

A Potter's Guide to Raw Glazing and Oil Firing

DENNIS PARKS

PITMAN

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First published in Great Britain in 1980
by Pitman Publishing Limited
39 Parker Street London

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ISBN 0 273 01498 6

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Printed in the United States of America.

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On the jacket: "Landscape Plate VII," by the author. Stoneware. 1974. Diameter 12 inches (30.5 cm.). White slip applied to leather-hard clay, oxides and glaze applied to dry clay; fired with drainoil. Collection of Dennis J. Roberts. (*Photograph by Valerie Parks*)

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**A Potter's Guide
to Raw Glazing
and Oil Firing**

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CRAFT ARTICLES

"Paul Soldner," in *Craft Horizons*

"Single-Fire Glazing," in *Studio Potter*

"Fired Free," in *Studio Potter*

"Dust Glazing," in *Ceramics Monthly*

"Single-Fire Glazing," in *Ceramic Review* (London)

"Single-Fire Glazing," in *New Zealand Potter*

"Starting a Pottery School," in *Goodfellow Review of Crafts*

NONFICTION (General)

"Snake, The Lawyer," in *Cavalier*

POETRY

Poems in *Spectrum* and *Carolina Quarterly*

To J.P.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Following is a list of the persons who shared with me in letters their knowledge, experiences, photographs, drawings, and glaze recipes:

William C. Alexander
Bozeman, Montana

Jim Allen
Houston, Texas

Bennett Bean
Blairstown, New Jersey

Frank Boyden
Otis, Oregon

Max Braverman
Hope, New Jersey

Rosemary Capes
Vera, Almeria, Spain

Burt Cohen
Nelson, British Columbia, Canada

David Cornell
Talent, Oregon

Bill Creitz
Manning, Oregon

Suzi Curtis
Coxwold, York, Great Britain

Carla Damler
La Jara, New Mexico

Peter Dick
Coxwold, York, Great Britain

Roland DiSanza
Ely, Nevada

Tony Evans
Plymouth, Devonshire, Great Britain

Ray Gardiner
Yoxford, Suffolk, Great Britain

John Green
Portland, Oregon

Ken Hendry
Fort Collins, Colorado

Steven Hill
Kansas City, Missouri

Andrew Holden
South Tawton, Devonshire, Great Britain

Phyllis Ihrman
Farmington Hills, Michigan

Sandra Johnstone
Los Altos, California

Jonathan Chiswell Jones
Hailsham, E. Sussex, Great Britain

Carl J. Judson, Jr.
Fort Collins, Colorado

James E. Kerns
Cedar Falls, Iowa

Steve and Ann Kilborn
Ranchos de Taos, New Mexico

Andrew Lord
Rotterdam, Netherlands

Jere Lykins
Rome, Georgia

Richard Mackey
Alturas, California

Lynn G. Maddox
Portola Valley, California

McKensie Musick
Portland, Oregon

Olin Russum
Monkton, Maryland

Don and Isao Sanami/Morrill
Nova Scotia, Canada

Larry Shep
Arroyo Grande, California

Don and Marcia Skolnick-Simonson
Germantown, Maryland

Peter Sohngen
Memphis, Tennessee

Paul Soldner
Aspen, Colorado

Andrée Valley
Ann Arbor, Michigan

Betty Woodman
Boulder, Colorado

My thanks to all of you, and to the editors of *Ceramic Review* (London), *Ceramics Monthly*, *Studio Potter*, and *New Zealand Potter* for their encouragement in this project. Those glaze recipes designated "Courtesy of *Ceramic Review*" are reprinted, by kind permission of *Ceramic Review*, from the *Ceramic Review Book of Glaze Recipes*.

I am indebted to the Nevada State Council on the Arts for a grant that allowed me to neglect making pottery while writing this book.

My appreciation goes to Ron Moroni and Valerie Parks for their photography, and to Katy Hertel, Margaret Norman, and Valerie for the drawings; to Lois Parks for typing and retyping; to Arnold Schraer for proofreading; and to Julie for advice and criticism.

Finally, an apology to my sons—Ben and Greg—for my writing on weekends when I should have been out fishing with them, as I had promised.

Dennis Parks
Tuscarora, Nevada
October 1979

'B-but, Mr Jimson, I w-want to be an artist.'

'Of course you do,' I said, 'everybody does once. But they get over it, thank God, like the measles and the chicken-pox. Go home and go to bed and take some hot lemonade and put on three blankets and sweat it out.'

