Ghost Pots of Marion County

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GHOST POTS OF MARION COUNTY

BY LINDA STOLTZ AND NORMA BROOKS

The authors of the following article have worked since October 1965, to prepare the story of the old pottery kilns of Marion county. Both women are employed by the Iowa State Department of History and Archives—Linda works in the Census department and Norma is circulation manager of the Annals of Iowa. The quest for old pottery began when Linda learned that her great-great-grandfather, T. H. Smith, was one of the first potters in Coalport, Iowa, around 1860. The search expanded and soon they were making discoveries about the pottery industries of Whitebreast, Attica, and Knoxville. Neither of the two women has ever had any schooling in archeology, but thanks to the help of several people they soon were confidently making progress. The pottery items discussed in this article are now on display in the Historical Building, Des Moines.

A trickle of a stream that used to be a tributary for the Des Moines river where steamboats chugged along . . . farm land and timber where the growing communities of Coalport and Whitebreast were . . . and where the pottery industry which was so important to the growth of Marion county once existed, now only the ghost pots remain.

These communities were built on the abundance of coal, clay, timber and fertile farm land. Beginning in 1843 when
Iowa was still part of the Wisconsin territory, people came from Virginia, North Carolina and Pennsylvania to settle in this rich land. These people differed from the trappers and explorers who came before them, for they wanted to develop towns, government and industry so they worked hard together to achieve these goals.

The towns of Coalport, Whitebreast, Attica and Knoxville each played a part in the development of an old industry which was a necessity in pioneer life as well as a form of artistic expression—making pottery.

One pottery kiln of Marion county was operated outside Knoxville by Jehu King, who was born in Somerset county, Pennsylvania, August 28, 1820. In earlier years he had learned the trade of brick-laying and masonry, then in 1855 he came to Knoxville and started a business in contracting and building. In 1872 he built and operated a brick kiln in Knoxville, then in later years his son, Silas, who was primarily a farmer, took over the kiln and manufactured pottery and drain tile as well as brick. Silas King's son, J. King, worked with him in this trade. Here is pictured an example of the buff-colored tile produced by King. It is one-half inch thick, 14½ inches around and 12 inches long. The rough, crude tile is flat on one side where it stuck to another tile in the firing process. At the site of the King pottery the shards, or broken pieces of pottery, which were found would lead one to believe that J. King was the last potter of his family. This pottery kiln operated at a much later date than those of Coalport, Whitebreast or Attica. The following map shows the exact location of the King pottery in Knoxville township, township 75 north, range 19 west, section 17.
King's kiln had a cement floor with scoops in it which were possibly used to place the tile into when firing. There are few remains to determine the kiln's structure and all shards and tile were discovered in the nearby creek bed. On the following page are two photographs taken in 1909 of King's kiln and of his hired men.
King's Kiln

King's Hired Men
Approximately 50 feet from the nearby creek were found crude brick fragments plus shards of jugs, bowls, flower pots, churns, and what appeared to be an animal feeder. This churn pictured below made by King is owned by Mrs. Dwight Harvey of rural Knoxville. It is cream to light green in color and its surface varies from rough to smooth. The churn stands 15½ inches high and measures 31 inches around the middle. The fired clay of most of the items discovered was a light grey buff with glazes ranging in color from 30% yellow buff (all churns), 21% black with brown trim, 19% un-
glazed (bisque finish), 11% black, 11% brown with black specks, 6% brown, 1% maroon, 1% pink buff.

There were several small potteries located in the town of Attica, and for many years the ware produced here was jugs, jars, churns, flower pots, and drain tile. The potteries supplied the entire demand for the surrounding area and many items were shipped to various parts of Iowa and Missouri. Today houses are built over the kilns. The 1875 map of Attica pictured below shows the location of one pottery kiln at township 74 north, range 19 west, sections 10 and 11, Indianola township.
The color of the clay shards found in the backyard of Mrs. Ethel Moon of Attica were 42% gray, 40% buff, 8% pink or orange buff, and the color of the glaze was 42% maroon, 27% buff or tan, 17% red ochre, 8% grey, 5% brown. Potters in the Attica area were Joseph Jennings, Ira Kendrick and Mr. Thomas. The next two photographs are examples of Attica pottery.
The churn below was donated by Engle and Glenn Visser of Harvey, Iowa. It was made by J. F. Jennings and engraved on the outside of the churn is Attica/Iowa 6. The churn features a brown slip on the inside and a green and brown salt glaze on the outside. It stands 14 inches high, and measures 11 inches across the top, 35 inches around the top, 37 inches around the bottom and $11\frac{1}{2}$ inches across the bottom.

