

## **The World of James and Nan McKinnell**

The names James and Nan McKinnell are household words for many Coloradoans. Their groundbreaking work in ceramics earns them a title of royalty, in a sense. Their journey includes apprenticeship, travel, discovering new clay bodies and developing glazes, and now, as senior citizens residing in Ft. Collins, CO, collecting affectionate accolades from fans and former students, and honors from their peers.

Nan began work on a graduate degree in ceramics at the University of Washington after earning a BFA from Nebraska State University in 1938. During this time she worked both as a teaching assistant and an elementary art schoolteacher. Jim returned to Seattle in 1945 and began graduate studies at the University after serving in the United States Navy.

Although Jim was pursuing a degree in ceramics engineering, he took a class outside this field in slip-casting from Paul Bonifas, a Swiss artist who had worked in Paris. Nan was Paul Bonifas's teaching assistant. (Both McKinnells name Bonifas as one of the greatest teachers from their pasts). They also list Michael LaCoste of Paris, Bernard Leach of Cornwall, Kathleen Horsman of Edinburgh, Peter Voulkos, and Rudy Autio as contributing to their inspiration.

The McKinnells married in Baltimore in 1948, and first came to Colorado in 1949 to attend the Aspen Art Festival. Though Colorado appealed to them, they would turn, instead, to work with Leach (above) in England. Leach, having met and collaborated with the great Japanese ceramist Hamada Shoji, was to become the prime mover behind the introduction of the Japanese aesthetic of simplicity, restraint and earthiness to the western world. Through connections made at this time, the McKinnells met and interacted with the leading ceramic artists of their time- and, indeed, of the twentieth century.

They moved to Boulder in 1951, but by 1953 embarked on a nearly twenty-year odyssey of research and teaching. Among teaching venues were the Archie Bray Foundation in Montana, the University of Iowa and Edinburgh College of Art in Scotland. They also stopped at Alfred University in New York where Jim created what Westword newspaper critic Michael Paglia terms "the unbelievable slab-built vessel, taking the form of a tree... finished in white glaze with the chocolate-y clay body showing through."\*

Returning sporadically to Colorado over the years, the couple finally settled into teaching at the now-closed Loretto Heights College where they

stayed until retiring in 1987. Throughout their long and adventurous career, Nan and Jim have worked together on a creation, at times; separately at others- each retaining a distinct identity while also living out a great love story together in the arts.

\*This work and 200 McKinnell pieces are on view in an exhibition titled Time in Tandem: James and Nan McKinnell Retrospective through March 26 at the Arvada Center for the Arts and Humanities.

*The Studio Potter* Interview with the McKinnells

James and Nan McKinnell: American Line Blend  
A Conversation

**Nan**

I was born in Stanton, Nebraska where my father was a dentist and my mother a housewife. For several summers we moved out to a prairie farm in North Dakota to enable my father to regain his health. There we lived in an old cracker box house that was often shaken by strong winds, winds which frequently fanned a prairie fire nearby. On the farm there were white chickens and beautiful Guinea hens, and wildlife such as garter snakes which my mother did not always care for. I remember a wildish bull I was afraid of too. Best of all were the prairie flowers – tiny bluebells (fairy flowers), freckled orange tiger lilies and closed gentian violets that I would open to see what was inside.

I remember my Aunt Edith had a wonderful collection in her china and glass cupboards, things such as German steins and Chinese and Japanese porcelains. I was fascinated by them. Even though I was a very young child, I had permission when we visited her to take them out carefully and examine them. To this very day I remember many of those pieces.

We moved to Crofton, Nebraska, a small town close to the Missouri River. I remember going on wonderful picnics along the river banks or in the Devil's Nest where in earlier years rustlers hid their stolen cattle. Flowers grew therein damp and shady places, and up on the dryer hills there were cacti. I often went off by myself to explore for birds and flowers and trees.

My father wanted me to help him in his dental office when I graduated from high school but I was keen to become a teacher. By this time we had moved back to the Elkhorn Valley, a few miles south of Stanton. My father consented to my wishes and said I could attend teachers' college at Wayne, seventeen miles from home, if I could get a job. He was quite surprised when I actually got one. I helped a maiden lady who was part owner of the student supply store at the college with her cooking and housekeeping and could earn 25 cents an hour extra by helping sell books or working at the soda fountain. There were books and clothing to buy and piano lessons to pay for. Tuition at the college was \$15 a semester.

After a year plus ten-week summer course in rural school teaching, I got a job teaching eight grades in a nearby country school. The little school was surrounded by corn fields and bawling cattle. I drove my Dad's old Hudson along three miles of graveled highway and one mile of dirt road that became sticky gumbo when wet, picking up children on their way to the school. The little old school house had no electricity or phone, but the children had desks and as teacher I had a big roll-top desk. There was a great old stove fired with coal and corncobs with a metal flange all around it to circulate the heat. The children had a kitchen band (pots and

pans) and a harmonica band and danced around the maypole. I wrote an operetta that we performed.

Each night after school, the floor was swept, the blackboard cleaned, coal and corncobs were brought in from the storage shed and the two privies out back checked, and I drove home with a box of books and cried over them. But soon I learned how to teach. I had to. The seventh and eighth graders were being prepared for tough examinations in subjects such as math, history, geography, grammar, literature, before they could be accepted for high school.

During my first week as teacher a little boy brought a field mouse to school to scare the teacher. He couldn't know, of course, that when I was a child on the farm I had carried mice and snakes around in my pocket to do the same thing to my mother. When I took the boy's little mouse in my hand, his smile just dropped away. He had expected me to jump up on the desk and scream as the teacher had done before me. The next day he tried it with a garter snake. I just took the little thing in my hand and gave the class a lesson in not killing snakes because they are so helpful to farmers.

