

# Shaping the landscape

## Exploring the roots of stoneware in Santa Cruz

By Jennifer Squires

Consider your favorite mug: the curve of the handle, the way your fingers fit around the cylinder. There is a personal relationship there, especially when the mug is handmade, a piece of functional ceramic art.

Decades ago, potters John and Marcia McDougal and Al Johnsen's understanding of that connection led them to found a revolutionary pottery school in Swanton, north of Davenport, where a generation of students trained on the craft of producing wheel-thrown pottery appropriate for everyday use.

"To be a potter was to be a craftsman. A craftsman makes things people can use," said Joel Megan, who operates Dark Horse Pottery in Davenport and considers the McDougals and Johnsen mentors.

The Big Creek Pottery School opened in 1968 in a converted cheese dairy on Swanton Road. It would train about 1,100 students over 16 years, leaving an indelible mark on the Santa Cruz Arts community.

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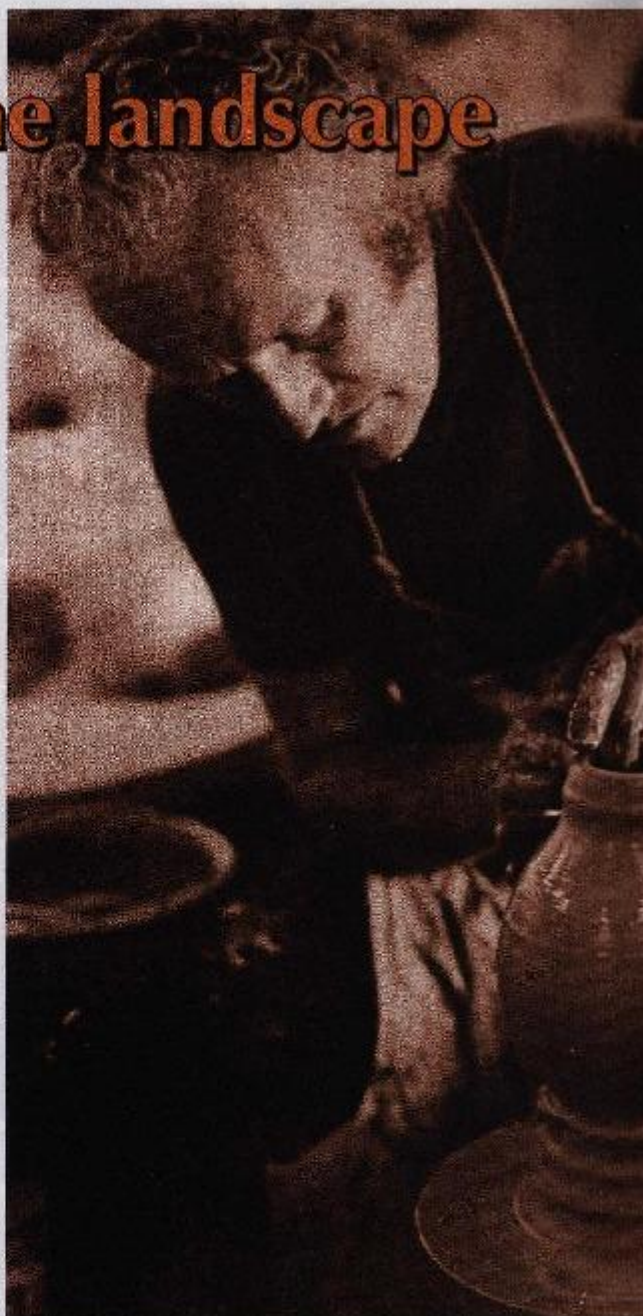
"Back then and still today the percentage of potters and pottery in Santa Cruz, I would certainly guess, would be way out of proportion for any other city," said Bruce Bratton, a friend of the school's founders who lived at the school and served as the handyman for several years. "We just have more here. People would come and see that."

Prior to Johnsen, the McDougals, and the Big Creek Pottery School, Bruce Anderson had been the sole potter in Santa Cruz. Anderson had founded Pogonip Pottery near the old Pogonip Polo Club and held a one-man show of his handmade stoneware at the Santa Cruz library in 1941.

Johnsen, who had trained at Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles before moving to Santa Cruz with his family, began a painter. He created the first arts center in Santa Cruz. When it was condemned, he moved the show to the old St. George Hotel. The event, in the early 1960s, launched the iconic Catalyst.

It was about that time Anderson stopped by Johnsen's studio, saw him painting, and suggested he try clay.

