

Bennington pottery on exhibit at Museum of Art and History

All the normal criteria for locating a pottery make Bennington, Vt., an unlikely choice for a site. It is, after all, a small town snuggled among the mountains in the southern part of the state, miles from markets and any major pottery centers. Although clay can be found locally, it is not all of the best quality.

During the 19th century, when Bennington's potteries flourished, raw materials had to be brought in, and the finished products shipped out — over poorly maintained dirt roads. Yet some of the most beautifully crafted pottery produced in the United States were made there.

There were two separate pottery operations in Bennington, but only one was involved in the creation of what collectors generally call Bennington pottery. The first, established by Connecticut-born Captain John Norton in 1793, ran a calm and predictable course for a total of 101 years, turning out utilitarian jugs and crocks.

The other pottery lasted fewer than 20 years, marked by abrupt changes of direction and ambitious efforts at innovation. When collectors speak of



Timeless Treasures • Prairie Museum

Bennington ware, it is mainly the output of this second operation, guided by an erratic character named Christopher Webber Fenton, that they have in mind. Fenton came to Bennington from Dorset, Vermont, where his family made pottery, and he married into the Norton family. He was made a partner in the Norton firm, but dreamed of extending its operation beyond everyday stoneware, and in 1847 struck out on his own, at first in an unoccupied portion of the Norton works.

The new concern, Fenton's Works, later to be known as Lyman, Fenton & Co. and then as the United States Pottery Company, experienced an astonishingly rapid expansion.

The most sought-after Fenton products include pottery with a mottled-brown, glazed finish called Rockingham, after the Rockingham

Potteries in England, where it was first developed.

The unusual mottling effect developed by Fenton is a spotted, twotone ware that most people associate with Bennington pottery. In 1849 Fenton patented another mottling method called Flint Enamel.

Fenton's real passion, however, was porcelain. The Bennington works mostly made parian ware, an unglazed ware resembling white marble in color and texture, and named for the Aegean island where the Greeks quarried marble. Developed in England, parian was first produced in America by Fenton.

Fenton became a major American source of high-quality ceramics, but had many problems. The biggest was shipping: the fine wares were fragile. Most had to be shipped by horse and

wagon, and breakage was extensive. Fenton also had trouble collecting payments. Such difficulties might have been surmounted by a steadier personality, but it appears that Fenton was somewhat volatile and capricious.

In 1858 the pottery went bankrupt, and, although sporadic attempts were made to revitalize the business, most collectors consider the wares made after 1858 to be inferior. Fenton himself worked briefly in a pottery in South Carolina, then founded a short-lived pottery in Peoria, IL, where he died in 1865.

Since Spring 1997, the Bennington Museum has been conducting a scholarly examination of the parian collection. For many years, dealers and collectors have accepted the word of Richard Carter Barret, author of Bennington Pottery and Porcelain (1958), as an expert. Scholars, on the other hand, have questioned the breadth of production ascribed to the firm, particularly the vast numbers illustrated by Barret.

A small portion of Parian ware ascribed to Bennington (United States Pottery Co.) is marked and scholars are

attempting to systematically determine if the larger portion was actually made by the United States Pottery Co. The value of Barret's book as a reliable tool for identifying Bennington parian has been comprised since there are dozens of inaccuracies. Some of the pieces noted as being made in Bennington are actually marked by English potteries. Still other pieces were published by Barret with complete disregard for historical accuracy. For example, his attribution of vases bearing portrait medallions of a bearded Abraham Lincoln and General Ulysses Grant to a factory that closed in 1858 defies historical fact.

The reevaluation of the parian collection at the Bennington Museum was based on and archaeology. By starting from the incontrovertible evidence rather than from the many attributions that have been made over the years, scholars have been able to reconstruct a significant body of work that documents the production of the United States Pottery Company. This body of work now holds together unquestionably and waits for additions that are based on firm evidence rather than



Sample of Bennington pottery.

hopeful speculation. For more information about the exhibit call 462-4590 or email at prairiem@colby.ixks.com.

Admission - Adults, \$5; Children (6-16), \$2; members free.

