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# Learning about Pots and

## Life at Big Creek Pottery



Scenes from Big Creek Pottery: the barn and the Santa Cruz Mountains.

by Bruce Bratton

FIRST, a few simple facts. Big Creek Pottery is located at the top of the hill, six miles up Swanton Road which is above Davenport. It's been a pottery and school since 1968 and more than 700 students have attended sessions and special guest workshops there. It was one of three such schools in the United States when it began; now there are over 200.

I wanted to get those facts down quickly because it's difficult to talk about Big Creek Pottery without getting syrupy and poetic. To begin with the pottery is located on 560 acres of land with nothing in sight but a few fences, the Pacific Ocean, some cows, a range of mountains, and either beautiful sunsets or rolling fog. The five acres that the pottery occupies was once the

leaving classes but after visiting other schools they decided to concentrate on pottery. "Living in and being completely surrounded with this atmosphere communicates the complete life of a studio potter," Bruce says, adding, "it's a community experience where you learn to give a lot more, and it's really a reflection of our own attitude." Having seen every one of the sessions at Big Creek, I can add that there is an almost total transformation from the new students, often shy and unsure of themselves, to the graduates who almost always say good-bye tearfully, knowing they have come to grips with, as Bruce says, "much more than just pottery." The fact that there are now more than 15 potters on Swanton Road and literally dozens in Santa Cruz attests to the impact that this area has on the graduates and, of course, vice versa.

Big Creek's special workshops have attracted almost 100 students and guests who also live in but for shorter periods. The names of visiting potters who have given these workshops read like a potter's dream: Daniel Rhodes, John Glick, Paulus Berensohn, Toshiko Kaezu, and most recently, Michael Cardew. Cardew, who is now 75 years old, and generally regarded as one of the two patriarchs of pottery in the western world, had never done a three week workshop like the one he conducted at Big Creek, preferring usually to lecture or give short demonstrations. On his leaving Big Creek he promised to return as soon as his schedule permits, and

site of the "Young America" cheese factory. The Gianone family began the operation in the 1860's and the large old cow barn still stands. Many more pieces of the old cheese-making equipment can be seen around the processing room and the cheese house.

No day is an average one at Big Creek Pottery. Although it's miles away from any outside pressures there's always excitement that easily catches all students, friends and casual visitors. It's because there's always something going on. Somehow everyone gets involved in helping, whether it's cleaning the studio, or rebuilding one of the kilns, or chopping wood for the wood kiln, or maybe packing pots for some craft fair or exhibit.

Big Creek Pottery is a family operation run by Bruce and Marcia McDougal, with their children sharing all the infinite chores necessary to keep the school going smoothly. In addition, Sarah Haynes works there producing many of the pieces sold at various fairs and crafts shows. The McDougals, along with Al and Clarice Johnsen, found the location with its unrestored buildings in 1967. With a little help from their friends

they completely renovated the two houses and built an entirely new studio with 24 potters' wheels, and began the first student session in 1968. After the second session the Johnsens moved down the road and formed Scott Creek Pottery.

Even though they advertise in the national crafts magazines and send out attractive brochures, word-of-mouth has drawn most of the students from all over the country. Each session is eight weeks long, and the tuition includes all meals, a room, and everything necessary to have a complete and intense exposure to what it's like to be a potter. Although the students are encouraged to make many pots during the session, Bruce says, "Our emphasis is on the process not on the product." He adds, "Being isolated from society's input, the students learn much more than pottery; they learn how to get along and work with each other." Marcia observes: "They get taken care of and are really nurtured, and in a short time they learn how they feel about themselves and life."

The McDougals have made many changes in their approach to having a school. At one time they included

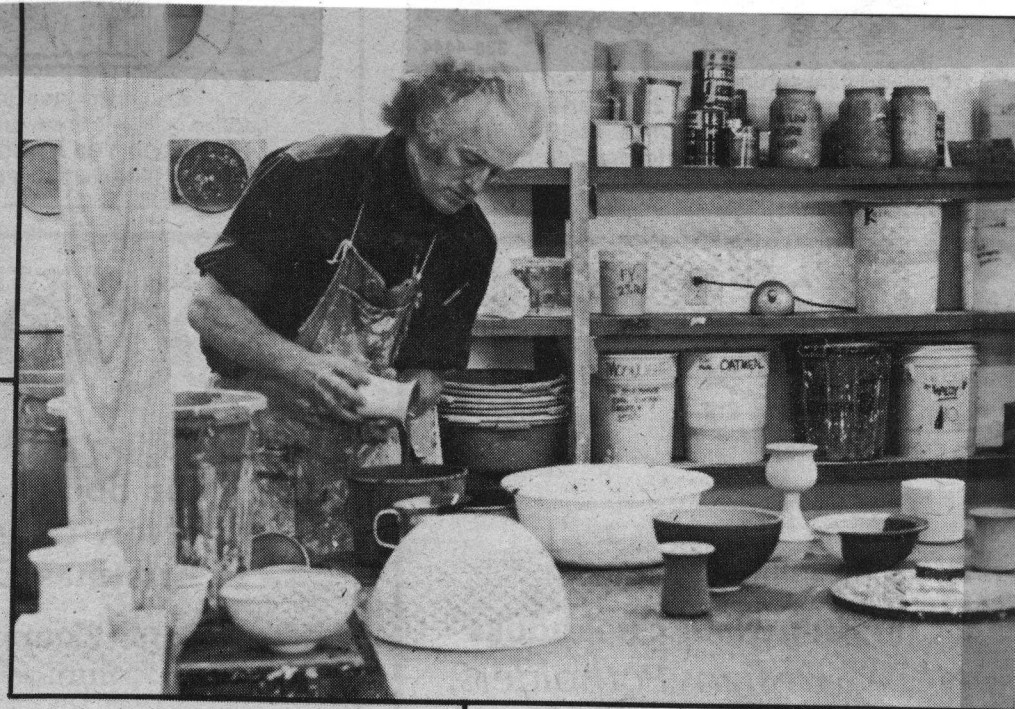
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"do it all over again because it was so full of humanness."

That's Big Creek Pottery or at least a bit of it. On December 4 and 5 from 9 am to 5 pm there will be a party there and the public is completely invited. Actually, it's a sale but up there everyone turns it into a party. John Lewis will be there with his award-winning glass creations, as will Jerry Stinn whose jewelry is in stores and galleries all across the country. Obviously Bruce McDougal will have his pottery for sale as will Sarah Haynes and Carol Highland. You can also see

and buy African and Bolivian weavings, fabrics, and garments. Bring the family, bring wine and a picnic lunch; or buy it there.

This is Big Creek's first open house since 1973, and it's a great chance to see all the things going on that I've been talking about. Then you can meet Bruce and Marcia and everyone else, and I'll take you on a tour, and just maybe they'll invite you back some night so you can sit with a glass of wine and watch the fires in the wood kiln roar up in fountains against the black starry night. I told you it can get syrupy. •



**Above:** Bruce McDougal at work in his studio.

**Left:** new pots face the horizon.

