

# MANUAL CONTROL

That's what makes it Art ..... isn't it?



PATRICIA EVANS

THE STORY OF  
DENNIS G EVANS  
LANDSCAPE PAINTER AND POTTER

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For Dennis

The words are my song; the images your soul. Thank you for giving me permission to write about your life in such intimate detail.

In praise of all unsung artists



DENNIS  
FIRST YEAR, ALBERTA COLLEGE OF ART,  
1964

## Foreword

A bunch of years ago, I found myself sitting at a canvas-covered table, staring down at a mound of grayish brown mud the instructor insisted was “clay.” For the rest of the week, our teacher/coach/mentor, Dennis Evans, taught us about possibilities; and how a piece of the earth and our ideas could adapt to one another. It was all there, in that week, spent at that table with Dennis.

Dennis taught me to see...**really** see...how many artistic possibilities come from the simplicity of the earth’s resources, and why generations have been able to make beautifully useful things, out of a simple “lump of clay.”

Fast forward to a wintery New Year’s holiday...My wife and I had the privilege of taking a two-day painting workshop with Dennis. When we went home, we encountered the most interesting weather patterns...sun, fog, rain, milky sun and just plain grey(gray?). As we ambled around with our dog, Kelly, we would stop and look...I mean **really** look...at the colours presented.

How would we mix “that” colour? How much practice would we need before our brush technique could, somewhat, replicate that? In the fog, the trees are black with spurts of dark green; in the grey, they’re dark green with splashes of lighter green; in the sun, they’re still lighter green with spatters of gold. The ideas and possibilities opened up like windows in the spring.

Our time with Dennis triggered many great conversations and wonderful debates. He got us started on this whole, **really** look/**really** see, thing and we’ll never be the same.

It’s all Dennis’ fault!

Donald Tippet Wade  
2013

## Preface

This is a personal project; after all, historians find details, irresistible.

Over the past forty years, I have been privileged to observe an artistic evolution. This book is intended to capture events which contributed to Dennis Evans' growth as a Canadian landscape painter and potter. Now that he concentrates solely on his own endeavours, I am witnessing the emergence of work that is at its most superior level of elegance and maturity.

It is my hope that, through this story, I have given the reader a better understanding of the images Dennis paints or has made in clay and, thereby I have provided a key to understanding their intrinsic value. This book is intended to offer insight into the man whose fifty year career has been an enigma. It is meant to show how he dealt with obstacles, professionally and personally, and the diversity of his abilities

During our years together, Dennis and I have tried to create an environment in our surroundings which personifies the values we hold dear. Someday, I know someone will be faced with the disbursement of this work, and I am confident the accumulation of Dennis' creative life will be treated with respect.

Finally, because this is a personal project, I have expressed my opinion about events and people, from my perspective. Others may recollect these tales differently, and that's okay; that's history.

## Introduction

This is a story of a journey. Its genesis is rooted in the numerous attempts Dennis and I made to visit a mysterious sounding place called “Naramata.” Singularly, and together as a couple, we really did search, quite unsuccessfully, for this physical place during various road trips, to and through the Okanagan Valley, until one day, it revealed itself to us.

A friend once said to me, “You ‘found’ Naramata when you needed to,” and it is slowly dawning on me that this may be true. And, if it is true, we found Naramata because certain events transpired over a lifetime together that brought us to this particular spot on the planet. We know that life is not a straight line. Our trips were travelled at various times, for various reasons, and with considerable gaps in-between. Because those on life’s journey have no idea what is developing, I think, also, this is the story about an evolution of our spiritual gifts. I hope the final leg of our passage is a long way off, and as yet, all the wonders of the journey are still to be experienced. There is still so much work to do and still so much to learn.

It came as a surprise to me as I set down events, that a slender thread, thin and gossamer, like a spider’s yarn, not quite there, but visible in the right kind of light, emerged. Perhaps, it is more like a gentle ripple moving noiselessly out from where a stone was dropped. The thread or ripple, if you like, link individuals and events. The impact of these links is sometimes as light as a breath upon the stillness of a pond; some are a sharp snap. Ultimately, all shaped what road we took. I hope that, as I write, I will be able to find the threads, and maybe, somehow, it will give me glimpse of the future. Perhaps I’ll have to wait a long time before I know for sure.

So, dear reader, as you take this journey with us, you will find out why my friend's story is worthy of telling. It is a written record of his life as a potter and a landscape painter. From time-to-time, I drift in and around the tale to make my imprint when our two lives intertwined. The joys and sorrows are uniquely ours, and they make us who we are, now. In the end, I hope this story gives insight into what it is like, for one young man, to be irresistibly drawn to reveal his character through paint and clay.



## NARAMATA MEADOW

Green pines in a meadow,  
Sentinels, dreaming in the sun.  
Grasses whisper lyrics forgotten.

His brush senses their song,  
Colours sweep onto a canvas skin.  
A moment detained, suspended.  
Like a breath, held.

Light sweeping,  
Boughs caught in its essence.  
Step into their embrace,  
Feel their pulse.

Between here and there,  
Lies a field.  
Come,  
I am waiting there.

Cover image

## CHAPTER 1 THE MUSE AWAKENS



The path begins on April 29, 1946. Dennis was born in a small town called Viking, Alberta to Arthur and Lillian Evans. Viking is one of those towns dwelling in that curious duality of space between Alberta's prairie and its parkland environments. It is surrounded by bush and sloughs, a scattering of lakes, dusty gravel roads and grain fields. The town, at least when I was introduced to it, was a collection of ordinary buildings sticking up in a wild patch of ground, bordered by paved highways going elsewhere.

The Evans' little farm house was home to three boys: Bryan, the eldest, and twins, Dale and Dennis. For those privileged to start life in a rural community, the impact of the natural environment is immediate. Perhaps, because a lot of Canadians come from a small town or other rural experience, no matter where we started from, we have a sense of place that will always be in our psyche. It is not surprising then, that Dennis' earliest memories are of playing in piles of golden leaves that had had fallen under the aspen trees growing on his parents' farm. I think that a sleeping Muse, awakened by this child rustling about in those leaves, must have whispered unbidden into his core. Artistic pursuits are simply not the likely outcome for a



DALE, BRYAN, DENNIS  
"THE LITTLE VILLAINS PLUS ONE"  
C 1949



HOUSE ON THE FARM  
c1945

boy raised in a small, rural town, anywhere; and never more so, than in Alberta. But, from some unknown place, there began to awaken the soul of an artist. In 1964, my friend was to take his first bold steps outside his home, to tread daringly along the path that has, at this point in time, brought him and me, in the middle of our lives, to this place called Naramata. Here, in his Naramata studio, his true abilities are intensifying and bursting forth. His painted images imbue the viewer with his emotional connection to the natural environment. It is emerging with a visceral force as each painting is created.

Where did it all begin?

Dennis' preschool days were spent on the farm, just a stone's throw from the homes of his paternal and maternal grandparents. Although the grandparents were all deceased by the time Dennis arrived, the knowledge that they had been there before him, anchored him to the surrounding land.

The Evans' small house was nestled in a grove of trees that surrounded it on three sides. A road passed by the house on the fourth. People had to travel through the grove trees and down a path to get to the farmyard. From there, everything opened up onto the fields and pastures, all the way down to the lakes and sloughs all around. It was amazing how he and his brothers were allowed to wander. They went down to the sloughs and waded in the mud, or went down to the lake and waded across to an island in the middle. The boys could walk to the top of Crocus Hill, pick the delicate purple flowers nodding in the sun, and bring them home. They would turn over rocks and look at worms, bugs, and even salamanders. Life seemed to be bursting everywhere; their mother even cracked open an egg, to show the wonderment of a developing chick inside. The brothers skated on the small pond just at the back of the house; they could put on the shared skates in the house and just walk out to the

pond. While Dennis says he didn't really take to skating, his twin brother certainly did. Of course, little kids don't know it, but like ducklings, a sense of place was taking shape. The fundamentals of colour, the sounds, the smell, the sound of the wind, and the connection to the land were being etched into the fabric of Dennis' very being.

Life on the family farm would be a short sojourn. Snowsuits, skating on the pond, exploring under rocks, jumping from ropes strung in the trees, and school bus rides filled in the first six years with happy memories. Grade one entailed a half mile trudge from the road where the bus dropped them. One day, disgruntled over "always carrying the lunch bucket," Dennis, coached by dad, left the dreary bucket by the side of the road for his twin brother to carry. When both boys arrived home, minus the bucket, the tearful Dale was sent to retrieve it. So clearly does Dennis remember his brother's tears, the hurt must have been shared between the twins. Apparently, harmony returned, and communal duties were worked out for carrying of the contentious object. But, needless to say, when there are twins in the family, what one doesn't think of, the other one will. They were conspiratorial in their mischief. The boys were tasked with gathering eggs, and after about a week, their mother began to wonder why the hens had stopped laying. To her shock, these little villains had been gathering eggs all right, but not a single one reached the house.

Plastered against the back wall of the hen house was the evidence of their "misdeeds." Obviously, the two boys were enormously curious, and their misadventures while on the farm brought their father home on more than one occasion when things got too far out-of-hand. For a man who married late in life, and who had, himself, been raised in an Edwardian home, Arthur must have wondered where he was going to find the patience to deal with these free-spirits.



## The Child

The Muse is whispering  
Her breath glides from beyond the stars.  
Visions of colour, splashed upon canvas.  
A child's senses, delighted.  
Beauty, comprehended.



DENNIS BRYAN, DALE  
"THE FARMERS"  
C 1949

After a particularly unfortunate string of bad luck, the family had to pack up their belongings and move into the town of Viking where Arthur got work as a carpenter. His job brought in a steadier income than that of a farmer, and Lillian, too, went to work to help supplement the family income. She and Arthur were janitors at the Viking school, and later, Lillian worked in the kitchen at Vialta Lodge, a seniors' residence. Working parents meant the boys had to assume some household responsibilities, one of which was preparation of the evening meal. Whoever cooked, the others had to clean-up. Dennis quickly sorted out what he preferred to do, and that was cooking, rather than clean-up, a skill which he mastered, much to his wife's gratitude.

Elementary school was shared with friends, and Dennis sometimes made his individual mark on his teachers. Mermaids on the Prairie: Take 1: Setting: Grade 5 art class: Timeframe: probably about 1957. To bring "art and culture" to the little unwashed beings attending school in the rural hinterland of Alberta, a series of radio programs were designed as a resource for art teachers. These broadcasts, likely created at the University of Alberta and broadcast far and wide by that cultural icon, CKUA Radio, consisted of an exotic story read over the airwaves. These stories were supposed to conjure up images that could be drawn, painted, or otherwise translated into an "art form," usually executed in powdered tempera paint mixed with water and slathered on paper. Masterpieces were created in the half hour after the broadcast ended. This particular day's offering was a story about the sea and featured a "king and queen" (aka merman and mermaid), beautiful fish and plants described in brilliant colours. Prior to the advent of colour television, and National Geographic documentaries, who had actually seen a blue and yellow angel fish, anyway? Dennis got busy on his drawing, featuring the king and queen on a throne, the queen resplendent in her bikini top and flowing hair. Note to self: if it makes the art teacher turn bright red,

and turn abruptly on her heel, that can't be good. Or, was his work actually, avante gard? After all, aren't "bad" reactions to an artist's work, a signal that, "This is really good art?" However, the bewildered child in Dennis still says, "What was I to do, draw her without a top?" It was, "just that close" to the end of a career!

So, fast forward to 1964: a significant year for Dennis. If you are a numerologist, sixty-four is the reverse of forty-six, his birth year. Now eighteen, Dennis' goal for this final year of high school was entrance into the Alberta College of Art (ACA), as it was known, then. How he even found out about this college is a bit of a mystery, as it was located in Calgary. There were no Internet searches, career fairs, or school counselors, to speak of, informing students about such post high school options, other than university. Dennis thinks he likely found out about the college from a member of the recreational painting class who was also a teacher in the high school. Most importantly, unlike the current registration practice that requires submission of portfolios, testing and interviews; at this point in time, the ACA admitted students on a "first come, first serve" basis. This was indeed fortunate for a student from a rural community. In Alberta, "art instruction" consisted of Art 10, 20 and 30 as prescribed by the Alberta high school curriculum. But, in a town the size of Viking, Art 20 for Dennis, was delivered by correspondence, if you can imagine, because the school simply did not have an art program. Later on, Dennis asked ACA President, Stan Perrott, how students, outside the larger urban centres, are handled under these current admission practices to ensure they are not placed at an unfair disadvantage. At the time Dennis asked the question, Stan said there were a few places reserved for promising students from small communities, but who knows if that is still the case.

The lack of formal art instruction was clearly a disadvantage. However, with encouragement from a bachelor uncle, Dennis started

attending a painting class sponsored by the Viking Art Club. This class was attended entirely by adults, except for this one unique teenager. Their teacher was Harry Wolfarth, Professor of Art, from the Extension Branch, University of Alberta. Professor Wolfarth may have single-handedly taught more extension courses, in more out-of-the-way towns in north eastern Alberta, than any other professional. Either he was extremely dedicated to his art, or he needed the money, or both. Mr. Wolfarth would faithfully arrive via the Greyhound Bus every week, and where he went after the class – either back to Edmonton or to another centre - Dennis is not sure. His presence in the little rural town had an exotic flair, as he had an eccentric habit of smoking a cigarette from a tiny pipe into which he fitted half a cigarette. While attending Mr. Wolfarth's class seems to be a fond memory, there was no "road to Damascus." There was no single defining moment that Dennis points to and says, "Eureka! That was when I decided I must be an artist!" On the other hand, in spite of our many moves, there is a tiny bit of that work that remains from this experience – a still life with a western Canadian icon, a Medalta jug, featured in the arrangement.

So, now, Dennis was in the eleventh grade. He and his best friend, Fred Nordstrom, headed off to Edmonton, having booked a flight through Pacific Western; quite a sophisticated undertaking for two hick-town boys. After their short flight on a DC-3, Dennis and Fred arrived in Calgary. Just two country boys travelling in style! Dennis had worked hard through the summers after school to earn enough money to spring for his adventure. The boys stayed with friends of Fred's family for three days. While in Calgary, they made the most of things, touring the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT), of which, ACA, was a part, as well as other Calgary "hot spots" – the zoo and downtown.

Departure from his boyhood home was swiftly approaching. Leaving



MEDALTA JUG AND TOMATO  
18" X 24"  
OIL ON BOARD  
PROFESSOR HENRY WOLFARTH'S CLASS  
c 1963  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

Viking in September 1964 for college, Dennis' packed his very modest belongings into his brother's 1954 Chevy. He, Bryan, and their dad, drove the arduous, four and half hours to Calgary. Dennis' chosen path was beginning to take shape with this conscious choice in education.

A page was turning.

## CHAPTER 2 POTS AND PAINT BRUSHES



First-year students at the Alberta College Art were restricted to a pre-set offering of mandatory classes. Simply put, it seemed to be an endless menu of drawing and design, more drawing and design, a half day of lettering, and some art history. The matter of art history classes will become a significant “bone of contention” later in Dennis’ academic career.

It was Dennis’ plan to work toward the “ad art” stream - the most common choice among those attending school. It “fit” the idea that most parents (and students) had, which was, “this is what artists do to make a living after graduation.” Like many students who pursue education beyond high school, college awakened Dennis to much bigger possibilities. Despite a threat made by painter and teacher, Marion Nicoll, who prophesied to six, unoccupied students sitting on a hall bench that, “you won’t be here after Christmas,” Dennis persevered. Even then, he exhibited a stubborn streak that served him well, and sometimes, not so well, throughout his life. I witnessed this invoked when he dealing with supercilious academics seeking to cripple his spirit. Interestingly, all but two of those six students sitting on that bench did drop out by Christmas, as Ms. Nicoll, predicted.

Frosh week presented an interesting challenge for this newly minted student. A wild ride on the go-carts at the Happy Valley Amusement Park ended in a rear-end collision that sent Dennis' glasses flying onto the track, only to be promptly run over and smashed to smithereens by another careening student. New to Calgary, Dennis had to locate an optometrist who would order new glasses – a week long wait. He also had to manage an expense that most first-year students and this one, in particular, could barely afford. He had to juggle his finances so he could see and still have enough money to eat. Classes had begun, but luckily the work expected of him was all close up, using plants gleaned from the flowerbeds as drawing resources, until the new spectacles arrived.

During his studies, Dennis struggled to make his ambition to be a painter, a reality. His Muse ignored him, and later that Muse had to make room for the influence exerted by her earthier sister, ceramics. In 1964, the faculty at the ACA was a “who’s who” among Canada’s most illustrious artists: Rolf Ungsted, George Angliss, Greg Arnold, Stan Perrott, Ron Spickett, John Esler, Ollie Olmstead, Gordon Adaskin, Walter Drohan, George Mihalcheon, Illingworth Kerr, and Douglas Motter, with a smattering of others with whom Dennis never had contact. ACA, as it is affectionately known to all who attended her, was a small community. Strong bonds, some life-long, developed between students and faculty. Calgary was like a small town with a population of about two hundred and fifty thousand. Still huge by small town standards, but still small enough to make one’s transition to an urban environment less painful than a larger centre, like Toronto or New York.

It’s odd, but have you ever noticed how often in an artist’s life that their living arrangements feature among their struggles? And, so it was that such tribulations beset this poor student in finding decent, affordable accommodation. It had to be close enough to walk to the

college, as Dennis had no vehicle and no extra money to spend on public transportation. During his first year of studies, Dennis teamed up with another Viking boy, Dodd Greenwood, who was studying to be a diesel mechanic at SAIT. Together, they rented a three room basement suite with a kitchen and front room. However, by late fall, Dennis was on his own, as his roommate got married. The “well advanced,” pregnant spouse arrived at their abode with her hubby. Three and a half really is a crowd, especially when two are newlyweds. Dennis contacted the landlady, who had another house, and he moved into a space until he went home in the spring of 1965. He had one tiny room that was about eight feet wide and twelve feet long with a common kitchen. Its only redeeming feature was that it was on the top floor and was warmed by the heat rising from below.

Returning for the second year of school in the fall of 1965, Dennis now entered the program as a painting major. For whatever reason, his particular learning style seemed to thwart him from grasping the intricacies of paint manipulation. Like fingernails scraping on a blackboard, his colours in this early period were garish and hard. However, in anatomy class, his attention to detail brought about a suggestion from instructor, Ron Spickett, that he should investigate three dimensional mediums, specifically pottery. This seemed the gentlest way to shift this serious young man away from what was clearly shaping up to be a disaster as a painting major. So, in January, at the start of the second semester, Dennis and a fellow student, Bonnie McComb, arrived on the doorstep of Walter Drohan’s ceramics class. Both students were set about working at a wheel, and after a frustrating four hours of pushing mud around, Drohan arrived back at their side and asked, “Now, would you like to start at the beginning?” Thus began a life-long loyalty to pottery. Avoiding what surely would have been expulsion because of poor performance in painting, Dennis could not escape his involvement with the medium of paint; this time as his minor. Enter Mr. Gord Adaskin.



BRUSH, PEN AND INK DRAWING  
10" X 10"  
ALBERTA COLLEGE OF ART  
c 1966

Second year finds Dennis in a house with a landlady offering room and board. For a small reduction in rent, and to escape certain food poisoning, Dennis was lucky enough to buy a ten dollar meal ticket from SAIT and enjoyed the glorious offerings of the commercial cooking classes at lunch; positively gourmet victuals in comparison to his rental abode. The landlady's concept of cooking was cheap and bordering on cruelty. Two young Middle Eastern men shared the same accommodation as Dennis. After being served the same sour milk three days in a row, their only defense was to throw their drinks down the sink to keep them from reappearing, like something out of a Hitchcock movie. Dinner was even more of a disaster. It routinely consisted of canned vegetables presented as a colourful "Jell-O Du Jour" concoction. Finally, one Jell-O concoction too many sent Dennis back to the previous, one roomed place. This time he was ensconced on the ground floor, in a palatial room with its own hot plate. However, within two months, all the tenants were unceremoniously ejected from their homes by the landlady. Apparently, she was on notice from the City of Calgary regarding the appalling conditions of the accommodation. Needless to say, not a single soul admitted to contacting the authorities. This move found Dennis north of the Highlander Hotel, or the "H Block," as it was known among the beer swizzling, student crowd. He found a one room basement "suite" where he resided until end of term.

This was 1966, and the spring of second year. Painting was a mandatory course at the college, even for non-majors. Now, the Muse screamed to be free. Teetering on the edge of his teacher's patience, Dennis asked if he could actually go outside to paint while the other students were studiously working away on one of the never ending still life arrangements set up in the classroom. His instructor, Mr. Adaskin, responded with an acerbic, "Yeah, okay." Translation: "Get out of my hair." It was April in Calgary; snow on the ground and ice still on the river.



BRUSH, PEN AND INK DRAWING  
17" X 22"  
ALBERTA COLLEGE OF ART  
c 1966

Dennis walked from the college to the Tenth Street bridge, a distance of about a mile. He was lugging a twenty-four by thirty-six inch board under one arm. Maxwell's painting box, one of the hapless students who quit at Christmas, just as predicted, was gripped tight in his hand. Dipping a jar into the Bow River, Dennis set about painting the fastest he ever painted in his life. He was freezing his skinny butt off. Arriving about one-thirty in the afternoon, he had to beat a hasty return to the college in time for critique at three-thirty. Bordering on what was surely hypothermia, Dennis arrived stiff and chilled-to-the-bone. He stood his painting on the railing, and waited for the usual disappointed commentary from his instructor. Mr. Adaskin arrived, grabbed the work, and began shouting, "Whose is this?" A shy hand inched its way up as Dennis waited for the explosion. Adaskin shot out of the room, running the length of the hallway along which the instructors had their offices, all the while yelling, "Look what Evans did; look what Evans did." At the next painting class, Dennis asked again to leave for the great outdoors, and the response was, "Oh, yes, please go right ahead."

This time, his work featured a little ramshackle bridge spanning a stream situated in the green space that became Confederation Park. This work, together with the painting aptly entitled, "Tenth Street Bridge," was selected to tour in the Alberta Culture-sponsored art show that travelled throughout the province during the summer of 1966. These travelling shows were conducted under the tutelage of Les Graf, an institution unto himself within this particular government department, and a personal, life-long supporter of the arts. Of note: Dennis was the only student to have two paintings selected, and he was no longer a painting major, having been seduced by the sensuous medium – clay. He also had works in clay touring that summer in the same show. When the travelling show came to an end, only one of Dennis' paintings came home. The one depicting the bridge in Confederation Park was filched sometime during the



## BRIDGE

He begged to be set free,  
To leave the staid walls behind.  
At last, to smell the wind.  
Shivering, canvas board in hand,  
He dipped his cup into the icy water.  
Colours flashing,  
So cold, must hurry.  
Images emerge; spirit soaring.

No one could believe his message.  
So clear now, so long misheard.  
Bond with paint and brush, consummated.  
A dream fulfilled.



THE TENTH STREET BRIDGE  
24" X 36"  
ACRYLIC ON BOARD  
ALBERTA COLLEGE OF ART  
1967  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

tour. To this day, the artist pines for his work, and a reward is offered for information leading to its whereabouts in order to thank the person for their good taste.

While discussing this travelling art show with Dennis, I realized that I had been among the art students in Mrs. Isabelle Sharpe's class in Crescent Heights High School, Medicine Hat, Alberta who were conscripted, on threat of failure of her class, to view the works on tour from the ACA. Many years later, I came across Isabelle while attending one of the Alberta Potters Association events in Medicine Hat. I am ashamed to say that it was only then that I learned what an accomplished artist she was. It must have been pure torture for her every time she entered her art classroom and met ignorant and uncaring fourteen year olds like me.

Meanwhile, back at college, Dennis had, by then, developed a number of friends among his fellow students. One day, Dennis, Susan Carruthers, Richard Crack and Myles Charles loaded themselves into Richard's 1957 Plymouth resplendent in its fins, apricot and black paint job with front black leather bucket seats. They headed out into the foothills along Highway 1-A, on their way to paint and draw. Myles is Métis, and his hometown was Lac La Ronge, Saskatchewan. Having been afflicted with polio as a child, he walked with a distinctive dip and slide, and he always seemed a little frail. In Dennis' opinion, Myles' talent was unsurpassed. Myles had been in a polio sanatorium in Regina for most of his young life, and Dennis describes him as a true individual among all the students at the college, probably because of this experience. We cherish two of Myles' prints: a self portrait which is a lino-block done on newspaper that has become very fragile over time because of the choice of materials, as well as an etching entitled, "Eve."

Now, cast your mind to images of characters in works by the authors,

W.P. Kinsella and W.O Mitchell. Like Kinsella's Frank Fence Post, with typical First Nation's humour, Myles pointed out the window and exclaimed in a very droll voice, "There are my bow and arrow cousins," as the car and its "cool riders" slid out along the old highway, through the Stoney Reserve, on the way to the spot where they had decided to work. Four more different personalities one cannot imagine; riding along, '57 Plymouth, black and apricot, in the mid-60s! Can this just get any better?

Now, most assuredly, the 1960's in Alberta were a more innocent place than today. During the first year in Calgary, Dennis was able to get a ride back to Viking with a local boy by the name of Stan Borrás. After Stan graduated, Dennis was without his own mode of transportation until fourth year, so hitch-hiking home to Viking for Christmas holidays and at the end-of-term became the norm. Dennis can't recall where he was left off or who picked him up, but nothing untoward ever happened, and he got back and forth unscathed. That would send shivers up and down a mother's spine today (probably did then, too), but Dennis never gave it a second thought.

In fall of 1966, Dennis' friend, Richard, took charge of making their shared living arrangements. Positively lavish: a whole basement to themselves, still located close to school. Now, work routines settled in with earnest. After a day in the ceramics studio, Dennis headed upstairs to the commercial art area where Richard taught him photography, or he would return to the ceramics studio, and work well into the night. In the spring of 1967, right after leaving school, Susan and Richard were married. Dennis was the best man; the reception was held at the Glencoe Club. During his association with Susan and Richard, Sunday dinners were hosted at the Carruthers' home in Wildwood. Roast beef – par excellence - at least it seemed so to the three starving artists. Conversation around the Carruthers' dinner table was a different matter. Father and mother-in-law hadn't talked

in years, so passing the salt became a negotiation. Among Dennis' memorable contributions to the student culinary experience was a large jar of his mother's canned plums. Somehow Dennis had managed to ferry it to Calgary unscathed, but over time, the seal broke and it fermented. Now, that was yummy! Richard's creation, "Irish-Italian" spaghetti sauce, stood everyone in good stead, and we still cook it up in our kitchen, today.

Painting was still on the agenda at school, and now, the eminent Ilingworth Kerr was Dennis' instructor. At this particular time, it seems that all the painting instructors at the College had a formula for setting up the still life compositions for their students. This was, in part, what presented earlier difficulties for Dennis. One day he asked Mr. Kerr if he could set up his own still life. Taking pastel drapery and bisque-ware pots cast off from the ceramics studio, Dennis created his own setting, in a pastel colour scheme he would use later. He, together with fellow student, Sandy Haeseker sat down on each side of the composition. This day was memorable because Dennis proceeded to paint the first still life that really worked for him.

At long last, painting started to go much better for Dennis. So well, in fact, that Dennis sold a work through Gunther's Mobilia, an elegant furniture store located on Seventeenth Avenue, just west of Fourth Street. The store specialized in the sleek minimalist designs typified by Scandinavian furniture and accessories. Mr. Gunther, senior, was a true supporter of the Art College students. Dennis' sale was for the vast sum of one hundred dollars, but Mr. Kerr was incensed. He had a commission for his students lined up with a downtown oil company, and Dennis' work was not to be a part of it, as he had planned. One has to keep in mind, that one hundred dollars was a whole month's upkeep – rent, food, and art supplies. The choice seemed obvious to Dennis.



DENNIS WORKING ON POTTER'S WHEEL  
ALBERTA COLLEGE OF ART  
1967



GUNTHER'S MOBILIA SHOW AND SALE  
1967  
PHOTO BY THE CALGARY HERALD

Gunther's Mobilia sponsored a spring sale for the students, allowing them to scatter their work among the expensive teak and leather, minimalist furnishings. The store advertised, and wonders of wonders, people came in and bought! Ever one to be managing things, Dennis was among the organizers. Someone had a vehicle; the students loaded up their goods, and arrived at the store. Unloading began, until Mr. Gunther noticed one of the pieces already installed in his store. It was a ceramic mural about three feet by five feet, created by Ann Marie Schmidt-Esler. Ann Marie had slathered it with brown shoe polish in an attempt to "improve" its finish. Typical of Ann Marie, she never stayed "inside the box" with her creations. Needless to say, the installers had to beat a hasty retreat with the piece, under the stern eye of the owner. They innocently put it on the loading dock at the back of the store to be returned to the school. Enter: City of Calgary garbage collection, and dear reader, "Art went to the dump;" a tragic story that will repeat itself much, much later.

The show was a hit. It was a collection of pottery, painting, and fabric art, all created by third and fourth year students. The Calgary Herald photographed the collection of work, giving the students free publicity. Dennis says that in over fifty years of marketing art work, he has never seen anyone who demonstrated such generosity or has given such a remarkable sales opportunity to "unknown students." Perhaps, it was Mr. Gunther's European upbringing. Clearly, he recognized the need to culture along these fine young men and women by giving them an opportunity to experience the reality of actually selling their work, and understanding that there was a real monetary value in what they were doing.

Now, one might be wondering? How was a small town boy financing his education in such an expensive program? Second only to the purchase of medical text books, art programs are among the most expensive undertakings in post secondary education, even today.



TEA CADDY  
9" HIGH  
CONE 10 REDUCTION STONEWARE  
ALBERTA COLLEGE OF ART  
1967  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST  
ENTRY FOR NATIONAL CERAMICS SHOW, 1969

Art supplies are exorbitantly priced, which is why so many potters become so resourceful in manufacturing their own equipment. Well, as it happens, Viking is situated on one of Alberta's first and most productive natural gas fields. As early as the 1920's and certainly after WW II, production in these natural gas reserves got under full-swing. There were four gas camps, known respectively as Viking, Kinsella, Irma and Tofield. The one in Viking was the biggest employer in the Viking area with permanent residents and summer "flunkies," hired to do everything from manning the radio dispatch, and painting everything the trademark colour, "gas camp green." It was applied to fences, buildings and equipment. Summer staff also checked valves, sprayed 2-4-D (or likely Agent Orange), mowed grass, and drove truck.

This employment paid the princely sum of three dollars and thirty-six cents an hour. Dennis put aside six hundred dollars from summer employment in Grades 10 and 11. When the art college adjourned for the summer, the gas camp job, supplemented by living at home, meant Dennis was able to save almost thirteen hundred dollars per summer season; just enough to finance a whole school year. A small student loan, in first year, paid back by the end of 1972, topped off his capital, and allowed him to spend four years on his labour of love. Now, a job at the gas camp was not without its hazards. Checking valve pressure and releasing the moisture build-up meant you had to be fast on your feet. In addition to moisture vapour spouting into the sky, the occasional rock came with it. Once, Dennis had to run back to the truck to inform his senior co-worker that the valve was on fire!

The first year, Dennis' father was concerned about his son carrying such a significant amount of cash in his pocket. To make things safer, he insisted Dennis get CNR money orders. One day while at college, Dennis was summoned to the administration building. He

was met by a CNR police officer who began berating him, inferring some fraudulent action on his part. The poor bewildered student laid all his money orders on the table, only to discover that the Viking agent had over paid him by fifty dollars. The brute leaned over Dennis while he wrote out a cheque and telephoned the bank to prove that he had funds to cover the refund. Satisfied, the train-yard bull finally retreated into oblivion. Finally, in the summer between third and fourth year, Dennis got “wheels,” and his hitching days were over. Now, his parents could relax a bit regarding the transport of these large sums of cash. Taking a weekend trip to Edmonton, Dennis perused the Edmonton Journal and found a sweet little, baby blue 1957 Volkswagen Beetle. He bought the car, got a transport license from an RCMP detachment, and proudly drove to Viking, ready to head off to school in the fall. Arriving back in Calgary for start of class, Dennis was once again without a home.

Someone in the pottery class mentioned a new guy was looking for someone to share expenses. This “somebody” turned out to be Leopold Foulem, a student from Montreal, who came especially to major in pottery with Drohan. As a child, he had been catered to by his family, and he had absolutely no housekeeping or cooking skills. In other words, Dennis’ standards were considerably higher. On more than one occasion, on a cold winter morning, Dennis would be sitting in an idling car outside the building waiting for Leopold to “emerge.” Exasperated, one day Dennis decided to drive off without his passenger. Of course, Leopold did not think about paying for this taxi service to school. This happened twice, each time Leopold arrived at school, steaming mad because he had to catch the bus. After the second time, he “got” it, and from then to the end of term, he was never again late for his ride to school. In the meantime, Dennis was seriously considering running away from home, but he never found another place to stay.



