

Rollin Pickford:

Portrait of a painter



*I*t is two-thirty on a blustery, cloudless Spring afternoon in north Fresno. Driving north on Millbrook Avenue, past the pine frame of an empty construction site and over a narrow canal surging with fresh Sierra water, I can see on the right side of the road a scene that is-- at this particular hour, anyway-- picture perfect.

by Steve Schmidt

Photos by Eusevio Arias

From the artist's notebook

Artist Rollin Pickford has kept a running journal of his past 33 years. These are excerpts from a section of that journal labeled

"Painting Philosophy"

"Do you do that all the time?" the schoolboys ask while I am painting.

"If a man were sweeping the street, repairing the sewer or driving a truck would they also ask this question of him? I think not. It is because my employment seems to these American boys freakish, frivolous and unnecessary perhaps.

"Why must it be, generation after generation, that artists are not accepted, looked askance at, patronized and even villified for obeying their strongest instinct, making their highest contribution to society?"

"In drawing from life around him the artist comes upon little enclaves-- small, humorous innuendoes expressive of human foibles-- a pair of shoes, removed, under a chair with one shoe tipped over, a crumbled napkin abandoned in comic attitude upon a pillow, a half-eaten canape, a loose array of wine glasses. These silent little actors, in their way explanatory, revealing, proclaim the whole human situation, tragic and comic."

"The worst of it is you can work on only one painting at a time and then only one brush stroke at a time, when your mind has seven league boots and your spirit is a magic carpet."

"In the half light of dusk one may discover subjects and compositions that elude him in the disarming and explanatory light of mid-day."

"The artist is all one continuous experience and effort, one long, tenuous thread of striving and growth-- living in the little city, going to its funerals, washing dishes, paying bills, taking the children to school, planting things, walking to see, always trying to draw, draw, draw thoughtfully, yearning, trying to be a brother, father, husband better, studying for deeper understanding, sleeping, waking, eating, fasting, working,

hoping-- and out of it all, trying to extract the real essence, the true and meaningful".

"We must take the creative days of sensitivity and response with the rest-- but oh why can't all of them be like this? When one is rested, alert, keenly aware, the stimuli and ideas tumble so fast that many are lost or crowded out by the onrushing procession. The brilliant leaf, the small schoolboy, and tonight the rich red reflective paintings of Autumn and , in its wake, the deep yellow poplars or cottonwoods against the powerful blue of October, behind the lilting flight of a bluebird. The trees I can find near the small ditch where Fowler Avenue meets Tollhouse road.

"Life needs contrast, just as painting does, but if all our days were such that a narrow room can widen into universe, what a mass of work we could accomplish."



A figure can be seen kneeling among the twisted, bare branches of a fig orchard. There the earth is covered with a moist bed of wildflowers and to the north, on the horizon, a field of Peach trees blossom in pink and white.

I step from my car and walk into the scene. The figure, now standing, comes into focus.

"I'm Rollin Pickford," a voice says quietly, almost feebly. The sound comes from a small man, looking about 65 years old, who is wearing a blue and white flannel shirt and patched green pants. He grins slightly and draws a finger across his forehead, pulling his hair away from his hazel eyes. We shake hands and he kneels again, before a large white canvas taped to cardboard.

He takes a thin brush in hand and dips the tip into a slate of watercolors at his side. The brush soaks up a pastel shade and he presses the tip onto the canvas. He is a painter, capturing on canvas the scene around us: the clear blue of the heavens; the shadows stretching across the orchard; the burnt orange of heat; and the pinkish hues on the horizon.

This particular moment, this particular time of day can now be seen on canvas.

But the weather above is changing. The clear blue is being replaced by milky greys and charcoal rain clouds.

"Gee, it's getting gorgeous." The quiet voice again. "Look at that sky. Oh boy."

Pickford is still kneeling in the soft earth as it rains into the late afternoon. It rains on the faded blue jacket and knit scarf he is now wrapped in and it rains on the canvas as he paints clouds into the scene. Water hits the painting, causing clear blues, golden horizons, peach shades to fade into grey. Pastels bled off the canvas. He wants the painting to reflect the moment, to show his love of nature, and so he lets the rain paint the rain.

"I just had to paint the weather," Pickford would say later. "I became a painter more for the love of nature than any other thing."

Some Fresnoans say that's what makes Pickford so special. His obsession with nature as presented on canvas have gained him the reputation as the San Joaquin Valley's premier artist. To many locals, he is the best.

