

Nomad artists travel to limelight

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by Russell Nichols

Wandering through a gallery of rendered waterscapes, moon-reflected inlets, country marshes and views of pastel sunsets, it's uncanny to believe that the creators of such works were initially denied access to Florida's galleries.

In turn, the eight black landscape painters, dubbed by the media as the Highwaymen, would caravan across the sunshine state to sell their vintage renditions of scenery; abandoning the destitute conditions of the packinghouses and citrus groves and making a living on what they loved.

Beginning Saturday through Sunday, June 6, the Highwaymen will be pulling over in Florida's capital. Tallahassee Museum's Phipps Gallery will showcase "The Highwaymen," a special exhibit presented by the Health Care Agency and Capital Regional Medical Center, where visitors will be allowed to view 47 paintings from art aficionado Geoff Cook's collection.

The exhibit launches Florida State University's "Seven Days of Opening Nights" arts festival.

But despite the painters' ability for mixing an array of colors, the Highwaymen were born in a time when blacks and whites did not blend as naturally.

Confronted with the segregation of the late 50s and early 60s, seven men and one woman from the South were forced to peddle paintings from their car trunks to small businesses.

"It was difficult getting the paintings in the gallery," said James Gibson, one of the original Highwaymen of Fort Pierce. "We went from door to door, in beauty salons, barber shops, restaurants, real estate agencies and motels."

But Gibson said he learned early on how to elude racial barriers. The 66-year-old discovered there was an art to selling art. Word-of-mouth was the ideal method of publicity.

"If white people liked you, they would help you," Gibson said. "Then, they would tell others."

And Gibson, who dropped his basketball scholarship at Tennessee State University to pursue painting in 1961, said he has honed his craft ever since.

"When I paint, everything inside of me comes out into my work," he said. "I'm realizing that the older I get, the finer I paint."

Contrary to Gibson, Roy McLendon said his childhood dream was always as vivid as the images he stroked on Upson board canvases.

"As far back as I could remember, I wanted to be a painter," McLendon said.

But the 71-year-old native of Telham, Ga. said there were misconceptions regarding the number of Highwaymen.

"It was originally only eight (of us)," McLendon said. "When our paintings went up in value, everyone wanted to be part of the Highwaymen."

Paintings that ranged in price from \$10 to \$45 now sell for \$1,000 to \$10,000.

Mary Ann Caroll, 63, the sole Highwaywoman, said from rock bottom, the risk was necessary.

"My husband left when my baby was five and I was broke," said the Sandersville, Ga. native. "It was a matter of taking a chance."

Caroll said it was less her gender that distinguished her from the men and more her lifestyle.

"The guys would go to the bar and shoot pool. I was churchy," Caroll said.

Although Caroll's experience differed from the men, her purpose was identical.

"If you don't follow your dreams, you won't know what you can achieve."

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