'But Mr J-Jimson, there must be artists.'

'Yes, and lunatics and lepers, but why go and live in an asylum before you're sent for? If you find life a bit dull at home,' I said, 'and want to amuse yourself, put a stick of dynamite in the kitchen fire, or shoot a policeman. Volunteer for a test pilot, or dive off Tower Bridge with five bobs' worth of roman candles in each pocket. You'd get twice the fun at about one-tenth of the risk.'

—JOYCE CARY, *The Horse's Mouth*

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1. View from Tuscarora looking east toward the Independence Mountains. (*Valerie Parks*)

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: “What Makes You Treat Me Like a Piece of Clay?” —HANK WILLIAMS

ON STARTING A POTTERY SCHOOL . . . IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE ON NEXT TO NOTHING

Even total strangers visiting my studio finally get around to the question, “How did you discover Tuscarora?” I always try to change the subject since the answer is rambling and a little embarrassing. (Columbus must have felt similarly when asked about how he stumbled onto America.)

I got lost. I resorted to what Europeans and Americans have traditionally done in confusion—move west. When that does not help, you just keep moving.

Tuscarora, Nevada, where I finally settled, has a population of sixteen. From the valley the town looks like a handful of dice rolled up on the side of a mountain, stuck there on some sagebrush. At the turn of the century there were still gold and silver here. Elevation: 6,400 feet. Distances: San Francisco—600 miles; Los Angeles—700 miles. The closest grocery store is in Elko, 52 miles south.

This is beautiful country, unless you have an obsession with trees. There are a few in the canyons: willows, aspens, and cottonwoods. You notice them only in the fall when the leaves begin to die, turning yellow, orange, and red—from a distance like bright balls on the gray-green felt of sagebrush. The mountains loom behind. Rocks pushed to the surface at the

peaks. Most of the year these are sculptors' mountains and painters' skies.

Before I settled here I had lived half my life in the suburbs of Washington, D.C.; gone to colleges in New Jersey, Switzerland, North Carolina, Iowa, and California. I spent two years teaching college in Illinois, then another four doing the same in the Los Angeles Basin, and lived a few other places for reasons I have forgotten.

Tuscarora tickled that fantasy of living the pastoral life where one is spontaneously stimulated and inspired—by sunrises, digging in the garden, slopping the pigs, seeing your wife milking the goats, watching your sons grow so rapidly that you are puzzled why you are not aging proportionately.

My good urban friends had many times tried to humor me through what they thought was an attack or an overdose of rural. But it was no use. With me a placebo works as well, maybe better, than the real medicine. I believed in Tuscarora before I drove up the road.

In our culture it is simple to understand someone in search of a better life giving up smoking, taking up jogging, and enrolling in Yoga. But a person who refuses tenure, quits a soft teaching job, and moves his family to an abandoned mining camp is rightfully suspect. The few who question me sympathetically, sometimes with a twitch of envy, are usually saying “Family money” under their breath.

That is a persistent, pernicious myth which we all live with, "If I only had his money, I'd do what I want." The opposite is more consistent: persons with money do not know what they want to do with it.

I am independently poor. The second son born to a civil servant and an elementary school teacher. I enjoyed what by global standards would be considered a soft and indulgent childhood. By mid-century American values, I grew up epicenter middle class. The cultural message was clear: grow up, get educated, and find a good job. My reaction to this environment was to develop an abnormal, obsessive fear of security, of being comfortable, serene, and bored: of being grown-up, static, stable, consistent, and dependable. It was fright, not money nor courage pushed me up the mountain. Of course, now that I am here I can generate many more palpable reasons for staying.

To supplement my income as a potter, my wife, Julie, and I purchased the only hotel in Tuscarora. It cost the equivalent of what my withholding taxes had been the year before. I started taking in students. At first it was just two or three referred by their teachers who were sympathetic to what I was trying. For the last couple of years students have been coming from all over the United States. The minimum stay is one month, but most stay for a full semester. Only eight are accepted. Now and then there is a waiting list.

Of course making it work was not that simple. During the six years while I was an assistant professor of art here and there, I had no summer vacations. I advertised and then taught summer workshops in Tuscarora. My special thanks go to the early students who came so far, not exactly certain what benefit they were going to get from the experience. We prospected for native materials, dug and processed our clay, constructed kick wheels, and built kilns. When it looked as if existing structures were too small, these students helped erect new studios.

