

# Family carries on pottery legacy

BY KIRSTEN VALLE  
STAFF WRITER

"He was a potter's son," began the poem Janet Calhoun wrote after her grandfather passed away.

"Wealth and fame he did not desire, just the love of family and a wood kiln that would fire."

Melvin Owens was not only a potter's son, but a potter himself. When he died April 12 at the age of 85, he left behind a whole family of potters and a legacy in Seagrove, a small town south of Asheboro nationally known for its population of potters.

Melvin Owens learned his craft from his father and older brothers and opened his own shop in Seagrove in 1930, where he created pottery for years and passed the art along to his daughters and sons.

"I started helping in the shop as soon as I was old enough," said 61-year-old Vernon Owens, Melvin Owens' second son, who has owned Jugtown Pottery in Seagrove since 1983.

"I grew up in it," Vernon Owens said. "I didn't know of anything else I wanted to do. I never did venture out very far."

Neither, it seems, did Vernon Owens' siblings. "We all work in pottery in one way or another," he said.

Lula Bolick, Owens' younger sister at age 59, owns Bolick Pottery in Lenoir with her husband. She has been married for 41 years and has made pottery the whole time.

"I never thought about doing anything else," Bolick said. "It's just in my blood, I guess. I like it because I'm at home."

Bolick has even passed the tradition along to her family. She taught her husband and eventually her daughter, 37-year-old Janet Calhoun, who now owns Traditions Pottery in Blowing Rock.

Pottery-making seems to be in Calhoun's veins. "I thought every-one made pottery until I was about

5 years old," Calhoun said. "I really had a passion."

Though family owned pottery businesses are certainly rare in the United States, they are not uncommon in Seagrove. Joanna Marslend, director of the North Carolina Pottery Center in Seagrove, said that there is a long history of family pottery businesses in the town.

"Seagrove is unique," Marslend said. "There are close to 300 years of an uninterrupted pottery business, and now there are over 100 potters in a 10-mile radius here."

Marslend said that although pottery is still a major business, its purpose has shifted somewhat over the years. When metals and inexpensive materials began to replace clay pots, Marslend said, pottery began to gravitate more toward art.

"It is very much a tourist draw," she said. "But there is a mix of art and utility. People pretty much do their own thing."

The pottery of the Owens family seems to exhibit both artistic and utilitarian values. "To me, it's a useful thing," Vernon Owens said. "We make vases, candlesticks — just things you put in your home."

Calhoun said she mostly tries to do functional pottery as well.

The art might perhaps lay simply in the tradition — the great legacy of Owens potters.

"Melvin Owens did leave a legacy," Marslend said. "(The Owens potters) are an institution in themselves. Through their tradition and style, they have helped to preserve the art of pottery in Seagrove."

And with tradition comes innovation, at least for Melvin Owens' descendants.

"A lot of my shapes are my shapes," Vernon Owens said. "Some pots resemble my dad's, but my pots are pretty much my pots."

Calhoun also said that she does unique things with her pottery, but like the rest of the family, Calhoun said she keeps things to how

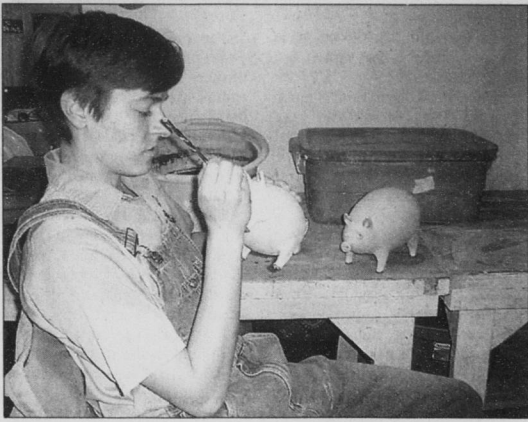


PHOTO COURTESY OF THE OWENS FAMILY

Travis Owens, a grandson of recently deceased potter Melvin Owens, is just part of a legacy of potters coming from Seagrove.

Melvin Owens liked them. "It's more of wanting to keep his shapes alive than trying to make them look exactly like his," Calhoun said. "I'll never be the potter he was."

Whether or not Melvin Owens' children and grandchildren will ever be the potter he was, they are certainly keeping his traditions alive and expanding the Owens base, with shops stretching across North Carolina.

Bolick has been showing her pottery at festivals across the state for 20 years, and the family's pottery has been displayed in various museums.

