Erica and Kjeld Deichmann take from a kiln some of the pottery which has made them internationally known artists in clay

NEW BRUNSWICK'S

Master Potters

RESIDENTS of Saint John, N.B., are becoming used to visitors who ask this question: "How do I get to the Deichmanns'?"

The directions are simple: "Take the Millidgeville road and you'll come to a ferry dock. Can't miss it. Cross the Kennebecasis river on the ferry and get off at Summerville. Drive on about two miles—there's only one road—and you'll see a sign reading 'Dykelands' . . . and there you are!"

Each year more and more tourists follow this or other routes to see Canada's internationally recognized potters, Kjeld and Erica Deichmann. Their distinctive pottery, each piece bearing on the bottom the Deichmann name with an "EKD" monogram (their combined initials) and "N.B." for New Brunswick, has been exhibited at the world's best ceramics shows. Using both ancient and modern techniques, some of which they have developed themselves, they are famous for their craftsmanship.

The directions to the pottery, obtained in Saint John, worked out very well for visitors one fine day last September. Reaching Millidgeville, a village north of the city, was easy. There was a wait and then a slow-moving ferry-boat nosed into the dock.

With cars and foot passengers aboard, the ferry headed into the river, plodding along at a four-mile-an-hour clip. The ride was free because New Brunswick ferries operate as part of the highway system.

The water shimmered under a bright sun as the ferry moved out of Brothers Cove, passed the rocky, spruce-covered islands called The Brothers, and crossed the mouth of the Kennebecasis.

Half an hour later, the paddle wheels reversed again and the skipper brought his craft into the dock at Summerville. This is at the western end of the Kingston peninsula between the St. John and Kennebecasis rivers.

From the Summerville shore, a gravelled road wound off to the left, up a hill. Two miles further along the pleasant country road the white sign with black lettering identified Dykelands Pottery.

The driveway led up to the door of a roomy-looking dark green frame building with white trim. A red shed and a log cabin roofed with sod were at the right. There was no sign of life and knocking at the front door brought no response. A screen door, a few yards to the left, opened into a long room with hundreds of pieces of pottery on display. The door was unlocked, the room unattended. The last resort was to go around to the back door.

But there, behind the house, was Erica Deichmann, busy with her chores. A line full of clothes flapped in the warm September breeze.

"Oh!" she said, "I forgot completely that you were coming. I'm terribly sorry. We've had visitors every day for the past nine weeks and I was just trying to catch up . . ."

Kjeld strolled around the corner, barefoot, smiling, with a hand thrust into clay-spattered blue jeans, his pipe alight. Their 12-year-old daughter, gold-haired Anneke, appeared from nowhere.

Erica, petite, lively, coils her blonde hair around her head in braids. Kjeld, more placid, lets his greying hair blow in the wind. Even at first meeting they give an impression of happiness and deep contentment with life and with work. Relaxed, gay, friendly, hospitable . . . these are the Deichmanns.

A few minutes later coffee was being served from Deichmann cups, sugar stirred with Danish steel spoons, around an outdoor table open to the sunshine and the breeze. The Deichmanns live outdoors as much as possible and late in the day dinner appeared on the same table. Henrik, (16) and Beth (14) Deichmann, just home from high school in Saint John, joined the group.

In the hours of casual conversation during the afternoon, the Deichmanns' story was outlined. It is the account of the transformation of a young couple into potters with an international reputation.

To Kjeld and Erica pottery is more than a handcraft. It's their philosophy, their way of life and the expression of life itself. That was apparent when Erica was asked if their work is ever copied.

"No reputable potter would copy another's work, of course," she said. "It is possible to copy a single piece. But to reproduce our work, the potter would have to lead our lives—would have to feel and think and work as we do."

The Deichmanns met in western Canada where Kjeld had gone from Denmark to try wheat farming

The clay the Deichmanns use is weathered for a year. Then it is mixed with water and a few minerals to add strength, strained through a fine screen, and dried to the proper consistency. Here Kjeld tests a sample

Erica weighs ingredients for a glaze to be ground by mortar and pestle (foreground). In 16 years she has made 3,500 experiments to obtain old and new effects and the records, in English and Danish, fill volumes

on the border of Saskatchewan and Alberta. Erica was born in Wisconsin but was brought up in Denmark, her father's native land. Then, for three years she lived in Alberta where her father was a minister.

Erica returned for a time to Denmark and Kjeld went to eastern Canada where he bought the farm on the Kingston Peninsula.

"We were married the 2nd of April, 1932, the day the boat landed in Saint John bringing me back from Denmark," Erica said.