![Churn](image)

*Photo by Norma Brooks*

The two drain pipes pictured on the following page, owned by Mable Roebuck, Attica, were made by Thomas and Jennings pottery. The pipe on the left is colored orange, yellow and buff and measures $\frac{1}{4}$ inch thick, $2\frac{3}{4}$ inches across the top, $19\frac{1}{4}$ inches tall, $3\frac{3}{4}$ inches across the bottom. The sec-
ond pipe is light brown in color and measures 4\(\frac{3}{4}\) inches across the bottom, 12 inches tall, \(\frac{3}{4}\) inch thick, 3 inches across the top and the neck is 1\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches high and \(\frac{1}{4}\) inch thick.

Another location of Marion county pottery kilns was the town of Whitebreast which is pictured on the following page from a Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific Railroad map of 1915. The Whitebreast pottery was found in township 76 north, range 19 west, Polk township. Shards with the names William McPheter and J. M. Bowman were found along the Whitebreast Creek, which is a tributary of the Des Moines river. The creek is about 20 miles long and enters Marion county from the west about four miles from the southwest corner of the county. Supplies and mail came to this community entirely by river and wagon transportation. Telegraph dispatches were transmitted by the memory and lips of immigrants coming in or strangers passing through the county.
There is little left of this pottery kiln and it would be impossible to state its size and shape. There is a natural spring nearby with a brick interior and part of the kiln wall was found inside the spring which supplied the necessary water for the kiln’s operation. Pottery shards found in this site were scattered in a larger area than they were at the other kilns investigated.

The Indian name for Whitebreast was Waupa-Cauki, and was so named when a bear with a white spot on his breast was killed near the creek. At one time there was also an Indian chief named Whitebreast who lived near this settlement.

Most of the pottery shards found in this area were made from a grog consisting of potters clay and broken pieces of pottery or fired clay used for stiffening. These bowls were possibly used to store butter or sausage patties and were covered with another bowl of the same size or several thicknesses of cloth and stored in a cave.
The extremely heavy, shallow bowl pictured below is unusual in that it was the only whole article unearthed in the excavations of all the kilns in Marion county. This piece was found by Carl Falkoski of Des Moines, and it is made of a grog with a salt glaze and is light green in color, and features a red ochre slip inside. The piece measures 10\(\frac{1}{4}\) inches across the top, 3 inches deep inside, 1\(\frac{1}{4}\) inches thick at the top rim, 33 inches around the top, 26 inches around the bottom and 8 inches across the bottom.

With the exception of the broken side of the piece pictured on the following page, its physical appearance is almost identical to the bowl pictured above. This bowl measures 11\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches across the top, 4 inches deep and 1\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches thick at the top rim, and has the number 4 marked on the inside bottom.
This next restored pot from Whitebreast has a red ochre slip inside and outside, and each piece necessary to restore the pot was found except for one 5\(\frac{1}{2}\) inch piece. The pot measures 8 inches across the top, 4 inches high, 3\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches deep inside, 25\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches around the top, 6\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches around the bottom, 5\(\frac{1}{2}\) inches across the bottom, and the ledge is 1 inch high.
Most of the information concerning the pottery kilns of Marion county was found in the old Coalport area. Coalport was a little steamboat town located in the valley on the west bank of the Des Moines river in Polk township, and was so named due to its rich coal deposits which made it one of the most important "coal-up" stops for the steamboats on their journey up the river. Steamboats passed through Coalport from 1837 to 1862, although the town was not laid out until May, 1857, on land belonging to William Bailey. In 1860, a steamboat was built in Coalport, it was 90 feet long, 15 feet wide with a 40 horse engine. The more famous steamboats and their captains were: *Pavillion* (captain unknown) believed to be the first steamboat to pass through Coalport; *Add Hines*, Captain Gault; *Clara Hines* (captain unknown); *De Moine Belle*, Captain Tisdale and pilot Joseph Ferris; *Defiance* (captain unknown); and the *Charley Rodgers*, Captain F. E. Beers and pilot Frank Davidson—no doubt there were many others, for history tells of at least 41 different boats making numerous trips up the river.

*Map Showing Location of Coalport*
Even in 1848, Coalport was a busy community, including a general merchandise store, saw and grist mill, blacksmith shop, cooper shop (barrel manufacturers), and one pottery shop. There was little money changing hands as most business was conducted on the trade and barter system. “I need a new treadle for my potter’s wheel, could your wife use a new butter churn?” “Sold!” These people were honest, loyal, hard-working, steadfast individuals whose purpose in life was their home, family and friends.

