

Potter Throws Herself Into Her Work

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EAST BERLIN (Adams Co.)

— Becky Mummert is an expert craftsperson who really throws herself into her work.

A potter of both redware and cobalt stoneware, Becky is known throughout the area for her beautiful, handcrafted pieces, from mugs, pitchers, platters and dinnerware to special-make items commemorating local historical happenings.

And it all begins with Becky "throwing" a lump of damp clay onto her potter's wheel and using the very most basic of tools — her fingers — to shape the revolving lump into a piece of raw pottery. Having crafted thousands of pieces over the last 20 years, she forms the clay effortlessly, styling the finished, graceful shape in a matter of a mere minute or two.

"I've done this for so long, I can almost do it with my eyes closed," quips this friendly, outgoing potter, working in a new shop she built just a year ago. But learning to properly "throw" a piece may take a novice a few months, especially perfecting the centering and learning how to avoid poking a finger through the soft clay sides during shaping.

While her thrown pieces begin in the same manner, the two types of pottery Becky crafts are distinctly different.

"Redware and cobalt stoneware are about as different in process and product as you can get," notes Becky. The two types of pottery are created from different clays, use different glazes and decorating techniques, and are fired in the kiln to different intensities of heat.

Always interested in art as a child, Becky followed high school with studies at the Maryland Institute of Art. When her husband was completing his music degree at Indiana University, she became friends with students in the ceramics, or pottery, department. The couple then moved to Louisiana,

where he taught at the Northeast Louisiana University and she began pursuing her pottery interest with classes.

"Those classes really 'took' with me," she recalls, looking back on the family's property along the Conewago Creek, where she grew up, and where the Mummerts have made their home since 1980. While she did make some pieces from the "homegrown" clay, the processing of the raw material of pottery is a tedious and time-consuming effort.

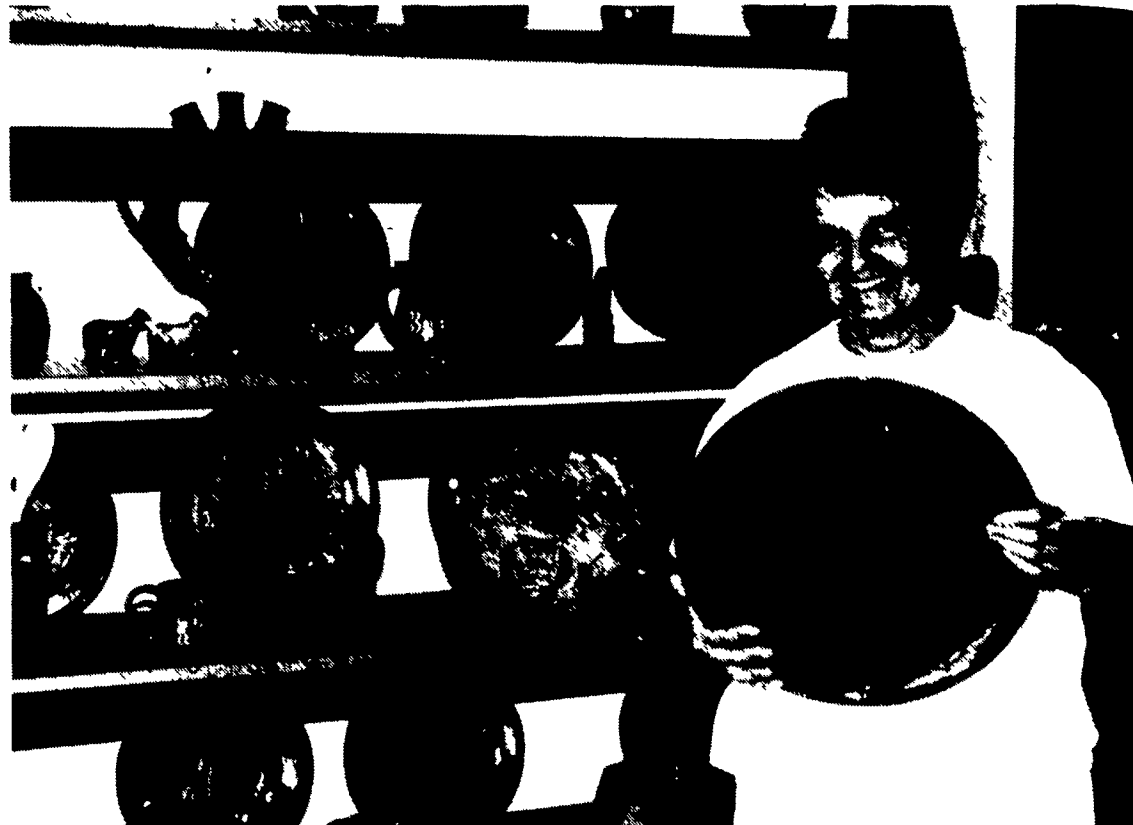
"Clay is made of rock particles that have broken down over thousands of years. It moves around underground. For a potter to use it, you must get out all the sticks and the stones, melt it down and sieve it to remove all foreign particles. Then it has to be aged," she explains. Purchasing her raw clay from a local supplier is much more efficient with her busy schedule.

