

*The*  
**MELMAR  
POTTERY**  
*of Ralph C. Erskine*



*A North Carolina Arts and Crafts Partnership  
with Auby and Maude Hilton*

**LEON E. DANIELSON**

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## *Preface*

Research on Hilton Pottery led me to Tryon in 1999 in an attempt to document the history of Melmar Pottery. Pottery stamped “Melmar/TRYON N.C.” long had been of great interest to collectors of North Carolina pottery, but over the years, there were more questions than answers concerning when it was produced, or why. Melmar pottery closely resembled the “blue-edge” ware of the Hiltons operating at Propst Crossroads near Hickory in the 1920s, but proof that it was produced by them was lacking. In fact, it was commonly believed that the Hiltons never made pottery for others using that party’s stamp.

In Tryon, my quest quickly became a lengthy diversion following my discovery of the major role played by Tryon in the early arts and crafts history of Western North Carolina, especially from about 1895 to the early 1940s. During this period, there was an amazing influx of artists, craftsmen and entrepreneurs who made Tryon a major center of crafts and art-related activity. Until recently, this history was long forgotten.



# *The Melmar Pottery of Ralph C. Erskine*

## INTRODUCTION

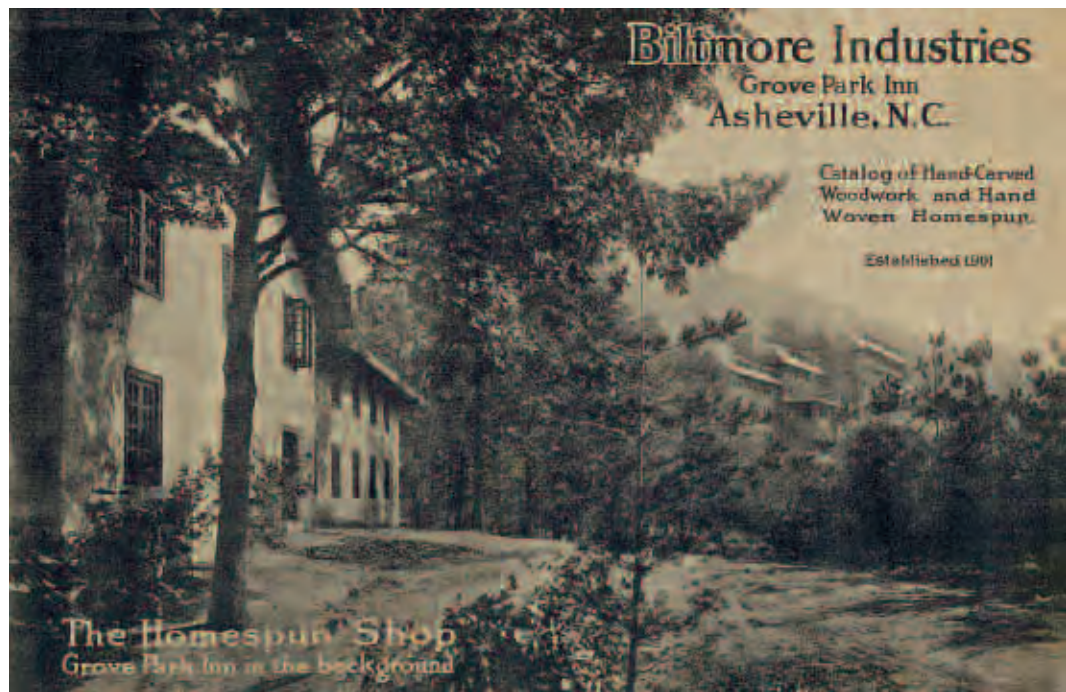
In the late 1800s, Asheville and surrounding towns in Western North Carolina were developing rapidly, the stream of visitors from throughout the East Coast and Midwest finding its climate and clean air healthy, and its geography attractive. Asheville was becoming a thriving resort town, with its clean, cool air invigorating to tourists, and in particular helping those afflicted with respiratory problems. People living in the low-country areas to the south and east of Asheville found Tryon's mountains to be cooler in the dog-days of summer, with much lower humidity. Improved transportation infrastructure greatly facilitated travel and tourism in the area, especially the improvement of the N.C. 10/U.S. 70 artery coming from the east into the Asheville area, and expansion of the railroad from the southeast into Tryon, and later Asheville.

