

TRADITION INNOVATION

American Masterpieces of Southern Craft & Traditional Art

The Hewell Family

The following text an interview summary from a conversation conducted by interviewer Tim Prizer on behalf of the curator on March 24, 2007.

Tim Prizer met with the family in March of 2007. Present at the interview are: Harold Hewell, born in 1926; Chester Hewell born in 1950; Nathaniel Hewell, born in 1976; Matthew Hewell, born in 1972; and Grace Hewell, who married into the family in 1949.

Hewell pottery is a family operation. As Chester Hewell says, “Well, we got it in our blood, making pottery. So, that would make us continue to want to do it. If you got clay in your veins, you’ll continue to do what you’re doing.” Although Grace wasn’t born into the family, she continues because she loves it. For the children in the family there is a tradition to

follow. Nathaniel Hewell comments, “When you grow up in pottery and work it everyday of your life for so long, you take the work and the craft for granted.”

The Hewells make what will sell. They are influenced by the customer. “What people demand, what they want... You got to make what you can sell. If you ain’t selling it, there ain’t no need in making it. So that’s the key words right there. What you’re selling.” The family shares Chester’s philosophy. “If you can’t sell it, it’s pointless for you to make it.”

Most of the pottery that the Hewells make has its basis functional art. Chester comments, “Well, everybody that I ever knowed of would rather make something that somebody’s going to use. And that gets back on the face jug would be like demand, you know. Somebody wanting something or the other that they’re not going to use other than to look at, but they are using it to look at.” Nathaniel Hewell follows up, “It’s very hard to make a piece that doesn’t have function. In



***Hewell Family- Rebekkah Jug
and Flower Vase***

Photo by Luis Quiles, 2007

order to make a pot, you have to have its function in mind. The function dictates the form.”

In their workshop orders are custom-made and each person makes a portion of each item. The group then compiles the parts to make the finished product. It is a group effort.

On the subject of master, Chester Hewell jokes, “It means you’re right nearly dead. When you master anything, it’s about over with. So ain’t none of us ever mastered it yet. You got to go to work willing to learn each day. If you think you know it all to start with, you’re done with anyhow... I done seen a lot of folks that knowed too much before they got started and they never did learn nothing.” Grace Hewell mentions that she has been making pots since 1949 and still picks up good habits everyday, as does Harold, the oldest potter in the family. Nathaniel finishes by saying there is always something to learn.

Chester Hewell, “There’s a big difference between what we do and a lot of these people that’s out here making a little bit of pottery. See most of the folks that’s making a little pottery, they buy their clay done ground and somebody’s done mixed it, a lot of them are using an electric kiln and a prepared glaze on their jugs and stuff. Everything we do we do our own self. We grind our own clay, make our own glaze, and do it all.

The Hewells are all native to the South. It has influenced their life and work, as Chester relates, “Well of course, you can tell the way I talk I’m from the South. And yeah, it influences what you do. See, they was making churns and jugs and jars and stuff, and that there’s a way of preserving the meats and pickling it all back yonder” He continues, “Everybody’s got a little bit of Southern in them when the sun’s shining and it’s warm.”

Chester Hewell, “Most old time potters started as farmers and worked on the land. Pottery is made of the ground, of clay.” Some features of the pottery which are particularly Southern are the alkaline glaze and flint glaze. The flint glaze dates back to the Edgefield district of South Carolina before the Civil War. Nathaniel Hewell expands, “There’s nothing about the pots that are not Southern. I mean they’re Southern in their function, they’re Southern in their glazes and their appearance. I mean, there’s nothing that’s not of this region about them. I mean, that’s just what they are... Like the way people use them in the South like storage of meats and stuff that had to be salted and stuff and had to be kept in warmer temperatures. The churns and stuff. Northern churns are different. The glazes are different. It’s just the total look.”

Chester and Grace speak to the evolution of the craft. Chester Hewell, “You’re always looking for something new that you can sell. You got to be an inventor and not an imitator... You got to move into the future or you’ll go out. We’re trying to come up with new ideas all along.” Grace speaks of the differences in

the old days of working pottery as a girl and young woman. The evolution of technology has altered the work, for instance electric instead of wood kilns.

Nathaniel Hewell on family, “The family openly discusses community goings-on and community members. The family is generally in agreement when it comes to these issues.” Every year the community comes to an annual dinner that the Hewell family hosts. While there is a connection Nathaniel comments that “no one outside the family has a grasp of the work, of the family’s feelings about certain issues in the community, and so on. When a customer calls Hewell Pottery, they speak with a member of the family, and this is important to the overall philosophy of the operation.”

The Hewell family keeps their traditions alive. Matthew Hewell’s children do everything the family does. They go to every public event with the family. Also, they have been raised in the pottery shop and are becoming potters themselves. Matthew has two children. Eli Hewell is eight years old and Susanna Hewell is four years old. Eli makes face jugs and other items. He really shows an intense interest in the craft and the tradition.