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# The Living Tradition: A Comparison of Three Southern Folk Potteries

John A. Burrison

In *THE HAND MADE OBJECT AND ITS MAKER*, folklorist Michael Owen Jones asks,

Is our subject matter just things, and may we content ourselves with the collection and study of artifacts? . . . not pot or chair, but pottery or chair production and consumption: what needs to be examined is not object or entity so much as process and event. . . Investigation of living human beings who are making and using things adds a dimension lacking in research for many decades; and observations of contemporary craftsmen offer insight for understanding objects made long ago about which little is now known (1975: 11, 13, 241).

Anthropologist C. Nootenboom makes the point even more strongly:

The art-object as such is nothing. It has value through the qualities it receives at the hands of man. This man. . . is the real object of the inquiry (Haselberger 1961: 372).

While we might argue that the artifact alone does have value, both intrinsically and, when it is "read" properly, for what it reveals of its maker and his culture (Glassie 1975), most of us would agree, even if we had never overtly so expressed it, that we study artifacts such as pottery largely to learn about human behavior. As a test of this implicit motivation, how many of us have fantasized about returning by time machine to the days of the potter whose kiln we are excavating or for whom we are searching historical documents, so that we can confront him face to face for answers to the many questions that nag us, and observe him actually producing ware?

Archeology and historical records are two important tools for understanding past behavior, but they do not begin to tell the whole story, and I know of no reputable archeologist or historian who would claim otherwise. The folklorist, who is trained to study living traditions and trace their temporal and spatial distribution, may be able to contribute to a fuller appreciation of early American pottery by examining pottery-making where it is still a living tradition.

Two of the features which are said to characterize the South as a region - its innate con-

servatism and the retention of an agrarian economy and life-style well into the 20th century - help explain why small shops run by traditionally trained farmer-potters survive today while their counterparts in the industrialized North disappeared years ago. There is a handful of potters in the South still using techniques and producing wares that to some degree represent the earlier regional tradition, while others now involved in essentially non-traditional ceramics belong to families which earlier had made folk pottery. From this group as a whole there is much to learn about the base tradition and the way it has been affected by the accelerated social and technological changes of this century. For this paper, however, I have chosen to dwell on three potters who participate most strongly in the older regional tradition, in order to suggest some of the human and technological dimensions of pottery-making as it might have been carried on in the deep South during the 19th century, a period for which records - both written and artifactual - are fragmentary at best.

It would be a mistake, however, to think of these potters as living fossils. Operating in ways unchanged for a century or more and geographically isolated though they are, all have been exposed to the outside world through school, service, the mass media, and by visits from outsiders. This contact has inevitably affected their approach to pottery-making (Sayers 1971). Keeping this qualification in mind, it is nevertheless astounding, in the face of modern ways of making things, to witness this survival of a pre-industrial technology, most of the components of which are still intact. It is as close to a time-machine visit to early American potters as one will ever experience, and more real than a costumed museum demonstration. One must also recognize that the earlier folk potters did not live in total isolation either, and that their work, too, was sometimes affected by change from the outside. The Bells, and other 19th century potters of the Shenandoah Valley, for example, made decorative pieces strongly patterned after popular English industrial wares, in addition to their more traditional utilitarian line (Wiltshire 1975).

Before turning to our three potters, it will be helpful to mention some terminology used by the folk potters themselves, which differs from that of studio potters and writers on ceramics.

Southern folk potters do not throw pots, they "turn ware"; the potter's wheel is often called a lathe or "turnin lay". Instead of firing, they "burn" their ware in a wood-fueled kiln (pronounced "kill").