After four years at that country school and two years in town schools, plus a total of six summers at the college, I received my bachelor's degree in music and education. Unfortunately, the art course was taught by an elderly, slightly rotund art professor who had little to offer.

In the summer of 1938 I headed west to Seattle and the University of Washington. I chose Seattle because I thought I might be nicer there in the summer than in hot Chicago at the Art Institute. Luckily, I got a teaching job in a small residential area grade school outside Seattle and eventually was able to attend the university full time and concentrate on finishing my MFA.

About a month into my first term, I was asked to teach half of a basic architectural drawing class. Mr. Hill, the instructor, gave me all the girls and kept the fellows to himself. This was wartime and there were very few men on campus. You can imagine how the girls felt – a woman teacher and no fellows to flirt with. It was a rough term for me.

It so happened that Jimmy's mother came back to the University of Washington to take some additional credits. Her brother, John Chester McPherson, was a very good artist who lived in Greenwich Village in New York City. She and I had our first pottery class together down at the ceramic engineering area, or "Mines" as it was called. When Jimmy returned from the war, he came up from the lower campus where he was in engineering school to take a class in which I was the assistant to the teacher, Mr. Bonifas, a French artist who had worked with Corbusier. That's how Jimmy and I met.

## **Jim**

I was born in Nitro, West Virginia in 1919. My father had a background in chemistry from Washington and Lee University and was in charge of a large smokeless powder plant at Nitro. World War I had ended

and there was no need for munitions so my parents gave thought to what was next for them. They considered traveling to Canada, where they surmised father's experience in chemistry would be helpful. I recall that they did not give us much detailed information about this period of their lives, but I do remember that when I was about four years old, lo and behold, they bought a large sedan, loaded our household goods aboard and started driving West toward Yellowstone Park. I suppose when they hit Seattle that was the end of the road.

In Seattle my father looked into several businesses that he considered buying or buying into. Finally he decided to go with the Northern Life Insurance Company. (The three other businesses he had looked into all failed in the Depression.)

I enjoyed growing up in Seattle. We lived close to the university and close to a magnificent park in a big canyon. I was active in Boy Scouts, in fact, the only person in our troop to become Eagle Scout. We spend an enormous time out in the Olympic and Cascade mountains, leading trips and climbing whatever mountain caught our eyes. Paradise Valley was where people skied in those days. Mt. Rainier had eighteen glaciers, more glaciers than any other mountain of the same elevation in the world. I was a pretty hot competitor and won quite a number of junior races in all kinds of slalom and downhill racing. We didn't have much professional advice from anyone in those days. It was not surprising that people got into accidents.

One day a big downhill race took place on Mt. Rainier. A heavy rain had fallen on fresh snow and there was about ten inches of corn snow on the longest, steepest slope. When an Olympic skier barely made it down to the bottom. I should have been warned not to follow. Halfway down I tumbled and broke my left leg in eighteen places.

I had a full-length cast up my left leg to the hip, and I wore it for six months. The doctor who operated on me owned the hospital and told me later that he didn't like to fool around with limb situations so I consider myself lucky I didn't have the leg taken off. I pushed the healing process and eight months to the day from when I broke my leg. I was back on skis again and starting to compete. One day on the same kind of hill, I broke the fibula again. That was the end of my skiing for a while.

At the time I had planned to go into architecture. The Depression was ending and most architects were on WPA, a government-supported employment. But a friend of my parents, a civil engineer, persuaded me otherwise. He told me that when he was in school he had been impressed by the ceramic engineers who never seemed to graduate because they were all getting good jobs before graduation. And jobs were hard to find then. "Get into ceramics," he told me. "You'll never have to worry about being employed." So that's what I did.

I was a naval officer in the NROTC in 1941. At the time, the navy told us that when we got our degrees in June we didn't have to look for jobs because we were going to be ordered right into active duty. I had to hustle

that summer to finish my thesis, and reported for duty in Los Angeles. I was immediately transported by battleship to Pearl Harbor where I was attached to an old 4-stack destroyer stationed off the entrance of the harbor by preventing unknown vessels from entering.

About an hour and a half before the Japanese attack, we sighted a midget submarine and fired on it, ramming and sinking it. Then we sent a message to the Officer of the Day in Pearl Harbor stating we had done so. We received a bizarre reply: "Please verify." They didn't believe what had happened! And I'm sure Admiral Short never heard about that incident or things might have been a little different.

The first Japanese planes came over a little later by way of northeast Hawaii. They flew quite some distance northeast, then west, and came back through a big valley that brought them right over Hickham airfield and the naval facilities. It so happened that at the same time the army was testing a new British radar, a big thing that looked like a whirling mattress. They were getting a reading on the planes coming in but thought it was a mirror image of some B-17s arriving from the West Coast. Neither the army or the navy had cross information for security. If there had been, there is a slight chance they might have gotten the word that they were under attack. In fact, there was bad information long before that. During my four years of NROTC, we were getting confident messages from our officers that we would eventually be at war with Japan but that the war would only last about three weeks.

