

CALVIN and RUBY BLACK

Calvin Black was born in 1903 in Tennessee. He left school at 13 and taught himself to read from the Sears & Roebuck and Montgomery Ward catalogs. Ruby was born in 1913 and raised on a farm in Georgia. She met and married Calvin while he was traveling through the South working for circuses and carnivals.

In 1953, Calvin and Ruby moved to Yermo in the Mohave desert, believing the change in climate would be good for Calvin's health. They bought their land for \$25 down and \$10 a month from a magazine advertisement. They named it Possum Trot before they ever saw it, a term used in the rural South for a shortcut between two settlements. When they arrived, there was no road. They built their house from lumber collected at the dump.

Shortly after Highway 15 was constructed to Calico Ghost Town, Calvin and Ruby opened a rock shop to take advantage of passing traffic. Signs invited tourists to see the art, buy pop on ice and warned against feeding the camels. With the help of a friend, Calvin constructed a 100 yard long roadside show which included small scale carousels, windmills, stage coaches and trains.

The heart of Possum Trot was its population of over 80 nearly life-size dolls made by Calvin and Ruby. Most of the dolls were female. They were named and modeled after friends, Lillie Langtree and her contemporaries and famous women from history. Calvin and Ruby took the dolls with them on trips to visit friends and relatives. Before Calvin started carving, he and Ruby decided on the personality, eye and hair color of each doll and then Ruby made the gowns. Calvin's carving tools were a hatchet and pocket knife. The dolls' heads and bodies were made from redwood power poles brought down by automobile accidents. Noses, legs and arms were made of sugarpine. Most of the female dolls had breasts. Hair on the earlier dolls was carved. Later, wigs were collected from the dump. All had hats and shoes, a few carried cameras. Several dolls had their portraits painted by Calvin. Some of the dolls took part in the roadside show, others peered out at visitors from house windows. When there was no more room in the shop, Calvin constructed the Birdcage Theatre where the dolls played leading roles in the "Fantasy Doll Shows" Calvin staged "for people who like art." Calvin wrote the dialog, songs and music, and provided the musical accompaniment. Calvin had learned ventriloquism when he worked for a puppet show as a young man, and was able to talk in nine different voices, which he used to perform and record all the dolls' voices. The voices were broadcast to the audience through speakers in the dolls' heads which were connected to small battery-powered tape recorders. Public admission to the show was 25 cents. Each doll had a tip can and viewers were encouraged to give their favorite doll a contribution, which would then buy her perfume or a piece of jewelry.

Calvin said that all he wanted was publicity. Unfortunately, however, it was not until after his death on March 2, 1972, that Possum Trot was included in major exhibitions and folk art monographs. It was the first environment filmed in the "Visions of Paradise" series about American folk artists. Calvin had asked Ruby to burn the dolls when he died but Ruby did not follow his wishes. She wanted the collection to remain intact but had difficulty keeping Possum Trot from deteriorating. When Ruby died in June 1980, local interest in Possum Trot was not sufficient to save the site and it was dismantled. Most of the dolls were acquired by a private gallery, and they are now being sold individually.