



Otis Norris

Interviewed by Saddler Taylor

1. Roots in Brown's Pottery (01:33)

S. Taylor: What was your, what was your first memory of anything related to pottery?

O. Norris: I was probably when I was, probably was about six or seven years old, when the Browns came. I remember going out to the pottery as a child but just vaguely. But really getting more involved in pottery was when the Browns, after Guy Daugherty died and Hooton Rattery bought it and brought in the Browns to do turning. They had a son, his name was Kenny Brown

S. Taylor: Kenny Brown?

O. Norris: Yeah, about my same, about the same age as me. In fact I think he was a year younger, but you know, playing with him and going, going out the pottery. And they'd be all working out there and like in the summertime, playing around the old pottery.

S. Taylor: What type of stuff were they making back then at the pottery? Was it decorative stuff?

O. Norris: Lots of strawberry jars, Rebekah pitchers,

S. Taylor: Unglazed?

O. Norris: Unglazed, unglazed stuff, yeah. Um, flower pots... yard ornaments. There were birdbaths and it wasn't, it was just plain stuff.

S. Taylor: Really utilitarian type of stuff, functional.

O. Norris: No functional stuff, it was all flower pots, of course the flower pots may be functional, considerably functional. Flower pots, strawberry jars, um washing pots that were flower pots.

2. Norris on his early years (02:21)

O. Norris: Teaching, teaching yourself how to make pottery. It took me probably about two or three years to be able to turn a good pot, so that it was uniform and decent looking...a decent weight. So it wasn't too heavy or too light.

S. Taylor: Yeah.

O. Norris: Because that's one of the things I got from the guys up in North Carolina, they introduced me to um, *Ceramics Monthly*. It's a magazine and I subscribe to it, and in it, it has a lot of () for whatever cones that you needed and things like that. And you just pick out a couple of good warmers that work for you and you can change the color by changing the oxides. I had to learn everything on my own down here because I don't, I didn't know any potter nowhere around me that I could even go talk to, that new anything at all... except in North Carolina.

S. Taylor: At that time, were you firing in an electric kiln, a wood kiln, or what did you have set up?

O. Norris: Um, I have an electric kiln and I also built a gas kiln out back using, I use natural gas. It was there at the shop and um, so I built a gas kiln.

S. Taylor: Is that what Bethune and Brown, those two potteries, did they?

O. Norris: Brown's used um, I think when they first started out they fired with wood and then they changed over to oil. They started firing with oil. Brown's fired cone three, that's what he fired everything to.

S. Taylor: That's pretty low.

O. Norris: Yeah.

S. Taylor: I guess if you're doing the unglazed ware, it doesn't have to be fired high.

O. Norris: Right, just hot enough to get the um, the clay to fuse together and hold tight so it'll be strong. When I fire, I fire it on six, at Bethune, it didn't go any higher. When I started over here, I started firing everything on ten, it's a lot hotter. On ten gas fire, it gets the best look from it. I think so anyway, without using any commercial glazes.

3. Norris on making his applied snake figures (01:31)

O. Norris: Now my first snake jug that I ever made, I was still working at Moore and Mack and I was in here working late one evening and I turned a vase and the clay

wasn't working right for me. So just decided to play with that vase and I knocked a few holes out on the inside of it and poked a hole poked my finger through the inside of it and then I rolled a thing that looked like a snake, and stuck its tale out one end and stuck his head coming out the other end. And that was my first snake busting through a jug.

S. Taylor: Now, would you say that's kind of your signature piece now?

O. Norris: Pretty much.

S. Taylor: The snake motif, the snake... image?

O. Norris: Right and everybody likes my snake jugs.

S. Taylor: Oh they're, they're wonderful. The detail...

O. Norris: Even people that don't like snakes like...

S. Taylor: Like me.

O. Norris: Like my snake jugs.

S. Taylor: So that really just came about by accident?

O. Norris: By accident, yeah. And another reason I kept on making them was, I was again, just playing and I made some snakes and laid them up on a couple bases and glazed them. They looked pitiful, they looked pitiful to me, and a dealer from North Carolina came in here one day and I sold both of them that I had for like twenty dollars a piece and he sold them on the internet for over a hundred dollars a piece.

S. Taylor: Wow.

4. Challenges of wood firing (02:51)

S. Taylor: Is there any, at any point in the wood fire process can you walk away from it and just let it go?

O. Norris: No, no.

S. Taylor: And you, you fire for six...twelve hours?

O. Norris: Twelve hours, yeah.

S. Taylor: So for twelve hours you're focused on that kiln?

O. Norris: Yeah. It's um... in the mornings, like when you just start off you know, I try to pace myself, I rest. I don't do anything else except... I'm lying around. I've got

my lounge chair and my drink cooler, and I'll just rest all morning. Just taking it easy, because I know at the end of that firing, you've got to work.

S. Taylor: Right.

O. Norris: Um, by the time you walk over, grab a slab or two slabs if you want to, walk back to the kiln, throw them in, and then you're getting away from it because of the heat. And then you're back over there getting another slab and getting it ready to throw in. So you're constantly on your feet, constantly walking, just like a production job in a mill. You know, you're just constantly getting a slab, throwing it in, that's a... and you do for probably about three hours, at the end of the firing... constantly throwing in a slab.

S. Taylor: So you're putting in wood at the end of the firing too?

O. Norris: Yeah. All the way up to... the last three hours of the firing, are the worst.

S. Taylor: As far as adding wood?

O. Norris: Adding wood.

S. Taylor: Just trying to maintain that temperature?

O. Norris: Yeah, mmm hmm. Keeping the, you've got to keep it up. If you let it die down for just a few minutes, you lose, it's losing heat so fast because you've got cold air going in through those doors. Cold air is being pulled in because that's drawing, and the temperature will drop two hundred degrees and then you've got to work hard to get that two hundred degrees back. And that's what I'm talking about, it's just totally different from gas... you have to work and watch it.

S. Taylor: And how did you settle upon that twelve hour firing time?

O. Norris: Um, that nine hundred degree point that it takes me to get through, that's um... takes me about half a day, just to get through that. Like, if I start at eight o'clock, say about two o'clock, somewhere along in there, I'll be past the um, critical point. And it just, it's just worked out to be about twelve hours. That's the way my kiln fires... fast. You can fire it faster but you're going to lose stuff, you can fire it longer but you're wasting wood. It's just, every kiln is different.

S. Taylor: Yeah.