This misinformation was a national tragedy, to say the least. Many of my friends on the ships were killed in that attack. We were poorly prepared. It was a total miscalculation. I didn't feel any great heroics about my role in the war. I have never been a person who has been afraid. I've done a lot of risky things, such as climbing mountains in the state of Washington. In fact, once I came very close to killing myself on Mt. Anderson. We were coming down a very steep slope on the mountain and I was far ahead of my other three companions. My father had loaned me an old Kodak camera, a really large one that in a leather case from my belt. About a quarter of the way down the slope the leather strap on the camera broke and fell, hitting the downward slope at a high speed. Without thinking, I made a dive for it. Immediately I found myself sliding so fast I couldn't possibly stop. By this time the camera was long out of sight. I had dropped down eight feet onto a rock where two crevasses came together and lay there on my back, stunned and not moving. Meanwhile the corn snow I had dug up on the way down began sliding down the steep slope and falling onto me, quickly covering my body. I knew I was a goner if it covered me completely – my companions could never have found me. So I just held my arm up as high as it would go. When my companions finally arrived and looked down they saw my tracks leading to the two crevasses and my hand sticking up out of the snow. Eventually they found me, but it took an hour and a half to dig me out.

I finished my master's degree in the spring of 1947 and taught a semester for the head of my department who was on sick leave. Nan still had a year to go. She was teaching full time and working on her degree and thesis as well.

About this time I had become curious about the state of ceramics in the rest of the country, and on New Year's Eve, 1948 I took a small plane to New York City where I arrived at the apartment of my relatives in Greenwich Village. My aunt, who was quite a good painter, urged me to go see the potter Henry Varnum Poor (she was his wife's sister). My uncle Chester (John Chester McPherson) was a well known artist and had taught at the Art Student's League for a while. He was a real tough character. Whenever there was a big party in the Village he always was chosen master of ceremonies because he could tell such raw jokes.

I hitchhiked up to New England through the snow and then went down to Baltimore to check out various ceramics firms. I'm of Scottish descent on both sides of my family, and all my relatives come from near Baltimore. There was a company in Baltimore called Locke Insulator, a porcelain insulator factory wholly owned by General Electric. They had several contracts out west with other firms. The vice president of new products was anxious for me to come and work there.

## **Nan**

Jimmy was working at Locke and wouldn't marry me until I finished my thesis. I kept having problems. I would write or call and say I couldn't get married on a certain date because I had some more firing to do. You know what problems are when you're working on a thesis. I wanted to finish the written part in Baltimore but Jimmy said, No, finish it all before marriage.

I had decided on a tea set for my thesis. First I sketched what I wanted. Then I made accurate drawings from which I made the models out of plaster on the lathe and wheel. Finally all the molds and master molds were made. The tea set included a lunch plate, a cup and saucer, a water pot, a tea pot, a jam jar, a cream pitcher and sugar bowl. (At that time I had thought I would go into industrial design.) Neither Jimmy nor I knew much about throwing because when our teacher Mr. Bonifas worked in Switzerland and Paris he always had throwers to follow through with his designs – he only worked with the plaster models and molds, about which he was an expert.

I also made a great many line blends on clay bodies and glazes. I didn't know anything about tri-axial glaze testing until Jimmy later told me about them after I had finished my thesis. Anyway, I finally finished everything and left for Baltimore. We were married on a hot, steamy day in July.

I remember I was still sort of a bride when once we decided to attend the annual American Ceramic Society's meeting in Cincinnati. (This was before NCECA and ACC.) On our return to Baltimore, the train stopped at

some city to take on mail and passengers. Jimmy took the opportunity to run across two sets of tracks to the depot to buy a paper. Suddenly a very long train stopped between us and the depot. Jimmy was nowhere in sight. Just as our train started to move slowly I spied him running frantically around the end of the long train. He was a good sprinter in those days and it looked as if he might make it. Several passengers gathered to cheer him on. One woman asked, "Whose husband is that?" "It's mine!" I cried. But just as Jimmy would reach up for the rear platform railing the train would give a puff of steam and jerk ahead. He finally had to give up. Jimmy has always gotten off trains wherever we traveled – in the U.S. or in Europe – but that's the only time he ever got left behind.

A year after we were married we decided to head for Nebraska from Baltimore during Jimmy's two-week vacation from Locke Insulator. We borrowed my father's car and camping equipment and explored Colorado. I remember attending the Aspen Festival that was held then in a big tent. Albert Schweitzer was an invited guest for the Goethe Bicentennial. We were also thrilled by the performance of the Minneapolis Symphony and enjoyed seeing Dimitri Mitropoulis rehearsing the orchestra in his blue jeans and shirt. While we were there we checked out Boulder, at that time a beautiful small university and retirement town.

### **Jim**

At Locke Insulator I had a split job. Half of my time was spent on research and the other half with the public relations department. I enjoyed the job. It was a well-organized plant. Most of the engineers were graduates of MIT and quite brotherly toward one another, wearing MIT ties on certain days.

### **Nan**

We bought a Jack Wolfe electric wheel in New York and Jimmy built a small electric kiln in the basement of the row house one-room apartment where we lived.

After we had been married about two years, Jimmy decided he didn't like some of the things going on at Locke and decided to leave. He had some GI money coming and had to use it some way or he'd lose it. We checked around into several schools in the U.S. but they were expensive: one of us would have had to work while the other went to school.

So we investigated Europe. Mr. Bonifas had told us about a school in Paris called Ecole Metiers d'Art. It so happened that we had recently met and talked with Bernard Leach when he was in Washington, DC about working in St. Ives, but he said he had already made arrangements with Warren and Alix McKenzie for them to come to St. Ives. He suggested instead we try the Penzance School of Art only nine miles away from St. Ives and work with his younger son, Michael.

First we went to Paris to work at the Ecole Metiers d'Art. Jimmy could attend the school full time but I found out that because I was a woman I could only go a few afternoons a week.

