

North Carolina Folk Pottery:
A Look at its Struggle for Survival in the Early Twentieth Century

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The first settlers in the piedmont of North Carolina depended upon themselves to produce the supplies that they needed for survival. Gardens were grown, livestock raised and all materials were made by hand. One of these handmade wares was pottery. Bowls, plates, cups, jugs, and pitchers were just a few of the supplies that were needed and produced by those families that specialized in pottery. This necessity was the motivating factor that influenced the appearance of the pottery. It was simple. It served its purpose and did little more. The traditional pottery of North Carolina is not known for its innovative designs and use of glazes, but instead for the long line of families that have continued to produce wares in the same style as their ancestors did eight generations ago.¹ However, consistency has led to problems in the industry. With the rise of commercialism and the transition from a rural to urban society in the early twentieth century, the potters found that their wares were no longer needed. Individuals did not need pottery for utilitarian purposes, but were instead collecting it as art. The basic forms and glazes of the North Carolina potters could not compete with this new art market.² Fortunately, families such as the Browns and Busbees recognized this decline in demand and made investments to help sell North Carolina folk pottery to a nation wide market. This introduction to a larger market created an awareness of the artistic value of North Carolina pottery and helped preserve the tradition. This paper will show that while one of the fundamentals of folk pottery is the preservation of the family tradition, the contributions of the Browns and Busbees was essential in upholding the trade.

¹ James Clay, *The North Carolina Atlas: Portrait of a Changing State* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971) 21.

² Jean Crawford, *Jugtown Pottery: History and Design* (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, 1964), 3.

Several scholars have recorded the histories of the major potters in the North Carolina Piedmont. These works look at the family members and the pottery that makes each family unique from the rest, but there is very little mention of the struggle that has taken place to keep these potteries, as a group, in business. Nancy Sweezy spent several years interviewing and learning about the pottery tradition while living in the Seagrove area of North Carolina. Her book, *Raised in Clay*, is an excellent compilation of many of the Seagrove potters. She includes interviews with the surviving potters and information about the history of the trade, but there is an obvious lack of analysis about the cause of the decline in demand, or any efforts to revitalize the craft.³ Charles Zug's work, *Turners and Burners*, reflects a similar approach to the subject. He took a detailed look at the practices and demonstrated how little has changed, but failed to recognize that indeed things have changed regarding the sale of the wares. These overviews do little to analyze specific family situations.⁴ The one secondary source that specifically deals with transition in economy is a work by Jean Crawford called *Jugtown Pottery: History and Design*. This work specifically credits the Busbees as being a primary influence in the revival of North Carolina pottery following its decline in popularity. The Busbees were perhaps the most influential family in providing outside support for a traditionally family oriented craft, but this work limits itself to the Busbee family and does not analyze other factors such as changing demographics.⁵

The most beneficial primary sources that are available regarding the folk pottery revival can be found in newspapers, specifically the *Raleigh News and*

³ Nancy Sweezy, *Raised in Clay* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984) 37.

⁴ Charles Zug, *Turners and Burners* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986) 236.

⁵ Jean Crawford, *Jugtown Pottery: History and Design* (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, 1964), 12.

Observer. Juliana Busbee was a socialite in the 1920's who contributed articles to the paper on a regular basis. These editorials reveal the efforts made by the Busbee family to support the potters and preserve the tradition, which was the Busbee's motivation. Records from the Brown families pottery ventures were also proved to be helpful. The Eleanor Hall collection provided an excellent oral history source. In the collection, Eleanor Brown Hall recalls the family's trips to buy pottery, the hardware store that sold the wares, and parties with the representatives from *The Treasure Chest*. This collection was important in research because the Browns were not a family that created pottery, they only sold it, and thus they were not as emotionally invested. Therefore, the memories of Eleanor Hall hold less of a bias regarding the pottery that her family helped to sell.⁶

A larger market was established in large part because of the Busbees catalogues that were published and sent into circulation to encourage people to buy North Carolina wares, and the efforts of the Browns at the hardware store and the nationwide *Treasure Chest*. The catalogues and advertisements for all three of these pottery dealers provide insight into the type of wares that people in the art market were buying, and the marketing strategies that were used.⁷

Biographies produced by Sweezy and Zug, along with primary information about the wares and the Busbees, have provided the majority of the information to be included in this paper. These sources all stop short of examining the ways that North Carolina pottery was transformed while retaining its traditional integrity. This paper

⁶ Eleanor Hall, oral history collection, University of North Carolina, Asheville, tape 1.

