

**Westman Oral History Collection**

**Interview Date: 1983-04-19**

**Narrator: Harold Medd**

**Location: Brandon, Manitoba**

**Transcriber: Megan Holowick**

**Date Transcribed: 2014-10-02**

**Topic: Ceramics**

**Type of Recording: Cassette**

**Length of Recording: 00:30:00**

**Introduction by Interviewer, start of clip 1 of 1-00:00:19**

Hazel Rose: This is Hazel Rose and I am interviewing Harold Medd and his topic today is ceramics.

HR Question (00:00:20): Mr. Medd uhm I wanted to ask you as bit about your background. Perhaps you could fill us in about your place of birth, your schooling, and your early endeavors?

Harold Medd Answer (00:00:33): Well now, it's a long to go back to place of birth and time of birth. Actually, I was born on the farm in the R.M [Royal Municipality] of Cornwallis in uh 1912, July 21. I was raised on the farm, went to the Little Old Country School through grades one through eight and then came into town [Brandon] to take grades nine, 10, 11, and 12 at the Brandon Collegiate Institute. After that I went back home and helped on the farm until I was 23 years of age and by that time I was interested in a lady in the neighbourhood. In fact when I was 23, I got married to Jean Beresford and the two of us moved south, a mile and a half from the home place ad started farming on our own in Cornwallis.

HR Q (00:01:43): Now was your home's barn, was it a homestead or was it a family farm?

HM A (00:01:47): Ah no it wasn't a homestead. Somebody had been farming it prior to my dad and a mother taking over the farm. This was just ah two miles south of Brandon. Uhm more of the background you might include that I am a third generation Canadian. Uhm my dad came out with his dad from Ontario to the Fort Cupell [?] area in 1885, the year of the Louis Riel Rebellion and they couldn't make a go out there it was just too far from civilization. It wasn't long that they moved back to Griswald [?] and actually homesteaded there, in the Griswald [?] area and from there moved south of Brandon where they raised the family; ah two girls and two other boys besides me.

HR Q (00:02:51): And is that commonly known as the Brandon Hill area?

HM A (00:02:56): Not not really, ah you had to go farther south and a little bit east to get into what we call the Brandon Hills. We called are area Cornwallis and it was the Little Old Cornwallis Country School number 187 that I attended.

HR Q (00:03:15): We were interested too in in this basic ceramics that you uh were took pottery. How did this come about?

HM A (00:03:27): Well ha now what that first came about through Mabel Yeomans, she was a quite a sculptor in her own rights. And uh through adult education she was able to obtain the first kiln that we were able to get a hold of and it was set up in cent in the old Central School in center part of Brandon and my wife and her mother, Mrs. Beresford, were asked to join the group and start doing ceramics. It wasn't very successful down there, they had to take their pieces down, hand molded pieces, they were fragile, they usually end up damaged in transit or they weren't fired properly and after the first winter of working done there, I decided it wasn't good enough and that was when I uh built my first kiln.

HR Q (00:04:34): And and what what year would that be?

HM A (00:04:34): As close as I can remember about 1955 [HR going "oh" in the background] and ah I was a very slow process to begin with a very small kiln uh the uh business professional women of Brandon joined in, some of them in with ceramic group and started coming here to do a little bit of ceramics. Uh Mabel stayed with it a bit, but Jenny and Meg Gemmill were tremendous people for the advancement of ceramics at that time, it was a pleasure to have them come. In fact, Jenny came on until the year she died and I believe she was 82 when she passed away, and she was still doing ceramics with us. Uh May Caldwell was another that ah I recall working with ceramics and this was really working with ceramics, I mean we didn't uh go out and get lessons. We read some of the very basic instructions from some books available to us, but mainly it was trial and error and we worked in a very small way for several years, but we could see some progress and uh as we progressed I had to build a bigger kiln and I ended up building 30 kilns altogether and there still in operation from actually from as far west as Calgary to Winnipeg.

HR Q (00:06:15): So you were really self-taught?

HM A (00:06:18): Yes, we were.

HR Q (00:06:19): Trial and error?

HM A (00:06:19) Trial and error

[HR going yah in the background]

HR (00:06:22): Marvelous.

HR Q (00:06:23): Now when did you set up your own shop?

