

Roots Deep in Southern Clay: Alabama's Jerry Brown

"Everything about the pottery business has art to it. There's art to making it, art to finding the right kind of clay, art ... to getting it mixed up to the right temperance, getting all the lumps ground out of it, and there's art to stacking it. There's art to firing it ... without breaking a lot of it ... The pottery business is one of the oldest trades in the world ... people come to my shop and say 'I believe I could do that.' And I tell them 'There's another wheel over there ... and they get in there and play with it and (then) they say, 'it's not as simple as it looks.'" Jerry Brown 1985

Hamilton potter Jerry Brown is the recipient of the Alabama Folk Heritage Award for 2003. In choosing Brown from a strong field of nominees, a panel of southern folk art scholars cited Jerry's significance as one of a few remaining Alabama folk potters and his service to the people of Alabama as a representative of the state's folk art traditions. They also noted his efforts in training family members and others in traditional pottery making.

Jerry Dolyn Brown was born in 1942 in Pine Springs Alabama. His parents, Horace Vincent Brown (1889-1965) and Hettie Mae Stewart Brown (1911- 1996), were both products of multi-generational pottery making families. The Browns, one of the South's most famous pottery-making families, are usually associated with Georgia, but in fact, members of the family have also made pottery in Texas, North Carolina, South Carolina, Alabama, Florida, and Mississippi. It is believed that Browns were potters in the late eighteenth century and possibly earlier. The Stewarts established a pottery in Louisville, Mississippi after moving there from Alabama shortly after the Civil War.

In the late 1930s, a recently divorced Horace Vincent "Jug" Brown, a Georgia-born potter, came to Louisville, Mississippi to work for Tom Stewart making pottery. He married Tom's sister Hettie Mae in 1939 and they soon moved to Pine Springs near Sulligent, Alabama to take over the operation of the E. P. Kennedy pottery. It was here that Jerry Brown was born in 1942. Jerry, his mother, older brother Jack, and baby sister Wanda Lou all helped at the pottery. Jerry and Jack learned to make pottery at a very young age. Occasionally their relatives Otto, Jimmy and Walter Brown and Hettie's brother Gerald Stewart would work with them.

Working in the pottery shop was hard work, but an aging Jug Brown and his two young boys managed (illus. of boys at kiln). Because he was an older than average father (born in 1889), Jug's boys were trained in a nineteenth-century style of pottery making. Like all pottery apprentices, Jerry and Jack made balls of clay for their father to turn. Jerry recalled that their father offered incentive for them to wedge and roll good balls: "My daddy (would) let me by with two or three (poorly made balls of clay)... you know those soft slips (soft clay) on the wheel? He just picked them up, a whole hand full and just throw them at me... He'd daub me with them slips upside the head..." (Photo: Horace Vincent "Jug" Brown late in life, Photo courtesy of Jerry Brown) Every aspect of their pottery business was traditional. For example, pottery was priced at so many cents per gallon. Jug Brown made utilitarian folk pottery using Albany Slip, white Bristol-type glaze and the traditional southern ash glaze. Jerry remembered that his father made some face jugs but very few, "there just wasn't much demand for them" in the 1940s and 1950s. He recalled that the family never threw away broken dishes in order to use this material to make teeth for face jugs. This face jug tradition was the contribution of the Brown family, because according to Hettie Mae Brown, the Stewarts did not make face jugs.

Tragedy struck the Brown family in 1964 when Jack was killed in an automobile accident. A year later Jug Brown died and Jerry, Wanda and their mother decided that they could not stay in the pottery business. Eventually, Jerry

became a logger like many young men in northwest Alabama. He eventually married and moved to Hamilton. After the birth of a son, Jeff, Jerry and his first wife divorced. While Jerry was successful as a logger, he yearned to return to the pottery business. In 1979, he met and married Sandra Wilburn.

In 1982, Jerry Brown began making preparations to reenter the pottery business after an almost twenty year career as a logger. "(I had been) logging for a living and we had about two bad winters, one right after the other, stayed round here with nothing to do, you know, just. I told my wife I'm fixing to clean out my barn over here and put me in a pottery shop ... A lot of my friends come and say, 'man, you're crazy tearing down a nice a barn ... to make a pottery shop out of... once I started tearing everything down and redoing it, it was probably about two months, I had my wheel in there and I was making chums. Put up my (pug) mill out there where I was mixing my clay with the mule. ... I'd been out it about twenty years and it probably took me about three or four months to really get the feel of it back right. Uncle Gerald, he come up and helped me out a lot.... I forgot about a lot of, the fundamentals...but still a lot of things I still remembered ... I still remembered how much it'd take to make any size chum or flower pot or pitcher or whatever, I still remembered all that, I'd been down to my uncle's shop and made maybe a couple of jugs ... In about six months I could make a chum as big as I wanted to make and been out of it twenty years." Sandra recalled, "He decided to get into it, it seems just like overnight. He just comes in one evening, he said I'm fixing to go into pottery business, he hadn't mentioned it to me ... next day he started out over here fixing his shop ... I guess all along he had it in the back of his mind, though."