BRUSH POT  
10" HIGH  
CONE 9 REDUCTION STONEWARE  
ALBERTA COLLEGE OF ART  
c 1967  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

Of course, access to a car was a luxury for most students at this time, and one day, Bonnie McComb and Dawn Johnston, two charmingly persuasive, female students, asked to borrow Dennis' VW. He agreed, and after their "pressing errand," they parked the car in the lot. When Dennis came out of school late in the evening, he went to start the car and drive away. A god awful noise emanated from under the hood. He coaxed the car to a garage close to home, and asked the mechanic on duty to have a look. The mechanic said, "Sounds like a bent rod." He promised to look further, but more than likely, repairs would involve removing the motor; usually, the standard for the repair of VW motors. Suddenly, the Good Samaritan had a huge bill looming in exchange for his good deed. Interestingly, neither Bonnie nor Dawn had said a word to him, and equally interesting, Dennis didn't ask the girls what happened. The next day, amid great trepidation, Dennis dropped in at the garage. To his surprise, and great relief, the car was repaired, ready to drive away – all for ten dollars. The mechanic was able to do the repairs without removing the motor. Dennis was back on the road, but he never lent his car out again.

By now, the end of his four year program was fast approaching. There were only three graduates in the ceramics program in 1968. They were Dennis, Ann Marie Schmidt Esler and Bonnie McComb. Before exiting school, Dennis began trading his pottery for fine art prints (etchings, litho, silk screen, and wood block). This collection hangs in his studio, and the work surrounds him with memories as he works away. Some of the pieces are by Ron Moppett, Eugene Ouchi, Ray Brown, Myles Charles, and Marcella Bienvenue. In fourth year, Dennis also sold a candle lantern to Illingworth Kerr and a three foot by six foot ceramic wall mural to Stan Perrott. The mural had its own misadventure. When it came out of the kiln, the pieces weren't pre-numbered. Word got out that Dennis was having trouble putting "Humpty-Dumpty" together, and students began drifting by; they'd

pick up a piece, just like a giant jigsaw puzzle, helping Dennis to fit it all together, again. The work was installed at Stan's house in Bragg Creek, but after Stan's death, the mural's fate is unknown.

Dennis' painting matured in the last few weeks of the spring semester in second year. In third year, very few paintings were produced due to the nature of Mr. Kerr's method of instruction. It had to be done right, or you went back and re-did it until it was right. The pottery work progressed through the required succession of projects until final semester in fourth year when Dennis' individual style began to emerge. Works, such as the brush pot and the covered tea caddies, were the beginnings of a break from student routine. As noted above, Dennis also created a small number of ceramic murals. The one installed at Stan's house, as well as one based on a still life composition (whereabouts unknown). An ambitious depiction with references to English literature and Shakespeare (again, whereabouts unknown) as well as one depicting an African theme, rounded out the work.

The College hosted a tea in conjunction with graduation ceremonies, and Dennis' parents made the gruelling trip by Greyhound bus to Calgary to take part in the event, returning to Viking by bus afterward. Later in the month, when classes ended, Dennis drove northward, home to Viking, all his worldly possessions stuffed into his little VW Beetle. Arriving in the afternoon, Dennis walked to the lot where his dad was hard at work on the construction of his very own home. Dennis said to his dad, "I'm here to help," and Dennis remembers his dad's smile. He just knew he made the right decision about spending the summer with his dad building the house. This was Dennis' parents' first home that was truly theirs'. Three successive crop failures, brought about by unseasonable hail and frost, caused the family to lose their farm to the bank. So, while Dennis and his two brothers were growing up, the Evans moved about, living in various

rented houses in the town. All three boys had moved away from home by this time. It is so regrettable that Dennis' father died in the summer of 1972, only four short years after completing this milestone project. The house remained their mother's home until her death in December 2001. The exterior still sports the ceramic mural that Dennis created, infused with iconographic images, to convey his heartfelt wishes for his parents' happy life there.

Work for a young artist was not easy to find. Finishing construction on the house in Viking in September 1968, Dennis motored to Edmonton for a few days. One morning, without a word to family or friends, he got into his little VW and headed west. Arriving in Vernon, he stayed with relatives who toured him around Kelowna. Dennis then started out in the general direction of Vancouver, taking a detour to see if he could locate - you guessed it - Naramata. During his boyhood days, a young minister by the name of Clinton Swallow was serving at the United Church in Viking. Reverend Swallow raved about the summers spent on the beach and by the Okanagan Lake. After a slightly interesting drive among the orchards, Dennis left thinking he had "found" Naramata, and that it seemed rather a let-down from what he had heard. What was so great about orchards?

Arriving in Vancouver, Dennis stayed with his aunt and uncle, Ann and Murray Clouston. Their house had just had major renovation, and Dennis spent a bit of time helping his uncle build shelving. For the month of October, Dennis landed a small job doing window displays for an independent department store. It was one day a week with the remainder of time spent in the warehouse; an arrangement that did not make him very happy. As it happened, Dale, Dennis' twin brother, was getting married that November so Dennis decided it would be a good time to go home. He arrived back in Viking for about a month, and after the wedding, went to Edmonton, taking over the space Dale had occupied in an apartment rented by their older

brother along with a very odd assortment of students from the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT). His job hunt began in earnest.

Through hometown connections, Dennis was hired by investors who owned and operated three car washes in Edmonton – one on Calgary Trail, one on Fort Road and one on Stony Plain Road. The latter establishment was their flagship. First day of work wasn't too bad. The next day, temperatures plummeted to minus fifty degrees Fahrenheit (does that even exist on the thermometer?), and the bone-chilling cold dragged on for thirty-nine consecutive days at minus thirty degrees or below. Dennis was maintenance guru until the early spring of 1970. Expected to work at the flagship carwash during the day and then do maintenance after hours, there, or at one of the other two locations, life became endless eighteen hour days. For anyone, and especially for a twenty-four year old, it was no life. The grind was becoming unbearable.

While in Edmonton, Dennis began making the acquaintance of Edmonton area potters. He completed one still life as a wedding gift for his brother. Otherwise, the maintenance job simply took too much out of him, and no real work was completed. Determined to leave the drudge at the car wash, Dennis quit, flat out. Casting about for a job, he landed a door-to-door sales job with Sunrise Industries. The company sold powdered milk. Two sales trips were made: one to Drumheller, the other to Medicine Hat. Lines of convergence were forming. Without a doubt, Dennis was the worst door-to-door salesman imaginable, but he managed to convince one family to buy. His customers: my sister and brother-in-law.

Prior to embarking on these sales trips, Dennis had applied for a position at the Canadian Penitentiary in Drumheller. Interviewed for the job, he didn't know what the outcome of the interview was until

late June. When a letter arrived from the Solicitor General's office, offering him the job, he accepted, immediately. Back went the sales kit to Sunrise Industries early on a Monday morning, and he drove as fast as he could to Viking to tell his parents the good news. That same day, he pointed his little car southward to Drumheller, ready to start work the very next day. It was June 1971.

## CHAPTER 3 FIRSTS



Dennis' first encounter with the Drumheller Valley was in summer time. It was very, very hot, and air conditioning was still a novelty. After a short stay in a small hotel located just across the bridge heading toward Midland, Dennis found a house to rent on Main Street, just to the south of the Tastee Freez. The house, generally, and the floor, in particular, was falling into the basement. Making an acquaintance with a dear fellow by the name of Charlie Swain, purveyor of insurance and real estate, Dennis asked Charlie to keep an eye out for him, should a good deal on a piece of property arise.

Meanwhile, while residing in the rental house, Dennis set up a painting studio in the spare bedroom and a series of abstract landscapes of the Drumheller Valley came into being. Charlie called one morning, just after nine o'clock and told Dennis he had, at best, a couple of hours to make a move on a property that had just come on the market. It was a tiny miner's shack located at 1310 Dinosaur Trail, along the road to Midland. Two sisters were in a state-of-war over the estate, and their lawyer had declared an ultimatum, "Sell or get out of my office!" After a brief drive-by, Dennis sped to his bank to ask the manager if he could take out a mortgage. The property, on



PENDANT  
SILVER & POPPY JASPER  
1" X 1.5"  
c 1974  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST



RING  
SILVER AND JASPER  
c 1974  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST



FLOWER GARDEN  
BATIK  
30" X 42"  
c 1974  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

a lot measuring about one hundred ten feet by sixty feet, was the whopping sum of two thousand dollars or about ten percent of real value. The house was worth nothing, but it was a terrific piece of land. The bank encouraged Dennis to simply take out a personal loan. So, the deal of Dennis' lifetime was finalized before going to work at one o'clock that afternoon.

At last, Dennis could begin work for himself on his first home. The house hadn't been lived in for several years. Pig weeds had sprouted in the garden, and some had reached an astounding seven feet in height. There was an odd assortment of fencing, one "perfectly good cabbage cutter" rusting away in the wild grass, as well as a collection of wooden enclosures along one rickety fence which had served as home to a menagerie of animals. As for the tiny, five hundred foot square house, Dennis re-wired, insulated, moved walls, plumbed and installed a gas furnace. The furnace required tunnelling out a spot in the crawl space. Dennis had made the acquaintance of Leonard and Eileen Emann during his Sunrise sales trip, and sure enough, Leonard worked at the Penitentiary. The Emann's had two young boys, Gregory and Darcy, who became Dennis' weekend helpers in the excavation process. The City of Drumheller had just begun installing access to city water along the Dinosaur Trail, and Dennis surprised the crew when it arrived in the front of his property by being ready for hook-up. Oh what joy, a hot bath before going to work.

Thirty-two, half-ton loads of garbage, piled high above the cab of Leonard Emann's little 1952 Chevy truck, wound up in the Drumheller landfill. In those days, "pickers" were allowed at the dump, and as the rusty cabbage cutter sailed into the air, it was snatched by an eager scavenger who said in amazement, "It's a perfectly good cabbage cutter." Oh, shame, Dennis – discarding such a prize!



SPRUCE IN THE CYPRESS HILLS  
8" X 10"  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
c 1973  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST



PINE ON A HILL  
8" X 10"  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
c 1973  
PRIVATE COLLECTION

Each room in the little house was painted in a primary colour. It was blue for the bathroom, red for the kitchen, yellow for the living room and green for the bedroom. Dennis was on a first name basis with the local building supply company – Whitlock Lumber. Amid much trepidation among the sales staff when he placed the order, a special colour of paint, to create exactly the right shade for the kitchen, was brought in just for him. It was “Chinese Red.” Staff members were so sure he wouldn’t like the colour; they made him pay in full before submitting the request. Ah, the first manifestation of shag carpet. A roll of yellow shag carpet was scored from a carpet warehouse in Calgary for give-away prices because of a water break in the store. The piece was just small enough to be folded up and tucked into the back of the VW beetle. A fantasy garden mural, created entirely from one inch tiles, appeared on the floor, back and sides of a forty-eight inch by thirty inch shower stall. After spending a morning gluing the tiny tiles to the walls and floor, Dennis recalled how he stumbled out of the stall. He realized he was high from the fumes, and that he was feeling ill. He had to shake off the stupor and be ready for work.

Two brick pillars were built using the old chimney bricks, and these stood on either side of the driveway. The small summer kitchen was turned into storage. Using Leonard Emann’s radial arm saw and the front room as a workshop, Dennis built the kitchen cupboards out of K3 Board. Dust flew everywhere. Together, Leonard and Dennis created a coffee table, end tables and a settee. The cushions were upholstered by inmates at the Penitentiary. Home sweet home!

When Dennis was hired by the Canadian Penitentiary, he was the very first, qualified instructor in crafts, and because of his training, Dennis was able to make significant inroads at work. He established a wide range of classes for the inmates, encompassing a myriad of disciplines including painting, drawing, sculpture, pottery, photography, lapidary and silver-smithing, copper enamelling, batik,

woodwork, leather tooling, petit point and tapestry work. Part of Dennis' job required shopping for supplies, so he became a regular customer of the Goldies' lapidary shop in Drumheller as well as at Green's and Charbonneau's in Calgary. Specialty orders from Tandy Leather, Whitlock Lumber, canvas for the ubiquitous chuck wagon lamps, tapestry wool, and stops at the framing shop were all part of his routine. Basically, Dennis took a shell of a room and turned it into a functional arts and crafts studio, which as it turns out, will not be the last time in his career that this challenge will present itself to him. Soon after this first studio classroom was operational, the whole set-up had to move because the space was re-allocated for another purpose. This gave Dennis the opportunity to really design a purpose-specific, and even more, functional space.

There be criminals here! When you work with thieves, expect theft!

Very shortly after being hired, Dennis received an order of supplies which he carefully locked away for the weekend. On Monday morning he arrived, prepared to retrieve the materials, and was shocked to find, they were all gone. Reporting the disappearance of his stock, the prison officials rounded on him, and promptly threatened to put a letter of reprimand on his file for failure to secure the missing items. Dennis immediately began his own investigation, and discovered that the room in which he secured the materials had been opened, sometime during the weekend, to allow inmates to fill cleaning buckets with water.

A formal board of inquiry was convened, and the findings sent off to Ottawa. The results came back, declaring Dennis negligent, and issuing a fine of five hundred dollars. Dennis had never joined the union, but found out that if he wanted to challenge the decision, he had to join. His challenge resulted in only a partial victory. The judgment ruled he would not have to pay the fine, but he was still



DOGWOOD IN SNOW

A calligrapher's marks

Simple notations in paint

An image, in shorthand, for the eye.



DOGWOOD IN SNOW  
8" X 10"  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
c 1971  
PRIVATE COLLECTION



IN THE DITCH AT BRAGG CREEK  
8" X 10"  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
c 1972  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

negligent. The union declared itself done with the matter. Now, here is that stubborn streak, mentioned earlier. Dennis obtained a copy of the Code of Conduct and found that the two parts of the reprimand couldn't be separated. He filed another grievance. This time on his own, as he felt the union had done nothing for him, the first time. This time, all charges and fines were dropped. Interestingly, the original inquiry never asked the guard staff to reveal who opened the door. Likewise, Dennis was unable to discover who opened the room; there seemed to be a lot of memory loss going around. However, it wasn't long after, and without any prompting from him, an additional, security-level storage closet, was installed in his shop.

This was not quite the end of things. Dennis is a man of integrity, and his sense of justice was left unsatisfied by this outcome. Determined to find the stolen materials, Dennis instituted a thorough search of all the inmates' cells, confiscating any product not accounted for in an inmate's individual, craft record. Unaided by the guards, moving cell block, by cell block, Dennis tossed unaccounted for materials into the back of a three ton truck. When he was finished, the truck was sent, full to the brim, to dispose of the goods at the dump. To this day, Dennis still wonders why the search didn't start a riot, or at the very least, why the inmates' representative didn't file a complaint with the warden? However, the shot across the bow had been fired, and now there was no question that staff and inmates knew what the rules were if anyone tried to abuse him again.

By this time, word had spread among wives of the Penitentiary staff that there was a "real live artist" in town. The Drumheller Potters Guild drafted Dennis to teach pottery at the Drumheller Recreational Department. This was a fabulous facility located right next to the city swimming pool, and soon Dennis had students filling the pottery classes. Just twenty four years old, Dennis was in charge of murders and assorted villains by day; sorority ladies on the weekend.

It was around this time, the province asked the Alberta College of Art to justify its existence. It was asked to demonstrate that its graduates were finding gainful employment. Aware of Dennis' work at the Penitentiary, Mr. Stan Perrott, President of the College, called Dennis and asked him how he got his job and what it entailed. When Mr. Perrott's research was finished, and a report submitted to the provincial government, the President of ACA was pleasantly surprised to find just how entrepreneurial their graduates were, and the diversity in their graduates' fields of employment.

In early June, Susan and Richard Crack asked Dennis to do a hiking trip with them. Richard had learned about the Stanley Mitchell alpine hut in Yoho National Park, and Dennis, a complete neophyte to hiking in the mountains, rented a miserable fitting backpack, bought a pair of brand new, untried hiking boots, and borrowed a barely adequate sleeping bag. Upon leaving the highway at Field, the three-some parked and began their trek upward. Very soon, they were slogging through waist deep snow! It was a brutal climb, and the exhausted hikers finally arrived at the hut late in the afternoon. Dennis had stowed a number of eight by ten inch, pre-primed canvases in his backpack, and the next day, he painted a series of quick landscape studies. The spontaneity in the work was inspired. He liked the freedom of the experience using this small scale, and he employed it many times when moved to capture a transitory composition in the quick shorthand of a few brushstrokes.

## STUDIO ONE: GARDEN ONE

Dennis' little house faced south towards the Red Deer River, and its backyard opened up onto the wild coulees and natural grassland of the Drumheller Valley. Cliffs, and the layered strata for which the valley is noted, were just out the back door. Crocus bloomed on the grassy knoll behind the location of his first studio. The studio was a

purpose-built structure with a A-roof line and walls tapering to the back, somewhat like a big square funnel. Okay, so it was the '70's! The structure sat on a concrete pad poured on a cold fall weekend. The concrete delivery arrived, and Dennis began to trowel away under a tarp, as it was pouring down rain; by now, darkness had fallen. Will he ever build a studio in good weather? The walls and roof were erected, and plastic sheeting covered the openings for, what would become, large windows in about two years' time.

Around this time, Dennis and his brother were called home by their mother. Arthur, their dad, was exhibiting episodes of memory loss and having other difficulties that their doctor had diagnosed as the early onset of Alzheimer's. When the boys arrived, they looked over their father's ledgers and could see a marked change in his handwriting. Upon their insistence, the doctor finally admitted their dad to the Viking Hospital. A week later, the doctor sent Arthur to the University Hospital, eighty miles away in Edmonton. Testing identified a brain tumour which was operated on with rehabilitation and chemotherapy treatments conducted at the Cross Cancer Institute. Arthur's first grandchild, Karla, was born at the end of November 1971. When able, Lillian took her husband home in January 1972. He rallied a bit, but had to be re-hospitalized in Viking when he began to deteriorate. Bryan was in Australia; Dale was in Calgary, and Dennis was in Drumheller. Without communicating, Dale and Dennis arrived, at exactly the same time, having left independently from their respective starting points, to walk up the steps of the hospital, together. Arthur died on June 21, 1972.

Backing up a bit: in April 1972, Dennis was cajoled into taking his young tunnelling expert, Gregory Emann, to an open house sponsored at SAIT. Gregory had shown an aptitude for electronics, and he wanted to check out the facilities and programs offered at SAIT. Leonard, Gregory's dad, had asked Dennis to be his son's



LANDSCAPE  
HANDMADE CERAMIC TILES  
48" X 48"  
CONE 9 REDUCTION  
c 1975



DRUMHELLER  
STUDIO ONE

tour guide. Off the two went on a Friday evening after Dennis finished work. Gregory had arranged to stay at his grandmother's house, and Dennis went on to stay over with his friends, Susan and Richard Crack. The next morning, arriving at 28 Hyslop Drive, there were Gregory and his aunt, Patricia, waiting for the tour. After chauffeuring aunt and nephew to SAIT, Dennis acted as their guide, taking them both around the college and the electronics facilities. He returned them home "to Granny's house" in the late afternoon. Then, Dennis and Patricia decided this might be a good time to go out to the movies, much to the chagrin of the nephew, who laid claim to Dennis, as his friend. Dennis and I cross paths again in July 1972.

My first job, after graduating from high school in 1969, was in the classified advertising department of the Calgary Herald. Located on the main floor of the Herald Building situated at the corner of First Street and Seventh Avenue, the department had floor-to-ceiling windows that afforded a fishbowl view of everything and anything that was going on at street level. Little did I know that, every day when I looked into the lobby of the Herald, the large, side-lit, ceramic mural I saw was created by Ed Drohanchuk, one of Alberta's preeminent ceramic artists. Ed's brother, Walter Drohan, taught Dennis, my future husband, to be a potter. I had moved on from the Herald and was now working at Canada Permanent Trust. I was busy saving my money by living at home, which was why I happened to be on hand when Gregory and Dennis appeared.

Now it was July 1972. Using my brother-in-law as the conduit to convey an invitation, I asked Dennis to be my escort to my cousin's wedding, and like ABBA says, "Take a chance on me!" We were married in December 1972, and so began our life together. I was twenty; Dennis was twenty-five. Our wedding rings were designed and made by Ted Fogg, a jewellery student enrolled at the ACA.



DRUMHELLER HILLS  
24" X 48"  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
c 1973  
PRIVATE COLLECTION



## VALLEY

Seekers came,  
Across the prairie grass, eyes down.  
Descending the great gash woven in the earth,  
Layer upon layer; time measured in eons,  
Down, to the languid waters of the Red Deer.

Riches in her belly,  
Emptied, by those who did not heed her pain.  
Her secrets were held safe,  
Buried in sediment, bruised by glaciers.  
Bones; petrified and silent.  
At last, stillness returned; thieves banished.

Dwelling in her sight, you perceived her beauty.  
She recognized you; your heart heard her hymn.  
Colours of sun, wind, stone, snow, twilight, moon,  
Brushed, with gentle strokes, across the canvas.  
Her chant held sacred; her secrets safe.  
Valley: our first home.



DRUMHELLER HILLS  
25" X 46"  
c 1973  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

By now, I was beginning to experience what it was going to mean to be married to an artist. Dennis and I went to Green's Lapidary and picked out a cut diamond which Ted incorporated into my engagement ring. On the evening the rings were ready, Dennis and I journeyed out to the Leighton mansion where Ted and his wife were house-sitting for Barb Leighton. Apparently, she was in the Arctic soaking up its ambiance. After a tour around the grand house, we sat in the living room, gazing up at the matching Ming vases sitting either side of the fireplace. As we watched from the living room windows, a snow storm gathered momentum across the foothills. My very first gift from Dennis was a small batik painting depicting a flower bed. No wilted posies from him.

Our love affair with the Drumheller Valley grew as Dennis began to show me around the region. It still contained relics of its coal mining history. Dennis began to paint the landscape, setting up an easel in our kitchen, because the studio had no heat. It was January 1973, very cold and deep with snow. Every weekend, we'd venture into the hills by heading up the coulee right behind our house. Dennis would take his camera; sometimes, it would be so cold that the shutter would stick.

One day we noticed a frosting of ice on the grass, high up on the bank. Upon closer examination, it was obviously a coyote's den, and the warm, moist breath from the animals had collected at the entrance, forming ice as it cooled in the cold prairie winter. Coyotes are so secretive that neither of us ever imagined we'd have the privilege to discover their den. One day, on an excursion by himself, Dennis came across a great horned owl sitting in an aspen tree. It was mid-day and the owl was resting, conserving its energy for the night hunt. Gradually, spring came, and we started landscaping our yard. It was a particularly gruelling task, but finally the grass seed was down, and we collapsed on the couch. Later that same evening,



MINER'S CABIN  
31" X 46"  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
c 1974  
PRIVATE COLLECTION

I made the pronouncement, "Someone is driving across our lawn." "Nah," says my husband, "you're imagining things." Sure enough, the next morning we discovered our next door neighbours had held a party the previous night, and rather than shuffling their cars around when someone decided to leave, they drove, corner to corner, across our newly seeded lawn. Can you say, "Are you kidding me?"

Now the studio got windows, recycled from a job my dad had in Calgary. We chose wooden fence slats, commonly used for corrals, for its exterior cladding. The slats still had a bark edge. We planted a flower garden outside the door and along the east wall using native plants dug from around us. There were shooting stars, wild roses, sage, and a sprinkling of tame poppies. Dennis heard about a farmer selling lumber from an old grain elevator. We secured some for a deck between the house and the studio; the lumber was so hard, Dennis had to pre-drill every hole.

This was our very first garden, and our very first, creative collaboration using a garden as a means of sharing. Instinctively, we wanted to have an environment around us that reflected our common values and sense of place. The yard evolved, rather than following, a formal plan. Besides embodying the natural spirit we held important, it was a source of inspiration for Dennis, as an artist. We also planted our first vegetable garden, making the beginner's mistake of planting all the zucchini seeds. Of course, all germinated. We were Enemy Number One with the neighbours as we tried in vain to give the prolific, monster gourds away. This particular spring also brought out a bumper crop of mosquitoes, and it was impossible to work or enjoy what we created. Just walking from the car, which was parked right beside the door, brought a swarm into the house. Temperatures were very hot, and we had no air conditioning in our little house. We were praying for fall.

During my first year in Drumheller, I was employed by the Drumheller Composite High School as a teacher's aide. My contract ended in June, so Dennis and I made summer holiday plans. We hadn't had a honeymoon, and Dennis asked me what I wanted to do. I said, "To Salt Spring Island, my friend." Off we went on the last day of June. Our little VW, not the same one from art school days, but a shiny new baby blue one from 1969, was loaded down with camping gear. A hibachi, a cooler and a tent had been purchased at Frenchy's Sporting Goods in Calgary. It was a real trek across the mountains in those days and long before the short-cut over the Coquihalla connector. We trundled along the winding two lane highways, stopping often to photograph the barns sprinkled throughout the Okanagan. Their rustic colours and shapes were so charming and so different from prairie barns. Finally, we arrived in Tsawwassen; we caught the big ferry to Swartz Bay, and then caught the little ferry to Salt Spring Island.

Okay, we admit it; we are prairie people. After driving the length and breadth of the island on the first day, we began to get cabin fever. We were the only people in the small campground we found, and the owners were very kind to us. One day, the owner of the facility dropped into our site and presented us with an enormous bouquet of Lupines – flowers that I had never seen before. We were just amazed when she told us the locals considered them weeds. Salt Spring was so unspoilt at that time, but after about four days we had had enough of island living, and headed back on the ferry to Victoria. In Gastown, Dennis and I went shopping specifically for a ship's bell. We found a beautiful brass specimen that has travelled along with us to each subsequent house. It was time to head home, and off we went along Highway 3 leading into the Okanagan. It was a weekend, and traffic heading out of Vancouver to the Okanagan was bumper-to-bumper. After a horrific traffic accident, which happened almost directly behind us, we staggered off the road at Keremeos, relieved

to have made it that far in one piece, and pitched our tent. The next day when we arrived in Penticton, Dennis announced he wanted to “show me Naramata.” Off down the winding roads we went, through the orchards, and after a short while, we turned around. I assumed we had seen, “Naramata,” and that was enough of orchards, for me.

By now, Dennis had decided to build his first kiln. He drew up plans, and ordered the fire bricks from Clayburn Refractories, Calgary. This was his very first visit to Clayburn, and it began a lifelong friendship with Dean Halverson and many an adventure in industrial kiln technology and its development. In order to get the bricks and materials to Drumheller, Dennis borrowed his father-in-law’s vehicle, a 1946 Chevy three-quarter ton truck – my dad’s pride and joy. The truck and Dennis arrived safely with the cargo. Construction was completed on the eighteen cubic foot, catenary arch kiln with four Heritage burners. Each burner put out one hundred thousand BTUs, enough heat for four homes. That said, Heritage burners were a marvel of efficiency. Mr. Jim Clachrie from the Gas Utilization Department at Canadian Western Utilities in Calgary began building kiln burners. Studio potters were continually coming to him with burners, purchased from the United States, which simply did not work. Through this association, Jim became Dennis’ life-long friend, and many a burner has made its way into our possession. When Jim couldn’t find a manufacturer to produce the burner design, it became a home industry for him. Dennis credits Jim Clachrie as, single-handedly, supplying almost all the kiln burners owned by studio potters living in Western Canada.

In 1972, building a gas fired kiln in rural Alberta was challenging. In 2013, with all the changes to the gas regulations, it would be impossible. When Dennis called upon the provincial inspector to approve his project, the inspector’s face nearly dropped to the floor. He said in a mournful voice, “I really wish you had come to see me first; I would have recommended electric.” The inspector couldn’t

find any fault with the “appliance,” and had to issue an operational permit. To round out the kiln’s function, we ordered twelve silica carbide shelves from Ceramic Arts, nearly breaking the bank. Dennis began making functional ware as fast as he could get his wheel set-up. People began to get to know about our little studio, and customers would show up at the door wanting coffee mugs, bean pots, cookie jars, bowls, vases, et cetera. It was a great time, and the community embraced Dennis’ work and our little shop along the Dinosaur Trail.

Drumheller’s history as a coal mining community was still evident when we lived there. Travelling from east to west, a visitor could go through Dorothy (where parts of the first Superman movie were filmed), East Coulee, Wayne, (with its eleven bridges), Rosedale (the swinging bridge), then through Drumheller, along the south side of the river to Newcastle and Nacmine, or across to the north side to where we resided, in Midland. Each community was distinct and had its own story. We lived a few doors from the Midland Hotel, and you could still see abandoned miner’s carts rotting in the ditch or used ornamentally on someone’s lawn. Now, the swinging bridge at Rosedale was crossed by curious visitors rather than the hard working men heading to the mine.

Dennis did a little painting of an Italianate-style home being demolished in Rosedale. While it had fallen upon hard times, its elegance and dignity still shone through. One day while in Wayne, Dennis and I discovered a little miner’s cottage tucked into the overgrown willows; the remnants of an overstuffed chair were sitting on the porch. Dennis was enchanted by the composition and the poignancy of the image. He captured its essence in a landscape painting created specifically as a gift for his older brother’s wedding in 1974. Looking at the painting in 2012, Dennis realized it is the origin of the technique he is using right now. When Dennis finally began



OWL  
16" HIGH  
CONE 10 REDUCTION  
c 1974  
PRIVATE COLLECTION



GARDEN SCULPTURE IN LANDSCAPE  
24" HIGH  
CONE 10 REDUCTION  
1975  
PHOTO BY RICHARD CRACK

working in his studio in Drumheller in 1973, his style truly became his own. He worked in a creative vacuum, because there were no other potters in close proximity. He used clay and glazes familiar from college days, but the forms and surface treatments were new. He entered numerous ceramic shows in Alberta and across Canada, but he was able to keep his distance from others, and his individual style started to emerge. His wheel work gained confidence. The pots lost their student look. He even branched out into a sculptural line for gardens. They were quite unique for the time, even though their marketability wasn't very successful. Everything in its own time! His mind and thoughts were never far from the studio even though he spent most of the day working for others. Able to eke out only a few hours on weekends, he was happy with the direction his work was taking.

Nineteen seventy-three was a monumental year for ceramics. The Alberta Potters Association was created to host the International Ceramics Symposium to be held, for the first time in its illustrious history, outside Europe. This premier exhibition was the first show scheduled for the newly opened Illingworth Kerr Gallery in the new Alberta College of Art building. Ceramicists from around the world descended upon Calgary. A hospitality event was catered on the Brewster Ranch property. Huge tents housed the dining and entertainment. Romanian scholars learned how to square dance that evening. An old Dodge van, modified to serve as a mobile bar, bounced across the pasture. The side, which had been hinged, flopped down, and Barb Leighton was first in line for a scotch. She would never know that I received my engagement ring sitting on the sofa in her house. At the end of the weekend, Les Manning was appointed head of the ceramics program at the Banff School of the Arts. The innovative ceramic work exhibited at the 1973 Symposium, stimulated new approaches to expression in clay. The discipline changed forever.

The little house in the valley was now a bit cramped, so Dennis and I decided to add a porch. The basement was skillfully excavated by Clayton Schrock, and using cement blocks scored from another site, Dennis built up the walls, completing the structure with my help, which was a challenge, given our height difference. We decided then that couples who can renovate together, stay together. As we were working on the basement, a piece of clay peeled off the wall and fell ever so gently into our hands. It opened like a book, and there, inside, never seen for eons, was a perfectly formed fern leaf, as fresh as the day it was covered by sediment. We went into an absolute panic as we watched the leaf wither and die before our eyes, out of our control. The clay dried out and crumpled. This was a long time before anyone had ever conceived of the Royal Tyrell Museum, but in that instant, we had a first-hand experience of how special the valley is. Scattered about the ground in our yard, we quite often picked up bits of petrified wood, remnants of a long ago, lush tropical forest.

Finally, the little VW was replaced by a Chevy Vega. Our first holiday trip with the car was in the summer of 1974. We headed off to Los Angeles, via Las Vegas, to visit as many galleries as we could manage in a two-week time. Travel across the desert was very, very hot. When we arrived in Las Vegas late in the afternoon, we headed immediately to the swimming pool. A plunge into the cold water nearly gave us heart failure and left us shivering in shock. Our skin was so hot; we must have been dehydrating from the inside out, like a bag of frozen peas. That night we tried to sleep in our tent, but by four o'clock in the morning, we had had enough misery and headed out for Los Angeles. Leaving at this hour, we discovered the big casinos put their garbage out back, just like other, mere mortals. We passed one poor soul, dressed in a suit and tie, walking off into the desert, alone. The big city loomed - LA and adventure!

In spite of Dennis' art school training, this was really the first time he saw original paintings by the masters. It was all new to me. We spent hours in the galleries, and saw the whole gamut of their collections ranging from the Renaissance through Mannerism to contemporary artists. For any student, and in particular an art student, to study painting and not have first hand exposure to works by the great masters is almost cruel, and it is certainly detrimental to the student's creative advancement. For Dennis, to see for the first time, actual work by Monet, Manet, van Gogh, Cezanne, and Giotto, et cetera, was like sunlight coming into a dark room. The quality of the brush strokes, the vibrancy of colour, and the obvious manipulation of the canvas to execute an idea, had a visceral impact; it was so much more than what could be gained from a book or a slide presentation.

