

A Brief History of Hewell's Pottery (Established in 1850)

When you buy a pot from Hewell's Pottery, you're purchasing a piece of history. The work may be brand

Seven generations of Hewells have passed down the craft from the pottery's humble beginnings in 1850

Harold "Bull" Hewell (born in 1926) is the current patriarch of the clan, which includes his wife Grace Nel



In "Brothers in Clay: The Story of Georgia Folk Pottery." Harold Hewell spoke about the expectations of his father, Maryland "Bud" Hewell (1891-1964): "I think he had in mind he wanted all his boys to be potters... I have three brothers, and we've all kept our hands in the business. We must have been born with clay in our veins."

That red Georgia clay has been pumping through Hewell veins and hands since 1850, when

Nathaniel Hewell (1832-1887), a Barrow County farmer, turned to pottery-making as a sideline, producing tableware and utilitarian pieces such as butter churns, jars, and jugs during the Civil War.

His son, Eli Hewell (1854-1920), moved the pottery to Gillsville, 12 miles east of Gainesville, around 1900, serving the agrarian clientèle of Hall County with food-storage crocks in the days before rural electrification.

Eli's son Maryland operated the pottery from the 1920's to the 1940's, turning out those essential farm wares as well as whiskey jugs for the R.M. Rose Distillery in Atlanta.

While the line Hewell's Pottery has produced - has changed over the years, and the process of pottery making has been modernized in some ways, two things have remained constant down the generations: the passion family members show for their craft and the hard work they commit to it.

Chester speaks with awe about the output of his father, Harold, in his heyday: "He could make enough stuff to keep two (assistants) busy, one preparing balls of (of clay) and the other filling the racks. I've see him make 1,000 gallons in one day, and part of it was in [labor intensive] Rebecca pitchers and washpots.

For many potters, producing 1,000 gallons would be a month.

Evolving While Remaining True to Tradition

"We're inventors, not imitators," Chester says of his family, and that's no idle boast.

Through the Depression, northeast Georgians depended on the Hewells and other Gillsville

potters to produce churns, pitchers, crocks, jugs and other glazed kitchenwares. The advent of commercial dairies and refrigeration cut into that demand, and the family began focusing on the flower pots that had been, to that point, a small part of the business.

Yet even as the demand for the unglazed garden pots grew exponentially, the Hewells have never stopped turning all their pieces by hand. Today, in a factory right out of the early Industrial Age, the family members turn out pallet after pallet-full of garden wares each week. They go through more than 12,000 pounds of clay weekly, dug beside the banks of the Hudson River in nearby Madison County.

Thgouh the pottery has made some concessions to modernity, including electric turning wheels and enormous gas-fueled ovens, Chester will have no part of pot-making machines.

"You know the reason (competitors) don't make strawberry pots like mine by machine?" he asks... "They Can't."

Gardenware had been the bread and butter of Hewell's Pottery for nearly four decades when, in the 1980's, Chester began to feel the powerful pull of family history. He built a wood-burning tunnel kiln a stone's throw from their gardenware factory and revived the making of alkaline-glazed (as-glazed) stoneware that his ancestors had started with during the Civil War.

Then in 2007, the Hewells discovered a family link to one of the wellsprings of Southeastern pottery making, Edgefield, S.C., known for pieces more decorous and fanciful than those produced in North Georgia. Chester's great-grandfather, Eli, had married into a family of Edgefield potters and worked for a while int he shop, famed in potter annals, of Dr. Abner Landrum.

Chester and son Mathew began to create detailed works that, after much experimentation, could be mistaken for highly prized ones from the Edgefield of a century ago. These new pieces are emblazoned with dancing figures, chickens, and other decorative flourishes.

Meanwhile, the Hewells continue to produce unglazed gardenware and alkaline-glazed

stoneware unabated.



Turning and Burning

A love for old farming ways, not just pottery-making, inspires the Hewells to host the annual fall Turning

In 1992, the first Turning and Burning festival, which mixes everything from horse-and-buggy rides and c

"We started this for a simple reason: Where else could you go and see things that were done in the country in the '20s and '30s?" Chester Explains. "We wanted people to see the old-timey ways. They're going away, and we we're trying to help keep them alive." *Even the festival's name harkens back: "Turning" denotes the grinding of clay in a mule-drawn mill; "Burning," the baking of pots in a wood-fired kiln.*

A Bright Future

Grace Nell Hewell fondly recalls her grandson Matthew, now in his mid-30's, as a small boy, sitting on her ball bench, "plottin' to keep the pottery going." By age 6, he had his own miniature

wheel where he turned small pieces for sale. So how long was it before Matthew started thinking about his own first child, Eli, becoming a potter?

"The day we found out we was gonna have him," Matthew responds without skipping a beat. He says this proudly, as he says everything about Eli and Eli's little sister Susannah, who also is ready to tie on an apron and get her hands in clay whenever breaks from school allow.

"It's amazing to me what his eyes see, the things ha can envision in the work we're doing." Matthew says of his son. "When Eli's hands catch up to his eyes, he's going to make some fine pottery."

No less an expert than "Brothers in Clay" author John Burrison is impressed with how much Eli's talents have developed already. Burrison picked a bowl by Eli for the Permanent collection of the Folk Pottery Museum of Northeast Georgia, making him the youngest potter with a work on view at the new Sautee showplace.

Hewell's Pottery, a leader in Georgia pottery making since 1850, would seem to have good stewards as a family tradition extends and evolves into the 21st century.

"This is out love, out living, it's all we know." Matthew says. "There are other (folk) potters who have full-time jobs and then they do pottery in their spare time. But this ain't a matter of an 8-to-5 job for us --it's a way of life."

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