In the spring of 1974, after I had spent my sabbatical and a leave of absence in Tuscarora,

I mailed a letter to California resigning my college position. This was twelve years after Julie and I first saw the town. We had stood, each holding a kid in diapers, and agreed Tuscarora would be a good place to set them down. I was not impulsive, though many times daydreaming through faculty meetings, I wished I had the abandon to be. By the time I decided, "If we don't go now we'll never make the break," our boys were teenagers.

The original Tuscarora Pottery School studio was a mid-nineteenth-century carriage shop with a worrisome lean to the southeast. We worked there for four summers until 1970 when the owner reclaimed it for his own use. The next three years we were set up in and around my refurbished chicken house. It was during the last summer there that we built a geodesic dome, 28 feet in diameter, which has since been the students' studio.

Our glaze room was an eight-by-sixteen-foot woodshed, inadequate in size and lighting. So as soon as the dome was finished and paid for, I started drawing up ideas for another structure. In the summer of 1975 we dug foundation holes and started construction on what will someday be a two-storey studio, eighteen by forty-four, with a glaze room, two studios, and a storage area.

Our construction schedule moves at a speed dependent on the financial health of the school. Though we have our nonprofit status with the I.R.S. (I am a poor fund raiser), our capital expenses' budget comes out of the students' fees. With enrollment of only eight, there is not much left after buying food, clay, chemicals, and firebricks.

Economy is one of the subjects my students learn. To circumvent salaries for a cook and janitor, we have a two-day rotating chore list. All of us take turns cooking meals, washing dishes, sweeping, and mopping. During the summers we raise vegetables organically, with a boost from the free manure off the neighboring ranches. Our milk is from three Nubian goats, eggs from our Rhode Island Reds, and fresh meat from New Zealand White rabbits, Peking ducks, and a garbage-fed pig. My sons



2. The "Hotel." (*Ron Moroni*)

3. Tuscarora Pottery School studios. (*Ron Moroni*)



and I hunt mule deer in the fall, and almost everyone gets into fishing—in the streams or through the ice.

This saving-and-sharing attitude steps up and takes on a strong ecological posture in the studio. All the pieces are single-fired, cutting out the time and energy of bisque firing. The fuel is waste drainoil which we collect free of charge, 165 gallons in a trip, from the service stations in Elko. Kilns are built with only one layer of firebricks. The outside facing is laid up with earthen bricks, made by the students. Labor costs are not calculated. The cash saving is the margin we grow on.

These practices obviously help the school's finances. Equally important is what the students learn from this lean life-style. If they carry the patterns they have lived here into their own studios, their chances of survival as potters are increased.

Though my teaching of clay techniques and aesthetics would probably be better described

by a former student, what I try to do is create an environment for learning—an adequate studio that is well-equipped but not lavish. I hope to remain a teacher who is committed to his personal vision first and works hard to materialize it, but still one who has the time and interest to answer questions. A teacher one uses like a reference book, pulled aside when there is no other way to solve a problem.

Here students have a block of time, a month or a year, that most have never had before. For the college students it is a break when there are no assignments; no history nor English papers to take them away from clay. For the production potters there are no urgent orders for planters, pitchers, and teapots; no one telling them what they *should* be doing. At its best this situation opens up a space where one can look deep and see what he or she *wants* to do.

Mostly I keep a low profile, but for continuity I still give a weekly critique, slide show, and demonstration. This is not intended to dominate nor fill the student with my philosophy, but is served up in the manner Hsiang Ju Lin describes hors d'oeuvres; they “. . . must taste clean. This means that their taste must be clear and definite, but not lingering. They must be like epigrams, pithy, amusing, light and brief.”¹