In the end, we didn't really like the immensity of this big American city, so we began to wind our way home, driving up Highway 99 along the coast of California into Oregon, grateful to be heading into the countryside. The coastal trip was breathtaking. We stopped in San Francisco and Napa Valley, experiencing our very first wine tasting at a couple of wineries that were already well established there. Dennis developed the hiccups from eating ice cream sandwiches, which made for an interesting echo as we toured the cellars – they probably thought we were two lushes who dropped in for the free wine.

That December, we asked Susan and Richard Crack to accompany us on a road trip to San Francisco over the Christmas break. We left Calgary on December 23<sup>rd</sup> – the roads were clear and dry. We arrived in Portland, Oregon at midnight. In the morning we got to Grant's Pass, which was "picture postcard perfect" with snow. We were the only ones moving as we had snow tires, zipping past the drivers lined up with their legs protruding onto the snowy highway to put on chains. We drove right up to our hotel in the Marina area.

The next morning, the weather was mild and everything was green! We began our exploration of the city, and Richard was constantly on his knees photographing the hand-crafted tiles that decorated every staircase and niche. We travelled everywhere in the city that time permitted, including across the Bay Bridge which collapsed during the earthquake in 1989. Most of the Marina buildings, which had the tiles we so coveted, were also lost at that time. The patterns on the tiles were based on Moorish designs which had links to Spain and then Mexico. We often think that, perhaps, our photo images may be all that remains as a record of their existence.

The highlight of the trip was the Avery Brundage Collection housed in a facility specifically designed and built for that purpose. Situated in the Golden Gate Park, it showcases Asian ceramics. This was Dennis' first exposure to examples of Asian pottery; work so cherished and emulated by his chosen profession. Seeing actual pieces was so much more enriching than a photograph. Immediately, he could see the quality of the craftsmanship, and he connected with the craftsmen who created these works, and with historical pottery, generally. He experienced this feeling again when he saw the collection of English slipware housed in Kansas City. It was easy to see how pottery and its makers are linked, culturally.

In 1974, Dennis, Susan and Richard bought a space in the first art sale sponsored by the Banff Recreation Department. Held at the Banff Elementary School, it was here that Dennis displayed his collection of garden sculptures. At the end of the sale, he hadn't sold a single piece. Disheartened, but not defeated, things would be different the following year.

That fall, Dennis taught a beginners drawing class at the Drumheller High School, and he hit upon the idea of holding recreational ceramic classes in his little studio in our backyard. He figured the space could

accommodate about ten students. The class was scheduled for three hours on Sunday evenings, for a total of ten evenings. The class was an overwhelming success. Ten adults, drawn from all walks of life, including the local optometrist and his wife, came to every class. One evening, during the slide show at coffee break, Dr. Smith announced, "This is way better than going to church." The firings in Dennis' first kiln were magnificent, and life was good.

It is, at this time, that Dennis' distinctive signature developed.

ARTIST'S MARK

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dennis". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping initial "D" and a long, horizontal flourish extending to the right.

## Chapter 4 CHANGE IS IN THE WIND



In mid-1975 Dennis and I were in for a huge shock. When he was hired by the Solicitor General's department in 1970, Dennis was the first, fully qualified artist to be employed in the Penitentiary Service, in all of Canada. He came into the job with a diploma from the Alberta College of Art. Prior to that time, individuals in charge of inmate craft programs were basically clerks who supervised the procurement of supplies for inmates to work in their cells, and they distributed the finished product. Re-organization of job descriptions at the federal level brought about the stipulation that Dennis' position must now be filled by someone holding a Bachelor's of Fine Arts degree. While Dennis would keep his job, it was "red circled," which meant no advancement. So, after a short four years on-the-job, teaching first-year transfer courses to the Alberta College of Art, and teaching fourteen disciplines which he had built-up in response to the inmates interests, Dennis felt devalued on a most fundamental level.

That stubborn streak surfaced; never one to sit back and stagnate, Dennis decided to upgrade himself. He approached the principal of Hill Top School and obtained permission to enroll in first year English and history classes that were taught to inmates by instructors from

Mount Royal College. Because the classes conflicted with Dennis' work schedule, he taped the lecture, and then came home to listen to them in the evenings and do the assignments. After successfully completing these two classes in the fall of 1975, Dennis' appetite was whetted, and he took two more courses in the spring of 1976, giving him two full university credits. Dennis made an appointment with Vic Brosz, head of the art department at the University of Calgary. After an assessment of his ACA studio work, and the junior English and history course credits, Dennis was awarded two full years advanced credit by the University of Calgary towards their four year BFA degree. Armed with these accomplishments, he approached the penitentiary for educational leave. The answer: NO.

More determined than ever, we were joined in a mutual cause. Dennis and I put our heads together. No one was going to stop Dennis from attending university. Ah, what the heck, for that matter, this would be a good opportunity for me to enroll, as well. We would have to finance ourselves, and that would be it. Now, we had a plan.

We began saving in earnest, putting the hefty sum of one thousand dollars per month into a new investment vehicle called an RRSP. We lived on one salary, as I was back working at the high school, and our house was mortgage-free. Dennis handed in his resignation, effective June 30, 1976. My job ended on the same day. For the next two months, Dennis made pots like a man possessed. The firings were grand, and boxes of pottery stacked up in the little summer kitchen *cum* storage shed. A replacement for Dennis was hired at the Penitentiary. His replacement, also a graduate of the art college, had been an acquaintance when Dennis was at school there. A short time later, we learned he had been fired for trafficking drugs. Life on the other side of the bars is not a good career choice.

The Banff Recreation Department advertised their art sale. Off we



BOTTLE  
14" HIGH  
CONE 9 REDUCTION  
c 1974  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST



JAR  
10" HIGH  
CONE 9 REDUCTION  
c 1976  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

went, this time, with functional pottery. We set-up in the school, and on opening day, people were lined up outside. Dennis and I ran out of stock by the end of the first day. Our biggest hit was a little bowl priced at three dollars, each. Now what? A panic phone call to my parents in Calgary sent them off to Drumheller late at night to collect more work from the little shed that was our storehouse. I jumped in the car in the morning and headed to Calgary to be back with the new stock in time for opening at ten. We had a huge financial success. At the end of two days, we had sold a thousand dollars. It was on Sunday evening that two elegant ladies approached us. They asked Dennis if he'd like to sell his work through their newly opened craft gallery called Gallery Three, located on Tenth Street – almost in the shadow of the bridge where Dennis painted his life-altering picture. “You bet,” he said with a big grin, and so began our most successful gallery affiliation, ever.

Now, our most difficult decision, and the biggest leap of faith in each other, was made. We decided to sell our little house. We weren't coming back. This little house, our first home, Dennis' first studio; everything created by Dennis' hand; giving it all up, was gut-wrenching. We didn't advertise. A teacher from the Drumheller High School simply announced she wanted to buy it. So, at the end of August, packing up the comfortable life we had made together, we headed into Calgary for the start of university at the beginning of September. It was tearful for me; Dennis never uttered a word, but I know how much he dislikes turmoil. I knew he was breaking up, inside.

Dennis and I rented a one bedroom apartment at Singer Gardens on University Drive, walking distance to University. We arrived with the rental truck, only to find that we had way too much stuff to fit. We had to drag the boxes we couldn't get into the apartment, back into the rental truck and, in desperation, deliver them to my parents' door.

The next day, Dennis and my dad set about building a storage shed in their backyard to house our overflow. We had no idea we had so much stuff, and I don't know what we would have done without their generosity.

On the September long weekend, newly settled, or perhaps I should say, resettled in Calgary, Dennis and I accompanied Susan and Richard Crack on our first hiking excursion to Wilcox Pass. Susan had started a Master's of Science program in biology, and she was studying specific flora in the pass. We camped at the Columbia Icefields and hiked up the pass in the morning. We lunched in a beautiful meadow. A few other adventurers were there, including a family with a small child. He was splashing his feet in the freezing cold, mountain stream and screaming with joy! Along the way, we were passed by a charming, elderly man all decked out in lederhosen. We watched as he came striding across the valley, and then proceed to pass us, like he was having a casual stroll. It was just the change of pace we needed to brace our minds in advance of the coming academic year.

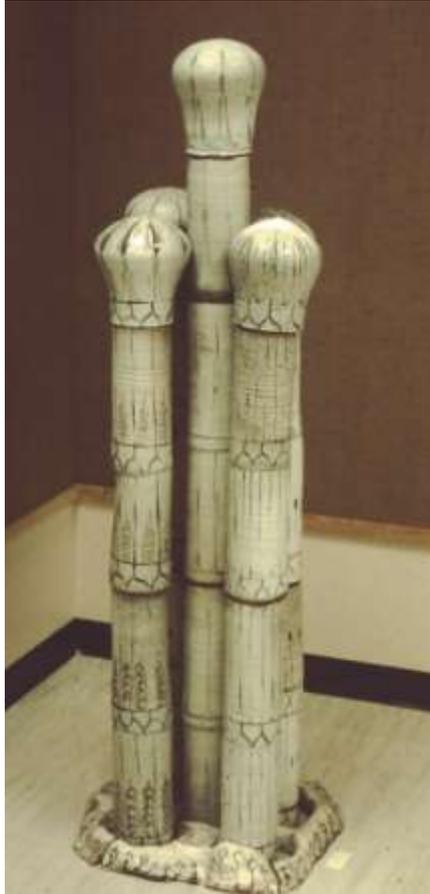
## CHAPTER 5

### ART ON THE TWELFTH



For Dennis, the start of university was on a Tuesday night. It was a third year art history class on Baroque art taught by Dr. David Bershada. Bershada prided himself on knowing all the students, and when he spotted Dennis he asked who he was and where he studied. When Dennis replied, “the Art College,” David sniffed and said, “Well, I don’t know what they teach there, but it’s not art history. I’d advise you to drop the class.”

Dennis came home that night after this three-hour ordeal, and collapsed on the couch. He was devastated by the teacher’s comments. He had just given up a good paying job, sold his house, and started a class that instructor had just told him to quit. Why? He was told he couldn’t possibly succeed with “only” art college training. Hoping to drop the class altogether, the next morning Dennis discovered that art history classes were required courses. To make matters worse, only those taught by Bershada fit his schedule. Determined not to spend another miserable night, Dennis made an appointment with the instructor. After their conversation, David softened his tone. Classes went well, as Dennis’ well-honed, visual skills stood him in good stead. After these “growing pains,” and the



GRASS  
72" HIGH  
CONE 9 STONEWARE  
UNIVERSITY of CALGARY  
1977



TREE TRUNKS  
20" X 32"  
CONE 10 REDUCTION  
UNIVERSITY of CALGARY  
c 1977  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

exam, his perceptive analysis of the Baroque art style saw Dennis finishing the term with a B plus. He had successfully won over Bershad's opinion of his art history background. Dennis took other classes from Bershad, and never had any further angst. As an artist, he had the training necessary to understand what he saw portrayed in the artwork. As an experienced painter, Dennis knew what he was looking at, and understood the artist's decision-making processes.

So, thus started Dennis' two year studies in ceramics and pottery at the University of Calgary, and believe it or not, the studios were actually on the twelfth floor of the Social Sciences tower.

Dennis has never been driven to seek acceptance from his peers. So, unlike many of his colleagues who sport extensive exhibition records on their curriculum vitae, often like trophies on a charm bracelet, Dennis has never made a concerted effort to participate in national and international ceramic exhibitions. Nor does he submit his work to the often suspect jury process that is usually a prerequisite to these events. However, in 1976 a glorious piece – a large hand-built owl - was accepted into a major national ceramics show. The 1976 National Ceramics Exhibition was a flag-ship event for western Canadian potters. It opened in the newly completed Glenbow Museum and gallery. However, it was how the inspiration for the owl came about that was, beyond a doubt, Muse-inspired.

Early one morning, in that semi-conscious state between dreams and sleep, in the realm that is reality and non-reality, Dennis slipped into a vivid state of dream consciousness. In the dream, he was in a large white room with black ceilings. A large crowd was assembled, and Dennis moved through the people, arriving in front of a pedestal. On the pedestal, there stood a large ceramic owl. Instinctively, Dennis knew he had created the sculpture. Telling no one about the dream, as soon as he was able, Dennis went into his studio, and without any

hesitation, he hand-built the creature from the image in his mind's-eye, all in just a matter of twenty minutes. The mystical element of this inspiration came about well before the Glenbow Museum was ever built, or the call for entries had ever been issued. Of course, we were at the opening night event at the Glenbow for the launch of the exhibition. Here was the white room with a black ceiling, and sitting on a pedestal, just as he had dreamed, was his owl. The only thing missing was the crowd. It was déjà vu for Dennis.

All during this time, Dennis was busy selling work through Gallery Three, and working his way through non-studio courses including an anthropology class and an English class. It was 1976 and the International Year of the Woman. An English class, advertised as "Women in Literature," was taught by Judith Sloman. On the first day of class, there were three men and about sixty women in attendance. Within three weeks, these numbers had dwindled to one guy (guess who) and about twenty women. Judith was a feminist, but she was also blatantly anti-male. The women in the class were more put off by her behaviour than Dennis, but he took to submitting papers using only his initial and last name. Enduring an antagonistic instructor was a very hard lesson for Dennis. Long after graduating, Dennis learned that Sloman had died. Perhaps her bitterness and patently negative attitude to life was something brought about by her illness.

The Alberta Potters Association (APA) was created in May 1970 to facilitate sponsorship of the International Ceramics Symposium in 1973. While living in Drumheller, Dennis was elected Calgary regional representative, to replace Santo Mignosa, a ceramics professor on sabbatical from the University of Calgary. Dennis remained the Calgary representative while enrolled in university, contributing articles on special topics that were published in the Association's newsletter, "Contact." Articles ranged from a descriptive piece about the Little Gallery at the university, to reports



PLATE  
18" DIAMETER  
CONE 10 REDUCTION  
UNIVERSITY of CALGARY  
c 1977



PLATE  
18" DIAMETER  
CONE 10 REDUCTION  
UNIVERSITY of CALGARY  
c 1977

on archaeological excavations at the ancient Meroe site in Sudan. At the APA annual general meeting in 1976, Dennis was elected treasurer, serving in that capacity until his departure for graduate school in August 1978.

While serving in his capacity as area representative, Dennis was approached by Archie Key regarding the establishment of a public space for artists to show their work. The Glenbow Museum was using the Memorial Public Library as storage, and the City of Calgary decided to refurbish the building, turning the main floor back into a working library. The lower floor was designated for meeting rooms. The upper floor was under consideration for exhibition space, as the main library was continually receiving requests for exhibitions, and they had no real, practical space for this purpose. Mr. Key had a long history with the arts in Calgary, and he envisioned the space to be used by small organizations, like the APA, for exhibitions of their members' artwork. The building was built with funds from the Carnegie Foundation, and its structure is neo-Classical in design. Using his special talents for making a great idea, a reality, Archie pulled together a consulting group consisting of interested parties that included Dennis, and the Muttart Gallery became a reality. As an organization, the APA and its members, have made good use of the space for its exhibitions.

The studio instructor for ceramics at the university was Vic Brosz. Dennis did a series of murals, using garden themes which were all eventually sold at Gallery Three. Dennis also created a series of jugged plates which were heavily textured, giving the surface a very "geological" treatment, reminiscent of hills in the Drumheller Valley. In fall and winter, Dennis also had to take a second studio class, and he opted for sculpture which gave him a chance to use other materials, including aluminum. The year flew by, and at the end of April, Dennis and I were out looking for summer employment.

For May and June, Dennis rented studio space from Santo Mignosa where he worked hard to replenish the stock that he brought along from Drumheller. Dennis fired Santo's big gas kiln, but was always just a little leery about it. He never left it unattended, and one night, while sleeping on the floor of the studio so he was not too far away from it, Dennis awoke to the sound of flames. Leaping up, Dennis grabbed the slip bucket (a slurry of water and clay) and threw its contents up into the rafters, putting out the fire that had started in the chimney. Badly shaken by the experience, Dennis and Santo examined the damage the next day, and Dennis discovered that the chimney had been steadily deteriorating over time. The inner liner had finally collapsed and turned sideways during his firing. The liner should have been stainless steel, but it was not. That was enough of that. By now, Dennis had his stock so he opted to spend the next two months driving a delivery truck for AlSCO Carleton, the door and window manufacturer where my dad worked. The manager was ever so sorry when he went back to school as he said Dennis was the best driver they ever had – even if he clipped off the sign from the truck box when travelling down the extremely narrow Bowness Bridge, which is now strictly relegated to pedestrian traffic.

We had put our name onto a waiting list for university housing, and wonders of wonders, we were notified that we had a place ready for us in the fall. We enlisted the help of Alison and Christopher Johnson for the move. Ali and Chris are from Britain, and we met through Susan and Richard. They had been visitors to our house when we were still in Drumheller. Christopher was taking his Master's of Science in zoology, and gave us the fright of our lives when he inserted himself deep into the mouth of a coyote's den. Canadians never do that! Now, they were our neighbours in Singer Gardens.

My mom and dad also arrived to help, and we managed to empty our

small apartment which was still stuffed with books, furniture and other household goods that didn't fit into the storage shed. We were exhausted by the end of the move, and fell into bed at midnight. At seven the next morning, there was a loud knock at the door. University maintenance people insisted on entry as they had orders to paint one frigging wall, and of course, it was the one with all the boxes piled against it. Anyway, our new space included a basement, which we promptly took over to store pottery, and I unearthed our little copper enamelling kiln which we put to use making pendants and pins for sale at the student Christmas sale. Again, Dennis sold about a thousand dollars. We felt positively rich as we hadn't touched any of the funds put away from the sale of our house.

That fall, Dennis and I got special permission to take an advanced level archaeology class from Dr. Jane Kelley. Jane is a specialist in Native American, south western archaeology, and it was in her class that we also met the eminent, Professor Peter Shinnie. Professor Shinnie was the chief archaeologist in charge of the excavations at Meroe. He was also a renowned Egyptologist. The class was about ceramics in archaeology, and components of Dennis' special project were purchased by the department. My love affair with the Archaeology Department continued through my working career in Research Services. Many years down the road, a couple walked into our Naramata studio, and we discovered he had been a graduate student on excavations at Meroe with Professor Shinnie. It was this visitor who informed me my beloved professor was dead. Yes, on that day, I knew the world is round.

By now, Dennis had taken to academic studies, and began exploring the possibility of continuing on with a Master's degree. Liz Mould, a friend and the university's glaze technologist, suggested Dennis contact the University of Houston. She had heard the university had just established a program, and that perhaps, Dennis might find it

challenging, there. When Dennis tried to find details about the program, he couldn't find out any information, so Liz personally contacted Huey Beckham, the head of the program. She discovered that, in fact, he was still in the planning stages. However, if he actually had an application from an interested student that would, definitely, help him make the case to his department head.

Classes at the University of Calgary ended in April 1978. In the lead-up to his graduation, Dennis had created a delicate wine goblet to be part of the work he submitted for his final show. The goblet was in two pieces, with the glaze creating the bond between the stem and the cup. Dennis had very carefully set his prize work into the kiln and left. The next day, after the firing was cool enough to unload, he discovered that his pieces were all off-centre. He asked around to find out what happened, and a fellow student sheepishly confessed that he was the one who moved the work in order to get his pieces into the firing. The inconsiderate jerk hadn't bothered to take the care needed to realign the pieces properly. Needless to say, the goblets couldn't be included, as planned.

A studio requirement was to have a review of one's work by three faculty members. On the day of Dennis' review, the first faculty member to show up was Vic Brosz, head of the Department of Art and a pottery instructor. He was so intoxicated, he was just about dysfunctional. The second reviewer was Will Gordon, who arrived late. The third, Santo Mignosa, never showed. In Santo's defense, someone likely forgot to inform him about the review. Thus so, Dennis' final undergraduate year, ended. He was pronounced the recipient of his holy grail, the Bachelor of Fine Arts degree.

In May, Dennis rented studio space from a friend, and fellow potter, Dave Settles at Ceramics Canada. He produced about twenty thousand dollars worth of product in four months. No word from

Houston. By now it was mid-August, so we began making enquires as to the status of his application. A week before classes were to commence at the University of Houston, Dennis was advised, informally, that he had been accepted. We went into overdrive. As I was still registered at the University of Calgary, we were still in student housing. We packed up our apartment and took everything down to my parents' basement. Bless them! We phoned the border crossing at Sweetgrass, and advised them that we were on our way to cross into the United States without any documentation to confirm that Dennis was accepted as a student. Would we have any trouble? They said, "Come right along." Imagine doing that now!

We left Calgary on a Friday, and got as far as Billings, Montana. Every hotel and motel was full because of a cattlemen's convention, but somehow we managed to find a room in a flea bag place called, "The Custer Hotel." It was so ancient that we didn't doubt for a minute that Custer had stayed there – probably his horse, too. The next day was a blur and the night after that. Around ten o'clock, we pulled off the road at a truck stop, somewhere between Dallas and Houston. After all, we figured we didn't really want to arrive in Houston late at night. The room we found was about as close to a "Bates Motel" as you can imagine. If something had happened to us, no one would ever have found us!

## CHAPTER 6

### FIRE IN THE ANNEX



In the early morning of August 29, 1978, after a truck stop breakfast, we drove down I-45 into Houston, right into the first parking lot we could find at the university, and set off to find the art department. The temperature was ninety-eight degrees Fahrenheit and one hundred percent humidity. It was like hitting a wet wall. We finally stumbled into the art department, and they called Mr. Huey Beckham, head of the ceramics department, and Dennis' graduate supervisor, to collect us. Huey took one look at us, and immediately packed us to the first fast-food joint he could find so we could get something cold to drink. After that, he took us back to campus and over to the ceramics department which was housed in an old World War II airplane hangar – perfect, or what? The sculpture and architecture departments were co-habitants and the ideal neighbours.

Huey graciously invited us to stay with him and his family for a few days, until we could get a place of our own. He loaded us into his air conditioned truck, and off we went to collect a son who was fishing “on the Gulf.” Ah, we thought; cool air at last. Well, we stepped out of the truck, and we were blasted by an even hotter breeze; the gulf was an unhealthy looking muddy yellow, and there were jelly fish

swimming near the surface. God, where are we? Huey's family was a little shy, but very pleasant to us. His wife, Carolyn, two teenage boys (Eric and Huey Jr.) and a Doberman made up the welcoming committee. Huey took special care to introduce us to the dog, as it was trained as a guard dog, and it could really do serious damage. Huey told us that the dog, didn't particularly like black people – interesting since his owners were African-Americans, but we saw the dog in action one day when a black student and friend-of-the-family, came to visit. The dog snarled and carried on like it was going to attack. Huey had to lock it in a back room before the poor fellow could come into the house. Prejudice in the animal kingdom, or was the dog just a red-neck, clothed in fur?

On Tuesday, September 5, Dennis and I went our separate ways on campus. He, to register; I, to beg, for admission. I had left the University of Calgary after my second year, and was now in Texas without any university program to go to. It took me the rest of the week to cajole and/or generally brow-beat, a poor admissions officer into letting this foreigner into school. Dennis, in the meantime, had been going through the wringer. Line up here; no, that's wrong, line up there. It was the ultimate in the lack of communication and academic bureaucracy gone amok. By the time Dennis was asked to smile for his ID badge, it wasn't his best "face" in the photograph.

Apartment hunting – Houston style: Huey really didn't know what to do with us since we were quite naive about the segregation of communities in Houston – Black poor; Hispanic poor, and worst of all, white poor. Please also bear in mind, cockroaches run rampant in all levels of housing, regardless of the socio-economic status, and cleanliness has absolutely no bearing. These creatures are even found in new construction. Our job was to just to keep them to a dull roar in our abode. After viewing a few absolutely, uninhabitable places, we managed to find a reasonably priced, one bedroom



SCULPTURE  
20" HIGH  
CONE 9 SALT GLAZE  
UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON  
c 1979  
PRIVATE COLLECTION

apartment on Fannin, half way between the Houston Astrodome and the hospital district. Huey seemed satisfied that we wouldn't be murdered in our beds. Public transportation was awkward, so we drove to school in the mornings, and I took the bus home as I finished earlier. I was usually the only white person on the bus, and I always made a point of getting off at the back door – good etiquette in Calgary, but in my opinion, just plain humble in a predominately black neighbourhood.

The hot, humid summers in Houston were daunting. Its semi-tropical environment was beautiful in the spring, fall and winter, albeit it became rainy in the winter, but still a welcome relief from the inevitable return of the heat. During our first Christmas in Houston, my mom and dad joined us at Christmas time. Dennis took ill during this time – suffering a relapse of the “flu-like symptoms” that have plagued him on and off throughout his adult life. He was sick enough to seek medical attention at St Luke's Hospital, but nothing was identified as the source of his illness. He remained afflicted until the late fall of 1979 when the symptoms cleared up on their own. The residual effect of 2-4-D; I wonder?

One of the underlying reasons for registering in Houston was that Dennis had some ideas about what he wanted to accomplish. Given the newness of the Master's program, Dennis felt that the distance from Alberta and new faces could give him a fresh perspective on his work. Huey's graduate instructor had been Carlton Ball, a man we had the pleasure of meeting in Alberta. In fact, Mr. Ball visited Alberta quite often, and we met him when he was a guest lecturer at one of the ceramic seminars held in the province during the late 1970's and in social settings, as well.

So, fall semester 1978 and winter semester 1979: at the beginning of the academic year of 1978, Dennis was left to explore and develop

ideas on his own. Not one to waste time, he began his work in earnest. The work he chose to execute was a series of twenty-two inch, jugged plates depicting elements of the landscape in opposition with one another. It was Dennis' intention to produce about two hundred pieces which, when shown together, would make a significant impact on the viewer by their depiction of the power of nature in the landscape. After producing about fifty plates out of his intended two hundred, Dennis' supervisor began to exhibit signs of discontent. Huey seemed, somehow, dissatisfied with the theme and the direction the plates were taking. In an oblique way, he hinted that he would not give Dennis a very good review during his interim evaluation. This sudden, negative feedback came after Dennis had been working for over a year on his concepts with little to no input, whatsoever. The lack of engagement and lateness with which advice was offered, should have been a tip-off for things to come.

For some reason, Huey seemed incapable of interacting on an intellectual and professional level with his most senior student. As a mature student, Dennis may have been as experienced as his teacher. However, the lateness with which Huey communicated his dissatisfaction put Dennis in a difficult position. He had to respond very quickly because he faced creating a whole new collection of work at a calibre worthy of favourable review. Was this a case of, "How high can you jump?" Falling back on old construction techniques, and what he felt were dated images (late 1960's when he was an ACA student), Dennis created a body of sculptural forms, many with salt glazed surface treatments, for the interim critique. These were all done within about a month, and his supervisor was very pleased. This left Dennis in a quandary; how to find a thematic pathway that would satisfy his desire to expand upon his creative energy and still live up to his supervisor's expectations.

During this first year of classes, Dennis made several acquaintances



DENNIS UNLOADING THE SALT KILN  
UNIVERSITY of HOUSTON  
c 1979



COVERED JAR  
18" HIGH  
CONE 9 SALT GLAZE  
UNIVERSITY of HOUSTON  
c 1979

among the undergraduates in ceramics and graduates in the painting, sculpture and jewellery disciplines, bearing in mind that Dennis was the lone graduate student in ceramics at this time. As neither Dennis nor I could work outside the university, we simply continued our studies straight through from the fall of 1978 and the winter of 1979. Then into the two condensed summer semesters of 1979, and back into the fall semester, with our eyes firmly fixed on April 1980 as our target for graduation. By doing this, I would be able to graduate at the same time as Dennis completed his program.

In the summer of 1979, Dennis dismantled a partially constructed kiln which someone had started, but had gotten beyond their capabilities to finish. He rebuilt the structure, and it became a fully functional salt kiln. On first blush, the partially constructed kiln looked like a daunting job to dismantle. Dennis went out to his car, and took out the car jack. Using a four by four he found in the kiln compound, he wedged it inside the kiln. The four by four stood vertically on top of the jack. He took a long pipe, put it on the handle of the car jack, and jacked away. There was a hellava noise, and the kiln came down in spectacular fashion. The noise created quite a ruckus that was heard inside. The undergraduate class came running outside with horrified looks on their faces, expecting to find Dennis buried under a pile of brick. Dennis, on the other hand, was standing on the other side of the compound, amid the settling dust; he had a satisfied look on his face – job well done! There was a look of total disbelief on the face of the original builder, who had taken a long, long, long time to get it to the stage that had just been demolished, in about five seconds. Not one brick was damaged, and all were reused in the construction of the new kiln, using a basic kiln design that had been used in Alberta for about twenty years. Dennis went down to the hardware store and got an odd collection of gas piping. Using a set of squirrel-cage blowers that he found stored in the ceramics studio, he constructed the burners for the kiln which were functional only



GROUP OF SPHERES ON 4X4 CEDAR  
24" DIAMETER (EACH)  
FUME FIRED  
UNIVERSITY of HOUSTON  
c 1980



## SPHERE

Were human beings created from clay?

Was the creator, a potter, imbuing the inanimate with life?

Sphere: organic, at one with the natural world.

A bond between art and nature,

A collaboration: organic and inorganic.

Mnemonic phrases, anchoring us to our origins.

Held fast in its form; the beginning of a universe.



FUMED SPHERE  
22" DIAMETER  
FUME FIRED  
UNIVERSITY of HOUSTON  
c 1980  
PRIVATE COLLECTION

because of the unlimited supply of natural gas. These burners were real gas hogs, and because the kiln was constructed of hard firebrick, it required lots of BTUs to heat it up. These babies did the job.

After a couple weeks, Dennis finished construction mid-day, and left for seminar class. By the time he returned, the undergraduates had completely stuffed the kiln with their own work, leaving no room for Dennis'. The, "little red hen" syndrome, indeed! Dennis quietly set about taking out enough pieces so he could put in some of his work. A sheepish group of students watched in silence, knowing full well they had "done him wrong." The first firing commenced. It was a success beyond anyone's expectations, and there was never a bad firing, thereafter. For good reason, salting was usually done at night. An interesting phenomenon is the side effect of the process. The by-product of hot sodium chloride is chlorine gas. A green cloud would roll across the campus parking lot and drift languidly across the highway. To this day, we think this effect was an improvement on the smell of greasy food coming out of the fast food joints nearby. It's fascinating that no one complained about the paint jobs on their cars. Was it likely, there were no bad effects? Only in Texas could one have contemplated, much less gotten away with, antics such as these in a major metropolitan area of a major city.

One Friday evening, at about ten o'clock, one of the Houston news channels announced the Annex Building at the University of Houston was on fire. Dennis leapt out of his chair. He could visualize all his work going up in smoke, plus he was wondering if the kilns were the cause of the disaster. We jumped in the car and made our way to campus as fast as we could go. We arrived there, parked, and made our way to the building which was surrounded by fire fighters who, by now, had the blaze under control. As mentioned, the Annex Building was an old World War II airplane hangar. All the graduate students were among the crowd that had gathered there. The centre section

of the hangar was completely filled with dense, black, billowing smoke.

Suddenly, out of the smoke came a large wooden sculptural piece which had been under construction for a commission. It was James Surles' work, and he was the sculpture instructor. He had commandeered his students to physically manhandle his massive edifice out of harm's way. The piece easily weighed a thousand pounds. It was longer than a telephone pole, with wooden projections that made the piece look like a porcupine – onus on pine. Needless to say, the instructor wasn't doing any heavy lifting, but he was as bristly as his piece. The students barely made it outside the doors before they had to drop it down on the ground where it sat with the rubble from the fire for at least three months. When it came time for clean-up, the maintenance department carted the sculpture off to the dump. The following day, Surles noticed his sculpture was missing. He cornered the hapless maintenance supervisor, and asked where his work was. The supervisor said, "It's gone to the dump." Next scene: Surles, a six foot, burly giant of a man, is hovering over a tiny, five foot tall, Mexican maintenance worker. He's yelling, "What do ya' mean, ya' took ART to the dump!!!" The word "ART" towered about ten feet tall. So, once again, the students were commandeered, and off they went in Surles' rickety old truck to reclaim, ART, from the dump. Alas, they returned empty handed. The piece was never recovered, and it remains only a memory of that fateful event. Indeed, dear reader, the sad tale had repeated itself.

The kilns were not the cause of the blaze; it was a bad roof over the electrical room, and the heavy rains had poured into the space and shorted out the electrical panels. The sculpture and painting departments moved out of the building, but the poor ceramics department had to stay because of all the specialized equipment that could simply not be moved. One would think this was a negative, but



SEVEN SPHERES ON CEDAR BASES  
12"DIAMETER (EACH)  
PRIMITIVE FIRED  
1980  
UNIVERSITY of HOUSTON

not so, the department craftily commandeered more space, and never gave it back when the other disciplines moved back into their completely renovated spaces.

