

Dryden Pottery: A. James Dryden of Ellsworth, Kansas

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Dryden Pottery has been the subject of numerous newspaper and magazine articles, a booklet, and a book. Rita Mortenson wrote a particularly interesting story for *Kanhistique* in 1981 and illustrated it with large pictures of Drydenware from the Pottery's Kansas years.

Alan James Dryden, known as Jimmy or Jim, was born in Englewood, Kansas, on the Oklahoma border, moved to Wichita as a child, and mostly grew up in Ellsworth—the town he calls “home” in Kansas. In Ellsworth he helped in his father's hardware store at 221 North Douglas and drew on this valuable family training in business to become an outstanding businessman in his own right. It was from here he graduated from high school in 1935 and left to major in chemistry at the University of Illinois; and it was from here he left again to attend Kansas State University to learn engineering, a trade that prepared him to help build a Colorado dam with the Corp of Engineers. From Colorado, he called his high school sweetheart, Helen Maloney, and said, “I'm Rich! Let's get married.” This supportive partnership endures to the present—sixty years. Very few months later, Pearl Harbor was attacked, and Jim was soon a T4—the equivalent of a buck sergeant—in the Army, mapping the South Pacific with the 648th Engineer Topographic Battalion, Company A. He served two years in Australia followed by nine months in the Philippines while it was under siege.

When World War II ended, the Drydens returned to Ellsworth. Jim immediately and serendipitously connected with Norman Plummer, ceramist for the Kansas Geological Survey, who introduced him to J. Sheldon Carey, renowned head of Kansas University Ceramics Department. Jim Dryden was off to school again—this time for the crash course in ceramics that prepared him for his life's work in the pottery business.

Mortenson described Jim's start in 1946 at his first factory in a Quonset hut near the Ellsworth Frisco tracks and his first sale before Christmas that year. She wrote about this startup: “Following an interval which was, no doubt, much less smooth than it sounds in the telling, the first pieces of Dryden pottery were without fanfare...sold across the counter of the elder Dryden's Ellsworth store.” When we interviewed Jim for our book, Dryden Pottery of Kansas and Arkansas, he confirmed—with a twinkle in his eye—that all did not always proceed smoothly. Dryden's first employees told us of the frontier conditions of the first pottery building—hot



U.S. Highway 40 on the north side of Ellsworth in the 1950s.



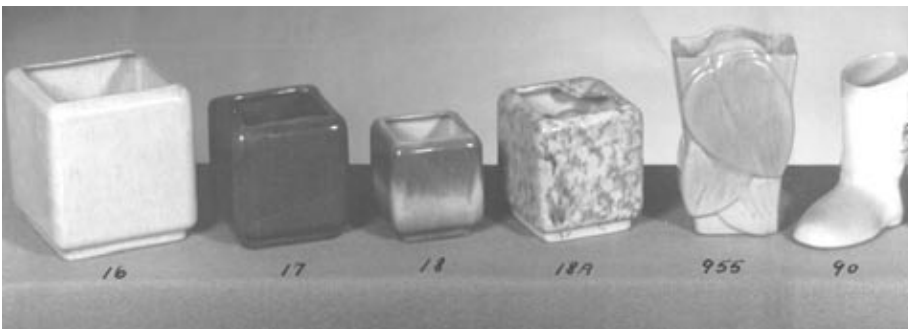
In the early 1950s, Dryden Pottery was in a barracks building front facing U.S. Highway 40. The kiln is on the right.



Jimmy Dryden pushes an Alpine kiln load in 1954 in Ellsworth



Dryden Pottery coffee break in Ellsworth with Dryden mugs, 1950s. From left, Jewell LeGrande, unknown, Florence Anderson, Grace Sanders, Gladys Hokr, Eleanor Haase and Tillie Dolezal.



These are examples of Dryden's earliest Kansas pottery.

in the summer, cold in the winter, dirt floors, an outhouse, an old wash machine tub for a sink that drained under the building, and a hot plate warming water to take the chill from cold hands. In 1948 the Pottery survived a nighttime kiln fire that burned a hole through the flue of the newest heavy duty furnace and set the rafters on fire. In spite of hardships, all employees interviewed remember the good times they had making pottery for Jim Dryden and cherish memories of their work for him and camaraderie among employees.

