

California - Possum Trot - Calvin & Ruby Black

- 1903 Calvin was born in Tennessee.
- 1913 Ruby was born in Georgia.
- 1916 - 18 At age 13 Calvin left school to raise his brothers and sisters. He taught himself to read from the Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward catalogue. At age 15, Calvin won a competition for singing in a woman's voice (*at the age of 17 according to LA Times 1986*).
- Calvin spent 10 years in the circus.
- 1933 Calvin and Ruby met in Georgia and were married (cf. Pioneers catalogue).
- Calvin panned gold in California.
- Calvin and Ruby lived in northern California and Los Angeles before moving to Yermo.
- 1953 (*1956 according to Kirsch 1978*) Calvin and Ruby Black moved from Redding to Yermo in the Mojave desert (12 miles from Barstow). They bought their land sight unseen from a magazine advertisement for \$25 down and \$10 a month. They named their property Possum Trot before they saw it.
- Calvin began carving wooden dolls which Ruby dressed. Over 80 near life size wooden dolls were created, each with a personality, function and costume of its own. Many represented Lilly Langtree and her contemporaries.
- When Highway 15 was constructed to Calico Ghost Town, Calvin and Ruby started a Rock Shop to take advantage of the traffic that passed by their house. Ruby sold polished rocks and postcards to tourists. Cecil Drennan, a friend, helped Calvin build his own 100 yard roadside show which included a train, stage coaches and merry-go-rounds with windmills. The materials came from Barstow dump. Calvin built the Bird Cage Theatre for the Fantasy Dolls Show. The dolls perform and sing in men's, women's and children's voices, all recorded by Calvin.
- 1969 The Birdcage Theatre was completed. Admission to the Shows was 50 cents.
- 1972 On March 2 Calvin died.
- 1974 Allie Light first saw Possum Trot. With Irving Saraf she made the film "Possum Trot: The Life and Work of Calvin Black". This was the first film in the series Vision of Paradise: Contemporary Folk Artists of the United States. The film was a finalist at the American film Festival and was shown at the Mannheim Film Festival.
- 1975-76 The Blacks' work was featured "In Celebration of Ourselves", San Francisco.
- 1980 In June Ruby died, after having carefully tended the dolls during the years since Calvin died. In the same year Whiteley (at whose gallery many of the dolls were eventually sold) visited Possum Trot (cf. Brown 1982).

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1971 Backroads to California (sketches and trip notes). Sunset Books. *

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(* - references in SPACES archives)

EXHIBITS

G. Ray Hawkins Gallery, Dec. 15, 1981-Jan. 23, 1982

"The Dreambuilders of California", Photographs of Possum Trot, The Chevron Gallery, San Francisco, April 9-May 25, 1984.

"Pioneers in Paradise: Folk and Outsider Artists of the West Coast", Long Beach Museum of Art travelling exhibit, November 25, 1984-January 20, 1985.

Whiteley Gallery, American Folk Art, 1985

"Divine Disorder: Folk Art Environments of California", Triton Museum of Art, Santa Clara, October 26-December 1, 1985

New York Museum of American Folk Art, 1986

"Cat and a Ball on a Waterfall: 200 Years of California Folk Painting and Sculpture", Oakland Museum of Art, March 22-August 3, 1986

"The Ties that Bind: Folk Art in Contemporary American Culture", the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Ohio, November 21, 1986-January 10, 1987

Folk Art exhibit, Orange Coast College Art Gallery, April 4-May 2, ?

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SOURCES

Barstow Desert Dispatch.
130 Coolwater Lane,
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Barstow Library

Allie Light and Irving Saraf
???? Concord Street
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(415)549-2500 (W)

Wynona Kenyon (identified and wrote a description of each doll)
Mohave River Valley Museum Association
P.O. Box 1282
Barstow, California 92311
(714) 257-3553 (H)
217 E. Elizabeth Street
Barstow, California 92311

Dolores Griffin (Administrator Ruby Black Estate)

Larry Whitely, Kathryn Loye. (Whitely Gallery has Possum Trot tapes).

Inez Storer (involved in film)
Lester Gallery
Inverness
669-1536

Pat Farraro (involved in early stages of film)

Dr. Wikke van Bonin (?)
Westdeutscher Rundfunk Koln
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