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Discovering ANTIQUES

May/June 2009



ANTIQUING IN WESTERN CANADA

Discovering ANTIQUES

VOLUME 11 - NO. 2 2009

Publisher

Discovering ANTIQUES

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www.crystalink.ca

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Front Cover: This vase is an example of the pieces produced at Athabasca Clay Products Ltd. Courtesy Gene and Gail Sabo.

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Athabasca Clay Products Ltd.

A Truly Western Canadian Pottery

By Conrad Biernacki



Stylized birds (see sidebar next issue) and the Thunderbird from the Haida of the Northwest Coast were popular designs on vases by Athabasca Clay Products. Turned on a potter's wheel by Alfred Messerli, they were painted by Pat Johnson (left) and Eialin Armfelt (right). Courtesy Gene and Gail Sabo

Last Christmas, a friend gave me a Canadian pottery vase. That's not unusual. Everyone knows that I enjoy pottery, and that any piece, including yet another Blue Mountain Pottery swan, would be a welcome addition to one of many collections displayed throughout the house, on (and under) the dining room table, jamming shelves in the basement, and (sadly) in plastic tubs under beds and in the garage. I had never seen a vase like this before. It was red earthenware turned on a potter's wheel in a very pleasing shape, and decorated with a hand-painted band of stylized birds. After admiring it for a moment (and appreciating the absence of any chips or cracks), I turned it over to find the impressed mark MADE IN ATHABASCA CANADA.

I've recently spent a lot of time researching and collecting pottery from the Medicine Hat and Redcliff areas of southeast Alberta (Medalta Potteries, Alberta Potteries, Medicine Hat Potteries, Hycroft China,

Sunburst Ceramics, and many others). Occasionally, I'd find references to a pottery in Athabasca that I'd file away for future investigation. Now was the time.

But first let me tell you about someone who you might think would be least likely to ever own a pottery—Edward J. Polanski. Born in Redwater, Alberta, in 1933, he became interested in electronics and attended the Radio College of Canada in Toronto from 1952 to 1953. Returning to Alberta, Ed's career in the television industry began in 1956 when he started selling TV sets and installing antennas in the newly electrified rural areas surrounding the small village of Thorhild (86 km north of Edmonton). Recognized as the pioneer in providing cable TV service to sparsely populated rural areas, Ed established the CATV network in northern Alberta in 1960. Its success was based on the use of transistors rather than vacuum tubes for transmission. It was the first time that this technological innovation was used in North America. One of the pioneers of cable TV in Canada, Ed established the QCTV cable network in west



Courtesy Alfred Messerli

Edmonton in 1970. It was at the same time that Jim Shaw began Capital Cable in the east half of the city. In 1987 Ed sold his company to Videotron of Montreal. Today, it is part of Shaw Communications, one of the largest such companies in the world.

“Typical, gambling, reckless entrepreneur that I am,’ says Ed, ‘I ended up with a pottery I never intended.” (p. 178, Marylu Antonelli and Jack Forbes, *Pottery in Alberta: The Long Tradition*, 1978.) “It all started when Ed and a few potential business partners began discussing the possibility of developing the town of Athabasca’s high quality red clay deposits,” explains Ed’s wife Phyllis in a recent telephone conversation. (Athabasca is 140 km north of Edmonton.) “They were all enthusiastic about establishing a pottery that would benefit the community. But when it came time to take action, my husband was the only one willing to move forward. It wasn’t meant to be a career change, just an adventure on the side.”

Athabasca Clay Products Ltd., in business from September 1964 to late 1968, was on the south side of 50th Avenue (the first east-west street south of the Athabasca River) between 48th and 49th Streets. The rented, two-storey, grey stucco building was once a furniture and woodwork repair shop owned by Steve Schinking. It was occupied by business offices before the pottery moved in. (Demolished around 1979, the property is now part of the north parking lot for the Buy-Low Foods store.) It has been estimated that Athabasca Clay Products produced about 150,000 pieces. Local collectors and many

residents in town have a strong attachment to them. “I find that whenever it becomes available, the prices make it uneconomic for us as dealers to compete with collectors,” says Charles Bazalgette of Old Crow Antiques in Athabasca. “If there is any locally, I never see it. So I guess people hang on to it.”