⁷ *J.B. Cole Pottery Catalogue* (Winston Salem: Meadearis Stamp and Printing Co., 1 June 1940) 1-48.

will look at not only why the pottery industry declined, but also at the efforts made to revitalize the industry, and what it means to name pottery “folk.”

North Carolina is rich in clays, due to the mountains in the west that provide rocks, which are broken down by rivers. This broken down rock forms clay, which can be gathered from the riverbed where it has formed. The earliest inhabitants of the region capitalized on this rich resource to make necessary pottery for themselves. Once Europeans settled the area they too began to capitalize on the abundance of clay.⁸

In the mid 1700’s North Carolina was primarily a rural agricultural state.⁹ The large storage vessels that the potters made and sold were essential for farmers to store grain, feed, nuts, and anything else that needed to be stored away for the winter. The potteries also produced plates, cups, bowls, jugs, pipes, grave markers, and an assortment of “whimseys,” which include ring jugs, monkey jugs, and face jugs.¹⁰ These wares all reflect what it means to be a folk product.

The term “folk” refer to crafts that are utilitarian.¹¹ The wares that the potters produced were not created to be “conversation pieces” or decorations. They were created to be used in daily life. In a world before mass production of goods that could be bought in any store, North Carolinians depended on the craftsmanship of families like the Coles, one of the longest lines of folk potters, to provide them with the

⁸ James Clay, *The North Carolina Atlas: Portrait of a Changing State* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971) 13.

⁹ James Clay, *The North Carolina Atlas: Portrait of a Changing State* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971) 21.

¹⁰ *J. B. Cole Pottery Catalogue*, 1-48.

¹¹ Vladimir Fawekes “Catawba Pottery-Making, with notes on Pamunkey Pottery-Making, Cherokee Pottery-Making, and Coiling.” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 88, no. 2 (July 1944) 78.

necessary vessels. This sense of utilitarianism is the first quality that makes a craft folk.¹²

Folk pottery must also represent the place in which it is made. For the North Carolina potters this was done through the materials they used, which could all be found locally in nature, from the clay to the glazes to the wood that fueled the kiln. The styles of the wares are also a reflection of where they were made. The grotesque expressions on face jugs, the unusual shape of ring jugs, and the monkey jugs were all products influenced by the southern lifestyle.¹³ The origin of the face jugs very well might reflect the African traditions involving the use of deformed masks as a way to ward off evil spirits.¹⁴ The fact that similar figures appear on jugs, which often contained whisky, a substance that many would want to protect, might be a reflection of the cross-cultural exchange between the slave culture and the potters.¹⁵ The grotesque images that are found on many jugs lead to their placement in a category of pottery called “whimseys.” These are wares that are more inventive, and artistic than the traditional products of the potters. They are, however, still utilitarian, and reflect the culture in which they were made, and therefore can be considered folk.¹⁶ It is important to note that there are no records that the traditional folk potters were themselves slave holders. The nature of their craft did not necessitate slaves, and many of the families could not have afforded to own slaves. Therefore one can infer that the potters simply adopted the tradition of creating the faces from African-

¹² Ibid. 79.

¹³ Henry Davis, “Negro Folklore in South Carolina.” *Journal of American Folklore* 27 (July-September 1914), 241-54.

¹⁴ Ibid., 20

¹⁵ Ibid., 21.

¹⁶ Sweezy, *Raised in Clay*, 77.

Americans. There is no strong evidence that there was any effort to exploit the slave crafts, but it was simply an unintentional crossover of cultures.¹⁷

Monkey jugs also demonstrate the influence of regional influences in the potter's work. The term monkey jug has a negative connotation. The jugs are designed to look like one tall jug but in fact contain two separate chambers with two different spouts.¹⁸ One idea is that they were created in this way so that while the white overseer was in the field with the black slaves only one jug would be needed to hold water for both races. The two chambers and spouts would allow both the overseer and the slaves to drink out of the same jug. The term monkey jug was adopted because of the derogatory name for African Americans during the slave South. African Americans were commonly referred to as monkeys, because of the belief that they were uncivilized, and resembling primates.¹⁹ The influence of regional slave culture on the wares demonstrated how the potters upheld the second aspect of what it means to be folk.²⁰ By capitalizing on the traditions and practices associated with the slave South, the potters defined their works based the African American culture, and regulations concerning the mixing of races. This use of regionalism is one aspect that is crucial in defining a style as folk.

