

Life In The Middle

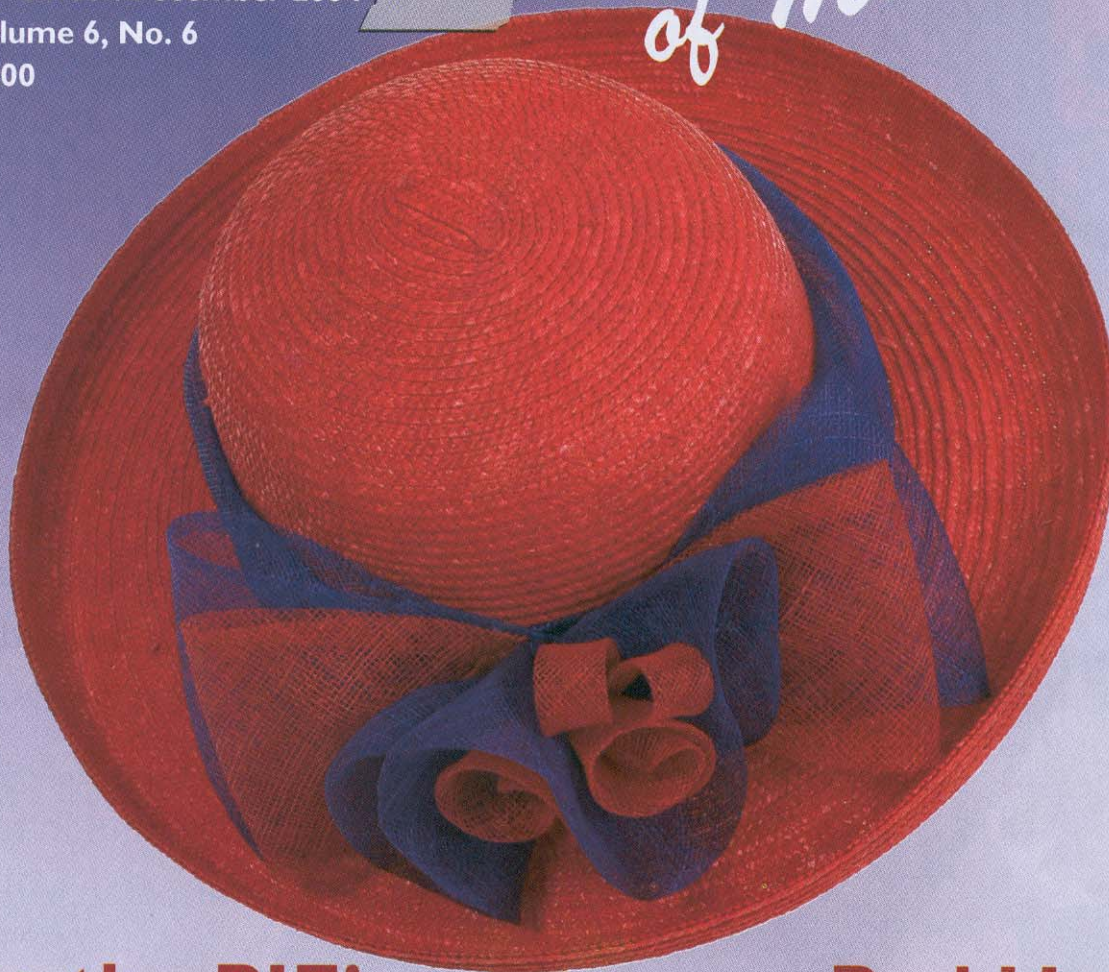


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Pass the PIE!

A salute to an American Tradition

Irishtown

A nearly forgotten mid-Michigan community

Pottery gaining new popularity

Red Hatters descend on mid-Michigan

As they say...they don't get older, they just get bolder!



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Mardi Gras Mask
by Barbara Taylor.

Photo by Ann Eby

Pottery gaining renewed popularity

by Ann Eby

However, there are still a number of die-hard potters and ceramists (largely the same thing), and some of them live and work in mid-Michigan.

Donna Hoff-Grambau lives near Winn, where she has her studio, Two Rivers Paper and Pottery. She does both wheel-thrown and hand-built pieces, using a variety of clays and glazes.