"I thought, hell, that's pretty nice. I stayed with it," Johnsen said.



(Above) Bruce McDougal creates a piece of stoneware in the classroom at Big Creek Pottery.



Photo © The Studio Pottery Journal, Volume 3, Number 1, 1974/75, Photography: Bill Finney



(Above) Bruce Anderson, in his Santa Cruz studio, was one of the area's first significant potters.

Eventually, both Johnsen and Anderson studied under Marguerite Wildenhain at the legendary Pond Farm Workshops in Guerneville.

Now 92 and living in Gig Harbor, Washington, Johnsen is working on a series of bells — some big and some small — as well as tiles, casserole dishes, a bit of sculpture, and some painting.

"I keep working every day," he said.

These days, Bruce McDougal only throws clay when there's a wedding in the family. Then, he handcrafts 100 ceramic drinking glasses to use at the reception and send home with wedding guests.

McDougal found clay at a young age. As a boy, Bruce McDougal spent summers sculpting tiny figurines made of clay scraped from a cliff on the shore of Lake Erie. McDougal enjoyed the tactile quality of the clay, a formative childhood experience that inspired his life's work as an artist, craftsman, and teacher.

"It just cried out to be played with," McDougal, now in his mid-60s, said of the clay. "It was my No. 1 toy when I was growing up."

McDougal went on to teach arts and crafts at several colleges in the 1950s and early 60s, but grew tired of academia. He and Marcia focused more and more of their time on developing their own wares to vend at craft fairs. In a serendipitous moment, John-

sen and the McDougals had neighboring booths at a San Francisco arts festival. Johnsen suggested starting a pottery school together.

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The Big Creek Pottery School, one of just three residential clay programs in the country at the time and the only one on the West Coast, immediately set itself apart from college instruction. Traditional university arts programs had drifted away from pottery basics. An aesthetic shift in the ceramics world, led by renowned artists Peter Voulkos and Robert Arneson, valued free-form sculpture over functional pottery.

The first Big Creek pamphlets offered "A Unique Pottery Experience. We like pots. We believe in them, and in the potters who make them." Bruce McDougal sent the flyers to colleges all over the country with an Art Department comprised of

Photo © Scripps Collection, Ellis Strong Denison Library



(Above) A selection of Easter eggs and cheese on a plate by Bruce Anderson of Pogonip Pottery.



(Above) One of Santa Cruz's most formidable instructors, Al Johnsen. Johnsen not only founded Big Creek and Scott Creek Pottery Studios, but also helped create the UC Santa Cruz ceramics program.

Photo © Al Johnsen Collection





Photo: © Big Creek Pottery Collection

(Above) The two farmhouses that housed the instructors and students at Swanton's pottery school.

four or more professors — he estimated that many instructors gave hope that the college had a ceramics program.

Johnsen had found the property for the school, an old ranch the McCreary family, the proprietors of Big Creek Lumber, owned. Students lived communally at the ranch, sharing meals made largely from the on-site garden and livestock the McDougals raised. They attended Bruce's class five days a week and the studio, equipped with 26 hand-built kick wheels, was always open.

"We were very fortunate," Marcia McDougal said. "We were in the right place at the right time."

About 1,100 students attended the 6-to-9-week sessions, which ran nearly continuously, until the school closed in 1983. The study involved three things, Bruce McDougal said: "Practice, practice, practice."

"We started at the beginning with how to work the clay, how to center the clay and how to pull it up into whatever it was going to be: plates and cups and bowls and pitchers," Bruce McDougal said.

Johnsen left the school after two years to travel. He became a successful studio potter, operating Scott Creek Pottery in Swanton, famous for his corn roasts and pottery sales. He also taught ceramics at UCSC's Cowell College.

The McDougals continued at Big Creek, adding guest workshops led by exemplary potters. Those programs gave the Big Creek

Pottery School a national reputation and, perhaps more importantly, inspired the students.

"You could just see these students change. They were young and didn't know what they were going to do," said Bratton, now a columnist in Santa Cruz. "By the time they left, they were different, their lives had changed, just really changed forever.... It was just amazing, really amazing

(Above) Students work on the hand-made pottery wheels at Big Creek Pottery.

to be a part of that."

While the Big Creek Pottery School focused on the basic principles of hand-thrown pottery, the intent was to give students the tools necessary to make a living as production potters so they could also make artistic pieces. As part of their training, students were given direction on how to construct their own kick wheels and taught how to build a firing kiln.