### **Jim**

In Paris we had a pedal tandem bicycle and rode all around Paris checking out the places where pottery was being sold and inquiring about potters. Thus we found Michael le Cost. We liked his earthenware pots and found he lived outside Paris. We visited him and he told us he could give the two of us lessons for a dollar a lesson. A bargain. So we accepted and rode out to Le Cost's pottery on our tandem bicycle several times a week using the Ecole Metiers d'Art only for practice. Michael was a wonderful teacher and gave us all the basics. He let us use his kick wheel to learn centering and showed us how to pull up the clay. While one was learning on the wheel, the other learned how to tap the pot into center on a turntable.

After the spring term ended we traveled throughout Europe that summer on a motorized tandem bicycle visiting potters, potteries and museums. Then we went to England in the fall and studied with Michael Leach at Penzance, where we did mostly repetitive throwing of once-fired pieces that were glazed with lead glazes. We often went to St. Ives to visit Bernard Leach. In fact, we took the bus there whenever they had a kiln opening or a party.

While we were at St. Ives we saw Warren MacKenzie and his wife Alix who were both apprenticing at the Leach Pottery. I think they were the only people that Bernard had ever invited to live right in his house and keep house and do the cooking for him. This was after Bernard's second wife had left him, before he married Janet. Warren had to come over to Penzance twice a week to go to the art school in order to get his GI money, so we would see him every Tuesday and Thursday. The next semester we went to work with Kathleen Horsman up in Edinburgh College of Art in Scotland.

After finishing our classes in June 1951 at the Edinburgh College of Art, we headed back to Baltimore via freighter. Nan figured our whole experience in Europe had cost us a total of \$3200 in government GI funds plus our own savings – twelve months at art schools perfecting our skills in pottery and another four months traveling through European countries.

Back in Baltimore I bought a city delivery truck, a really ancient thing, but it did have a place for us to sleep inside. We loaded up all our possessions (there weren't many) and started across the country for Boulder, Colorado.

The truck only went twenty-five miles an hour. We finally figured it was due to a governor on the engine. In addition, the radiator leaked and we had to stop every few miles and get out and pour water into it. Nan sat on an apple box because there was only a seat for the driver. We

arrived in Boulder and camped right in the heart of the city. (Now there are big buildings where we camped.)

### **Nan**

I managed to get a half-time job teaching in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. We were able then to rent a house where we could make pots, but only for nine months because the owners from Kansas came to live in it every summer. I became pregnant with our daughter Kate immediately after getting to Boulder.

We were asked to teach adjunct evening classes for the University of Colorado. Since there was only one pottery room at the university, they didn't have much space so we used our rented house. I had been a teacher and Jimmy had done some teaching so we just went ahead and did it. Several faculty men and women came to our house for those classes, including Ann Jones the university ceramics teacher, and we taught a number of women who went on to be very good potters. We were the only producing potters in Boulder at that time.

Shortly before the date of Kate's birth, Jimmy went to the university to be interviewed for a position as surveyor for the U.S. Geological Survey. He had taken a surveying course at the University of Washington and got the job because he was the only one interviewed.

We had to move out of the rented house after nine months, so we bought a 24-foot trailer by trading our old delivery truck for part of the price. We moved out of the nine-room house into the 24-foot trailer, and Kate was born a week later. I had a little glaze cupboard built into the trailer. Below it was a Jack Wolfe wheel we had bought in Baltimore in our early days. We had a Leach kick wheel, a lot of insulating firebrick from our kilns at Boulder and some nichrome wire. Jimmy also had a big army tent. Now we were all set with a baby, a dog and our pottery equipment.

### **Jim**

As soon as Kate had her six-week check up with the doctor, I loaded the government truck with the army tent, the Leach kick wheel, the insulating firebrick from our small electric kilns, and the nichrome wire. We also took some earthenware clay and cone 05 glaze materials. I hitched the truck up to the house trailer and Nan pulled a loaded luggage trailer with the old Plymouth that my father had given us.

### **Nan**

We headed north. Kate had to be nursed and have her diapers changed just south of Ft. Collins so we stopped. Jimmy said, "I'll go ahead and gas up the truck." (Pulling the trailer took a lot of gas.) So I said, "I'll find you later in Ft. Collins," which was a very small town at that time. Just then, a policeman came alongside and said, "You can't stop here." "Well," I said, "have to nurse my baby and change her diapers." He

seemed unconvinced so I drove down the main street pulling the trailer. I couldn't find Jimmy anywhere. Furthermore I was stymied because I had never pulled a trailer before and didn't know how to back up or turn around. So I had to go one mile north of town, a mile to the right, then a mile back into town to try and find him. I finally did and we drove on to Wyoming where we set up camp near a stream outside Lander.

Jimmy put the Leach wheel in the army tent along with the other equipment and materials and built a little kiln. In spite of his long working hours surveying in the mountains, he managed to make a few pots. I managed to squeeze in making a few small pots too between Kate's diaper changing and feeding and naps.

Jimmy was interested in finding a good propane-type burner for firing salt and reduction kilns. Actually, we tried out several kinds and fired our first salt glaze kiln.

### **Jim**

We were sent to a different area about every three months. After Lander, it was Lamar, Colorado then Amarillo, Texas and then back to Wyoming at Laramie in the early summer (with a vacation in Mexico.)

We were back in Boulder for the rest of the summer. I had told Alden McGrew, head of the art department at the University of Colorado, about Kate Horsman, our Edinburgh teacher. He was impressed and invited her to teach the summer session while Ann Jones was off. Paul Soldner decided to take her course so we became acquainted with Paul and Ginny and their little Stephanie who was a few months older than our Kate.