Pickford has won several honors with his paintings, too. He has won top awards in national and state showings. His

paintings- there are more than 5000 of them- have been exhibited in a handful of foreign countries and major cities throughout the U.S. He's listed in the "Who's Who in American Art." And he made the cover of the 1978 Fresno telephone directory with his painting of the Meux home.

Pickford is well aware of the praise others have for him, but it's not

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—Rollin Pickford

something he goes around bragging about.

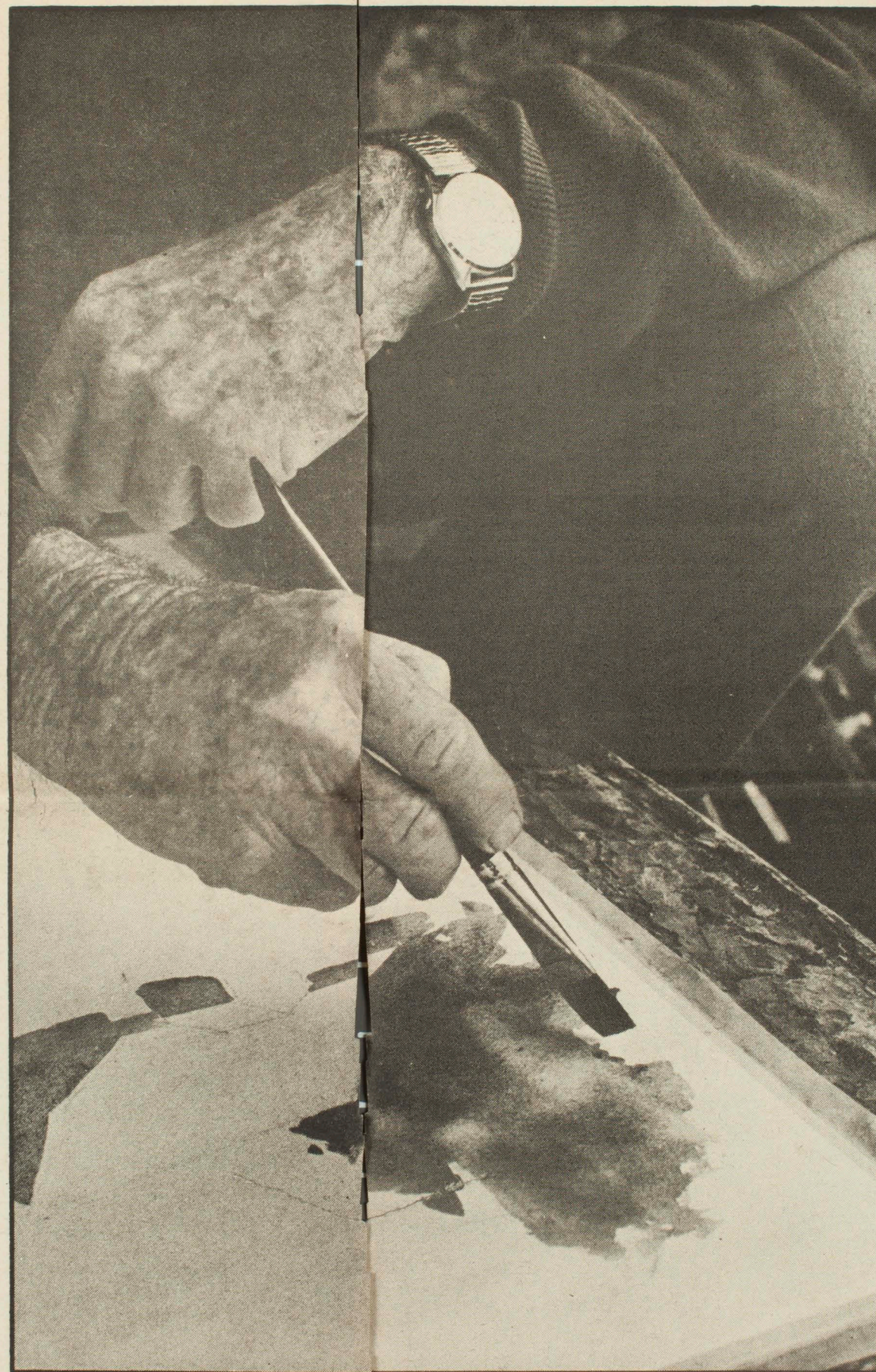
"I'm not a sophisticated person, as you can readily see," he says.

