

Dryden Pottery—An Arkansas Treasure

by G. L. Dybwad and Joy V. Bliss

This year [2001], A. James Dryden (fig. 1) celebrates fifty-five years of continuous pottery business—forty-five in Hot Springs preceded by ten productive years in Ellsworth, Kansas. As collectors of Drydenware, we were surprised to find no collectibles catalog for this long-standing enterprise. Upon meeting Dryden and his family and learning more about this fascinating man and his illustrious career, we knew his story must be told. The resulting book, *Dryden Pottery of Kansas and Arkansas*, is a biography and Pottery history as well as a catalog and price guide.

As a GI returning from the South Pacific at the end of W.W.II and unsure what his civilian work would be, Dryden had a serendipitous encounter on the streets of Ellsworth, Kansas, with ceramist Norman Plummer of the Kansas Geological Survey. After they had visited, Plummer led Dryden to the best clay and ash fields in Kansas and introduced him to the head of the University of Kansas ceramics department, J. Sheldon Carey. A crash course in ceramics at the University resulted, and Dryden opened his Pottery in his home town, Ellsworth, in the fall of 1946. In the early years, the business steadily expanded until Dryden was selling pottery not only to many department stores and distributors in his home state but in places far distant from Kansas.

Dryden started his business at just the right time. Because of the war, no one had produced pottery for four years. Stores had no stock. Also, people were traveling and buying once again, and he found a market in those desirous of souvenirs and utilitarian household pieces. Among his customers were tourists who stopped at the Pottery, the Harvey Houses along the Santa Fe Railway (Fig. 2), Macy's of New York, Van Briggles of Colorado Springs, and numerous souvenir shops across the country that ordered items for resale inscribed or labeled with their names. (Fig. 3) An early innovation of Dryden's was personalizing bisque ware through unfired glaze with a dental drill. Souvenirs and pitcher-tumbler sets were inscribed with family names, a



Fig. 1. Jim Dryden examining a piece of Dryden Pottery thrown by his son, J.K. (Kimbo) Dryden, 2000.



Fig. 2. Kansas slip-cast "6" pitcher, inscribed "Albuquerque" and made for Harvey House, Santa Fe Railroad in Albuquerque.



Fig. 3. Kansas fish vase, inscribed as a souvenir of the Black Hills.

practice he continued in Arkansas. (Fig. 4) The beauty of these pieces derives from their gorgeous and varied glazes.

From a young age, Dryden expressed an interest in art. Recognizing talent, his mother paid anyone able and willing to teach him the skills of drawing and painting. He became a remarkably accomplished cartoonist, a talent that has served him well in creating a wide array of advertising signs and brochures for the Pottery. (Fig. 5) The study of chemistry in college well prepared him for formulating his early glazes using the volcanic ash laid down in Kansas thousands of years ago.

Long hours of hard work, dedicated and capable employees, an admirable product, and a tremendous advertising campaign resulted in a successful business. In spite of his successes, he knew the benefits of locating in a area with a bustling tourist trade and, after investigating many areas, chose Hot Springs, an area with more hotel rooms per capita in 1956 than any other city in the United States.

In Kansas, almost all pottery was slip-cast, made from locally harvested clay, and glazed with Kansas volcanic ash. Many molds were brought to Hot Springs and collectors will find similar designs made in both states. However, shortly after the move to Arkansas, pressed pieces and thrown pottery were added. At the present time thrown originals are the primary product, although a few favorite slip-cast pieces are made—most notably the 715 Grecian Pitcher, a design carved from walnut by Jim’s uncle and illustrated on the front cover of the *Dryden Pottery* book. (Fig. 6)

Some Kansas mold designs were ascribed numbers. From 1950, these numbers were incised on the bottoms of

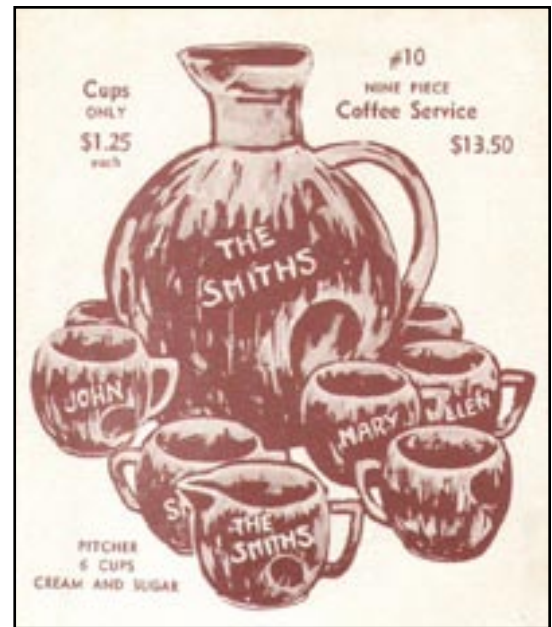


Fig. 4. This first Arkansas ad was drawn by Jim Dryden in 1957. Pitcher with the Smith surname and mugs with the first name of each family member.



Fig. 5. Advertisement drawn by Jim Dryden.