Ring jugs, a third type of "whimsy" look like a clay pipe has been wrapped into a circle, with a spout at the top.²¹ The theory behind this design is that since refrigeration in the rural south was difficult, these jugs had a greater surface area so it was easier to control the temperature of the liquid it held. This design demonstrates

¹⁷ Davis, "Negro Folklore in South Carolina." 23.

¹⁸ Three Mountaineers, *Sunset Mountain Pottery Catalogue*, 1930-36. Eleanor Hall Private collection.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 27.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

the sense of regionalism and functionalism, placing ring jugs in the category of folk.²² Ring jugs were a product of necessity. Individuals needed an efficient way of keeping liquids cool, but it was often times hard to maintain a steady temperature in large jugs. So the ring jugs were developed to solve this problem. The practicality of the jugs reveals the purpose of folk pottery.

The final quality that all folk pottery must possess is that it must be unchanging over time. The wares produced in North Carolina were made via techniques that had been passed down through the families for generations. The farmers in the area continued to need vessels to hold an assortment of goods, and so the methods of production did not change. The shapes of the vessels became an identifying feature of the different families. Each family had its own styles that they liked to create and these were passed down through the generations. These designs are still being used and act as an excellent identifier to determine whom the potter is.²³ For example, the tri-colored clay baskets that are still being made are a signature of the Owen family in Seagrove. The design is unique and can be traced back through at least the past three generations.²⁴ Records revealing the wares produced show that this design was passed on from one family member to the next. In looking in J.B. Cole's pottery catalogue one can find the same shapes that are present in the Cole studio today. The most notable of these are the face jugs, which have been a Cole family trademark for generations.

²² Georgeanna Greer, *American Stonewares: The Art and Craft of Utilitarian Potters* (Exon, PA: Schiffer Publishing Co., 1981) 37.

²³ Three Mountaineers, *Sunset Mountain Pottery Catalogue*, 1930-36. Eleanor Hall Private collection.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 1932, 17.

But the settlers that would begin the folk pottery tradition were not the first potters in North Carolina. Some of the first Europeans to create a notable pottery industry were the Moravians. The Moravian potters gathered clay from the riverbeds, just as later folk potters would, and created utilitarian wares. But there was competition between the potters, which created a different mentality among the craftsmen. “Usually each new line draws new customers and there are potters enough around us where they would rather go.”²⁵ This was the mentality of Fredrick William Marshall in a letter he wrote in 1793. Marshall was one of the six master potters from Bethabara, a Moravian settlement near present day Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The Moravians understood the need to change forms and styles of pottery in order to stay competitive in the pottery market. With six potters in one town, each a member of a different family, there was considerably more competition among the craftsmen. This competition motivated the changes in Moravian pottery. In contrast, the folk potters of the Seagrove area did not work individually, but as a family, thereby eliminating competition.

The Moravians were famous for their blue slip pottery, but each artist had his own technique, which was a merger of German traditions, as well as techniques developed in Moravian settlements in Pennsylvania, and finally North Carolina. The Moravian potters utilized the rich clay deposits of North Carolina to establish a healthy pottery trade that flourished until after the Civil War.²⁶

²⁵ Fredrick William Marshall collection, Bethlehem, Pa. Moravian Archives. *Letter to Family in Pennsylvania*, March 1793, file 132.

²⁶ John Bivins, *The Moravian Potters in North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972) 15.

The Moravians were not the only group that recognized the superior clay deposits in North Carolina. The famous English potter Josiah Wedgwood sent an excursion to an area near Franklin, North Carolina that was especially rich in kaolin, an extremely pure and fine type of clay, used in fine porcelain wares.²⁷ Wedgwood's group brought back ten tons of the fine clay. Wedgwood used this to create one line of pottery. He recognized that the clay gathered in North Carolina was of a much better quality than what he could collect in England, but it was not feasible to sponsor any more trips to America. That one batch of clay was all that Wedgwood ever gathered from America.²⁸ Wedgwood's appreciation of the fine clays that the North Carolina riverbeds offered was not unnoticed by locals. A thriving pottery community was established as soon as the first Europeans began to populate the area in the mid 1700's.