Athabasca Clay Products used unique kaolinite-rich clay deposits found along the banks of Tawatinaw Creek, a tributary of the Athabasca River that winds

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*Ed Polanski, founder of Athabasca Clay Products
(photo taken 1979). Courtesy Ed and Phyllis
Polanski*



Eialin Armfelt decorates an ashtray with an incised design, 1967. Dorothy Nielsen Collection, Athabasca Archives

through town from its source in the Columbia Icefield in Jasper National Park on its way to Lake Athabasca which empties into the Arctic Ocean. This clay was first used by at least 1909 when George Green established a brickyard in Athabasca Landing (the settlement became a town in 1911 and changed its name to Athabasca in 1913). His clay was dug from somewhere east of the village. From 1912 to 1913, Claude Thillet operated a rival brickyard near Colinton, 4 km to the south. Using clay found on the property, the company also made pottery as reported by the *Athabasca Times* (July 31, 1913). "Vases, pitchers, jars and flower pots of good and neat designs came out without a flaw, hard and solid...E. Walden, who has

charge of the work, is confident that the products can be enamelled and that the clay will absorb coloring matter." (Hired in 1913, Edwald Walden was a potter from Germany who had previously worked in the United States.) Encouraged by these initial results, a complete pottery plant was installed. "The tastefulness of the designs and the manner in which the various articles are finished indicate that Mr. Walden is an artistic as well as a practical potter." Because of the quality of the pottery's wares and low production costs, the plan was to supply all the retail outlets in Western Canada, undercutting eastern manufacturers. But the company closed when it was realized that the new railway lines to the Peace River district would bypass Athabasca. Edwald then established his own pottery, but his achievements remain to be discovered.



Ken Polanski (Ed's nephew) sprays a piece of pottery with background colour before it is painted or incised with a design, 1967. Dorothy Nielsen Collection, Athabasca Archives

Athabasca clay from the Loxam farm (east of the town along Tawatinaw Creek) was used by the Edmonton brick company Northwest Ceramics, later called Northwest Brick and Tile, from 1958 until it closed in 1996. It was owned by Medicine Hat Brick and Tile, called I-XL Industries from about 1968, a subsidiary of Redcliff Pressed Brick founded in 1912. (Bricks were first made on the Edmonton site in 1907 by Acme Brick using clay found on the property. From 1952 to 1957, the plant was owned by the British firm Borneo Clay Products

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*After pieces are removed from their moulds, Dorothy Nielsen smooths the rough edges and removes the mould lines, 1967.
Dorothy Nielsen Collection, Athabasca Archives*

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and called Alexandra Brick and Tile.) The same clay has been generously provided by the Loxam family to the Athabasca Pottery Club since its founding in 1961. Active today, the club still digs and processes clay for its members.

In the beginning, the decorative wares made by Athabasca Clay Products were turned on a wheel by Alfred Messerli, a potter from Switzerland. After he left in late 1966, the pottery switched to using moulds. Two hundred were purchased from Arnel's Ceramic Molds in Portland, Oregon (owned by Macky Ceramic Products since 2004, see www.mackymolds.com), and perhaps other suppliers. Production resumed in February 1967. Using slip casting techniques rather than a potter's wheel increased output by 10 fold and reduced unit production costs by more than 250 percent.

On the wheel, Alfred produced about 20 to 30 pieces a day. These included a variety of vases, bowls, candy dishes and ashtrays. They were decorated with a variety of designs that were either painted or incised into the surface of the piece before firing. Although many

examples are painted in black leaving the natural red clay as the background, other colours, including blue, green, yellow, brown and pink, were sometimes painted or sprayed on. Eialin Armfelt, from Denmark, was the first decorator. Her early motifs included maple leaves, blueberries, and what became the pottery's most popular design—a scene with Canada Geese and bulrushes (the name Athabasca is believed to be a native word meaning The Place of the Reeds). Later, she added whooping cranes, the Provincial wild rose, and mountain and prairie scenes. First Nations designs included Northwest Coast totem pole figures of the Haida, geometric patterns, and stylized birds.

Although Eialin left the pottery in 1967, her designs were adopted by Pat (Ryan) Johnson, who added some of her own motifs, including a doe and fawn, a jumping deer, and native children. Miloslav Tichy, from Czechoslovakia, worked at the pottery from April 1967 to September 1968 as a decorator and glazer. His designs included bison, deer, and leaves, as well as Eialin's stylized birds.

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Decorators signed their work on the bottom with their first initial. Eialin's mark was an elaborately scrolled E, while Pat used a simple P. They also added the initials of the potter. The overlapping letters AM are for Alfred Messerli and MT stood for Miloslav Tichy. Other staff included Dorothy Nielsen who smoothed the rough edges and removed the mould lines after the pieces were cast (often using an electric dentist's drill with various attachments), Bill Wood who prepared the raw clay, Norman Cowley who was probably in charge of the moulding process, and Ed's nephew Ken Polanski who sprayed on coloured backgrounds (yellow was achieved with a coating of clay from Estevan, Saskatchewan), loaded the electric kilns and looked after the firing.

In addition to the potters' and decorators' initials, Athabasca Clay Products were also identified with impressed marks (ATHABASCA CLAY PRODUCTS LTD. ATHABASCA ALBERTA CANADA, MADE IN ATHABASCA CANADA, and ATHABASCA), a raised mark (ATHABASCA ALBERTA CANADA), a decal or circular blue-printed paper sticker (ATHABASCA CLAY PRODUCTS LTD.), a circular black stamp (ATHABASCA CLAY PRODUCTS

LTD., MADE IN ATHABASCA CANADA, and MADE IN CANADA), and perhaps others. Some of the moulded pieces have the impressed name "arnel's," the company that supplied the moulds.

