

The Potter's Craft

by Lynne Belluscio

Mark Presher, who lives in LeRoy, has been the potter at Genesee Country Museum for many years. He presented a wonderful program at their Domestic Skills Symposium this past Saturday. He talked about the importance of the potter in a community. In nearby Morganville, there was a blacksmith, a harness shop, a coopers shop, a grist mill and saw mill. There was a boot and shoe shop, a wagon shop and a general store. There was also a trip hammer shop and Fortunatus Gleason's pottery which was begun in 1827. Probably the most important product of the potter in the early days was storage crocks. Albert McVean, in the Annual report for the LeRoy Historical Society cited a story that John and Mercy Shumway were married in March 19, 1835 in Pavilion and that they drove to Morganville to buy crockery with which to set up housekeeping. They bought two small covered crocks, one to hold salt and one to hold saleratus. (a type of leavening like baking soda). Those two jars are in the collection of the LeRoy Historical Society. The remarkable thing about those two pots, is that someone actually wrote down what the two crocks were used for.

Gleason's pottery used local clay and produced redware which is often called earthenware. The clay was dug up and worked in a pug mill. After the clay was turned into pots, crocks or jugs, it was dried and then dipped in "slip" which was the glaze. When fired in the kiln, the glaze turned shiny and sealed the clay. Red ware was fired at a lower temperature than the grey stoneware which became popular later. The problem with red ware was that the glaze was lead based, and when acid foods were stored in the crocks, the lead leached into the food. This was not unique to Morganville pottery. The Romans knew that people got sick from redware glazed dishes. Never the less, it was necessary to glaze the clay because it had to be water tight.

Crocks were used for dry goods, such as salt and saleratus. Fruit was preserved in sugar and put in crocks. Sausage and meat (such as minced meat) were "potted" and sealed with a layer of molasses or lard. Sometimes the tops of the crocks were covered with stretched cow bladders. (Believe it or not, when I worked at Genesee Country Museum, we acquired several cow bladders and tried this. When they were pulled tight and dried, they were like a drum head.) Sometimes, when preserves were put into crocks, the tops were covered with muslin or paper. But the unusual and unique characteristic of Morganville pottery is the clay lids. Mark has said he has never seen another 19th or 18th century pottery with this kind of lid. Instead of the lid, sitting inside the top of the crock, the lid extends over the top and prevents dirt from collecting around the lid and dropping into the crock. As they say, form follows function, and certainly this is an example of that axiom.

Morganville also produced shallow milk pans, in which milk was placed so the cream could rise to the top. The cream was skimmed off and churned into butter. The skimmed milk was used for cooking or fed to the pigs. There are also redware pitchers, colanders, and bottles. Glass bottles were not common and the Morganville pottery made bottles for a druggist in Batavia, S. Dustin. There are also marked Morganville spittoons. The whole idea of men spitting tobacco juice into spittoons on the floor is nasty, much less the job of the person who had to empty the ugly stuff. But it was better then spitting on the floor. Morganville also manufactured chamber pots, a necessary item when trips to the outhouse in the middle of the night or in the winter were impossible.

Part of the production of redware is the firing of the kiln. It was necessary to fire the kiln to a temperature of about 1700 degrees. Albert McVean had collected the story of the



Morganville kiln firing from Clinton Ford: "The kiln was eight or ten feet in diameter and high enough for a person to stand up in it. Hardwood was burned for fuel to provide heat for firing the ware. At one time quince wood from the old Norris Nursery near the original clay source was used. The kiln fire was started in the middle of the afternoon and kept burning for about thirty hours."

When the Erie Canal was built in 1825, the grey clay that was needed to make stoneware was shipped to Rochester. Stoneware, which was glazed with salt glaze - -not lead glaze - - replaced the old redware. The redware potters, such as Morganville switched to making flower pots and drain tiles for fields. The Morganville pottery closed in 1900. In 1973, an archeological dig was held at the Morganville site by the Royal Ontario Museum and the Rochester Museum and Science Center. Later, a pottery was built at Genesee Country Museum, based on the measurements and drawings of the Mor-



ganville Pottery. It produces redware, but unlike the original Morganville Pottery, it also produces stoneware. In 2008, the Stafford Historical Society published a booklet on the Morganville Pottery, and today includes an exhibit about Morganville in their town museum. In 2009, Genesee Country Museum produced a 30 minute video "The Potter's Fire" which captures the art of Mark Presher, master potter. As a side note, at Saturday's presentation, Mark mentioned that he is searching for an apprentice to study under his tutelage, because he is thinking it might be time to retire. Mark said that only those willing to work hard need apply.