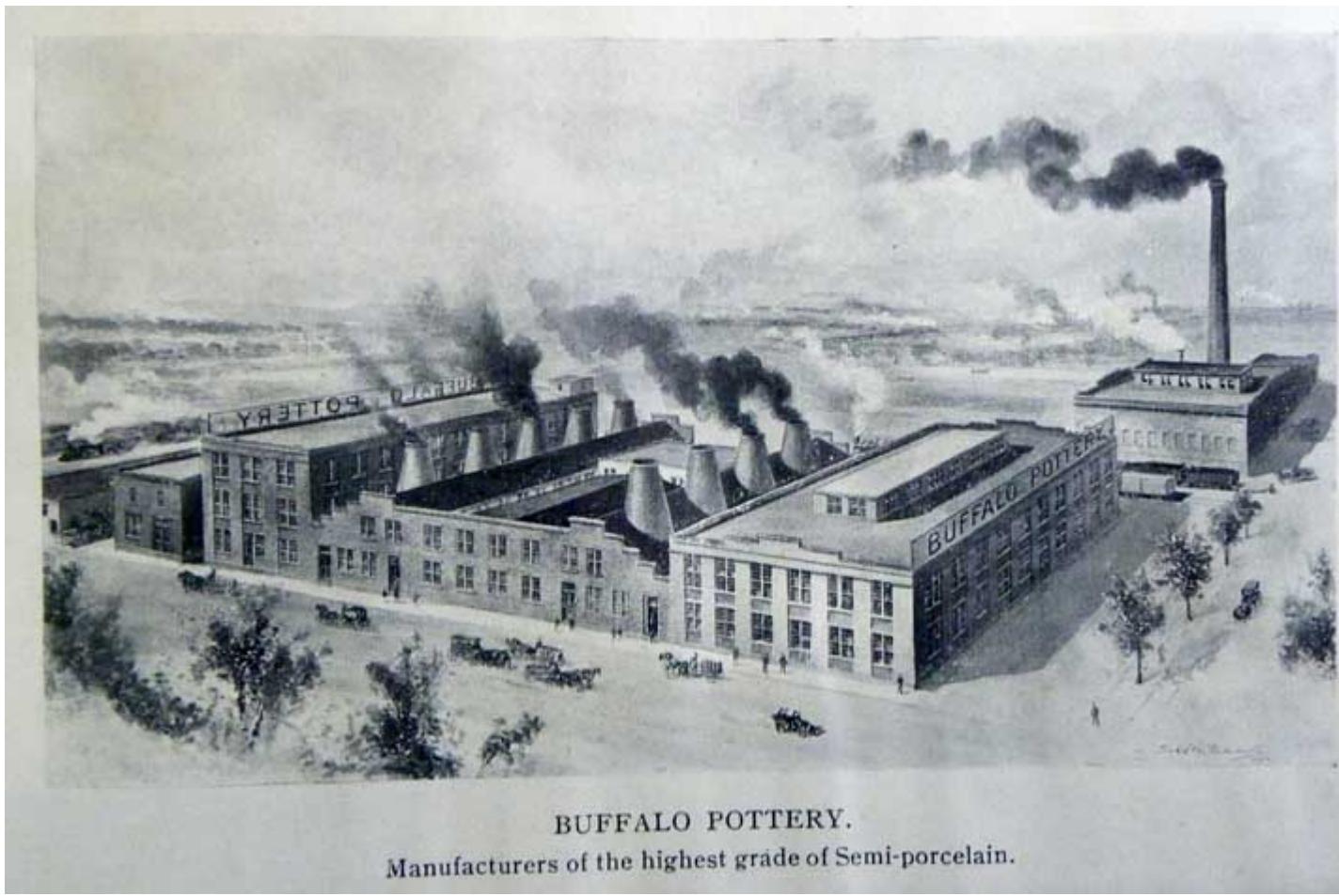


MERRY CHRISTMAS FROM BUFFALO POTTERY

I have previously written about the company known as Buffalo Pottery (later, known as Buffalo China) and its relation to the Larkin Soap Co. (LSC). Significantly, the LSC created Buffalo Pottery (BP) in 1901 as an arm of LSC. Its purpose was to create the pottery that which was given by LSC as premiums in exchange for certificates earned from the purchase of Larkin products. LSC founder and President, John D. Larkin, Sr. (JDL, Sr.) had determined that it would be far more inexpensive to manufacture the china itself, and would assure its availability as compared to purchasing china from other entities.

Officers of the new venture mirrored those of LSC, to wit, JDL, Sr. was President, his son, Charles Larkin, became Vice-President; another son, John Larkin, Jr. (JDL, Jr.) was Treasurer; and became President upon the death of this father in 1926 and Darwin Martin was elected Secretary.

By 1903 the new company had acquired 8.5 acres of land two miles east of the LSC buildings, on Seneca Street at the corner of Hayes Place. The property had been developed by the construction of the buildings necessary for what was to be a major enterprise. By October of that year the first kiln was fired. The company hit the ground running since it had its major customer, LSC, anxious to begin huge purchases of BP' products. (See :The Book of Buffalo Pottery" by Seymour and Violet Altman , often referred to as 'Vi and Si' affectionately by the collectors of the company's products); published in 1969, it is a treasured, well researched history of the company and inventory of its products. As a side note, the Larkin Gallery had a recent visit from the grandson and great granddaughter of Darwin Martin, who live in Illinois. They had no idea about BP and DDM's involvement in it, so Jerry Puma (my 'partner' in the Gallery) and I forthwith sent a copy of this book to them.



