

## White Oak Pottery

# From hobby to international firm

White Oak Pottery in Milton has grown from a hobby to an international business in eight short years. By 1976 the firm will have outgrown its Steeles Ave. location and will be looking for more space.

What's behind this success story? According to John Secord, ex-teacher and founder of the business, it's all the result of good local personnel.

"I've never seen a group of people co-operate so well," he says of his eight woman staff. "They are all mature women, conscientious and res-

ponsible. They are only asked to do something once and they do it."

**Working partners**

As with all working relationships it's a two-way street. John and his wife Sharon and their partners Bernie and Susan Henry are working management.

A tour through the plant reveals everyone, bosses included, covered in clay and working in a relaxed, congenial atmosphere.

It's an eight-step operation from mixing the clay to packaging. John and Bernie prepare the clay in large

barrels using the slip-cast method. Water and chemicals are added to a mixture of talcum powder and clay and pumped through rubber hoses to Mae Chaisson who fills the moulds.

**Quality work**

When it is set, Mae removes the elastic bands and carefully parts the still wet casting. They are set to dry, then cleaned up by Helen Brush, Elsie Joyce and Norma Serafini. "This is where the quality goes in," John points out. The pottery is trimmed with a knife, fettled and washed. The tops are made level and the piece wiped with a wet sponge.

Yvonne Address is in charge of the firing. The first time in the kiln the pieces are fired to an easy bisque, making them absorbent and ready for the glaze.

**Five colors**

Glazing is Sharon's department. White Oak has developed five colors, cobalt

blue, avocado green, earth chocolate brown, white and cranberry red. Each piece is hand-dipped in the same basic formula as glass.

It's then back to one of the eight kilns where the pottery sits on individual stilts to keep it from sticking to the shelf.

After inspection Alice Kennedy and Marilyn Rydall pack it for shipping.

**Red clay**

Susan Henry and Betty Irving operate the red clay section where the now-famous White Oak hanging planters are made. "It's a fashion that's here to stay," Susan says, determined to make White Oak first in red clay pottery.

Her dream is close to realization with a full page Simpsons-Sears ad about to appear in the Toronto Star Dec. 1 featuring the earthy pots.

"The country look of the red clay pot is definitely the

big thing right now," John says. "At gift shows it's obvious that what we have is a nationalistic appeal, something different from the imported pottery."

**German market**

The Canadian government is agreeing with him. They are presently negotiating for export of White Oak Pottery to Germany. "They're also interested in us because we are one of very few Canadian companies to make dinner plates as well as other pottery items."

Although believing the manufacturer does the thinking for the consumer, John listens carefully to suggestions by his customers as to design. "I believe for every person's taste there are a hundred others who feel the same way."

Even when a piece is designed to meet certain specifications, White Oak listens and offers changes. John is in constant touch with what sells by reading trade journals and attending craft shows.

**Artisans accept**

Mass produced pottery is often frowned upon by artisans. John says his company is well accepted by the craft community.

"We're doing our own thing and it helps them to promote their pottery as well," he says. "We sell to many craft shops and are proud to be associated with that field."

He gets philosophical about pottery as an art form. "The crafts of any country are the people talking back in terms of culture. I get along well with all local potters."

"I find the young people today are keen for reproductions and older people associate and remember through design of years gone by." An example of this seems to be in the popularity of clay bakers, the rooster dish as a soup tureen, and very large crocks and vases.