Now, they say that, “What you don’t know can’t hurt you,” and that must have been true for us. Houston is located right in “Hurricane Alley,” but during our two years in this city, we never had more than a smattering of tropical storms and the occasional tornado. I say that so casually now. I know we came home with grocery bags with maps for tracking the hurricane’s location in the gulf, but we never did that. We never put aside water or extra food. Looking back on the potential destruction that these extreme weather conditions can cause, we were just lucky. We were always interested in our environment, but found most Houstonians couldn’t seem to “read” their skies. Actually, they knew very little about the flora and fauna in their city. We, too, got complacent. One afternoon, after dallying too long at an art supply store, we faced the forces of what would be deemed, a mild, tropical storm. The sky darkened very quickly, and we knew we needed to get moving. However, before we had gone more than a few blocks, we were in darkness, driving rain, trashing tree limbs, flying debris and rapidly rising water. A few more blocks, and the water lapped at the top of the car’s wheels. Dennis slowed to a crawl so we wouldn’t make waves and headed us into a small parking lot at the back of a building. It was lit and seemed to be on higher ground. We stayed there for a bit, feeling very unsafe, and thought we could strike out again for home. We managed only a short distance when we were cut off by flooded streets. We made a run for the parking lot at a 7-Eleven that fortuitously presented itself. It was quite clearly an island on high ground, and thank goodness it was there. We had no sooner parked when a city bus came ploughing through a flooded section of road, creating a wave that surely would have swamped us.

Also, unbeknownst to us, we had somehow managed to be living in the only apartment block that was built on reasonably high ground in our immediate area. We had one of the famous Houston bayous behind us. These are at least thirty feet deep, concrete lined channels, designed to cope with storm surges. We were told that Hurricane Andrew caused this one to overflow its banks, resulting in corpses floating out of the morgues, away from the hospitals and down Fannin. Urban legend – I don't know? Anyway, our apartment did get flooded a couple of times, due more to bad maintenance of the outside drains than the actual storm, itself. That resulted in new carpet for our apartment; cockroaches can tread water.

During this time, Dennis was befriended by an older, undergraduate student, Andrew, who lived in Galveston. Andrew was a "mature" student in chronological age, only. He was taken with Dennis' abilities, and invited him to build a kiln for him at his home. As payment for the work, we would be housed in the family motel, The Anchorage, situated right along the sea wall. Dennis and I jumped at the chance. Andrew's family was Greek, and their hospitality and kindness was very generous. The family, itself, was unusual. Papa was clearly the patriarch; Mama; the quintessential southern belle. It seemed to us that Papa, "knew people," and his exodus from Chicago to Houston must have been in lieu of whatever he did while in the construction industry in Chicago. Mama floated her days away in a Valium-induced haze. Papa had a room in the house especially stocked with "gifts" to be doled out to people when he was happy with their services. Dennis and I apparently fit that category, as we often became the recipients of expensive perfume and colognes. Andrew was innocuous; a boy in a man's body, forever seeking his father's approval and over indulged by his mother. Injured as a teenager during a football game, Andrew had a perpetual limp due to the poorly healed condition of his ankle. Thank goodness he was 4-F when it came to the draft. He drifted about, unemployable, part-time

student, and working as the short order cook in the Anchorage restaurant. Andrew had a younger brother, we only met once. He appeared to be a successful business man. At least, he was the only one, not on the family payroll. The middle brother was a nocturnal creature, and we were told he was the family's accountant. When we caught a glimpse of him one morning, he was carrying a gun case from his car. It's always the quiet ones, we told ourselves.

The first time Andrew came onto Dennis' radar, he never actually saw him, per se. Dennis walked into the middle of the clay preparation area, and all the students were sitting on the floor, sorting through a pile of wet clay. Dennis walked in, just as one of the students asked, "What are we looking for?" The response was, "Andrew's finger!" Dennis never did see the finger, he left. A few weeks later, Dennis got to know Andrew, and Andrew found out Dennis could build kilns.

Andrew was very competitive; the pieces he threw were large, and he was very aggressive in executing them. The space where he made his pots was also his weight lifting room. Because of his injury, he wasn't able to run or play sports to keep in shape. He decided, he needed his own kiln, and Dennis was just the guy to give him what he wanted. He wanted a kiln large enough to fire at least six pieces at one time. That firing chamber was twenty-eight inches wide, sixty inches high and ninety-six inches deep. Imagine how big the pots were. The kiln was built in the same way Andrew built pots – very competitively. He ferried the bricks; Dennis stacked them in place. The kiln materialized in two days. Dennis made eight, "knock-off" burners, based on Heritage designs; the orifices drilled bigger. They sucked the gas out of most of Texas when firing. The giant palm trees shook in the heat. Later on, Andrew decided to coat the exterior of the bricks with a synthetic waterproofing. Then, he decided to add a thin coat of refractory material. Needless to say, he

didn't tell Dennis about all the "doctoring" with this synthetic coating. So, when the refractory material started flaking off in great quantities, it was a total shock to both Dennis, and the technical representative, from A P Green. Later, when Dennis found out about the undercoating, he knew the problem could never be rectified. Before leaving Houston, Dennis built Andrew a second kiln for salt glazing. It was much smaller, only taking three pots at a time.

Because of our association with Andrew, Dennis and I spent several weekends, free-of-charge, in a reasonably nice motel, right on the Gulf of Mexico. We enjoyed many lovely meals cooked by Andrew, and many rum and cokes poured by his dear old dad. We know that the parents are now gone, but they gave us many delightful memories, including a lasting image of the perpetually decorated, and thoroughly dusty, Christmas tree in their family room. It seemed, to me, should the lights have ever been lit on the tree; the whole thing would have turned into one gigantic fireball.

Galveston has a beautiful historical district, and we wandered the streets, photographing the elegant mansions that looked like they are dreaming of the Antebellum south to rise again. This was also the first time Dennis and I saw mausoleums and graves above ground. Given the high water table, people could not be buried in the same manner to which we were accustomed. We also visited with another student who lived in Galveston. Her husband was studying medicine and was in his residency there. She introduced us to "Moose," a grizzled old fellow who ran an equally grizzled beer and sandwich place in a rather unsavoury spot, right downtown. He had it all figured out; he was called, "Moose," and he called everyone else, "Moose," so there was never any confusion about names. His noontime lunch crowd was remarkable. The phone never stopped ringing for two solid hours with orders for sandwich specials, "to go."

I suppose, this is probably a good place to talk about how important “student mix,” is to the success of art students. At both the ACA and the University of Calgary, students and instructors actively engaged in an exchange of ideas, even including what was happening in their personal lives. These conversations often acted as informal seminars. In particular, Dennis remembers Will Gordon, a sessional instructor at the University of Calgary, hired for his industry experience and plaster mould-making expertise. Will made a point of initiating discussion with his students at the beginning of every class. These discussions could be about anything, and the time spent in this engaging environment resulted in a sense of common purpose and camaraderie.

In contrast, the University of Houston was really an odd assortment of students. The majority of undergraduates taking ceramics were mature women who left class and hurried home to lives outside the university. These matrons, along with two Vietnam vets markedly damaged by their experience in the war, one fellow who sashayed in and out of the studio when he felt fit, plus a couple of southern belles, made up the rag-tag student body. Add to this mix, an instructor with stunted communication skills, and the result was a group of students who were never drawn into any significant form of discussion. As a result, a sense of fellowship never developed. Probably because Dennis and I were older students, we were “adopted” by one or two of the married students, and they graciously included us in their family Christmas and Thanksgiving celebrations. They were concerned we were so far from home. Texas hospitality was hard at work, and we thoroughly enjoyed ourselves.

Beverly Thompson regularly invited us to her home, and we spent a weekend with her son and his wife at a family cottage in Louisiana. It was our first, and only, venture into Cajun country, and it was really an experience. Built of Cypress wood, the little cottage will never rot.

At least one hundred years old, the lovely old house sat right on the edge of the swamp, and it had a resident beehive in the walls. Or, could those have been rats we heard? Our journey took us past Lafayette, Baton Rouge and across the Atchafalaya River. Spanish moss dripped from the trees. There was an eerie sense of decay, and something “not quite safe” about this excessively green environment. Even the water was greenish in colour and very still, giving the impression that something was lurking just below the surface. That weekend, we met a Cajun family renowned for their fresh pork sausage. Made with rice and onion, it had to be eaten very quickly as it contained no preservatives. It was delicious, and we’ve had nothing like it since. The family was thrilled to meet a couple of Canadians, and spoke a kind of pidgin French.

Phyllis’ kiln: One of the mature female students asked Dennis to help her construct a kiln. She had no money, and no knowledge of kiln construction. We arrived at her home in the heart of red neck suburbia. She had access to a large amount of clay, wheat husks and silica sand. Dennis constructed a catenary arch form, mixed the product, made bricks and laid them in place. In 2013, the design would probably appear in Harrowsmith or some other “back-to-nature” publication. Phyllis and Dennis went to the local hardware store, and purchased some odds and ends of pipe from which Dennis built four burners, right on the spot. Regrettably, Dennis has no idea how this design worked as it was never fired during the time he was in Houston. Sometime after we were back in Canada, Phyllis sent him a photograph, and to Dennis’ relief, given the climate in the region, the kiln still seemed to be in good shape.

In November 1979, Canada was thrust onto the front page of American news. Living in Houston, Dennis and I were startled to learn about Canada’s role in secreting six American diplomats out of Iran. As an undergraduate, I had more interaction with the ethnic mix

of foreign students at the university, and I remember the hushed voices of the female Iranian students as they told me about trying, unsuccessfully, to call home. They were so afraid they would be expelled by the US government, and they feared what returning home would mean for their freedom. Most were in western dress, and the men, in particular, were enjoying their American lifestyle.

A day or two after the news about the Iran “affair” hit the airwaves, Dennis and I were travelling along one of Houston’s freeways. Now, in a city where individuals are known to carry guns in their glove compartments, it can be a little disconcerting to have a car pull up right beside you. It slowed down. We had kept our Alberta license plates current, and we had a decal of a Canadian flag with its distinctive maple leaf on the back of the car. The occupants of the car beside us began waving, and smiling, and pointing to our flag. “Oh Canada, with glowing hearts, we stand on guard for thee.” Wow, did we ever feel patriotic. Down the entire length of the promenade outside the very posh Astoria on Main, the red maple leafed flags of Canada fluttered in the breeze as Houston saluted its neighbour.

By the time one reaches Thanksgiving in the USA, Christmas planning gets underway very shortly, thereafter. The final semester, which began in January, loomed large for Dennis. After completing the work for his interim evaluation and getting a good review, Dennis had only about four months left in his program. He reckoned that he had to create large pieces that would have an impact on the viewer. If he was going to get through his program and graduate in a timely fashion, these pieces had to be dried and fired with an absolute minimum of loss, using some sort of spectacular, surface treatment.

Here, I must add how we were financing our education and living expenses at the University of Houston. Before leaving Calgary, Dennis produced about twenty thousand dollars in functional pottery

that he boxed, labelled and stored in Frank and Norma Oliva's garage in Varsity. Poor Frank figured he'd never get his garage back. Norma, former co-owner of Gallery Three, had split with her business partner and was now operating under the name, The Galleria. Norma, our fairy godmother, was faithfully selling the work and sending us a monthly cheque. With careful budgeting, we were able to live on these funds, and we still hadn't touched any savings.

Anyway, back to the studio. The Muse spoke and inspiration came. Dennis set about creating hand-built spheres. With care, he says, spheres are easy to dry, thereby eliminating the first hurdle. He devised a clever method whereby the spheres were dried in a cradle made of canvas, thus allowing the object to be turned. The spheres were gently "whacked" with a specially made, large wooden paddle to release the tension that builds up during the drying process. Thereby, cracking is prevented. Not a single piece was lost during drying. Speed and success; all absolutely essential if this tight timeline was to work. The very first attempt was ambitious because of its size. So, a method had to be found to support the work while firing. A large barrel of sand sat in the corner of the kiln compound, and Dennis simply scooped up enough so that he could nestle the sphere into it. To his surprise, when he took the piece out of the kiln, it had a phenomenal, pastel coloured, fumed effect on the surface. Voila! Now, another problem solved. No fooling around with glazes and the possibility of failure. Fire once, product finished. Done!

Dennis asked where the sand came from, and Huey said "the beach." Dennis scurried off to the library to find out what was in "beach sand," and found a preponderance of sulphates and phosphates. Dennis then visited the chemistry department to find out where he could get these magical compounds. Whoever he talked to said, "Oh, we have a bunch of 'old chemicals' right over here, and we've been trying to figure out what to do with them because they are all, way out-of-date

for our needs.” Perfect for this potter, and Dennis headed out the door with his arms full of exotic, toxic waste. No charge.

Taking each individual phosphate and sulphate, Dennis mixed them into sand, carefully pouring the sand/chemical mixture around the clay piece which was inside a sagger specially constructed for this purpose. The first firing was spectacular! Now, Dennis was really rocking. He had a successful construction technique, a seamless drying technique and a firing technique that not only fired the work, but it applied surface features; all were fool-proof. Could a graduate student in ceramic arts ever ask for more?

The theme Dennis had attempted in his plate series remained foremost in his mind, and it became the underpinning for the creation of these spherical forms – the force of nature in the environment. Metaphorically and physically, Dennis understood that there is a force inside the sphere, and a force outside the sphere. Conceptually and physically, these inner and outer forces push against one another. The only interface between the two realities is the ceramic shell. This is also true of the simple pot. Its walls protect what is inside from the environment that is outside. The sphere, therefore, has not moved away from the metaphorical understanding of a basic, clay pot. Production of these pieces continued until Dennis created about thirty-five pieces. Now, he could pick and choose what he wanted to show in his graduating exhibition.

Unfortunately, there was a huge lack of natural inspiration in Houston’s urban environment. If one wanted to use the derelict conditions of the inner city in the 1970’s then this would have been a great resource. To find inspiration rooted in the natural realm, Dennis had to, once again, draw upon his past experiences including his childhood in rural Alberta, his forays in the mountains while at ACA, and his former home on the edge of the Drumheller badlands.



DENNIS  
UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON  
1979



SPHERE  
20" DIAMETER  
FUMED FIRED AND BURNISHED  
1980  
UNIVERSITY of HOUSTON  
ENTRY FOR ALBERTA CERAMICS SHOWCASE

Undergraduate students registered in the ceramics program were physically located in a space adjacent to the graduate studio, but still close enough for interaction. One day, Dennis noticed a student struggling with a process. In fact, he noticed that she had been struggling with this particular problem for a few weeks, and suggested another approach to eliminate the technical problem, completely. The visibly relieved student proceeded to try out the new approach, and her pieces moved right along. A day or so later, Dennis' supervisor noticed the change, and asked her what she was doing. The student said, "This is something Dennis' suggested." Well, Huey went ballistic. Cornering Dennis in the open graduate studio space; he spent the next two hours berating him for advising the student. He "informed" Dennis that he had no business interjecting his advice into the classroom.

A professional teacher comprehends the power differential that exists between student and teacher. As Dennis' graduate supervisor, Beckham totally misused his authority that day. His actions became particularly spiteful when he cast dispersions on Dennis' letters of reference. At the end of the episode, Dennis had absolutely no idea of where he stood. But, one thing did become clear, though. In the course of his tirade, Beckham revealed a great deal about his own insecurities as a member of a visible minority employed in the Houston university-system. That said, the impact of Beckham's behaviour, and the hurt he inflicted, were never forgotten; it just dulled over time. Of course, all the undergraduates were aware of what was going on, as they could hear the dressing down that Huey was dishing out to Dennis. The student Dennis helped was in a state of shock and very agitated. However, it was intercession by another graduate student that finally toned Beckham down. She told him to his face to "chill out." Elizabeth Polifka had been admitted to the graduate program in ceramics. She was about forty-five years old, the wife of a NASA rocket scientist (really), a mother, and about the

same age as Huey. Far less vulnerable than Dennis, she told Huey she was appalled by his mistreatment of Dennis. The next day, Dennis checked his file for his reference letters. Santo Mignosa had written one of the strongest recommendations one could ever hope to receive. Now, having read the real content in his letters of reference, Dennis had to figure out how he was going to function until the end of his program, knowing this side of Beckham.

Elizabeth remained his steadying force. One day she arrived to class with a mischievous smile on her face. Tucked in her bag was a sample of NASA's ceramic tiles that had been designed to protect the space shuttle from heat during re-entry. She said they were going to be "glued onto" the shuttle's underbelly. Dennis said, prophetically as it turned out, "that's not going to work." Of course, the tiles were not to leave NASA's labs. Elizabeth's husband would have been in big trouble if it had become known that one had been removed from the lab, let alone taken to school for "show and tell." An elementary description of the tiles is that they consisted of a honey-comb of tungsten-type alloy; about one and one-half inches deep, stuffed with high temperature, ceramic fibre.

So, the big push was on to complete the degree requirements. At this particular time at the University of Houston, graduate students in studio arts had to satisfy four examination requirements. These were: the graduating exhibition, an oral exam, a written exam, and a thesis. When it came time to make arrangements for space in the university art gallery, the curator was astounded. "Are you ready for that already? There's no space in the gallery for at least a year!" Taken aback by this cavalier response, Dennis asked if his show absolutely had to be held in the university art gallery, thinking he could find exhibition space somewhere else. He soon learned all suitable alternatives were also booked. What to do? Obviously, he was not going to find a space in a conventional gallery. So, typical of

Dennis, he began thinking outside the box, or gallery, as it were. Given the powerful, organic nature of the pieces, it occurred to him that a garden setting might work. Sure enough, a fellow student suggested a garden owned by her close friends, Bill and Charlotte Randolph. They were absolutely thrilled to host such a unique undertaking. Plans moved ahead once again. Invitations were issued to fellow students and academic staff. A special ceramic punch bowl was made in keeping with the garden theme, together with small drinking cups to match. A special punch was concocted. The works were installed. Opening day was Sunday, April 13, 1980, and the pieces looked fantastic in this natural setting. All who saw it, were completely captivated. The exhibition was entitled, "Ceramic Form as an Expression." After all this effort, Dennis felt let-down. Apart from his immediate supervisor and Val Link, another member of his review committee, not one other academic staff member showed up. The absence of the Chair of the graduate programs especially annoyed Beckham. A number of graduate students put in an appearance. On the other hand, the Randolph's friends and neighbours came out in full force, filling Dennis' guest book with strong words of support.

A week later, it came time for the oral component of the degree requirements. In preparation for this, Dennis, once again, put up his show. Minus the garden, the work was displayed in one of the empty studio spaces so the examiners would have a point of reference. For comparison, a slide presentation, to show the pieces as they had appeared in the garden, was also given. The format for the oral examination permitted any instructor from the Department of Art to come and to ask the graduating student questions. These questions were not restricted to the content of their show. This time, two instructors, besides Dennis' immediate supervisor, showed up. They were Val Link, the jewellery instructor, who was part of Dennis' graduating committee, and the previously absent, graduate chairman.

Mr. Link was quite complimentary, but didn't really ask any major questions. The Chair of the graduate programs did a quick walk-about, stopping by Dennis, and asked, "This is very nice, but what does it have to do with pottery?"

Dennis was all ready. He launched into a detailed explanation of what he had been trying to do in the last two years regarding the shapes and the metaphors within nature. Dennis answered, "The sphere is one component of the pot – the body. It is the yin and yang found in nature, and the shell of the pot separates the two." He was about to go on, but the Chair turned on his heel and left the room. Dennis was left standing with his jaw nearly hitting the floor. He had no sense of whether he was a complete failure or absolutely brilliant. As far as ever having anything to have to do with the man again; it simply never happened. It was as though he vanished. The show was summarily dismantled at the end of the day, and other than a comment from Beckham that Dennis had met the oral examination component of his degree requirements, nothing further was said.

Prior to launching into his own thesis research, Dennis visited the university's archives to suss out previous submissions from graduates in the art department. A number lacked the degree of academic standard and professional presentation that Dennis felt was required at this level. Some were not much longer than an undergraduate paper. Dennis resolved to raise the bar in his discipline. Dennis' written thesis consists of three parts: what he was trying to do; how he was going to do it; and a historical overview to ground how he arrived at this stage in his work. The historical section was a compilation of the research completed for a series of special projects undertaken for art history course requirements. The technical section was a collection of drawings and explanations of the techniques used to create the work. He modelled his drawings on the style found in Bernard Leach's publications. Unfortunately, for

Dennis, this choice in drawing-style didn't satisfy his supervisor. So, once again, he found himself re-doing work to meet his supervisor's "ideals." As to why Dennis created what he did, he simply edited notes compiled over his two years in the program. I was entrusted to type the thesis, and we wanted to make the work look as good as we could. We borrowed an electric typewriter from the department so the type would be of better quality than we could produce with our old manual typewriter. Boy, what we could have done with word processing – except it hadn't been invented yet! Looking back, it seems like we weren't that far removed from quill and paper.

Dennis used resources from the Universities of Houston and Rice libraries. The more current developments in pottery, especially from southern California, were extracted from press clippings in the Los Angeles and San Francisco newspapers. However, one scholarly publication stood out from the others. Ironically, Dennis had discounted this work when he first saw it in Calgary, but it became pivotal in creating a vocabulary whereby Dennis could more succinctly describe his own creative endeavours. Philip Rawson's book simply entitled, "Ceramics," was a real discovery. Why hadn't he previously valued its content? Dennis supposes it simply took time for the author's insights to become relevant in his own work. Later in Dennis' career, he had an opportunity to hear Rawson speak at the Banff Centre when he was a guest lecturer there. He met Rawson after the lecture for a brief conversation, and Dennis says there was a greater exchange of ideas in that brief meeting than in months of study at the post secondary level. Rawson's book went back into print when it became popularized in Garth Clark's publication, "A Century of Ceramics in the United States." It was Rawson's lucid discussion of ceramics as an element linking human culture that gave Dennis the vernacular he needed to respond to the Chair's question, "What does this have to do with pottery?" Now then, Dennis had to have three readers, and those he chose were: his

immediate supervisor, Huey Beckham; Val Link, head of the jewellery department, and Sharon Patton, an art historian, specializing in African art. Regrettably, before she was able to read his work, Sharon took employment elsewhere. So, Dennis asked another art historian, Dr. Peter Guenther, a European modern art specialist, to replace her. A draft of the thesis was circulated for commentary, and as it made its final rounds among his committee members, Dennis went to check on its whereabouts. When Dennis checked his mail box, he found the thesis had been signed off by all three of his committee members. The department head, Mr. George Bunker had no hesitation in giving his final sign-off, and the thesis was now turned over to the dean's office at the College of Humanities and Fine Arts for final endorsements and binding; one copy to be sent to the library for posterity.

Who knew what was in store for this humble thesis? It turns out that it became mired in the incompetence of the dean's office. We were back in Canada before we began to wonder what had happened to our copies of the thesis. Upon contacting the faculty office, they admitted they had no idea where it was, but promised to "get back to us." Initial inquiries started in July 1980. We asked again in November, and finally, Dennis had to contact Elizabeth to investigate matters. In February 1981, Elizabeth wrote to say that it seemed Dennis' thesis was "among others" that were never sent to the bindery. On March 10, 1981, the dean personally wrote, "Your thesis has now been sent to the bindery," and apologized profusely, throwing full blame for the oversight on inept staff. After a few more months, our copies showed up. Finalizing matters had taken exactly one year after the original submission to the dean's office.

Meanwhile: the final hurdle. The written exam was a gruelling six hours with a one hour lunch break. In advance of the exam, Beckham did a very decent thing. He went to Dennis and told him

that, as a graduate supervisor, he was required to submit three questions. There were three graduate students writing at this particular time which meant there would be a total of nine questions on the exam. Each student was required to answer three during the allotted time. Huey asked Dennis to come up with three questions, and said that he would submit them under his name. It seems, this was the standard practice among the graduate supervisors in the studio arts when they had students sitting for this examination. The written exam was a pass or failure. This concluded all the degree requirements, and Dennis was now entitled to include Master of Fine Arts among his credentials. I had quietly finished my degree requirements and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts, *cum laude*.

It was late April, and time to go home. We gave up our apartment, crating as many pieces as we could afford to ship home from the graduating show. Dennis also had a large collection of plates that had been stored in our apartment, and these were also crated and shipped with the other pieces. We had hunted up a reasonable rate for shipping twelve boxes back to Calgary, and off they went.

We removed the plates from the wall, and because we needed large nails to hold them up, we patched each hole so we wouldn't lose our damage deposit. The wall was heavily textured, and patching was easy to disguise. One evening, shortly before leaving, Dennis noticed that he missed a hole. He re-patched it with a flour and water mixture created for this job. The next night, a few more holes seemed to have been missed. Suddenly, it dawned on the two of us that the roaches were eating the patch material. Start the car!

We loaded our Chevy Vega, which now sported a brand new motor, and made one last trip to Galveston before our long drive home. It was April 29<sup>th</sup> - Dennis' birthday, and we were, again, guests of Andrew's family at the Anchorage Motel. As we walked along the

beach, I suddenly spied a perfect sand dollar (sea urchin) that had washed up on the beach. It seemed like Mother Nature, herself, had dropped this gift at Dennis' feet. I had been looking and looking for this little treasure, but had never found one, until now.

So, we began our way northward, the way we had come, up the Interstate through Dallas-Fort Worth. All along the ditches, on that warm spring day, the blue bonnets and primroses were a riot of colour as though bidding us farewell. We were light hearted. On the way northward, we headed through Oklahoma City, and drove smack into a blinding rainstorm. The roads ran red with rain that had been coloured by the iron in the soil. High atop a hill, there was a field of new green grass. A herd of Black Angus cattle stood at the fence. The green field was at the top of a cliff with red soil exposed to the highway. Red, black and green; all in a great composition; too bad we had no way to stop along the freeway to capture the image.

We continued on to Kansas City to visit the Kansas City Museum of Art. It was the first opportunity we had to actually see a collection of English slipware; the beauty of which Dennis had discovered while researching a paper on the English Arts and Crafts movement. None of the photographs did the intricately decorated work justice – the actual pieces were spectacular.

Now, Dennis possessed a Diploma (Ceramics) Alberta College of Art, a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Calgary) and a Master of Fine Arts (Houston). He had experienced three levels of post secondary education, and had, during his education, been instructed by four major artists and numerous, lesser known artists. Looking back on these studies now, Dennis feels that nowhere in the course of all his advanced study, did any significant level of intellectual discussion or formal discourse take place. None of the institutions that Dennis attended promoted a truly, interdisciplinary association among the

visual arts, science, religion, philosophy or the humanities, generally. So, for someone like Dennis, who was at a particularly advanced level in the development of his career, and someone who was seeking an intellectual dialogue about fine arts in relationship to other disciplines, he felt he really lacked the benefits that a “cross-pollination” of ideas could have imparted to him. Consequently, something always seemed to be lacking in the seminar discussions.

## Chapter 7 NOW WHAT?



Well now, here we are at the Canadian border. Unlike the unhindered crossing into the United States two years previously, when we had no documentation, we arrived in Emerson, Manitoba carrying paperwork supplied by the Canadian Consulate in Los Angeles to help facilitate our re-entry into Canada. Basically, the border guard ignored the documents and proceeded to check us over, which included a trip to the office to fill out more forms. Finally, satisfied that our five year old car had, indeed, been purchased in Canada, we were on our way.

We arrived in Edmonton in time to attend the opening of “Alberta Ceramics Showcase” at Beaver House on May 9, 1980. While in Houston, Dennis had entered a large burnished sphere that had been shipped to Edmonton when it was accepted for the exhibition. On Mother’s Day, Sunday, May 11, 1980 we were standing at the backdoor of my parents’ house in Calgary. We left all our stuff on the patio, afraid that we might be carrying a cockroach among our books. Sure enough, when we unpacked the boxes, there was one, albeit stiff, specimen. Now, we had come full circle. Calgary in 1980 was hopping. When we left in 1978, Calgary was just a sleepy, little city.

In a mere two years, the city was literally vibrating from an unprecedented boom. Whole subdivisions were appearing, almost overnight, as hordes of newcomers arrived to find work. Housing prices seemed to climb daily. Calgary was becoming known for million dollar deals, sealed with a handshake, and two hour lunches. Mordecai Richler, visiting the city, noticed all the building cranes in the downtown core and said, "Calgary will be a great city once it gets unpacked." Boy, did we need to get jobs, fast.

Almost immediately, I was successful in finding a position at the University of Calgary. Dennis headed off to re-acquaint himself with his mentor, Santo Mignosa, who was still teaching at the university. Santo had heard that Jim Kalbfleisch was looking for a thrower. Dennis went off to introduce himself to JBK Pottery, a small ceramics production company, located in the basement of a wholesale clothing supply company, right smack in the heart of downtown Calgary. JBK Pottery supplied functional ware to gift stores right across Canada. Dennis was hired on-the-spot, and joined a staff consisting of Jim, the owner; Steve Potter, Bliss Mackie, former rhythm guitar and vocals for the Original Caste of "One Tin Soldier" fame, Monica Buchwitz, and Louise Christensen.

The amount of hand-crafted ceramic work being shipped from the site was unprecedented anywhere in Alberta, and probably Canada. Vic Brosz said, "You're gonna flood the market!" Little did he know; things were just getting started! Very shortly after Dennis went to work for JBK, Calgary's boom town state precipitated the sale of their building. Jim had a five year lease on the space, so the owner had to buy him out. This was exactly the "leg up" Jim needed to move his business into a light industrial area that had recently sprung up in northeast Calgary. He bought a brand new warehouse, and his neighbour, the owner of the clothing supply company, came along and moved in, right next door. Hy was a terrific neighbour, but he

couldn't fix a thing. Mention the word, "hammer," and he ran the other way. One morning, Dennis arrived at work, and there was Louise Christensen, eight months pregnant, perched under the hood of Hy's car, tuning up the carburetor.

Given the hot housing market, Dennis and I got in a panic. Would we ever find an affordable house? We began by looking at pre-owned homes, but every time we saw something we liked, it seemed to sell within hours of listing. Even worse, what we could have purchased for forty thousand dollars, before we left for Houston, was now running seventy thousand or more. Finally, we managed to find a small, two bedroom bi-level, new construction, in a cookie-cutter subdivision not far from Dennis' work for the princely sum of sixty-nine thousand dollars. How would we ever pay for it? The subdivision was called Falconridge, located in northeast Calgary, so the commute time was very reasonable for Dennis. We moved in on October 31, 1980 in a blinding snow storm that left the un-grassed yard a swamp of mud over which we had to move furniture and belongings. We used the money from the sale of our property in Drumheller to make our big purchase. Our mortgage was held by the Alberta Treasury Branch at the usury rate of thirteen percent.

We graduated from university without any debit, and thinking back, Drumheller was probably the only time that our pay cheques ever went so far. Anyway, once we moved in, Dennis and I began the process of making the house our own by finishing the basement with carpet and installing a bathroom and a bedroom for guests. It was spring by now, and we had to address the blank canvas that was our yard. Dennis built a fence, put down sod, and slowly, the lot that had been scraped bare of every living thing, began to transform into a place with trees and perennials – the first on the block. When we moved from the subdivision in 1990, very few of the homes had much landscaping to speak of, which was one of the reasons we moved.

By early 1981, Calgary really began to suffer from the implementation of the National Energy Program that was crippling the oil patch. Its policies were putting many people into bankruptcy. Now, those subdivisions, which had been going up overnight, were being abandoned, overnight. A great many homeowners were out of work and could no longer maintain their mortgages. Mortgage rates were at nineteen percent, or higher. We knew one couple who drove to the bank; they left their car in the parking lot, put their keys in the night deposit box, and took a taxi to the airport. Suddenly, the banks had huge inventories of foreclosed homes. Houses began to empty all around us, but we managed to hang on because both Dennis and I were employed, but the value of our home plunged. Luckily, our mortgage had been locked in for five years at thirteen percent, which was sounding positively, "low." The days of the two hour lunch were over. Bumper stickers began to appear that said, "Please God, give us another oil boom. We won't piss it away this time."