### **Nan**

Jim had moved some very heavy surveying equipment up in the mountains and had to have a hernia operation. So we decided to go back to Seattle. Things were getting rather claustrophobic in the trailer – in addition to our baby, we had by that time two dogs and six puppies. I was looking forward to living in a house again.

While we were in Seattle, Jimmy had an engineering job at Boeing. We made a few pots either in the garage where Jimmy had built a small electric kiln or in the trailer parked behind the house.

Peter Voulkos came to Seattle to give a workshop. Peggy, his wife, had been a very good student of mine in one of the drawing classes I had taught at the university when I was a graduate student. She had also taken pottery later under Paul Bonifas.

### **Jim**

We were very impressed with the workshop Pete gave in Seattle and were delighted to be invited to attend a workshop given that spring in Helena, Montana by Marguerite Wildenhain and Pete at the Archie Bray Foundation. In fact, we were so impressed with the Archie Bray

Foundation that I gave up my Boeing job and moved out to Montana. We lived in our trailer the first year.

The Archie Bray Foundation was an exciting experience for us and a great learning period. Pete was there for the first few months and then he left to go to Los Angeles. Then we worked with sculptor and potter Rudy Autio. Rudy made pots now and then but he was chiefly involved in sculpture and producing huge bas relief murals for churches and libraries, especially ones executed for Great Falls, Montana.

Peter gave several workshops at the Archie Bray while we were there. He was astounding in the way he did things. He was infallible and everything seemed to come so easily for him. We learned a lot watching Pete throw and decorate his magnificent pots – huge casseroles, vases, covered pieces, tea pots and plates. Everything went well for him – the worst thing I can remember happening to him was once a cat knocked over a beautiful porcelain vase that had just come out of the kiln and smashed it.

### **Nan**

Pete and Peggy's daughter Pier and Rudy and Lela's daughter Lisa and our Kate were all very close in age and played together. Later, after the Voulkoses left, we moved into their little house behind the pottery. Peter was a very handsome young man and all the ladies were just crazy about him.

### **Jim**

I had to learn how to fire the hard brick kiln that Archie Bray, Sr. had built with Rudy's and Pete's help. It had a gas pressure of about 5 pounds, no damper and a very tall chimney. Nevertheless we got some pretty amazing pots out of that kiln.

Nan and I taught the classes. I also did research for Archie Bray, Jr., an airline pilot until he took over the brick yard after the death of his ceramic engineer father. Each day I tested clays that were being used at the brick yard, trying to solve the problem they had with their bricks. Half of all their bricks cracked in the fire because, as I later determined, the clay wasn't mixed well enough. At one time they were losing 50% of the bricks fired in the beehive kilns. It would have done them in financially. Each day I made a number of test bars and put them through a heat stress test to see if they cracked. (Amazingly, all those thousands of test bars I did were stored away for reference.)

### **Nan**

Pete said he didn't want other people using his glazes so we started to work on new ones for ourselves. Before arriving at the Archie Bray Foundation we had done only low temperature firing so Jimmy spend a thousand hours testing glazes, starting with the empirical formulas and conducting line and triaxial blending. I also helped him.

We ended up having so many glazes that we had to pick and choose just a few to actually use. Many of them we used later when we were at Deerfield, Massachusetts.

That fall, Professor Ruth Pennington from the University of Washington had asked if we would teach ceramics at her Fidalgo Allied Arts six-week summer school on an island off the coast in Puget Sound. What a challenge! How could we furnish everything for a pottery in an empty building, build a kiln, and then tear everything down and take it away at the end of the six weeks?

So during the remainder of the winter at the Archie Bray Foundation we squeezed in time to work on our first three-chamber kiln. We decided that a three-chamber kiln was a little impractical and settled for two chambers, the first for high temperature glaze firing and the second for biscuit firing with left-over heat which, in a one-chamber kiln, is wasted up the chimney.

### **Jim**

It so happened that back in 1950-51, while living in Boulder, we once drove down to Colorado Springs to look up a potter named Edgar Johnson, quite an amusing fellow, a graduate of Alfred. Edgar showed us a very small kiln he had built with a sort of arch made out of loose brick. He fired elegant little cast porcelains to cone 12(!) in it.

Now I had already built a number of kilns. In fact, my thesis at the University of Washington was a kiln project. As an undergraduate engineering student, I remember I was taught the standard doctrine that everything had to be constructed in an orderly fashion with steel and other permanent structural material, and once built it couldn't be altered. It was thought better to build a new kiln than to alter it. Of course, by this time I had built several small loose brick electric kilns for my mother to use and for our teaching and work in Boulder.

I do not know of any historical precedence for this kind of loose brick kiln. My engineering background had acquainted me with standard but complicated and method-oriented techniques of industrial kiln construction, but in the situation we were faced with for the Fidalgo Allied Arts it seemed necessary and logical to have everything as portable as possible. As I look back on it, I don't think we anticipated any great difficulties from this process. I think we didn't want the bother with arch bricks, or with building up a structure to hold them. That's when we thought of putting metal rods through the loose brick to construct the kiln roof.

### **Nan**

About this time Jimmy also discovered the right kind of propane burner. While on one of his early morning runs, he saw a crew from a county truck burning weeds along the road, using propane gas to fuel their burner. He

immediately realized it was just the kind of burner needed for the portable loose brick kiln.

In addition, we finally got the sizes of the two chambers just right in order to reach cone 9-10 for glaze firing in the first chamber. Then we adjusted the hold between the first and second chamber (brick-end size, 2 1/2 x 4 1/2 in.) in order to reach cone 08-06 for biscuit firing, and put an ordinary stove pipe up for the chimney. We were set. It worked!