What you can see is a boyish-looking 68-year-old professional artist; a soft-spoken family man and lifelong Fresnoan who "can't stop" doing what he does best: using subtle shades of watercolor to create paintings that are far superior to the bold landscape and seascape prints seen on the walls of doctor's offices and middle-class living rooms.

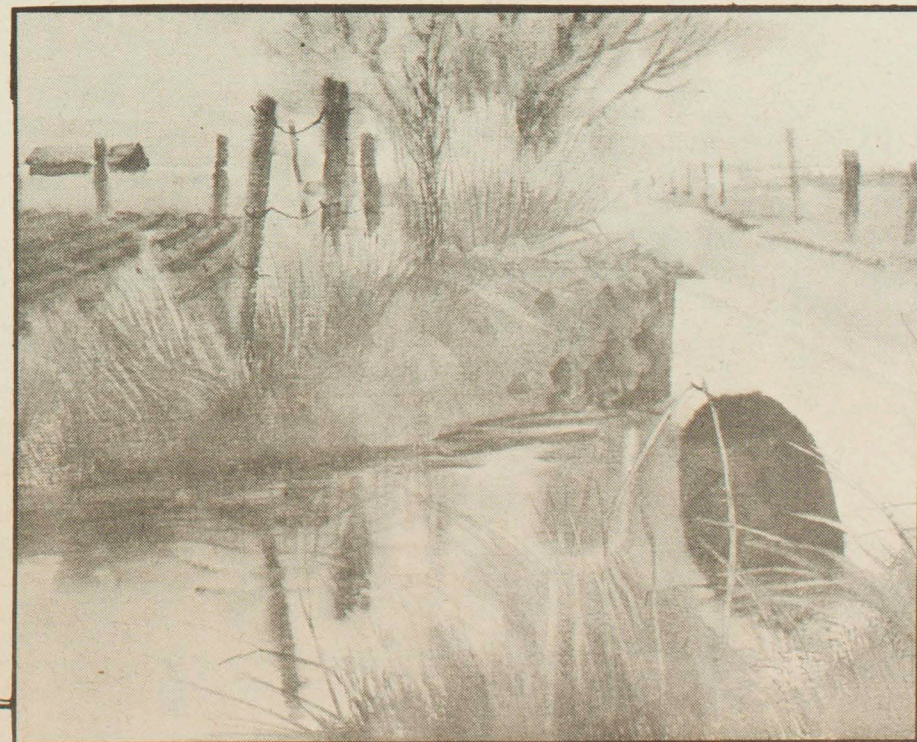
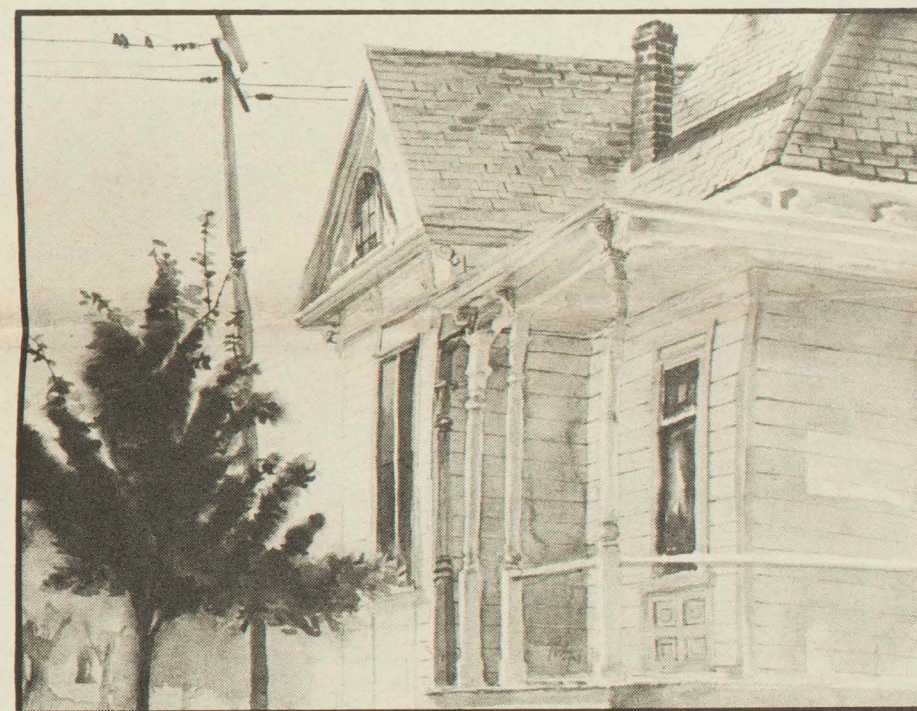
His props for these paintings: the farmlands, badlands and vistas of central California; from the rugged coastline to the dry, sun-burnt fields around his home town.