#### STUDIO TWO: GARDEN TWO:

In early spring 1981, Dennis built a small, sixteen cubic foot, hard brick kiln in the backyard of our home at 12 Falchurch Crescent N.E. Dennis asked some of his co-workers at JBK if they would like to help him build the kiln, and two guys, Serge Pardeahtan and Steve Potter, volunteered. Note to self: keep the beer out-of-reach until the job is done. Work started in the morning, but by early afternoon, the walls of the kiln were so crooked that Dennis gently sent his "helpers" home. The next day, he tore it all down and rebuilt it, by himself. He bought four burners from Jim Clachrie, who was still making the "tried and true" Heritage model. In the summer, Dennis built a two car garage, another first on the block. The concrete for the garage floor arrived in installments. Greg Christensen, Louise's husband, was driving a cement truck for Burnco, and whenever he had a small amount left in the hopper, he'd try to get to our place and dump it on

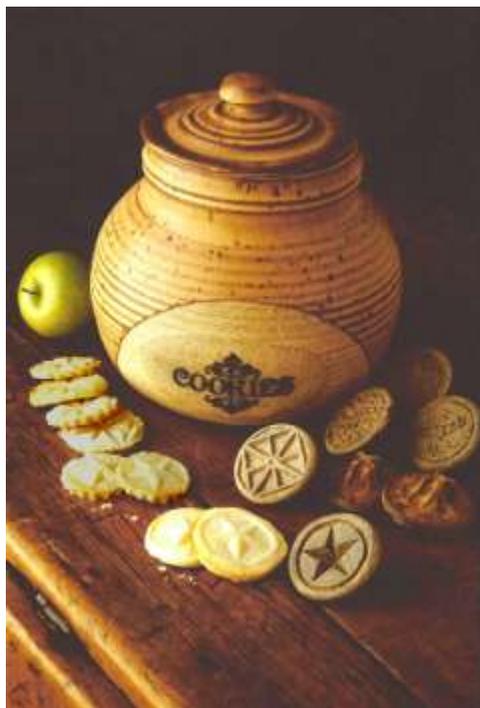
the pad Dennis had ready for this purpose. Sometimes, it was a little stiff. Likewise, it wasn't unusual for the two of us to be trowelling a freshly delivered load at midnight. Previously, a room in the basement with a large window to let in lots of light had been set up as the studio. Dennis installed his wheel, several shelving units, and a large sink with access to water. Nant Mill Pottery was born.

In May 1981, Dennis was elected as a director on the board of the Alberta Potters Association (APA) in charge of the newsletter. Physical production of the quarterly newsletter was done on weekends at my university office. I was now the APA's recording secretary. Subsequently, Dennis was elected as president at an annual general meeting held at Beaver House in May 1983.

JBK Pottery's relocation to the northeast warehouse in 1981 was a very exciting time for the business. It coincided with a successful relationship struck with a national distributing company called, Distribution Actuelle, and it was at this time that Dennis was promoted to production manager. Every day, five days a week, for the next five years, JBK Pottery filled a CANPAR delivery truck, right to its roof, with hand-crafted ceramic products that were shipped right across Canada. An astute business man, Jim Kalbfleisch blended the production of hand-crafted items with extremely good business savvy; quite a rarity in the industry. Jim decided it was time to mechanize his operation to improve quality and reduce costs. He felt the best way to do this was to adopt equipment like that used in the big ceramic plants located in England. So, in January 1982, he and Dennis went off to Stoke-on-Trent via Ward Air. Now, that was the way to fly: china, silverware, comfortable seats and a complementary "open" bar. From Gatwick, he and Dennis took the train to Victoria Station. From there, they took the tube to Euston Station and headed north to Stoke. Accommodations had been arranged on their behalf by Services Engineers, an industrial equipment manufacturing



JBK POTTERY  
ENVELOPE KILN  
FIBRE LINED  
1982



JBK POTTERY – COOKIE JAR  
9" DIAMETER  
CONE 9 REDUCTION  
c 1984

company. After their “English” breakfast the following morning, Jim and Dennis were picked up and whisked off to the company. They saw a cup handle machine, fine-tuned for delivery, and a multitude of other apparatus on the production floor. After touring the plant, they were taken to two ceramic production factories, one of which was Wedgewood. The difference between the two companies was like night and day. Housekeeping at the first one was atrocious – clay and dust everywhere. Wedgewood, on the other hand, was immaculate. One could have eaten off the floor. Both factories gave them a select tour of their plant because of the potential for industrial espionage. Imagine, two studio potters from Calgary, spies! The plants were eye-openers. Until now, neither Jim nor Dennis had a full appreciation of what these machines were capable of producing.

Jim’s prime objective had been to find a rolling machine to produce circular ceramic frames. He had given Services Engineers the task of coming up with a design, but during their presentation, Dennis realized they proposed a process whereby three sizes of frames were being made, one at a time. He piped up and said, “Couldn’t they all be made at the same time, one inside the other, and cut with a pin tool?” The salesman paused, and said, “Oh, we never thought of that.” That evening, Dennis and Jim talked over what they had seen. They quickly came to the realization that JBK Pottery couldn’t possibly handle thirty thousand frames, per day. However, Dennis and Jim also realized how they could adapt the production techniques they had seen to a scale more suitable for the size of JBK’s operation. Maybe they were spies. After the eight hour flight home, Dennis had a notebook full of ideas and designs.

Back in Calgary, Dennis and Jim began addressing production needs and streamlining processes, building specialized equipment, on-site. Such things as multiple sponging machines to de-burr the bottoms of the pots, a product dryer, and clay cutters were just some of their

innovations. A new kiln needed development to meet the marked increase in volume. Dennis and Jim conceived a design for an envelope kiln that moved between two platforms; thereby, making it possible to fire every day. A steel frame was welded together, giving each end of the kiln, a door that could be opened. This enabled the kiln to be moved between the platforms, as planned. This was not a new concept in industrial production, as it was common in north eastern USA and British pottery establishments, but it was certainly a new application in Canada for a studio pottery. The kiln, itself, was constructed of ceramic fibre (remember those space shuttle tiles) which made it light enough to move, back and forth. The firing took place up through the bottom, not through the sides, as more commonly done at the time. The burners were situated in such a manner that it made it almost impossible to ignite, manually. So, spark plugs were attached to each burner, and these were hooked up to a battery charger which acted as the ignition source. Elizabeth's husband, the engineer from NASA, would have been very proud of these two guys.

Not enough can be said for Jim's very decent treatment of Dennis. Throughout Dennis' employment at JBK, Jim always treated Dennis in a very collegial manner. Jim and Betts Kalbfleisch became our personal friends, and we had many, many enjoyable evenings over dinner and numerous bottles of wine. I never saw Dennis so happy as those times when he and Jim were conspiring to build some new piece of equipment or tackle some other challenge in the business. Jim is an honest and ethical business man. These were management traits that Dennis never again experienced during his employment in subsequent, small businesses.

But, time was flying by and change was coming. After the whirlwind business trip in January, Dennis thought he and I would enjoy a longer trip of our own. So, in December of the same year, Dennis

and I decided to travel to Great Britain. Ali and Christopher Johnson had returned to England and were living near Bristol. Cobbling together a month's vacation, Dennis and I flew to Gatwick and spent Christmas with our friends. Then, we began travelling about Britain with a Brit Rail Pass. We went everywhere by train, visiting as many cathedrals as we could manage in the time we had. We saw Wells, Salisbury, Ely, Rochester, Canterbury, Bath, and King's College in Cambridge, St. Paul's, Westminster, and the church in Wrexham, Wales, to name a few. The cathedrals were a fantastic experience for these two art and art history graduates who had studied Medieval, Gothic and Classical Revival periods. An added bonus was that, at Christmas time, the cathedrals were tuning their organs, and we heard their sounds in glorious celebration. Some organs were only played at Christmas, so the experience was twice as special.

At Wells Cathedral, Dennis and I saw the spiral staircase, and the upside down arch in the nave that are featured in most art history textbooks. Each one of these features, created by the builders at Wells, was unique for their time, and these architectural solutions solved problematic structural issues that had plagued cathedral builders for centuries. Because she had taken her catechism there, Ali was touring us around the site. She was astounded to learn these details about its history from two Canadians. The stained glass, the flying buttresses, the barrel vaults, the statuary, the smell and sound left us humble and energized, all at the same time. This trip would not be forgotten. We took a quick trip to Wales, and dropped in on a couple of relatives, as well as Nant Mill. Our acquaintances with these family members left us determined to return.

## Chapter 8

### AFRICA, YOU SAY?



On June 22, 1983, while Dennis was busy at work at JBK, a small, unassuming man walked into the studio, and the fellow paused to ask if Dennis Evans was there. Dennis heard his name mentioned, and as he walked towards the front of the studio, the man was looking over the samples displayed on the wall. He introduced himself as John Foofat, and he said he had been given Dennis' name by the Alberta College of Art. At this time, Dennis was a community advisor to the ceramics program. Mr. Foofat was looking for an expert in studio pottery to go with him to Africa, and oh yes, he would need an answer by that afternoon!

Just imagine the conversation Dennis and I had! I was at work when the telephone rang, and it was Dennis asking me if I had ever heard of the Commonwealth Secretariat. When I asked why, he said he had just been asked to go to Africa. I said, "You're going, aren't you!" It wasn't a question, I knew the answer. I practically ran down the hall to find out if anyone in the vice-president's office knew anything about the Secretariat. Dennis also told me that Mr. Foofat's wife, a lady by the name of Marjorie, worked at the University. As luck would have it, I did know her, in passing. It gave me some comfort that

Dennis wasn't being sold into white slavery. John and Marjorie Foofat hosted an evening at their home to help us get acquainted with them, and to what was going to happen. At the same time, two other specialists were recruited; one was an expert in woodworking, the other an expert in upholstery. All three men were to be commissioned to assist two small business enterprises located in Swaziland. John told Dennis that when he saw the samples from JBK Pottery, he knew Dennis was just the man for the pottery job. As it turned out, the Secretariat had to cut its budget, so they asked John to find the woodworking/upholstery expert in one person. John found just such a person teaching at NAIT in Edmonton. Dennis first met his colleague at Heathrow Airport. His name was George Oosterwald, and although a Canadian citizen, George happened to be in Holland visiting family. It was most fortuitous that Dennis and George could leave together from Heathrow.

## SWAZILAND

Dennis left Calgary for Africa in July 1983, travelling into London to meet with the Minister of Economic Development at the Commonwealth Secretariat. The Secretariat was under contract with the Swazi Small Enterprise Development Company Ltd (SEDCO) for expert assistance. From the Secretariat, Dennis went back to the airport and caught a direct flight to Johannesburg, with a short stop at Nairobi for refueling. No one was allowed off the airplane. In Johannesburg, he and George sat in the international lounge for five hours waiting for connections to Manzini, Swaziland. Dennis and George were met by John Foofat. They had supper and stayed overnight at the big casino and resort in Manzini. Leaving George in Manzini, where he was to be based, John and Dennis immediately headed off by car to Mbabane the next morning to where Dennis was going to work. Dennis was at work by eight o'clock on July 21st. Flight time, from Calgary to Manzini, had been thirty-six hours.

With only eight hours sleep, and now to work, adrenalin kept Dennis going. So, on the first day at his post, Dennis went to Potter's Joy, did an evaluation of current processes and production items, developed a report, had it typed, and was ready for a meeting with the Minister of Industry and Small Business at ten o'clock on the second day on the job. As it happens, the Minister was also a Swazi prince. But, never mind that, the girl serving tea in the afternoon was a princess – by royal bloodline, not in attitude. John and Dennis met with the Minister for two hours. They left the meeting. Before lunch, John typed up a memorandum of understanding for the Minister's signature, and this became Dennis' working document for the next two and a half months.

After this meeting, and still all on the first day, Dennis was at Potter's Joy, assessing the needs in product design, production techniques and plant flow. Very quickly, he came to the realization that any modifications could not be fancy. Dennis also realized that he would have to rely solely on his past experience and instinct. Whatever he implemented, under these very fast-track circumstances, would have to work out in the end. The knowledge gained at JBK Pottery proved invaluable. Potter's Joy had been producing the same objects, using the same designs, for years. In addition to the decorative ware they were making, it desperately needed expansion of the product line to include more functional items. The plant had a poor production layout, so walls were knocked out, and equipment was moved to improve flow. New equipment was purchased or made locally, as necessary. A training regimen was set up to introduce the staff to the new product line. Then, John undertook responsibility for setting up new markets, locally, and in South Africa.

This was apartheid South Africa, and Dennis' employees were Swazi. The pallor of discrimination by the South African whites against the blacks was omnipresent. One day, the plant manager, Mr. J. Ndlovu

(pronounced end loo vu; Swazi for elephant) was sent to Durban to pick up potters wheels and other equipment. On the way back, he was stopped by South African police and severely beaten. The police didn't believe his documentation. They decided that, as a black man, he couldn't possibly have been entrusted with this valuable cargo. When he finally got back to Mbabane, Dennis and John urged him to report the incident to his own government. He refused; he said this was a fairly routine occurrence, and nothing would be done, anyway.

On a marketing trip to South Africa, John, Dennis and Phillip Mswane (pronounced em swan ee), who was their SEDCO contact, travelled into South Africa. This required a border crossing between the two countries. There were three gates with big signs: "SOUTH AFRICAN WHITES," "FOREIGNERS," and "BLACKS." John's previous employment with the United Nations had given him "honorary white" status. Although African by birth, ethnically, John is Asian. South African racial profiling didn't include a category for Asians, so he had to carry a document that declared him an "honorary white." Of course, John was humiliated by this status conferred on him, but it was the only way to get business done.

On most weekends, Dennis was alone, as John had many friends in Swaziland with whom he visited. Having no vehicle, Dennis did a lot of walking. The newness of landscape and the people were invigorating. Armed with his camera, he tried to preserve the experience. At the end of the day, the sun would quickly disappear, creating a sunset totally unlike those in North America. Some weekends, John, Dennis and George went exploring, and they took excursions to the Swazi National Game Park as well as Kruger National Park.

They also went to Pigg's Peak to visit a Swedish-sponsored, pine

furniture factory. They were invited to the manager's house for a Sunday meal, and a particularly interesting discussion ensued about the pros and cons of foreigners developing and running businesses in Swaziland. This discussion stayed with Dennis, as it concluded success would only come when Swazis did things for themselves. Another occasion found John and Dennis enjoying an evening at a social club in Mbabane. Its members were predominantly British expats, and one fellow found out that Dennis and John were from Calgary. He strolled over; he was in Swaziland to commission a power plant, and asked Dennis if he knew Boyd Carruthers from Calgary Power. In shock, Dennis replied, "Know him? I was his son-in-law's best man!" The groom: Richard Crack, his old ACA buddy.

On the very first weekend in Swaziland, Dennis had the opportunity to celebrate the King's birthday, keeping in mind that he had been dead for four years. But then, we do the same thing, and call it Victoria Day. The birthday celebration was held in the national soccer stadium, and on this day, it housed close to twenty thousand people.

Dennis learned that Swaziland has a unique system for establishing church groups. If five people get together, select one person to be bishop, and register with the government, they have a legal church. The women in each group have very distinctive colour codes. All the dresses and head gear are of the same design. The difference is in the colour. There are no duplications. For example, you could have a bright, full length green dress with a white head dress and white sash. These parishioners would be quite distinct from persons wearing full length white dresses with green accessories. Parishioners packed the stadium. One denomination began singing a hymn, a cappella; when finished, another immediately picked up the singing with another hymn, also a cappella. There was really a great competition going on, here! The result was the truly glorious

harmony that can only be made by hundreds of human voices. They were singing with a resonance that Dennis could, physically, feel in the soles of his feet, and it reverberated right up and into, the centre of his body.

Social events abounded. One of John's acquaintances had a sister who got married one weekend, and both Dennis and John were invited to attend. John issued the following order, "You have only one thing to remember. Don't eat the food, and don't drink anything." It was an all day affair. There were about thirty bridesmaids, all decked out in traditional Swazi dress, all trolling for husbands, so it was quite acceptable to be topless. Cattle are considered a sign of wealth, and to slaughter a cow for the wedding showed the bride's family wealth and status in the community. Dennis saw the carcass hacked into chunks and thrown onto a bent and twisted piece of metal laid on top of a bonfire. So, this was BBQ Swazi style. Dennis could see why John advised him not to eat the food.

John could hardly wait to get to the Sunday afternoon brunches at the Swazi casino in Manzini. There was a phenomenal offering, but the shrimp and crab were theirs for the taking because the Swazi customers said, "Worms! We don't eat worms!" Of course, by now, Dennis discovered that John had quite a culinary bent. In fact, on the first night in Mbabane, John obtained permission to use the hotel kitchen after hours. Earlier in the day, he had stopped in to see an old friend – a butcher – who had greeted John like a long lost son. The purchase of the day was brain, tripe, and spleen. John arrived at Dennis' door with a big smile and said, "It's ready." They headed off to the dining room. He had Dennis try a bit of each delicacy, and asked, "How do you like it?" Dennis' reply was, "It's something a person will have to get accustomed to." John laughed and laughed and said, "With a response like that, you'll do very well in Africa." The hotel's willingness to give John access to their facilities was just

one example of the great rapport he had within the Swazi community. On more than one occasion, Dennis saw John sought out for advice on running numerous, small businesses throughout the country.

Now then, Dennis noticed that Potter's Joy had a rather large inventory of small clay apothecary bottles in storage, and he asked why there were so many, and what they were. He was told the jars had been made for the local witch doctor, but the sale didn't go through because the good doctor was in jail. The King of Swaziland had been in power for such a long time that, when he died, no one could remember the process to select a successor. Now, there were factions in the royal household. The King is permitted multiple wives; the eldest wife was promoting her son; another wife was promoting hers. The favourite was a young man enrolled in school at Sherborne, England. The witch doctor was recruited by a detractor to put a curse on this contender to the throne. When he stepped off the plane in Swaziland, upon his return from England, the doctor was arrested. Apparently, it is illegal under Swazi law to put curses on someone, especially a would-be king. Needless to say, the market for the apothecary jars collapsed with the doctor's arrest. Man, business can be so fickle!

The two and a half months allotted for the contract sped by. All indications from the government seemed to support the notion that the team would be asked to stay on in their respective roles. John developed a proposal, and put the wheels in motion for a return visit. The big mistake: Dennis and George should have thrown some money into the kitty to allow John to stay in Swaziland in order to walk the proposal through the government bureaucracy. This would have ensured that it was sent off to London for sponsorship. Instead, the entire team returned to Canada in early September, and the proposal was lost in the quagmire of African bureaucracy, forever.

When Dennis got back to Canada, he was so energized. John had opened his eyes to the greater world, and the potential for his expertise to be used in international development projects. Dennis began looking at possible projects sponsored by CIDA, but nothing came of it. This Canadian organization was so bound in bureaucracy in comparison to the British system. Expectations placed on experts were too primitive, and Dennis turned away their offers.

The project in Swaziland fostered a life-long relationship between the Foofats and the Evans'. We continued to meet, socially, when the Foofats were in Calgary, and we visited them when John retired and settled in Southport, England. John's health deteriorated in retirement – a prime example of someone unprepared for the gap created by this change. John no longer felt useful. He had filled so many high stress positions when he was working, and spent his entire life developing small businesses in third world countries. He agonized over the fact that none continued very long after his departure. When his influence was gone, so it seemed, was the business. These results were an echo of the discussion that one afternoon at Pigg's Peak. One only hopes that John planted some small seed, somewhere, during his twenty-five years in international development that will flourish sometime in the future.

For all the excitement and energy generated by the Swazi project, all was not well within the studio ceramics industry in Canada. Nineteen eighty-four saw a significant decline in the industry and a total crash within six months. There was a huge influx of off-shore "decor" products in soft, pastel colours. Cheap, and of poor taste, these items flooded the North American market. The decline in demand for hand-crafted items was further fuelled by the interior design industry that began promoting this pastel colour look in everything from vinyl siding to carpeting. Individual studios, like JBK and others were using earth-tone glazes on a stoneware body. To adapt to the drastic

changes wrought by this sudden shift in consumer demand required enormous flexibility and financial investment. Potters had to rethink their firing temperatures, and develop a whole new glaze technology. The cheap pricing of these mass produced items was also a huge economic blow to self-employed artisans whose margins were small. Numerous, individual studio potteries closed because they couldn't compete. Undeterred, Jim again applied what he knew to something completely new. This time, it was the industrial-scale production of ceramic plating for bullet proof vests and armoured vehicles—another first in Canada.

Amid these harsh realities for potters, Mrs. Lily Schreyer, wife of Governor General Edward R. Schreyer, was an ardent supporter. She commissioned an all Canadian-made, hand-crafted dinner service for Rideau Hall, Ottawa. The event was marked by a black-tie opening at the residence, hosted by the Governor General, and as president of the Alberta Potters Association, Dennis received an official invitation to attend. Since this was such a rare opportunity to represent Alberta potters on a national scale, Dennis and I cobbled together the unheard of sum of one thousand dollars to fly him to Ottawa where he thoroughly enjoyed the event among a number of Alberta artists, and old acquaintances, in attendance there.

## TANZANIA

In mid-April 1984, Dennis was once again presented with a unique opportunity to return to Africa. A business man, A. J. Manji, with ties to Tanzania, had plans to develop a dinnerware plant in Dar es Salaam. Again, the flight was very long. First to London, and then a fast train ride into downtown to pick up the ticket for the African part of the trip. Dennis' frugal sponsor purchased a discounted ticket that had to be picked up, personally. London to Cairo was the first leg of the flight, and all passengers were disembarked at Cairo. Escorted



SWAZI MOM AND CHILD  
1984



POTTER'S JOY - PENCIL POT  
4" HIGH  
CONE 6 OXIDATION  
c 1984  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

to the international lounge, as Dennis and the other passengers walked through the door, their passports were confiscated. He, along with his fellow travellers, sat in the lounge and waited. Dennis' wait lasted three hours. There was only one coin-operated dispenser for soda and chocolate bars. As it got closer to departure, the passengers began to get uneasy. They all wondered when they'd get their passports back. When departure time was nearly upon them, a uniformed official came into the room and tossed all the passports onto a long, narrow table. Mayhem erupted as people dove for their documents; it was pandemonium. Miracle of miracles – there were no passports left over, and no one was left standing without one or, worse yet, holding the wrong one. What would have happened if everything hadn't worked out?

So, it was off to Dar es Salaam aboard a Boeing 707, operated by Egypt Air. It had web seats and no amenities. Later, Marjorie Foofat told Dennis that Egypt Air had the worst air maintenance record in the entire world. By a miracle or a prayer, Dennis got to Dar. Coming in for the landing, the plane broke down below the clouds, and Dennis spotted a runway off to the right hand side of the plane. He remembers thinking, "Hmm, Dar has two runways." Suddenly, the plane propelled itself back above the clouds, circling around for a second time. Again, a runway appeared beside the airplane. Again, the plane propelled itself above the clouds. About this time, Dennis realized, "Oh man, there is only one runway." It was the one that kept showing up, beside, the plane. Third time, it seems, is lucky, and the plane landed, taxiing up to the "terminal" which looked like a small concrete bunker. There was an old Olive, (name on the tractor, not the receptionist), sitting on the tarmac with an old rusty wagon attached to it. The luggage was dumped on it, and hauled around to the side of the building. Everyone went through customs, and once finished there, the luggage was piled in a huge conical pile. Just like the passports, everyone made a dive for their property.

Finally reaching the other side of the gate, Dennis was met by A.J. Manji and driven into Dar and his hotel.

Dennis' contract was for a feasibility study. He had to source out raw materials, equipment manufacturing potential, and recommend production processes. Tanzania was in the depths of a socialist government which meant all raw materials and equipment had to be available, or manufactured, locally. There could be no imports. Retail stores were in a very sad state. They were selling anything they could get their hands on; a food store might have only suitcases for sale. Where they came from, who knows? The food stores that did have food, such as canned goods, couldn't sell their products. The cans had domed tops and warped bottoms, spoiled from sitting so long on the shelves. Moreover, no one could afford to buy these goods, anyway. However, the markets were a-buzz with flies and local products. Piles of coconut chunks, a source of cooking oil; greens, and eight foot high piles of small dried fish, like anchovies, seemed to be the main food source. While the variety was limited, it seemed healthy, or at least, far better than the canned offerings.

Dennis knew immediately that the government departments were going to be difficult, if not impossible, to work with as the employees viewed every foreigner with extreme suspicion. Without the smooth skills of John Foofat to navigate through this "closed shop mentality," Dennis knew cooperation would be just about impossible to secure.

Dennis had the good fortune to have a driver at his disposal. When he had a few days on his own, he asked to be driven around the countryside. Off through plantations and down country roads, they went. It was a completely different experience from Swaziland. New textures, new smells and new colours. Because the environment was so foreign, Dennis found his sense of reality, totally up-ended. There was nothing familiar as an anchor. Enormous banana and

fruit trees were everywhere one looked. Something exotic and unfamiliar seemed to appear at every bend in the road.

Then, Mr. Manji asked Dennis to attend a trade show in Zanzibar to explore potential sales for the proposed dinnerware products. I suppose, it might be a good time to mention that Dennis actually hates flying, and this was going to be his first time on a very small plane: six seats to be exact. Filled with apprehension, Dennis dawdled his way out onto the tarmac, which might be why he was the last to board. His slow arrival meant he had to sit right beside the pilot. Off they went, down the runway, and up into the African clouds. Unexpectedly, Dennis relaxed. Sitting beside the pilot, watching him navigate, was just the place he needed to be. Dennis decided the pilot wasn't in a panic, so why should he be, and he thoroughly enjoyed the flight. No groping about for the runway when they landed, either.

On Zanzibar, Dennis had another driver who toured him about, and Dennis saw Zanzibar truly lived up to its exotic name. It had lush growth everywhere, with a number of Moorish ruins, remnants of a time when there were Arab trade routes up and down the east coast of Africa. Elegant colonnades stood in the jungle, like so many sentries still dedicated to their post after everyone had gone; ancient aqueducts rose up, surrounded by growth. In the harbour, local fishermen still used traditional Arab fishing boats with their triangular sails. More cinnamon trees, lemon grass, and now, cloves. Fruit trees lined the roads, but he had no idea what they were. Everything was so novel, it over-taxed the senses. Dennis knew it would take weeks to get one's bearing, and only if one could actually settle down, would it be remotely possible to start painting in such a place.

To keep organized whenever Dennis undertakes a project, he starts a notebook which is his "bible." Without it, he is lost. On the trip to

Zanzibar, at some point during the trade show, he laid down his book and forgot it. He didn't know he was without it, until he was back on the plane. Dennis was deeply troubled, because he couldn't prepare his report without his notes. Mr. Manji calmly reassured Dennis that all would be fine, and that his book would be returned to him by the next day, right to his hotel in Dar, no less. Sure enough, there it was. That was an amazing experience because Dennis couldn't figure out how something as basic as a paper notebook could be returned so easily to its owner. Who was A.J. Manji, exactly?

On the way back to Canada, Dennis stopped off at Stoke-on-Trent to source out equipment. It happened to be the May bank holiday, and everything was closed. So, when in England with nothing to do, go to the pub. Dennis found a cozy, little one near his hotel, ordered a cider, and found a corner table. Oddly, the patrons seemed stand-offish. Dennis went up to the bar, and asked for another round. Someone called Dennis a "Yank." Well, that was set straight real fast. He was a Canadian. The tone in the pub changed immediately, and Dennis never bought another drink the rest of the evening. Now at home, Dennis presented his report to the owner who, in turn, forwarded it to the Tanzanian Minister of Industry. Dennis waited for a response from Manji, wondering if the project would move forward. Not one word was forthcoming from his contractor. To this day, he doesn't know what happened to his report and its recommendations.

In August 1984, Dennis was hired to consult closer to home. Vallance Pottery, a studio pottery in Clinton B.C. asked him to visit and conduct an analysis of their business. Dennis worked for two days studying the operations of the home-based studio and prepared an analysis. It seems Dennis was gaining a reputation as the "go-to guy" for this sort of project.

In December Dennis and I decided to take another trip. This time it

was Greece. As students, we studied the art, the architecture, the myths, and the philosophy of Greece. Now, we wanted to see the real thing for ourselves. After a five day, guided tour that included Corinth (the canal and footsteps of Paul), Delphi (the oracle and stadium), Epidaurus (the sweet spot in the theatre), Olympia (the workshop of Phidias) and Mycenae (the great lion gate), we flew to Crete. Winter was the perfect time to visit, as the main archaeological sites were nearly deserted. At Knossos, Dennis scrambled up a wall in exactly the place where art history books showed ceramic storage jars, almost as tall as a man, would be located. He nearly landed on top of them, so accurate was his ability to find them. Only another potter would feel the connection to the original makers, and know about the challenges those ancient hands faced during the creation of such massive pieces.

In Iraklion, I lost sight of Dennis amid the swarms of holiday shoppers. When we re-connected, I found out he had been chasing another woman, but I understood why. We learned in classical art history that the Doric race had vanished. Oh, contraire; Dennis had been chasing a living, breathing example. The lovely lady was the embodiment of the classical one-to-seven proportions cherished by the Greeks as representative of perfection in the human body. Her eyes were in the typical wide-open position, and she had a long, straight nose, exactly as portrayed in the Doric sculptures found in the Athens museum. From Crete, we travelled to as many islands as possible, opting for planes because the seas were too rough to sail. We spent New Year's Eve on Rhodes, but our time on Santorini (Thera) was the most memorable. We took a local bus as close as we could get to Akrotiri, a town buried under tons of ash when the island blew apart. The site was locked. Totally disheartened, we turned to leave. A faint voice called out to us. A little Greek gentleman, who referred to himself as, "The Keeper," took us inside and gave us a running commentary on the whole excavation. He had

been there from the beginning of the work, and knew all the details not found in guidebooks. We were blessed by the gods, and gave him a huge tip. He nearly cried, but we told him he had made our whole trip a special experience, which he had, and it was worth that, and more, to us

The final leg of our journey was a week in Athens, and we were like kids in a candy store, tasting and touching, and walking everywhere. Dennis, the tall, dark, handsome stranger, was brazenly chased through the Plaka by young ladies trying to sell their wares: crocheted tablecloths. Our trip to the Parthenon was also eventful. As we were walking, an elderly gentleman suddenly fell by the side of the road; it appeared he had suffered a heart attack. Dennis gently laid him down, but not knowing any Greek, simply called out for help. "Help" must be "help" in any language. A neighbour lady appeared, and immediately ran back to her house to telephone. All we could do was commend the old fellow to her care, and leave. His eyes were closed, and we think he may have slipped away while Dennis was holding him. We were so lucky we still had a bit of a walk to the Acropolis, as it took us quite awhile to shake off the experience we had just had.

When we arrived at the top of the Acropolis, it was completely empty. Well, for about five minutes, anyway. A tour bus, carrying Japanese visitors, arrived. However, in those five minutes, Dennis was able to photograph the site, devoid of the hordes of humanity one usually sees. At last, we were basking in the beauty of the Golden Ratio. Millions of marble chips littered the ground, and scaffolding was everywhere as restoration seems constant. Imagine, what the site would look like if the Turks hadn't used it for target practice? Here was the embodiment of the art and architecture that Dennis and I so loved when studying at university. Athena has our heart, forever.

Dennis continued in his role as president of the Alberta Potters Association, initiating the establishment of a thousand dollar scholarship to be awarded to one APA member who wanted to extend their studies, or pursue some form of personal development, inside or outside, their own studio. In 1985, Kirsten Abrahamson was the first recipient of the scholarship. Dennis also found affordable, group insurance coverage for the studio artists operating their own small businesses. On April 29<sup>th</sup> which was, coincidentally, Dennis' birthday, Jim Clachrie, a long-time friend of the pottery community, retired from the Gas Utilization Branch of Canadian Western Natural Gas. In his capacity as APA President, Dennis presented Jim with a salt fired, lidded jar created by Val Eibner. Val was the ceramics technician at the University of Calgary, and she now lives in Summerland, British Columbia. In May 1986, the second APA scholarship was awarded to Debbie Cherniawsky.

## Chapter 9 ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS



Nineteen eighty-six deserves its own chapter, because so many life-changing things happened to us, individually, and as a couple. Looking back on it now, it's as though a series of ripples started running through our lives at this time. Ultimately, the ripples spread out and influenced what happened in the following two decades, right up to and including, our retirement in 2006. The road through life doesn't have any sign posts or markers to tell you about the turns or bumps. That's a good thing, too. If we knew what was in store, we might not have gone down a particular road, and who knows what we would have missed.

By 1986, JBK Pottery was unable to maintain the level of production previously enjoyed, and sales could not sustain the large staff. Jim decided to take over as production manager, and in reality, it was time for Dennis to move on. By this time, Dennis had moved his studio out of the house, and into the larger space available in the garage. He intended to return to the production of pottery under his own company name, Nant Mill Pottery. As a "coming-out" party for his business, Dennis had a one man show of his functional work at

The Galleria in the spring. During the intervening years since leaving Drumheller, Dennis had never really worked in his own studio. Now out on his own, he had to focus on making pottery in earnest as this income played a vital part in our livelihood. After six, productive years with JBK Pottery, Dennis struggled to find his own style. The glazes and the surface treatments were his own creations, but there was a strong influence in his shapes that reflected his time in the bigger studio. Gradually, his work took on a more personal touch as Dennis wasn't restricted to a catalogue, as had been the case in the commercial studio. Along with selling work in local galleries and boutique shops, Dennis started attending gift shows. Sales at these trade shows rounded out our annual income, and gave him insight into a marketing tool that would prove to be valuable in a later application. Because financial constraints were minimized by my income, Dennis was able to spend some time doing plates and teapots using plaster moulds. Even though a plaster mould was used, each piece was one-of-a-kind, and some of these teapots are works that are most cherished. Dennis continued in his studio until 1988 when he started getting consulting contracts. Ultimately, these contracts take him away from his own production, altogether. Dennis has fond memories of this studio time. He was his own boss, and he did his own thing. The work sold quite well, and the pace was relaxing.

