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MONTANA

MAGAZINE

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Rattle & Hum

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Decades of Clay at Helena's Archie Bray



HELENA'S
ARCHIE BRAY
FOUNDATION
PROVIDES
INSPIRATION
TO THE CERAMIC
ARTS WORLD

'A FINE PLACE TO WORK'

These arches are one of the Archie
Bray Foundation's landmarks.

There's no place like the Archie Bray Foundation. Anyone who knows clay has heard of the internationally lauded ceramic arts facility, located on 26 acres of what was once the Western Clay Manufacturing Company just outside the city limits of Helena.

But even folks who have never thrown a pot and out-of-town visitors to "the Bray," as it's fondly known, will be captivated by the center's enchanting grounds and history. Set against a mountain backdrop, the Bray's mix of industrial architecture, antique beehive kilns, and large scale sculpture amid gentle, grassy fields make for a strange and beguiling landscape. Everywhere you look, colorful ceramics left by former residents are a reminder of all those who have prospered in this setting, famously described by its founder as "a fine place to work." The Bray is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The story of this place begins in the 1940s with Archie Bray, a brick maker and ceramic engineer, who had clay "in his blood," according to Helena writer Rick Newby. Bray also had a deep love and appreciation for the arts, music especially. Because he wasn't an artist himself, Bray satisfied his passion by bringing performers to Helena and befriending artists of every stripe.

Two of those were Peter and Hank Meloy of Helena. Hank was a painter and Peter was a prominent attorney who later became a district judge. Both men liked to work with clay in their spare time, and Peter even built a small pottery in his back yard. With encouragement from the Meloy's and Branson Stevenson, an artist from Great Falls, Bray came up with the idea to build a pottery on the brickyard grounds.

The two men who helped make Bray's vision a reality were Pete Voukos and Rudy Autio, a pair of young artists he'd hired to work in the brickyard. Helena ceramic artist Richard Notkin calls it "incredible luck" that Bray met up with those two. "They were still kids," says Notkin. "Who knew they'd become such important figures in the ceramic arts?"

At the time, says Lela Autio, Rudy's widow, the two men were just happy to have jobs. "We were all poor as church mice," recalls Autio, an artist herself, who gave birth to two of the couple's children during their time in Helena.

In 1951, Bray and his charges began laying brick for ▶



'YOU KNOW IT'S PRETTY AMAZING. EVERYWHERE I LOOK, I SEE PEOPLE WHO HAVE BEEN AT THE BRAY.'

PETER HELD, CURATOR AT ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY CERAMICS RESEARCH CENTER AND FORMER BRAY DIRECTOR

Facing page: Steven Young Lee is the Bray's resident director

the new pottery, with the help of community members and ceramics lovers from around the state. Upon its completion, Autio and Voulkos set to work making functional ware intended to bring in a profit. But when the workday was done, Autio and Voulkos had the freedom and resources to pursue their own ideas.

Pretty soon, the artists were making pieces that not even Bray could appreciate. According to Newby, the tension became especially thick between Bray and Voulkos. "Peter Voulkos really went

off, in my estimation, to the wild end," says John Board, a longtime Bray volunteer. "I kind of suspect that they just got tired of thinking that ceramics should be making teacups and plates and saucers."

But for some reason, Bray put up with the unruly potters. "Even though he was a tough old bugger, he really had this generous spirit about him," Newby says.

In those first few years, a string of important ceramic artists visited Helena, bringing attention and cachet to the fledgling facility and

inspiring the young potters to break all the rules of clay. Autio and Voulkos eventually left the Bray, but their genesis there forever marked it as something special. The Archie Bray Foundation became the first residency program in the world dedicated solely to the ceramic arts.

Although it did not always thrive, the Bray managed to survive.

"It was very much a different organization back then," says Notkin, who was a resident at the Bray in the 1980s, when the place was run by Kurt Weiser. That was after the brickyard had closed but before the grounds were acquired by the Bray Foundation, so the artists were confined to a few small buildings up front. Money was tight and working conditions were spare. "I'd say it was kind of a monastic experience," says Notkin.