## ARTS AND CRAFTS IN WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA

The history of crafts in the Western North Carolina area dates to early settler days when families took pride in being self-sufficient. They had skills to make their own furniture and wooden items, hooked and braided rugs, and woven items such as homespun, blankets and placemats. They also did their own dyeing, and practiced other handcrafts. While some of these skills declined in the mid-1800s with the availability of commercially made products, by the late 1800s the rising demand for handcrafts from the rapidly expanding tourist industry led to the establishment of crafts shops and roadside stands throughout Western North Carolina.

The area was blessed to have people interested in promoting the home-based craft industry through teaching, establishing sales shops and outlets, working with craftsmen to produce products that were in demand, and writing to promote the craft industry. Some of these were Penland Weavers and Potters established by Lucy Morgan in 1923, the Spinning Wheel established by Clementine Douglas in Asheville in 1924, and the John C. Campbell Folk School established in Brasstown in 1925 (Eaton p. 80).

Biltmore Industries catalog, 1920s. (Courtesy of Sid and Ann Baynes.)



In Tryon, Ralph C. Erskine was very interested in handcrafts and traveled extensively in the area as early as 1903-'04 to learn more about the crafts industry. He wrote and published articles on his discoveries as early as 1907. Margaret W. Morley was another Tryon writer promoting area crafts. In her book, *The Carolina Mountains*, published in 1913, she writes about finding makers of brooms, baskets, pottery jugs (a generic term for all kinds of home-made pottery), coverlets and other woven items

throughout the mountains around Tryon. The book included a chapter about "Traumfest," Morley's name for Tryon meaning "Fortress of Dreams." Copies of this book were printed and then bound in homespun cloth made by the Valhalla Hand Weavers, and a copy was placed in each room of the Grove Park Inn in Asheville.

Perhaps the best-known craft operation in Tryon was Tryon Toy Makers and Wood Carvers established by Eleanor Vance and Charlotte Yale in 1915. Arriving in Asheville in 1901, Vance and Yale were involved with the Vanderbilts in establishing Biltmore Estate Industries in 1905 to teach carving and furniture-making. They resigned in 1915 and moved to Tryon. Business for Vance and Yale was very good at



Tryon Toy House. Photo postcard published by Misseldine's Pharmacy, Tryon, N.C. Printed by The Albertype Co., Brooklyn, N.Y. The Toy House was constructed in 1923 as a sales shop for products of Vance and Yale's Tryon Toy Makers and Wood Carvers. (Collection of the author.)

Tryon Toy Makers and Wood Carvers and in 1923 they expanded by building the Toy House on Howard Street for use as a sales area. This building still stands as a private residence. Toys eventually became their best selling item. The Tryon Toy Makers and Wood Carvers shop was a popular stop for local residents, well-known artists wintering in Tryon and other prominent visitors. Tryon Toy Makers and Wood Carvers taught over 140 local residents, mostly young people, to make toys and furniture. Additional carving activities in Tryon have been identified, such as the Tryon Craft School and the Wood Carvers Studio, involving some of the carvers associated with Tryon Toy Makers (McCue, 2004).



Examples of "Blue-Edge" ware attributed to Hilton. (Collection of the author.)



"Blue-Edge" plate stamped Hilton. Stamped Hilton blue-edge pieces are rare. Cup stamped "Melmar." The cup and saucer are a matched set but the saucer is unmarked. (Collection of the author.)