HM A (00:06:27): Well uh, really this was a very slow building process and uh when we would actually say that we had setup a shop, I don't really know but I quit farming in 1947. Ah no, I moved off the farm in 1947 and come into this house [618 Richmond Avenue Brandon, Manitoba, location of the interview]

and it was ah I was still farming and farmed from here for about 11 years. So in 1958, I ceased the farming operation and turned all my time to ceramics, so possibly we could from that date where we got into production and built up classes until we ah were quite busy. I had to build a second kiln and I fired both kilns every day to keep up with the demand.

HR Q (00:07:34): Mr. Medd we been talking about the initial participants that were in your ceramics classes and I would like you to expand on this subject and tell us more about who you taught and the communities that it has effected?

HM A (00:07:53): Well now were covering a lot of territory. They ah interest built up once they knew it was being done in Brandon and we had people come ah for instance two carloads, mainly of Icelandic people came I believe for three winters all the way from Baldur to do ceramics in our home and they did some beautiful work. They Icelandic people are very good at handiwork.

HR Q (00:08:25): Would that be once a week?

HM A (00:08:26): Yes it was and ah they came on days where when their advised to travel because of the weather. Uh like of Tom and Elva Wilkins from Killarney, came over and uh we taught them and then Elva took on classes there [Killarney], bigger than what Jean and I ever had and really got into it. In fact, and it was Tom and Elva who uh started the Westoba Ceramics Association. Now also we taught the uh Indians [Aboriginals?] and Inuit people at the Sanatorium [Ninette]. It was rather unfortunate that we didn't get started sooner with them, because it was shortly after they got along very well that the operation closed down and everything disbanded.

HR Q (00:09:27): Would you go to Ninette?

HM A (00:09:29): Yes we did, we went to Ninette. Uh we also went out three winters to Minnodesa and taught Bernice [?] and Keith Shinako [?] among they were among are students there and after the third

winter it was getting a little bit too heavy for me [clearing out throat sound from HM]. So at a party, farewell party in the spring when we were closing down for summer at least. I just said to ah the group that ah Jean and I wouldn't be back next fall, but I think I know who will take it over and without ever speaking to the Shinakos [?]. I turned to Keith and I said "You will won't you Keith." And he was clearly interested in ceramics and he was ah good oh artist in his own right in painting and he right there and then said "Yes we will carry it on," and they carried on very extensive program in ceramics. We took it to some of the schools, I recall building a kiln and taking all the way up to the school at Camperville.

HR Q (00:10:41): That's between the lakes isn't?

HM A (00:10:43): Uh it's on the no it's not between the lakes. It's on the west side of the lake not between them, west side of Lake Winnipegosis. Now who else uh I think we should mention, Floss Ducharme, she got making figurines here with Jean's mom, Mrs. Beresford, and she wanted to do just that so people interested in making little dolls went to Floss Ducharme and she had quite a successful group of people going to her place. Uhm another one Jackie White was a student of ours uh we taught her ceramics and then we taught her husband mold making and they went into it in their own home and had quite a successful class going there.

HR Q (00:11:47): Did you teach mold making on a regular basis?

HM A (00:11:52): Not on a regular basis. When...

HR Q (00:11:56): Or on demand?

HM A (00:11:56): On demand yes, that is what I was looking for. Anytime four, five, or six, or seven people would indicate to me they would like to like to learn mold making then I would hold a class and these were all day classes. Ah in order to ah to give them a good background we started at nine in the morning and went through four in the afternoon and during class I made a one-piece mold, a two-piece

mold, and a three-piece mold right in front of them and I showed them the steps that were taking, the formulas for mixing the slurry, plaster, excreta and ah some of them were quite successful in going from there and making dozens and dozens of molds. Molds are very expensive to buy its almost prohibitive now the cost. So we continued to make them and we still are making them.

HR Q (00:12:58): You and I were saying that Brandon then was really the hub of ceramics because it spread in all directions uhm and to western Canada is that true?

HM A (00:13:10): Yes I believe for a while it was more ceramics being done in south western Manitoba around the Brandon area then there was anywhere west or even Winnipeg. So it did start from here and I have spoken about the uh Tom and Elva setting up Westoba Ceramic Association. Another of our students uh went one step farther and uh got the Canadian Ceramic Association uh started and it was uh few years ago, could a been three or four years ago that the Canadian Ceramic Association held there convention here in the Red Oak Inn.

HR Q (00:14:01): And you had a worthy ah what would you say ah presentation made to you at that time didn't you, an honored?