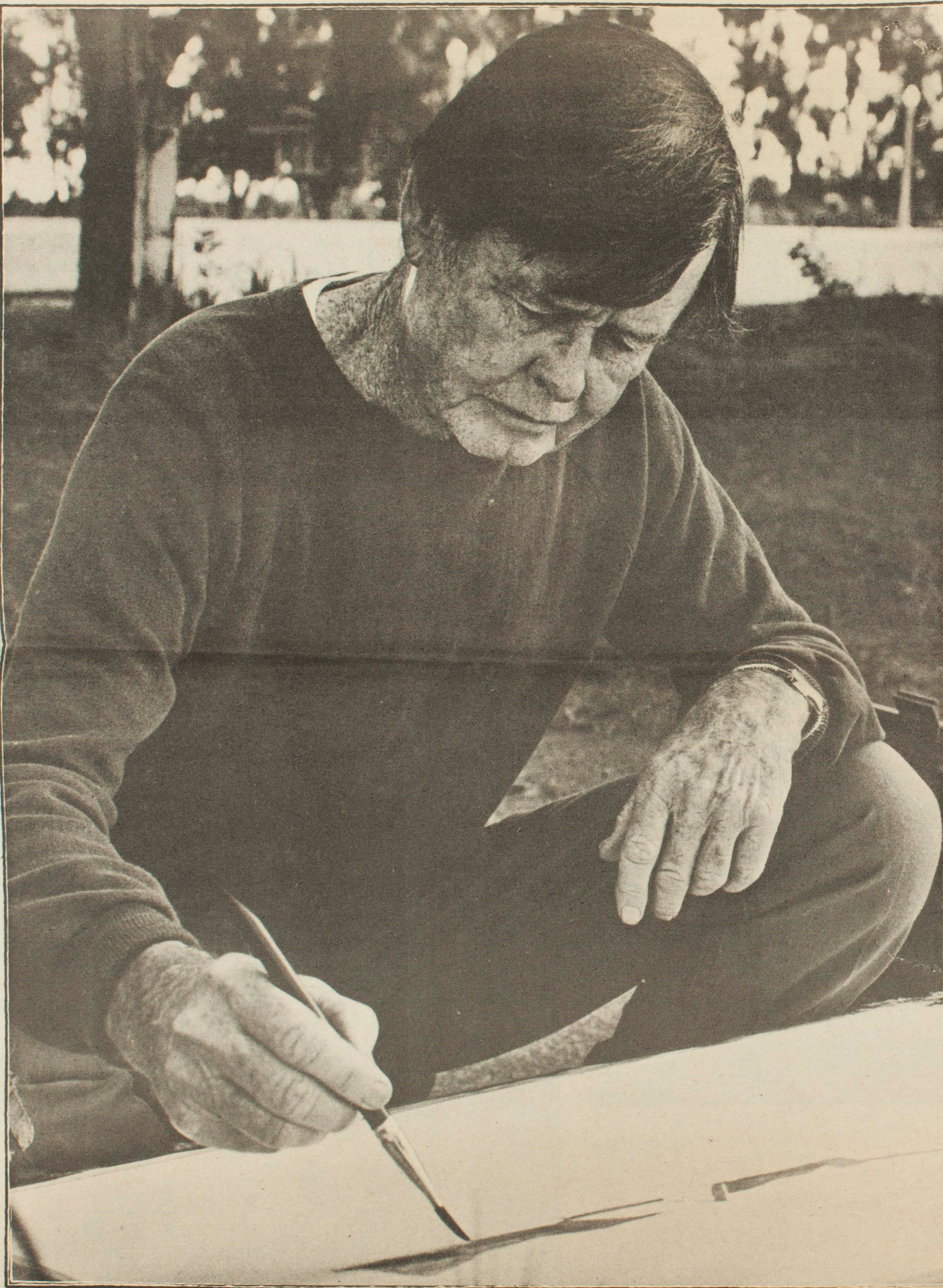
Pickford once wrote in the journal he has kept for 33 years, "For many years the countryside has been studied in large. Now I examine the minutiae of the fields and orchards and barnyards which have inhabited my paintings in large, simple groups, shapes and colors. This by walking."