Photo postcard with Sally teaching a basket-maker. Made for Blue Ridge Weavers, Arts and Crafts, Tryon, N.C., by Herbert E. Glasier & Son Co., Boston, Massachusetts. Ca. 1925–'30. On the back of the postcard Sally has written: "Miss Spicer making a basket, Sally Cathey instructing. Tom carving a dogwood cane (dog's head)". (Collection of the author courtesy of Genelle Dalton.)



Photo postcard of Maude Hilton dolls. Made for Blue Ridge Weavers, Arts and Crafts, Tryon, N.C., by Herbert E. Glasier & Son Co., Boston, Massachusetts. Ca. 1925–'30. (Collection of the author courtesy of Genelle Dalton.)

Supposedly Sally Cathey was an intermediary in the arrangement for the Hiltons to make Melmar pottery. She indicated to three different people in personal conversations that Melmar Pottery came from Auby and Maude Hilton—Pat Johnston, author and collector, when discussing the origin of Melmar Pottery; Robert Brunk, Asheville auction house owner, in conversations while preparing for the sale of personal property from Cathey in 1987;<sup>8</sup> and Nowell Guffey.

Sally Cathey was a close friend of Auby and Maude, and when they delivered pottery or dolls, they often would "spend the weekend".<sup>9</sup> A letter from Maude Hilton to Sally Cathey written during the years of WWII discusses a request that was made by Sally for specific new items. Maude indicates in response that they would try to produce pieces like the "styles you sent" and that they would make samples for her to see. She also wrote that they should visit them to see the examples, perhaps finding other items of interest. It is signed "As ever your friends." Clearly, Sally Cathey knew the Hiltons well, purchased their work for her home and shop, and worked with them to produce new designs, including, as she stated, Melmar pottery. Genelle Dalton (nee Streadwick 1923–2003), niece of Sally Cathey, remembers going with George and Sally in their station wagon to pick up items that had been ordered from the Hiltons in about 1929–'30 (personal interview 3/18/00).



Maude Hilton letter to Sally Cathey discussing an order Sally placed with the Hiltons. Ca. 1942–45. (Collection of the author.)

8. Personal communication February 5, 2000. In that written communication, Robert Brunk also indicates, "Sally always talked about the boxes of letters she had from Maude Hilton which she kept under bed, but she could never find them, and if they existed, they are gone."

9. Source: Pat Johnston. Pat had in her collection at one time a Maude Hilton doll that was documented by Sally Cathey to have been acquired from the Hiltons in 1936. The full note read "Today I received a note from Sally C. about the doll. She said Mrs. Hilton gave it to her in 1936. When they took pottery, dolls, etc. to her they (the Hiltons) would spend the weekend" (letter from Pat Johnston to the author dated November 19, 1985).



being turned, glazed and fired by different people at different times and for different orders. Second, the Hiltons were not accustomed to production turning of identical pieces, so with such large orders, more than one turner could have been involved in completing each order. Third, since the Hiltons moved from Oyama to Pleasant Gardens in 1934, while Pacolet Plantation was in business from 1933 or 1934 to 1939, some of the orders could have been completed at Oyama and some at Pleasant Gardens. Finally, the round stamp (the “TRYON, N.C.” portion) may have been developed simply to better fit the bottom of the pieces since they are so small. It should be noted that the straight Melmar portion of that stamp is the same as the one used for the “regular” stamp. Thus, at this time, there is no substantiated evidence that suggests that anyone but the Hiltons made the pottery stamped “Melmar.”

### THE NAME “MELMAR”

The third question often posed about Melmar Pottery is the origin of the name “Melmar.” There has been a lot of speculation, and a lot of different stories were told over the years as to the origin of the name, with little background substantiation or documentation. There was a general belief that the name was a combination of two names, just as “Danersk” furniture that was produced by the Erskine-Danforth Furniture Company was a combination of those names. A thorough exploration of the Erskine family history (Polk County Historical Association; Tryon Chamber of Commerce), reference to Tryon area geography (various maps; Morley) and interviews with researcher/collectors, suggest the following account.

