

Dryden Pottery—An Oklahoma Neighbor

By G. L. Dybwad and Joy V. Bliss
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Jim Dryden, founder, examines one of their products in 2000

Dryden Pottery has been close to Oklahoma for fifty-six years. The Pottery opened in neighboring Kansas in 1946, when A. James Dryden, founder, returned from WW II and built the business from the ground up in his hometown—Ellsworth. Ten years later Dryden moved his Pottery to Hot Springs National Park in neighboring Arkansas.

From a young age Dryden's interest in drawing and painting led to remarkably accomplished cartooning, a handy talent he used not only in decorating pottery pieces but in creating a wide array of advertising signs and brochures for his business. College chemistry courses taken before the war added to his understanding of his early glaze formulations; and he had learned the merchant trade from his father, who owned a successful hardware business in Ellsworth.

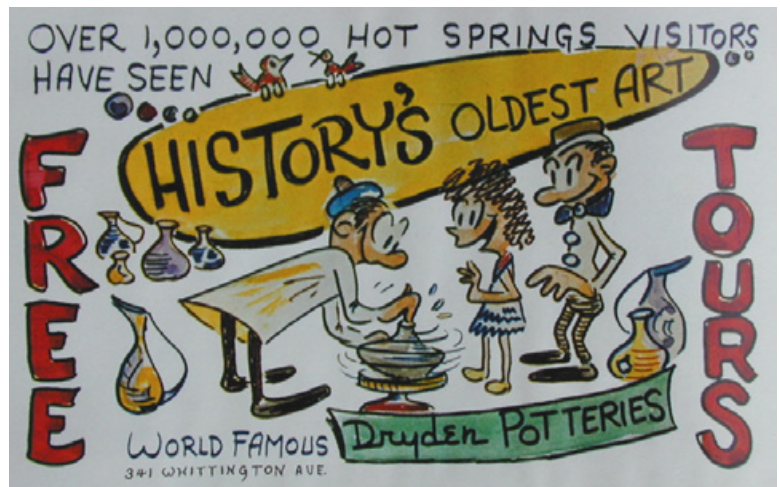
A day after returning from the war, a serendipitous encounter led to an intensive course at Kansas University with renowned ceramist J. Sheldon Carey. Dryden wasn't shy about asking for additional guidance, and owners of Camark (Arkansas), Van Briggie (Colorado Springs), and Frankoma (Sapulpa, Oklahoma) all helped him in the early years. Dryden said, "The story about Dryden Pottery to date would be incomplete without telling of the importance of these potteries because they were instrumental in helping me avoid the pitfalls of a 'start-up' pottery." Frankoma offered the most help. With founder John Frank's blessing, Dryden learned from Charles Watkins, a mold-

maker trained by Frank; and by September 1946, Jim was making his own molds in Ellsworth. He names John Frank as one of the seven VIPs in his life.

Dryden started his business at just the right time. Because of the war, no one had produced pottery for four years and stores had no stock. As people traveled and were able to buy again, they desired the souvenirs and utilitarian household pieces he made. For ten years his business grew steadily, and Dryden was selling pottery not only to many department stores and distributors in Kansas but also across America. Among his customers were tourists who stopped at the Pottery, the Harvey Houses along the Santa Fe Railway, Macy's of New York, Van Briggie Art Pottery of Colorado Springs, and numerous souvenir shops that ordered pottery inscribed with their business names. Inventive Dryden used a dental drill to personalize bisque ware through unfired glaze; these unique pieces are very collectible.

Long hours of hard work, dedicated and capable employees, an admirable product, and a tremendous advertising campaign resulted in a successful business. In spite of his success in Kansas, Dryden knew the benefits of locating in an area with a bustling tourist trade and chose Hot Springs, Arkansas, an area with more hotel rooms per capita in 1956 than any other city in the United States.

In Kansas, most pottery was slip-cast—



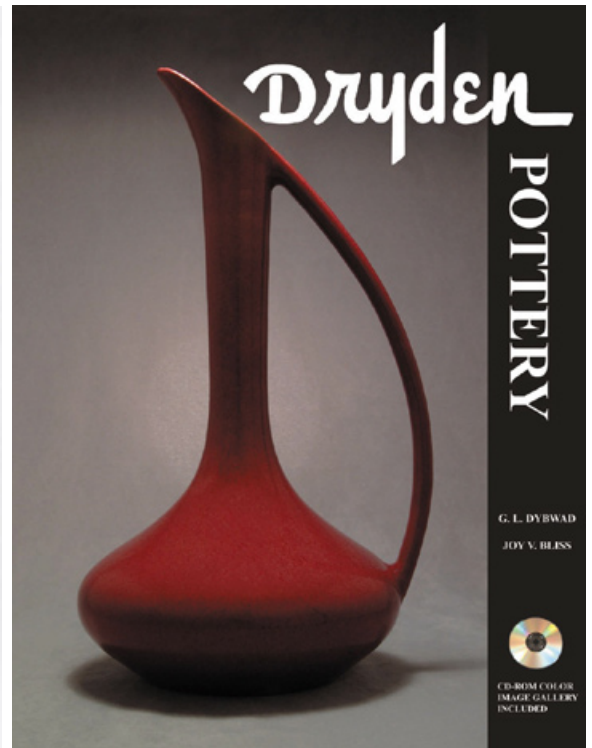
One of Jim's cartoon ads for the Hot Springs pottery