#### MEADERS POTTERY

Lanier Meaders is the best known of the three potters to be examined, having been featured in print and film, and his wares now command high prices among collectors outside the region. He works in the foothills of northeast Georgia at the site where his grand father, John, established the Meaders Pottery in 1893 (Burrison 1976: 11). John himself was not a potter, but he built the shop as a business for his sons, hiring two local potters to work there until his oldest boys could learn the trade. Some 70 folk potters have operated in the community since the 1830's; the Meaders family thus entered the craft late, but carried it on after the rest had abandoned it. At least since the 1840's, the kind of pottery made there has been alkaline-glazed stoneware, using either slaked wood-ashes or lime as a fluxing agent along with clay and sand or its later substitute, powdered glass (Burrison 1975). The wood ash type is known locally as "Shanghai" glaze.

Lanier's father, Cheever, was the youngest of John Meaders six sons. Cheever learned pottery-making from his older brothers, who later set up their own shops in the area, leaving him to take over the original operation in 1920. Cheever continued to serve the needs of north Georgia farm families by hauling his jugs, churns, and milk pitchers by wagon, and later truck, to general and hardware stores all over the hills. In 1937 Allen Eaton's classic, *Handicrafts of the Southern Highlands*, introduced the Meaders Pottery to the world beyond those hills (Eaton 1973: 212-14, opp. 139, 142-42, 291).

Lanier Meaders, named after Georgia poet Sidney Lanier, was born in 1917. His introduction to pottery came early; he remembers crawling on all fours watching his father at work in the shop and enjoyed riding the head-block of the potter's wheel as his older brother spun it around. When old enough to help, Lanier led the mule around in the pottery yard to mix the clay, made up clay balls for his father to turn, and helped "set" and unload the kiln; later, he dug clay and chopped wood. By the age of 13 he was learning to turn, and at 16 he burned the first load of his own ware, one-gallon pitchers and small churns that were so heavy the handles on some broke as they were being lifted onto the truck. Two years later he joined the United States Army, seeing combat in Europe as a paratrooper during World War II. Following his discharge, Lanier returned home, and spent the next 20 years commuting 84 miles each day to a job at a steel fabricating plant, only helping at the pottery occasionally on weekends.

In 1967, when the Smithsonian Institution was filming a documentary on the Meaders Pottery, Cheever became too ill to work, so Lanier stepped in to demonstrate. At this point, with his father in declining health, Lanier involved himself more actively in the craft, producing loads of face jugs for the Smithsonian sales shop. With Cheever's death several months later, Lanier made the commitment to becoming a full-time potter. His three brothers had long since chosen factory jobs with the security of a steady income to support their families, so Lanier was the obvious choice to take over the family business. The flexibility in working hours and the opportunity to be his own boss offered a definite improvement over his previous job which had been wearing down his health.

The few changes Lanier has made in production methods have permitted him to function more efficiently as a one-man operation; otherwise he might not have survived for long. As early as 1960, in order to ease the laborious task of refining clay for his father and permit the old mule, Jason, to retire, he replaced the old wooden "mud mill" with an electric motor-powered one. In 1967 he recycled many of the bricks from Cheever's kiln, which became inoperable after the Smithsonian filming, into a new kiln closely patterned on the older ones, but with the addition of oil-burner assists to simplify the "blasting off" process toward the end of the firing. Dissatisfied with this system, however, he has since reverted to wood fuel alone, using sawmill slabs obtained from a nearby lumber company. Lanier also has modified the traditional alkaline glaze formulas by substituting commercially processed ingredients - whiting, feldspar, and Albany slip - for the lime, pulverized glass, and creek "settlings" which had required the use of the hand-operated glaze mill, thus eliminating what he describes as a "man-killing" job (Figure 1).

In other respects, Lanier's manner of working differs little from that of his father. He still weighs his clay on the home-made scales with their plowpoint counterweights and uses his father's treadle-operated kickwheel, complete with height-gauge stick and the ball-opener lever which gauges a uniform bottom thickness for larger pieces. Like his father, he "pieces" his churns, turning them in two sections which are then joined, and incises the customary accenting line or two around the shoulder. He burns his 17 feet long by 8 feet wide "tunnel" kiln on the average of once every three weeks except during the winter, when the dampness makes it difficult to fire.