### **Jim**

We loaded the red Chevrolet truck with pails of glaze, a couple of potters' wheels, boxes of insulating firebricks, everything we needed for a six-week course at Fidalgo Allied Arts. It all turned out most successfully, and Ruth Pennington asked us back to do the same thing but on a different island the following summer.

### **Nan**

Neither Jimmy nor I can remember which one of us saw an announcement in a ceramic publication about the need for a potter in the historic village of Old Deerfield in Massachusetts. To check out the situation, Jim got a ride with a student returning to a college not far from Deerfield. When he got there, he thought Old Deerfield with its academy and mile-long row of ancient houses looked interesting. There was a small grade school within a short distance of Old Bloody Brook Tavern for Katie to attend. We made the decision to move.

In June we again loaded up the trusty red truck along with ah huge trailer Jimmy had built. Into the trailer we put our biscuit and finished pots, burners and bricks for the kiln, a clay mixer Jimmy had made out of an old hot water tank, and our few personal possessions. What a load! I had a feeling we might not make it and, sure enough, five miles from Deerfield the trailer began to sag to one side. I gunned my vehicle and drove past Jimmy yelling in my loudest school teacher voice, "The trailer's broken!" he simply turned into a filling station and let the poor thing die right there in a vacant lot.

We unloaded, got sort of organized for Old Bloody Brook Tavern, and began building our loose brick kiln.

### **Jim**

The kiln was a top loader. It was easy for Nan to stack because she could reach down into the kiln to position heavy shelves and pots rather than lifting them up high, as we did with the one at Archie Bray. We also used the top of the kiln to store pots between firings, which were every three weeks.

Another aspect of this kind of kiln was its ability to expand. When we first tried, it took not more than half a day to enlarge the kiln and get it ready for the next firing. We had never done this before, although we knew theoretically that we could.

While we were at Deerfield, a Japanese potter named Teruo Hara came to work with us. I had invited him to come and stay with us because one day he called up and said, "You've got to come and rescue me – my whole pottery burned down!" I got into my truck and drove south to Boston where he lived and loaded all his surviving equipment aboard and moved him back to our place in Deerfield.

Hara had a very important exhibition coming up in Florida, for which he had to make a lot of pottery and sculpture. Our kiln, however, wasn't large enough to fire all the things he had to by a certain time. So Hara and I removed the end of the kiln and added about thirty percent more volume to the space. This was the very first time we had done this. Eventually we added about fifty percent to the kiln and a fifth burner.

Now I began to get a fair number of inquiries from people about the kiln, even from overseas. I remember that before long I had a huge stack of correspondence from people all over the world who had written asking for plans of the kiln.

Toshiko Takaezu, for one, was able to build a kiln based on our plans. I remember meeting Toshiko in Hawaii before Pearl Harbor. She was, in fact, the first serious potter I had ever met. While I was stationed in Hawaii, I had a chance to visit a small ceramics plant high above Waikiki and just below the crest of the ridge. At the time Toshiko was employed there as the person in charge of casting ash trays. She couldn't have been more than eighteen years old. I was only twenty-one myself.

## **Nan**

Jimmy would send out information and photos everywhere – Australia, Japan, France, Canada, and of course all over the USA. An architect friend took pity on us and said, "You can't spend all your life sending out this information. You need help." He drew up plans and converted them to blue prints for us to send out for \$10.

While working at Deerfield we were asked to prepare a number of exhibitions for the next year. It was a lot of work for a very short time. Our first exhibit was for America House in New York City, the next at the George Walter Vincent Smith Museum in Springfield, MA, and the third at Deerfield Academy.

We made lots of pots, and just about the time we finished we were also invited to have an exhibition at the Sharon Art Center in Peterborough, New Hampshire. We were out of both pots and energy. There was a moment for panic. What to do?

We surveyed the display room and found a number of rather sad-looking pots still left on the shelves. After thinking it over we decided to try and fix them up. Jimmy retouched some of his brushwork and we sprayed and syringed a mixture of scrap glaze plus 8% rutile on others – anything to make them better. We hoped.

## **Jim**

We added two layers of soft bricks to the top walls of the kiln to accommodate the larger load and refired all the pots. When we opened the kiln everything looked beautiful! We had the best show at Sharon of all the four engagements.

Not everything was so successful, however. Once we bought some firebricks in Deerfield that we thought would be reasonably correct for our kiln but they failed in the first firing at cone 10 and all the ware sagged down. Only the pots held up the load of shelves. [Laughter] so you learn. Every single potter has to learn what works. I don't care where they are – every potter has a different experience.

## **Nan**

At that time we were one of the first potters in New England to fire high temperature reduction stoneware. At Deerfield some funny things happened when visitors came into our display room after seeing the historical colonial rooms. Stoneware was a rather unfamiliar word to most. One visitor asked, "Are these Indian pots?" and another wondered if they were Persian pots. Once a woman exclaimed: "Oh, stoneware!" her friend then asked, "Do they chip out the stone and pour glaze over it?"

## **Jim**

The very famous pottery team of Edwin and Mary Scheier asked us if we would take over their teaching at the University of New Hampshire in Durham while they were on sabbatical in Mexico. I was able to be at the university to teach for the full nine months, but since we earned our rent at the Old Bloody Brook Tavern by taking people through the historical part of the house, Nan could be there only for the six months that the tavern was closed to visitors.

Nan came up later to Durham and we built two more temporary loose brick kilns at the university to give students experience in reduction firing, as the Scheiers used only electric kilns. We got some great firings out of the propane kiln, using the second chamber for salt glazing. We also built an oil-drip kiln somewhat based on kilns in Britain, but it was not as successful as the propane one.