Early Coalport was populated by a half-dozen families, each having six to twelve children. Entertainment was scarce in this thriving little community. There were no clubs, reading circles or card parties for the women to attend, and as a result their only diversion was a wool-picking or a quilting bee. For the male population there were no lodges to attend, and the only clubs they knew were the ones they used to kill rattlesnakes creeping out of the “snake den” in the Spring. As there were no ready-made cigarettes or cigars to be purchased in the general store, the men, as well as the women, chewed and puffed their home-grown “long green.”
The town of Coal Ridge was located on a big hill just above Coalport. This quaint little settlement was a seat of learning for all youngsters nearby. Here the ever-famous Coal Ridge Baptist Church was built in 1873 at a cost of $600. It is still holding church services and is well-preserved. William Crouch laid the foundation of cut stone for this church and Warren D. Everett was the first pastor. It was the meeting place for all the social activities of Coalport and Coal Ridge. Children and adults eagerly looked forward to the church’s biggest event of the year—the July 4th ice cream social.

In the homes of both Coalport and Coal Ridge everyday cooking utensils such as crocks, jugs and butter churns were used and therefore kept the potter’s wheel spinning, as he was the main source of these essential items. The first things a potter must consider in building a kiln are his materials—water, fuel and clay. The clay used at Coalport came from the coal measures, which were found under layers of coal, and was commonly referred to as “fire clay.” The “fire clay” is grey-colored and even-textured and through the process of slip casting, this clay fires a soft melon shade, making a high-quality pottery.

The kiln of Coalport made only pottery. Their tools were simple—a horse-drawn sweep, a potter’s wheel, a drying shed, a few hand tools and a kiln. The sweep was made of wood and consisted of a large tank containing paddles fastened to a rotating center post. Harnessed to a long arm which extended to the top of the post was a horse or a mule, usually blind or blindfolded, who provided the power by walking in a circle around the tank. The tank was filled with clay and water and as the animal walked its circle, the paddles turned and the clay was mixed and tempered to the pliable consistency the potter desired. The weight of the animal walking in the same circle day after day caused deep ruts in the ground.

The potter would take a lump of the tempered clay from the sweep, place it on his wheel and peddle away. The potter’s wheel consisted of a flat wooden plate on top of a center spindle which was turned by working the feet on the treadle and crank fastened to the bottom of the spindle. The faster the potter worked his feet, the faster the plate upon which the pot-
tery was formed would spin. This method is commonly known as “thrown pottery.” As the mass of clay on top of the wheel spun, it was with his bare hands that the potter deftly formed his piece. After the wheel was stopped, handles and spouts were attached, and just before completing his work he usually applied a “slip” of locally obtained red ochre to give a dull, smooth, hard finish. Often the potter used steel stamps to impose his initials on his work. Now the article was allowed to dry for a short time, then the potter slid a thin wire under his work to free it from the plate. At this point, the potter would carefully place his work in a drying shed where it would remain until it was completely dry and could be fired. If the clay pieces contained any moisture when placed in the kiln, many would be distorted or broken under the pressure of the extreme heat.

Salt was used to furnish a glaze and was applied simply by throwing several handfuls into the kiln before sealing the door shut. In the intense heat of the kiln the salt would liquefy and let off a white gas and create a green glass-like glaze. Pioneers new to the territory would question the large puffs of white smoke which rose from the kiln because of this process.

The Coalport kiln was a circular to ovate dome-shaped building with several smoke stacks 1½ feet high and dimensions of 14 feet wide and 24 feet long. On the following page is a photo of the floor of the kiln—the round white spot to the right is a 50-cent piece. The kiln was built with hand-made “fire bricks” 4½ inches wide and 3½ inches thick, varying in length from 9 to 9½ inches. The fire boxes inside the kiln provided the intense heat necessary to fire the raw clay. These boxes were 2 feet wide and 2½ feet deep. They were also constructed with the fire brick, thus making the walls of the boxes 9 inches thick. Air-vents were chopped in the brick approximately every 4 feet to insure even distribution of the heat. On the following pages are photographs of the kiln before and after excavation, the second photo also gives a good example of the size of the fire boxes.
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Floor of Coalport Kiln

Before Excavation

Photo by John Phipps

Photo by Norma Brooks
When the pottery had dried sufficiently, it was arranged end to end and rim against rim in stacks sometimes four or five feet high in the kiln. To save space the potter would sometimes place smaller items inside the larger pieces.

