

JACK NEFF: POTTER, PAINTER, PHILOSOPHER

"It does concern me that we may be losing touch with the earth, with trees, and clay, and dirt and fiber. My attraction to pottery was the satisfying merger of the creative spirit and manual labor. I think in our mechanized, technical age we better keep our hands to the plow somehow. There are people out there who don't even know how to grow a potato. I think that's getting kind of dangerous. If you don't know where your roots are, if all your cups are plastic, if everything comes from K-Mart and nobody makes anything anymore, I think we can lose track of what it means to be a human being."

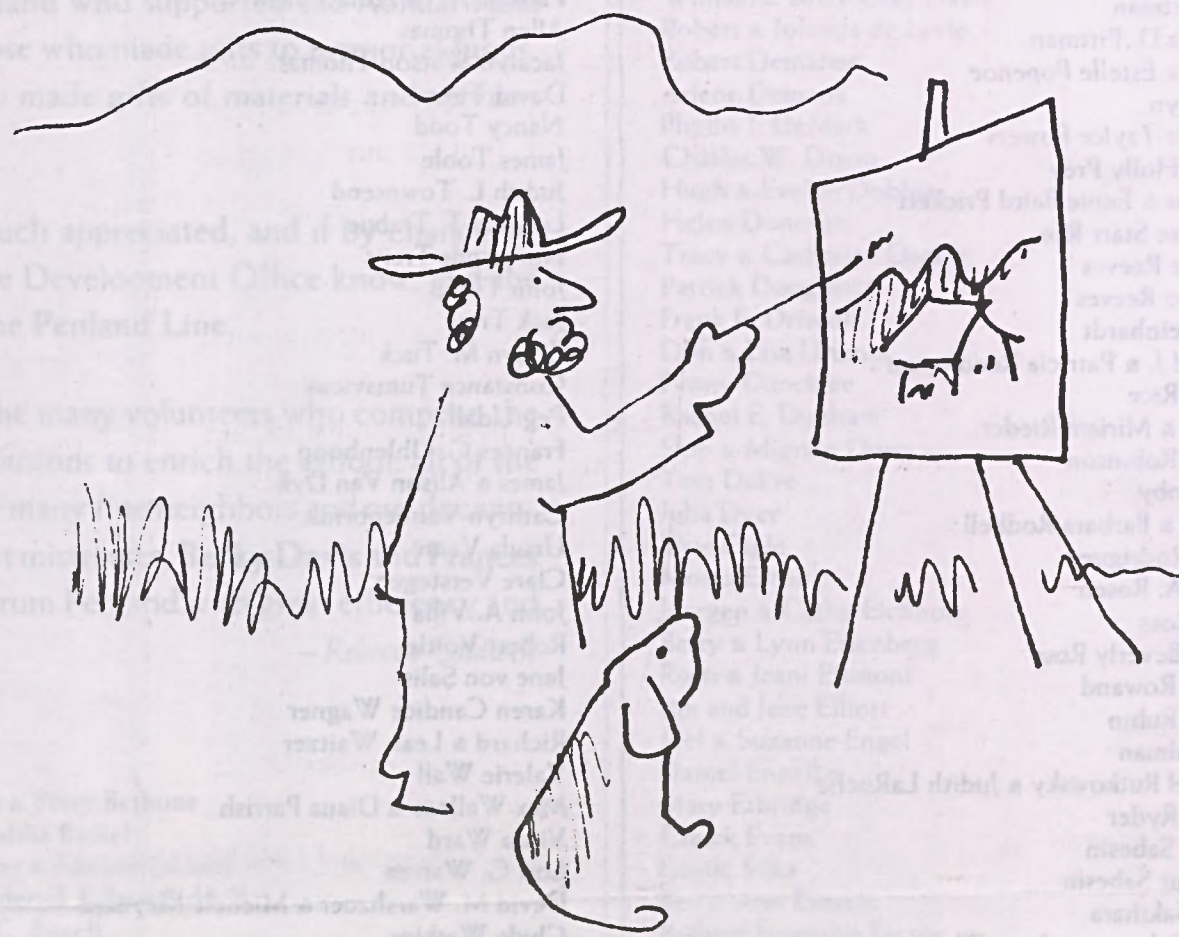
Jack Neff, well-known in the Penland area for his paintings and drawings, was actually a ceramics resident at the school in the early 1970s. I visited him at **Betty O'Brien's** house in Glen Ayre, where he is recuperating from the effects of chemotherapy. Despite his weakness from the treatment, he kept me laughing as he gave me a quick tour of his career.