During the mid-twentieth century, the few remaining Southern folk potters discovered an urban market interested in their pottery as art reflecting a folk heritage. In Alabama, this interest intensified in the 1970s and really took off during the 1980s after the production of several exhibitions about Alabama folk pottery. In 1985-1986, the Alabama State Council on the Arts and Appalshop shot and produced the film *Unbroken Tradition*. This documentary, funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, documented pottery making at Jerry Brown's shop. This along with the new public consciousness of traditional Southern pottery encouraged Jerry's resolve to reenter the pottery business.

While encouraged by the interest in old-time pottery, Jerry Brown realized the modern market was unlike that of his father. At first, he made old-fashioned utilitarian forms such as flue thimbles and did not mark his pottery. About a year into his rebirth as a potter, he started signing vessels on the bottom. He first sold pottery by the gallon, a traditional pricing mechanism, but quickly learned to price by form with face jugs selling for the most. He also began experimenting with glaze combinations and unusual forms in response or in anticipation of market desires like other Southern folk potters who they met at workshops and folk festivals. In 1984, Jerry and his Uncle Gerald Stewart participated in the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife. Then, in 1992, Jerry won the prestigious National Heritage Award from the National Endowment for the Arts. Those experiences have exposed the Browns to many other traditional potters and their repertoires. Consequently, the Brown Pottery showroom contains more canister sets, soup bowls, coffee mugs, chickens and face jugs. The pottery chickens were an idea that Jerry and Sandra got from meeting the Meaders family of Georgia. Jerry has also demonstrated at many shows of historic pottery. He realized that ash-glazed pottery was older and that other Southern potters were still making and selling it. Since he could not remember his father's ash glaze formula, he asked his Uncle Gerald to help him devise a formula for it and he began using it on many vessels, especially his face jugs. Jerry and Sandra also received glazing advice from their many studio potter friends. A red glaze soon entered their repertoire. Perhaps the area of greatest experimentation came with the use of cobalt. At first, the Browns used cobalt to make a simple ring decoration around their chums. Later, they mixed cobalt with a Bristol slip to make a solid blue glaze. After that, they tried applying the cobalt randomly in a "splatter" glaze or by "feathering" it with a chicken feather. In 1998,

Browns Pottery launched a web site by virtue of its membership in the Alabama Mountain Lakes tourist organization. The web site gave the Browns another dimension of market exposure.

Despite this modernization of Browns Pottery, if a nineteenth-century potter could spend a week with Jerry Brown, he would feel right at home. Jerry Brown still digs his own clay at a clay pit in Detroit, Alabama started by the pottery-making Rye family over one hundred years ago. He continues to mill or "grind" the clay with an old-fashioned mule-powered pug mill. He does use an electric wheel to "turn" the pottery, but he still uses an old two-piece technique for making large vessels, which was standard practice for early potters. "I ask a lot of people come here which side of the jug you put the handle on; very few have ever told me. They say, 'it don't make any difference,' I tell them, 'it does' and they want to know why, I tell them, 'it ain't but two sides of a jug - inside and outside.'"

Sandra Brown has become the most active female folk potter in Alabama today. She does not turn much pottery, but works as hard as Jerry in glazing, finishing, and marketing the ware. In fact, she handles most of the sales work. She also makes the faces on many of the face jugs produced at the shop. Her son Jeff Wilburn was the first and most productive of all of Jerry Brown's apprentices and her daughter Tammy Wilburn Rawls works from time to time at the shop. Jeff is now helping Jerry train his son Brandon Wilburn. Jerry and Sandra have trained a number of younger people in their shop. Jerry's son by his first marriage, also named Jeff, has received training and has worked in the shop. He is currently working as a logger but Jerry hopes that he will become more interested in becoming a potter in the future. Jeff Brown's daughter Jennifer has also shown interest in making pottery. She sometimes turns small objects in her grandfather's shop. The latest student at Brown's Pottery is Joey Froelich, a pottery enthusiast who lives in nearby Winfield.

Jerry Brown has found that it helps to educate his customers about both the technology and tradition of his pottery. "When I go to some of the arts and craft shows and have it setting out on the table on display, most people walk by and don't even realize it. They think its ceramics (Note: By "ceramics" Jerry is referring to slip molded hobby ware)..."they don't even realize its hand-made pottery ... what you call stoneware ... It's real durable ... You can take a little cream pitcher and two men or three men my size can lay it down on its side and stand up on it and it won't break." However, for the most part, the public is informed, very interested in southern folk pottery and needs no such explanations. The market for folk pottery was once only a few counties in breadth, but now, Alabama's folk potters sell their work throughout the United States. For Jerry Brown, there is great satisfaction in having made that decision twenty years ago to continue his family's long tradition