Kjeld had been trained in art and wood sculpture, not in farming, and had studied in Denmark, France, Norway, Germany and Italy. When he discovered some clay on his farm, and felt the plastic mass in his hands, he turned to what has become his life's work. After a year's further study in Denmark, he and Erica came back to the farm which then became a pottery.

Success did not come soon or easily. For two years the Deichmanns made pots and, unsatisfied, broke them up as failures unsuitable to market. Each time the wood-burning kiln was opened hope sprung up anew and finally they produced a few pieces they considered good enough to sell.

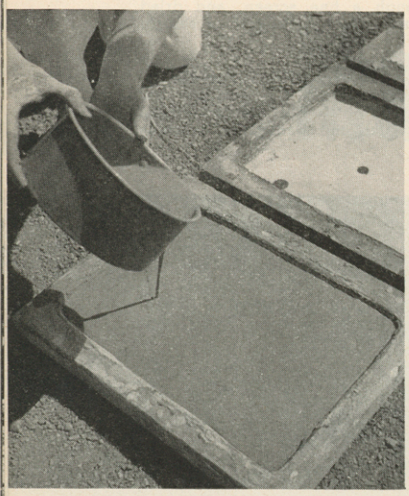
Recognition and acclaim of the critics came as the Dykelands Pottery, the renamed farm, produced the strong, distinctive shapes and glazes which won prizes at exhibition after exhibition in Canada, the United States and abroad. Deichmann pottery has been on display at the World Fairs at Paris and New York, and the Glasgow Exhibition, as well as the Canadian National Exhibition at Toronto, the National Ceramic Exhibition at Syracuse, N.Y., and several Canadian museums and art galleries. They have arrived but it was touch-and-go during some lean years. "We couldn't have done it without help from Denmark," Erica said, "I don't wish to imply that we were in actual hardship, but one winter oatmeal was a mainstay of our diet."

The big barn which housed their first kiln has become a home and work shop. A wide-windowed room which commands a magnificent view of the Kennebecasis river is used to display the pottery. At the other end of the building is the workroom with Kjeld's wheel at one side and Erica's scales, sieves and ingredients for glazing at the other. Here she prepares the glazes although the actual glazing is done in the sod-roofed shed outside which adjoins the shed containing the kilns.

Between the display and work rooms, the barn has been converted to roomy, rambling living quarters with sketches and finished paintings by Canadian artists hung on the walls.

Connoisseurs compare the Deichmann stoneware with that of the Sung period (960-1279 A.D.), the golden age of Chinese ceramics. Not only do the Deichmanns produce the simplicity and effectiveness of form, high quality of body and hardness of glaze which the Sung potters achieved, but they also have recaptured glaze effects rare since that period. One is the treasured "purple patch"—a red blush on a green or light blue glaze.

Besides finely-ground minerals and metallic oxides, Erica has used ashes of wheat, wood, fern, seaweed, mustard weed and many others in her glazes. The glazes are mixed with water and applied to the pot by dipping, brushing or spraying.

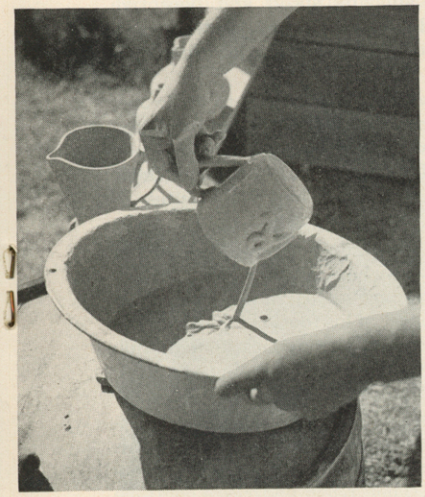


Watery clay, strained through a fine-meshed sieve, must be dried. These plaster-of-Paris moulds soak up the moisture

With a pitcher and vase completed, Kjeld starts to make another pot. Shaping clay on a potter's wheel is called "throwing"

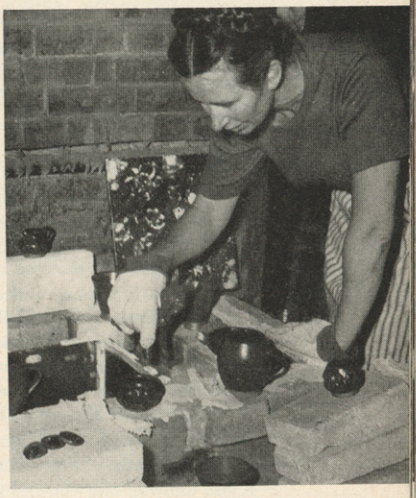
While Kjeld works on the wheel, Erica likes to model. The clay they use comes from Musquodoboit, N.S. When fired it makes stoneware