By now I had been working at the University of Calgary, Research Services Office (RSO) for six years. It was at this time that the university undertook steps to capture its financial interest in the many technological innovations being developed by its researchers, and a new arm of RSO, known as the Office of Technology Transfer (OTT) came into being. During the course of the OTT's creation, the director of our department underwent a life crisis which rocked the stability of my work environment and severely affected the director's health. My desire to continue working for this organization waned.

My position was secure, but staff had increased from three people to eleven. The stress, generated by constant change and dysfunctional management, began to burn me out. I made plans to open a craft gallery, along the lines of the very successful Galleria, or at least that was what I hoped.

Given Dennis' experience in creating turn-key operations, and our long experience in selling his pottery, it seemed like a natural fit for us. Dennis and I scouted out a location in a trendy commercial area in southwest Calgary. We found out that a laundromat was vacating its space at 636-17 Avenue, and we approached the owners with a proposal to rent it. The building was owned by Judge Brennan and his wife, Mary Jane. They were very colourful landlords, to say the least, and were very gracious to us. We set up a limited company, under the business name, Artisan Studios, and took out a modest business loan from the crown corporation called Alberta Small Business Opportunities Company. The provincial government insisted that it had to have our house as collateral. I resigned my position at the university, effective June 30, 1986. Now, neither of us had a steady pay cheque which was a huge gulp for me. All of a sudden, I wasn't sure if I was up to the challenge of being a business owner.

Dennis gave up working in his studio for the next two months. During July and August, he worked tirelessly to address all the physical needs to get the business open by the fall. He designed and built display cabinets, painted the interior of the gallery space, installed lighting, and created a special wall assembly with a fabric covering to facilitate paintings. Dennis also developed the thousand square feet of space in the lower level to provide more display space and an office. All this happened while simultaneously coordinating a provincial ceramics exhibition for the Alberta Potters Association. I typed the catalogue to accompany the exhibition that was scheduled



DRAGON TEAPOT  
7" DIAMETER  
CONE 9 COPPER RED REDUCTION  
c 1984  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST



SPICE SHAKER  
6" HIGH  
CONE 9 REDUCTION  
c 1986  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

to launch on September 27<sup>th</sup> at the Beaver House Gallery in Edmonton, Alberta. The exhibition travelled throughout the province, and was shown in public galleries located in Calgary, Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, Grande Prairie, Fort McMurray and Red Deer. This was the third installment of the history of pottery in Alberta. Studio Ceramics in Alberta (1947-1952), and Studio Ceramics in Alberta II (1953-1963) were the models for Alberta Clay Comes of Age: Studio Ceramics in Alberta III: 1964-1984. I was secretary for the Alberta Potters Association, and one of three APA volunteers working under Dennis' direction. Others were Frances Burke (editor of Contact) and Anita Dumins (treasurer and exhibition co-ordinator). Working on behalf of the co-sponsors were Carol Walker, the Alberta Art Foundation's liaison, and Ross Bradley, for Alberta Culture.

Dennis and I were well underway in the creation of our gallery when we were quietly informed, by a good friend and fellow potter, that the owner of The Galleria was extremely angry with us. Since, we had had such a long, personal and professional relationship with Norma, we couldn't imagine what we had done to offend her. We went immediately to her store, and asked to speak to her. She accused us of "stealing her trade secrets." We couldn't picture, or comprehend, what these secrets were, or why opening our store would be such an egregious offence to her, but the rift never healed. It wasn't too long afterward that she asked Dennis to remove his work from her gallery. The door, metaphorically speaking, was slammed in our face, and our twenty year history evaporated forever. It really hurt.

Artisan Studios was created as a consignment gallery. Artists and crafts people gave us their work, and we kept one-third of the selling price. By hook and by crook, we opened just in time to get traffic from the fledgling, "Art Walk," although we were never allowed to become part of the actual "Walk," because we carried "crafts." We held a special opening celebration, and my loyal colleagues from the

university made it a financial success. The Christmas season fast approached and that, too, was reasonably successful, financially. Then came January, February, March and April – slow, slow, slow. We soon discovered, our location was just “shy” of the more heavily subscribed shopping strip along the avenue. As the weather began to warm up, and the wedding season got into swing, sales began to pick up again, and it seemed some momentum was returning. The summer months were busy, but not a financial runaway, and by now, I realized that I truly disliked being a retailer. I was quite used to working long hours, but as my own boss, I was working all day, evenings and weekends, and the business simply didn’t seem to generate enough money to hire any help. Dennis was busy making functional work in his studio, going to craft sales at Christmas, but he was also becoming known within his community as a kiln and equipment manufacturing expert.

Gradually, the manufacturing of custom designed kilns and specialized equipment came into being under the auspices of Nant Mill Pottery. Financially more lucrative than making pottery, Dennis’ first custom kiln was built for Marilyn Settles and Linda Howes. He painted it “baby blue,” and Linda and Marilyn were ecstatic. They presented their builder with the set of cones from their very first firing; they were perfectly bent, top and bottom. Only a potter could be so thrilled with such a gift. Dennis still has his trophy.

After this success, Dennis’ custom kilns began appearing in a number of places, including a private studio at Sylvan Lake, the über successful, Annette Greenberg Studio in Edmonton, and the Lethbridge Potters’ Guild. Every weekend, without fail, Dennis would assist me at the store. I was always relieved to have his help during these very busy times, but moreover, he gave me a sense of security, as one never knew what was going on along the avenue. He lent a special presence to our store, as people loved to talk to the artist.

Quietly, I began taking steps to sell the business, and had discretely contacted a commercial realtor. He was actively working with two ladies whose husbands were going to finance the purchase. All seemed to be going well until "Black Monday," and the stock market crashed. My potential buyers evaporated. I was depressed. But, my friends, not everything was bleak. Calgary was in an enviable position amid this stock market disaster that was again affecting the business community. The 1988 Winter Olympics had been awarded to the city, and plans were underway for the two week extravaganza scheduled from February 13 to 28, 1988.

While busy minding the store one day, one of my artists, Margaret Best, approached me. She was a board member for the Alberta Crafts Council (ACC), based in Edmonton. The ACC had secured an Olympic license, and had undertaken a juried exhibition to line-up top calibre craftsmen to be showcased during the Olympics. In order to sell the work, the ACC planned to open three retail outlets. Two were to be located within the heavily secured athletes' villages - one at the University of Calgary and one at the Canmore Nordic Centre. The third had to be created from scratch in space at the Calgary Performing Arts building. The ACC had great hopes for the Performing Arts Centre site, as it was steps away from Olympic Plaza where the medals would be awarded. Thousands of people would be going by the door; ergo, surely, sales would follow. This was late October 1987, and only the selection of artists had been organized. Margaret's keen business sense gave her a good idea of the scope of the project, and the pressing need to get underway. I guess she must have seen something in me. She asked me if I'd take on the job to create all three venues. Two would come into being, and then have to be folded after the fourteen day event. All three outlets would be staffed by volunteers. Approximately four hundred crafts people had already been told to deliver work to a warehouse at the beginning of February!

The Christmas retail season was looming on my doorstep, and this period was my most productive sales time. The money I made was essential for my operations in the following year, and survival of the business was depending upon it. If this business was going to last, I had take the ACC offer which promised me ten percent of sales. Sugar plums were dancing in my head. With assistance from a program sponsored by Employment Canada, the project could support three paid staff, all of whom had to be collecting, or be eligible for unemployment insurance. Margaret took it upon herself to hire someone to coordinate the stock/warehouse/creation of the outlets portion of the operation. This person was responsible for the set-up of the warehouse (space and shelving donated by Husky Oil), receipt of goods, provision of inventory control, distribution, stocking and retrieval from all three outlets, construction at the Performing Arts site, and take-down of the two stores located in the athletes' villages at the end of the fourteen day event. The ACC planned to keep the Performing Arts Centre outlet open as long as financially feasible.

I had the perfect person in mind as volunteer co-ordinator. Her name: Lesley Starnes. I am pleased to say, she and her husband became life-long friends. She had been with a major design firm when I met her, and was a highly skilled manager. She was also a superb crafts person, calligrapher and, as it turned out, a potter. She approached me to carry her calligraphy and a very cleverly designed, garlic cookbook and apron. I just knew from our conversations, this was the lady I had to have for this job. Now, I only had to find an office manager. I had agreed to supply, free-of-charge, Artisan's software program for inventory control. Could this be complicated? Oh, you bet.

The project was given space in the downtown offices of Imperial Oil. Lesley dived right in, creating a timeline and milestones to be met.

She set about organizing the task at hand. She, the warehouse coordinator, and the office manager were at work by nine o'clock. I came to the office every morning, before going to Artisan Studios which opened at ten o'clock. I don't know how many parking tickets I got because of expired time. In late November or early December, fractures began to appear in the staffing.

As a former manager, it didn't take Lesley too long to realize that the other two employees were in over their heads. Luckily, she filled me in on the problems, and I was determined that the project would not be a disaster because of two incompetents. The warehouse person realized her own shortcomings and quit. During the entire planning period, she had not been forthcoming to me or to Margaret Best. When she resigned, she couldn't face me, but called Margaret. Margaret, herself, hardly knew what to say about the situation when she had to tell me what had happened.

Absolutely nothing had been done to organize the impending receipt of product and the creation of the venues. I don't know what the individual had been doing with her time, but she obviously hadn't been able to manage the tasks required for the project. As for the office manager, she didn't have the maturity or experience to manage her own life, let alone, the organizational skills we were going to require once sales actually began. When I dismissed her at the end of her probationary period, her parting words were, "Oh well, I knew if I made it through today, I'd be really lucky." By now, Lesley had over one hundred volunteers organized, and they were scheduled for the security clearance process that had to be finished in January of the New Year. Would she take on more responsibility? You bet! There must be a god, and she is a potter.

I talked to Dennis; I talked to Margaret, and I talked to the ACC board. If asked, Dennis would step in. The ACC agreed, and they

offered Dennis the job. Just six weeks away from opening ceremonies, Dennis replaced the warehouse/retail co-ordinator. Lesley jumped into the fray and took over the management required to get the Performing Arts Centre built. This is what she had done for a living. She designed the entire site, laid out the floor plan, including where the door would go; got electricians and painters co-ordinated, figured out shelving needs, and just made it happen. In the meantime, Dennis was setting up the warehouse provided by Husky, stick-handling crafts people; a number felt it necessary to become overnight “princesses,” handled deliveries, put out “bush fires” created by some really bad attitudes, managed inventory control at the warehouse and the three venues, made deliveries and handled set-up. My god, this just might come together. Lesley and Dennis set up the physical stores in the athletes’ villages, including fixtures. The Canmore site required an hour’s travel, one way, to service. I hired a wonderful lady as office manager. Her natural ability, including taking everything in stride and making us laugh, created a workplace that was fun, for all of us.

February 13, 1988: temperature: minus thirty-one degrees; with wind chill, minus fifty-degrees – no kidding. Dennis and I had tickets for the opening ceremonies. We dressed in the warmest clothes we owned, and took our sleeping bag so we could wrap ourselves into it. A very good friend kindly offered to look after Artisan Studios so we could attend this signature event and still keep our store open. We headed off to McMahon Stadium, and as they say, “let the Games begin.” We were two frozen blocks of ice as we stumbled back onto the C-Train at the end of the ceremonies, only to find that we had not had a single customer, the entire day. The whole city was either at the opening ceremonies, at home watching it on TV, or just plain inside, because of the cold. The next two weeks were amazing. After the blistering cold at the opening ceremonies, Chinook winds swooped in, and gale force conditions halted some events more than

once. The weather was so unseasonably warm, downtown bars opened their patios, and one big party atmosphere prevailed. The ACC outlets were busy, but sales were slow. We had incredible work. The Council had done a superb job of selecting the art work. We had one-of-a-kind, everything: wooden sleighs that were future heirlooms, hand-etched stone plaques, blown glass, weaving, pottery, silver jewellery, silk, woollens and fur hats. It was a cacophony of colour, texture and beauty. The ACC hosted a special event at their Performing Arts Centre site and the Minister of Culture presided over the opening of the store. Just one week to go.

So, if you haven't already guessed, it seems that Dennis' lot in life is to forever see challenges, just over the horizon. Once again, these challenges will take him away from his studio. This time, it will be the mid-1990's before Dennis gets back into his studio again, and only for short period of time. During that interval, though, he created some impressive plates and large bowls. After that, he doesn't get back to his own work until our move to Naramata in 2006.

Now, about those challenges that beckon, and that horizon he keeps seeing. During the early fall of 1987, Dennis had been introduced to Mr. Strater Crowfoot, head of economic development for the Siksika Nation, located east of Calgary at Gleichen. Dennis' introduction was made by none other than, Margaret Best. Mr. Crowfoot had, on his desk, a proposal for the implementation of a pottery training program with the ultimate aim of starting a small production facility. Margaret made Dennis aware of the proposal, and some apparent dissatisfaction with it. The proposer: none other than that careless lout who didn't put Dennis' wine goblets together properly when they were students at the University of Calgary. Perhaps, that was why the plan was poorly presented. Margaret was marketing First Nations artwork made in Cluny, and had established a very good rapport with Strater. She felt he would be very receptive to Dennis' skills and

experience, so Margaret very kindly invited Dennis along on one of her trips, and an introduction was made. Margaret went on her way, and Dennis continued discussions with Strater. After a short consultation with a Siksika board member, Mr. Crowfoot invited Dennis to put together a counter-proposal for his department.

Meanwhile: back to the Olympics project. Dennis was advised that his counter-proposal to the Siksika had been accepted, and he had the go-ahead for implementation. Oh yeah, you guessed it, immediately! While working with Lesley, Dennis discovered she had a diploma from the Ontario College of Art with a major in ceramics. She hadn't worked as a potter for some time, but her abilities were as obvious to him, as they were to me. Dennis needed an assistant, fast. Dennis advised me that he would be leaving the Olympic project before the take-down of the athletes' village sites, and he wouldn't be able to handle the return of stock from these sites. Oh yes, he was taking Lesley with him in order to get the curriculum and studio organized. My best person: poached!

By sheer good luck, a competent, young woodworker named Scott Harris stepped up to the challenge, and into Dennis' shoes. Scott's work was for sale at the ACC sites, and he took over the management of these venues and their shut-down phase. Volunteer co-ordination basically ran itself, as the need for their manpower was winding down. By now, the ACC had a manager for the Performing Arts Centre venue once the Olympics were over. Basically, I had clean-up to do and turnover of the project to the Council. My cheque for ten percent of sales was one month's rent. Oh, well. Lessons learned: craft sales during an Olympic event are a great idea, but are not a great business decision. In 1988, promotional pins were the rage, and if ACC had sold kitschy pins, they might actually have made more money. Also note to self: no matter what anyone tells you, business does not boom in the host city after an Olympics.

I ramped up my plans for the sale of Artisan, and it was finally purchased in December 1988. The new owner took over in January, and my presence was required for one month to help with transition. After a few weeks at home, I began to realize that, financially, I needed to get back to work. I called a dear colleague, now an associate vice-president, to ask him if he would act as a reference. I was looking for work. He said, "Would you like your old job back?" Yes, there is a god, and she's a research administrator! On April Fool's Day, 1989, I was back in Research Services. It was now under the supervision of a new director, who also started work on April first. After our very successful working relationship, he and his wife remain our dear friends.

Finally, our regular income was re-established, giving Dennis the chance to, "think outside the box." So, exactly what had been happening with Dennis?



NANT MILL SIGN  
12.5" X 26"  
CONE 10 STONEWARE  
c 1986  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

Nant Mill was a grist mill and dairy situated on the Clywedog River, near Coedpoeth, Wales. The Mill was managed for about one hundred years by the Evans family. It is now a historical site.

## CHAPTER 10 OLD SUN POTTERY



Mr. Strater Crowfoot, the great grandson of Chief Crowfoot, a signatory of Treaty 7, had been elected Chief of the Siksika. Under Chief Crowfoot's leadership, Dennis moved forward with the creation of a fifty-two week ceramics training program. He built a gas fired kiln and special equipment, ordered potters wheels, clay and materials, and, once again, created a classroom/studio from nothing. The ceramics training program introduced skills to the Siksika students to prepare them for a semi-industrial production facility that was in its germination stage. Product would be made available for a proposed interpretive centre and for sale across Canada.

With that in mind, training did not take the traditional art school direction. Drawing upon Dennis' experience from the penitentiary, JBK Pottery, Swaziland, and his own studio, the curriculum emphasized Siksika design and culture. Twenty students were recruited and divided into two classes; one group in the morning and one in the afternoon. While one group was in the studio, the other took upgrading in mathematics, English and bookkeeping. The ultimate objective for this project was the creation of a facility owned and operated by the Siksika Nation as a means of diversifying their

economic base. Now, what about First Nations, rural Alberta, and welfare culture? This community was a challenging blend of individuals; some individuals were products of their Aboriginal heritage, subtly flavoured with small town, and rural Alberta, attitudes. This “mix” was further convoluted by what the federal government, unwittingly, infused into the fabric of the Reserve: quintessential bureaucratic skill. Centuries of government management has social welfare and government bureaucracy ingrained as a mind-set that can only be described as detrimental to Native people, or anyone, for that matter. When any individual always has money to spend, a good work ethic, is not easily found.

For example, one day, one of the students came late to class. Asked why he was late, his response was, “I’m on Indian time.” Dennis didn’t blink; his response was, “If your ancestors had been on Indian time, they’d have missed all their food sources that were in-season, and they’d have all starved to death, and you wouldn’t be here.” The student just smiled, sheepishly, and went to work. More accurately stated, the student might have said he was on “welfare time.”

Likewise, small town, rural attitudes manifested themselves in unique ways. One day Dennis was having a salad containing a variety of fresh vegetables including green pepper. One of the students asked, “What are you eating?” Dennis replied, “Green pepper.” The student’s response was, “That’s not Indian food.” Dennis asked, “What’s Indian food?” The reply was, “Meat and potatoes.” Dennis thought, “Boy that sounds pretty familiar to what I ate when I was growing up.” Never mind that peppers were transported to Europe by early explorers to North America.

A very special benefit of working on the Reserve, and being accepted by the locals, was that Dennis and Lesley were often invited to attend social gatherings. In July, the Siksika hosted an annual Pow Wow

on the banks of the Bow River, south of Gleichen. A traditional canopy, using aspen branches and their leaves for shade, was constructed for visitors. Dancers, in full ceremonial dress, descended into the arena. The sight, combined with the drumming, was very emotional. Performances were uninhibited; there was neither media coverage, nor any non-Native audience, to speak of. Interestingly though, the week before the Pow Wow, one of the students had come to Lesley and told her his four year old son was excitedly asking him about, "going to see the Indians." Bless him; this little fellow had not been tainted by the concept of race or colour. But, it was sad, too; the child didn't identify with his culture.

Training was in full swing. Students were taught hand-building, wheel work and slip casting techniques. Every project was purpose driven in order to develop a marketable giftware line. The approach to hand-building and wheel work was what, normally, would be found in most art schools. Slip casting was another matter, as it is not generally taught at post secondary institutions. Dennis designed projects around the creation of vase shapes using a very simple technique to form the plaster proto-type. This technique could be used in any studio setting without major investment in plaster equipment. Some students were outstanding in challenging themselves. They took the basic information and created original, large and magnificent work with surfaces ideal for decoration. Two student works are next to the fireplace in our home in Naramata. Dennis says he has had the good fortune to meet two "naturals" in his life time. One is Bob Lem, who was a fellow student during University of Calgary days; the other is Keith Red Gun, a student in the Siksika training program.

By February 1989, classes were coming to the end, and Mother Nature opted to send the graduates off in grand style. The weather was horrendous, and the commute to Gleichen was dangerous.

On the way out to work, Dennis skidded into the ditch, and later that very same day, just a little further down the road, Lesley was not only in the ditch, but rolled her car and had to be hospitalized for three days. Dennis was left to handle both classes in the last week of the program, as well as prepare for the graduation ceremonies slated to be held in Strathmore, Alberta. He didn't care, one bit. Thank god, our dear friend was alive, and that was all we cared about.

So, the students graduated, but there was no production facility in which to go to work. While the training program was in progress, the Siksika Nation was busy building a new administration building as well as a specially designed building to house the production pottery facility. It was going to take close to a year for the facility to be ready, and the economic development officer was not about to lose a good contractor, so Dennis was not idle. Dennis knew exactly what equipment was needed, and they hired him to manufacture it.

In August 1989 my dad took ill, and as it turned out, he never left hospital. He and mom had moved back to Medicine Hat, Alberta to enjoy their retirement in a smaller city. Never sick a day in his life, he suddenly developed pancreatitis and was airlifted to the Calgary General Hospital. In October he died. Dennis visited my dad every day, and for this I was so grateful. During my dad's stay in hospital, Dennis and I would seek solace in each other, and we took long walks in the Weaselhead, a wilderness area on the edge of a beautiful residential community called Lakeview.

In January 1990, Dennis and I decided it was time to leave Falconridge, and lo and behold, we found the perfect fixer-upper at a really good price in Lakeview, that beautiful district on the edge of the Weaselhead and Glenmore Park where we had spent time together. It was January when Dennis and I put our house up for sale – a rather unlikely time of year to sell property, but a warm Chinook wind

was blowing; temperatures soared. People came out in droves to view our house, and we sold within twenty-four hours of listing. You won't believe it, but the buyers were a young couple who grew up in Manitoba; the young lady had been taught by an aunt. I think my dad must have "sent" them to us. Originally, our move was slated for August, but circumstances changed for the sellers, and they asked us to take possession in April. Our purchasers agreed, and the shift of house and studio was on. Again, it snowed just before our moving day, but this time it was April, and the sun was warm. Our Christmas cactus burst into bloom in our new home; the move was blessed.

On a foggy day in November, the entire Evans family was rocked to its core. Our sixteen year old nephew was driving to a school-sanctioned, sporting event, and died in a car accident on Fourteenth Street S.W., a few blocks from his home, and ours. The young, inexperienced driver of the car had decided to maneuver his vehicle around a line of traffic, and unwittingly slammed into a light standard. Darren died at the scene. The family gathered around each other, trying to make sense of our loss, and trying to figure out why such a cruel twist of fate would have befallen such a life-loving boy. Dennis' twin brother, Darren's father, wrote a letter to the court, forgiving the young man who was driving, urging the judge to be lenient in his sentencing, not wanting to see two lives lost. Somehow, everyone had to go on without this sweet young man.

Now then, just before our move in the spring, Dennis was asked by the person in charge of Siksika economic development to set-up a commercial sewing machine operation. As I mentioned, this new fellow was very shrewd, and he knew exactly who could get a job done. This new project was intended to employ ten Siksika women in the manufacture of a variety of sewn goods, ranging from heavy fleece jackets, using imported American Indian blankets; sweatshirts with quilted flashings, bags; whatever it took to generate sales.



OLD SUN PLATE  
10" DIAMETER  
CONE 6 OXIDATION  
c 1991  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST



OLD SUN VASE  
4" DIAMETER  
CONE 6 OXIDATION  
c 1991  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

The administrator for economic development envisioned a training program and the set-up of a production operation, using Dennis' already successful model for pottery. Dennis dove in; knowing nothing about sewing operations; he was on a steep learning curve. This was before Internet, so he had a lot of leg work to do, beginning with personal visits to industrial sewing machine distributors. He met with representatives at Sun Ice, the official Olympic garment manufacturers, as well as other smaller, garment makers in Calgary. Armed with information garnered from these resources, Dennis recruited an instructor, built cutting tables and storage units, ordered materials, as well as serger sewing machines. Sun Ice generously filled Dennis' half-ton truck full of bolt ends and boxes of partially used thread – enough for the entire training program, and then some, all at no charge. Operations were set-up in the hay loft of a barn located on the Reserve – bearing in mind, the loft was insulated, heated and dry-walled, making it quite habitable.

After the training program was completed, the entire operation was moved to space available in the new administration and commercial site. Once Dennis was satisfied the sewing machine operation was running on its own, he turned his full attention to the work needed to complete the pottery plant. In the spring of 1991, work began in earnest on the new facility. Working in our shabby little one car garage at the back of our property in Lakeview, Dennis designed and constructed ware carts, a one hundred and twenty eight-cubic foot, eight hundred thousand BTU, down draft, car kiln with automated shuttle system for the car, work tables, as well as work stations. The monster kiln needed a very special electronic ignition system, and Dennis headed off to control specialists who could build it for him. After seeing the design, hearing about its intended application, and Dennis requirements for a manual override, the amazed engineer looked at Dennis and made the profound statement, “Manual control: that’s what makes it art, isn’t it?”

August 1991: not our best summer. Our dear friend and family member, Leonard Emann, died of cancer. Not only were Leonard and Dennis friends, they were brothers-in-law, and former work colleagues from the penitentiary days. They shared so many laughs, and had intended to share so many more. That was not to be. Leonard stayed with us when he was undergoing chemotherapy treatments at the Tom Baker Centre, and he and Dennis got to spend precious time together. Leonard and my sister had been planning so many things for their retirement, and we planned to do so many things, as couples who enjoyed one another's company. Leonard's passing left an enormous hole in my sister's family, and at the age of fifty-seven, she found herself going through life, alone. Reeling in the wake of three successive family losses, in as many years, made Dennis and I vow to each other that we would do what we wanted to do, right now, rather than trusting in the future.

Picking up after this sorrow, on September 24, 1991 Dennis rented a big flatbed truck and loaded the components of the kiln, ware carts, as well as a wide selection of materials, and headed off to Gleichen to install the beginnings of the pottery factory. His plan was to use the readily available manpower at the site to help him unload. September 24<sup>th</sup> is Siksika Day; the anniversary of signing Treaty 7. This day is an annual civic holiday, and no one, absolutely not one single person, was any where to be seen. Undeterred, Dennis put together the gantry he had designed for the assembly of the kiln. Luckily, he had planned to take the gantry and had been able to get it on the truck with everything else. Using his gantry and physics, Dennis unloaded the entire shipment by himself. He was working on a strict deadline. It seems, there was only one flatbed truck in all of Calgary, or at least, that was the one and only one that he could find, when he rented the truck. The rental agency made him swear to have it back by four o'clock that same day as it was booked by another customer. Talk about meeting deadlines!

The next day, Dennis was back at the site and the assembly of the kiln began. All the welded components had been manufactured in our single car garage in Lakeview. It was like a large Meccano set. Working alone, Dennis cut all the insulating fibre to fit and fastened it into place using specially devised ties; the design developed years before at JBK Pottery. The roof of the kiln was assembled on the floor and raised into place using the same gantry used to unload it. At the same time, sub-trades had been hired to divide the industrial building into four distinct spaces: a production room, warehouse and shipping space, kiln room and office space, as per Dennis' layout. Dennis had light-heartedly promised the head of economic development that pots would be manufactured in the plant by November first, but on the first day of November, there was a huge hold-up with electrical installation, so there was no power to run the potters wheels. Undaunted, Dennis strung an electrical extension cord, all the way from the administration building and across the parking lot. He plugged in a wheel, opened a box of clay, made a pot and presented it, still wet, to the manager. The pot sat, like a trophy, on a shelf in the office.

A line of wheel thrown work, decorated with First Nations designs, and a line of slip cast vases were developed; production was underway. Of the twenty students originally trained, five were brought on board at the opening of the facility, with plans to bring on others, as needed. All of the students had been paid to attend the training program with the understanding that they would go to work in the pottery facility when it was ready. When it came time to go to work, many declined the opportunity to put their new found skills to work for a salary.

Time to travel, again: This time Dennis and I boarded a plane for Great Britain, specifically to visit Wales, and to concentrate on family history. This was our big research trip. We made contact with a

cousin, Rana, and her husband, Kelvin, and she, in turn, introduced us to her sister, Helen. The four of us had a marvelous time travelling all about, getting acquainted with this area of Wales. We visited Nant Mill, Brymbo, the Wern, and Ruthin. Dennis and I discovered how to find original documents at Somerset House, London, and we realized searching census records in Wales would have been a fool's journey without the expertise of locals. We visited Rose Cottage and Cae Llewellyn. We just adored our new found family, and we felt at home. Promises for visits to come were made.

The last leg of our trip took us to Orkney, the ancestral home of the Harray family; Dennis' maternal grandfather's birthplace. We visited the few remaining family members still residing there, and we were guided to locations that were of great significance to the Harray family's history. Upperbigging, the home of six generations of the Harray family going back to 1731; St. Michael's church and graveyard, the standing stones at Stenness, as well as the excavations at Scara Brae, all took on a special significance to us. Wales, and now Orkney, left Dennis with an ever widening sense of place, growing stronger with each successive visit to his roots. The archaeological sites appealed to our artistic and historical bents, and we promised each other to return for a longer stay.

Back in Canada, at the beginning of the New Year, Dennis began attending the major gift shows held in Edmonton and Toronto. Sales generated at these trade shows are essential to any manufacturer of giftware, and as a result of his participation in these events, Dennis was able to establish one hundred and sixty-eight outlets, right across Canada, eager for Old Sun Pottery products. The name, "Old Sun Pottery" was chosen in honour of Chief Old Sun, one of the Siksika signatories of Treaty 7. The title, "Old Sun," describes an individual as a wise elder. An outlet at the Calgary International Airport turned out to be the leader in Old Sun Pottery sales, and

every week, Dennis personally delivered several boxes to the store on his way home from work. In Old Sun Pottery's case, this outlet had double the national average in sales.

At the very beginning of his contract, Dennis had made it clear to Chief Crowfoot that once the pottery operations had commenced and were running smoothly with First Nations' people in charge; he would extract himself from the operation. The time came in March 1994. Dennis notified the Chief and Council he would be leaving, and economic development asked if he would stay on as a consultant, to visit the plant once a month to ensure operations were still running smoothly. One of the staff was installed as the office clerk with responsibility for sales. Dennis had the gift show schedule set-up for the coming year to ensure income would be sustained. One afternoon, in his role as part-time consultant, Dennis arrived at the plant expecting the staff member to be away at the Toronto gift show. The staff member was sitting in the office. When asked why he wasn't in Toronto, he replied, "Oh, I didn't feel like it." Dennis got into his truck, drove back to Calgary, and never went back.

## CHAPTER 11 GOING, GOING, GONE



After leaving Old Sun Pottery, Dennis built-on to our one car garage, expanding it into a two and one-half car size, anticipating his return to his own pottery studio.

### STUDIO THREE: GARDEN THREE:

Having been away from the production of his own functional line, Dennis began experimenting with new work and new techniques. He decided to return to a plate format – a theme that had been on hold since Dennis' graduate studies. The method of construction and the design applications were, of course, new and very large. Drawing upon all the experience gained in industrial techniques learned after university, Dennis streamlined processes to make it possible to work alone. Large plaster moulds were made for twenty-one inch plates, and twenty-one inch bowls with a four inch lip. Because of the size and weight, it was impossible for one person to turn them over during the drying process. To alleviate the need for help, Dennis conceived of and built, a "drying easel." Its operation was a sight to behold: simple and efficient – one flip was all it took. Dennis didn't lose a single piece in drying or firing.



PRE-RAPHAELITE BOWL  
21" DIAMETER  
CONE 1 OXIDATION  
C 1993  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST



HERON PLATE  
22" DIAMETER  
CONE 1 OXIDATION  
c 1996  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

However, as is the case with most hand crafted items, the labour-intensive nature of the decoration made it impossible to sell them at their real value. One pre-Raphaelite bowl design took over eight hours to carve. At best, Dennis might get minimum wage to recoup his labour, and the piece was worth so much more than that. It was, now, that he was also being contracted to build more kilns. One was created for Anita Dumins as payment for her husband's realty services; one went to the City of Calgary's recreational facility, Northmount Pleasant; another, built for a private studio in Okotoks.

But wait; is that something on the horizon? While Dennis was at Old Sun Pottery, he had a visitor from Plainsman Clay, a supply company based in Medicine Hat. This turned out to be a fortuitous visit.

#### CERAMICO STONEWARE INC.

In 1994, a not-for-profit rehabilitation agency for the mentally and physically handicapped, located in Medicine Hat, Alberta, was seeking a specialist to re-tool a pottery plant. The original plant had been designed to make ceramic, slip cast water coolers. That enterprise was unsuccessful, and now the facility had been offered to the agency. Equipment included a state-of-the-art, kiln. Dennis' contribution would be streamlining production, new product design and, the Achilles heel of every plant, market development. So, Dennis started work with the community agency that took the name, Ceramico Stoneware, for its product line. This meant a three hour drive from Calgary, in all manner of weather. Work commenced Mondays at eight o'clock. By working extra hours, Dennis could leave early Friday to make the three hour trek home – again, in any kind of weather. To reach Medicine Hat in time for work, Dennis had to leave by four-thirty, Monday morning, sometimes racing a blizzard.