“Balance plugs” were placed evenly between the crocks and jugs to separate and support the wares. The plugs, made of soft, raw clay, were used wet so they could easily mold to the rim or to the bottom of the pottery. Some of these plugs found in the area had been rolled in sand at the time they were made, but the reason for this is not known. They were made quickly in the left hand and pounded on each end with the right hand. The pottery was fired for a week and remained in the tightly sealed kiln for another week until completely cooled, if a draft were allowed to reach the pottery before it was cool the surface of the pottery would have bubbles and some pieces would be cracked or broken.
The Coalport kiln was built on the Des Moines river bank for easy access to water, and was operated by William Welch who learned the potter’s trade in North Carolina from Silas West in 1821. Welch built his first pottery shop in Wilkes county near the Blue Ridge Mountains in North Carolina, then in 1836 he settled in Van Buren county, Iowa, one mile below Bonapart, and erected the first pottery kiln in the territory. Here he had an unfortunate experience for his kiln was well-stocked with several hundred dollars worth of pottery ready to be fired, when his shop caught fire and burned to the ground, leaving Welch three or four hundred dollars in debt. During his residency in Van Buren county, he was employed as a county recorder. In 1826 he bought land 1½ miles southwest of Fairfield, Iowa, and set up a pottery kiln. He then sold out and in May, 1845, came to Marion county and made a claim five miles south of Pella, Iowa, and set up another pottery kiln. Pictured on the following page is his great-granddaughter, Mrs. Kate Todd Thomas, holding an extremely large vase made by Welch before he came to Coalport. The vase is glazed in a combination of yellow, tan and green with the number 33 on the smooth finish of one side. The piece is 14 inches high, 31 inches around the middle and 21 inches across the bottom. Mrs. Thomas lives in Pella, Iowa.
The churn pictured below, owned by Mrs. Millie Woods Schakel, is at Central College, Pella, and features the imprint of W. Welch and the number 4. The churn has a tan-brown, rough finish and two ridges around the top above the handles.
In 1847, Welch sold his claim to the Hollanders of Pella who used gold as an exchange rather than the barter system. With his gold, Welch bought a Coalport claim from L. W. Babbitt. From the beautiful virgin wood in the area Welch built a large home for his family on Coal Ridge hill. Just west of the house was a small log shed about 10 feet by 10 feet, with a fireplace in one end and only one small window. This was undoubtedly used as a drying shed for the unfired pottery. He erected and operated this pottery kiln prosperously for several years and eventually sold the claim to A. E. Dudok Bousquet. In the Central College Archives appears the following deed:

William Welch and wife to A. E. Dudok Bousquet—"... undivided one half of Lot No. four (4) of Section No. fourteen (14) in Township No. seventy six (76) North of Range No. nineteen (19) west, containing fifty-seven and forty-six hundreds (57 46/100) more or less, and we hereby warrant the title to the same to the said A. E. Dudok Bousquet.

Bousquet was a wealthy businessman for he was part owner in the Des Moines Steamboat Company, a general merchandise store and a flatboat venture. When the people of the community were in need of funds to raise their crops, Bousquet advanced them the money.

With this last sale Welch retired from the pottery trade. He first built and operated a steam saw-mill in Coalport, then he sold this and later bought the mill back and moved it to Whitebreast prairie, which is only a few miles west of Coalport. When he retired from this business in 1870, he settled in Pella, Iowa.

Thomas H. Smith leased the Coalport pottery kiln from Bousquet in 1860. Smith became blind between 1860 and 1870, his blindness was believed to be caused by cataracts. His wife was also blind. In the 1870 census of Polk township, Marion county, Smith was listed as “blind” and his occupation as “potter.” Therefore, to perform his duties on the potter’s wheel, Smith needed the assistance of his only son Cass and his sons-in-law, William Bailey and Jacob Neely. Bailey and
Neely were both farmers, but helped their father-in-law with the pottery trade. People in the area referred to this pottery enterprise as "Smith and Bailey" since Neely worked with pottery only when weather prohibited his farming. Even though he was blind, Smith remained the most highly skilled of the potters in his family. On the following page is a jug made by T. H. Smith which is dark brown with a rough textured salt glaze. The broken jug to the right was found at King pottery. Smith's jug is an example of early "thrown pottery," and was donated to the Historical building by J. Glenn Neely of Des Moines. The jug was a useful item in the early American homes since it could be used to hold kerosene, vinegar, or home brew "white lightning." The jug is 12 inches high with a 1 inch opening at the top and a 1 inch spout with a \( \frac{1}{4} \) inch opening. It measures 23 inches around the middle, 7\( \frac{1}{2} \) inches around the bottom with a handle 1\( \frac{3}{4} \) inches thick and 7 inches long.
In the photograph below is a fine example of Coalport pottery belonging to Mrs. Jessie Adams of Knoxville, Iowa. This particular piece is a canning jar with the imprint of T. H. Smith on both sides. It is dark brown, almost black, in color and has a rough texture. The imprint of T. H. Smith was made by putting one letter at a time on the clay, which was indeed a remarkable feat for a blind man. Mrs. Adams is a great-granddaughter of T. H. Smith and has several pieces of pottery made by him in addition to a collection of smaller items made by his son Cass in the 1880’s.
T. C. (Cass) Smith was well-known among the people in the valley and surrounding areas. He was young, industrious, neat as a pin and was called a "bit of a dandy." There were few ladies in the community he had not dated, but he was bald and forty before he married his wife Effiem. As a potter's son, he had learned the pottery trade well and became the fastest potter in the valley. On this page and the following are several of his works. His specialty was small, ornamental items such as churns, flower pots with a drainage dish, pitchers and cuspidors, but he also fashioned large, useful household wares as well. The two maps on pages 333 and 334 show the location of Coalport and also the location of the kiln during the time of Cass Smith. The kiln was located in township 76 north, range 19 west, Polk township, section 14.