He took up pottery while studying painting at the Art Student's League in Manhattan. In 1968 he went to study at the New York State School of Ceramics at Alfred University. He completed a master's degree there, but did not yet feel competent as a working potter. At the suggestion of **Robert Turner** he applied for a Penland Residency.

Jack remembers being "swept away" by the beauty of Penland when he arrived with his family in September of 1972, for what would be a four-year stay at the school. **Cynthia Bringle, Richard Ritter** and **Mark Peiser** were fellow residents. He describes Penland as having a great spirit at that time. Several days after our visit, Jack, still thinking about our conversation, called to say that he'd remembered a story that illustrated that spirit.

"**Mark Stanitz** and I had thought it would be a nice idea to have a telescope on the grounds to use at night when people were out walking around," he told me, "We were trying to raise money to buy this telescope. Late one night, we were at the Barns talking about food, which was a bad time to talk about food because everyone was starved. One student knew a lot about Mexican cooking and the idea for this big Mexican dinner came up."

Jack went to work and threw 130 plates out of red clay so



that everyone could paint them with bright colors. "I had the plates ready to be decorated and I went home for dinner," he recalled. "I was gone for two-hours and when I got back, all but five were painted and stacked in the kiln. I guess everyone had just descended and done this. It was fantastic! I painted the other five and fired them all. Opening that kiln was like Christmas...some of them were pretty bizarre." As soon as the plates were ready, the dinner was organized. Each person paid \$2.00 and got to keep their plate. It was a great success and raised several hundred dollars. "There was a lot of magic back then."

But the residency years were not all magic. His last year at Penland was a time of personal turmoil. His marriage broke up, and his wife and two children moved to Ohio. Jack began to turn away from pottery and spent most of his time at Laurel Cottage (his Penland home) making drawings. When his residency ended that year, he moved to a small house north of Bakersville and began to support himself doing odd-jobs and landscaping.

Reflecting on that time in Jack's life, his friend **Jan Ritter** told me that "He got away from pottery and just steeped himself in being in the mountains. When he left Penland, none of us saw Jack. He lived in a primitive cabin off on Roan Mountain; he planted bamboo around it. Jack lived there for quite a few years before he came out, and then we started seeing the paintings which are so wonderful."

At first, he sold a few paintings to friends and showed them at local galleries, but they were not widely seen. In

1989, when health problems, which were later diagnosed as cancer, made it impossible for him to continue heavy landscaping work, he turned to **Harvey Littleton** and other friends who helped him get his paintings into several area shows. This increased the interest in his painting, and he was able to sell more of his work.

Jack's paintings, mostly landscapes, are impressionistic, and immediately appealing. With a flavor of primitive art, they perfectly capture mountain life. He is fascinated by the depiction of negative space, the space between things. For this reason, he often paints on a dark background. "I don't really know what I'm doing," he laughed, "I'm just posing these questions as I paint, and sometimes things happen." Other Penland artists speak of Jack as a

man who has finally come into his own with his paintings. He has also produced hundreds of delightful, spare drawings so numerous that he's thought of sending a picture of himself with a pile of his sketchbooks to the Guinness Book of World Records.



Although he no longer pots, Jack still thinks about the way crafts can connect people with each other, "When you get to doing pottery, a whole lot of stuff opens up to you. You get interested in things that you didn't even notice before, and all of a sudden you're tied in with some dude who lived in North Africa, fourteen-hundred years ago. You look at his stuff and say, 'Wow! Look what he did.'"

The paintings and drawings that have taken the place of his mugs and bowls reflect his affinity for the natural world, but have also helped connect him with his neighbors. "Over in Bakersville, where he lives, they all know Jack," Jan Ritter told me, "Jack's got a painting up in the local restaurant, there's a drawing of his on the wall of the little quick-mart. He really took the time to get to know people. You can't say that about most of the people who come through Penland. They don't take that time, but Jack did. If you see him in the restaurant, he's very rarely alone; there's always some old-timer with him. Everybody knows Jack, and everybody loves him." —**Robin Dreyer** 