A fund-raising auction at the North Carolina Pottery Center on Sunday will feature the works of

Melvin and Vernon Owens.

But no matter how famous and widespread the Owens family pottery businesses become, the legacy, it seems, will always reach back to its roots, Melvin Owens.

"He did get recognition when he was alive, but it's great that people are still interested," Calhoun said. "He was a big inspiration to so many potters."

Her poem reflects Owens' legacy and life, ending strongly and simply, "Grandpa's life on earth is over; his race on earth he has run. He had a wonderful life — the life of a Potter's son!"

Contact the Features Editor at [features@unc.edu](mailto:features@unc.edu).

# Minimal levels of lead discovered at Seawell

BY MARY MCGUIRT  
STAFF WRITER

A routine inspection gave rise to concerns from parents, teachers and health officials when traces of lead were found in the dust of Seawell Elementary School's pre-kindergarten building last week.

The school was preparing to begin the process to become certified by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, which requires schools to be declared lead-free.

But when tests were conducted, two of the five samples indicated minimal levels of lead in the overhead steel beams that support the pre-kindergarten building.

Tom Konsler, environmental health supervisor for the Orange County Health Department, said school officials were contacted last week about the findings.

He said the samples in question contained 46.6 micrograms per square foot and 53 micrograms per square foot. The state's limit is 100 micrograms per square foot on floor surfaces.

But he added that there would be a higher allowance for these samples because they were not taken from the floor. "At this point, classrooms do not rise at level of health hazard for lead," Konsler said.

The school sent parents a letter explaining the situation Wednesday. Superintendent Neil Pedersen and the Orange County Health Director Rosemary Summers each told parents not to worry.

"The levels of lead detected were

so low that we are not recommending blood tests for lead in students in these classrooms," Summers stated in the letter.

Summers said concerned parents should contact their family physicians to discuss whether their children's blood lead levels should be tested and offered the services of the Health Department to parents without access to a doctor.

Konsler also said that even though the levels of lead found in the school were significantly lower than what is considered a health hazard, parents should take their children to the doctor if they have any concerns.

He said lead is particularly damaging to children under 6 years old because they are still developing. Potential risks of lead exposure include learning disabilities and retarded development.

In the letter, Steve Scroggs, assistant superintendent for support services, stated that immediate measures are being taken to ensure the safety of the students. "We chose to be proactive and handle the situation by doing a complete remediation project including encapsulating the painted beams and cleaning out all the dust," he added.

Konsler said the building pre-dates a 1978 law preventing the use of lead-based paint.

He said the health department will continue its monitoring.

Contact the City Editor at [citydesk@unc.edu](mailto:citydesk@unc.edu).

# Action stalled on voter-owned elections

BY SHANNAN BOWEN  
STAFF WRITER

After reviewing a report that revealed the nitty-gritty of Chapel Hill Town Council campaign spending, the council decided to defer action on voter-owned elections until an appointed committee develops a more conclusive plan.

Peter Walz, an analyst at Carrboro-based Democracy North Carolina, conducted the study of campaign spending in support of the recently submitted proposal.

Voter-owned elections would allow council and mayoral candidates to receive public funds for their campaigns by abiding by

strict regulations that would limit the amount of contributions received and the amount of money spent by candidates.

Walz's report, which studied campaigns since 1995, concluded that council candidates, like mayoral candidates, have spent an increasing amount of personal funds over the years, giving candidate with more money a greater advantage.

"It's become a matter of spending enough to be competitive because the tendency is to believe that spending a lot is going to win an election," Walz said.

His report shows that since 1995, candidates who finished as one of the top four spenders in the council election had a 69 percent chance of finishing as one of the top four choices by voters.

Only four of the 14 candidates who spent less than \$6,000 won a council seat. "It deters people out of office and is hurting our democracy because of economic status," Walz said.

Council member Jim Ward,

whose campaign was one of the most costly in council elections, according to Democracy North Carolina, said he supports the voter-owned elections proposal.

"It's a growing problem that is seen at all levels of the government," he said. "Costs go up in news ads, postage and other things associated with campaigns that cause candidates to spend more and more."

"(Public financing) is a move forward in creating an atmosphere where more and more people feel comfortable running for office."

Although time constraints and undecided issues about voter-owned elections have derailed the plan, the council will have time to review the proposal and possibly install it for the 2005 elections.

Walz called the council's interest a step in the right direction. "They're on the road to making elections not about money but about issues."

Contact the City Editor at [citydesk@unc.edu](mailto:citydesk@unc.edu).

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