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# The Sewer Tile Clay Pottery of

## Grand Ledge, Michigan

Marsha MacDowell and C. Kurt Dewhurst

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

At the outset it would be valuable to examine the history of Grand Ledge, Michigan, to set the stage for the development of folk art ceramics in that city. It was in June 1836 that a group of land speculators headed by a Z. Lloyd arrived in the Grand River Valley and purchased the section of land that is now Grand Ledge (Pierce 1936:23). It is noted in the records of the *Grand Ledge Independent* that, "Late surveys revealed a superior grade of sandstone, coal and clay, while the topography which is the topography of the whole lower peninsula of the state, shows but eight points with a higher elevation than Grand Ledge, which is the summit of Eaton County, being 830 feet above sea level and 250 feet above Lake Michigan" (1970a:b-4).

The Grand River Valley, near where Grand Ledge was to develop, had a carved river bed that was approximately 60 feet below the surrounding terrain. The resulting sandstone ledges on the two sides of the Grand River were left exposed and were later to account for the name of the town. By 1849 Grand Ledge was filled with settlers, a dam built across the river, a sawmill erected, and in 1850, the city was granted a post office. The next 50 years were a period of rapid expansion and economic development. In 1870 the seven small islands in the Grand River at Grand Ledge were the object of marked development as a resort area (*Grand Ledge Independent* 1970b:b-6). A dance pavilion, a hotel, and a rowboat rental service that provided a grand view of the famous ledges, helped to attract tourists. A beautiful casino, a roller coaster that spanned the islands, and a steamboat paddlewheeler completed the attractions, making the "Seven Islands...one of the most popular picnic places in Michigan...with as high as twelve train loads of people from various sections of Michigan and Chicago all in one day" (Pierce 1936:31). Even though the resort business was to diminish after the turn of the century with the invention of the automobile, Grand Ledge remained a thriving town.

Grand Ledge is unusual because there are few known potteries in Michigan. Unlike other Eastern states that had numerous potteries, Michigan had only seven cities with potteries besides Grand Ledge. These cities were: Corunna (John Neuffer Pottery, ca. 1863-1864), known for its redware; Detroit (Martin Autretsch, ca. 1863-1869 and Theodore Blasley, ca. 1865), known for redware; Grand Rapids (David Striven and Samuel

Davis, ca. 1859-1867); Hadley (Mortimer Price, ca. 1863-1864); Hanover (Elijah Nichols, ca. 1863-1865); Ionia (Sage and Dethrick, ca. 1893-1903), known for earthenware; and Marshall (Aaron Norris, ca. 1862-1894), known for redware (Ketchum 1971:171).

In the early 1860's a pottery was built by Lew Harrington on West Jefferson Street near the present site of the Grand Ledge Clay Products Company (Figure 1). Local legend contends that Indians in the area had used this site for pottery making. It was also discovered by homesteaders that clay along the Grand River was suitable for the production of earthenware. Information about Harrington is scant, but it is known that he was the father of Edward, a painter (Kent 1922a:1), and that he produced jars, churns, and crocks (Pierce 1936:27). Another early potter, George B. Loveless, also built a pottery near or on this site. The 1860 census for the Township of Onieda (which includes Grand Ledge), listed George B. Loveless as a potter and his son George Willis Loveless as a peddler. He was a colorful figure, too old to enlist at the outbreak of the Civil War, but undaunted by age, dyed his hair black and joined anyway. When the war ended, he returned home where he commenced a more personal kind of battle. The *Grand Ledge Independent* cites the incident in the following story:

When the railroad was being built from here to Grand Rapids, the graders struck Mr. Loveless's land just at the end of the bridge by the chair factory; they had been allowed to complete the grade across his land without settling the right of way, and when they got the rails laid to the west end of the bridge, just before them on a pile of railroad ties which he had put up sat Mr. Loveless with a double barreled shot gun. He had established a dead line at the end of the bridge and told them that the first man who crossed it would be shot. They settled. Loveless was eighty years old at the time (Kent 1922b:3).

By 1869, work on the railroad was completed and trains began running through Grand Ledge on a regular basis.

