

Big Creek Pottery fired up a generation

Bus-3

Exhibit tracks the influence of seminal Davenport pottery school

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By **TINA BAINE**

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Bruce and Marcia McDougal were ahead of their time.

In 1963 they bought a school bus in Iowa for \$50 and used it to move to California, years before converted buses became the popular hippie conveyance. From 1964-67 they imported and sold strung beads out of a little shop in Santa Barbara, long before vendors

sold them along every touristy street in San Francisco. And in 1968 they founded a Bay Area pottery school when there were only two other live-in craft schools in the entire country — both on the East Coast.

The McDougals had a knack for recognizing need and leading the way, and their Davenport pottery school was a hallmark of that prescience. For 16 years they brought the world's best potters and

1,100 students from all parts of the country to an idyllic farm setting near Santa Cruz to live together and explore the possibilities of pottery. They embraced functional pottery, unlike their counterparts in college art departments. They built ranks of kick wheels and showed students that a ceramic vase could be every bit as viable and artistically conceived as an abstract ceramic

SEE **POTTERY** ON E6

Bruce and Marcia McDougal stand by a shelf of their pottery inside their home in Davenport. The McDougals ran Big Creek Pottery in Davenport from 1968 to 1984, offering a live-in craft school for those who wanted to learn the art.

KEVIN JOHNSON/SENTINEL





ABOVE: Two celadon jars by Warren MacKenzie from 1977.
TOP: A stoneware platter by Bruce and Marcia McDougal from 1982.

POTTERY

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sculpture. And they created a communal living/learning environment that was, for many, a life-changing experience.

To capture and celebrate that revolutionary nature of the Big Creek Pottery workshops, the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History will present a multimedia show, Big Creek Pottery: A Social History of a Visual Idea 1967-1983, in the main gallery starting today through July 17. To tell the story, guest curator Karen Thuesen Massaro has assembled 140 photographs and 70 ceramic pieces, largely from the McDougals' private collection.

The McDougals' contribution to pottery and education is best understood in context. In the 1950s, Peter Voulkos was a leader in the world of fine art ceramics. He was known for his abstract expressionist ceramic sculptures — weighty pieces that may have started as a traditional thrown platter or vessel, but were then vigorously torn, gouged and punctured into something totally new.

"He (Voulkos) felt he had gone beyond what he called 'utility wares,'" Bruce says. "He stepped away from what he felt was craft and elevated ceramics to an art."

University art departments of the 1960s followed suit, embracing their teaching staff in favor of ceramic sculpture and limiting functional pottery making. Marcia says she and Bruce saw the whole movement to abandon traditional pottery-making as an opportunity.

"Voulkos would never allow his students to throw," she says. "He really opened up a need for us. The techniques Bruce had to teach just weren't available."

When the McDougals moved to Northern California in 1967 they met fellow potter Al Johnsen, who introduced them to the Davenport area. Touring the area they discovered an abandoned dairy ranch on Swanton Road, recently purchased by Big Creek Lumber, that they thought would make a great pottery school.

IF YOU GO BIG CREEK POTTERY EXHIBIT

WHAT: Big Creek Pottery: A Social History of a Visual Idea 1967-1983

WHERE: The Museum of Art & History at the McPherson Center, 705 Front St., Santa Cruz

WHEN: Today through July 17

COST: \$5 general; \$3 students 18 and older and seniors; \$2 students 12 to 17; free to museum members and children younger than 12. Museum entry is free the first Friday of every month.

HOURS: 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday

INFO: 429-1964, www.santacruzmah.org

REUNION: For more info on the first-ever Big Creek Pottery reunion July 2-3, visit www.bigcreekpottery.com.

The McDougals say they couldn't have built their school without the help and generosity of the McCrary family, Davenport residents and owners of Big Creek Lumber.