The families that settled along the Catawba River valley and established a living based on pottery would pass on a tradition to eight future generations. These early European folk potters did not share the same mentality as Marshall. They did not need to. The Moravian potters based their business on aesthetics; their wares were utilitarian but they were also motivated by design. There was such a concentration of potters in a small area that had to remain inventive in their craft to

²⁷ The kaolin that Wedgwood gathered in Western North Carolina was not the same type of clay that the folk potters used, who was located in the piedmont. Kaolin is a much finer, and purer form of clay. It is used for making fine porcelain. The difference in the clays is that Kaolin is found near the original location of the rock that it was formed from. It does not need to travel with a stream or river to be broken up. The clay that is found in the piedmont however did travel some distance in flowing water, and this movement in water is what breaks it down into clay. But this also means that the clay will contain debris that was mixed in as it moved through the water and is therefore not as pure as kaolin.

²⁸ Letter to Unknown Family Member, Circa 1750, *The Selected Letters of Josiah Wedgwood*, ed. Ann Finer and George Savage (New York: Born and Hawes Publishing Company, 1965).

stay in business. The concentration of potters in the area made it essential for the potters to remain inventive if they wanted to continue their business.

The folk potters depended on the lack of alternatives for customers.²⁹ With a limited number of potters in the area, and a limited area that produced good clay the potters along the Catawba River valley held a monopoly. The potters produced wares that were needed in rural farming communities, and the potteries were the only place to get them. Most people were farmers and needed vessels to store grains, and everyone needed kitchen utensils, and the only place to get these goods was from the pottery families. Because of this dependence on the pottery there was no need to be inventive, people would buy it just the same, as long as it served its purpose. The Cole, Brown, Teague, and Owen families maintained these same traditions through the generations by passing the heritage through their families.³⁰ The styles worked. The potters knew which vessels were needed and continued to produce them throughout the generations, providing the surrounding families with a consistent ware that did little more than serve its purpose.

However, the thriving art scene in the United States during the 1920's and a decreasing need for utilitarian pottery placed strain on the traditional folk potters of North Carolina to move away from the folk tradition and adopt an artistic art deco inspired style. This emphasis on art rather than the traditional methods of utilitarian wares was the result of a growing tourist industry and commercialization, which introduced the family potteries of North Carolina to the rest of the world.³¹ However,

²⁹ Newman Ivy White, *Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1952), 577.

³⁰ *J.B. Cole Pottery Catalogue* (Winston Salem: Meadearis Stamp and Printing Co., 1 June 1940) 1-48.

³¹ Eleanor Hall, oral history collection, University of North Carolina, Asheville, tape 1.

the folk potters of North Carolina were able to prosper due to the emergence of groups, including Busbee Pottery, Brown's Hardware, and the Three Mountaineers, which provided an outlet for the sale of traditional wares.

Pottery was present in every aspect of daily life for both the potters and the consumers. The traditions of the potters were passed down from one generation to the next within a family, usually through the males.³² This was in part because of the physical demands of potting. Lifting the heavy wet clay could be quite difficult, and many women were not capable of this. It was also a result of a practical division of labor. The women had other work to do, including raising the children, cooking, cleaning, and gardening.³³

The men of the family would typically spend six days a week working on pottery, only taking a break on Sunday. Daily activities included spinning wares on a wheel, manning the kiln and glazing the pieces. Since the styles did not change it was easy to create the pieces. A good potter could make up to ten pieces in a day.³⁴ Firing the wares was always a big event. People from the community would gather around to watch, as the potters would start the giant fire that would heat the kiln. Since the glazing process was so involved it only happened two or three times a year. Once enough pottery had been made to fill the kiln it was loaded in a specific manner. Larger pieces were placed at the back, closest to the fire. Because of the size of some the wares it would take more heat to thoroughly dry them. The more detailed pieces,

³² Charles Zug, *Turners and Burners* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 236.

³³ "Betty Graham Visits Jugtown," *The News and Observer* 31 August 1924.

³⁴ Charles Zug, *Turners and Burners* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 236.

such as face jugs, were placed at the front of the kiln. This way if an air bubble in another piece exploded it was less likely for the detailed faces to get destroyed.³⁵

For children life in a family of potters was just as busy as it was for the adults. From the time that the children were old enough to roll the clay into balls for the master potters life revolved around pottery. Children also learned how to throw, the term used for describing creating pottery on a wheel, at a young age. They would practice with small balls of clay in the evening, or while the master potters were attending to the kiln. Children made smaller versions of the pieces made by the masters. The miniatures were occasionally sold as toys for children, but their primary purpose was to provide practice for the children.³⁶