The first day on the job, Dennis was informed that another expert in



CERAMICO COVERED POT  
5" HIGH  
CONE 6 OXIDATION  
c 1994  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

plant design and processes had also been contracted. Mr. George Varly was recruited through the professional industrial ceramics firm, Henshall Bramford & Partners, based in the United Kingdom. Mr. Varly, an American, spent his entire career in the industrial ceramics industry in the heart of the Ohio Valley. Varly was contracted for one week to do essentially the same job as Dennis, and he expressed his concern regarding this replication. It wasn't clear if Dennis was supposed to exploit him for his expertise, or what. Varly and Dennis conferred on this awkward matter, and the men decided to join forces. A productive, and mutually respectful, partnership resulted.

Both consultants were asked to submit productivity improvement assessments, and Dennis realized that Ceramico's mandate needed further expansion if plant capabilities were to be maximized. It was most unfortunate that the facility had already faced so many problems, not the least of which had been its original source of trainees. Originally, the community agency had tried training young men with brain injuries; the majority, as a result of car accidents. Regrettably, these young men had lost so much of their manual dexterity skill, no amount of training could restore the hand-eye coordination required to produce ceramic products. By now, all these employees had been replaced by individuals who were retraining under EI sponsored programs. Basically, this was the same employee training structure Dennis had experienced at Old Sun Pottery.

There was another glaring problem. Ceramico Stoneware was a slip-casting operation, dependent upon properly weighed and mixed plaster. Immediately, Dennis noticed workers were pouring an indeterminate amount plaster into an equally indeterminate amount of water, and promptly blending the mixture. He gently suggested there was a better way. He showed them how to weigh the water and plaster, how to introduce the plaster to the water, and to wait the

requisite amount of time before mixing. Success! Originally, the slip casting part of the operation was labour intensive, but with the addition of pumping and distribution systems, as well as mould racks, Dennis so streamlined the casting process, it very quickly became a one person procedure. Iris, one of the trainees, was the star of slip casting. She was also a star, in another field. For several years running, Iris had held top honours as the Alberta bagpipe champion, in her classification.

Dennis found Mr. Varly's industrial background to be invaluable. Varly took one look at the "Cadillac" kiln, and recognized its manufacturer. Immediately, he knew all about its special quirks, and after a few tweaks and some training the, until now, unsuccessfully fired kiln, became fully operational. Another trainee, Larry Riggall, took the kiln under wing, and he became the expert in its function. As mentioned, Varly's contract was short-term, and when he left, Dennis picked up the ball. Dennis re-designed the jigger operation, based on Varly's suggestions, and built racks and a drying chamber for these products. He also built an extruder to produce handles, and three, four foot wide turn-tables. The result was a mini assembly line. Ah, those were the days when one could get all the parts at Princess Auto to build these miraculous inventions.

The board took marketing under its wing, but regrettably, it wasn't long before the whole business fell apart. A volunteer board simply cannot be expected to make a success of a business. Volunteers do not have the time required to implement or maintain a viable marketing plan, no matter how good their intentions may be. The plant folded, and the space was leased to a local entrepreneur. The entrepreneur wanted to make kitchen gadgets, including brown sugar softeners. JBK Pottery made a similar item for years; sadly, the "heyday" for these novelty softeners had since peaked. Dennis built additional equipment for this fledgling business, but it seems that this

enterprise, too, was destined to fail. Unlike JBK Pottery, this owner knew nothing about the ceramic giftware industry. Compounded by the owner's lack of technical know-how, the business soon closed, and the equipment was sold off. The space was re-purposed, yet again.

In the matter of the sell-off of equipment; it wasn't long before Old Sun Pottery also folded. Again, the reason seemed to be, a lack of commitment and marketing by the stakeholders. One afternoon, Dennis got a call from the head of economic development, who asked Dennis for advice regarding the sell-off of pottery equipment. Dennis took this call pretty hard. After so much work to set-up a fool-proof business, how could such a viable entry been allowed to fail? What the person in economic development never knew was that, prior to their call, one of the former students had said to Dennis, in passing, "The plant's closing – I guess we needed a white guy to run it." This outcome demoralized Dennis.

One can only look back on these intense projects when enough time has passed. Only then, does a person have the perspective necessary to understand government sponsored projects, and what these really can, or cannot, accomplish. Old Sun Pottery and Ceramico Stoneware seemed predestined to fail. Why? No amount of effort in management, training or production could have saved these enterprises simply because the stakeholders had no personal or financial investment in these businesses. Boards and councils continue, whether or not such enterprises rise or fall. In the one instance, matters were compounded because the workers simply did not have to depend upon earnings from the plant; in the other plant, volunteers simply can't be expected to allot the time necessary to run a business that is not theirs.

With hindsight, it seems the same fundamental flaw permeates many

business initiatives undertaken with government and NGO sponsorship in Third World countries, as well. When John Foofat retired from his assignments, he looked back on his twenty-five year career, and was devastated to realize that nothing he initiated, in countless African and Oceanic countries, still existed. John brought enthusiasm, knowledge, creative approaches, and hard work to every project he was assigned. He worked countless hours to bring stability to all manner of small business and the employees who staffed them, but to no lasting end. The problems inherent in these projects were mirrored by those Dennis undertook. Is it possible that somewhere, someday, a project initiated by either of these men will rise out of the ashes? Possible, but doubtful.

So what kept Dennis going? I think it was very simple. It was the degree of personal satisfaction gained from taking on an incubator project. Dennis thrived on the challenge of a project that involved the creation of something from the ground up, under unique and/or intense, circumstances with a tangible result at the end. Each project presented a more stimulating environment than a nine-to-five job, and Dennis had to rely entirely on his own abilities.

In March 1996, Dennis and I went off for a two week visit with Marjorie and John Foofat. John had decided to retire, and he and Marjorie were back in Britain for good. We arrived at Stream Cottage, a historical, thatched cottage at the edge of the historical village, Odiham, in Hampshire, just a skip from London. It was owned by John's mentor, John Major. The four of us went touring about England including Blenheim Castle, Warwick, Stratford-on-Avon, and Burton-on-the-Water. Having left Canada with a minimum of cash, we were nearly broke by the time we paid the exorbitant entry fees associated with the Trust sites. We left the Foofats to venture on to Folly Farm, near Bristol where we again visited with Ali and Christopher Johnson. Folly Farm is a Trust property which, at



FLOWERS ALONG THE FENCE  
GARDEN THREE: LAKEVIEW



CALGARY FLOWERS  
GARDEN THREE: LAKEVIEW

this time, had been untouched since the 1800's. The huge stone farm house was colder inside, than out. When we left for southern Wales, crossing the enormous bridge over the Severn, I thought I would never feel warm again. We didn't venture north to visit with any of the Evans'. Instead, we visited Cardiff and the Welsh Museum as well as other historical sites in the south. While at the Welsh Museum, Dennis struck up a conversation with the miller, and explained his connection to Nant Mill. The miller was charming, and he presented Dennis with a wooden tooth that was part of the mechanics in the milling process. He inscribed it with his name and the date. We cherish this example of pre-industrialization in England, and what it meant in relationship to Nant Mill. It seems Dennis and I have another link in common. My maternal great grandfather was a miller in Russia. His descendant runs an organic mill on my great grandmother's property in southern Saskatchewan. Anyway, it was time to return to Canada; the lilacs were blooming in London, and we were going back to snow banks.

A few notes about our Lakeview garden. This garden was the most ambitious we had ever undertaken. It surrounded the house on all four sides, and included three ponds. Our house sat on a hill which meant the lawn was nearly impossible to cut. Before Xeriscaping was a buzz-word, we stripped off the lawn and replaced it with rocks, bark and perennials. We were shocked when we dug into the soil; it was dead. Years of fertilizing left the soil devoid of nutrients, living creatures like worms, and starved everything of moisture. The dirt was a mass of nodules; unpleasant to touch. What a difference we made in the course of our fifteen years of gardening at this location. One day we came home to find a young couple ensconced in the side yard with their tri-pod, busily photographing flowers. We waved, they waved, and everyone was happy. Oh, did I mention, we purchased half of an old laneway, adjacent to our lot? Stay tuned.

## CHAPTER 12

### UP A HILL; UP A MOUNTAIN



Suddenly, Dennis had no contracts. The equipment manufacturing component of Nant Mill Pottery dried up; there were no other pottery manufacturing plants anywhere in Canada requiring his expertise, and no overseas opportunities seemed on the horizon. So, it was back to the studio. For a time, the slowdown of his formerly productive business impacted Dennis' health. He worked very hard to develop coping skills to deal with the anxiety attacks that sometimes left him creatively and emotionally crippled. Slowly, Dennis began to work his way back, emotionally, by painting.

He had, over the years, collected a very large inspirational resource for his paintings, and now was the time to tap into these materials. Like his old friend, Santo said, "The muses can be cruel mistresses if they're neglected," and Dennis found he needed many concentrated hours of work to re-acquaint himself with his brushes and paint. The foothills west of Calgary became a particular inspiration and resource. Some days, he simply got in the car and drove south towards Priddis, or to the northwest, to Cochrane. Taking his camera, he photographed the landscape to stimulate his creative mind. Once Dennis had created a significant body of work, he began

approaching galleries in and around Calgary to see if someone would market his paintings. A number of galleries agreed, on the condition that he use their framing facilities and their choice of frames, before they would actually hang the work. After a significant financial investment in frames, and after a couple of months of no sales to recoup his basic costs, the galleries asked Dennis to remove his pieces so they could make room for the next sucker!

By now, Dennis decided, financially, he had find employment outside his studio, and that he had to present himself, professionally, in the interviews. To prepare for the new style of interviewing now cropping up in business, Dennis enrolled in a professional development program geared to help the participant find the right job “fit.” It seemed to work, the first interview was with a company called, the Status Factory, specializing in cast pewter promotional items. He was hired. Would this just be another trial in disguise?

Again, Dennis was faced with a very steep learning curve in order to master the processes required to produce the pewter products to the standard he wanted. This little business had so much potential, but it also had so many issues to overcome. Not the least of which, turns out to be the owner, himself. Okay, so Dennis had another windmill to tilt at. Exactly how he manages to wander into these mine fields, only the gods seem to know, and they're not talking.

The redeeming feature at the Status Factory was the staff. They were a really great bunch of workers – first generation Vietnamese Canadians. A lot of these individuals had been in refugee camps in Thailand and Cambodia; some had been rescued from boats out at sea. Some had lost family members during this horrible time in their lives. As new Canadians, some couldn't practice their profession. One of the best skilled painters was Su San who was trained as a doctor; she was called Susan. This was Dennis' first experience with

the working poor, and he had infinite respect for them. Many had to have more than one job just to make ends meet, so after finishing work at Status at five o'clock, they went on to their next workplace.

The previous plant manager was fired for selling product out the back door. It seems, this fellow went in on the weekends and manufactured products for orders obtained "on the side." Because there had been no production manager over the previous couple of months, the plant had spiralled down to a point where it was almost non-functioning. The owner had no idea how to operate his own plant, seeing himself strictly as the "sales" force. So, Dennis had no back-up regarding processes. He had to hit the ground running because several major orders were pending, not the least of which was one for the illustrious client, the Calgary Stampede. In the lead up to the launch of the Stampede, it was not uncommon to produce ten thousand lapel pins in an extremely short turn-around time. This meant that when the regular staff went home, Dennis picked up the slack to finish the order, often working all night. In the first few months after starting with the Status Factory, Dennis lost so much weight; he looked like a refugee from a concentration camp.

As mentioned, these processes were new to Dennis. During his first week at the Status Factory he struggled valiantly to cope with technical issues affecting the plating process. He even consulted the former owner, by telephone. The fellow, sitting by the pool at his home in Phoenix, suggested fix after fix that never worked. Finally, he recommended sending samples to Toronto for analysis. A fax came back with a breakdown, and suggestions for a very simple correction. Appropriate chemicals were added and voila, everything worked. After getting periodic tests done on all the tanks, Dennis clearly understood all the requirements for the maintenance of each tank, adding chemicals as needed. Never again would Dennis fall prey to the nasty problems caused by such bad maintenance.



BALE YARD  
18" X 20"  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
c 1995  
PRIVATE COLLECTION



ASPENS  
16" X 20"  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
c 1995  
PRIVATE COLLECTION

One process in the creation of proto-types for casting involved engraving an image into brass. The concept was first plotted out using computer software, and then the file was transferred to an automated engraver. It reformatted the image and engraved it onto a large plastic master. This master was then used as a pattern for the hand engraving process. The large master was eight times larger than the final products which were, typically, only three-quarters of an inch across. Cutting bits were sharpened to a tolerance of two thousandths of an inch. This precision was a totally new experience for Dennis; it was simply never required in studio pottery. The actual casting process was a pleasant surprise though, as it had so many similarities to the casting processes in pottery production. The moulds were rubber, not plaster; the material was pewter, not clay, but the scale – now that was positively teeny, tiny.

Alas, again the Achilles heel: marketing and sales. The sales staff had little or no concept of production scheduling. The salesmen would take orders and promise any delivery date, just to get the sale. That often required overtime, and even working all night, to meet the customer's deadline. You can't tell little kids playing in Tim Horton's Tim Bits Hockey Tournament; their medallion will be sent to them the day, after, the tournament. The "disconnect" between sales and production was an on-going source of tension and stress for the production manager and his staff, but after a year or so, Dennis had the sales management trained, to a point. He always had to be on guard for lapses in their judgment that could throw off his delicately balanced production operation. The company specialty was a small run, and short timelines. They produced work for the Calgary Police Force, the Calgary Stampede, Spruce Meadows, numerous oil companies, and many non-profit organizations, airlines, sports organizations, universities and others, located throughout western Canada – except for the brass frogs that went to Iowa for trophies in an annual frog racing competition. Go figure, frog racing!

Dennis tried to introduce new items to the product line, thinking beyond promotional items, in order to diversify the business. He developed numerous proto-types which he presented to the owner. The owner was always very enthusiastic about what he saw; he routinely put them on his credenza, and when asked about them later, he would always say, "I'll get on that real soon." Dennis could see that there was a definite limit to the profit that could be generated from promotional items, alone, and that the plant needed to start making giftware, small statuettes, frames and home decor items. A multitude of ideas were generated by Dennis and the owner's wife, who was also eager to see the business grow. These went nowhere. It became obvious that the owner's pathological inertia was impacting on the survival of his business. Clearly, it was floundering when Dennis was asked to postpone depositing his pay cheque, so he started looking for another position, somewhere else.

Of course, there were some very positive sides to his job at the Status Factory, not the least of which was some staff as well as the chance to learn processes in an industry completely new to Dennis' extensive repertoire of expertise. The production staff was a lot of fun to work with, and they had a great sense of humour, even though many had come from unbelievably traumatic experiences from their homelands. The owner also had a knack of drawing a very eccentric group of associates around him – a male psychiatric nurse, a Mormon, a unemployed historian, and the ever suffering, wife.

Staffing was a challenge because the business could only afford to pay minimum wage. One regular source of manpower was through a placement organization that dealt with the "unemployable." This organization trained new immigrants, hard-to-place individuals, and young adults who had bi-polar or schizophrenic disorders. Dennis' patience and encouragement made him a particular favourite with the organization whenever they had real difficulties in finding a job for a

hard-to-place client. There were two individuals who must be mentioned in this context. The first was Kyle. When he first came to work, Dennis put him in charge of the plating room. It was a pretty complicated process with a number of very dangerous chemicals. After a few days, Kyle wanted to leave as he couldn't handle the stress. The placement officer came, expecting to remove Kyle altogether. However, Dennis simply accepted Kyle's declaration, and suggested that he try the casting room instead. The placement officer was absolutely amazed that Kyle would be given a second chance, and Kyle responded so positively to the casting room, Dennis was completely satisfied with the job being done.

The second success story was Sharmani – a mail order bride from Fiji. She was a new Canadian, and the placement organization had prepared her for employment by teaching her the basics of English and mathematics. Dennis put Sharmani in charge of shipping and receiving. She was so good, and so accurate in her counts that Dennis could actually challenge a customer who claimed being shorted in their order because he knew Sharmani's accuracy was unquestionable. It meant a great deal to Dennis that when he left the Status Factory, the agency made a point of acknowledging his role in creating a supportive work environment for their clients.

Of course, as in any workforce, there is always a wide range of personalities, and one never really knows how an individual is "wired" and what forces are working on them. Some have family problems, some have financial stress, and some have dependency problems. The Status Factory employees had all of these issues. One individual was particularly fragile, and the torments he had, Dennis could only guess. One morning during a long weekend, the owner's wife arrived at work and found Graham had taken his life inside their plant. He had access to some particularly dangerous chemicals, and his death was not gentle. His work at the Status Factory had been

exemplary. The entire staff was devastated by his loss, and Dennis was particularly impacted by his death. Dennis had been grooming Graham for greater responsibility within the production area. Graham left a note for Dennis. The whole staff attended his funeral, but it was only years later that Dennis discovered Graham's family had left his grave unmarked. It seems, they just moved on; abandoning Graham in death, just as they had in life. Their cold, detached attitude towards their son had been palpable from their behaviour at the funeral.

Of course, there are always a few jokers on staff, too. Well, almost on staff. The owner's two little girls travelled with their parents' everyday from a small community outside Calgary to attend day care. After day care they descended upon the Status Factory, entertaining each other while waiting for the trip home, and that's when the test of Dennis' patience also began. One of the little girls had a terrific imagination. Her father's car was notorious for being a pig sty with used hamburger boxes, milk shake cartons, flyers, pop cans, you name it. One evening on the trip home, Miriam, who was sitting in the back with her baby sister, announced to her parents who were sitting in the front seat that there were "rats under her seat." After all, she could hear them. Unfazed, her mother simply told her, "Put your feet up." Dennis referred to these quips as "Miriam-isms." Another day, when Miriam was particularly bored, she washed her sister's hair in the toilet bowl. Dennis was forever sending the girls, with their mother, back upstairs. The kids always wanted to visit Dennis, but the hazardous materials and dangerous equipment made it no place to play. Sometimes, it seemed the hazards were only Dennis' worry.

It was time to go back to Wales; this time to celebrate the advent of the Millennium. We nearly didn't leave because of an accident involving my mother. She was quite frail by now; however, with coaxing, my sister stepped to the plate, and we were able to make

arrangements that permitted our departure. About two days before we were scheduled to leave, a letter arrived in our mailbox. It contained a list identifying members of the Reed family. Dennis' maternal grandmother and family were pre-Confederation settlers in Canada originating from Norfolk, England. Armed with this list, we rented a car at Heathrow and headed straight for Norwich, arriving on the heels of a snow storm. We trekked out to Runham, a little hamlet close to Great Yarmouth that had been the Reed's family home. There, in the graveyard of a decaying Norman church, amid the snow and ice, we scraped at the tombstones in a valiant attempt to find Dennis' ancestors. We were expected in Wales, and had to move on far too quickly for our liking, so we vowed to come back. The winter moon, on the shortest day of December 1999, watched our departure.

We arrived in Wales in time for Christmas celebrations and were treated to perfectly cooked lamb prepared by Ian Pritchard Jones. When Ian, his mom, Helen, and his grandmother, Ruth, visited us in Calgary in 1998, it was decided that we would visit them to celebrate the start of the Millennium. Unfortunately, shortly after arriving in Britain, Dennis took very ill, and nearly missed all the fun. Between Christmas and New Year's celebrations, another cousin, Rana Thompson, organized a family reunion of grand sorts, and Evans' came from everywhere, imaginable. We were so blessed to meet so many relatives, and we felt like we'd known them for years. The evening of the reunion was the first time Dennis had been out of bed for a whole week. We spent New Year's Eve with Helen Roberts, Rana's sister. At midnight we walked home in the dark, the sky lit with fireworks set off at various points on the hillside. Dennis' ancestors must have been walking with us, we felt so content.

Dennis held on at the Status Factory until 2001 when an ad appeared in the Calgary Herald. The Canadian Craft and Hobby Association

had a vacancy for an executive director. The successful candidate had to have skills in accounting, publishing and trade show organization. This was right down Dennis' alley. His diverse background makes a very impressive resume, and he was hired. Even though Dennis had experience in the areas advertised, it was still a sharp learning curve because each of the areas was structured very specifically to this industry. It was trial by fire: Dennis started at the beginning of March 2001, and his first task was to handle a trade show in Halifax the first week of April. He had to publish the organization's trade magazine, "Canadian Craft Trade," as well as get the show guide ready. Then, it was off to Halifax, landing at the airport in the pitch black of night. Dennis rented a car and drove to the hotel. It was nearly midnight, and he had to be up and ready to go by eight o'clock Halifax time – a mind numbing three hour time difference from Calgary. The morning of the show dawned with a maritime ice storm nearly shutting Halifax down. No one with the CCHA could have realized the impact this storm had, as it seriously deterred attendance over the following two days.

There were internal storms at that first trade show as well. The first "fire" that Dennis had to put out was between two vendors. The hotel misrepresented the amount of floor space it had available to host the trade show. The length of the hall was ten feet shorter than what they had advertised, so each vendor had to give up a foot in each display area. Industry standard is a ten foot booth, so any vendor arriving with a pre-designed, hard wall display, was impacted. Two of the vendors got into a fight – the words were colourful, and many. Ever the diplomat, and the new guy on the job, Dennis sought out the wisdom of the godfather in the trade. He advised Dennis to leave them alone, and that they'd sort it out on their own – he was absolutely right. There were smiles all around by the next day.

On the day prior to the opening of the show, Dennis and I explored

Halifax and drove to Peggy's Cove. It was wet and slushy; some of the roads in Halifax were closed due to downed trees. Even so, we could see the area was very beautiful, and we regretted not having more time to experience a different part of Canada. At the end of the two days, it was off to Ottawa to check out the venue for the September trade show. It was going to be held under the bleachers of Lansdowne Park where the Ottawa Roughriders play football.

By now, it started to dawn on Dennis that some details were omitted during the interview. The organization's finances were far from the rosy picture painted for him. In fact, the CCHA had not made a profit in over five years. More to the point, in some years there had been a huge deficit. So, Dennis set about getting the Edmonton show on track, as the Alberta shows were historically the best, financially. Reviewing the budget, Dennis could see there were extravagances in certain areas of spending. The board meetings were moved from their traditionally, expensive hotel conference facilities into the modest room at the CCHA office, printing costs were cut in half with no decrease in output, Information to members was actually increased with more mail outs, and staffing was trimmed. In the first full year under Dennis' management, the organization showed a profit of forty thousand dollars. After a successful show at the Northlands Agricom in Edmonton, Dennis plunged ahead with plans for Ottawa.

Unfortunately, Dennis did not get to Ottawa. My mother died on September 8<sup>th</sup>. She was buried in Medicine Hat on September 10, 2001. The very next day was the infamous 9/11 incident. As we drove along Highway 1 from Medicine Hat, back to Calgary, the road was, eerily, deserted. Not surprisingly, 9/11 had a huge impact on attendance in Ottawa. The two board members, who covered for Dennis, came home distressed both by the events of 9/11, and the Association's poor financial performance at the show. As a result,

the organization did some rethinking, and concluded that the eastern portion of the trade shows had to move back to Toronto. Dennis manned the office until finances permitted the hiring of one staff member to manage office tasks, so he could focus on publishing and trade show organization.

Dennis surveyed CCHA's entire membership, and determined the best time for the Toronto show would be in the fall, after the summer, before the Christmas rush for orders. This information was put before the president in early spring to allow sufficient lead time for advertising. However, by the time all the organization should have been underway, the president was still "considering" the proposal. He didn't want to do what was recommended, no matter how well argued, but he didn't suggest a viable alternative. Now, the board and the executive director were at a stalemate.

News came that the Status Factory had been taken over by a new management group that sounded promising. They presented themselves as a venture capital group, and invited Dennis to come back as general manager.

Dennis resigned from the CCHA as their management style had become untenable. Later, Dennis learned that the trade show was eventually held in Toronto, but on a different date. As it turned out, this was a very good thing. Had it been held when Dennis wanted, it would have coincided with the outbreak of SARS in Toronto in that same year. However, some years later, Dennis also read in the news that the former board member and person hired to replace him embezzled over a hundred thousand dollars to cover her gambling debits. She was facing criminal charges and a possible jail term.

Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.

Intrigued by the offer from the Status Factory, it was with high hopes that Dennis had handed in his resignation at CCHA, and returned to the Status Factory, finding that the production staff was now dominated by Afghanis. Basically, the employees were one extended family, controlled by the head of the family. Dennis' extensive experience working with new Canadians hadn't prepared him for the tribal mentality of these employees, and in particular, the man who was now head of casting. He was a Workers' Compensation Board nightmare, insisting on wearing sandals in the casting room where hot metal routinely fell on the floor. Amullah Safari was the only male among the other Afghanis. His wife, two sisters-in-law and a niece were all part of the staff. One pay day, he came to Dennis and demanded Dennis hand over the girls' pay cheques. Dennis shook his head, and flatly refused. On another occasion, Amullah Safari got into a dispute with his brother. That meant one of the sisters-in-law was also part of the disagreement. He marched into Dennis' office and demanded that Dennis fire the female employee. Again, Dennis told him no, and to keep his disputes out of the workplace.

Very soon, though, it became obvious that the front office at the Status Factory was still in disarray. Dennis took over supervision of production to ensure customers got their orders, all the while being assured by management, they were working on a business plan. So, Dennis went on holidays with the understanding that when he returned in September, the new plan would be implemented. He would assume the general manager's position for which he had been hired. With great anticipation, Dennis arrived at the office after his holidays to attend the staff meeting scheduled to implement the changes. The meeting was convened. It went downhill from there.

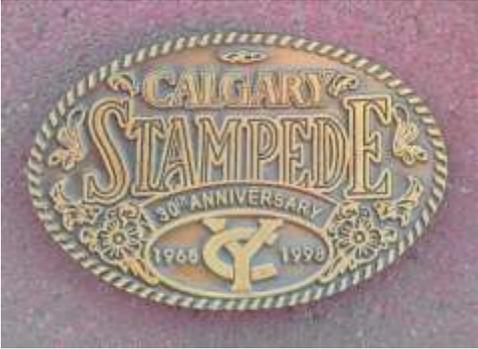
During the previous four months, neither old nor new owners had done anything to develop sales. No sales; no salary for employees, including Dennis, simple as that. At the staff meeting that morning,

Dennis felt that he had been hit with a brick. It was apparent that not only had nothing been done about sales; no one had had done anything remotely associated with the survival of the business. The strategy, formulated by these supposedly, professional new venture capitalists, was a one page spread sheet which they tried to pass off as their business plan. Dennis exploded. He says he was so angry he was shaking. Facing the owners across the boardroom table, he said, "This is the most pathetic thing, I've ever seen." He turned, and walked out the door; gone for good. When I spoke to him later in the day, I knew Dennis was despondent. He had been sorely let down, and the trauma of the day's events was evident in his voice. Not surprisingly, the Status Factory's doors closed permanently, about one week after Dennis' departure.

The company's legacy: the emotional toll it took on Dennis, compounded by the fact that Dennis was owed several months in unpaid wages. He was never able to collect as the company folded. Soon afterward, he was contacted by numerous suppliers with whom he built up good rapport on behalf of the owners, and was informed they were also out thousands of dollars. The owners – new and old – showed absolutely no remorse. In 2005, Dennis received a letter from Revenue Canada advising him that his former employer was in arrears for Canada Pension and Employment Insurance premiums collected from the employees. Collected, but never submitted. Dennis' reply to Revenue Canada was succinct, but he never heard the outcome of the review. About this time, too, Dennis found out that Jim Kalbfleisch had been finessed out of his controlling interest in his business by a venture capital group headed up by none other than someone I knew as a former head of a major technology commercialization office. Ethics in business - apparently not.

Prior to retirement, one last contract for a customized kiln came Dennis' way in 2004. Larry Riggall, his old buddy from the Medicine

Hat project, was now working for a drill bit company located in Redcliff, Alberta. The business needed a kiln to heat up drill bits in order to extract the individual bits for repair. The kiln was commissioned in October. Dennis was now fully focused on our plans to retire at the end of 2005 and getting his own studio ready for our ultimate move from Calgary.



STATUS FACTORY LAPEL PIN

## CHAPTER 13

### PUSH “RESTART”



When my mother died in September 2001, I inherited a modest sum of money, and Dennis and I started thinking about retirement. We decided somewhere with a gentler climate was what we wanted. On the Thanksgiving weekend we headed off to Kelowna arriving amid rain and cool temperatures. The next morning Dennis and I started exploring. Our first excursion was south along Highway 33 to find a small acreage listed in a real estate publication. After about forty minutes, the road getting steadily less and less populated, we looked at each other and said, “We could get lost out here and nobody would ever find us!” U-turn. Back to Kelowna. South to Penticton.

Arriving in Penticton, we again hunted up a real estate magazine, and began searching the listings. A tiny entry said, “House for sale in the village of Naramata.” Pat: “What, there’s a village – you never told me.” Dennis: “What village? I never knew there was a village!” Pat and Dennis: “Let’s go see.” It seemed like we drove and drove and drove, but in fact, it was only twenty minutes. Why had we never found the village before this time? We descended Robinson Avenue, in the falling light of the afternoon and parked outside the Naramata Store. We walked towards the lake and there, at the

mouth of the Naramata Creek, a blue heron was fishing for his supper. We were smitten. How could we get a place here?

On the way out of Naramata, we drove by the house advertised in the real estate magazine. On Monday morning we phoned the listing realtor, and asked to see the property. "Sorry, I can't show you anything until Wednesday." The agent couldn't be bothered to see if anyone else in his office was available. Yikes, now what. Undaunted, Dennis called another realtor, and still no one was available! One more call. If no one co-operated, we were going home! A charming gentleman picked up the phone, and we met at his office. We were loaded into his car, and off to Naramata we went. We toured the village, heard the details about the Blackwell water dispute, learned about septic fields and their limitations relating to development on small properties. We were told that the house prices had bottomed out because of the Blackwell dispute, and had nowhere to go but up. We felt welcome. On Wednesday morning, we headed home to Calgary with eight hours to talk about all the possibilities for the property. By Thursday morning, we presented our offer. The house was ours on 1 December 2001.

We were busy making plans for Christmas in Naramata when we received a call from the Viking Hospital. Lillian, Dennis mother, was in the hospital, but the whole family was expecting her release that weekend. The call was from the doctor, informing Dennis that his mother had passed away, very suddenly. Once again, the whole family was in a state of shock. Lillian had been hospitalized because of persistent pneumonia, a blood clot resulted, and she never went home to her beloved house. For Dennis and I, the loss of our mothers, just a few months apart, was numbing, and escape to our little house was our solace.

The purchase of our Naramata property, its renovation, and the

creation of a studio, were just what Dennis needed. Only now do I more fully realize the physical and emotional toll that three, successively destructive workplace environments had on Dennis. An association with individuals, with the charm and remorselessness of socio-paths, came at the expense of Dennis' well being. If Dante could create another level of Hell, I would ask him to create one at the very bottom of the Inferno where there was no hope of redemption for employers who prey on honest, sincere people. They don't deserve forgiveness.

#### STUDIO FOUR: GARDEN FOUR

When Dennis and I bought our Naramata property, our realtor discovered that the empty lot beside us belonged to the Crown. We decided to make application to the province to see if we could buy it. Great shades of Lakeview; another laneway to buy! We'd need the land if we were going to build Dennis' studio. The first step required publically posting the property and our intentions for it. After what seemed like a reasonable wait, I called the British Columbia Land and Water Inc., and I was told the office had received numerous objections to our purchase. Who could object to the purchase of this small, dusty, weed-infested lot situated between two houses, right in the middle of the block? Apparently fears ranged from increased traffic by the school, limited fire fighting access, and a neighbour's loss of access to his car port, through the lot. The fellow handling our file said, "I had to drive down to there and see what the fuss was all about." Before I could interject, he said, "When I saw the lot, and reviewed the complaints, I was able to address all the issues, and your application is approved." Our cheque, cementing the deal, was written on June 24, 2003

Upon advice from our insurance company, we arrived on the July long weekend to install fencing. We were shocked by how dry the

soil was. In fact, Dennis had to pour water into the holes being drilled for the fence posts just to prevent the dirt from flowing back into the holes and the walls from caving-in. On August 16, 2003, I got a phone call at work. Dennis asked me to find a copy of the Toronto Globe and Mail. When I asked why, he said, "Naramata is on fire, and it's on their front page!" Our niece and family were holidaying at our house, and we hadn't heard from them, but our dear neighbours called. In the event of an evacuation, was there anything they could remove from the house for us? We said, "No, just get your butts outta there!" The staff at the Naramata Store told us they couldn't see across the street. Niece and family finally called, nonplussed by the danger. By the long weekend in September, the imminent danger had passed, and we made a trip out to see the state of affairs.

When we arrived at our little house, we found cold embers in the yard. Smoke was still very heavy in the air. As we drove out of the village to return to Calgary, we passed Canadian Forces trucks coming to relieve the exhausted fire fighters. In every sense, it was still a war zone. At Christmas, we saw a documentary about the fire, and Kelowna's fire chief said during an interview, "I'm afraid we're going to lose Naramata, today." That very afternoon the wind changed, or his prediction would likely have come true.