BUFFALO POTTERY.

Manufacturers of the highest grade of Semi-porcelain.

Figure 1 Buffalo Architecture and History

Always alert for more opportunities to expand and market its products beyond satisfying the LSC's need for premiums, in 1950 the company's then President, Robert E. Gould, came up with a plan to expand BP's good will in the community. It would reward all of its employees, customers and select friends with a special holiday gift. The

Christmas plate was born! However, BP did have an underlying, practical motive for this limited production that would be manufactured each December for 12 years.(except for 1961). It was an opportunity to experiment with color, body and methods of application of design. Designs might be applied by transfers, decals or hand-applied colors. (Vi & Si, p. 135.)

It should be noted that Gould had been an employee and an officer of BP since 1938. He brought to the company significant training and experience in the ceramic industry. He had attended Ohio State University and had been employed in a variety of ceramic-related jobs such as ceramic engineer in industries. He had been General Manager at Giesche Porcelain Co., in Poland for 6 years, returning to the U.S. in 1935 to serve as Chief Ceramic Engineer for the Tennessee Valley Authority. Gould became President of BP in 1946 until he retired in 1964. (Vi & Si, pp. 31-32.) It was undoubtedly that extensive experience that fed his willingness to be creative with experimenting with not only new techniques of making and decorating china, but also exploring marketing tactics.

So, back to the Christmas plate project. annually, 150 dozen plates were made each year between 1950 and 1962, but firing and distribution was about half that due to breakage and flaws. The series of these annual plates was to end with the 1960 plate, but by request of Hample Equipment Co. of Elmira, NY, a special plate was designed in 1962 for it exclusively. There was no 1961 plate.

Of particular note is the artist for each year's plate. The first two plates were the work of



Figure 2 The Book of Buffalo Pottery

The rest of the plates featured the designs of renowned East Aurora artist, Rix Jennings. I will return to him in a moment. The first year he designed a plate, 1952, he simply followed the typical Christmas/winter scenes style of his predecessor, i.e. Santa driving his reindeer. The reverse side was exactly the same. But for Jennings's signature on the plate, I would have assumed it had been created by Travers.

The annual design for the last nine plates was taken from illustrations of Charles' Dickens's, "A Christmas Carol." One year the plate was decorated with a gold rim, that being the plate designed for Hample. Each year, a different scene from Dickens was featured, and it was complemented with a summary of the story depicted by the scene or a holiday wish on the back side of the plate. Jennings introduced color into his designs, generally against a white background. The 1957 plate was a little different, with a white center and a beige border. Vi and Si suggest that some of the plates had other background colors. The 1959 and 1960 plates experimented with usage of pastel colors against a white background. There was no 1961 plate, but the last plate, for Hample, was simpler in colors, merely green on a white body, but finished off with the elegant gold rim.

From 1956 on, the plates were no longer identified as being from Buffalo Pottery, but rather from Buffalo China, reflecting the change in the corporate name.

Vi and Si indicate that each Jennings plate came with a leaflet describing the scene. I have never seen the leaflet.

I promised to come back to Jennings. It is interesting to me that despite BP having several talented artists in its employ, ex. Ralph Stuart and Robert Helmich, it looked elsewhere for the artist destined to design the Christmas plates. In 1952 Rix Jennings was retained to design the rest of the plates through its last one in 1962. Jennings, born in 1906, attended the Albright Art School and by the 1920's he had acquired an excellent reputation as a commercial artist. He

had also become a skilled designer of stained glass windows. (One of his noted set of stained glass windows were those he designed in 1928 for St. Matthias Episcopal Church in East Aurora.) He spent a year at the Walt Disney studios in Anaheim, Calif. in its school of animation, where he had the opportunity to work on such movies as "Dumbo," "Fantasia" and "Bambi." He returned to Buffalo during the 1941 Animators Strike. Back home, he began teaching a water color course at U.B. and there in that class he met his future wife, Sydney Owen, who he married in 1944. They moved to East Aurora where they lived the rest of their lives. He died in 1996.

It was likely his Disney experience that informed his skills reflected in the Christmas Plates. Obviously the people he drew were not meant to be realistic; they are quite cartoonish in character – not in a funny way, but in the simpler, suggestive way to involve the observer to participate in the creation of the story.

Jennings became a major player in the East Aurora Arts and Crafts scene. He had a varied career: designing illustrations for advertisements in newspapers, magazines and other publications; etching, book binding, wood carving, tile painting and lithography. Working in oils, water color or pastels, he created many beautiful pieces of wall art. (I am privileged to own a large landscape of dunes against a backdrop of waves which hangs in my home.) His murals of East Aurora history grace the walls of East Aurora Town Hall.

Vi and Si. speak of the collectability of the Christmas plates, citing the relatively small size of the annual production and the even lesser amount that survived without getting broken. In their book, they comment on the fact that by 1969 the plates had already become a collector's item and that antique shops throughout the country were already selling plates for \$15 and up. I have no idea how much they go for now. The seven I own that are in the Larkin Gallery I acquired quite a few years ago I am sure for more than that.

But I invite you to stop in to the Gallery to take a look at them. They are in a case close to the Seneca Street lobby. And Happy Holidays!



Figure 3 The Book of Buffalo Pottery