

Red Wing's Rich Pottery History

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From 1877 until 1967, Red Wing was a major player in the American pottery industry. It began in 1861 when country potter John Paul discovered the large, glacially deposited clay pits beds located a few miles north of Goodhue. His efforts encouraged others, such as William Philleo, who formed a company which made architectural terra cotta, and David Hallum, a Philleo employee, who set up a stoneware shop near Third and Minnesota Streets. These early clay producers were the start of the rich "potteries" history in Red Wing and gave more than 5,000 people across the US beautiful things to collect today.

There were three main companies that produced stoneware in Red Wing: Red Wing Stoneware (1877-1906), Minnesota Stoneware (1883-1906) and North Star Stoneware (1892-1896). A fourth major business that benefited from the clay pit deposits found in Red Wing was Red Wing Sewer Pipe Company (1891-1970s). Red Wing Stoneware and Minnesota Stoneware bought out North Star in 1896 shortly before they merged to become Red Wing Union Stoneware in 1906. They would later change their name to Red Wing Potteries, Inc. in 1936 when the company diversified their lines to include art pottery and dinnerware.



Photo courtesy: The Goodhue County Historical Society

Red Wing's pottery industry really took off with the opening of Red Wing Stoneware Company in 1877. They produced utilitarian stoneware items such as jars, jugs, churns, water coolers, and bowls. Recognizing the high demand that Red Wing Stoneware Co. saw for its products, Minnesota Stoneware Company was opened in 1883 to further exploit the needs of the market. Until around 1900, both companies relied upon hand-turning to produce much of their ware. Skilled craftsmen working at a potter's wheel formed each piece. Bowls and other smaller pieces were molded with the use of a "jolly", a machine that worked like a potter's wheel, but formed the shapes between a plaster mold and a hinged template, rather than the potter's hands. Machine-turning or slip-casting and molding completely replaced hand-turning in 1917. The only major difference between pieces produced by each company was the shapes of the tops of molded jugs and the markings on the bottom. There was so much demand for the stoneware products made in Red Wing that in early 1892, North Star Stoneware was formed. However, due to a nationwide economic depression in 1893 all three saw a significant downturn and they faced their first short term closing in order to survive.

The leadership of the three companies came together in 1894 to form a sales cooperative called the Union Stoneware Company (1894-1906) for economic efficiency, bringing together their shipping and distribution cost along with order processing and fulfillment. Each company maintained their separate identity and had shares based upon company product output at the time of formation of the cooperative. The orders were distributed based on their shares in the newly formed company. Because of this distribution system, lack of business and inability to operate at a profit, by 1896 North Star was bought out by the Red Wing and Minnesota Stoneware companies. This strategic planning by the two remaining companies helped them survive and by 1900 both companies saw prosperity with the advancement of ceramic technology from salt-glaze, hand decorated to the white glaze wares, improvement in clay quality and production methods. These production advancements along with the conversion from wood/coal to oil brought the potteries into the 20th century.

The two companies were formally merged in 1906 under the name of Red Wing Union Stoneware Company (1906-1936). As the need for stoneware products diminished as refrigeration, and other household advancements became widely available, the potteries diversified their product lines to include art pottery and, by 1930, dinnerware. These additional product lines required another name change in 1936 to Red Wing Potteries, Inc, which is the name it operated under until it closed in 1967.

This is the first in a series of articles sponsored by the Red Wing Collectors Society (RWCS) as part of the City of Red Wing Sesquicentennial Celebration as well as the 30th Anniversary of the Society (1977 to 2007). From now until the RWCS Annual Convention, July 11-14 the members of the Red Wing Collectors society will provide you a snapshot of the major production lines of the Red Wing Potteries stoneware, art pottery, and dinnerware.

To learn more about the pottery history of Red Wing please visit: the RWCS website at www.RedWingCollectors.org, the RWCS Foundation Museum at Pottery Place Mall or website at www.RWCSFoundation.org, or the Goodhue County History Center www.goodhuehistory.mus.mn.us.

Red Wing Stoneware Company and the Minnesota Stoneware Company together produce 13 different ovals. The ovals applied to the stoneware crocks and jugs proclaimed the companies title. Whenever the Red Wing or Minnesota Stoneware Company changed their (name) title, they changed the oval to reflect the transformation. With 13 distinctive ovals and various sizes of jugs and crocks, what better goal then to collect one of each size and oval.

With the vast amount of stoneware produce daily, there is always bound to be mistakes or irregularities. Red Wing Stoneware pieces have been found with ovals applied upside down, red wings stamped twice or the red wing applied in blue ink rather than red. We have seen the gallon number applied in the red wing and the gallon number stamped in red ink rather than blue. Any irregularities can be highly prized by certain Red Wing Stoneware collectors.

Red Wing Stoneware Company has also produced a number of different stoneware bowls, pitchers, bean pots, and other utilitarian items for everyday kitchen use. Because these products were commonly used, a number of grocery, hardware, and other businesses commissioned Red Wing Stoneware to print the name of their business on these pieces. Businesses printed attractive and charming phrases along with the name of their business and the towns they operated in on these wares. This type of Red Wing advertising ware was given away as premiums by these businesses during grand openings, holidays or promotions to their loyal customers. Red Wing advertising pieces are very much valued by those stoneware collectors who specialize in just the advertising area. However, advertising pieces have a special meaning for those collectors, who may be from that town, had a relative in that business or name on the advertisement has a special meaning to them.

As with any collection, values on these zinc glaze pieces of Red Wing will be determined by their rarity, beauty (perfect balanced markings, dark colors and glossy glazes) and desires (to complete a set, advertising interest or that one piece that may highlight your display). Basic values of these Red Wing, Minnesota & North Star pieces have been published in stoneware collector's books such as "Red Wing Potters & Their Wares" by Gary and Bonnie Tefft & "Red Wing Stoneware" by Dan DePasquale, Gail Peck & Larry Peterson.

I would like to invite all of you reading this article to visit the old pottery in downtown Red Wing during the 2nd week in July (Red Wing Collectors Society Convention). You can see and talk to hundreds of serious & excited Red Wing collectors and view thousands of Red Wing stoneware pieces for sale or trade. This is the Mecca of conventions for us Red Wing collectors and the second week of each July, a few thousand collectors make Red Wing their home. Red Wing collectors love the City of Red Wing not only for its history of stoneware, but the hospitably that the citizens and business exhibit to us during our stay.

So if at that auction (with your stoneware books in hand) and a piece of Red Wing catches your eye, just remember, that piece has a book value. However, to those collectors in the back of the crowd who truly desire that piece, it is almost guaranteed that the piece will go home with them. It is sometimes amazing how deep their pockets are and those book values you just reviewed have just flown out the window. Welcome to the world of RED WING STONEWARE collecting!

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If you are interested in becoming a member of the Red Wing Collectors Society please call our office at 651-388-4004. Members receive a subscription to our newsletters, access to the members' only section of our website, and the ability to attend the Annual Convention here in Red Wing, July 11-14 and purchase a commemorative.