We had been in Deerfield almost four years when I was asked to apply at the University of Iowa. After teaching a ten-week summer session at the University of Colorado, we arrived in Iowa City. We were there for the next six years, minus the academic year of 1965-66 when we taught at Alfred University.

In 1963 I attended a Hamada six-week summer workshop in San Jose, California. Hamada brought his eldest son Shinsaku, who had just married, to be his assistant. Shinsaku passed out copies of Hamada's "One Hundred Tea Bowls" in color. About forty people from all over the U.S. attended the workshop.

I enjoyed Shinsaku a lot. Hamada was brilliant. He lectured every morning from 8:30 to 11:00, speaking better English than anyone in the

workshop. In the afternoon he worked all by himself in another room, but his son worked out where we were so we were able to watch him throw very large forms on the wheel. We all got a lot out of the experience.

**Nan**

I took a following three-week workshop with Hamada at the University of Washington. I had taught along at Fidalgo while Jimmy was at the San Jose workshop, and when Hamada came up to the university, Jimmy took care of Kate while I took the workshop. This was a great experience, too.

**Jim**

I dropped in on Nan's workshop two or three times just to see what was going on. This workshop was managed in a somewhat different way from the San Jose one and there were some problems. Bob Sperry was in charge, but a mortuary man had been hired to build a complicated kiln that was very hard to control. On the first biscuit firing it automatically went off at cone 9. [Laughter] Hamada was shaken – all those shrunken little pots.

**Nan**

We were asked to fill in at Alfred for Bob Turner – Jimmy for the second-year graduate students while I taught the senior class.

**Jim**

One day Dan Rhodes called for me while we were at Alfred and said he wanted to see me. "I decided you should go to Japan," he said – just like that. "I'm on the committee that makes decisions on the Fulbright awards," he informed me, and insisted that I apply. So I spent the whole summer getting all my material together, with information on names and places of people to see. Alfred University wanted me to teach their summer course, but I thought it better to spend my time getting ready for the application.

When we returned to the University of Iowa that fall, I discovered that a foundation called the Hill Family Foundation offered grants to faculty members who qualified. I already had done so much work preparing for the Fulbright that I decided to apply to the Hill Foundation instead and forget the Fulbright.

When the Hill Family Foundation grant came through I decided to go. Originally, the grant was only for a nine-month period, but we stretched it to ten.

**Nan**

It was an exciting experience to be in Japan. The Hill Family Foundation said we must visit the schools they sponsored that taught English. Consequently we traveled around Japan and visited those schools as we were supposed to. We tried studying the Japanese language at the

Naganuma school in Kyoto but since we were older we didn't get very far. It would have been better to study directly under a Japanese person. Our daughter Kate learned more Japanese in her high school in Kobe than we ever did.

In the meantime, we worked with Kenji Kato in Tajimi. We found his name through the Bedai ceramic school in Kyoto. Every week we took the train out to Tajimi on Monday morning, and returned on Friday. Kate was a boarding student in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade at the Canadian Academy in Kobe. She had to take three trains to get back and forth while we only had to ride two. We enjoyed the train and loved o'bento's for lunch, after we got acquainted with them. On weekends we were all together in our small three-bedroom apartment in Kyoto.

### **Jim**

Kenji Kato spoke pretty good English. He grew up during the war, and told me that in order to get ahead in post-war Japan it was important to speak English well. He was the only one I knew who could tell me about Tomimoto. Tomimoto and Bernard Leach were the last two people to study under Kenzan VI. When their period of training ended, Kenzan VI offered his title to Tomimoto, who declined, so the title went to Leach, who theoretically became Kenzan VII. Since, however, Leach had no parental connections in Japan and also since he felt apparently that there was little honor attached to it, the domain came to an end.

### **Nan**

While we were in Kyoto, Leach and his wife Janet came over. Janet had a large show in Tokyo and Bernard gave some lectures. Hamada also had a wonderful show. We went up from Tajimi to Tokyo to see Hamada's show at the big department store where they have so many galleries. In order to catch our train to Tokyo we had to get up very early. I was tired by the time we arrived in Tokyo but went to see Hamada's exhibition which I had opened earlier that day. Hamada was there and told us, "I want to take you to tea." He took us down to the tea room and ordered a dessert made of hazelnuts and whipped cream. I was so tired and hungry. I'll never forget that as long as I live. It was the best dessert I've ever had in my life.

### **Jim**

In Kyoto we also became close friends with Kanjiro Kawai's nephew, Takeichi, who ran the pottery after his famous uncle died. Through him we were able to watch the rebuilding of their wood kiln, and even put pots into the first firing. I was sorry we did because the first firing of any kiln is mostly a learning experience – the results there were less than great. We also were able to put our pots in some of the more ancient kilns in Kyoto.

## **Nan**

While we were in Kyoto we met a potter from New Zealand who was studying directly under Takeichi. He kindly let us use his tiny studio. It was about the size of two or three telephone booths put together, and we did all our glazing out in the alley. But it was a nice experience.

## **Jim**

Later we went up on the train to Mashiko to visit Hamada and decided to stay at a small inn near the station. It so happened that I had once met a young man who gave a workshop at the University of Iowa after I had gone to Alfred to teach. Later he came to Alfred and stayed with Dan Rhodes. He was very anxious for us to visit his place in Mashiko while we were in Japan. His father, Totaro Sakuma, was Hamada's best friend, having been Hamada's most devout student when Hamada returned from England years before.