HM A (00:14:09): It was quite an honor Jean and I actually were the honored quests at the convention. Ah to take part in the uh affairs uh the theme was Manitoba and they asked me to show the coloured slides on southern Manitoba. Ah they asked me to give a demonstration on ceramics and show them some of the things that we were doing and talk to them about the possibilities of ceramics because there endless and you can't stay in a rut, you have to uh uhm get out of that, expand ah experiment.

HR Q (00:14:57): It's a creative process then?

HM A (00:14:59): Is it ever it really is; you can start right from scratch and hand model something out of clay if it is a good model. You can go from there to making a mold of that model reproducing it by the

hundreds in greenware and we have done that. My wife is the artist, let's get things straight; my wife is the artist, I'm the technician. And I do the mediocre ordinary things like pouring greenware, making molds, firing the kilns. But when you want something special, Jean will hand model it and then I'll will make the mold of that thing so I can produce it for the people doing ceramics in greenmark [?] castings and carry it right through right from the primitive beginnings.

HR Q (00:16:02): So really ah ceramics is a twofold process then, it's creative for you as well as the people that you teach. You might come up with ideas of things to present to your pupils?

HM A (00:16:16): Yes and that works both ways too, uh Hazel because uh they being ideas the members of the class are coming here are always bringing ideas and we will try to uh make that idea work or maybe expand it a bit, but they uh initiate ideas as much as Jean and I did so it's a sort a joint effort.

HR Q (00:16:47): Mr. Medd, I was wondering if we could just discuss a few of the basic terms of the ceramics business.

HM A (00:16:55): You mean to clear up some questions in the peoples...

HR Q (00:16:58): About greenware?

HM A (00:16:59): Yes.

HR (00:16:59): Etcetera.

HM A (00:17:00): Yes. Now of course when we started doing ceramics, we were hand modeling and using the coil method and the slab method and the pinch method hand modeling clay objects. But people once said that it's too difficult, some people are real artists and will carry on and do beautiful things but most people prefer to get what we call greenware castings. Now greenware is unified clay that castings comes out of a mold. The clay that we buy to use as casting in a dry powder form and we mix it in washing machines, according to a formula and the molds are practically water type. Now call

this mixture slip and it's like heavy cream and we pour it into the mold and leave it in the mold until the casting is the desired thickness in the mold and then we turn the mold upside down and drain everything else out; this is how things became hollow. I have had many people say "How do you get them hollow," it is the most simple process in the world because the longer you leave it the thicker it gets and then when its right pour it out just like emptying cream out of a jug.

HR (00:18:34): That's interesting.

HM A (00:18:34): And then you leave it in the mold until it starts to shrink a little and it will shrink away sides of the mold and then you take one block of the off uh and see its okay and then you continue to open it up until you take the casting right out of the mold. Then you set it up for two or three days while it dries and this then becomes greenware casting unfired clay cast object.

HR Q (00:19:05): And it's very perishable isn't it?

HM A (00:19:08): Yes it's quite fragile. We have ah some ah people break some pieces but not many. They so learn to treat it gently, especially after they broken the first piece when it's already about ready to be fired. Uh most clay objects are prepared for firing, what we call setting; that getting it all smooth, taking off the mold lines, and then it goes into the electric kilns and is fired to 2010 degrees Fahrenheit. And then after it has cooled down in the kiln, there taken out and then the people who and settled them, glaze them. Two or three or four, sometimes five coats of glaze depending on what type of glaze their using, what colour their using, and then the object is placed back in the kiln, where it' fired to 1773 degrees Fahrenheit and that changes that dough colour glaze into beautiful colours with a glass finish.

HR Q (00:20:24): This is when you say to your students oh but you can cook or do whatever you like with that. You could put it into your oven, which is only 350 degrees for sure?

HM A (00:20:35): It should be able take it shouldn't it after being fired and matured to 2010 degrees.



HR Q (00:20:42): I thought we could discuss ah your source of supplies and ah whether you anything native to Canada that you use or not?

HM A (00:20:53): We don't use native clay, we bring a very highly processed casting clay body in the dry powder form that's almost as fine as talcum powder. It is a mix, it is so mixed with different ingredients until it fires while which we prefer rather than the terra cotta clays that some people work with. And it's hard durable and will take glazes that are available to us, so we bring it in. Uh some of the clay was milled in Denver and was brought on by the uh truck load into the Brandon area and into the Winnipeg area where it was distributed around the people who required it. They uh there was a clay body actually found north of Neepawa that would of been okay but it was a small body and no company would come in and set up a mill to mill it for our use, because it's a really expensive operation and they wouldn't want much larger clay body then what was located there.

