

Pisgah Forest Pottery

A step back in time

By Lindsay Lancaster

A best-preserved historic pottery workshop in North Carolina is in jeopardy because of sky-high property taxes and no descendants to which to pass the family tradition.

Walking into Pisgah Forest Pottery is like stepping back in time. Coffee cans from the 1920s still line the walls of the original stone pottery building, which Walter B. Stephen (1876-1961) built in 1926 off N.C. 191 in Skyland. The 1917 clay filter press is still in use and the 1929 wood kiln is still functional, though it is not in use because there isn't enough pottery being created at the pottery to use the kiln, which fires around 300 pieces at a time. A kick wheel can also be found at the pottery.

Stephen, originally from Iowa, had traveled West to Nebraska in a covered wagon as a young boy, and there he lived in a sod home near the Sioux Indians. He had seen the last buffalo hunts and had met "Buffalo Bill" Cody.

"He [Stephen] was a true pioneer," said Rodney Leftwich, a self-employed potter who researches Southern pottery and worked as a potter at Pisgah Forest in the '90s.

Stephen and his mother started their first pottery establishment, Noncannah (an Indian word meaning long stream), around 1904 near Memphis, Tenn. There they created slip-decorated pottery, using white porcelain liquid clay to paint layer upon layer of decorations. The earliest of their pottery was matte green with Stephen's mother's slip floral designs. Stephen eventually started creating scenes on the pottery depicting his own memories.

After his parents passed away, Stephen came to Skyland in 1913 for the good clays and mineral deposits, establishing a second Noncannah Pottery before founding his third, Pisgah Forest Pottery.

He passed down Pisgah Forest Pottery to grandson Tom Case in the early '50s.

When he graduated high school, Case attended Asheville-Biltmore College and studied chemistry and ceramics. With the knowledge he gained from the chemistry classes, he formulated some different glaze formulas.

"A lot of the glazes were just

experimental" with different colors and different materials, he said.

Now 77, Case is not producing a great deal of pottery anymore, and with some lots in the Skyland area going for upwards of \$2 million, Leftwich said Case could end up being taxed out of the place where he grew up because of high property taxes in that area.

According to Leftwich, Case has basically single-handedly preserved the pottery site and the way his grandfather had things.

"This place is the best-preserved pottery site in North Carolina," Leftwich said.

Tools and equipment at the workshop from Stephen's day have been left the same. "It is so different from Mr. Stephen's day," Leftwich said, explaining that Stephen built the original pottery building in 1925 out of fill rocks he carried to the site, and also built his own kiln and made his own tools. "If he didn't have it, he made it." Stephen was one of the first members of the Southern Highland Craft Guild. Leftwich added that nowadays, people call themselves potters after taking a pottery class at a community college.

In its prime, the pottery had about five people working there. Case, who now works alone at the pottery, usually makes around 75 pieces in a two-week period, which are similar pieces to those of his grandfather.

"What I make is about the same as what has been made here for years," Case said. "The shapes and the pieces are just about the same style."

Case has a great deal of memories at the pottery; he was born at the home on the property.

"I was raised here and it just has a lot of memories and a lot of value to me," he said.

He remembers his grandfather telling stories about seeing Buffalo Bill and living in a sod house.

"He was an interesting person to be around and talk to; he was sort-of self-educated," Case said.

After 30 years of collecting, 10

years of researching and several years of creating pottery at the location, Leftwich published a book in 2006 called Pisgah Forest and Noncannah, The Potteries of Walter B. Stephen.

In a way, Leftwich feels like Stephen is responsible for getting him involved in pottery. In the 1950s, Leftwich's dad was a furniture maker and would take him to the Southern Highland Guild craft fairs. Leftwich said that as a youngster, he would nag his father to take him home. To get him to be quiet, his father would take him over so he could watch the potter at the potter's wheel. Although Leftwich never directly met him, the person he watched was Walter Stephen. He remembers Stephen's hands more than anything, and watched him closely.

"I wish I had known him," he said.

Out behind the pottery workshop and across the stream is what was once Stephen's library. After Stephen's death in 1961, Case closed up the library.

In 1992, Case's wife, Dot, opened the old library for Leftwich. Due to a major flood in 1977, the floor had about a foot of

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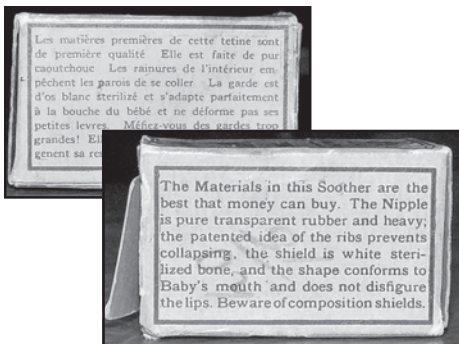
Rodney Leftwich talked about the details of some of the pottery that Walter Stephen, founder of Pisgah Forest Pottery, created. This particular piece allows the person looking at the pottery to see a glimpse of Stephen's early life, traveling out West in a covered wagon and throwing biscuits off the back to a dog.