"Many artists abstract their subject matter, emphasizing and improvising design, pattern, movement, color, line, dark and light or whatever. Offhand I can recall almost none who have made abstraction of the atmosphere, the light, the temperature, the aspect of an hour.



The valley as viewed through Rollin Pickford's eyes.





This I will study. It bears deep examination I think."

Nearly every day he can be seen driving in his beige 1968 Oldsmobile station wagon to some country site to carry on this study. Out there he can catch the rich red of Autumn, a brilliantly-colored leaf, the deep yellow of poplars, or a Spring rain storm on canvas.

"The artifacts of the San Joaquin valley," says Pickford, "have made a painter of me. And I'm an outdoors person. I just love to be out."

And by using watercolors, Pickford says, he can capture a sense of immediacy on canvas that some of his oil and acrylic paintings lack. "If I were cast on a desert island and could choose only one medium I would choose watercolor," says Pickford. "It is more spontaneous and reflects more of the painter unguarded."

When Pickford is not out in the country, he's at his east Fresno home where he lives with his wife, Glenna. Most of his children—Jeff, Jim and Melissa—have long since grown up and moved out, although son Joel, a prominent local photographer, occasionally calls it home.

It's the kind of place you might expect Pickford to live in. Colorful plants and trees seem to grow untamed in the front and backyards. A tall Modesto Ash tree towers over a peach tree and Scottish Heather on the small front lawn. Inside, a series of long, tall windows allow the sun to light up the living room where the walls are covered with the artist's landscapes and a portrait or two. In the middle of the room, unframed paintings are stacked up for potential buyers to see.

In the backyard is what Pickford calls his "haywire studio" which consists of a weathered wooden table next to a brick shelter holding painting materials. Back here, under the makeshift fiberglass roof covering the shelter, he often spends part of his day drawing plants or models.

The artist also spends part of his day—usually the morning—at home showing his works to friends and customers and packaging his paintings for shipping. He begins and finishes a painting on a typical afternoon and draws at night. He frequently draws musicians at area recitals and TV concerts because "I hear the music better when I draw it."

Back when he was actively raising a family and drawing ads for local firms to make ends meet, Pickford didn't have much free time to concentrate on his art. Now, after decades of working for others as an artist, Pickford can live out the rest of his life painting the colors of each particular day and making money doing it.

Born one hot Spring day in 1912, he was christened Rollin Pickford Jr. after his father, a hardware store clerk who later became a bookkeeper.

As young as the age of 3, Pickford showed an interest in art. Today he keeps

a photo in an old leather-bound photo album showing a 3 year-old Rollin drawing on a large pad of paper while sitting under a Christmas tree.

He attended Fresno High and then went to CSUF, then called Fresno State College, for 2 years before moving onto to Stanford University, where he earned his BA in graphic arts.

He was already addicted to painting by the time he graduated. Pickford now calls many of the watercolors he produced during these years "bold, powerful. They show an emotional involvement that was pure and unadulterated. Now my paintings are more knowing, with more nuances."

Because being a professional artist was not financially practical, Pickford got some experience as a carpenter. In 1936, he then started a career in the advertising business.

For the next forty years, Pickford drew ads for area firms such as the Sun-Maid Raisins and the Lisle Funeral Home, but he wasn't enamored with the work. "It was a means of making a living, but my heart wasn't in it."

From 1948 to 1962, the self-taught artist also kept busy instructing art classes at CSUF.

It was in 1976 that Pickford cut his

ties with the advertising profession and started painting full time. Since then, he has created on the average more than one painting a day. He sees a shaded fig orchard and wants to paint it. He catches on canvas a thunderstorm blowing in from the coast.

"Painting," says Pickford, "is like you stepped out of this world."

In the small, crowded den of his house of 33 years, Pickford keeps a large manila envelope labeled "painting philosophy" among the letters and papers on top of a wooden desk. In the envelope, the artist keeps, on type-written paper, a selection of comments he's written through the years about his work.

One entry reads: "If I think of my life, at times it seems to have been spent almost entirely in numbing cold or dry, burning fields of summer noon—walking, looking, bending, crawling through fences, climbing, resting, thinking—being thirsty or lonely, frozen or hungry or hot and always, always striving to the utter limits of my being for better understanding, keener interpretation, more accurate knowledge, faster growth, bigger objectives— and a good watercolor."