Pottery for these families was not a hobby, but a business. Records needed to be kept, kiln fires attended to, and clay gathered for the next firing. The pottery occupied the family's life. A grave marker, appropriately made out of a jug that has been turned upside down, near Seagrove, North Carolina, reads "Alas, Alack the Day the Potter Himself has turned to Clay."³⁷ This epigraph shows the utilitarian nature of the pottery, and the connection that the potters had to their craft. Every aspect of life for the potters revolved around pottery. Not only did they begin working on it starting from childhood, they used it themselves. In the families' own kitchen and barns wares could be found. The grave marker reveals how involved the families were with their craft. From the age children could roll a ball of clay, throughout life, and even after death pottery played a pivotal role in daily life.³⁸

³⁵ "Betty Graham Visits Jugtown," *The News and Observer*, 31 August 1924.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Nancy Sweezy, *Raised in Clay* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984) 37.

³⁸ "Betty Graham Visits Jugtown."

For these reason the farmers of the surrounding areas were just as dependent on the wares, as the potters were on selling them. They needed plates, and cups to eat with, bowls in every size for serving, jugs to store liquids, especially whisky, large crocks for storage of grains, and other foods.³⁹

However, once North Carolina began to become more urban, and commercial manufactured vessels became readily available, the demand for the traditional pottery of North Carolina diminished. Farming became less common and there was no longer a need for large storage vessels. Plates, cups and bowls could be bought in stores, and people were less inclined to buy handmade wares.⁴⁰

Following World War I as people moved into urban settings, the emphasis in art rather than craft threatened the traditions of potters. With the thriving economy of the 1920's people were able to buy commercial goods, and use their disposable income to buy art, not folk crafts. The demand changed from utilitarian to artistic.⁴¹ Since people were no longer buying pottery out of necessity they became more particular about the appearance. The art deco movement of the time largely influenced people's taste. The simple brown, yellows, and reds of early pottery were no longer enough. People began to want colorful pieces with unique designs, something that the North Carolina potters were not practiced at.⁴²

The rise of the art deco movement in the early part of the twentieth century focused on linear, stiff and angular designs.⁴³ None of these characteristics of art

³⁹ Owen interview.

⁴⁰ James Clay, *Atlas*, 57.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁴² Mildred Harrington, "Interesting People: The Master Potter of Jugtown," *The American Magazine* CIII, no 6 (June 1927) 53.

⁴³ Jo Marceau, *Art: A World History* (New York: DK Publishing: 1998) 610.

deco are found in the traditional pottery in North Carolina. Folk pottery traditionally has soft lines. The terms that are used to describe the features on folk pottery reveal the appearance. The center bulge that is found in many pieces is called the belly of the vessel. It is the protruding center that slims again to form a neck to the piece. These terms, belly and neck, reveal the difference in the art deco movement and the traditional aesthetics of folk pottery.⁴⁴

The demand changed. The graceful forms that were reminiscent of the curves of the human body were no longer in demand, but rather sharp lines and angular forms were popular. To get a clear grasp of the variations in style it is perhaps beneficial to look at one of the best, and most commonly recognizable examples of the art deco movement in America, the Chrysler Building, designed by William van Alen between 1928 and 1930. The Chrysler building has straight lines running the length of the building, with triangles along the top, elements that correspond with the art deco movement.⁴⁵ The styles of the art deco movement that are illustrated in the Chrysler Building reflect the overall accepted style of the time.

But the change in demand was more than just a change in style. A rising awareness of the arts inspired many individuals to collect art. It was not only art deco; the music and literary scenes were also vibrant. Some of America's most acclaimed artists of all medias were a product of the 1920's. F. Scott Fitzgerald, Langston Hughes, Duke Ellington were just a few of the artists that inspired the country to get

⁴⁴ Sweezy, 98.

⁴⁵ Marceau, 611.

involved in the arts.⁴⁶ However, the arts that gained popularity were the new styles and ideas, the traditional folk pottery was overlooked. Laura Teague, a member of a long line of potters, recalled in an interview about hearing stories of tourists stopping by expecting to see modern art, full of color and angles, and how disappointed they were to realize that the pottery was nothing more than simple earthen colored vessels.⁴⁷

As the growing art scene steered art buyers to the contemporary artists, it seemed that the families that had survived off of the family trade for generations would have to abandon the business.