The Deichmanns divide their work. Kjeld prepares the clay, "throws" it on the wheel and does the firing. Erica attends to glazing, experimenting with new glazes and modelling. Here Mrs. Deichmann is at work on a horse-like creation which she calls a "goofus"



Raw glaze is applied to once-fired pots by brushing, spraying or dipping. Erica favors dipping. Then the pots are fired once more

Kjeld heats his kilns with this burner which looks like a large blowtorch, moving it nearer as the firing advances. Kerosene is the fuel



Potters always wonder how a firing will turn out and it's an exciting time when the kiln is finally cool enough to be opened up

Few potters have so successfully combined the ancient elements of earth, air, fire and water as have the Deichmanns. Here they discuss a display of their work at an art centre

The color of the raw glaze is no indication of what it will be in the finished product. For example, a glaze may look pinkish before the glaze firing and come out speckled green; or look light grey and come out strongly blue or oxblood red, depending on the composition of the glaze, the metallic coloring agent and the atmospheric conditions in the kiln.

Erica's work is complicated because the type of clay used, the position of the article in the kiln, and other unknown factors all affect the glaze. In addition to recording the ingredients she uses, all the other known facts have to be recorded as well.

The atmosphere in the kiln is equally important. In an "oxidizing" atmosphere a certain copper glaze will produce a blue or green color, but in a "reducing" atmosphere the same raw glaze will produce red. Oxidizing means that ample oxygen is present and reducing means that the oxygen content of the kiln's atmosphere has been greatly lowered so that the glaze gives up its oxygen to the air, and the color in the glaze is derived directly from the metal.

Potters use various methods in reduction firing. Some place charcoal in the kiln to take up the oxygen and others use different materials—even mothballs. Reduction firing methods were discussed as Kjeld showed two American visitors—one a potter and the other a painter—through the firing shed.

Kjeld was asked which method he used. "We just control the draft," he answered simply.

Kjeld showed the visitors the square and box-like kilns, built of firebrick. The larger is used for firing the raw clay pots—the "biscuit" firing; the smaller, for the second firing after the pots have been coated with glaze. This is the "glost" firing.

Kjeld designed and built his own kilns and originated his own method of firing them. He uses what looks like a giant blow-torch burner, which he aims at an aperture in the kiln. As firing progressess, he moves the torch closer and closer to the kiln opening.

On this visit the kilns were open and empty, the burner cold, but when in operation the fuel is kerosene, which Kjeld says gives him close control over the firing. The usual temperature range for their glost firing is 2,400 to 2,600 degrees, but Kjeld's torch can heat the kiln to above 2,700 degrees.

"We can go higher if we wish", he said, "but don't for above this the clay would flux. We used to burn wood and a firing took an average of 27 hours. Now it takes six to seven hours, but of course the kiln is much smaller. I prefer oil to electricity because the flame gets right into the kiln and sometimes produces interesting effects."

Some of the effects are interesting indeed. The Deichmanns have a tall coffee pot in their dining room with one side a purple-red and the other a green—a copper glaze reduced on one side and oxidized on the other. They have many examples of partial reduction—such as red vases and cups with green glaze remaining in the bottom.

Raw clay for their work is brought to the farm from Middle Musquodoboit, N.S. It contains grey, blue and red clays, which, when mixed thoroughly, turn to a uniform chocolate color. Kjeld dumps the clay in a field and lets it weather at least a year.

This clay has the unusual property of being almost as plastic as that used for earthenware, yet it produces a hard, grey stoneware on firing.

When "throwing" (working at the potter's wheel) Kjeld works with amazing speed and deceptive casualness. He gladly demonstrated his technique, shaping a round blob of clay into a jar with a lid in a few minutes.

"With a lid", he said as he proceeded to make one, "you've got to think upside down." He measured the opening in a newly-made jar with calipers, then turned the upside-down lid to fit. Both lid and jar couldn't have taken him more than five minutes.

The wheel itself is his own make. He discussed power wheels and said he didn't think he wanted one as he believes the kick-wheel is more sensitive. His own turns smoothly, and keeps running for some time with a single thrust of his foot. He likes to work barefoot, giving the wheel a strong kick as its motion slows, while his hands are busy shaping the cool, wet clay into a new pot.

At the Deichmanns' summer is the time for relaxing. Winter is the work time, for the Kennebecasis is frozen, the ferries are tied up and very few visitors care to walk the ice. Then Kjeld and Erica continue their experiments in shaping and glazing the stoneware which has made them famous ◎