The small but very informative “Rigo / Pretty-Lip / Soother” or pacifier box with its original contents, a shaped pacifier sucking nipple with a “the shield is white sterilized bone... Beware of composition shields.” With recent environmental health warnings, it looks like Rigo was ahead of its time. The use of bone or ivory definitely predates the age of plastics. (Courtesy of the Rubin Clet collection.)

nice in its own right, but it *is* just a nice old pacifier. The original box that it came in, however, opens up a new story. The label reads “Rigo / Pretty-Lip Soother / Made in England / for the / Richards Glass Co. / Limited / Toronto / and / Montreal.” Produced around 1900, what really sets this box off is that one side of the box is in English and the other side is in French. It was made in England for the French-Canadian market in eastern Canada and ended up in a collection in California.

What I have realized by looking at these old boxes is that there is a lot of beauty in the period of their production along with a history lesson that could never adequately be put into words. The graphics are pleasing to the eye and significant as pieces of artwork. One of the greatest assets we have found in our ACIF organization is that among the 1500 or so American-made baby feeding bottles, there are at least six different bottles known to exist only because one of the ACIF members has only the box that it was sold in. Other than the box, these particular bottles would not be known to exist.



Both sides of the Rigo box, front in English and behind in French.

A Look at the Capstan Glass Fluted Tumber Series by Barry Bernas. Continued from page 39.

Summary

The examples documented in this write-up were either advertised by Capstan or an actual example has been located and verified. I was limited to these two sources because a product catalog from the Capstan Glass Company hasn't been found. Because of the latter limitation, I don't know the full extent of the fluted tumbler line that was manufactured by factory hands for this South Connellsville firm. There may be many more paneled models still on the loose that need to be corralled and branded as authentic. If you can help me increase our knowledge base about this type of food tumbler or just want to discuss any aspect of this article, please don't hesitate to contact me directly.

BLB

Endnotes:

¹ *Tumblers, Jars and Bottles; A Product Identification Guide for the Capstan Glass Company, South Connellsville, Pennsylvania, Barry L. Bernas, 239 Ridge Avenue, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, 17325, pg. 11.*

² *Ibid, pg. 55.* Either Capstan Glass ads or actual labeled tumblers were used to compile this brief listing of possible foods that could be packaged into this type of glass container.

³ *Ibid, pg. 10.* This reference has a sketch of the Capstan logo extracted from the trademark paperwork and pictures of how this symbol was replicated on a machine pressed tumbler and a machine blown jar or bottle.

⁴ *Ibid, pg. 63.*

⁵ *Ibid, pgs. 72-73 and 137.* For more information on other design patents issued to Theodore J. Piazzoli, please look for my article titled *Piazzoli Designs from Capstan Glass* in a another issue of *Bottles and Extras*.

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mud and there were spiders crawling everywhere. Leftwich said so much was lost to flood damage and to silver fish eating up a lot of the paper. Almost all of the books were destroyed along with all of the pottery.

In the library, he did find a couple of letters. Leftwich's eyes welled up when he talked about finding Stephen's description of his very first piece of pottery, and how he made and fired the pot, but the glaze had only half-way melted. Stephen wrote that he was so frustrated, and that “my little mother encouraged me.”

His mother's kind words prompted him to turn the pot upside down and re-fire it. It turned out okay and he ended up selling that first pot decorated with cotton blooms.

In just about every letter that Stephen wrote, he referred to his persistence and “doggedness to stay with things,” a trait which he believed he had gotten from his father, who was a Mason that came from Scotland, Leftwich said.

After a lot of searching and making contacts with people who may have collected some of Stephen's pottery, Leftwich was lucky to find some in the Memphis area.

He happened to be going to Memphis and had found a person with a pot that identically matched the description of Stephen's very first pot, signed Stephen and son, before a name was chosen for the pottery. The piece dates back to around 1907.

“We found that [first] pot,” Leftwich said. “We're pretty sure, as much as we can be.”

In the letter, Stephen also talked about the hardships he faced, and described his first kiln.

Case has a collection of Stephen's pottery at Asheville Art Museum, some of which are his favorites.

“They're really nice and they're sort of special to me,” he said.

Leftwich hopes that someday, there will be a way to fund the creation of a video to have a record of what's there.

A wide range of pottery made at Pisgah Forest Pottery and Leftwich's book are available for sale. Pottery prices range from around \$10 to \$400.

For more information about the pottery, call Tom or Dot Case at 828-684-6663.