



HISTORICAL PHOTOS OF BIG CREEK REPHOTOGRAPHED BY KAREN THUESEN MASSARO.

1

Big Creek POTTERY

by Karen Thuesen Massaro

The Big Creek Pottery School, by many accounts, the first workshop oriented residential learning community in the Western United States was opened by Al Johnsen and Bruce and Marcia McDougal in 1968. Until it closed in early 1984, the school offered an enlightened style of education in comparison to what was available at area universities during that time—one focused on making functional, wheel-thrown pottery from start to finish, benefitting its temporary residents with opportunity to immerse themselves in the ceramic process alongside others.

Mid-Century California San Francisco Bay Area Clay Education

Attitudes toward studio pottery as a viable career path were improving during the post-WWII era, influenced by the examples from the British and Japanese studio pottery movements as well as earlier American potters of New England and Southeastern US.

Appreciation of Japanese ceramics was solidified with visits by two Japanese potters. Japanese folk-art potter Rosanjin was a 1954

artist-in-residence at Mills College in Oakland where his activities contributed to an increase in Abstract Expressionistic ceramics. Later, in 1963, Herbert Sanders invited Shoji Hamada and his son to San Jose State College to demonstrate and exhibit their work.

Across America, ceramic programs often limited student access to firing and sometimes even to glazing into the 1960s. Students were expected to learn a discipline notwithstanding incomplete access to information and studio experience. Abstract Expressionism and Japanese sensibilities linked process and chance with artistic intention. American ceramic education changed with recognition that, when we make fired work, the process continues until and often after the kiln has cooled.

It can be said that the San Francisco Bay Area does not now have and has never had, a teacher who successfully built a strong functional pottery program. Anthony Prieto at Mills College brought a fine contemporary Mediterranean sensibility to the Bay area, but he was not a functional potter. Herbert Sanders researched special



2



3



4

1. Students in the first year of workshops throwing at the 24 wheels constructed by the McDougals and Johnsens.
 2. Bruce and Marcia McDougal at Big Creek, 1968.
 3. Big Creek Pottery site in 1967, before construction began.
 4. Bruce and Marcia McDougal's plate, 17½ in. (44 cm) in diameter, stoneware, glaze, 1982. Photo: Paul Schraub.

glaze effects and enhanced his curriculum with examples from his personal collection. Again, the vessel or platter was explored as a fine art form rather than a particularly useful one. Many of Sanders and Prieto's students went on to teach in the region, focusing on the "artful vessel" and ceramic sculpture.

Rules for studio practice reversed 180 degrees at California College of Art in Oakland (then CCAC) where until Vernon Coykendall's retirement in 1969 only a "pot" form could be made. Ironically, the program was weakened by his inactivity as a potter.

Perhaps the strongest training option for functional potters began at Pond Farm in 1949 when Marguerite Wildenhain began teaching each summer until 1980. Unfortunately her program was very restrictive. There are those who thrived on her rules, but studio time was limited and few pieces were fired.

By the early 1960s, fast morphing Bay Area Pop and Funk ceramic art was a nexus for ideas bootstrapped on the demise of European derived vessel aesthetics. Many young sculptors led by

talents such as Voulkos, Arneson, Melchert, Frey, and others had themselves jumped the fence from potting to change the scene.

As ceramic sculptors were hired in Bay Area art departments, functional pottery making was neglected or deleted from curricula: it was their way of leaving the past behind, defensive but understandable. Few departments had the resources to cover the burgeoning interests of clay users. Aspiring potters found few learning sites or mentors; there simply weren't many functional potters in the Bay Area. No wonder that, in 1968, Big Creek Pottery School began with full enrollment.