6-Inch Ivy Vase, made in Kansas from Dryden mold #94 (courtesy of Joyce and Gary Kraft).

made from locally harvested clay, which fired tan, and glazed with Kansas volcanic ash. Among the many items were vases, wall pockets, figurines, tumblers, cups, pitchers, and myriad ashtrays all durably glazed in colors such as mauve, blue, green, yellow, black, tan, brown. Most mold models were taken to Hot Springs and collectors will find similar designs made in both states, although they are distinguishable because the distinctive Kansas ash glazes were replaced by Arkansas quartz glazes. As was true in Kansas, all the raw materials for the Arkansas product were harvested locally—clay from Malvern, talc from Bryant, and quartz from the Ouachitas. The hand-dug Malvern clay, which fired tan, has long since been replaced with a refined commercial clay that has very little grog or filler and fires bone-white. Shortly after the move pressed and wheel-thrown pieces were added. At the present time most pottery is wheel-thrown, although a few favorite slip-cast pieces are still fired—most notably the #715- Grecian Pitcher, a design carved from walnut by Jim’s uncle and illustrated on the front cover of our book.

Many Kansas mold designs were numbered. From 1950 on, these numbers were incised on the bottoms of pots along with the stylized script “Dryden.” Pieces with small feet are unmarked. “Anna Van” is the mark Dryden used for pottery made in Kansas in 1954–55 for resale at Van Briggie Art Pottery. Few Arkansas cast pieces have numbers. Dryden employed many artists who either threw on the wheel or decorated pottery; they dated and signed their work—generally with their initials. In the 1960s, Jim Dryden’s son, James Kimberly,



The #715-Grecian is the signature Dryden Pottery design



Dryden Pottery bottom signed by David Dahlstedt, 1978

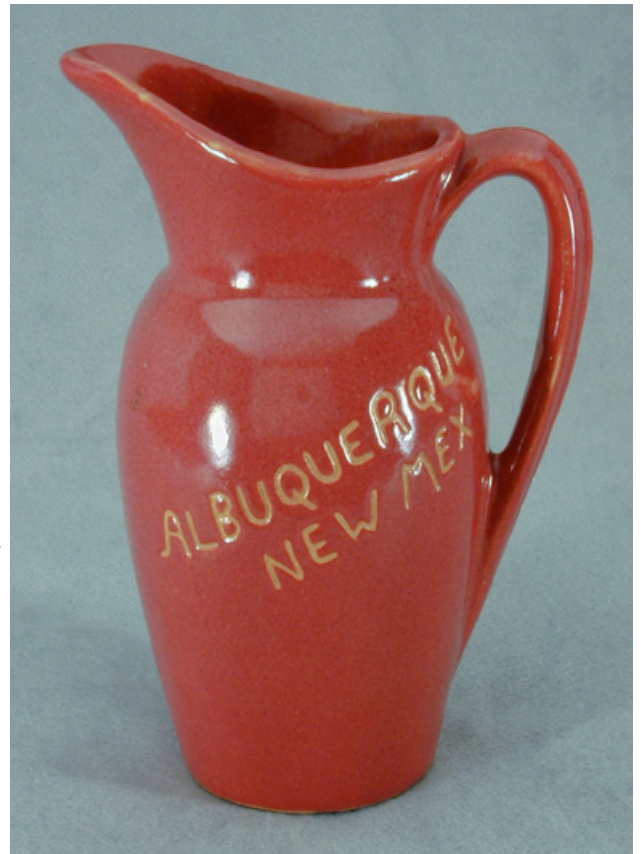
added the word “original” to thrown pots; and in the early 1970s, the bottoms were also marked “Ozark Frontier.” Most Drydenware came with an adhesive label or string-held tag, which if still present, serves as further identification for collectors. Because of constant experimentation, a hallmark of Dryden Pottery has been variety in form and glaze.

From 1990 Drydenware has been included each year in Schroeder’s Antique Guide, and values have increased with national attention. Current interest is spirited—a tribute to longevity and an admirable product. As collectors and writers, we were surprised to find that no collectibles catalog existed for this long-standing enterprise. After many meetings and much correspondence with Jim Dryden—who still works at the Pottery each day—and upon learning about this fascinating man and his productive career, we wrote *Dryden Pottery of Kansas and Arkansas*, a biography and Pottery history as well as a catalog and price guide.

For further information or to order the book, contact The Book Stops Here, 1108 Rocky Point Court NE, Albuquerque, NM 87123-1952, telephone (505) 296-9047, eMail gldybwad@comcast.net; www.bookstopshere.com, or call Dryden Pottery at (501) 623-4201.



Vase with incised bamboo design by J.K. (Kimbo) Dryden, Hot Springs, AR



Kansas slip-cast 6-inch pitcher: inscribed “Albuquerque”—made for the Harvey House, Santa Fe Railroad



Arkansas clamshell ashtray decorated by Finish artist Maij-Lis