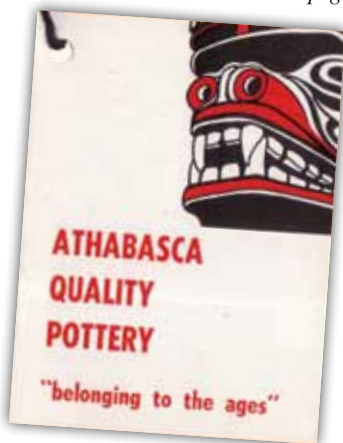
"We were trying to develop the same kind of market as there is for Eskimo carvings," explained Ed (p. 179, *Pottery in Alberta*). "We encouraged Indian help, researched Indian legends, and made designs based on Indian sketches and legends." Athabasca Clay Products seemed to enjoy much success and was sold in 46 gift shops in Alberta, British Columbia and Saskatchewan. (They also shipped processed clay to high schools in Alberta and Saskatchewan for use in pottery classes.) Athabasca Clay Products opened its own outlet at 11334 Jasper Ave. in Edmonton (opposite St. Joseph's Cathedral Basilica) in April 1966 selling both wheel-turned and moulded ware. Edward Pohranichny managed the store from April to September 1966. (He had previously apprenticed as a radio and TV technician in Ed Polanski's Thorhild store from November 1959 to the spring of 1963.) Edward then worked at the pottery until April 1967 where he did everything from preparing

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The bottom of each piece is usually impressed with the pottery name or labelled with a sticker or decal. This example was turned on a wheel and has the hand painted initials AM for the potter Alfred Messerli and an E for the decorator Eialin Armfelt.

Courtesy Gene and Gail Sabo



A hang tag highlighting the history of Athabasca and the quality of Athabasca Clay Products' wares was attached to each piece of pottery before it was sold. This example shows a Bear motif inspired by a Haida totem pole carving.

Courtesy Gene and Gail Sabo



Potter Miloslav Tichy dips a mug into a vat of glaze which will form a clear protective coating after firing, 1967. Dorothy Nielsen Collection, Athabasca Archives

the clay and casting to firing and glazing, as well as the bookkeeping. Terry (Coles) Raines became the next store manager until the spring of 1967, having previously worked at the pottery during the summer after graduating from high school. Joseph Polanski (Ed's father) later managed the store until it closed.

Peak production was 60,000 pieces a year with a maximum workforce of 16 employees. But the pottery never made a profit and lasted for only four years. Ed had hoped to get a contract from the Bay, but the department store chain was more interested in Blue Mountain Pottery. In the face of adversity, Ed maintained his optimism and believed that his pottery could break even and become profitable sometime in the future. In 1967, with strong Federal Government financial support and marketing assistance from the Research Council of Alberta, plans were being developed to build a huge new pottery that would employ 40 to 50 people and produce 250,000 pieces annually. The Federal Department of Trade and Industry was ready to assist in the development of the company's export markets, particularly the United States. "The main challenge," explains Phyllis Polanski, "was the high transportation cost for getting the finished pottery to market." When a licence became available for a cable TV station in Edmonton, Ed returned to his earlier career.

...continued in the next July/August '09 Issue

Acknowledgements:

For their generous assistance, the author would like to thank: Marilyn Mol, archivist, Athabasca Archives; Phyllis Polanski, wife of Ed Polanski, owner, Athabasca Clay Products; Eialin Armfelt, Dorothy Nielsen and Edward Pohranychny, previous employees, Athabasca Clay Products; Gene and Gail Sabo, collectors; Malcolm Sissons, president, I-XL Industries Ltd.; Rosie Guay, past president, Athabasca Pottery Club; Cathy Roy, curator, and Katherine Milliken, researcher, both at the Royal Alberta Museum, Edmonton; Bruce Bernstein, executive director, Southwestern Association for Indian Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico; Dwight Lanmon, research associate at both the School for Advanced Research and Museum of Indian Arts and Culture, Santa Fe, New Mexico; David McNeece, Museum of Indian Arts and Culture/Laboratory of Anthropology, Santa Fe, New Mexico; David Roche, American Indian Art consultant, Sotheby's, New York; Suzanne Stiegelbauer, associate professor, Texas State University, San Marcos; and Arni Brownstone, assistant curator, Kenneth Lister, assistant curator, Trudy Nicks, curator, and Arthur Smith, head, Library and Archives, all at the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto. Special thanks go to Peter Kaellgren, curator, Royal Ontario Museum, for his Christmas gift that inspired this article. Brian Musselwhite, assistant curator, Royal Ontario Museum, is thanked for his continuing support and enthusiasm for my research in the field of Canadian ceramics.

Conrad Biernacki is the programs manager at the Royal Ontario Museum and frequent exhibition curator at various galleries and museums. He is writing a book on Blue Mountain Pottery to be published by the ROM in 2010. You can reach him at conradb@rom.on.ca.