

Morgan's history

□ Company likes to paint the past, but sometimes grows weary of all the detail

By CHARLES F. TRENTIELMAN

Standard-Examiner staff

PORTERVILLE — In a life filled with details, JoAnne Company wishes more people would pay her to be fuzzy.

You know, not so precise and with a little more feeling.

But no. People want the tack on their horses to be buckled right, the windows to be colored correctly, even the buttons on people's coats to be the right kind of buttons. They want photographic history, and well, they're the customers.

So she spends a lot of time crawling around in attics to check old paint, puzzling over old pictures to check window placement. As a result, she produces some startlingly detailed works of historic buildings in Morgan County. A rendition of the Morgan Opera House in the 1920s is only her latest, and the county is littered with her re-creations of peoples' cabins, homes and barns.

There's no denying the demand. "When you paint you take commissions, and you paint what people need, what they want," she said simply, with that attitude that says "It's a living."

A living is what the Morgan High School art teacher was hoping to make from her work, ever since first grade when her teacher put a drawing of a cat she had done up on the bulletin board. It was put up all by itself and left there for a real long time.

"I just decided I was neat," she said, and thus was born a career. "You can never tell what a teacher will do to you."

As she grew she went from cats to horses and from horses to putting buildings behind the horses. From there she started leaving out the horses and just doing the buildings.

She and her husband, Dave, moved to Morgan about 20 years ago and she painted away and tried to make a living at it. Her husband jokes that "she paid for the paint" but when pressed admits she also paid for the car insurance.

Her early works are more impressionistic — what she calls "loose." It's a style that tries to capture the feeling of a moment, the emotional impression of it, rather

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BRUSHING UP ON THE PAST:

JoAnne Company (above) holds her painting of the old LDS Church in Porterville. At left, Company displays a memory of her own childhood, a painting of her father pulling out a tree stump.

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Standard-Examiner

2021/00/24

Art

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than serve as a record.

She showed one painting, done in 1979, of her father working a team of horses.

"That's Bill and Rock and Rowd," she said, indicating her dad and the animals. The painting, in strong browns and yellows, shows the strain of the horses, the light of the afternoon and the heat of the day, but you can't see a single detail on face or tack.

It's about her favorite painting. Don't bother asking her to sell it.

She struck commercial gold with the Porterville Church.

It's the old LDS meeting house, built before the turn of the century and now a private home and landmark. She looked at it and decided to paint it as it first looked as accurately as possible.

She researched how the steeple used to be (it is now gone) and even discovered where the original picket fence ran. She made it a winter scene at turn of the century, capturing the roof decorations and even the red sandstone steps.

When it was done "I thought 'This ought to sell,'" she said.

The owner of the Spring Chicken Inn, a restaurant in Morgan City, let her display work there, "and as I was hanging it up a man over at the counter came over and asked if it was for sale."

She said yes, "and he said 'let me have it, I'll be at your home tonight with the money.'"

She found out later that the man had gone house to house in Porterville collecting for the painting, which now hangs in the Porterville LDS Ward house.

And so was born a career.

Now people ask her to paint their grandfather's cabin, or their mother's barn, or whatever, and she's glad to do it. She's learned that those kinds of commissions demand a lot of research, though. If she does a team of horses, the tack has to have every buckle in place, because horse fanciers will spot an error in a second.

Her most recent effort is the old Morgan Opera House, now the Spring Chicken Inn.

Painting it was difficult. Built in 1906, its ornate stone facade is gone as are the decorations that used to adorn the roof peak. So is the roof peak, as far as that goes.

The Morgan Historical Society pulled out every picture it could find, but that left her with a kind of jigsaw puzzle problem. "There were parts we couldn't see in each picture," she said, and of course black and white pictures don't tell you much about colors.

She ended up crawling around in the attic, looking for old window ledges that might show the original paint. "I talked to a lot of people who can tell you all kinds of stories about that old place," she said. "People who

met their wives there, plays they saw."

The restaurant now owns that picture, she said, and plans to make a postcard of it.

The ironic thing about that painting, she said, is what she didn't do with it.

Behind the opera house you can just see the old Morgan High School. Since it's far away and small, she made it a bit fuzzy, "and people are all telling me I should have made it more detailed," she said.

She's got lots of plans: a series on barns in Morgan is one, and

there are plenty of buildings left she hasn't done.

But she's also getting a bit rebellious. Detail work is fine, and commission work is fine, but she wants to have fun too.

She's working on it. The day after she was interviewed she phoned just to check in and to brag a bit.

"After you left I went down stairs in my studio and just painted loose, like we were talking about," she said. "Oh, isn't that just heaven, to do what you want to do?"

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