Responding to a Need

Bruce and Marcia McDougal, who met at the Chimney Potters, a cooperative studio started by Marcia and others, watched the swell of desire by Californians to live with handcrafted useful items: they began selling from their Berkeley studio in 1957. A decade later Johnsen and the McDougals sold from neighboring booths



PHOTOS: PAUL SCHRAUB



1. Cynthia Bringle's vase, 11 in. (28 cm) in height, stoneware, 1980.
 2. John Glick's small pitcher, 6⁵/₈ in. (17 cm) in length, stoneware, mid 1970s.
 3. Warren MacKenzie's celadon jars, to 4⁵/₈ in. (12 cm) in length, porcelain, 1979.
 4. (opposite) Michael Cardew's covered casserole, 12¹/₄ in. (31 cm) in length, salt-fired stoneware, 1976.

at a summer San Francisco art fair. Socializing led to a discussion about founding a pottery school. Al tossed out the idea and Bruce quickly put in his “yes.”

Dissatisfied with constraints of academia, Bruce had recently quit his teaching job. Meanwhile, Marcia had grown a ceramic jewelry business that paid more than Bruce's teaching salary; the idealistic decision to leave was affordable. Both couples were ambitious to achieve their dreams and were builders by nature.

In 1967, the back to the land movement was just beginning. Sixty miles south of San Francisco, wooded, hilly, and pastoral acreage rolled down to bluffs rimming the Pacific Ocean. Quiet roads betrayed emptiness, Route 1 revealed abandoned barns, and

land was still cheap. The McCrary family, owners of Big Creek Lumber Company, had purchased an abandoned ranch, one of the oldest coastal cheese dairies in California. In partnership with the three artists, they agreed to assist in making the buildings ready for a live-in school.

“The winter of 1967-68 was spent in preparation, as we camped on the site every weekend, cleaning, building, painting. We rebuilt the old cheese house into a dormitory and gallery, built 24 potter's wheels, printed and mailed brochures to schools and museums.”¹ In spring 1968, the McDougal family and the Johnsens moved to the school site. Al and Bruce moved their kilns to Big Creek Pottery. Bruce surveyed Art Departments across the country and sent flyers to those with three or more faculty members, reasoning that the third instructor would likely teach ceramics. “Inquiries began to arrive from all over the country. One student found our flyer on the floor of the New York subway.”²

The first flyer proclaimed idealism, “A Unique Pottery Experience’, We like pots. We believe in them, and in the potters who

make them. We believe that the only way to be a good or a better potter is to make pots. Many pots. And to make or take the time to devote a concentrated and uninterrupted period to working with clay and consciously striving to improve. In order to make this possible, we have searched for and found a beautiful location where we can offer students a summer of serious study and instruction in throwing and traditional techniques.”

Two years later, the McDougals bought out the Johnsens and remained the owners/directors of the school. During 1970 new student housing was constructed. Bruce taught all the pottery sessions. High fire gas and raku kilns led the firing menu, later augmented with salt kilns and wood firing kilns. The initial contact person for students, Marcia, attended to school needs from housing to poetry readings. Big Creek Pottery School was a family operation with older and younger residents doing daily chores. Breakfast began at 7:00, morning class at 9:00 with lunch at 12:00 followed by afternoon class, dinner and a relaxing evening. Classes were held five days a week, the studio was open 24/7. The McDougals goal was for the Big Creek weeks to be a life learning experience: how to live with and learn from others, build a community and problem solve.

Bruce continued to teach throwing and firing sessions every year. Students also experienced kiln building and kick wheel construction. His published kick wheel plans were available through the then ubiquitous Whole Earth Catalogue. (The plans for McDougal’s wheel can be downloaded from the Ceramics Monthly website in PDF format. Visit the table of contents page for this issue and click on the “kick wheel plan” link below the title of the article.)

Expanded Influence

Big Creek Pottery might have remained a regional school except for Bruce and Marcia’s friendship with Dan and Lyllian Rhodes. They had helped the Rhodes’ find their neighboring retirement home site and housed them during its construction.