The first organized clay product company was the Grand Ledge Sewer Pipe Company formed in the 1880's. In 1906, another business began across the highway. A number of local businessmen, including R. E. Olds, founder of Oldsmobile, and

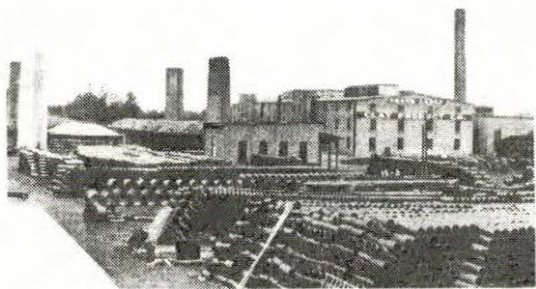


Figure 1. This postcard view of the Grand Ledge Clay Products Company was one of many variations popular around the turn of the century. Eight beehive kilns were built in 1907 when the company was established.

John W. Fitzgerald, father of a Michigan governor and grandfather of a Michigan Supreme Court justice, organized a new business which has flourished until today. The firm was originally intended to produce only conduit pipe for underground wiring, but a disastrous fire in 1937 destroyed the dies for the pipes, and the company began to manufacture sewer pipe tiles. This turn of events instigated a rivalry between the two companies which continued until the closing of the first factory, leaving the Grand Ledge Clay Products Company the only remaining tile producing firm in Michigan. During years of competition, the original firm changed hands, becoming the American Vitriified Company, owned by the Ohio-based firm of the same name. Many sewer tile workers in Grand Ledge worked at various times in either firm. Because of its Ohio association, American Vitriified brought many specialized workers from Ohio, particularly molders and branchers. And in the early teens, Grand Ledge Clay Products was employer to a large group of Syrians, but for the most part, the industries have found their labor force locally. Many of the workers' families still live close by.

For years both companies worked out ingenious methods of removing the clay from the ledges and transporting it to their plants. For one company this meant hand loading the clay into a V-shaped narrow gauge train car which was pulled along by donkeys underneath the Pere-Marquette railroad, across the highway to the factory. Grand Ledge Clay Products utilized a horse-drawn V-shaped train car that ran on a narrow gauge track to the main building. At one point it even ran across a trestle bridge built on conduit tiles. For a long time most of the clay was loaded by hand, making the jobs at the sewer tile factories arduous and demanding. Yet it was in this setting at the end of their long days that a small number of employees created their own artistic diversions and modes of self-expression in clay.

#### FOLK ART POTTERY

Before examining folk art pottery in Grand Ledge, it would be useful to define folk art. Alice Winchester, in the catalogue to the Whitney Museum of American Art exhibition entitled *The Flowering of American Folk Art, 1776-1876*, defined folk art in the simplest terms:

American folk art consists of paintings, sculpture and decorations of various kinds, characterized by an artistic innocence that distinguishes it from so-called works of fine art or the formal. This is necessarily an imprecise, even subjective designation. Indeed, the line that separates it from academic art is not always sharp and clear; there is a wide borderline in which they merge and overlap. But American folk art as we have come to understand it has its own qualities of vigor, honesty, inventiveness, imagination and a strong sense of design (Winchester and Lipman 1974:9).

Holgar Cahill, while director of the Index of American Design some 40 years ago, wrote that folk art was "the unconventional side of the American tradition in the fine arts...it is a varied art, influenced by diverse sources, often fresh and original and at its best, an honest, straightforward expression of the spirit of a people" (Cahill 1932). Cahill emphasized that folk art was an overflow from the crafts, the expression of the common people, made by them and intended for their own use and enjoyment. Recent exhibitions of regional folk art in Georgia, Kentucky, and Michigan have given credence to Alice Winchester's belief that "...as interest continues to grow, more and more folk art related to that of the Northeast, but with its own regional accent, will be discovered in the South, Midwest, the Southwest and the Far West" (Winchester and Lipman 1974:9).

The creation of folk art pottery in Grand Ledge was just what Alice Winchester referred to as a folk art related to the Northeast, but with its own regional accent. The folk pottery produced in Grand Ledge has been commonly referred to as "sewer tile art" as it was produced by workers at the clay potteries around the turn of the century. The sculptures created there were fashioned out of sewer tile clay, and these creations were merely the off-shoot of the real artisanship of the workers at the potteries of Grand Ledge. At the end of the day, some workers with spare amounts of clay would fashion items as whimsical diversions from their routine. Animals such as lions, frogs, and turtles were particularly popular. In addition, some utilitarian creations such as planters, umbrella stands, lamp bases, pencil holders, match holders, and assorted household containers emerged from the kilns at the end of the day. The decorative animals often served as doorstops, banks, and paperweights in the home of their creators. These creations were molded and then hand incised, put into the kilns with the rest of the clay products which were fired daily: drain tiles, clay flue lining for chimneys, wall coping, wall blocks, and slump crocks. The sewer tile art was done for the pure intrinsic pleasure of the workers, as they were rarely sold. One senses that there may have been some competition among workers at the potteries to see who could fashion the most appealing lions, particularly because there were so many variations and so many were made and brought home for doorstops. Residents of Grand

Ledge during that time of major pottery activity remember that almost every house in Grand Ledge had a lion for a doorstep that was either made by the man of the house or was a gift from a friend. Yet few remain today and only recently have those pieces been recognized as a forgotten folk art form in Michigan.