Initially, Lanier, like earlier potters in his community, did not sign his work. By 1968, however, increasing outside attention made him self-conscious enough about his role as one of America's last folk potters to begin incising his name in script on the bottoms of his pieces. He continues to make many of the same utilitarian wares as his father,



Figure 1. Meaders Pottery glaze mill (potter's quern) once used to mix and refine alkaline glaze, now retired. Upper stone "runner" rests on vertical shaft which can be adjusted to change fineness of grind; photograph shows how upper end of handle is boxed into framing of kiln shelter.

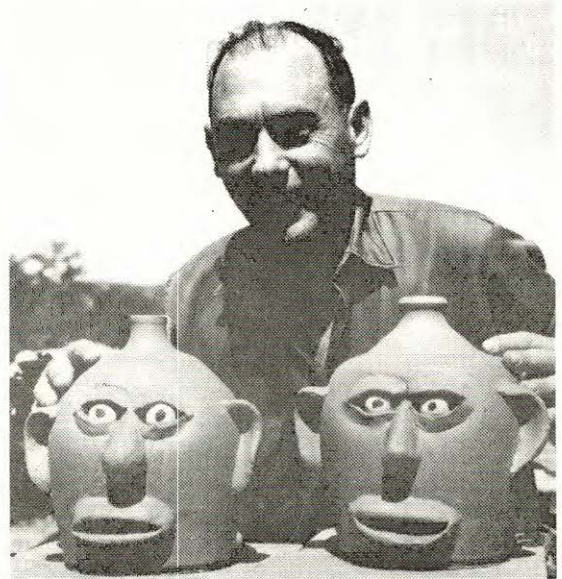


Figure 2. Lanier Meaders in 1968, with unfired face jugs made for the Smithsonian sales shop. Photograph by Kenneth Rogers, courtesy of Andrew Sparks, editor, *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution Magazine*.

partly in response to community needs. Outside interest, however, has prompted the addition of new items to his repertoire, and his work has shown a progression in certain respects since he first took over the shop. This is especially evident in his face jugs, the earliest examples of which were quite basic (Figure 2). His father produced no more than a few dozen face jugs in his career, but publicity has made this Lanier's most popular item, so that by now he has turned out several thousand. Although he would rather make other things which require less attention to detail, he finds it more stimulating to make the features and expression of each face a bit different and has reserved this form as a vehicle for revolutionary change. By 1968 he was experimenting with modeling the damp jug walls so that they more closely followed the configurations of the human face, and now he consistently applies this sculptural approach, extending it to mutations like wig-stand heads. Sometimes, new ideas result from customer preference, as when in 1975 a folk-art dealer in Virginia requested some two-face jugs, which soon became one of Lanier's best sellers.

His mother, Arie, has also influenced his work.

Once her children were grown, she began working with Cheever in the shop, first applying decorative motifs like grape clusters and dogwood blossoms to his wares, and, finally, from 1957 to 1969, producing her own line of "art" pottery, brightly colored with mail-order chemicals and designed outside the local tradition. Lanier draws on her ideas for pieces such as his grape vases. Imagination, however, has been present in his work from the beginning, as exemplified by his laser jug, included in the maiden firing of his new kiln in 1967 (Figure 3). Having read an article in a popular science magazine on lasers, which he interpreted as concentrated red and blue light, he was inspired to build two large ash-glazed pieces patterned on the traditional double-handled syrup jug form, each with holes in the sides to receive lightbulb sockets. The two mouths were to face each other and create a deadly cutting laser beam. The experiment, however, was never completed, as one jug was ruined in the firing. The surviving laser jug serves to remind us that with today's folk potters surrounded by modern technology, virtually any combination of the old with the new is possible.