4. Summer students raku-ing, 1969. (Larry Logan)

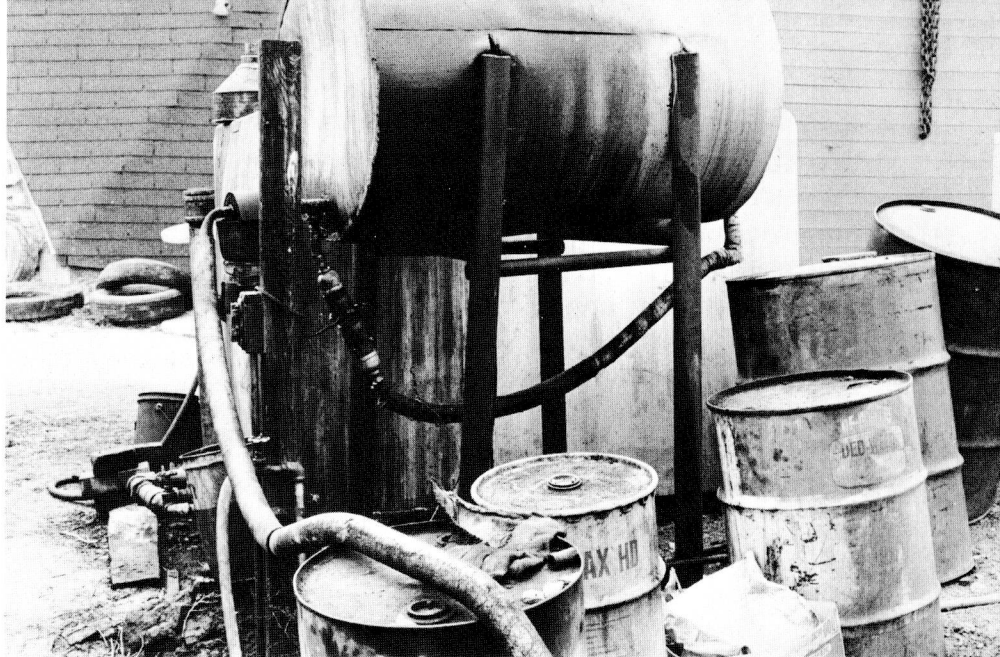


TECHNICAL INNOVATIONS?

It was the beginning of a particularly snowy winter when Fred Elliott, a neighbor on unemployment, asked me to teach him how to make flowerpots. By profession he is a core driller and by nature he thinks in mechanic-logic. Since I always have some machine around that needs repair, we traded skills: he fixed my cement mixer and I taught him how to throw pots.

By Christmas Fred had made, glazed, and fired flowerpots for all of his relatives. Before the ground had thawed enough for him to start drilling again, he had a knowledgeable foundation in ceramics—built by his inquisitive enthusiasm. Along with regular subscriptions to *Popular Mechanics*, *Popular Science*, and *Road & Track*, he now received *Ceramics*

5. Drainoil storage and
preheating system.
(Ron Moroni)



Monthly and *Studio Potter*. He read Leach, Cardew, Nelson, Olsen, and Yanagi, and had surfaced with this gnawing realization (one I always hope for in promising students) that, “Hey, my teacher hasn’t been telling me everything!”

When I wandered into the Tavern one night, Fred called me over and started in, “I’ve been thinking. Those technical innovations you’ve put to work around the studio . . . they’ve come about only because you . . . because you’re lazy, ignorant, and cheap.” Fred is direct that way. He said it to me in the manner he might explain the principles of the internal-combustion engine—“compression, ignition, power, exhaust.”

I did not agree right then. Fred had described my professional habits in terms I seldom used in reference to myself. But his tone was not pejorative. He spoke through a grin of discovery. The inspiration that had come was that his teacher: (1) stopped bisquing from laziness; (2) applied glaze to dry pots from ignorance of the leather-hard techniques; (3) and switched to drainoil for fuel because it was free. My immediate reply was, “Yes and no.”

By now the time limit for a snappy comeback has lapsed. This book is a follow-up: a detailed account of what my student succinctly sum-

marized. In describing techniques I will explain precisely, in detail, the steps I have taken to make wet glaze adhere to dry pots, the size of pipes I have wrenched together to make a burner fire, etc. These minutiae are important only as the focus for an isolated example. Do not confuse a personal preference, a regional prejudice, or a Rube Goldberg with spaceage technology.

Fred is no longer interested in making pots (he is now a drilling supervisor), so I am addressing this book to the students of ceramics, in school or out, middle-aged or young, who are intent on going through life with clay on their hands. You have learned to glaze bisque-ware, fire with gas, and, if you have not yet helped construct a kiln, you have at least seen one being built. You are energetic, but short of cash, and always on the lookout for technical tidbits that will make studio life viable.

Everything outlined in this book works and, at the risk of appearing a little mechanically naïve, I have intentionally included a number of my false starts and dead ends. There is no reason another potter should make the same mistakes. Brand names of tools and machines are mentioned parenthetically as a starting point, not as an endorsement. If you cannot find a “Charles Heavy Fluid & Grease Pump” at