**Items Made by Cass Smith**

The mottled cocoa and dark brown pitcher with bowl on the left measures 3 inches across the top, 7 inches around the middle and 3 inches high. The bowl on the right is 2 inches high and $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches across the top and is also a mottled cocoa and dark brown color.
All of the items pictured here are owned by Mrs. Jessie Adams of Knoxville. The cuspidor on the left is colored a cocoa brown and measures 9 inches around and 4 inches across the top. The dark brown churn is 4 inches tall and 8 inches around.

This dark brown churn was made in the 1880's by Cass Smith and measures 8 inches tall and 14 inches around. Its surface is smooth and a salt glaze was used on this piece. A smooth surface and salt glaze are found on all the items pictured here.

In later years, T. H. Smith lived with the Bailey family, and Mrs. Liddie Hodgson of Des Moines, who lived with the family as a young girl helping with household chores, remembers that in addition to utilitarian items, Smith and Bailey also made fancy bowls, cups, and plates for the family's personal use. Mrs. Hodgson said the Bailey's large house had four upstairs bedrooms, a spacious living room and a sitting room downstairs with sun porches both upstairs and downstairs. She also recalls a large yellow umbrella holder made by T. H. Smith which stood near the front door of the home.
According to the 1870 Polk township, Marion county census, the value of T. H. Smith’s real estate was $1,200 with personal estate valued at $700.

In 1875 the population of Coalport was 879, however 28 years later the town was finally deserted due to floods. Spring floods were a common and unwelcome sight in Coalport, forcing all the residents in the valley to move to the hills. Old-timers remember how the people planned for these yearly floods and made the necessary repairs to strengthen the levy. They tell of chickens floating downstream in their nests, horses fighting their way to dry land and pigs squealing in desperation. Men from nearby towns came in rowboats to help rescue these unfortunate families and their animals from the raging waters.

The *Knoxville Journal* of Friday, June 5, 1903, carried the following two stores concerning the flood:

Joseph Neely’s house, also on the Coalport bottom, had 15” of water on the floor. That house was built 37 years ago and at the present is the first time the flood waters of the Des Moines has approached nearer than several hundred feet of the door. Last year a plot of four acres was out of water where the house stands.

and in the late flood news:

Joseph Neely, of Coalport, was in town Wednesday. He lost 70 acres of corn that was up and doing nicely. Mr. Neely hoots the idea that the bottoms will soon drain and be in fit condition for cultivation. He says that most of the best bottom farms have a peculiar contour—being lower at the bluff than the river brink. Water will stand on from $\frac{1}{3}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ the submerged area for three or four weeks. Mr. Neely does not expect to be able to replant more than 17 acres out of his 70 this season.

There was a large log jam on the river to hold back the floods and one dark night, one of the younger men of the community, Alvie Bailey, set fire to the logs as a prank. Later the river began to recede since the logs were no longer in its path, and eventually the river changed its course and made a new path about $\frac{3}{4}$ mile from Coalport. Now many years and many floods later, Coalport is gone—not a house nor a road.
remains, it has all been turned under by the plow, that is, all but a dense trail covered with underbrush and halfway up the steep bluff a pile of bricks, a pile with just a little order that was once a kiln. The first thing one notices is the green glaze made from the many coats of salt. All that is left is an occasional remnant of pottery—a ghost pot.

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