#### BURLON CRAIG

The second potter to be considered is Burlon Craig, a gentle giant who works in the western Piedmont of North Carolina. Burlon's community has maintained an alkaline-glazed stoneware tradition since at least the mid-19th century (Zug 1979: 50-54).



Figure 3. "Laser jug" made by Lanier Meaders in 1967. Height: 17½ inches. Unmodified (mill-ground) ash glaze. From author's collection.

Born into a non-potting family in 1914, Burl first became involved in the craft at the age of 12, when a local potter named James Lynn hired him at 10¢ an hour to help get wood and clay. In his spare time he would "fool around on the wheel", until, by the age of 15, he had become serious about turning. He then hired out to other potters in the area, including the Reinhardt brothers, until he joined the United States Navy during World War II. When the war ended, he purchased his present home from potter Harvey Reinhardt, located just 400 yards from where he first learned the craft.

Until his recent retirement, Burl balanced pottery-making with a part-time job in the machine room of a nearby furniture factory. He therefore customarily burns only four to six kilns of ware a year, although his "ground-hog" kiln, which he inherited from Reinhardt when he bought the property, is larger than Lanier's, measuring 24 feet by 12 feet.

Of the practicing Southern folk potters, Burl may be the most traditional. Perhaps his most fascinating piece of equipment is a water-powered trip-hammermill of the sort used by local potters to pulverize the glass used for their "glass glaze", a type of alkaline glaze. Burl mixes the powdered glass with wood-ash, clay, and water in his muscle-powered, stone glaze mill, the last of its kind still in use. Using a full truck-load of sawmill scraps as fuel, it takes about ten hours to burn his kiln, a relatively short time when compared with stoneware potters in other parts of the country but characteristic of his area, possibly because the clay there is less pure and requires a shorter time to mature. Burl pays a friend to help feed the large fire-

box, a sweaty job which intensifies during the "blasting off" of the last few hours.

When North Carolina folklorist Charles G. (Terry) Zug introduced me to Burl in 1977, his repertoire of forms seemed to be somewhat more limited than Lanier's, emphasizing 4-gallon pickling jars which double as churns, unglazed flowerpots and face jugs. Unlike Lanier, however, Burl makes his face jugs in a range of sizes, from tiny miniatures up to five-gallons. The moderately ovoid jug wall is not altered by the kind of sculpting now employed by Lanier. Facial details, such as the comb-incised eyebrows and upper lip, squared-off ears and nose, and eyes made of the same clay as the rest of the jug, are applied rather than modeled into the surface and recur with predictable regularity (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Pint-sized face jug made by Burl Craig in 1977. Height: 5½ inches. Glass glaze. From author's collection.

A number of older local potters of Burl's acquaintance had also made face jugs. He marks gallon numbers on his jars using an old set of stamps with hand-carved lead faces and wooden handles which he acquired from an earlier potter and of a type traditional in that locale. Shortly before my first visit, he also began marking all his ware with his name and post office using a stamp made for him by a local collector. In the past few years, encouragement from collectors, dealers, and folklorists has prompted Burl to revive some of the older local forms with which he had become acquainted in his early career, including ring jugs, "monkey" (harvest) jugs, five-necked jugs (quintals) for cut flowers, cream pots, and chamber pots. He also has been perfecting swirl-wares which alternate stripes of light and dark clay, a decorative specialty of the Reinhardts.

The clay Burl uses contains small white quartz embedments which partially melt when fired, as well as a metallic impurity, rutile (titanium dioxide) in combination with iron, which produces an unintentionally decorative milky-blue streaking in the glass glaze. In this respect as well, his ware maintains a continuity with that of earlier local potters; indeed, Burl has had some amusing confrontations with antique dealers at nearby flea markets, who unknowingly tried to sell him his own work as high-priced antiques.