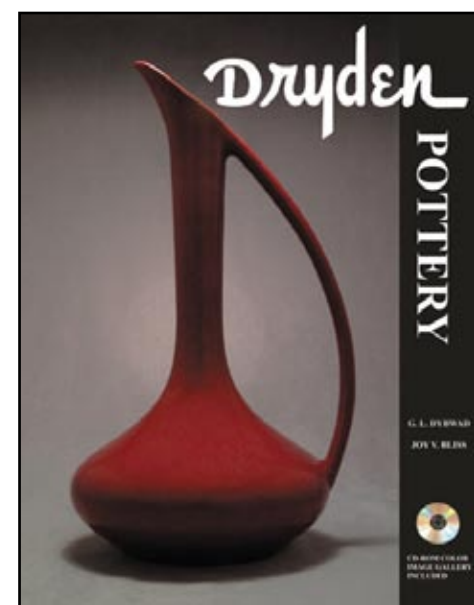


Fig. 6. The front cover of *Dryden Pottery* by Dyrwad & Bliss features the Grecian Pitcher.



Fig. 7. Bottom of Kansas 49 pitcher showing Dryden script and number.



Fig. 8. Bottom of boot made in Kansas for Van Briggles of Colorado Springs, Colorado. Inscribed "Anna Van." Dryden made pottery for Van Briggles in 1954-55.



Fig. 9. Large highway sign promoting the Pottery, 1957.

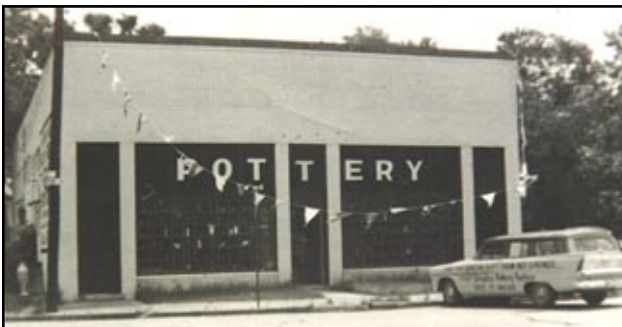


Fig. 10. The Pottery facade in December 1956 when Dryden opened for business.

pots along with the name "Dryden." Pieces with very small feet are unmarked. When marked, most are scribed with a distinctive Dryden script (Fig. 7); occasionally a block print is found. Pottery made in Kansas in 1954–55 for Van Briggles of Colorado is marked "Anna Van." (Fig. 8)

By 1959, Dryden advertised that all the materials that went into his Arkansas product were harvested locally—clay from Malvern, talc from Bryant, and quartz from the Ouachitas. Over the years the

hand-dug Malvern clay, which fired tan, has been replaced with a refined commercial clay that has very little grog or filler and fires bone-white.

Dryden is a master advertiser. (Fig. 9) Throughout his fifty-five years, he has tried all manner of ideas with great success. In Kansas he enticed tourists from Highway 40 with a free look at snakes, free water, free souvenirs, appealing highway signs, and postcards and advertising brochures placed at strategic locations in towns near Ellsworth. Free tours were offered in Kansas but none to compare with those in Arkansas where the Pottery had a special tour route with ramps, viewing areas, and guides. These instructive tours had a tremendous draw, and many residents can still remember the busses that stopped regularly at Whittington Avenue in Hot Springs National Park.

(Fig. 10)

In Arkansas, Dryden has employed hundreds of people among whom were many artists who threw on the wheel or decorated pottery. These persons signed their work—generally with their initials—and dated it. (Fig. 11) For example, a pot bearing the mark "ARS 74"

was thrown in 1974 by Arval R. Sanders, now chief of the Hot Springs Fire Department, and undated pieces marked “Maij-Lis” were decorated in 1961–62 (Fig. 12) by May Lis Foster, currently a Hot Springs portrait artist. In the late 1960s, Jim Dryden’s son, James Kimberly (“Kimbo”) was the first to add the word “original” to the bottom of thrown pots. In the early 1970s, the bottoms were also marked “Ozark Frontier.” Kimbo, who has been the production manager for a number of years, literally grew up at the pottery and is remarkably skilled at the wheel. (Fig. 13, 14, 15)



Fig. 11. Dryden Pottery bottom mark of David Dahlstedt in 1978—“DD 78.”

Drydenware was undervalued until fairly recently. Since 1990, it has been included annually in *Schroeder’s*. Once the pottery came to national attention, values steadily increased.

In general, slip-cast pottery is not as costly on the collectibles market as thrown pieces. However, some collectors want inscribed slip-cast pieces. We’ve seen collections inscribed with of all possible towns and tourist spots within the collector’s state, of every possible state, and of every possible glaze color of a particular piece. Other collectors want only the thrown original



Fig. 12. Arkansas Maij-Lis clamshell ashtray.



Fig. 13, 14, 15. Three vases thrown by James K. (Kimbo) Dryden: Bamboo Vase, Lidded Pot, and Lizard Vase.

pieces; some of these prefer only whimsical handmade figurines. Because of constant experimentation,

the hallmarks of Dryden Pottery have been variety in form and an array of beautiful glazes. (Fig 14) Possibilities for collectors are vast, and current interest is intense—a tribute to longevity and an admirable product. We are pleased that Dryden Pottery is taking its rightful place in Arkansas history. It is an Arkansas treasure.



Fig. 14. Showroom in 2000. Filled with colorful pottery.

Ask questions about Dryden pottery or order the book from The Book Stops Here at www.bookstopshere.com or 505.296.9047.