In return, Rhodes gave a one-day demonstration attended by 89 mostly Bay Area ceramists, paired with a smaller one-week workshop. First, In 1971 Dan gave demonstrations attended by 89 mostly Bay Area ceramists that catalyzed change: this workshop leader was not himself a production potter. Secondly, attendees had access to a master internationally recognized for his particular talents. Potters with experience were attracted to continue learning with other masters as well: John Glick, Paulus Berenson, Michael Cardew, Warren McKenzie, Toshiko Takaezu, John Reeve, Jim and Nan McKinnel, Paul Volkening, Karen Karnes, Ruth Duckworth, Michael Casson, Cynthia Bringle and Harry Davis.

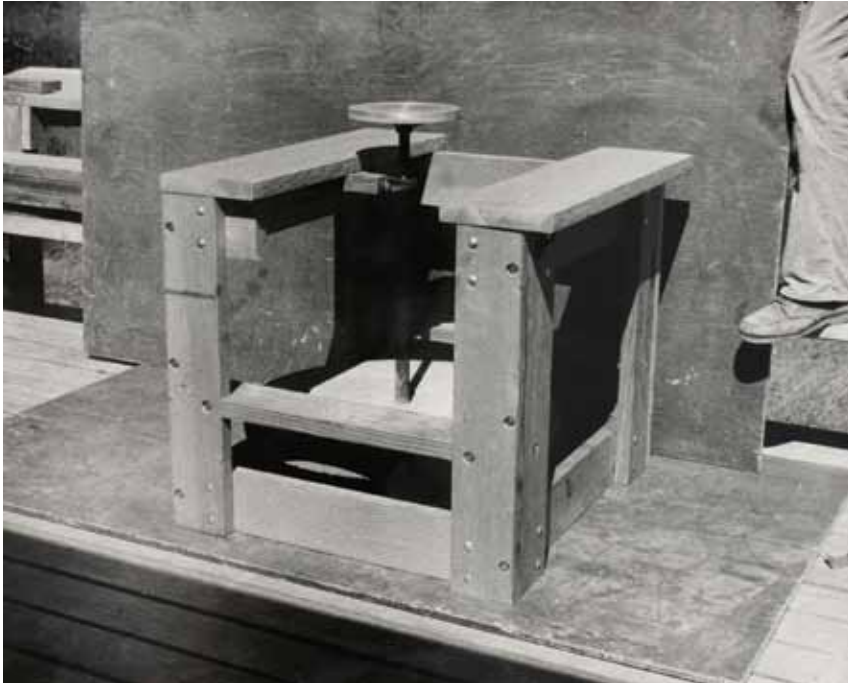
Marcia and Bruce invited teachers they admired. Workshop leaders designed their own one to nine week programs. Some, like British potter Mick Casson, brought a few hand tools for his wood firing workshop, “Jugs and Jars,” while at the other extreme, John Glick gave three orchestrated workshops. He sent pieces ahead and used the Julia Childs, cooking show method of ending his demonstration with a completed result, voila! Glick also taught business practice and ethics for the potter. He writes, “Marcia and Bruce were role models of how to live generously. My own career was at a formative stage back then, so Big Creek reinforced the importance of sharing ideas with others in the field, experimentation, experience, techniques, and my philosophy of keeping work fresh and fun.”

Warren MacKenzie and Canadian potter John Reeve each wrote about their joint 1977 workshop. MacKenzie wrote, “The students were from all over the US and some foreign countries. My memories of Big Creek are of students who were eager to try anything. There were few ‘assignments’ but there were no empty times. People worked hard in the studios at all times. They worked hard and also played hard. Everyone pitched in on what needed to be done from clay making to kiln packing and firing and at the end of the session the studios were scrubbed.”

