

Nostalgic Adventure—Artist Hunts Old Country Schools
The Peninsula
Sunday, August 29, 1954
The San Francisco Chronicle



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Rachel Bentley, a white-haired Menlo Park grandmother, is a collector in water colors of California's original old schools.

The quest for these usually crumbling little ruins of one and two rooms has lured her, sketch pad in hand, from her comfortable home at 680 Cotton street over many of Northern California's most perilous trails through 28 counties.

The trophies of her determined hunts, some 100 paintings, will hang at the State Fair in Sacramento September 2-12.

Such recognition — though the school houses will not be in the main, competitive art exhibition—would be a fitting climax to any similar venture. An artist could call it quite with a warm glow of accomplishment at that point and move on to another subject.

Hunt Goes On

But not Mrs. Bentley. For her, the hunt goes on.

"Wouldn't it be wonderful," she said, with the fire of her obsession in her eyes, "I could get some backing to go

off hunting these lovely little schools all over the country?"

Tiny and vivacious, Mrs. Bentley said she took up the artist's palette about six years ago to fill the void left by her five children, three boys and two girls, who are making lives of their own and have given Mrs. Bentley eight grandchildren.

Studying under various local teachers, Mrs. Bentley has become a creditable landscapist.

As a member of the Palo Alto Art Club, her work has hung at the Palo Alto Public Library and various other informal galleries in the area.

How it All Started

In a library exhibit, Mrs. F. G. Frink, who arranges the continuous hangings of Art Club artists, spotted a couple of one-room schools Mrs. Bentley had painted on the Peninsula.

In January, Mrs. Frink asked Mrs. Bentley if she had any more the library could hang during Public Schools Week.

"All I could find were three," said Mrs. Bentley. "So,

I set out to get all that were left standing."

The hunt was so fascinating (it brought her into nooks and crannies she'd never explored before) that she branched out. She intends to start moving south now.

In the spring, for Public Schools Week, she had 48 old schools in watercolor. And by that time, she confessed, she was hopelessly hooked by the adventure.

She offered her schools to the State Fair as a special exhibit, and the fair officials were delighted.

Many Calls and Letters

"I hope I don't seem awfully pushy," Mrs. Bentley said. "But, after all, it must be interesting. I get so many calls, people stop me in the street. I have some delightful letters."

Mrs. Bentley's mother, Mrs. William Doud, who is 86, accompanies the school artist on most of her safaris. "My husband, W. H. Bentley, is a San Francisco broker, and he travels a lot. He's on a tour of the East now," said Mrs. Bentley. "And that leaves me a lot of time for my trips."

A friend also has taken some of the hunts.

The latest, to fill out the 100 paintings for the State Fair, took Mrs. Bentley 1648 miles in ten days, sketching five or six of the old schools a day.

"Of course, it would be better if I could paint them on the spot. But it would take too long, and traveling is expensive. I'm not one to pitch

a tent and I have no trailer. I like my comforts," said Mrs. Bentley.

Scenery and People

The lure is not merely the joy of capturing the quaint old buildings — though they have fascinating moods, some forlorn, some gay, some glowing beneath a stormy sky — but also the marvelous scenery and the people the Bentley safari encounters along the way.

An art instructor's family had bought one old school and converted it into a home. The kitchen is at the base of the belfry, the school bell's rope hanging above the sink.

"They use the bell to call their children," said Mrs. Bentley.

A number of the abandoned schools have been converted into residences, but some not so charmingly, she added.

And a number still serve as schools.

"I was amazed at the quality of the work of the children," Mrs. Bentley declared, "despite the lack of gadgets schools have nowadays."

Odd Names

Some schools have funny names — Jelly school, Rocky Comfort, Woodpecker. Almost all are hard to find or reach, and school and county officials have seldom been of much help.

"I've found going about in my hodge-podge way, asking for old schools at gas stations or eating places, more fun, anyway," Mrs. Bentley said.

"The reaction is always the same," Mrs. Bentley chuckled. "They look at me as if I were crazy when I say I want to paint an old school, where is one? And then I have to explain. And then the light dawns, and they say, well, there is one over that hill five miles . . ."

Ralph Ledesma, Redwood City artist under whom Mrs. Bentley currently is studying, has given her the greatest encouragement in her painting, she said.

A Nostalgic Feeling

There is a kindly, nostalgic feel in all her paintings. The fan mail Mrs. Bentley has received about the school paintings reflects the nostalgia, and so the comment is always pleasant. "Although I did get corrected on a date," she said.

The severest criticism came from one of her four granddaughters. "She asked me if I wasn't signing my paintings too big."

But with approbation or without it, Mrs. Bentley said: "I simply can't stop."