It has been said that folk art makes a strong emotional appeal to many people (Winchester and Lipman 1974:9). Many claim that folk art is "...a peculiarly and exclusively American thing, expressing our great qualities of originality, inventiveness and independence" (Winchester and Lipman 1974:14). Certainly the folk art of the potteries of Grand Ledge fits this description for it was clearly an expression of individuality and inventiveness in the face of a growing industrial age in Michigan. Unlike the folk arts of New England that were touted as being inspired by the freedom, time, and environment of the earlier generations of Americans, the folk artists of the industrial age created almost in spite of the time and environment. The folk pottery of Grand Ledge was truly and expression of individual independence and originality at a time when Michigan's industrial growth was threatening individual expression.

The folk art pottery in general, and the clay lions in particular, of Grand Ledge were no doubt to some extent the outgrowth of the rural folk artist's attempt to imitate what he had seen in books or first hand or had simply heard of by way of mouth. Possibly the inspiration for the clay lions was those produced in Bennington, Vermont, or perhaps in examples imported from England. More elaborate creations they surely were, but these lions of flint enamel or Rockingham-glazed ware may have served as influences in the minds of the Midwestern folk artists. The Bennington lions were often made without bases, with rough cast manes or smooth curly manes. These lions, like the other dogs, deer, and various animals made at Bennington or in other "industrial" potteries elsewhere, were beautifully rendered by highly skilled and trained potters. Figurative detail was incised and shaped producing nobility in these small examples of decorative pottery. The glazes were perfectly conceived and applied with true professional skill. It is no wonder that these figures would be remembered and copied in years to come. One can only speculate on the exact origin of the influence of such examples on the resurrection of this form in the Grand Ledge sewer tile clay lions. There are many possible explanations for the appearance of folk pottery in Grand Ledge as the area was largely populated by New Englanders and especially settlers from upstate New York. Perhaps some settlers moving from Vermont to nearby Vermontville, Michigan, carried with them the seeds of the idea or perhaps an actual example. Also, it is important to note that there were many similar lions made in Ohio sewer tile factories, particularly around the Zanesville area. Naturally, there may have been some sharing of the form from state to state due to the migration of workers to different potteries, as previously noted in the case of the Grand Ledge American Vitreified Company. Never-

theless, it is quite evident that the potters in Grand Ledge borrowed freely from the ideas of others but reflected their own personality and originality into their work.

The creation of lions in Grand Ledge was certainly the most popular subject. The Bennington-type lion or Rockingham-glazed lion on a base was transformed in pose by the folk artist from a more naturalistic stance to a more rigid sphinx-like position resting on a flat clay base. The end result varied depending on the folk artist's ability to render his own conception. The most sophisticated pieces were achieved in direct contrast to the material used in their creation. The lion (Figure 2) is depicted in accurate proportions with a sculpted mane and strong facial character. The legs and paws seem to be relaxed and yet quite lifelike. In addition, the tail sweeps around and under the back of the left leg. All in all, it is a fine example of a Michigan artist's work. The glaze is even and the decorative treatment of scalloping the edges is a unique final touch to the piece. The underside of the base shows the manner in which the clay was worked into the mold. Obviously, the mold itself was the real artistic achievement; unless, however, it was taken from another lion, folk or otherwise.



Figure 2. Lion, Artist Unknown, ca. 1910, 5"x9", courtesy of the Hon. and Mrs. John Fitzgerald. Molds of lions were prepared by the resident "folk artists" and the lions served as doorstops and bookends.

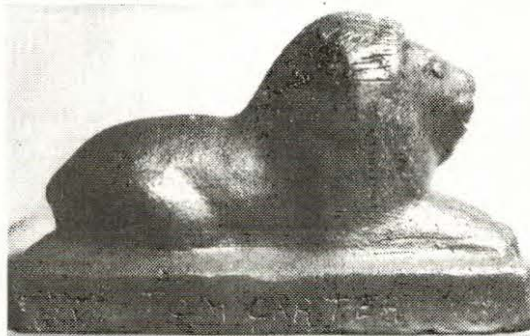


Figure 3. Lion, by Tom Carter, ca. 1910, 5"x9", courtesy of the Hon. and Mrs. John Fitzgerald. Each creation varied considerably and frequently decorative elements were incised, as in this example.