Dryden Pottery is a Kansas success story. From this humble beginning in the Quonset at 1st Street and 8th Avenue, Dryden produced slip-cast pottery from local clay, which he and his first employee, Joe Jezek, dug by hand and fired with beautiful glazes made with Kansas volcanic ash, also dug from local farmland. From the beginning, Jim called his pottery "Melodies in Glaze." Joe Jezek [1911–1979], an excellent engineer and handyman and also Jim's brother-in-law, was an industrious worker. He was Dryden's right-hand man during the ten years of operation in Kansas.

To take advantage of Highway 40 tourist traffic, Jim moved the Pottery in December 1949 in what one



Joe Jezek makes a mold in Ellsworth in 1950



Jimmy Dryden, right, is shown with two old friends, Tom Zouzas of Ellsworth, left, and George Eschbaugh of Wilson, a fellow student at Kansas State University and designer of Dryden's "Modern Fish Vase," mold #88. "Jim Dryden Day," Ellsworth, Kansas, August 2001.

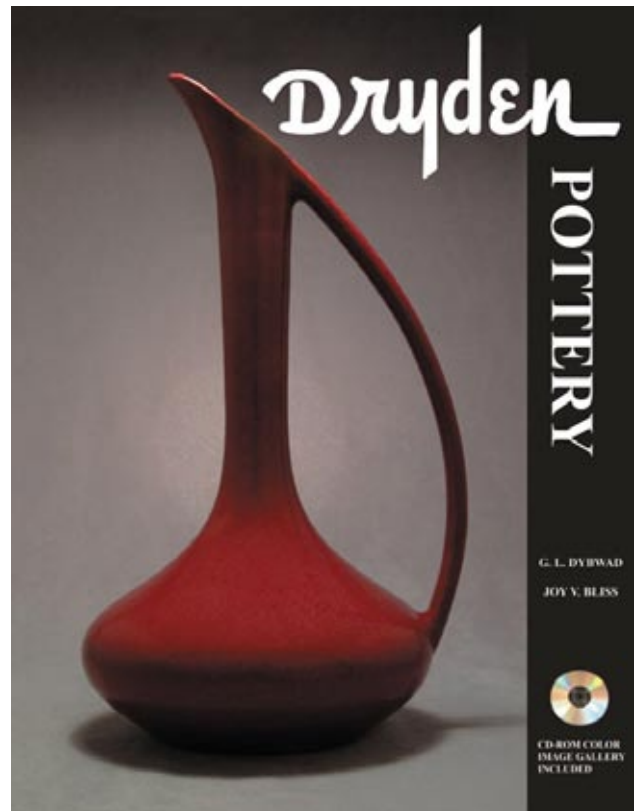


This photo was taken in 2000 of Pauline Marcotte Zvolanek. Zvolanek of Wilson, Kansas, who worked for Dryden Pottery in 1947, demonstrates how she dug volcanic ash for glazes from this cliff 53 years ago. The ash consists of fine silica grains and the supply is inexhaustible.

Ellsworth newspaper described as the single biggest moving operation ever attempted in town. In these early years, Jim was carpenter, potter, advertiser, salesman, and delivery person; and Joe was always there making mold models, directing employees, overseeing proper kiln loading, packing pottery for delivery, and in general seeing that the plant ran smoothly. For Jim, tremendous physical work, long hours at the Pottery, long road trips, and sales ingenuity resulted in a very successful business.

Jim had many friends at other United States potteries, including John Frank of Frankoma and Jessie H. Lewis, president of Van Briggles Art Pottery in Colorado Springs, Colorado. In spite of his successes in Kansas, he could see the advantages of locating in a high-traffic tourist area. He encouraged Van Briggles to hire Joe Jezek, and they did. In early October 1956, Dryden fired his last Kansas pottery and gave it to friends. Two of these pieces are pitchers inscribed to Ned and Rose Huycke, editors of the Ellsworth Reporter, and Millie and Sharon Foster, friends from Alcoholics Anonymous. Hodgden House Museum in Ellsworth holds these pieces. The buildings were for sale but everything else—molds, kilns, drying racks, and unfinished pottery—was packed for transit in three semi-trailer trucks, and the Drydens and their two children, Kimberly and Keats, left in their car for Hot Springs National Park, Arkansas.

The business prospered in Arkansas where again Dryden first used local materials to fabricate his pottery, finally turning to commercially available clay. During the transition period tan clay from Malvern, Arkansas, was indistinguishable from Kansas clay; but once commercial clay was substituted, it fired bone-white. Continuing at first with slip-cast pottery and mold models used in Kansas, Dryden quickly added pressed and wheel-thrown pieces. Today the primary product is wheel-thrown and includes a wide range of original



Dryden Pottery's signature design, a 11 1/2-inch tall pitcher - #715-Grecian, is featured on the front cover of *Dryden Pottery of Kansas and Arkansas* by Dybwad and Bliss

pieces from whimsical to fine art pottery.