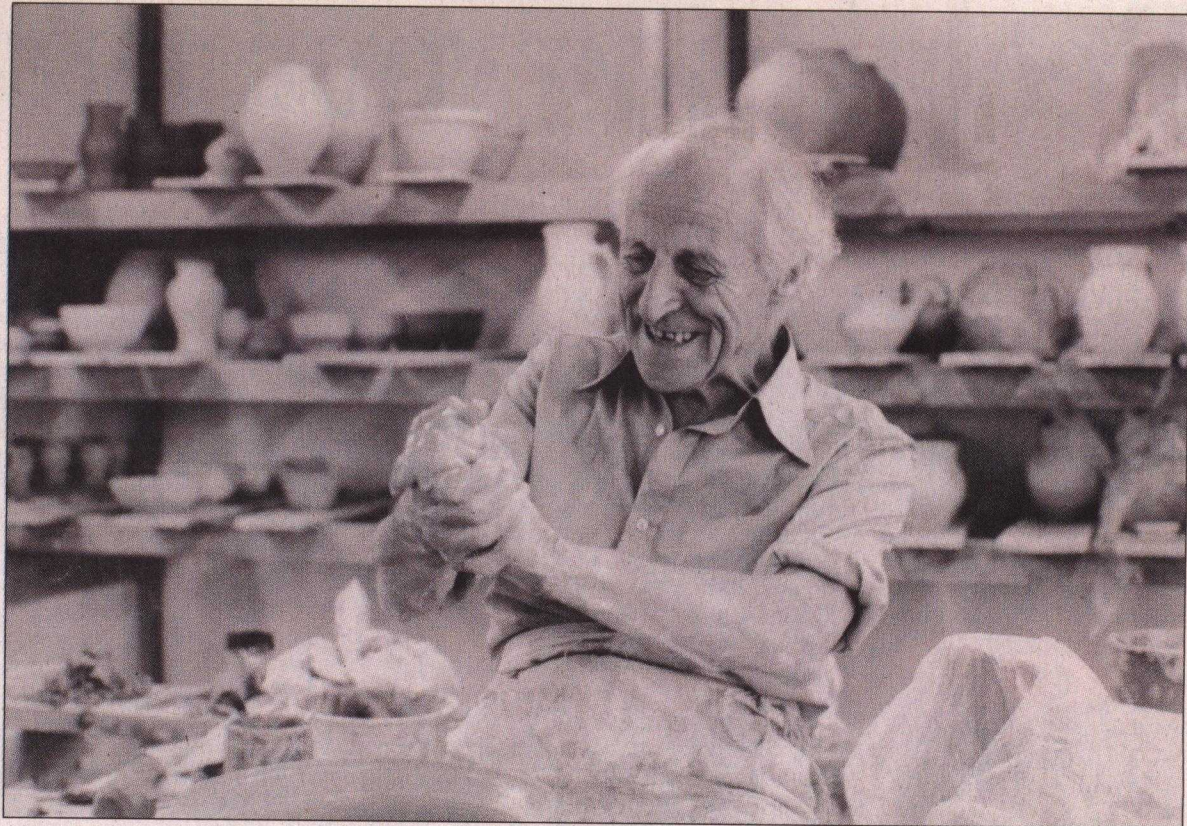
"They made such an incredible investment in the property. They restored two buildings and built a brand new studio, where the classroom was — a big, generous building," says Marcia.

"We couldn't have restored those buildings," adds Bruce. "We didn't have the know-how or the money. They just jumped in with enthusiasm."

While the buildings were taking shape, the artists, their families and friends camped there on the weekends, cleaning and painting, and converting the old cheese house into a dormitory and gallery. They built 24 potter's wheels and mailed brochures to schools and museums. Finally, in the spring for 1968, the McDougals and Johnsen moved to Davenport and held their first summer-long pottery class for 25 students.

"We were so innocent then," says Marcia. "We never had a budget. We just asked ourselves, 'What could students afford?'"

Two years later, Al Johnsen left and the McDougals were in charge. They improved the housing, added kilns and expanded the workshops



English potter Michael Cardew is happy to be done with a throwing demonstration in 1976.



Students of Big Creek Pottery participate in a discussion surrounding Peter Carl Harris, who is shown referring to his book. At the time, Harris was a recent Columbia University graduate who majored in art and history. He found a brochure for Big Creek Pottery on a New York City subway car floor and decided to venture to Davenport in the summer of 1968.

to spring and fall. Bruce did the teaching and Marcia was in charge of operations.

"I was 36 and I became everyone's mother," she says, laughing. "I did all the correspondence and did a lot of the cooking. I planned all the meals, bought the food, and was still making my own jewelry. I had to drive to Santa Cruz twice a day."

The school matured and began attracting students who were quite advanced, as the McDougals began inviting renowned guest artists to teach workshops.