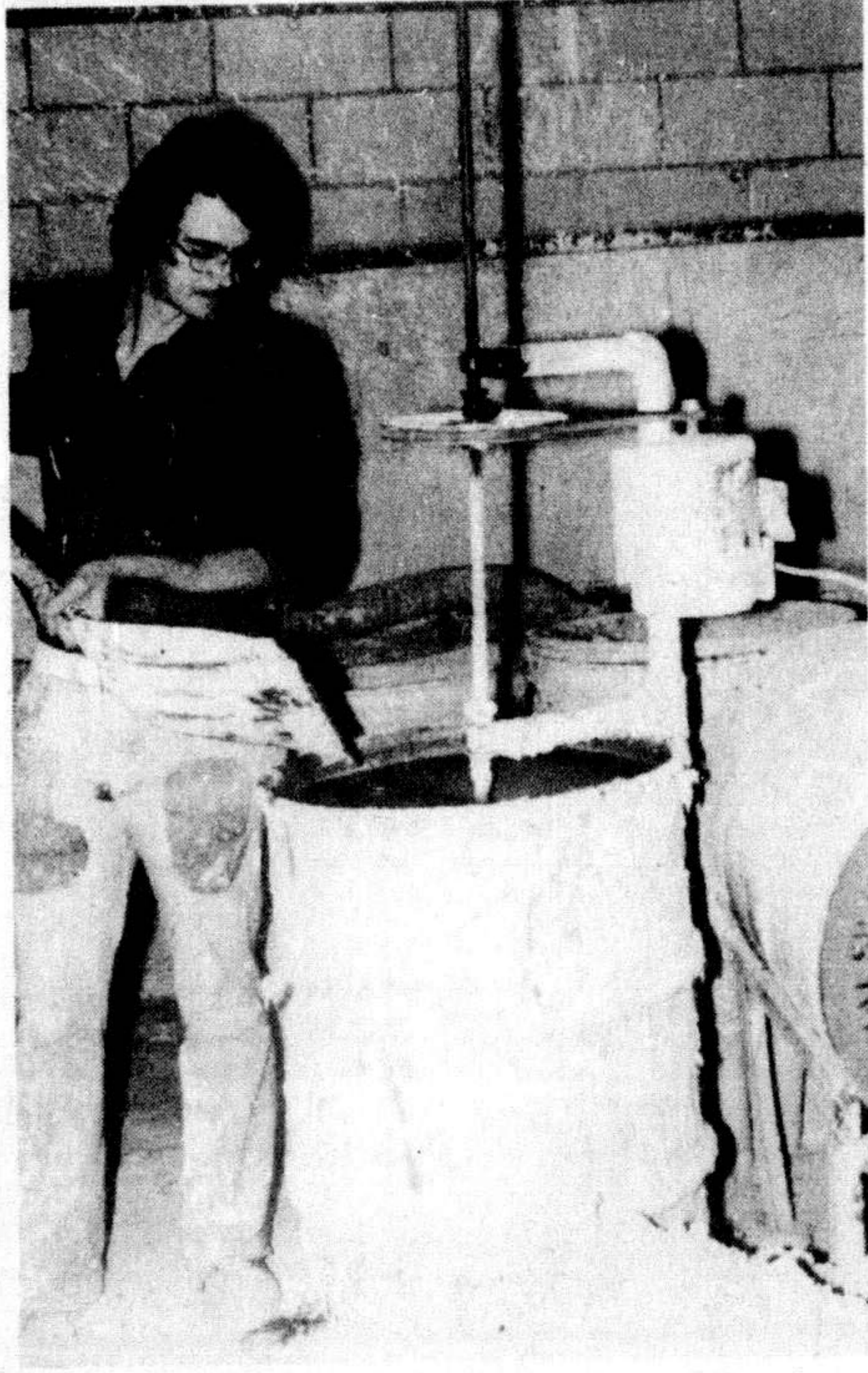
Local crafts shops package cooking herbs in especially-designed White Oak pots. A retailer of soaps and candles with an Upper Canada design uses White Oak soap holders exclusively.



**RETAIL DISPLAY** at White Oak Pottery shows the varied designs of the many lines offered. Bernie Henry is one of the owners along with his wife Susan and John and Sharon Secord.



**RED CLAY POTS** are part of the country look. These hanging planters have macrame holders. John Secord considers the red clay look makes the product distinctly Canadian.



**JOHN SECORD** shovels some talc into the clay, water and chemical solution. When mixed, the liquid clay is pumped through rubber hoses to the castings.



**ELSIE JOYCE** makes the top of a mug level by dipping it into water and rolling it gently on a flat surface.



**YVONNE ADDRESS** fires each piece of pottery twice in these circular kilns. They are fired before and after the glaze.



**ALICE KENNEDY** takes great care while packing the pieces for shipping.



**NORMA SERAFINI** fettles the pottery in the cleaning and department

**Half-priced**

Local shoppers are quick to take advantage of the half-priced seconds for sale directly from the plant on Steeles Ave. Although it's also possible to buy from the attractive front-office displays, more and more customers are cashing in on the good buys they find out back.



**FILLING MOULDS** with clay is the job of Mae Chaisson. When the clay is set Mae removes the elastic bands and carefully parts the still-wet casting.

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