Marcia noted that Michael Cardew felt the lively 1976 session was his best workshop of all time. His letters reveal that, surprisingly, this was the first time he had led a three-week workshop. Previously, Cardew had chosen to give shorter demonstrations or lectures. He expressed, “Thank you for all your kindness to me. I can’t begin to tell you adequately how much I enjoyed and appreciated the whole



4



Kick wheel designed by Bruce McDougal.

experience of those 3–4 weeks. What I admired especially in you and in the whole of Big Creek Pottery is the beautiful way you run the place—such a harmonious blend of ease and efficiency combined—organized, and yet always that lovely feeling of freedom all around, and a spirit of generosity which is the real fruit of vitality, and is the most important thing! And the FOOD—all those lovely fruits of the garden.”

Although Big Creek Pottery School’s focus remained partial to educating functional potters it also welcomed others to share their skills. Recognized masters Duckworth and Takaezu gave shorter 2–7 day workshops. Another example was the two-day 1983 hands-on brick-making and construction workshop led by Nader Khalili, an Iranian architect who partnered with global organizations to promote building safe, cheap, livable structures of handmade clay bricks. These arched structures could be glazed and fired in place.

The Legacy

In all, over 1100 students attended workshops at Big Creek, including Arnie Zimmerman, John Toki, Kathy Erteman, and Debra Butterfield. We cannot see a “Big Creek Style.” That was never intended. Students were encouraged to make and fire quantities of pots; each person needed many personal experiences with clay to find his/her path. The 1981 flyer reads as a mission statement, “Big Creek Pottery has for many years offered the best in individual instruction in the art of working with clay, both in traditional techniques of pottery and in the special gifts of eminent guest artists whose knowledge and skills provide the maximum in exposure to new ideas and techniques.”

The last workshop year was 1983. Declining student numbers alerted Bruce to change: college students were now more likely to

major in business than in the arts. Fortunately, the McDougal style is naturally welcoming with openness to alternatives. By the late 1980s, Bruce and Marcia phased out their pottery making and focused on the Davenport Cash Store, built in 1978 as a sales extension and studio space for the advanced students (until 1983). Not surprisingly the Cash Store, overlooking the ocean on Highway 1 became an icon for both locals and tourists. The restaurant, an outgrowth of the meals for many at Big Creek, is remembered for creative California food served on tableware produced by Big Creek potters. Its gallery showcased work by local potters. The Davenport Cash Store was sold in 2005.

On the McDougal’s Swanton Road home site, firebrick paths enveloped with pots evidence devotion to vessels. More and more pots through the doorway, hallway and rooms, culminate in the kitchen where Big Creek specimens compliment those from our states and other lands. Thin splits in clay

walls, chips, stains on a few vases and pitchers witness how the inanimate can become an old friend, as potters have long intended. Early this March, Michael Casson’s crock will be emptied of flour, cleaned and readied for a vacation, with other fine vessels to stand “spic and span” on a pedestal at the Museum of Art and History at the McPherson Center in Santa Cruz, radiating what master potters have done with clay and talents they brought to Big Creek Pottery School.

“The Big Creek Pottery: A Social History of a Visual Idea 1967-1983” curated by Karen Thuesen Massaro will be on view March 26 to July 17, 2011 at The Museum of Art and History @ the McPherson Center, Santa Cruz, California. The school is profiled with 70 vessels made by visiting masters, the founders, and students along with photographs primarily from the McDougal collection. Writings by those who came to Big Creek, filmed portraits of Al Johnsen, Bruce and Marcia McDougal, as well as a recorded audio interview of Michael Cardew enhance the exhibition. A DVD of a 2009 interview with Bruce and Marcia, an essay, and a photo archive will be for sale during the exhibition, with proceeds to cover the exhibition costs as well as to create an archival document.

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Notes:

1. “Recollections of Santa Cruz and Big Creek Pottery” by Bruce McDougal from *Time and Place: Fifty Years of Santa Cruz Studio Ceramics pub. Museum of Art and History, Santa Cruz, CA, 1997:18.*
2. *Ibid.*