Peter Held was a resident at the Archie Bray in the 1970s, and is now a widely regarded curator and ceramics expert. Held says that the Bray was unusual for its relative isolation and the fact that "nobody was looking over your shoulder." "It's just a wonderful sort of inspiring setting," he says. "I think a lot of people grow as people there as well."

As curator at the Arizona State University Ceramics Research Center, Held now sees the Bray's considerable influence from a different vantage point. "You know it's pretty amazing," says Held. "Everywhere I look, I see people who have been at the Bray."

In the 1980s, Weiser spearheaded the purchase of the brickyard, securing the land that has become so integral to the Bray's character and giving artists room to do large-scale work. Similarly, each director that came before and after has made some important contribution to the organization's long-term stability. After many years of being a one man show, the Bray now operates with a full board and a staff of seven.

Little things have changed. In 2005, the Bray opened its new David and Ann Shaner Studio, a facility that houses studios and a gathering area for receptions and slide lectures. ▶

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'I ALWAYS SAY THAT IT'S KIND OF INTENTIONALLY UNSTRUCTURED.'

STEVEN YOUNG LEE, CURRENT RESIDENT ARTIST DIRECTOR



The Archie Bray Foundation's grounds are full of installations done by former resident artists.

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Although it's spawned many imitators across the globe, Lee says the Archie Bray Foundation is still one-of-a-kind. At the heart of its mission is still the resident artist program. Under Josh DeWeese's tenure, the organization built a strong resident artist scholarship fund, ensuring that artists are free to work without having to worry about how they'll pay for studio space. Minimal demands are placed upon residents as far as teaching and producing work, and there are no formal critiques.

"I always say that it's kind of intentionally unstructured," says Steven Young Lee, the resident artist director. A result of this approach, the only thing that distinguishes Bray artists is the strength of their work. "There's no Bray style," says Notkin. "And that's a good thing."

Add to that the fact that the humbly-termed "resident director" position that has always been held by a working artist, usually somebody young and promising. Like his predecessors, Lee is continuing the Bray's tradition of innovation and making his own mark on the place at the same time.

Currently, the organization is looking into ways to reduce its carbon footprint, with an eye toward a major kiln overhaul. Just by paying attention to small things, the Bray has already reduced its energy consumption by eight percent, Lee says.

The Bray's magnetic energy continues to attract the kind of artists who go on to become giants in the field, among them David Shaner, Notkin, Weiser, Sarah Jaeger and most recently, DeWeese.

Even for non-artists who, like Board, have become honorary members of the clay community, the Bray casts a powerful spell. Board recalls driving to the Bray one day and wondering to himself just why he loves it so much.

"The first (reason) was, 'It is a life-affirming place to be.' The second was 'It is a creative place.' And the third was, 'The people are just nice,'" he says. **M**

Emily Donahoe has written extensively about the arts in Montana and most recently for *Ceramics Monthly*.

BUTTE, continued from page 12

that are articulate and could contribute to the film. Finding women was a big challenge. Butte's a man's town but women have played a big role. Finding Marie Cassidy was wonderful. She had journalistic aspirations and was very informed about history and collected all sorts of bits and pieces about Butte's past.

MM: Was it hard to track down underground miners? Have many of those who worked underground died?

ROBERTS: It is getting harder. The ARCO retiree group noted in the film has just 20 members left. But there are guys who didn't join that group. It's especially getting tougher with the really old-timers, the ones who experienced more of the history, the strikes and the company's reaction to them and things like that. Some of the younger guys can discuss the craft of mining but don't have as much knowledge and memories as the older guys.

MM: How much did it cost to make *Butte, America*?

ROBERTS: It was about \$800,000 over 10 years. It's a lot of money but not that much when compared to other film projects. We shot some of the recreations in video, for the Granite Mountain fire and other scenes, and that required lots of work. But we shot in film mostly, and film is very expensive. We decided Butte deserved film. Some of the light there is so extraordinary. We shot over a five-year period and we absorbed a lot of personal costs. We used a lot of expensive talent from the Bay Area and then we shipped the film there for post-production work. It was totally independent. I raised a lot of the money myself. We would go from grant to grant. In the lulls, we would do more research.

Butte, America will make a tour of Montana cities in the fall of 2009. Copies will eventually be available for purchase. For information about screenings, the film itself or DVD purchases, go to <http://butteamericafilm.org> **M**

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