Direct evidence comes from pottery researcher and collector Pat Johnston. Sally Cathey told her that “Mel” came from the Melrose community. Her notes from interviewing Ms. Cathey read as follows:

“ . . . Mrs. George Cathey and Ralph C. Erskine decided to promote the pottery of Ernest Hilton by combining the sale of it with jams and jellies. Mrs. Cathey designed jelly jars, onion soup bowls and little pitchers, and Mr. Hilton made the pieces of pottery. It is believed that the name “Melmar” represented Mel for Melrose and Mar for Margaret, wife of Ralph Erskine. Melmar Pottery was sold for only a couple of years.”<sup>12</sup>

These notes suggest that Melmar Pottery might have been sold in addition to being used as premiums by Ralph Erskine in his business Pacolet Plantation. Sales might have occurred in Ms. Cathey’s shop Blue Ridge Weavers. They also could have been used as containers for selected products sold by Pacolet Plantation, such as jams, mustard, or honey, either onsite at Pacolet Plantation, or at a store outlet Ralph Erskine had in Tryon. This might explain the existence of a variety of pieces stamped “Melmar Pottery/



The Melmar logo was used on labels for Ralph Erskine’s Pacolet Plantation catalog-order food product business. It includes a honeybee and stalks of corn, drawing from some of the products he sold, and the profile of mountains, reflecting the mountains surrounding Tryon.

While the Melmar stamp on pottery has been known for some time, the MELMAR logo was discovered only recently while doing research for this book. On page 12, Perry Coggins is stocking shelves with cans and jars of food items, many of which have labels with this logo.

12. Personal communication with Pat Johnston 7/14/2000.



Mountain View from Tryon. From left to right: Hogback, Rocky Spur, Melrose Mts. and Piney Mt. in the foreground. "Gillette Woods" is nestled just below Piney.

Photo postcard showing Melrose Mountain in the background on the right. The inscription on the front reads "Mountain View from Tryon. From left to right: Hogback, Rocky Spur, Melrose Mtns. and Piney Mt. in the foreground. 'Gillette Woods' is nestled just below Piney." Made for Blue Ridge Weavers, Arts and Crafts, Tryon, N.C., by Herbert E. Glasier & Son Co., Boston, Massachusetts. Ca. 1925-'30. (Collection of the author courtesy of Genelle Dalton.)



Margaret Macullar. 1918. (Courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. R. Anderson Haynes.)

While the name Melrose had special meaning to the Erskines, it is not likely that we will ever know for certain whether, in their minds, Melrose was first and foremost the mountain, the community, the avenue, or even, possibly, the power company. It could also have come from the historic town of Melrose, Scotland, since the Erskines were of Scottish descent.

Research leads to the belief that the last part of Melmar came from the name Margaret. Over the years, stories circulating about the origin of Melmar generally had "mar" coming from a person's name, but, whose name it was, was never documented. Ralph Erskine, following the death of his first wife, Barbara, in 1915, married Margaret Burbank Macullar in 1918. In 1919 they had a daughter, Margaret Carolyn. Whether Ralph chose "Mar" from his wife or daughter, or both, will likely never be known.



*In 1933 or 1934, Ralph C. Erskine established a catalog-order food business named Pacolet Plantation in Tryon, N.C. He offered five different pieces of Melmar pottery as free premiums to be included with orders, the number of pieces depending on the size of the order. Melmar pottery was made for him by Auby and Maude Hilton and stamped "Melmar Pottery/TRYON, N.C." The logo for the business included a honeybee and stalks of corn, drawing from some of the products he sold, and the profile of mountains, reflecting the mountains surrounding Tryon. Although the business closed in 1939, Melmar pottery is highly prized by collectors.*

