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Sisters on a mission : Fulfilling a dream to paint the missions of California

By ELIZABETH HAMILTON NEWS-PRESS CORRESPONDENT

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Ever since she was a child growing up in the shadow of the Santa Barbara Mission, Julie Calhoun, 65, dreamed of traveling across California and painting its 21 missions.

Life always got in the way of the painter's dream, however.

Marriage took her to Illinois in 1976 and when she returned to Santa Barbara in 1998, she was working and hardly had enough daylight to paint her beloved Santa Barbara Mission, let alone all the others.

When she retired in June, Ms. Calhoun decided to fulfill her lifelong goal.

On Sept. 8, she and her sister, Becky Fields, 59, piled into their Volkswagen Westphalia van with two canvas bags filled with paint brushes, assorted watercolors, easels and tripods.

"It was totally a sisters' road trip," said Mrs. Fields on a recent sunny afternoon sitting outside the Santa Barbara Mission. "It was my hippy trip I never took."

The women painted in watercolor all 21 missions in 21 days, returning to Santa Barbara on Sept. 29. They traveled primarily south to north, beginning at San Diego de Alcal Mission and ending at Mission San Jose.

After grabbing a morning latte, they would visit the day's mission, snapping photos and taking historical tours, all the while scoping out the ideal location for their picturesque compositions.

Afternoons were devoted to painting.

Each piece took three to four hours.

Sometimes they sat near one another, painting the same adobe facade. Other times they painted on opposite ends of the mission property, one sister honing in on a fountain, the other painting a window with yellow flowers beneath.

"They all have their own beauty," Ms. Calhoun said. "It's kind of like every state. There's certain things you like about each one, but they all have their beauty."

Mission gardeners, gift shop employees, tourists and children would pause to watch the sisters paint.

At San Francisco's Mission de As's, the sisters sold their two paintings to the women who ran the gift shop.

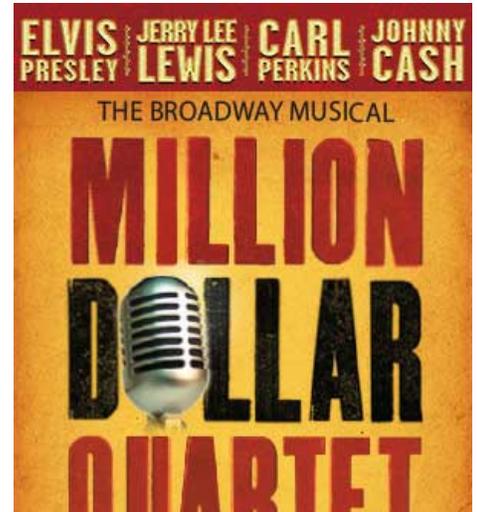
With the exception of a night spent at a hostel with a hot tub, the sisters spent most nights in campgrounds, sleeping on the two foldout beds in their van. They ate out once a day, snacking on cheese and crackers and drinking wine the rest of the journey.



Santa Barbara painter Julie Calhoun, left, and her sister, Becky Fields, traveled California painting its 21 missions. NIK BLASKOVICH / NEWS-PRESS



Mrs. Fields' watercolor interpretation of Mission San Antonio de Padua, in Jolon



Each sister's favorite painting corresponds with her favorite mission.

Ms. Calhoun's was Mission San Antonio de Padua, in Jolon.

"It's furthest off the beaten track," she said. "The fact that it's way out in the sticks helps you get a better idea of what mission life could have been like."

Mrs. Fields' favorite is the Nuestra Señora de la Soledad Mission in Soledad. Though the information packet they brought called it the "forgotten mission," the sisters witnessed a baptism and a wedding while there.

"It kind of sprinkled on us, too," said Ms. Calhoun. The raindrops added little drops to the paintings.

Ms. Calhoun sells her watercolors at the Santa Barbara Arts and Crafts Show on East Beach every Sunday. She has sold hundreds of paintings of the Santa Barbara Mission alone. Mrs. Fields picked up watercolor painting 31/2 years ago, when her older sister gave her a lesson while on vacation.

After the lesson, Mrs. Fields said she thought, "You know, that was the most fun I've ever had, painting watercolors, so I should do that more often."

Ms. Calhoun said she hopes to showcase her mission paintings in an art gallery in Santa Barbara. Then she will probably sell them at the beach.

Mrs. Fields, who returned to her home in Kent, Wash., after the trip, hopes to include a few of her pieces in her sister's show.

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Ms. Calhoun's watercolor painting of Mission San Carlos Borromeo del rio Carmelo, in Carmel.



Mission San Diego de Alcalá, as painted by Ms. Calhoun.

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