" to receive them.

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Featured Photo above: Edna Bullock, *Nude in Tall Grasses*, 1987 © 1987/2022 Bullock Family Photography LLC. All rights reserved.

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Sources:

- Barbara Bullock-Wilson, interview on March 15, 2022, and various email exchanges
- John Rexine, Collections and Exhibitions Director, Monterey Museum of Art, interview via email
- Stefan White, interview via email
- Robert Sadler, interview
- [BigSurKate.blog](http://BigSurKate.blog)
- The Paris Review
- The Henry Miller Library
- "My Bike & Other Friends (Volume 2)," by Henry Miller, Capra Press, 1978
- "My Life and Times," by Henry Miller, Playboy Press, 1975
- "St. Emil Joins Henry Miller," a film by Joe Kishton
- The Big Sur Guide magazine
- San Francisco Examiner
- Monterey County Herald
- The New York Times
- The Los Angeles Times
- "Stefan White, son of The Henry Miller Library Founder Emil White," A Big Sur Podcast with Magnus Toren
- University of California, Santa Cruz