

Saving and Preserving Arts and Cultural Environments  
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Telephone: 213/463-1629



October 14, 1988

Dear Ms. Aguiler:

We just received a letter from State Senator Art Torres about your frustration in getting some information about Calvin & Ruby Black's Possum Trot. Our records show we did reply, but it seems you did not receive the information. Our phone number appears above.

Here is the information you requested. When Calvin Black died he told Ruby he wanted the dolls destroyed. Ruby however decided to save the dolls and theater, and said that upon her death she wished the dolls could be saved and kept together as a unit. Being generally suspicious and not favored by the arts establishment in Barstow, she declined to sign a paper stating she wished to donate the material to the community. She also declined the idea of selling the dolls or the site in her lifetime if in fact funds could be raised. That she could end her days at the site was never in question.

In fact, I approached the local (Barstow) museum to ascertain whether they had interest in the site, but they said all their preservation efforts were going to try to preserve a Fred Harvey facility in Barstow. Upon Ruby's death I again questioned the museum and they still were not interested. Relatives of the Blacks had no interest in the dolls and saw no value in them.

The person chosen to do an evaluation of the art works, Larry Whiteley, made an offer for the pieces and was awarded them by the court handling the estate. The land was sold to another person and all buildings were torn down. Mr. Whiteley then put the pieces up for sale and they were sold mainly to people on the East coast. I believe one or two of the pieces are in the collection of the Museum of American Folk Art in New York. Others are in the possession of a Midwestern art professor who has featured the dolls in exhibits. None seem to be in the collection of any public institution in California.

SPACES, as you see from the enclosed material, is specifically interested in honoring these artists, getting the works documented, educating the public and trying to preserve the sites. We identified over 50 sites in California and ten were acknowledged under California State Landmark # 939. Unfortunately, public or private sector funding to preserve this bit of California art is negligible.

I hope you would consider becoming a member of SPACES and help us try to save or at least document the works of other artists like the Blacks.

Your address was not legible in the xeroxed copy of your letter sent to me by Senator Torres, so I am sending this letter to you through his office. Thank you for your interest. Please let us know if we can help you further.

Sincerely,

Seymour Rosen  
Director