Aging of clay may be done in as little as a few weeks or for years; sometimes Becky incorporates vinegar into her clay mixes to hasten the process. According to Becky, Japanese potters bury clay to age for intended use decades later by their grandchildren.

From the mixing of the clays to the covering with the final glazes, potters constantly use chemistry processes. Becky mixes as many as five types of clays to get just the right color and consistency she wants to produce a certain kind of finished redware or stoneware. And since each batch of even the same clay may vary slightly in shade, the finished pieces often have subtle differences in coloration.

Redware is so called because of the reddish-brown finished color of the pottery, due to concentrations of iron in the raw clay used to form it. After the piece has been shaped by hand or formed through rolling or molds, ornamentation is applied while the clay is still wet.

Decoration may be applied with a watered-down form of clay, call-



The Redware turkey platter Becky Mummert displays is a favorite of her son's. In the background are some of her other redware pieces.

ed "slip." Some decorations are dribbled, frechand, onto the clay, poured out of a "slipcup." More intricate designs, drawings and words are formed by "sgraffito," which means "scratch through." A coating of the thin clay slip is applied over the wet piece and the ornamentation scratched through the slip coating. All of Becky's artwork decorations are done frechand.

After the first, or bisque firing, in the kiln, the redware piece turns a terra-cotta color, the familiar brick-red shade of clay flowerpots. After a coat of glaze is applied, a second and hotter firing in the kiln yields the finished, shiny product of a darker, reddish brown.

By comparison, cobalt stoneware turns pink after the first, light, firing in the kiln, necessary to set the clay firm enough to handle. Decorations are then applied to the fragile pieces, using a liquid

cobalt, followed with an application of glaze. A second firing, to temperatures reaching nearly 2,400 degrees, renders the stoneware extremely durable and hard.

Redware is especially popular for accent and decorator pieces and in traditional, period settings. Cobalt stoneware, because of its durability and functionality, is often purchased for more everyday tableware use and for bakeware.

"It's dishwasher proof and also washes very easily by hand; my husband can attest to that," grins Becky. During her busiest times of area craft-show schedules, he often lends a hand with customers at her sales booth.

The Pennsylvania Dutch traditions and heritage of the area have heavily influenced Becky Mummert's work. Many of her redware designs are reproductions, and numerous historical museum shops sell her pottery. Recently a friend visited a Philadelphia mu-

seum and related to Becky that some of the pottery originals she saw "looked just like yours." Her work has gone to many of the states and is often sought by customers as gifts to send to friends in foreign countries.

Only rarely does she find time to make special items for herself or her family. But a special request from a friend some ten years ago led her to create a whimsical item, popular among gardeners, called a "toadhouse." Becky's design resembles an upside-down clay flowerpot, with a small entrance and a stylized toad shape on top. The houses are designed to be placed in gardens and entice toads, which catch many insects, to make their home among the plants.

With the building of her shop last year a short distance from their house, Becky was able to move her equipment, supplies and inventory out of rooms of their home and into an area with more adequate space and a display room. She recently added a second kiln as well. When the kilns are in use, Becky rarely ventures too far away so she can monitor their progress and the heat levels generated. Even after a full day of several hours in the shop, evenings often find her back there, shaping handles for mugs and pitchers, unloading kilns, packing orders.

"I ate, slept, and drank this for years," Becky says of the long hours she has regularly spent in meeting private customer and craft show sales. With their two children through college and her shop now a reality, she is reducing some of her sales commitments enough to spend more time enjoying golfing.

Craft-show seasons are generally in the spring and again in the fall before the holidays. On July 23, Becky will take part in the third Annual Terre Hill Day in Lancaster County, an arts and crafts show of juried work. One of her largest shows is the local Colonial Days in East Berlin, and she regularly takes part in the York County Crossroads Folk Art and Craft Show at the York Fairgrounds, scheduled for November 19 and 20.

For more information, Becky Mummert may be reached by telephone at (717) 259-9620.

**Homestead
Notes**



Becky Mummert begins "throwing" a pitcher from a piece of raw clay.



Every piece of pottery, both redware and cobalt stoneware, goes through two firings in Becky's kilns.