HR Q (00:22:14): I was wondering too if you could just tell us approximately how many glazes you had in your workshop? Just off the top of your head, what would you say you had?

HM A (00:22:26): Well we buy them in four ounce jars and gallons. There's almost endless numbers of colours. Now we had stayed with one company and we haven't even bought all the colours available for that company. What with the a satin glazes and the Matte glazes, high gloss, the uh Willoughby's special effects glazes, the crystal glazes. I would say we have possibly 500 different colours in glazes for our students to use.

HR Q (00:23:13): Tell us the little story about the gold glazes?

HM A (00:23:16): Gold?

HR Q (00:23:17): Gold yes.

HM A (00:23:19): Well that's a...real gold that is gold in a liquid media where it stays suspended in the media and when you put it on an object of course the media is burned out and uh depending on what gold you buy, uh the English gold we buy leaves a deposit on the object of 22 karat gold, it pure but you can but it 10 karat gold in a media, it isn't nearly as expensive and of course prices went up. I haven't bought any since then because 100 gram jar I normally buy for 35 dollars ah went up close to 400 dollars for approximately four ounce of gold. That sounds a lot but really it isn't because you spread it thinly and yet you get full gold cover on your object and ah were still doing god work.

HR Q (00:24:24): It takes special firing doesn't it?

HM A (00:24:26): Yes it does, uh gold some of the decals, mother pearl all fire to a cone 109. That is control cone that bends over melts and you see it peep-hole in the kiln indicating that you have reached the proper maturing temperature for gold or mother pearl or decals and that is 1333 degrees Fahrenheit, still red still quite hot. In fact, hot enough to uh allow the gold or decals to move into the glaze surface. So it is quite a permanent surface.

HR Q (00:25:19): Mr. Medd, you still act as a consultant to other teachers?

HM A (00:25:23): Yes at times I still do, I have ah people right now who are just getting started into ceramics come to me with problems and I definitely try to solve the problems for them. Uh one thing about it we never kept any secrets from anybody, if we found out about something worked and worked well, we always let other people know about it. But uh problems will always arise in ceramics and sometimes you can't even come up with an answer to a firing problem but often we can if we had a lot of experience. So yes, I take pleasure in helping anybody in ceramics that I can.

HR Q (00:26:09): And uh do you go to conventions or exhibitions or does your class participate?

HM A (00:26:16): They used to participate. In fact when our classes in Brandon going, they put on a whole exhibit of ceramics ware, usually if one of the churches and uh we would charge a little bit for people coming in and give the funds to the church and we enjoy that but ah it became a really too much of a project, too much work.

HR Q (00:26:53): Mr. Medd, I wonder if in closing if we could have your views on what has been the lasting satisfaction in being a ceramist?

HM A (00:27:05): Well really as you look around not you our home, which is filled with our own work, but when we go visiting people and see and recognize the nice pieces some of our students have made and have them on display in their own home, that beauty which will remain has remain for decades I would think has travel all over the world actually. I guess that is the most satisfying for Jean and I. There is a lot aspects and that is the people that come often for Jean and I to be able to fill a need for people.

HR Q (00:27:59): And everybody, it doesn't matter who needs a touch a beauty in their life and ah ceramics when you look at the different things that you and Mrs. Medd have done in this room like the vase with the prairie scene on them of the stark trees and the buildings uhm it just touches you and so perhaps when your students look at what they done maybe that's same sense of satisfaction is there?

HM A (00:28:30): Yes its...we have had people come into this double room in particular and say how much beauty there is there, "it is like a museum," we have had several comments like that, that is satisfying for us.

HR (00:28:53): I want to thank you Mr. Medd for this I forgot to mention you live 168[Mistake] 618 Richmond Avenue.

HM (00:29:03): Right.

HR (00:29:04): And ah you have a well warm path to your backdoor and we thank you very much on behalf the Voices of Yesteryear for this interview.

HM (00:29:16): This has been satisfaction for Jean and I, it's been a wonderful hobby and ah we will never forget the pleasure that people have brought to us. I hope we have in turn given people pleasure also.

HR (00:29:35): I'm sure you have and thank you very much.

HM (00:29:38): Thank you.

[After 00:29:40 there is a light ticking sound till 00:30:00]

**End of interview-00:03:00**