Well, the younger son of this neighbor and close friend of Hamada got word through the people at the train station that we had been seen on the train. At 11:00 o'clock in the evening he came down to the inn where we were staying and insisted that we leave and come stay with him. We did, but not until the following night when we were also to have dinner with his family.

The next morning we visited his father's wonderful pottery where a television crew was running around getting shots of Totaro Sakuma working. In the afternoon we visited Hamada after he returned from Tokyo, where he was then the director of the Folk Museum. Hamada asked us to stay for dinner, but we explained that we were to be at the young Sakuma's house for dinner. Hamada just picked up the phone and told Sakuma that he was changing our plans – that he was making *sukiyaki* for us. After dinner he took us out to the huge Japanese house where he stored his amazing collection of not only pots but many other beautifully crafted articles which had caught his eye.

I think one of the reasons why Hamada went out of his way to be so helpful toward us was because of something I had done for him while he was in Seattle for his second workshop. At that time Hamada had seen and admired a special kind of wristwatch worn

Westword presented the McKinnells one of their coveted Best of Denver 2000 awards, the “Best Ceramics Duet.” This is what Westword had to say about the duo:

Susan Sagara, an assistant curator at the Arvada Center, crammed a couple of the lower-level galleries with more than a hundred pots for Time in Tandem: James and Nan McKinnell Retrospective. The McKinnells, now retired, were globe-trotting beatniks from the 1940s to the 60s. They landed in Boulder and Denver a few times before finally settling outside of Fort Collins three decades ago. The show included their student work and the work that later made them famous locally and nationally. A real revelation of the show was how distinct each one’s work was from that of the other: James follows the Japanese-inspired tradition, the main current in contemporary ceramics, while Nan’s pieces look like handmade versions of industrial design. Through the great volume of worthwhile pieces it presented, the Arvada show revealed that the McKinnells are among the best potters to have ever worked in Colorado.

Jim and Nan McKinnell have been included in annual pottery exhibits throughout their prestigious career, beginning in 1955.

### **Selected Two-Person Exhibitions**

1958- America House, New York, New York  
1959- De Cordova Museum, Lincoln, Massachusetts  
1960- George Walter Vincent Smith Museum, Springfield, Massachusetts  
1960- Greenwich House, New York, New York  
1962- Art Center, Kalamazoo, Michigan  
1965- L'Atelier Gallery, Cedar Falls, Iowa  
1966- Alfred University, Alfred, New York  
1967- Dubuque Art Association, Dubuque, Iowa  
1970- Scottish Craft Center, Edinburgh, Scotland  
1971- Colorado State University, Ft. Collins, Colorado  
1973- Glasgow School of Art, Glasgow, Scotland  
1974- Lodestone Gallery, Boulder, Colorado  
1975- Metropolitan State College, Denver, Colorado  
1979- Guest Artists Utah State University, Logan, Utah  
1981- Sangre de Cristo Art Center, Pueblo, Colorado  
1986- Retrospective, Beaumont Gallery, Loretto Heights College, Denver, Colorado  
1988- Featured Artists and Lifetime Achievement Award, Colorado Gallery of the Arts, Littleton, Colorado  
1990- "Reaching Forward, Looking Back," Arvada Center for the Arts and Humanities, Arvada, Colorado  
1991- Michener Library Gallery, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, Colorado  
1993- "Clay and Fire: A Journey," Retrospective, Shwayder Art Building Gallery, University of Denver, Denver, Colorado

### **Other exhibits:**

The Wichita Art Association\*; Wichita, KS.  
Fiber, Clay and Metal; St. Paul, MN.  
The Syracuse Ceramic National\* and International; Syracuse, NY.  
The Miami National\*; Miami, FL.  
The Brussel's World Fair; Brussels, Belgium.  
The International Exposition of Ceramics\*; Prague, Czechoslovakia.  
Scripps College Invitational; Claremont, CA.  
Designer Craftsmen U.S.A.\*; Museum of Contemporary Crafts; New York City, NY.  
Greenwich House; New York City, NY.  
Massachusetts Association of Craftsmen\*; Andover, MA.  
Midwest Designer Craftsmen; Kalamazoo, MI.

International Exhibition of Ceramic Art\*, Kiln Club of Washington, D.C.  
Iowa Designer Craftsmen; Davenport, IA.  
Art in the Embassies, Smithsonian Institute; Washington, D.C.  
Festival Exhibition; Edinburgh, Scotland.  
Society of Scottish Artists, Royal Scottish Museum; Edinburgh, Scotland.  
The Archie Bray Foundation Exhibition; Washington, D.C.  
The Craftsman's Art, Victoria and Albert Museum; London, England.  
Glasgow School of Art; Glasgow, Scotland.  
Colorado Artists, Denver Art Museum; Denver, CO.  
National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts\*; Greeley, CO.  
Ceramics West, Utah State University; Forgan, UT.  
Sangre de Cristo Art Center; Pueblo, CO.  
International Ceramics 1990, Kansas State University; Manhattan, KS.  
Arvada Center for the Arts and Humanities; Arvada, CO.  
Colorado Teapots, Arapahoe Community College; Littleton, CO.  
American Craft Council\*; New York City, NY.

\* indicates award

### **Permanent Collections**

The Everson Museum, Syracuse, New York • Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D.C. • Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England • Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Massachusetts • Alfred University Museum, Alfred, New York • The Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh, Scotland • Museum of Contemporary Crafts, New York City • Vance Kirkland Museum, Denver, Colorado • Arizona State University Art Museum, Tempe, Arizona • AMOCA (American Museum of Ceramic Art), Pomona, California.