However, the diminishing folk art scene was recognized and actions were taken to preserve this North Carolina tradition. The most important aspect to saving the practice was marketing. Western North Carolina was growing during the 1920's. George Vanderbilt had introduced artists to the area when he built his home in Asheville at the end of the previous century. He had also helped to bring the railroad to Western North Carolina. The area was receiving praise for its magnificent beauty and the health benefits that its clean cool air provided. Tuberculosis sanatoriums were built for those suffering from respiratory problems and many more came to the area to escape the summer heat of the Carolina piedmont.

This appeal of the mountain region is exactly what S.J. Anderson was cashing in on as he and representatives in New York City, Chicago, Boston, and Los Angeles,

⁴⁶ These artists influenced Americans in their tastes and desire to have access to art. When comparing the popular styles of the 1920's and the folk art styles it is beneficial to look at these mainstream artists as a model of what was universally accepted. Despite the fact that the Chrysler Building, Fitzgerald, Hughes, and Ellington have no direct connection to pottery, they are the best examples of popular culture at the time, and were chosen because of their easy recognition, and common association with the 1920's.

⁴⁷ Laura Teague, interviewed by Sally Council, Seagrove NC, 25 September 1993, Owen family personal collection.

began selling “mountain pottery”, as representatives of the Asheville based *Treasure Chest*.⁴⁸

The Treasure Chest was in existence from 1926 through 1956. Hugh C. Brown, Edwin Brown, and W.H. Lashley founded the company that sold crafts at Browns Hardware Store that was located at 25 Broadway in Asheville.⁴⁹ The wares that they sold were labeled “Sunset Mountain Pottery”, after the mountain that looks over Asheville.⁵⁰ At the time Sunset Mountain was advertised as a premier tourist destination, where people could look out and observe the city’s beauty. *The Treasure Chest* capitalized on this advertising and used it to help sell its pottery. Representatives from *The Treasure Chest*, and later *The Three Mountaineers* would travel to Sanford, North Carolina to buy pottery from potters like J.B. Cole and resell it in Asheville and market it as Mountain Pottery, despite the fact that it had been made 200 miles east of Asheville.⁵¹ In Mr. Brown’s journal there are entries discussing routine trips to Asheboro by train, the closest city that was on the rail line to the pottery rich areas of Seagrove and Sanford.⁵²

As stated previously the shapes of the wares, as well as the glazes are an excellent way to identify a potter, without looking for a signature on the bottom of the piece. The catalogues for both *The Treasure Chest* and *J.B. Cole’s Pottery* in Steeds, North Carolina shows striking similarities in the pottery. The same shapes and glazes are used, as well as coding to identify who the potter was are used in both catalogues.

⁴⁸ Eleanor Hall Collection, tape 1

⁴⁹ Ibid., tape 2.

⁵⁰ *Land of the Sky and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park* (Asheville and Knoxville: Great Smoky Mountain Publishing Company Inc., 1929).

⁵¹ *The Land of the Sky and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park*.

⁵² Eleanor Hall, tape 3

Clearly the mountain pottery that was sold at *The Treasure Chest*, and the folk pottery of the piedmont are one and the same.⁵³

The Treasure Chest did not limit its market to Western North Carolina. Mountain Pottery was sold across the nation. S.J. Anderson sold pottery at 255 5th Avenue in New York City. Other sale locations were in Boston, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Eleanor Brown Hall, the daughter of Hugh Brown, recalls when all the representatives would meet in Asheville. They would all get together at the Brown family property off of Beaverdam Road in North Asheville for square dances, where she would hear stories of the sale of mountain pottery all over the country.⁵⁴

The Treasure Chest was not the only national network of mountain pottery. Juliana Busbee visited the Davidson County Fair in Lexington, North Carolina in 1915. She was the chair of the North Carolina Federation of Women's Clubs. While at the fair she was asked to help arrange a fruit plate, and was given an orange clay pie plate to use. She fell in love with the art. She emptied her suitcase and filled it with pottery from Moore County that she bought while at the fair. When she met her husband, Jacques at Union Station in Raleigh, she unpacked her suitcase in the station, and he too fell in love with the pottery.⁵⁵

Through some research the Busbees discovered that the pottery had been made in Whynot, a small settlement in Moore county. In the winter of 1917, Jacques made his first trip to the area. When he got off the train at Seagrove, the closest station to Whynot, rumors immediately began to circulate about him being a German

⁵³ Three Mountaineers, *Sunset Mountain Pottery Catalogue*. And J.B. Cole *Pottery Catalogue*.

⁵⁴ Eleanor Hall, tape 1.