"We got everybody we ever wanted," says Marcia. "All our heroes said 'yes.'"

One of their most treasured recruitments was noted potter Michael Cardew, who at 75 lived in England and had never visited America.

"He was there for three weeks and it was so wonderful," remembers Bruce. Cardew later wrote a letter to the McDougals saying that his three weeks there had been one of the most important experiences of his life.

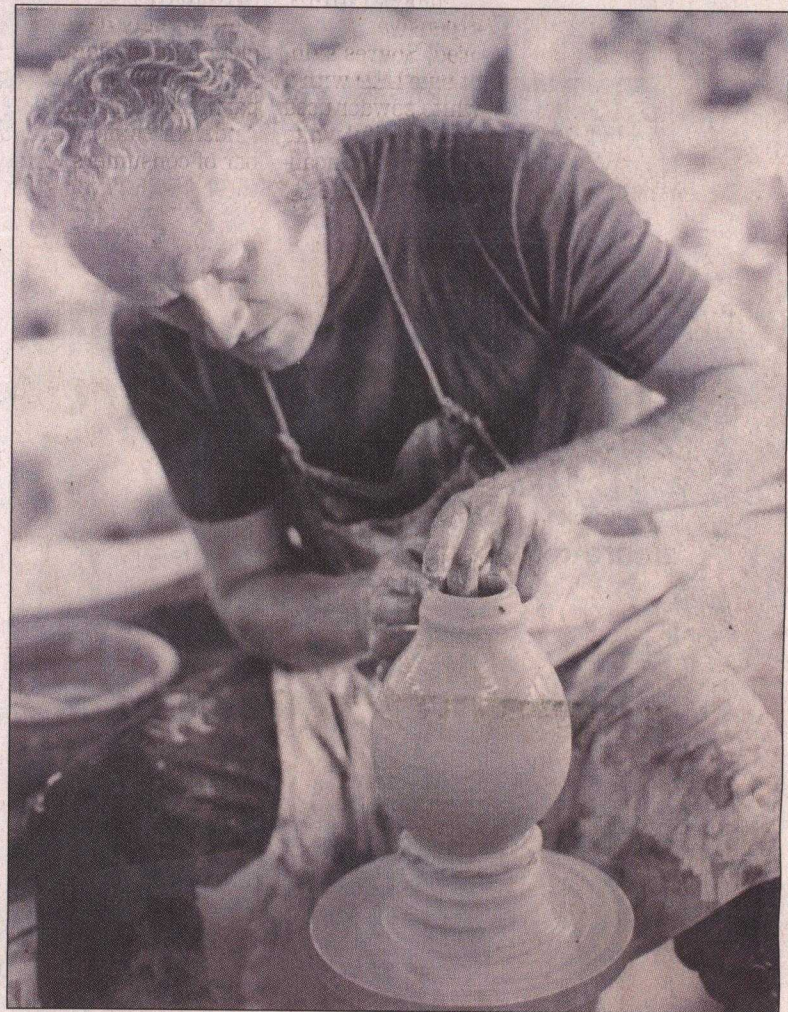
Following in the McDougals' footsteps, similar workshops proliferated across the country. But in 1984, the Big Creek Pottery workshops finally ended after 16 years, when attendance dropped.

"A new era came along," says Marcia.

"Nobody was interested in the drop-out scene," adds Bruce. "They wanted an MBA from Harvard to make a big salary and retirement."

Luckily, by that time running the Davenport Cash Store — a popular gift shop, gallery and restaurant in Davenport — had taken over their lives.

Curator Karen Thuesen Massaro says the McDougals were at the forefront of a sea change in the way people could be trained.



Bruce McDougal throwing at Big Creek Pottery in the early 1970s.

"They nurtured people to find their own love of doing and making, and out of that would come the best work."

As a result, there never was a "Big Creek Style."

"They were very open to other people's ideas," Massaro says.

The couple encouraged students to make many, many pots, which would give them the experience to find their own personal direction.

"The proof of the pudding," says Bruce, "is how many of those who came to our workshop are still producing pottery 40 years later."

Still lively and engaging at age 80, and living in Davenport not far from the original workshop site, the McDougals will have the opportunity to see some of their students again in July, when a reunion will be held in conjunction with the exhibit.