

Believe It or Not at Ripley

It's a town paved with broken shard, and it's also the spot where one pottery maker has shaped his destiny out of clay.

STORY BY LIZ PENSONEAU
PHOTOS BY ADELE HODDE

A quarter of a century ago, Jack Cannon was teaching pottery making at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville. One spring day in 1976, he and his wife Hildegard made what they describe as a "flying trip" to Ripley, a tiny hamlet in west-central Illinois with a rich history as a "jugtown." It was a trip that would change their lives. By fall, they were residents of the town, and Cannon was about to embark on the career change of a lifetime.

"I wanted to work with natural clay," Cannon said. "Most people use commercially processed materials. If you were to take classes in Georgia, you probably would use the

same clay as someone in Alaska. Now, where is the originality in that? It's the clay that makes the pot."

And it was Ripley's native clay that inspired Cannon to turn away from university life and take a full-time seat behind the potter's wheel. Today, his well-known Cannon Pottery business provides the town with its only claim to fame.

Not only is Ripley's clay perfect for stoneware, considering its plastic-like quality and its good drying and firing properties, the fact that it is readily accessible adds to its appeal. Cannon simply crosses his own 10-acre parcel onto a neighbor's property and digs the clay out of the hill.

"This is what the clay looks like," Cannon said, crumbling a handful of the earth's natural resource. "It is disintegrated rock, over a long period of time, and it

occurs close to the surface here. The deposited layer that I use, and which seems most pure, is approximately 12 inches thick."

Cannon busted up another large clump of the clay, pointing out that the gypsum and pyrite will be removed.

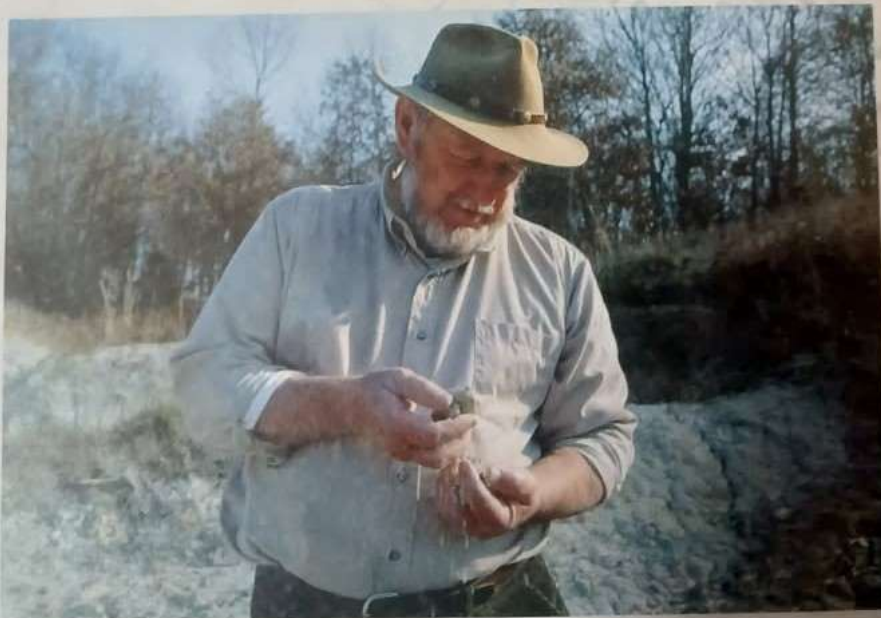
"We take (minerals) out of the clay, but we don't add to it," Cannon explained.

Processing of the clay takes place outside the couple's workshop—a converted barn—using an array of equipment, some of which was fashioned by the Cannons themselves. It's a complicated, time-consuming process that, overall, requires about 30 days.

"There are plenty of people who make pottery, but few who process their own clay," Cannon commented.

The clay is ground by use of a hammermill. It is then slaked in an excess of water, stirred and finally put through a very fine screen and into a settling tank. Then the water is siphoned off the top, and the clay mud is put into cloth-lined trays to dry. When it is stiff enough to work, it is carried inside.

In the couple's rustic, but cozy work area inside the barn, the clay, which has taken on a Playdough-like quality, is put through a pug mill. Although it comes out thor-



Jack Cannon crumbles a handful of Ripley's clay, which is legendary in Illinois' pottery making industry.

Outdoor Illinois



oughly homogenized, it is still in need of pounding and kneading to rid it of air pockets. Next, it goes on Cannon's wheel to be "thrown." Once shaped by the master's hands into an interesting piece, it advances to the shelf to dry for a week before it is ready to fire. When enough pieces are accumulated, they are placed into a 50-cubic-foot kiln and fired for the first time.