In November Dennis made a treacherous journey out to Naramata by himself to begin construction of his studio building. His trip through the Rogers Pass was very difficult. Roads were very icy; big semi-trucks had trouble navigating up the mountain passes; an eight hour drive, took nearly ten. However, by December 14<sup>th</sup>, the walls were up, the shingles were on the roof, and the doors in. Plastic was stretched over the window openings in anticipation of their arrival on Christmas Eve. Just in time too, because winter arrived.



VASE  
18" HIGH  
CONE 6 OXIDATION  
2008  
PRIVATE COLLECTION

Dennis collected me from the Kelowna airport on December 14<sup>th</sup> so we could enjoy our Christmas holidays in Naramata. When we arrived in the dark of the winter night, the little building was glowing. Dennis had hooked up temporary lighting so I could see the results of his hard work. Our anniversary present was an order of cedar shingles to finish off the exterior of the studio and house. By now, Dennis was a bit of a legend in the neighbourhood for his speedy building. One of the neighbours commented on this, and added, "You know, you're making us look bad." Every chance we got, Dennis and I headed off to Naramata; the back of the van loaded with tools. Dennis was very motivated to get the studio and renovations in the house finished. I was warned that when he retired he was "hanging up the tool belt." Now, we were a year away from our retirement.

In April 2005, it was time to put our Calgary home on the market, and at the end of that same month, Dennis was hospitalized for a surgical procedure. When he came home in the afternoon, the first open house took place. The first realtor to arrive made us an offer for full price, and that was the end of our stability, for awhile. While we were packing up, our dear friends, Doris and Sterling, asked us to house sit for four months while they travelled in China and Vietnam. We had planned to spend July in Naramata, but needed somewhere to stay during August and September. Dennis and I had day surgery scheduled in September and October and planned our respective recuperations in Naramata. We were holding a lease for an apartment in our hands when the phone rang. It was our generous-spirited family, Doris and Dale, offering us their basement for all the time we needed.

Everything was moving incredibly fast now. One month prior to the new owners taking possession, it started to rain. We had nearly cleared everything out of the house and into storage so it to be

moved to Naramata in phases when, all of a sudden, the rug was sopping wet. We went into panic mode. First, we had to drive to the storage unit to retrieve our wet-dry vacuum. Then the battle began. The ground was so saturated; the water simply had nowhere to go. Not one sump pump was to be had in all of Calgary. Dennis had a clever idea and retrieved the pond pump, spending the entire night bailing out the basement. The rugs were dried and everything seemed under control. One week before departure, it started raining again! In desperation, Dennis opened up the sump hole, and drilled a hole into the sewer pipe exposed in the centre of the hole. Slowly, the water began to drain away through this tiny opening. Arms bruised from the rough concrete and the force that he had to use to get the hole drilled, Dennis really did save the day!

On the final morning at our Lakeview house, I cried as I drove away. Our house in Lakeview was my favourite place in the world. It had sheltered us for fifteen years and was our sanctuary through all kinds of personal trials. We left great neighbours, of all species. We were quite attached to the big white rabbit, named Stew, who regularly came to visit Dennis. One day, Dennis decided to give the kids who owned him, a scare. He put Stew (last name Pot), into the biggest kettle we had, and put the lid on. He went next door and rang the door bell. When Lisa, the rabbit's little owner came to the door, he asked her if she was missing anything, and opened the lid. Two big white ears popped up - giggles, all around.

At the end of January 2006, Dennis and I were finally on our last trip to Naramata as visitors. We were retired, and the little house would be our home. We had been to Naramata, fifty-two times over the intervening five years. We headed off at four o'clock in the morning; the sky was clear, the stars shining. By the time we arrived at the Banff gates, we were in a driving snow storm. By the time we got to Field, the snow banks were higher than the car. By the time we got

to Golden, we were in trouble. We hit a huge block of ice that had fallen off a truck, and it put us into a sideways skid; Dennis got the car under control, and we held our breath – no damage to the under carriage of the car, and we were still mobile. At the summit of the Rogers Pass, the army was setting up its cannon for avalanche control. Keep going, don't make eye contact! At Revelstoke, the ice on the road had been pounded into pot holes, and we had to slow to twenty kilometers or risk being shaken to bits. When we arrived, exhausted, at Sicamous to fill gas, the attendant asked, "Where did you guys come from?" Apparently, the highway was closing behind us as we drove steadfastly westward. From the parking lot, we could see the sun was glinting off the mountains, the temperature was gradually rising, and we were going home.

## CHAPTER 14

### MANUAL CONTROL:

That's what makes it Art, isn't it?



Until Dennis' retirement from the pressures of the external work world, his painting career has been one of reoccurring starts and stops, punctuated by big gaps between studio-time. Now in Naramata full time, Dennis began, in earnest, to study his new environment, absorbing its subtle nuances. Before he could begin painting with confidence, he started by producing the same composition in different colours. He began to see and feel the atmosphere. Almost immediately, one realizes that his results were far different from many other Okanagan artists. Others use bright colours; more than one admitting their choice was to appease gallery owners purporting these images to be representative of the area.

Finally, as Dennis continued painting on a full-time basis, the images began imparting to the viewer, the emotion of the landscape. Now also, Dennis could apply a critical, as well as, informed perspective to all his landscape paintings, starting from his beginnings as a student up to his current, more mature body of work. Along with his maturity as a painter, came a deeper intellectual understanding of his subject matter. He sees that his use of colour portrays emotion in all the



GARDEN FOUR  
NARAMATA

different periods of his work. His very first, successful painting, the Tenth Street Bridge, created when he was a student at the Alberta College of Art, used large amounts of pastel colour, with a heavy contrast of black, revealing the edginess of the city landscape.

As noted earlier, we have observed a number of artists in the Okanagan Valley who use very bright colors along with strong graphics. These works are unquestionably appreciated, enjoyed, and they are definitely understood. They are colourful, have great compositions, and a convincing emotion; all reflect the inner emotion of the artist. One can't help but wonder what is in the minds of these painters. However, for me, these portrayals do not reveal the unique atmospheric conditions of the valley, especially those prevailing in the summer time. With the ever present haze generated by the hot temperatures in the valley, the whole landscape actually turns pastel in colour. Admirers have looked at Dennis' paintings, and commented that the work appears luminescent because of the techniques he's used.

To put Dennis' work in a context: around the 1860's to the early 1900's, a painting style called, the "Impressionistic" movement developed, followed on its heels by the "Expressionistic" movement. Embodying elements of both these movements, the Group of Seven chose to portray Canada as an unspoiled, sprawling landscape. Dennis' work uses landscape to portray emotion. Deliberately choosing certain colours, he attempts to visually convey a sense of gentleness. Some colour choices create a forbidding, tense atmosphere; others capture an energetic "eagerness."

Dennis sees calmness in the semi-arid landscape; so most of his paintings use pastel colours. He feels his choice of palette best portrays the calmness found in the gentle landscape surrounding his studio. But in reality, his subject matter is not the external, surface



KARL  
12" X 12"  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
2008  
PRIVATE COLLECTION



VASE WITH BRANCH  
10" HIGH  
CONE 6 OXIDATION  
2008  
PRIVATE COLLECTION

features of the landscape, at all. Instead, his images concentrate on the feeling and emotion in the landscape in an attempt to reveal its inner soul. Dennis concedes his work is a subjective, personal invocation of emotion, and that he only uses the external, familiar shapes in nature to ground the viewer.

Occasionally, he'll use a bold colour, common in Expressionist painting, to execute the same composition, just to see and experience how these colours change the effect, and how it impacts on the viewer's reaction. For example, in his 2013 Munson Mountain series, he created one landscape that is pastoral and calm. In another, by under-painting the canvas in a deep purple, he transformed the same composition into an environment with definite suspense in it. While certainly not a formal movement like Impressionism or Expressionism, Dennis has chosen to brand his work as, "Emotionistic."

Dennis says that the multitude of paintings created in the art college studio, using very bright and contrasting colours, were "absolutely the worst paintings I ever did." When painting finally made sense to him, the creation of the "Tenth Street Bridge," stands as the first work to reflect the hints of his pastel palette. The "Bridge" painting has a very stark contrast between the trees and water opposing the snow, but this is where the palette started. The following year at the college, this pastel palette began showing up in his studio work even more and even in still life compositions. "Finally," he says, "the 'back' of those severe, mind-numbing colours, was broken." Copious amounts of white paint with very little colour imparts the serenity he feels within his beloved natural spaces.

Taking stock of his academic training, Dennis says he can't really remember being stylistically influenced by any of his painting instructors. Their work was very seldom seen on a day-to-day basis

at the ACA where he studied, or in public galleries. In actual fact, Dennis really had a very small collection of instructors: Stan Perrott (who instilled confidence in his students, always lending a hand with problem solving), John Esler (an acerbic personality who forced Dennis and others to develop coping skills), Gordon Adaskin (who realized the important breakthrough of the “Bridge,” painting, shouting, “look what Evans did”), and Illingworth Kerr, (a strict disciplinarian, who also helped his students with problem solving). Dennis learned a lot from each and every one of these men, but never felt that any of them influenced him to a point that he became a little disciple. It seems obvious from their student interactions that two of them were teachers, and that two weren't. Dennis readily attributes his influences to the Group of Seven, Tom Thompson, van Gogh, and the French Impressionists; stylistically and intellectually.

After college, the first unimpeded opportunity to paint for himself came in his studio in Drumheller, and these works clearly use this pastel palette. His large canvases depict the valley walls and the soft colours portray the sun bleached shades and the semi-arid conditions of the valley. The Okanagan, too, is a semi-arid environment, but it has the atmospheric influences of a large body of water that creates hazy skies. Other artists may only see harshness in the Drumheller landscape with the dramatic erosion created by wind and water and rugged coulees etched out over time, but there is tranquility there that can only be depicted with a soft palette.

A person can walk out into the Drumheller landscape and get lost, mentally, leaving the rest the world behind. As a young married couple, we so often spent our weekends doing just that. The softness of the grass and sage against the sun-dried land formations created patterns and designs that practically painted themselves.

Bright, harsh paint, right out of the tube, so popular among his



## EXCUSES

Every day, I make excuses; I know I shouldn't.  
I know my presence is unsettling,  
Sliding between the brush and the colour.  
I can't help myself; I have to see.  
Mesmerized by the force of this presence, I have to know.  
Quietly, I sit.  
Slowly, my eyes open to capture what emerges.  
Am I jealous of the bond between canvas and the creator?  
Perhaps; until I am swept up in the emotion of the image.  
I want to flow, like the paint, over the landscape  
And settle, at rest, in its beauty.



NORTH NARAMATA ROAD  
8" X 10"  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
2008  
PRIVATE COLLECTION

colleagues, just wasn't right for him. Dennis finds that canvases using these bright paint colours have no means of generating atmosphere and no means of acknowledging quietude in the landscape. Only by getting down on his hands and knees and by looking at the micro-landscape, is there brilliance in the flowers and blades of grass. This brilliance appears as little snippets in the detailed foregrounds in Dennis' work, and in some cases, bright colours are used right from the tube. As Dennis began to understand the Drumheller landscape, it was here that he developed his fundamental tools for mixing colour and perfected composition skills that he relies upon now. In time, his paintings have taken on a radiant quality of their own, and in some depictions, they seemed to be backlit.

Dennis' believes his ability to understand his environment is rooted in his childhood and his frequent and recurring wanderings in the wild openness around Viking. This rich landscape began etching an indelible place in his mind. Immersed in close contact with his physical environment didn't mean much at the time; it was just something kids do. He believes that had he had grown up in a large metropolitan area, his awareness of and sensitivity to his natural surroundings wouldn't have been fostered.

Like all prairie people, after the long winter snows, he remembers waiting eagerly for spring so he could get back out into the countryside to explore all the new waterholes, smell the fresh tang of the new green leaves, and generally inhale all the new, interesting things that spring brings. As spring gave way to summer, he continued exploring the changes in the countryside. There were seemingly endless, hot lazy days at the lake as he roamed about with his friends. The fall colours were a whole other experience. As a preschooler on the Evans' farm, Dennis remembers tumbling into large piles of yellow golden leaves and just rolling around in them,

with a sense of pure joy. Later, as a young boy living in the town of Viking, he trekked across the fields, over the snow, stopping in a wind protected grove of trees to heat up a can of beans, and then heading home in the soft greying light of the winter afternoon. He even spent a night out in a tent at minus twenty degrees Fahrenheit. The whole backdrop of land, sky and lakes surrounding his home was his playground. Endless days, in all seasons, and even some nights, were spent absorbing a sense of place that he wasn't even aware of at the time.

The subliminal imprint of Dennis' environment has a pivotal function within his chosen career. Dennis says that, "I want the viewer to experience the emotion in the painting. For example, what does a predominantly red landscape convey? What does a yellow or purple landscape convey? I want to do this with a new eye. I'm not talking about undiluted colours right from the tube. I'm talking about the very essence of softness and the pastel colours that I see in the landscape." The character of the painter is certainly defined by the use of these tools. Dennis uses a pastel palette to push the limits with each painting. Also, there is no, one style that lasts for long, as he sees the beginnings of something new to be used in the next painting, and the next one, and the next one after the one he just finished, and so on. These changes may be subtle, but they are there. By understanding the intimacy of pastel colour, Dennis avoids entrapment by the "prettiness" in a landscape.

Of course, Dennis's other love is pottery. Here, the influences could not help but be local. At the time Dennis was a student, the pottery community in Alberta was very dynamic, and it would have been hard, if not impossible, not to be influenced by the great work around him. Walter Drohan was the only instructor Dennis had while at the Alberta College of Art. Drohan, by virtue of his long teaching career at the ACA, and his brother, Ed Drohanchuk, through his popular

and commercially successful studio located in Calgary, and later Bragg Creek, were leaders in their field during the 1960s and 1970s. Their influence was exerted right across Canada. The Drohan/Drohanchuk notoriety imbued every young clay artist with a desire to emulate this success. In the shadow of these two giants, pottery students at the Alberta College of Art found it hard to develop their own style. It was only in the last semester, just before graduation, that Dennis' individuality started to emerge, but it would take long hours working in his own studio for his work to take on his personal interpretation.

The Naramata studio is unique in Dennis' history because it was built as a studio, and surprisingly, Dennis doesn't share this sense with his first workshop in Drumheller. Perhaps external pressures from his job, and the limited time afforded to actually work in the space, were the reasons for this reaction. The Naramata studio was built to serve two functions: painting and potting. Now able to spend long, uninterrupted hours perfecting his own work, some might think he's obsessive, but he sees himself as passionate about what he is creating. Having moved beyond the external stressors of his working career, the only challenge confronting him is the amount of work that is developing in his studio. The result is an environment in which he thrives. He lives in the landscape he paints, and he makes pottery he enjoys. If someone buys his work from him, it is a bonus.

At last there is time to think about what he is trying to portray in his canvases. The landscape has a soul, and it comes right out from the canvas, to touch the viewer. Dennis uses colour, usually pastel, sometimes monochrome and at other times, complementary, sometimes large format, or sometimes small, always trying to capture the essence of the landscape. He takes a pastoral image and transforms it into a heroic one through his choice of colour. Images come easily; their sources are all around him. Most inspirations are



MOUNTAIN LION  
18" X 36"  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
2011  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST



RAVEN

Oh, sleek warrior  
Your battle: that which exists  
And that which happens.  
You carry your icons high.  
I offer my shield; I bow my head.  
I lay my banners at your feet.  
Great vanquisher of night; of sorrow; of death.  
Immortal; in flight, eternal



RAVEN  
24" X 48"  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
2011  
PRIVATE COLLECTION

within walking distance from the studio, and most days, he walks in its presence. Dennis' virtuosity with his technique and brush, imparts spirit to the painting. As each new image emerges on the canvas, I expect one day I shall go out to the studio and find no one there. I suspect his work is slowly being embedded with tiny molecules of his very being, and given the number of years he still has left to create his paintings, one day he will simply be merged with it.

Recently, a series of paintings, with spirit animals placed in the landscape, have emerged. Starting with one of his typical landscape compositions, Dennis superimposed the portraits of animals specifically chosen because of their iconic place in the human experience. These compositions also contain abstract symbols. Taken as a whole, the content of these paintings is intended to reconnect the viewer with humanity's pervasive sense of the sacred in the natural world. Some of the animals portrayed in the paintings are in a soft pastel rendering while others are a more hard-edged depiction. These differences in depiction are how Dennis sees the animal and its relationship to its environment. For example, the "Raven" has minimal colour and minimal elements depicting the landscape, implying to the viewer, the symbolic duality of worlds travelled by the Raven. The Raven itself is painted in a style imparting a mystical presence. In contrast, the Mountain Lion is painted with a hard edge and intense colour with a pastel landscape background. The colours depicting the Mountain Lion are to help the viewer sense the raw physical power inherent in the animal who resides so secretly in the quietness of its surroundings. The abstract symbols, or totems, are an overlay of designs utilizing colour and shape to create an impact on the viewer. Colour is very important as are the abstract elements. By utilizing cultural references harkening back to Celtic origins, these symbols are integral to the spirit they are intended to capture and are inseparable from their relationship with the landscape and nature.

In 2007 Dennis and I went back to Britain. Our first stop was Runham where Dennis and I spent several days visiting the Runham Church, as we had vowed we would in 1999. The church has Norman roots, and we found several head stones with attributions to the Reed family. We also sat in the church warden's parlour reading the written records for births and deaths since the beginnings of the parish. There were red field poppies blowing in the wind, and Dennis and I took a picnic lunch to the graveyard, sitting among family members so long departed. A lady graciously gave us some flowers from her bouquet to leave on the graves. Leaving Norfolk, we wound our way partially across Britain, and then up to Orkney, finally arriving in Wales. By now, it was the end of September, and we boarded a flight from Liverpool to Italy.

What artist or art historian can say their education is complete until they've visited Italy? Our first stop was Venice, then by train to Cinque Terra for a few days of hiking the hilltops. Florence and Tuscany, pre-requisites for all tourists, were next and then onto Sorrento. We tromped about Herculaneum, Pompeii and Paestum, the massive buildings requiring stout hearts and strong legs. We ate lunch on the ancient stones at each site. The walk down a tree lined road to the gateway of Paestum was serene, as though building up to the crescendo of the perfectly preserved site. There were only a few people on the grounds, most tourists choosing the "glitter" of Pompeii. The tranquility exuded by the nearly deserted fields around Paestum reminded us of our Greek experience. Perhaps these ruins are best left to their ghosts. While touring Herculaneum, Pompeii and Paestum, we became conscious of the artists who toiled at these sites, millenniums ago, working day-in and day-out, putting elements together to gain the acceptance of their clients and the public. We were humbled by the realization that Dennis' own work is part of a great legacy created by artists and craftsmen through time, be it good or bad.

The final leg of the trip was Rome. For nearly thirty years, Dennis had promised me a walking tour of the ancient city, and as we stood on a street high above the ruins of the Roman Forum, Dennis began describing the site to me, just as he had remembered from his studies in John Humphrey's class on Roman art and architecture. A crowd gathered near us, all listening intently to Dennis' commentary. We made a conscious decision to forego the stress of the persistent line-ups found at most locations, except for two: the Vatican and the Sistine Chapel. One other collection in the Vatican Museum was also important to us – the Etruscans. We knew there would be no line-ups there. We surprised a drowsy guard who was pleased to have company. He was very proud of the work he was watching over, and said, "You know there's more here than just the Sistine Chapel." The Etruscan collection was on our list of "must see," because Dennis always held their accomplishments as surpassing Greek and Roman work. Their ability to represent elegance in simplicity is unequalled. The remaining days of the holiday were spent walking on the ancient stone streets; we were content to absorb the essence of the ancient and modern, realizing that everyone should, at some time in their life, experience a culture that is both foreign and yet, familiar.

We returned home to Naramata on October 31, 2007, and we did not leave for any exotic locations until 2010 when our friends, Emlyn and Donna Jessop, suggested a guided trip to China. Granted, it was a whirlwind fourteen days, but we saw and experienced many architectural and artistic highlights including: the Terra Cotta Warriors, the Great Wall, the Forbidden City and the Lingerling Gardens. Art, architecture, ceramics, gardens, temples, markets: each experience enriched by our education and personal interests. Dennis was particularly touched by what he saw. Whenever we travel, we realize that history is really about art, music, theatre, and literature. What gifted artists and craftsmen have made is usually all

that remains of a culture, and it is this artistic expression that gives us the means to understand foreign and exotic people. Dennis sensed that if we bring what we are, to what they are, we go away a much richer person. It is the creative manifestations of a people that endure. It doesn't matter if one is an artist in Rome, Greece or China, or whether one lives now or a hundred years ago, artists all struggle with the same things. It's been said before; creativity is what makes us human.

So, by now you would think, we would be a bit more accustomed to the merging of events and people with us, now that we're here in Naramata. For example, among the seventy strangers on our trip to China was a couple from Calgary. We found out that they owned an empty lot in Naramata, right within sight of our house. In fact, they were planning to build their dream home there. Colin was a photographer, and we were excited about their plans. Sadly, it was not in Colin's destiny to make this dream a reality.

And, still more about convergence. In 2007 Dennis was asked to teach at the Naramata Centre, and we met Masako and Lynn Ryan, master Ikebana artists teaching during the same week as Dennis was teaching pottery. Quite by accident, I discovered that Lynn and his family lived in Maple Creek, and that his sister, Judi and I started Grade One at the same time. The following year, we visited with the Ryans again, and this time we discovered that Dennis' cousin, Myrna Mackey (nee Harray), and her siblings, are Lynn's cousins, by marriage on Myrna's mother's side. I joked with Masako that she and I would likely discover we were twins separated at birth. We couldn't wait for what we might discover the following year, but alas, this was not to be. Lynn died quite suddenly. When Dennis got the news, he retreated to his studio and poured his heart into a painting as tribute to what Lynn's life and spirit embodied. The painting is now Masako's, and she is trying to find its "home;" in other words, just the

right spot to hang it; so it travels about her rooms while she seeks just the right place. She refers to the painting as her “travelling icon.”

Actually, I have to correct myself. Dennis and the Ryans actually met over a pot. As Ikebana Masters’, Masako and Lynn make very conscious choices about the containers used to display nature’s work. Dennis dropped into their classroom looking for one of their students – me. On the table he spied their collection of vessels brought for their students use, and an unassuming bottle called out to him. He had only seen such a bottle in a book. Jokingly, he said to Masako, “great knock-off.” Masako looked puzzled, and in her gentle, gracious way said, “what do you mean, ‘knock-off’?” Dennis replied, “This looks like a Hamada.” She said, “It is.” Did the world just tilt? Dennis thought so.

The work and philosophy of Shoji Hamada, Bernard Leach and Yanagi Soetsu are the foundation of the studio pottery movement in North America. The path that has been Dennis’ chosen profession lies at the feet of these masters, and every art school teaching pottery from the 1960’s onward, pays homage to the contributions made by these three men. It turns out that Mr. Hamada lived down the street from Masako, and Masako’s father loved the humble work produced in Mr. Hamada’s studio, often buying pieces for mere pennies. Mr. Hamada is one of Japan’s national treasures. So, here was Dennis, standing in a little classroom in the Naramata Centre with a bottle created by a national treasure and “holy” man for potters. He lost all colour in his face. He had only seen these works in books or museum collections. His feet had wings as he rushed back to his class to tell them what he had seen and held. At the beginning of this journey, I said there were threads, or ripples running through our lives which connected us to people and events in ways we can only see, now, because enough time has passed. More correctly, maybe is only now that we are allowed to see what has

transpired. A couple of years ago, Masako gave Dennis the Hamada bottle as a gift. It is his most treasured possession.

Here is what I believe.

Artists are connected through time by their work. When a painter stands in a gallery and breathes in the faint, lingering odour of the colours applied on canvases by a human hand from long ago, he or she stands in the radiance left by their creator. If the observer is conscious of this radiance, the energy can be embraced and reflected in their work. When a potter stands in a room filled with vessels made by masters, the present-day potter feels the smoothness of the clay and knows the heat of the kiln when the work was created. Hence, the human chain, linked by art, is never broken, and so, the journey moves forward. Someday, someone will stand in the light or the heat of the work created by this man, and they will know his inner soul.

So, what is next? Only the Muses know for sure. Dennis' painting style will continue to change; he will never be static. What will emerge, time will be his witness. One thing for sure, Dennis will always make pottery bowls; bowls are his form of meditation. What other ceramic shapes will appear, again time will be the observer. What is absolutely certain is the studio will always be a place where inspiration and excitement are present. It will be a meeting place for friends and colleagues. Our home and yard will remain a place of warmth and contentment for all who wish to linger. The garden will age and change, just like the gardeners, and spring will bring renewed enthusiasm for the gardener, the garden, and the artist. Travels will be essential for our creative spirit, recharged by new cultures, the art and the people. The countryside will remain a critical part of what flows into our work, as is the presence of friends and family. This is definitely not the end point in this journey.



ODE TO A BOWL

Unknown hands made me,  
from clay, dug from the field.  
Heat from the fire transformed me.  
So my heart could fill with sustenance.

My foot rests upon your table.  
My body; the yin and the yang.



BOWL  
5 "DIAMETER  
CONE 6 OXIDATION  
c 2012  
PRIVATE COLLECTION



## FIRST CRUSH

Hearts quicken,  
The warm sun beckons.  
The meeting, arranged.  
Cheeks, flushed.  
Fullness of life, bursting.  
Touch: caressing, unhurried, gentle.  
Harvest begins.



FIRST CRUSH  
36" X 48"  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
2011  
COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST



SELF PORTRAIT

Who is he?

This man, who is at one  
with the sky, the wind, the trees.

Stars give him sight,  
the moon, her heartbeat.

Sun lights his brush.

Pigment flows from his veins.

Metaphors poured upon canvas.

Earth and painter; conjoined.



SELF PORTRAIT IN A LANDSCAPE

36" X 48"

ACRYLIC ON CANVAS

2011

COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

## LIFE BOWL

When you look at the construction of your bowl, you will see that it has a strong foot, representative of the solid foundation that individuals must create in order for their relationships to succeed.

This contrasts with the actual bowl, itself, which is free-formed with its edges fluid and undulating. This represents the flexibility that must be shown towards one another in order to be content in one's life. The bowl is also multi-layered. These layers go in different directions, but they cannot exist without one another's support.

This bowl is intended to be used. It cannot languish on a shelf, forgotten or ignored. It is to be filled with dreams, hopes, wishes and memories created by you. You can expect that your bowl will get an occasional bump or nick, but it will survive because it exists in an environment of love and respect.



BOWL  
10" DIAMETER  
CONE 6 OXIDATION  
2010  
PRIVATE COLLECTION



BOWL  
13" DIAMETER  
CONE 6 OXIDATION  
2010  
PRIVATE COLLECTION



BOWL AND PLATE SET  
BOWL 8" DIAMETER; PLATE 9" DIAMETER  
CONE 6 OXIDATION  
c 2009  
PRIVATE COLLECTION



THE PLAYER

Donald, man  
He be a warrior.  
Howl for battle; blow down the walls.

Donald, man  
He be a healer.  
Sing sweet; forget your pain.

Donald, man  
He be a lover  
Croon soft, hearts follow.

Donald, man  
He be a player.  
Sound is in his soul.



DON  
"COOL"  
24" X 48" X 4"  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
c 2010  
PRIVATE COLLECTION



## LAKE SONG

I am from the land of prairie grass, sky and wind.  
Her fluid voice was mute to me, but now I hear.  
Sometimes, she speaks so softly,  
I am surprised to find I am walking near.  
Her face, smooth; a countenance in a mirror,  
Reflects blue, pink and white, in quiet contemplation.  
Sometimes, she sends out worry lines,  
A message, hurrying to shore.  
She can roar; blue-black, white capped,  
Crying for freedom from her stony bounds.  
Sometimes she is radiant, light caught in her charms.  
She is teaching me her songs.



MUNSON MOUNTAIN #1  
36" X 48" X 3"  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
2013  
PRIVATE COLLECTION



## MOONLIGHT

Walking at night:

The world, so ordinary in sunlight, shifts;

The familiar recedes.

Curves and corners, cloaked in velvet gloves,

Where is the edge?

Clouds run across the sky;

Ephemeral forms, back lit by moonlight.

Leaves, drenched in silver mercury, tremble.

Transformations everywhere; as if by magician's skill.

Soft rustlings; breezes, imperceptibly, touching the skin.

Silence wears its shroud.

Darkness: the backdrop for light.



MUNSON MOUNTAIN #2  
36" X 48" X 3"  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
2013



MUNSON MOUNTAIN #3  
36" X 48" X 3"  
ACRYLIC ON CANVAS  
2013

## Exhibition Record

- 1966 Alberta Culture Travelling Exhibition  
Group show, Sunrise Gallery, Calgary, Alberta
- 1967 Group show, Gunther's Mobilia, Calgary, Alberta
- 1968 ACA Student Show, ACA Gallery, Calgary, Alberta  
Group show, Allied Arts Centre, Calgary, Alberta  
Solo exhibition, ACA Gallery, Calgary, Alberta
- 1969 National Ceramics Exhibition, Toronto, Ontario
- 1972 Flare Square, Salute to the Arts, Calgary Exhibition and Stampede, Calgary, Alberta
- 1976 Alberta Mud '76, Edmonton Public Library Gallery, Edmonton, Alberta  
National Ceramics Exhibition, Glenbow Museum and Gallery, Calgary, Alberta  
Two person show, Gallery Three, Calgary, Alberta
- 1978 Alberta Mud '78, University of Calgary Art Gallery, Calgary, Alberta  
BFA Graduating Show, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta  
Earth, Water, Fire, Air: Muttart Gallery, Calgary, Alberta
- 1980 MFA Graduating Show, Solo exhibition, Houston, Texas  
Group show, University of Houston, Houston, Texas  
Solo exhibition, Muttart Gallery, Calgary, Alberta  
New Works in Clay, Solo exhibition, The Galleria, Calgary, Alberta  
Solo exhibition, Muttart Gallery, Calgary, Alberta  
Alberta Ceramic Showcase '80, Beaver House Gallery, Edmonton, Alberta
- 1981 Variations in Vessels, Alberta Potters Association, Muttart Gallery, Calgary, Alberta  
University of Calgary Alumni Exhibition, Calgary, Alberta
- 1986 Two person exhibition, The Galleria, Calgary, Alberta

- 1987 Solo exhibition, Artisan Studios, Calgary, Alberta
- 1990 Group exhibition, Rocky Mountain Art Gallery, Calgary, Alberta
- 1991 Group exhibition, ArtsNest, Calgary, Alberta
- 1994 Masks, The Croft, Calgary, Alberta
- 2008 Dennis Evans Art Studios, Solo exhibition, Naramata, BC
- 2009 Dennis Evans Art Studios, Solo exhibition, Naramata, BC
- 2010 Dennis Evans Art Studios, Solo exhibition, Naramata, BC
- 2011 Shatford Centre, Group Show, Penticton, BC
- 2011 Dennis Evans Art Studios, Solo exhibition, Naramata, BC
- 2012 Dennis Evans Art Studios, Solo exhibition, Naramata, BC
- 2012 Shatford Centre, Solo exhibition, Penticton, BC
- 2013 Shatford Centre, Group Show, Penticton, BC

### **Articles and Publications**

- 1977 A Studio on the Twelfth Floor, CONTACT, Vol. 23, March 1977, pp 12-13  
Meroe: A talk by John Robertson, CONTACT, Vol. 33, May 1977, p. 13
- 1980 Ceramic Form as an Expression, MFA Thesis, University of Houston, Houston, Texas
- 1980 Fumed Surface Effects, Ceramics Monthly, December
- 1984 Swaziland Pottery Adventure, CONTACT, Vol. 56, January 1984, pp 17-18
- 1986 Alberta Clay Comes of Age, Studio Ceramics in Alberta III: 1964-1984, published by the Alberta Potters Association
- 1987 The Fibre Kilns of Dennis Evans, CONTACT, Issue 70, November 1987, p. 22
- 2001
- 2003 Editor, Canadian Craft Trade, CCHA, Calgary, Alberta

## **Public Service**

- 1971 - 1972 Member, Drumheller Arts Advisory Committee, Drumheller, Alberta
- 1974 – 1976 Calgary area representative, Alberta Potters Association
- 1976 - 1978 Treasurer, Alberta Potters Association
- 1982 - 1984 Member, Community Advisory Committee, Alberta College of Art, Calgary, Alberta
- 1985 - 1987 President, Alberta Potters Association
- 2007 - 2008 Board Member, Discover Naramata Community and Business Society, Naramata, BC
- 2010 - 2013 President, Naramata Community Garden Society
- 2011 - 2013 Board Member, Discover Naramata Community and Business Society, Naramata, BC
- 2012 - 2013 Member, Naramata Cemetery Committee

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patricia Linda Evans was born in Maple Creek Saskatchewan. She spent the first twelve years of her life on a farm a short distance from the town with an assortment of dogs, cats and even a lamb. She attended the University of Calgary and the University of Houston obtaining a BA (Hons.) in history. She was a senior research administrator at the University of Calgary for twenty-five years before retiring to Naramata BC in 2006 with her husband.

