

33. HIPPIE POTTERS AND JIM REIDHEAD

In high school, I had taken an interest in pottery, but the school's program had lapsed. In support of my interest, my parents consulted Clara Hatton, a neighbor who ran the modest art program (Department of Home Economics) at Colorado A&M. Miss Hatton referred them to Jim McKinnell, a ceramic engineer sporting a tartan plaid jacket and bow tie, who together with his wife, Nan, was teaching ceramics at CU in Boulder.

My parents helped me buy a potter's wheel and a small electric kiln. Jim McKinnell made helpful introductions but cautioned sternly that making a living as a potter was not possible.

High school chemistry opened up a new horizon for understanding glaze materials and their geologic origins. The Cherry Factory allowed me some space to try building and firing a wood kiln and the surrounding dead cherry orchards offered an inexhaustible supply of good firewood.

Taking due note of McKinnell's admonition, I set my sights on a career in ceramic engineering.¹ High school had gone well and I seemed to be on an academic glide path when I went back east to college.

After a year, I returned to start a serious pottery. Among other things, Jim McKinnell's warning rankled. My new wife, Jeanne, liked pottery and there was a big brick warehouse at the old Cherry Factory for us to take over.

My parents' disappointment at my abrupt career turn was mitigated by the addition of a daughter-in-law and the prospect of eventual grandchildren. My father was supportive (if a little disappointed that I wasn't taking to agriculture) but happy that Jeanne and I would be living next door, and my mother was grateful that, at least, I hadn't taken up agriculture.

We set about constructing a pottery. The workshop was on the first floor of the brick warehouse, with an apartment upstairs. We built the kilns from

salvaged brick. Jeanne and I roughed it the first couple of years, with no running water and a long walk to the outhouse until our first daughter, Meredith, was born,

We began exploring some traditional methods used in Early American potteries. Because the kind of pottery equipment that we wanted was not available, we started building our own scaled down industrial equipment,² and then building more for other potters with the help of a good friend, George Post (1947-).³

In my spare time I had taken courses in welding, forging, foundry, machining and drafting in the Industrial Arts program at CSU, and I'd grown up on a farm, so I knew enough to be dangerous.

By the mid-1970s, our small team of 3-5 people using traditional technology was producing thousands of pots for household and restaurant use in Northern Colorado. It was in this capacity that we became friends with Jim and Donna Reidhead.⁴ In 1972 Jim and his partner, Carey Hewitt, had started *The Cupboard* in Fort Collins, which carried our pottery for many years.

With Judson Pottery successfully established, our new machinery company, Bluebird Manufacturing, ran its first ad campaign under the banner "*Want to make a living as a potter?*".

Soon we were shipping machinery to potters, schools, colleges and laboratories, mostly in the US but also around the world. We received two patents on arcane mechanical devices for clay processing equipment.⁵ The business was successful from the get-go, owing to blind luck, low overhead and fine employees.

In connection with the Bluebird Manufacturing catalogs, we wrote *A Production Potter's Notebook*, a tract on making pottery for a living, which was widely distributed in the 1970s and helped earn Judson Pottery a national reputation. Jeanne's work with traditional *pitcher molding*⁶ was featured in national publications.

My father was getting up in years by this time and needed help to manage the farm, now leased out to a tenant. He had sold 100 acres over the years, so 220 acres were left, which we began farming.

Ironically, success with Judson Pottery and Bluebird Manufacturing provided Jeanne and me a grubstake to get into farming and ranching. Modern farming was looking considerably more attractive than the version I remembered. It also helped that Jeanne took to irrigating and operating farm machinery like a duck to water.

When we moved to the Tibbits Place in 1977, Judson Pottery followed us and is still running (if at a bit more leisurely pace than in the old days). Stop by sometime!

Now that the curiosity of some readers regarding the Cherry Factory and hippie potters has been attended to, we'll be getting on with the story in the next chapter.

¹ Ceramics encompasses pretty much everything that is non-metallic and inorganic involving high temperature: abrasives, bricks and tile, cement and plaster, electrical insulators, glass, pottery and porcelain, refractories, plus nuclear fuel rods and ICBM nose cones.