Hoff-Grambau, a registered nurse who teaches nursing classes on-line through Davenport College, first became interested in pottery about 25 years ago in art classes at Wayne State. Then her working life, as well as responsibilities as a wife

and mother, kept her too busy for artistic pursuits. In 1997, she took pottery classes at CMU, and this time she was able to stay with it.

Hoff Grambau now offers classes at her own studio. Besides teaching students to use the potter's wheel and do hand-built pots, she also teaches classes in making beautiful hand-made paper.

I knew that most "hand-made" paper starts with a slurry made from paper towels or toilet tissue, to which natural materials are added. "What do you use for a base?" I asked.

"I don't use a base," she replied, "I use natural plant material for the whole process." When I was at her studio she was cooking up a brew which looked a lot like swiss chard, but it was not for supper. Hoff-Grambau was making paper from hosta plants.

With extensive gardens on her property, she has abundant papermaking materials available right outside her house. I was especially impressed by a large, beautiful papyrus plant growing at the door.

Papyrus is native to the Nile valley in Egypt, and was used to make very early paper, and of course is the plant from which the name "paper" is derived. Centuries later, it will again be utilized to make paper...this time here in mid-Michigan!

Most of us, as children, had the pleasurable experience of making mud pies or building sand castles. It was exciting to take plain old dirt and sand and create something with form – something recognizable that actually held together for a while. Later, some of us worked with potter's clay in high school or college art classes. But then...life intervened, and we left the world of creative messing-about behind us.

Back in the 1960s and 70s there was a resurgence of interest in making pottery. The Art Center in Alma (now a private home) offered classes in both hand-built and wheel-thrown pots, and many area adults were able to revisit their childhood creativity and make attractive and useful things from an elemental material. No doubt some of these objects can still be found in area homes. Clay is much more durable than mud or sand!

That movement died out in the 80s, along with candle-making and leatherwork, and most people did not continue to make pottery.



Donna Hoff-Grambau makes handmade paper at her Winn studio, Two Rivers Paper and Pottery.

Photo by Nathan M. Grambau

It was probably inevitable that Hoff-Grambau would combine her two crafts and create "paper clay." She says that the idea was not original with her, but it certainly is appropriate. This is a mixture of paper made into a slurry and combined thoroughly with clay, which is then used to build lightweight pots. These pieces can be fired in the kiln just like regular clay.

Hoff-Grambau sells her wares at craft shows and festivals. I bought one of her pots at the annual Master Gardeners Conference in Mt. Pleasant because I loved the glaze (she makes her own glazes, rather than relying on those available commercially).

Another local artist who works with clay is Barbara Taylor of Mt. Pleasant. Taylor's pottery is all hand-built, quite large, and very organic in form. Her pieces usually have indentations or crevices large enough to hold small garden plants, and that is where she displays a lot of them; in her garden.

Taylor, who is the assistant director of Faculty Personnel Services at CMU, first began working with clay in the '90s. She took pottery classes at CMU, and pottery-making soon became a serious avocation. She has converted her basement into a spacious studio where she now conducts classes for other people interested in hand building, teaching various methods such as slab, coil or pinch-pot techniques.

In addition to making decorative pieces for her own garden and house, Taylor recently displayed several colorful masks in the Art Reach Mardi Gras exhibit.

Taylor does not make her own glazes, but she uses commercial glazes in a very innovative way. Teaching students to use these glazes is also an important part of her classes.

Claymates, the name Taylor chose for her business, give us a clue that this is supposed to be fun as well as serious art. Her classes are arranged for the convenience of her students, in the evenings or on weekends. All of the clay and glazes are provided for student projects, and Taylor has a kiln large enough to fire really big pieces.

If are interested in learning to make your own pots or other art objects, or if making paper from plants sounds intriguing, you can contact either woman for more information. Or, you might want to check



Barbara Taylor (left) instructs a student in her Mt. Pleasant studio.

Photo by Ann Eby



Abstract form by Barbara Taylor.

Photo by Ann Eby

out the art classes at CMU that they both found so life-changing.

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