⁵⁵ David Whisnant, *All That is Native and Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 14.

spy, because of his New York accent and middle class clothes. But, despite this setback Busbee quickly befriended Ben Owen, one of the many struggling potters in the area, whose family had been in the area making pottery since they arrived from Stratford, England in 1750, or so the story goes. A full-length biography of the Busbees, and their involvement has not yet been written, and the only definitive evidence that exists is obscure newspaper articles and folklore.⁵⁶

What is fact is that Jacques was born James Littlejohn Busbee in 1870 to a wealthy Raleigh family. He left home to study art at the National Academy of Design, the Arts Students' League, and the Chase School in New York.⁵⁷ His fascination with the art scene encouraged him to change his name to Jacques. He returned to North Carolina several times in attempts to make a living as a portrait painter but had little luck. Juliana Busbee later pointed out, "Portrait painting in North Carolina is close akin to the mortician."⁵⁸ Juliana meant that portrait painting was not a desired profession in North Carolina. It was not a trade that had many repeat clients, much like a mortician. The few individuals who were wealthy enough, and had enough time on their hands to have a portrait done usually only did so once or twice in their lives. Jacques' only success as a painter came from a commission from the North Carolina Historical Commission, when he was asked to do several landscapes on Roanoke Island.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Jean Crawford, *Jugtown Pottery: History and Design* (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, 1964), 12.

⁵⁷ William S. Powell, ed., *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography I* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 289.

⁵⁸ Juliana R. Busbee, *The Jugtown Pottery*, Mrs. Jacques Busbee Collection, North Carolina Department of Archives and History.

⁵⁹Ibid.

Juliana also had a background in the arts through her involvement with women's organizations. She was determined to expand the support of North Carolina handicrafts by the Women's Club Art Department. She believed that "the only art that could reach all of our state, the poor and the wealthy, the learned and the ignorant was the art of the handicraft."⁶⁰

It is clear that both Jacques and Juliana had a love for art, especially native North Carolina Folk art, but the exact date of their first involvement with the Seagrove potters is unclear. In an article from *Everywoman's Magazine* in 1916, it is clear that the Busbee's had begun their business with the potters. "For years Mr. Busbee and I have been collecting specimens from the different potters in the state".⁶¹ It was clear that they had been acquainted with the potters in the region for some time.

Despite the Busbee's love for art it is questionable whether their involvement was spurred by this love or by the marketability of the wares. Juliana stated in *Everywomen* that, "It would be a good investment for some merchant in every town in the state to handle our native pottery. Every tourist wants something characteristic of a place for a souvenir, what would be more charming than a piece of real North Carolina dirt."⁶²

In 1916, Mr. And Mrs. Busbee left North Carolina to spend the winter in Greenwich Village. They took with them a large collection of North Carolina pottery to sell. The decision to expand the market to New York was an attempt to spread the

⁶⁰ Juliana Busbee, untitled manuscript, Juliana Busbee Collection, Special Collections, University of North Carolina, Greensboro.

⁶¹ Mrs. Jacques Busbee, "North Carolina Pottery and Pine Needle Baskets," *Everywoman's Magazine* 1, no. 1 (October 1916) 9.

⁶² Ibid.

regional art to a larger audience, and what better place to begin than the artistic area of Greenwich Village?⁶³

This year in New York resulted in the sale of the pottery and greater notoriety. New York ceramic experts received the wares with enthusiasm.⁶⁴ But, the influence of the art scene would affect the Busbee's and their vision. Juliana Busbee later referred to the year in New York as a time for change in her artistic appreciation. "We went to New York for a year and became violent converts to modern art."⁶⁵ This influence would ultimately affect the pottery that the Busbee's bought and sold.

When the Busbee's returned to North Carolina, the area was in the middle of prohibition. Theoretically this ban on alcohol would hurt the local potters due to the fact that a large percentage of their wares were jugs that were most commonly used to hold whisky. Because of this change in demand many of the potters continued to make some wares, but were forced to downsize and look for work elsewhere. J. B. Cole found work in a sawmill, as did Charlie Auman, two members of the traditional Seagrove pottery families.⁶⁶

While these potters did not entirely abandon the family tradition of pottery, the Busbee's saw these diverging occupations as a break in the tradition. For this reason in subsequent visits to the area to collect pottery, the Busbee's focused in on Jugtown pottery, because they believed this to be the only unbroken line of potters remaining. Juliana Busbee's Greenwich Village tearoom advertised the pottery as "the only surviving folk craft pottery in the United States. Folk craft, because it is an

⁶³ Juliana R. Busbee, *The Jugtown Pottery*.