The lion in Figure 3 was fashioned by hand sculpturing, a variation on the mold technique. These pieces were predominately worked by hand and incised with decorative detail on the facial area, paws, mane, and tail. They were truly the products of untrained folk artists. The strength of their simplicity and the anthropomorphic character that shines through in the smile and eyes is a welcome expression of humor and warmth. Each piece generally varied in the attention given to details. Derivations of this decorative doorstop or ornament were the lions made as banks for families and friends of the artists. As one can well imagine, the lion must have been the source of much experimentation of form and function.

Even though the lions were by far the most popular folk art pottery subject, many others were attempted. Roy Poole was born in Grand Ledge in 1898 and worked there his entire life. He was employed at both American Vitriified and the Grand Ledge Clay Product Companies. In his spare time, he fashioned and fired numerous animals of sewer tile clay for his own pleasure and to decorate his house and garden. He made turtles, alligators, frogs, coiled snakes, lamp bases and assorted containers. Many pieces, such as his turtles, were quite large and surprisingly heavy. The hand-fashioned turtle has a shell that was incised with deeply scored shell-like patterns with extended appendages that were also finished with decoratively incised claws (Figure 4). The head extended upward conveys a primitive expression of life. The eyes seem to be looking up at the human standing over the turtle. Perhaps Roy Poole had a particular attraction to turtles and frogs which were no doubt common along the Grand River which ran through town. Yet his alligators and other creations were true products of his own imagination.

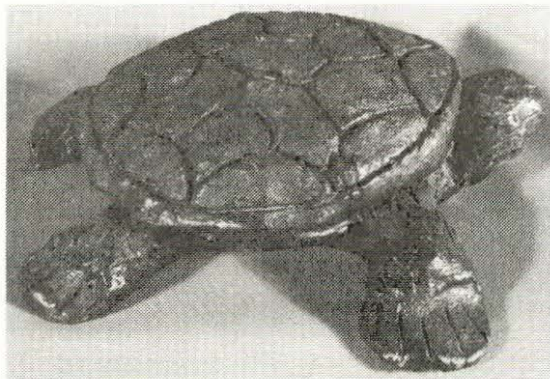


Figure 4. Turtle, by Roy Poole, 1920-30, 13" long, courtesy of Betty and Harlan MacDowell. Roy Poole fashioned large animals and containers that decorated his house and garden, but he made turtles of all sizes including "thumbnail" size turtles.

Another subject that was popular was the sculpted tree trunk, which served at various times as the form for urns, planters, and practical containers. Many examples exhibit the variety of forms that were explored. Both were hallowed

out and the exterior was incised to simulate bark and stylized stumps or branches were often added. The practical and ingenious potters of Grand Ledge found pragmatic use for the tree trunk creations as seen in the water cooler (Figure 5). The variations in form are as endless as the imagination of the potters themselves. Even cemetery planters were made in Grand Ledge, much in the same spirit of the cemetery markers of sewer tile clay that have been found in southern Ohio and Kentucky.



Figure 5. Watercooler, Artist Unknown, ca. 1915, 32" high and 12" diameter. Private Collection.

An unusual architectural use was made of the conduit tiles in the construction of the previously mentioned bridge, house foundations, basement wall finishing, the siding of garages, and in some remarkable instances, the formation of entire buildings. Among these were: a Chevrolet dealership built in 1920-21 which was razed in 1966, a still extant carriage house built about 1915 for a funeral home hearse, the now destroyed buildings that had been erected in the teens to house the Syrian workers, and on the property of the Grand Ledge Clay Products a building that at various times served as a blacksmith shop and horse livery (*Grand Ledge Independent* 1970a: 4). This last structure was probably built in the late teens or early twenties of this century.

The work of the potteries of Grand Ledge, Michigan, is like that of countless other products that reflect the cultural tradition of our towns and their people. The difficulty lies in uncovering what has for so long gone unrecognized in our midst. It has been said of the folk arts, "the artisan tradition discernible in all folk art is perhaps its chief unifying characteristic, but it is the eye of the artist directing the hand of the craftsman that gives it esthetic validity" (Winchester and Lipman 1974:14). This has been the nature of the life of the artist/craftsman in Grand Ledge, Michigan, and it time to examine and separate the integral character of the contributions of the folk artists. Hopefully this one segment of one state's folk art tradition will now be recognized for its particular expression of originality, inventiveness and independence in the American tradition.

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