

"Her Magnificent Obsession"

By VIRGINIA FRANGIONE

RACHEL BENTLEY is an artist with a magnificent obsession. Having devoted her life to her home and family, she suddenly realized six years ago, that the family was practically grown — three of the five children were married, that her husband's business called him to various parts of this country and Mexico, and she doubted whether her music and gardening would prove adequate to fill her leisure time. At this point she read Winston Churchill's book, "Painting as a Pastime," and after attending a local



Nicassio School

artist's watercolor exhibit with these two events influencing her, she joined the Palo Alto Art Club and studied under several noted teachers. Her medium was water color and with her love of nature, she chose landscapes as her subjects. She worked hard and faithfully in spite of many discouragements. After a time she ventured further afield and eventually, besieged by wanderlust, she sallied forth to the proverbial distant pastures which had always seemed greener. Thousands of miles of California and Nevada have been covered by her since those early trips.

One fall she turned southward and followed the Mission Trail


from San Juan Bautista to Mission San Diego De Alcalde, the first of the Mission chain. Painting in the shadow of these ancient buildings or sitting in the sunshine in a peaceful monastery garden was like turning back the pages of time and living in another country — an experience like a benediction, she claims.

Later Mrs. Bentley traveled the trails of the Forty-niners, lured by history of the gold rush days and the picturesque remains in the ghost towns of California and Nevada. To this roving artist the

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Prunedale School



HER MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION

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Mother Lode Country was friendly and fascinating, and she returned to it many times.

In January of this year Rachel Bentley began a search for the tiny country schools in order to sketch them. To exhibit a few schools in honor of Public School week was her objective. The more of these subjects she found, the more thrilling and nostalgic the adventure became. It was then that the "Magnificent Obsession" really took over! She followed every clue, searching out schools on main roads and back roads. Many of the buildings stood forlorn and forgotten she found although others had teachers and pupils. All were picturesque and the artist chose those ranging in age from fifty to a hundred years and over. Their names suggest the pioneer heritage of old California and read like a lyric of the past.

Everywhere, Rachel found that the country school is on the verge of vanishing completely, as the school districts consolidate and the big school buses take over; the era of the "little red school house" is almost at an end. The artists hope is that the hundred and more school houses she has painted to date may stand as a permanent record, a pictorial contribution to the history of California.

She has endeavored to produce a pleasing picture, a colorful

landscape, as well as a portrait of each schoolhouse. Since the background varied greatly, from coastal fog and bleakness, to mountains and sunny valleys or from open grazing lands and to deep dark canyons her colors proved most effective.

The top illustration shows the tiny abandoned Prunedale School of Pacheco Pass in Santa Clara County. Marin County claims the red schoolhouse of Nicasio, built in 1871, and used now as a residence. Hazel Dell School, dating back to the 1860's, and standing neglected in a farmyard in Santa Cruz County is on the easel by the artist. The large watercolor on the wall pictures California's first brick schoolhouse erected in 1852, and located at Columbia State Monument, Tuolumne County. The lower picture depicts Center School, in Lassen County, still in use, even to the pump and cup!

Rachel Bentley was born near Madison, Wisconsin, but grew up in Pasadena, her family having moved here in 1900. She attended Pasadena Schools and Pomona College in Claremont. There she married a college classmate and settled on a fruit ranch in the beautiful La Canada Valley. After sixteen years of walnut ranching in Oregon they returned to Menlo Park, California. There are now four small grandsons and four little granddaughters. Even the grandchildren are conscious of their grandmother's obsession — the older ones on the lookout for more subjects to paint, while the little folks believe all small houses are "Grandma's Kool Houses".

The collection of schools were first exhibited at the Main Palo Alto library when they numbered about fifty. Two further trips resulted in double that number subsequently shown at the 1954 State Fair in Sacramento, the Woodside Open Air Art Show and the Children's Library at Palo Alto Community Center, and are scheduled for several showings in the Spring where her landscapes will also be exhibited — an unique effort to preserve for posterity the romance of early days in California.

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