Pottery students from across the country converged on the Big Creek school. After they completed their training, many stayed in the area to build a life. Some married one another. A group of former students in the 1970s established a guild in Santa Cruz and exhibited in galleries across Northern California. There was a time when nearly



(Left) An example of Al Johnsen's stoneware.

Photo: © Big Creek Pottery Collection

Photo: © Mickey Carroll



Photo: Al Johnson Collection



(Above) Master potter Al Johnson demonstrating for his ceramics class at Cowell College in Santa Cruz.

every vacant building on Swanton Road was rented out by a former student trying to make a living as a production potter, Marcia McDougal recalled.

"It was basic to human needs," she explained. "Everyone needs wares."

A cultural shift in the mid-80s led to the school's closure. The McDougals continued to operate the Cash Store — by then a restaurant and bed & breakfast — for many years.

The Santa Cruz Museum of Modern Art & History curated a show on the history of the Big Creek Pottery School in 2011 and coordinated a reunion of former students. The McDougals had kept in touch with many over the years, and reconnected with more during the event.

"We were amazed and surprised and pleased with how many of the people there were still making pottery," Bruce McDougal said.

"It was wonderful," his wife added. "We're lucky in that our students will revisit us. We hear from a lot of people. They're part of our family, too."

Johnson, too, stays connected to those he taught.

"It's kind of like an extended family now," he said. "That's one of the big things I learned about teaching. I feel like you

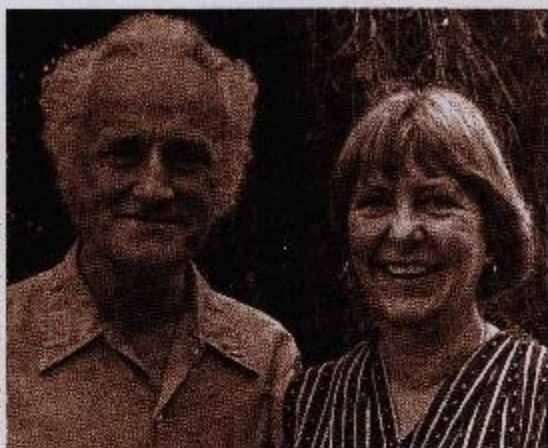
have to treat students with total respect and have them as part of your family, as part of yourself."

Joel Megan, the Davenport potter, is one of the many students who learned the tradition of craftsmanship from the McDougals and Johnson. Megan focuses on making useful pots: bowls, mugs, plates, baking and serving dishes, teapots and vases. The raw wood shelves in his Davenport studio are

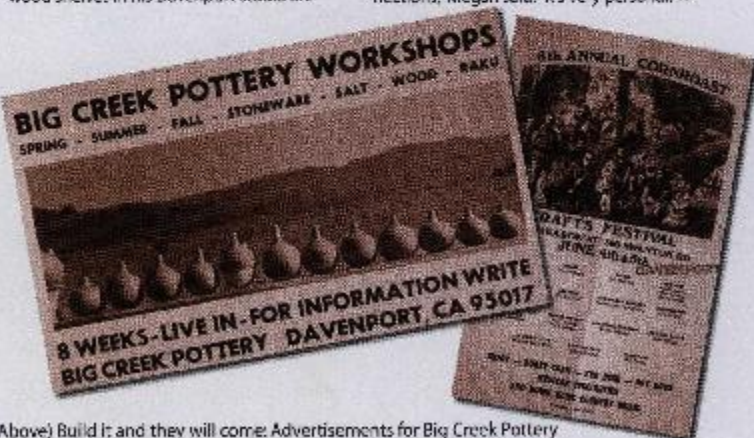
stacked with his Anglo-Orientalism-inspired work. Visitors reach out to grasp thick mugs with two hands, turn platters over in their hands and admire the deep oranges, ocean-inspired teals, and new ash-encrusted creams of the delicately glazed stoneware.

"Al [Johnson] taught me once — the handle in a coffee cup. People put their finger in it every morning. You're making these connections," Megan said. "It's very personal." ❧

Photo: Big Creek Pottery Collection



(Above) True adventurers, Bruce and Marcia McDougal moved from a 1950s school bus to an abandoned dairy ranch to help found the Big Creek Pottery school.



(Above) Build it and they will come: Advertisements for Big Creek Pottery and the Scott Creek Pottery Cornroast, even without phone numbers, address or website, enthusiastic potters managed to find them.

Graphic: © (Big Johnson Collection/Big Creek Pottery Collection)