

Donation of the Month

Object: Red Wing Crock, 1910s

Catalog #: N75.13.5

Donor: Unknown



They were the Tupperware of their day. Sturdy, dependable, easy to clean, and available in a variety of shapes and sizes. For over a century stoneware manufacturers in Red Wing, Minnesota, made essential products for home and farm - butter churns, jugs, crocks, water coolers, mixing bowls, canning jars, etc. - common, utilitarian wares that got the job done in America's kitchens, pantries, and root cellars.

A hard, vitrified (glass-like) ceramic, stoneware's roots began in 17th-century Europe. In America it was first made in the Virginia, Pennsylvania, and New York colonies in the early 1700s. From there it spread out across the countryside as new settlements were formed and people needed containers to hold food and drink and do other jobs around the home.

There is some confusion as to the beginning of the ceramic industry in Red Wing. In 1861 a German immigrant, either Joseph Pohl or John Paul, settled in Goodhue County. He farmed and made stoneware vessels for his own use, firing the local, pure clay in a wood-fired kiln. His wares proved popular with his

neighbors but the work was labor intensive and he eventually gave it up. Luckily, several entrepreneurs took stock of the area's proximity to the Mississippi River and its vast, readily accessible clay fields and an industry was born.

The first entrepreneur was the town's former mayor, Francis F. Philleo, who with his son William announced in 1866 the founding of a pottery factory.

The two operated Philleo and Williams for several years until the factory went up in flames in 1870. Two years later the Red Wing Terra Cotta Works was formed, followed by Minnesota Pottery in 1874. In 1877 or 1878 a group of investors founded Red Wing Stoneware Company, which soon became an industry leader. Other manufacturers included the Minnesota Stoneware Company in 1883, the Red Wing Sewer Pipe Company and J.H. Rich Sewer Pipe Works in 1891 (which used clay considered unsuitable by pottery manufacturers), and the North Star Stoneware Company in 1892.

Competition between the factories was stiff and Red Wing, North Star, and Minnesota joined forces in 1894 to create the Union Stoneware Company.

While each division retained its own identity and product line, the new company cut marketing costs, provided a shared sales outlet, and prevented price wars. But North Star couldn't compete and it was closed in 1896. By

1906 the remaining two companies merged under the name of Red Wing Union Stoneware Company.

Potters came to Minnesota from the east, especially from Ohio, which had its own tradition of pottery. Although early pieces were hand-thrown on the traditional potter's wheel, increasing demand and advancing technology allowed for pottery to be mass produced in molds. Fired once, the clay was like stone - strong, non-porous, and vitreous; fired twice, and decorations and a glaze could be added to make the piece beautiful and sanitary.

At first Red Wing potters made salt-glazed ware, impressing marks into the soft clay or painting cobalt-oxide butterflies and leaves on a piece after its first firing. During the second firing salt was shoveled into the kiln, producing a thick sodium vapor which reacted with the silica in the clay to form a nubby, orange-peel-like glaze on the surface. By the early 1900s the company switched to a white Bristol glaze which was applied before the piece went into the kiln, making for a more uniform surface. Rubber stamps coated with chemicals allowed decorations and logos to be placed on the body of the piece before the glaze was applied.

Glazes, forms, decorations, and markings can be used to learn more about a piece of pottery. On this particular Bristol-glazed crock from the Museum's collections the number "2" indicates the crock's capacity in gallons. The oval logo with "Red Wing Union Stoneware Co." indicates the piece was made sometime after 1906, when the Red Wing and Minnesota potteries finally merged, while the wing logo, first adopted in 1909, advances the date a little further.

Putting the red in the red wing wasn't easy. Since most chemicals that produce a red color tend to burn out at high kiln temperatures, uranium oxide was used. But over the years the wing logo grew smaller and smaller as the cost of uranium ore escalated and further government regulations on it were imposed. The large wing on this crock dates its manufacture to the early 1910s. Although uranium oxide is radioactive, in this application it doesn't pose a danger because it is sealed under the glaze. Who knows what harm it did to the factory workers who came into daily contact with it.

Crocks (or jars, as they were known at the time) like this were used to prepare and store food. Industrious housewives added to their larder by brining meats, pickling cucumbers, or making sauerkraut in crocks, topping them with stoneware lids. As stoneware tends to keep the foods stored inside it cooler, it was an important addition to the root cellar. Its impenetrability made it rodent-proof, too.

Stoneware lost its place in the American home in the early 20th century with the increasing availability of canned foods and home refrigeration.

Modernization, urbanization, and changing fashions played a role, too.

During the 1930s the Red Wing Union Stoneware Company mostly phased out its plain, "old-fashioned"

stoneware products and began making decorative earthenware pitchers, flower vases, flower pots, ashtrays, kitchenware, and dinnerware. In 1936 the company changed its name to Red Wing Potteries, Inc., and continued to manufacture products for the home including lamps, figurines, and cookie jars.

Many factors are said to share the blame for the demise of the company - foreign competition, outdated production methods and sales strategies, a crippling labor strike. Red Wing closed its doors in 1967 only to be reborn, in a way, when the company's last president, Richard A. Gillmer, bought the remaining inventory and ran an outlet store. Years later, as collectors' interest in the historic pottery grew, two studios opened in Red Wing to make replicas of late 1800s pieces as well as new items paying homage to the old techniques and traditions.

Today collectors recognize the beauty of American stoneware and its importance in history, paying top dollar for rare or extremely lovely pieces. Perhaps the highest price for a piece of Red Wing was paid by a Minneapolis collector in 2002 when he bought a 20-gallon 1890 salt-glazed crock decorated with birds and leaves for \$37,000. A lot of money for something that was once considered quite common and utilitarian.

CREDITS

DePasquale, Dan & Gail, and Larry Peterson, *Red Wing Collectibles: An Identification and Value Guide* (1985); "Minnesota Potteries in Red Wing, MN," Antiques Oronoco website (<http://www.antiques-oronoco.com/pottery/redwing.php3>); "Red Wing History" and "More About Red Wing Stoneware," Wing Tips website (<http://www.redwing.net.com/>); Gillmer, Sue, "A Brief History of the Pottery Industry in Red Wing," Red Wing Collectors Society website (<http://www.redwingcollectors.org/>); Palmer, Kim, "Hot Crocks in Red Wing," *Minneapolis Star Tribune* (7-9-2003); and "Red Wing Pottery," Nancy's Collectibles website (<http://nancyscollectibles.com/septnewsletter.html>).