#### GERALD STEWART

The last potter, Gerald Stewart, works in a section of east-central Mississippi that was never a pottery center. His potter father, Homer, moved there from South Carolina in the 1880's, setting up a log shop and mule turned clay mill. Homer glazed his ware mainly with Albany slip, but he was also known to have used salt and ash glazes and, later, white Bristol glaze with cobalt-blue bands (Mellen 1939: 69-70).

Gerald, who was born in 1917, began working in his dad's shop when eight years old, doing light chores like making up small balls of clay. By the age of 16 he was producing marketable ware. He and his oldest brother James ran the business after their father died. Eventually abandoning the old place, each brother set up his own operation in the community. Gerald's shop, established in 1968, is smaller and more old fashioned, producing hand made wares, a substantial percentage of which is glazed. (His brother's shop is more mechanized, employing semi-skilled workers who primarily turn out unglazed garden pottery.)

For his glaze, Stewart exclusively uses Albany slip. What attracted me to his work was the greenish deposits of melted fly-ash blown by the kiln draft from the firebox onto the wares, to contrast pleasingly against the otherwise uniform brown. However, when Stewart switched from wood to gas fuel in 1973 this effect was lost. Since he assigned no aesthetic value to the fly-ash, the change in the appearance of his wares does not concern him. He burns his compact, 12 foot by 8 foot kiln every two weeks throughout the year; this regularity can be partly attributed to the milder winters in his section of the South as well as dependence on pottery-making as his sole means of support. Churns are his most popular item, and he says he "can't make enough of them, what with customers wanting them to pickle vegetables." He enjoys making churns the best, but when he tires of them he switches to other items such as unglazed Rebekah pitchers and chimney-flue thimbles. Like Burlon Craig, he decorates his hand-turned flowerpots with scalloping and ornamental bands impressed with a coggle wheel improvised from a plastic furni-

ture caster. Unlike the two other potters, he does not sign his work.

Gerald Stewart's most unusual products are the partly glazed, dome top cylinders and oblong posts used as grave markers in several local cemeteries, for which he charges \$3 apiece. He claims his brother James originated these, but similar grave pots and molded slabs were once produced throughout the South; to my knowledge, Gerald is the last to make them. Unlike those elsewhere, his are not intended as tombstone substitutes or planters, rather four are placed at the corners of an individual grave or family plot as boundary markers.

In examining the lives and work of these three potters, there are significant points of comparison that may not already be apparent. All three are of the same generation, born within three years of one another. All left home for the first time to fight in World War II. Gerald Stewart represents at least the third generation of a Southern pottery family; Lanier Meaders is a second generation potter, while Burlon Craig is the first of his family to become involved in the local pottery tradition. Yet all three seem to be the final link in the chain of transmission --Burlon's children are not interested in maintaining the craft, while Gerald and Lanier have no heirs. Even so, these potters are not so old that they cannot look forward to at least another productive decade. Lanier and Burlon are the last folk potters producing alkaline-glazed stoneware, while Gerald is the last to make ceramic grave markers, both distinctly regional traditions.

Of the three potters, Lanier seems to have the most ambiguous feelings about the craft. At times, the pressures of maintaining the family business and the compulsive attraction of the shop have been so powerful that he has had to push himself away for weeks or months to relieve the tension. Yet, of the three, he has shown the most creativity within the boundaries of the tradition; he is constantly experimenting with and refining his wares with a self-conscious artistry that belies his denials of being an artist. There is a restlessness in his nature that may partly account for his innovations; the attraction of an outside market with its subsequent customer influence plus the artistic visions of his mother acting as a stimulant have also had their impact. Yet, while Lanier may have ranged farthest from the inherited core tradition, he has done so in a way that revitalizes that tradition rather than abandons it, and thus he manages to retain his integrity as a folk potter.

If these three living potters have taught us one lesson we can apply to their long dead counterparts in whatever geographic area we are studying, it is that while the regional pottery tradition served as a model and frame of reference, it still allowed them the freedom to express their individual personalities in their work, and to solve the technological and artistic problems that confronted them.

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