² Our principal need was a pugmill, we started with a simplified version of a design shared by New Zealand potter, Harry Davis (1910-1986), an unsung hero of pioneering pottery in Nigeria and Peru. Pugmills are used for preparing and tempering clay. Early versions were made of wood and powered by beasts of burden. I know of a mule powered pugmill, still surviving (the pugmill, not the mule) in North Carolina. In modern industry, pugmills are huge machines primarily used in brick and tile making.

³ In addition to George, I particularly want to mention Sue Foster (1941-2019), who organized our office, and then stayed on to work with us for a good part of the next fourteen years, the last several at Phantom Canyon Ranch.

⁴ More about Jim (and Donna) later.

⁵ A vacuum breather valve and a hammermill blade design.

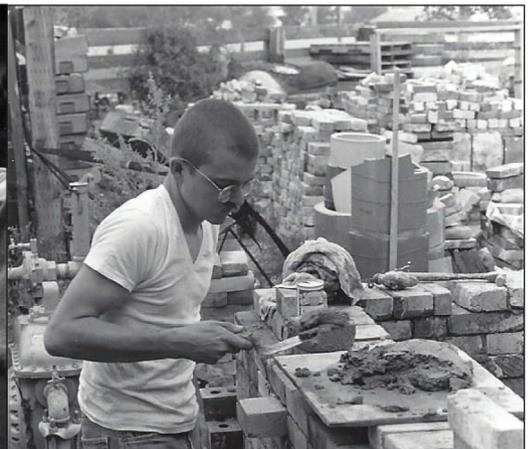
⁶ Making plates and bowls with slabs of wet clay formed over bisque-fired molds.



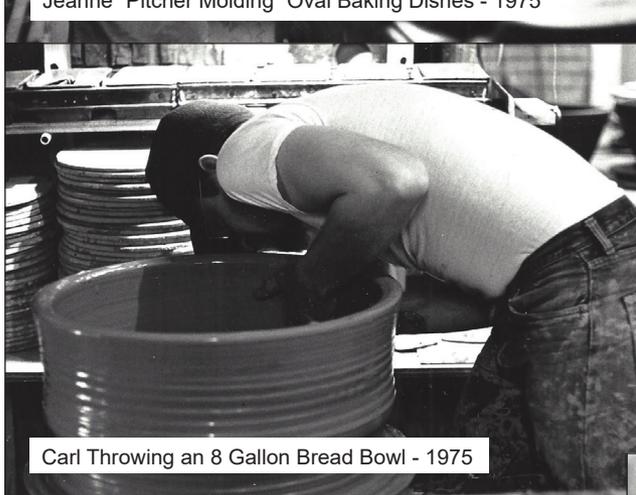
Jeanne "Pitcher Molding" Oval Baking Dishes - 1975



George Post Soldering a Wheel Pan - 1970



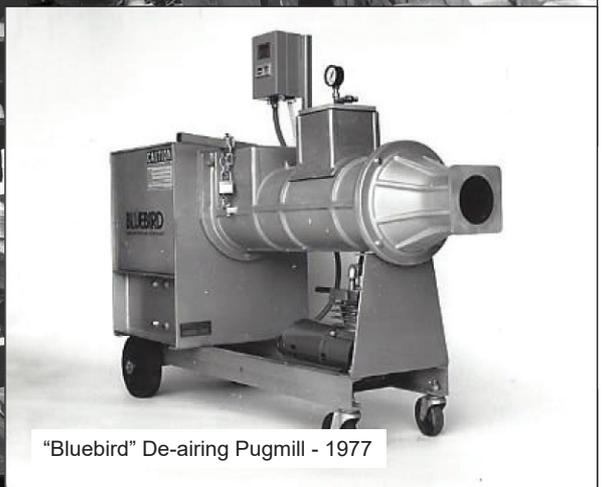
Carl Building the Car Kiln - 1974



Carl Throwing an 8 Gallon Bread Bowl - 1975



Jeanne Glazing Sugar Bowl Lids - 1976



"Bluebird" De-airing Pugmill - 1977



Judson Pottery Showroom - 1973



Screw Top Bottle - 1976



Sue Foster - 1971