

Bottle Village in movie

Grandma's a celluloid hero

By John Rogers

"—That old time woman, she did real good."

That line, from a song by Holly Near and Jeff Langley, helps set the tone for a bright new film that takes a soft and gentle look at Mrs. Tresa "Grandma" Prisbrey, Simi Valley's 80-year-old bottle lady.

Grandma, for nearly two decades now, has been the creator, chief architect and caretaker for Grandma's Bottle Village at 4595 Cochran St. And now, she's a film star too, as the sole character in a 20-minute color movie about herself, titled "Grandma Prisbrey."

The film was created by UCLA student and west Los Angeles resident Claudia Queen who first learned of Grandma after seeing pictures of her work at an art exhibition at the Women's Center in Los Angeles.

Queen's film was premiered at UCLA's Melnitz Hall this week along with several others, as part of a class project. It received the warmest response of any film shown there.

It takes one on a visual tour of Grandma's Bottle Village, showing the various mosaic walkways and fences, the little bottle houses, literally thousands of pencils and buttons and the hundreds of dolls and other scattered odds and ends that make up the village.

The trip is accompanied by sounds from a Folkways album called "New American Music," by a piece called "The Dolls" by Mozart, and by Holly Near singing, "Old Time Woman."

Grandma also talks about the village as she shows her audience around, and she tells of some of the highlights the village has seen over the past two decades.

She tells, for instance, of putting her houses together mostly from discarded bottles and other items found in junk piles, noting, "I just love to go to the dump, that's where I get most of my stuff."

And she recalls her popular anecdote of one ill-fated trip to the dump that wound up with her apprehension by a policeman.

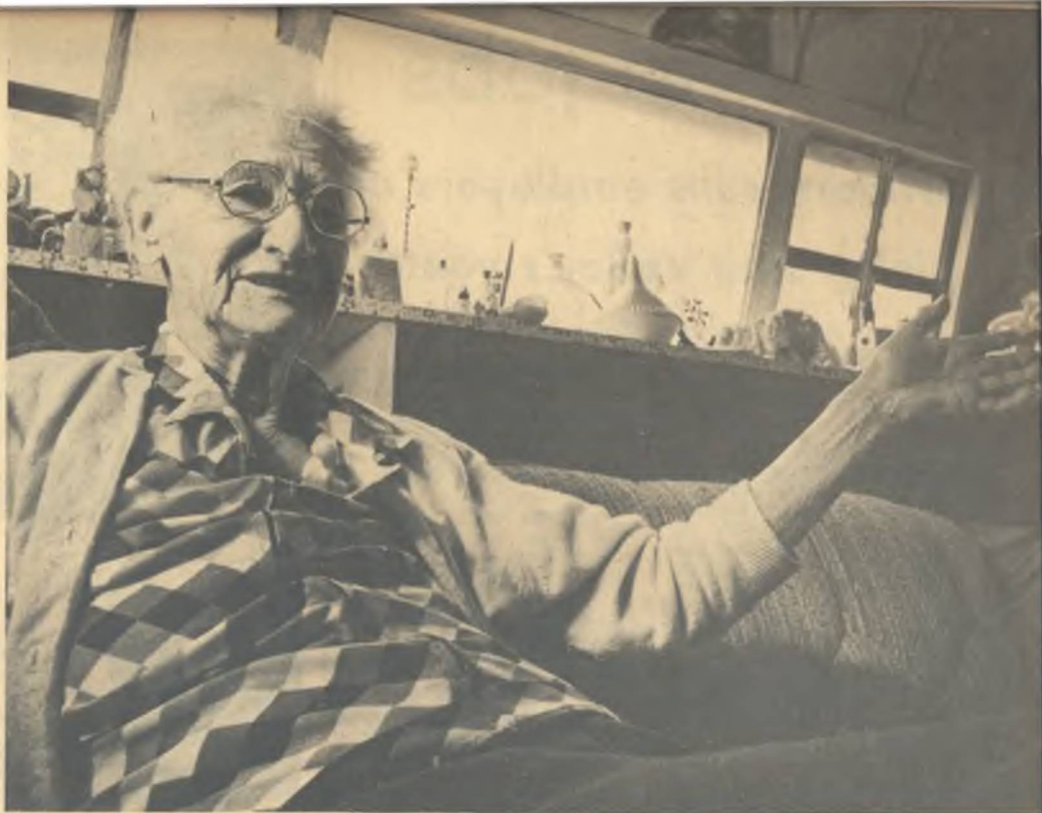
She was only two blocks from home when she saw the red lights and heard the siren, so she didn't bother to stop.

When she finally did stop at home, the policeman got out and patiently informed her that her car had a broken window, no taillights, a horn that didn't work and any number of other violations. When he finished, she fired back, "I know that and I haven't got a driver's license either. What do you think of that?"

Grandma also tells of how a visitor to the village from back east once saw his sister's old discarded wedding picture in one of the village's sidewalks. Grandma had recovered it from the dump.

She also offers her thoughts on art, having come to be regarded in the past year or two, as a modern folk artist.

"I always thought an artist was somebody who painted pictures," she says, and also comments, "Now they call it modern art and all the time, I didn't know what I was doing."



GRANDMA PRISBREY, the subject of a recent movie by a UCLA student, sits in her trailer home at Grandma's Bottle Village on Cochran Street and discusses her creation of the village. The film, aired this past week by UCLA takes a look at Grandma and her creations. For more on it, see story, this page. (Enterprise photo by John Jenkins)

Queen's film picked up its share of Grandma Prisbrey supporters from a UCLA audience that made such comments during a critique session as "The best project one I've ever seen," "It's really a nice portrait of the woman," "It's very warm and authentic" and "Whose grandmother is she anyway, and where is Bottle Village located?"

Several members of the audience also seem surprised that, over the past few years, Bottle

Village has come so close to destruction.

It almost came to an end several months ago before a couple bought it and allowed Grandma to stay on indefinitely as its caretaker. The previous owners had threatened to bulldoze the village to increase the property's real estate value if they couldn't sell it.

Richard Posner, an instructor at UCLA who has visited the village and given Grandma some of the handblown glass he's made as a

present, asked, "Why isn't the government out there doing some thing to save it? The structures are going to fall down pretty soon if they aren't repaired. You'd think they could get CETA (Comprehensive Employment Training Act) funds to hire at least a part-time person to repair it. It is folk art and it should be given a designation as an artistic site and preserved."

Queen, meanwhile, is willing to show her film to interested organizations.