Cannon points out that the pottery is carefully stacked in the kiln, which usually is warmed up overnight. A heat indicator can be viewed through a peephole in the door. Natural gas is his fuel of

choice, and horseshoes adorn the structure to bring good luck to the potter. The couple's so-called "kiln goddess," Mrs. Moe, is perched precariously on the front edge of the kiln's roof. Unfortunately, her soul mate, Mr. Moe, "the kiln god" has already joined Ripley's shard pile.

"The flame comes in, is deflected upward and drawn under the floor through a flu and into the chimney," Cannon said, pointing to the structure. "The entire firing and cooling down period takes about three days. This first firing is called a bisque firing."

Next comes the glazing process. Each piece is carefully removed from the kiln and either dipped into the glaze, or the glaze is poured over it. The glaze dries onto the

The back wall of the Cannon Pottery workshop hosts a framed display of Ripley memorabilia.

piece and coats it. Both Cannon and his wife work at applying the glaze.

Glazed pieces are returned to the kiln, where "kiln furniture" consists of shelves supported by fire brick. The firing process is repeated, and this time, the ingredients in the glaze cause it to melt and adhere to the piece itself.

The selling price of Cannon Pottery is determined by its complexity, the time consumed in making the article and the amount of space it takes up in the kiln where no two items can touch. Prices usually range from \$4 to \$100.

Although the Cannon Pottery shop was open to the public for many years, today the couples' wares are sold there only twice a year: the Saturday before Mother's Day and the first Saturday in December. But, on these days, you'd better be there early. The doors open at 9 a.m., and the merchandise usually sells out within the first hour.

Jugtown Revisited

The Cannons' successful business adds yet another chapter to the "Jugtown" lore surrounding Ripley.



Mrs. Moe (above) is the Cannon's kiln goddess. (Right) Jack Cannon's tremendous talent is reflected in this piece of his circus series, which he retained as one of his all-time favorites.



"Ripley was settled in 1835 and thrived as a pottery town," Cannon said. "Stoneware was manufactured here until 1910, with the heyday being right before and after the civil war.... The term 'Jugtown' was used loosely, as it actually encompassed a two-mile radius in Ripley Township where early pottery makers came and went.

"Factories here were never huge," Cannon continued. "They shipped by horse and wagon, and some shipments floated south on the LaMoine River. Everything was made by hand...it was a tough business back then. Items such as canning jars, crocks, milk crocks and whiskey jugs were made for home and farm use."

He said the glass industry eventually was responsible for the demise of the ceramic canning jar and whiskey jug. Hildegard Cannon added that skilled workers were paid by the piece—a half-cent to one-cent per gallon jug.

"Pay was measured by the gallon, so if they made a small jar, they had

Hildegard Cannon has retrieved many items from the shard piles around her home and has been successful in piecing together some historic finds that give clues about an industry that once thrived at Ripley.



The Cannon's personal collection of old Ripley pottery includes many canning jars and a package of Zubian Sealing Wax, "the finest in the market."

to make four to get a penny," she said. "Records indicate that some minors were given a whang string, and for each day of work, they received a tiny ceramic jug to put on the string. Their pay was based on the number of jugs on the string."

Hildegard then produced an old ledger from I.N. Stout's General Store. Stout also owned I.N. Stout Pottery at Ripley and paid his workers by giving them credit at the store. Entries told the story of labor being exchanged for certain items, and it wasn't hard to determine someone's occupation based upon the ledger.

"Ball boys were hired to form certain size clay balls for the turners (throwers). People stacked and fired kilns. Wood, clay and coal needed to be hauled in by horse and wagon. The whole community figured in

one way or another in the operation of Ripley potteries," she said.

Times have changed as far as wages and life at Ripley are concerned. But one constant remains the same. And that's the clay—the natural resource that has made it possible for the Cannons to earn a living doing what they love.

Information you can use:

Cannon Pottery:

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Address: R.R. 3, Box 59, Mt. Sterling, IL 62353.

Telephone: (217) 322-3150.

Note: The Cannons, themselves parents of four grown children, say classes of students are welcome to visit whenever they are home.

For more information about Ripley and Illinois' early pottery making industry, the Cannons recommend reading *Arts, Crafts and Architecture in Early Illinois* by Betty I. Madden. The book was published by the University of Illinois Press at Urbana in cooperation with the Illinois State Museum.

