

Peter's Pottery is family business born from a dream

Associated Press

—MOUND BAYOU, Miss. — Arthur Woods sits with his back arched over a potter's wheel, his fingers stained brown from spinning moist clay.

The noise of boxes being stacked on shelves echoes through the 3,000-square-foot studio. But Woods doesn't hear it; he's too focused on the bowl that's just beginning to take form. His eyes never leave the spinning clay as he uses a small, wooden stick to etch lines into the wide-mouth vessel that moments earlier had been little more than a shapeless glob.

—He finishes his spinning, trims the bowl's edges and stacks it on a shelf for his brothers. The bowl will be fired by Sandy, glazed and painted by Joseph, and sold by Peter.

—An assembly line of artists, the Woods brothers create dozens of stoneware pieces a week for their business, Peter's Pottery — a rustic, wood-frame shop hidden in this small Mississippi Delta town founded by former slaves. They ship their artwork to galleries, gift shops and other customers throughout the United States, and to a few fans in Canada and Germany as well.

More locally, the brothers attract buyers like Betty Knight, who travels 200 miles from a town near the Tennessee border two or three times a year to visit Peter's Pottery.

—“Every piece has character and uniqueness all its own,” says Knight, who was in the shop one recent day. She buys functional pieces, such as plates and platters, for her own use and to give as gifts.

“I like the way the pieces blend, even if they're not fired at the same time,” she says, referring to the



Joseph, left, and Peter Woods talk in their store in Mound Bayou, Miss. The pair, along with brothers Arthur and Sandy, sculpt clay designs of animals, pitchers and trays and sell them from their Peter's Pottery studio shelves. They also ship the pottery across the country and abroad.

heating process used to harden the clay.

The artwork, identifiable by an engraved “P” with a line through its stem, is born from the dreams of the four brothers, sons of poor sharecroppers.

Inside their dimly lighted studio, the brothers work as a team.

Joseph, 52, the oldest brother, keeps everyone in line. They call him “Sgt. Slaughter,” a reference to his 29 years in the Army Reserve.

“Everyone knows what they're supposed to do,” he says. “I tell them, ‘This is ours. You can make it go or you can make it sink. Let's not let anything interfere with the

business.”

Soft-spoken Peter, the youngest at 36, is well-liked by the customers, but described as spoiled by his siblings. Arthur, 46, and Sandy, 39, are mostly behind the scenes. They shy from spectators as they go about firing the 20 kilns or mixing the clay that comes from a large pit clear

across the state in Macon.

The brothers, along with their assistants — Sandy's daughter, Char-dra; Joseph's son, Fitzgerald, and his son-in-law Cedric Blake — turn out between 800 and 1,000 pieces a year.

Prices range from \$10 for a miniature vase to \$300 for an umbrella

stand to \$500 for a limited-edition cross. Other designs include animals, tableware and candlesticks. There's also a rabbit collection named for each brother.

The works are muted shades of teal, nutmeg or Bayou Blue — a grayish, navy tone that is the studio's signature color.

“Nobody else can make that color unless I give them the formula,” says Joseph, who has no intention of giving away the family secret.

Though molds are used, the hand-detailing means that no two creations are exactly alike.

“Art is not even,” Joseph explains.

The artwork, a miniature elephant with its trunk suspended in air or a bowl and ladle shaped like a duck, are the result of a melding of the minds.

Located down a gravel road with, in one of the impoverished town's few neighborhoods, the studio is made from cypress wood the brothers got by bartering their pottery. Behind the building is a garden with a 10-foot concrete cross filled with water as its centerpiece.

“There are only a handful of black potters in this region,” Joseph says, relaxing on a garden bench amid the flowers. “Stoneware is not an art everyone is into.”

But it was an art the brothers learned while growing up.

“Growing up, we had to learn to make something out of nothing. We learned to utilize everything,” Joseph says.

Nothing is wasted, not even the 6 acres of farmland next to the store. There, the brothers grow sweet potatoes and collard greens that they give away to customers and the elderly of Mound Bayou.

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