The beautiful Kansas glazes of mauves, blues, greens, tans, black, and yellows are distinctly different from those on Arkansas pieces, which were at first colorful orange and browns and turquoise but soon included all colors. Multicolored glaze on a single piece of pottery is distinctively “Arkansas.” In addition to admixed colors on high gloss pieces from flow or drip glazing applied by dipping and spraying, application also changed dramatically to include sponge, brush, and spatter. In Arkansas, a number of glazers worked many years for Jim and added their own easily recognizable colors and styles. All Drydenware glazes are extremely durable, and it is unusual to find a crazed piece even after years of harsh use. Dryden also employed artists who incised greenware and decorated in under- and over-glaze. From the day he started making pottery, Jim has been an experimenter. Variety in form and variety in glazes are hallmarks of his pottery.

Drydenware can be recognized in several ways. At the first Pottery in Ellsworth pieces were not inscribed with mold numbers. After Dryden moved to the Highway 40 location all but pieces with too small a base to accommodate it were numbered and inscribed with the Dryden name. For two years starting in 1954, when Van Briggles Pottery could not keep up with production, Dryden made pieces for it with the inscription “Anna Van Colo Spgs” and delivered them by truck to Colorado Springs.

Jim liberally applies “Dryden” labels to his pottery. We found twenty-two different labels in addition to a variety of identifying cards meant to be attached with string. If still attached, these labels and cards are an aid in estimating the age of a particular piece of Drydenware.

Dryden offered personalization of his ware. He was the first to inscribe with a dental drill through unfired glaze and would do so for individuals or businesses. It is not unusual to find a pitcher with a family surname and accompanying tumblers inscribed for each member of the family. Many businesses, such as the Eisenhower Museum in Abilene, sold souvenirs personalized for them with either their label or inscription. Mold numbers that had been used in Kansas for ease of reordering were essentially abandoned in Arkansas where bottom markings were the Dryden name and often the Hot Springs location. For awhile in the 1970s, Jim called his pottery “Ozark Frontier”. In addition, potters who worked for Dryden and threw on the wheel, generally signed their pieces with their initials or name and the year. Thus, TL 89, is potter Tony Lawson in 1989. At the present time, all one-of-a-kind art pottery pieces are made by Jim’s son, Kimberly, and Kimberly’s three talented sons. However, Jim is still at work at age eighty-four and is often in the showroom. From a young age, he has been an excellent cartoonist—a talent used for years to design business advertisements. More recently his artistic abilities have been used to paint in glaze on wheel-thrown pottery. His pieces depicting smiling fish are highly prized and generally sell immediately upon placement in the showroom.



Jim Dryden often makes gifts of his pottery, such as these Arkansas pieces from 1995 for the Ellsworth Class of 1935.



Dryden’s pottery display in the early 1950s at the Kansas State Fair in Hutchinson. The display are is also by Dryden.

A. James Dryden is truly a Kansas original. He has not forgotten his Kansas roots and returns often to visit Ellsworth friends. Jim is exceptionally generous with his pottery, and many are his beneficiaries. In addition to gifts to friends, for years he has fashioned and given unique commemorative pieces to each attendee at 648th Battalion reunions and has done the same for the alumni of Ellsworth High School Class of 1935.



An example of Dryden ware made in Kansas and sold to Van Briggles in Colorado Springs, Colorado in the mid 1950s. Marked "Anna Van Colo. Spgs." The popular item is #80-Boot Vase.

Upon publication of *Dryden Pottery of Kansas and Arkansas* in 2001, civic-minded folks, old friends, and a number of former employees of Dryden Pottery in Ellsworth joined together during the annual Cowtown Festival in a gala celebration. August 4 was declared "Jim Dryden Day" by Bill Graves, Governor of Kansas. Dryden returned for this special event with his two children and five grandchildren and received the warmest welcome. Many other family members drove long distances to be present, most notably Lucile Jezek, widow of Joe Jezek, and Jim's sister Ruth. It was a grand opportunity for the younger Drydens, who had never visited Kansas, to learn firsthand of their grandfather's roots and the tremendous effort he undertook in Kansas fifty-six years ago.

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Dryden's distinctive label that was used in Kansas.