⁶⁴ Mrs. Jacques Busbee, Letter to Editor, *The News and Observer*, 21, July 1929.

⁶⁵ Juliana R. Busbee, *The Jugtown Pottery*.

⁶⁶ Juliana Busbee, "Age-Old Profession Now Flourishes in Sand Hills," *The News and Observer*, 5 June 1927.

expression of people through the urge of necessity. Its pedigree is unbroken since 1750.”⁶⁷

The tearoom was in an ideal location. Greenwich Village was the center of art movements. Although these movements did not include the folk pottery tradition, the concentrated population of people in the area who had an appreciation for the arts created an enthusiastic clientele for the Busbee’s to sell to.

Ben Owens, Henry Chrisco, Rufus Owens, James Owens, and J.W. Teague all turned wares that the Busbee’s shipped to the Greenwich tearoom. James Owen was the main potter who turned the wares shipped between 1917 and 1922. However the process was not as simple as Jacques Busbee would have liked. The potters did not make what the New York clients were requesting. They stuck to making what they had always made, and did not change production to adapt to the changing market. Jacques expressed frustration at several occasions due to the fact that if an order came in for a specific piece there was no guarantee that the potters would fill the order in any hurry. They would instead continue with what they were making, and fill the order when it was convenient.

A second problem arose for the Busbee’s. The potters, all of who at this time were older and as Jacques stated “hard baked”⁶⁸, were not willing to change the forms that they created or the glazing techniques. Although these are the exact features of the potter that attracted the Busbees to the pottery it was not marketable to a large enough community.

⁶⁷ “Native American Pottery for Decoration and Household Use,” *New York Sunday Tribune*, 31 March 1924.

⁶⁸ Crawford, *Jugtown Pottery: History and Design*, 21.

In 1921 or 1922 the Busbees found a solution to this problem. They created their own potter shop and hired Charlie Teague Jr. and Ben Owen Jr. to be the master potters. With this new shop, and younger potters who would be more open to change in technique, the Busbees could meet the market demand for folk pottery.⁶⁹

With the Busbees now in control of the artistic side of the wares, they were able to introduce the potters to the oriental style that was gaining so much popularity in the New York market. This transformation in the style in folk pottery is what is commonly called the Busbee Vision.⁷⁰

This infiltration of oriental styles reveals the changing face of art in America. The increase in travel and trade introduced American artists to other forms of art, and these became the popular trend. Previously, the limited scope of art that people were exposed to allowed artists to remain true to their original style, but with broadening awareness of art, individuals wanted pieces that represented new styles. The traditional American styles were no longer desired.

These new forms were not the traditional style for North Carolina Folk Pottery, leading many to argue that in the attempts to sell “pedigree” folk pottery, the Busbees compromised the pottery’s integrity. However, the adaptations that were made were not as radical as it might seem. The oriental style that the Busbees introduced had some similarities to the North Carolina tradition. Both styles were marked by primitive, basic shapes, with monochromatic glazes, and therefore easy for the potters to recreate in their own wares.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Mrs. Jacques Busbee, “Pottery in NC,” Letter to the Editor, *The News and Observer*, 21 July 1929.

⁷⁰ Charles Zug, *Turners and Burners* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986) 262-71.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 393.

The Busbee Vision changed what is considered folk pottery. The Busbees wanted to be able to sell the pottery to a nation wide audience, like *The Treasure Chest* was doing, but styles and techniques needed to be updated in order to make the pottery appealing to a large enough audience. This helped ensure the continuation for North Carolina pottery, but jeopardized the folk aspect of the wares.

The folk pottery tradition has existed since the 1700's. Little has changed in that time. The same families are still producing the wares, using similar methods to those used eight generations ago. Although the Busbee Vision slightly altered the styles of pottery that were being produced, the basic practices are still the same. The longevity of the practice can be attributed to the rise in organizations geared to preserving the folk pottery tradition in the 1920's, right at the time when popular tastes in art, and a growing commercial art market, seemed to be the end for North Carolina Potters. Busbee Pottery, the Brown Family, and *The Three Mountaineers*, all enabled the potters to continue operating because of their dedication to preserving the tradition which creates wares which are not only pieces of art, but are practical wares that reflect the place they were made, and the lives of the eight generations of potters who have been creating them.

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