The museum's summer hours are: Mon - Fri, 9 a.m. to 7 p.m.; Sat, 1 to 7 p.m.; and Sun, 1 to 5 p.m..

Firefighters work to save ancient sequoia trees

PINE FLAT, Calif. (AP) — A ferocious wildfire fed by underbrush and weeks of dry weather roared toward a treasured grove of ancient sequoias, setting up potentially devastating scenario if flames reach the trees.

The 48,200-acre blaze moved through the valleys of the Giant Sequoia National Monument and came within a few miles of the Freeman Creek Grove and Trail of 100 Giants. "If fire does get in the Trail of 100 Giants, we won't be putting firefighters in there to try to stop it. It will be a climax of 300- or 400-foot flames," said Jim Paxon, spokesman for a national team of elite firefighters called in to manage the blaze.

The trail includes 125 giant sequoias over 10 feet in diameter, and more than 143 sequoias under 10 feet in diameter. The trees are between 500 and 1,500 years old.

More than 1,000 people have fled and at least 10 structures have burned. Among those evacuated were several hundred Boy Scouts, campers and residents of two hamlets, Johnsondale and Ponderosa.

The fire comes in the middle of one of the worst fire seasons in recent memory. A grueling drought has created hot spots across the West, with devastating fires popping up in California, Arizona, Colorado and Oregon. The California fire was only 20 percent contained Tuesday. And because the monument's deep canyons and mountain ridges make for erratic winds, it was hard to predict where the fire would go.

The U.S. Forest Service said it wanted to interview a middle-aged woman who apparently walked into an area store and said she had started the blaze after abandoning her campfire.

Anti-logging activists and forestry officials have clashed over how best to take care of the sequoias.

Environmentalists have blocked efforts to thin underbrush in the forest, saying it is a front for logging.

But forest officials warn that simply letting the forest grow without check makes the trees easy prey for the very kind of fire currently raging.

The forest service has done some controlled burns and machine thinning of brush and smaller trees in the forest, but has been hampered by lawsuits and lack of a management plan.

"The last couple years that the monument has been in place, it's been kind of 'hands off,'" in terms of fire preparation, said Kent Duysen, general manager a sawmill in Terra Bella.

The fire began Sunday in Johnsondale, a hamlet about 130 miles north of Los Angeles, and quickly blew out of control.

Helicopters zoomed through a dirty haze Tuesday, dipping giant buckets into Lake Isabella to douse flames.

Saving the biggest trees was a top priority, U.S. Forest Service spokesman Matt Mathes said. He called the sequoias "priceless" and said resources were not being spared to protect them.

"These trees can withstand a lot of fire, but if there's a lot of fuel buildup on the forest floor and temperature and humidity and winds are not favorable, we could have a problem," he said.

Sequoias can live more than 3,200 years, their massive trunks capable of withstanding countless fires. But fires can kill them when other trees spread flames to their limbs high above the ground.

The fire has crackled through a region that has seen little or no rain since spring.

Firefighters worried lightning from thunderstorms forecast later in the week might boost the flames.

About half of the fire burned in the 327,769-acre Giant Sequoia National Monument, which is located within the 1.2 million-acre Sequoia National Forest.

The monument preserves about half of the existing groves of giant sequoias as well as American Indian archaeological sites.

Juveniles playing with matches are believed to have caused a second California fire, which has burned 1,800 acres of wildland and about 25 structures in neighboring Kern County near

Lake Isabella. It was about 70 percent contained earlier this week.

Elsewhere across the West, a fire that threatened 65 homes in southern Oregon grew to 97,392 acres and nearly 300 National Guard troops were sent to help.

In Colorado, higher humidity and light rain helped firefighters battling a 4,400-acre blaze near Rocky Mountain National Park. About 225 homes in several subdivisions near Lyons, Colo., were evacuated.

In Washington, a 25,300-acre fire was 30 percent contained. More than 1,100 people, some from as far away as Mississippi and New Mexico, have been assigned to the fire.

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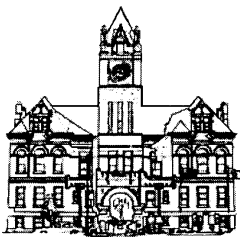
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