

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Pottery Industry

History of Homer Laughlin China Company

O. H. 380

ARTHUR WELLS

Interviewed

by

Thomas Hess

on

October 21, 1976

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Pottery Industry

INTERVIEWEE: ARTHUR WELLS

INTERVIEWER: Thomas Hess

SUBJECT: Production of China, Founding of the Company,
Antitrust Action, Tariff Protection, Materials

DATE: October 21, 1976

H: This is an interview with Mr. Arthur Wells taken in his office at the Homer Laughlin China Company in Newell, West Virginia, on the morning of October 21, 1976.

Mr. Wells, I would like for you to just start and tell us about the early history of Homer Laughlin China Company and how it has grown.

W: The Homer Laughlin China Company was started in 1872 by two brothers from Suffolk, England: Homer and Shakespeare Laughlin. They started their first plant in East Liverpool along the river. Their first effort resulted in disaster. A year later, they were able to get together more capital so that they could build a kiln and try their venture once again. This time it succeeded. It has prospered ever since then.

Early in the pottery business it was thought that each plant should only be of a certain size, should contain its own clay processing works, and its own kilns, and its own shipping facilities. Consequently, plant two was built and when it reached that particular size and capacity another plant was built. Then the plants were modernized and moved to the east end of East Liverpool.

About the turn of the century, Shakespeare Laughlin, who had been the salesman of the two brothers, died. A man by the name of Clark came into the company and was a super salesman. He sold so much pottery that the company needed more production so it moved across the river and bought

land from the Knowel family, who owned a large farm here. They didn't buy all of the farm, but a good portion of it. Plant number four was the first of these plants, built in 1904. Soon afterwards, another plant, plant number five, was built in 1905. Our principle customers, there were only about eight, were Sears & Roebuck and Woolworth Company, which made for very nice relationships. In the first four plants we had concentrated on the production of semi-vitrified ware. Plant number five was designed to expand our market some and get into vitrified ware for hotel use. Homer Laughlin, with Shakespeare gone, sold out his shares, moved out to Los Angeles and became very wealthy in real estate. He got into the automobile manufacturing business and there lost his fortune.

The pottery industry was concentrated here on both sides of the river. By this time, it was Edwin Knowel's company, and there was a Taylor and Knowel Company. The stock in the three companies was owned jointly and interchangeably amongst the same owners.

In 1912 what was known as the North American Pottery Corporation ran into an antitrust suit brought under the Sherman Antitrust Act. As a result, the ownership of the three companies was required to be divided up so that they would be individually owned and not constitute a trust. It was brought as a restriction of trade. It was definitely a monopoly. The very heart of the pottery industry was right here in this area. There was some small amount of pottery made in the Trenton, New Jersey area, but the big part of it was made right here in this area.

There was thought at this time to change the name of the Homer Laughlin Company to the Wells and Clark Pottery Company, but Homer Laughlin had a reputation and an appeal in the market. Consequently, the name Homer Laughlin was kept though there were no Laughlins involved in the business. About this time, just following the war, plant number six was built. This was our first venture in a tunnel kiln. There had been two other tunnel kilns before, one in a brickworks in New Cumberland, and another one in Hanover that got blown up. Tunnel kilns were a real advance in the pottery industry.

our business continued to prosper. Plant number seven was being built in the late 1920's, about 1926 or 1928. Plant number eight, where we are right now, was built and completed in 1929. That's about the extent of the development and growth of Homer Laughlin China Company.

H: What prompted the china industry to be located here in this particular area?

W: In the early 1800's, say about 1832, Pittsburgh was the gateway to the west. Immigrants came through Pittsburgh and they boated down the Ohio. Some English immigrants noticed the outcroppings of clay across the river, the Ohio. They were from pottery background in the midlands so they settled there and made what was know as yellow clay pottery. This is not the clay we use today.

H: I understand then that the clay industry was centered around English people, right?

W: Yes. Slightly later, people from the Dresden area of Germany came into the community. When I was a boy here, we had two German newspapers in East Liverpool. In the architecture of some of the older homes in East Liverpool you can notice the English influence, and also the German influence. It wasn't until after the Second World War that we had a great influx of West Virginians coming into our community here. Now we have workers from many different ethnic backgrounds.

H: You mentioned the antitrust suit brought against the North American Potters Association. How about tariff protection for the pottery industry?

W: Since the beginning of this century, the pottery industry both in Trenton and here have enjoyed some tariff protection. Labor constitutes fifty percent or more of our production costs. When we have a higher wage rate than foreign producers, it puts us at a definite disadvantage. This protection, though, has gradually decreased since it was started at the beginning of the century. It gradually decreased to where it is now practically nonexistent.

H: Certainly, Mr. Wells, you've noticed a change in the pay of workers through the years since you started with the company, or even earlier. How have those wages and conditions changed?

W: The brushers, ladies working on the line, worked the beginning of the century for 75¢ a day. Now this same job assignment demands \$3.15 an hour. You see that there is considerable difference. The lady that was working for 75¢ a day, ten hours, had no fringe benefits, none. Now our workers have almost the full package of fringe benefits. They have paid vacations, overtime pay, eight hour days, hospitalization, life insurance, and the major benefits of most other major industries.

H: Mr. Wells, the raw materials that are necessary to go into your business, I understand, are available right across the river?

W: No, not for the type of pottery that we are making now. The raw materials consist of clay, several types; it consists of what is known as china clay, plastic clay. There is need for feldspar, ground silica, and for talc. None of those are available, the types that we use in our production, right here. Some of our clays come from as far away as England, much of it from North Carolina. Our talc comes from up in New York State. We bring the raw materials from all directions right here. What was initially true, that the clay available there in Columbiana County was for a grade of pottery that could be made on the potter's wheel--it was a one-burn type ware, either vitrified or semivitreous that we're producing now . . .

H: Mr. Wells, you've used the term vitreous and semivitreous. Would you explain the difference for us between the two types of ware?

W: The same ingredients go into both types of ware. The vitreous ware is a heavier ware that is made for your commercial use, restaurant and hotel use. Your semi-vitreous is your ware that you would buy for a set of china at home. The proportions of the material that are mixed together make the difference. The soak that is given to the vitreous ware takes up a much greater quantity of water before it is fired. The temperatures at which these wares are fired and the length of time that they're held at different heats all kind of work together to make the difference.

H: You've mentioned two different kinds of kilns. That early kiln back when Homer and Shakespeare Laughlin were doing their experimenting in the 1870's, could you describe it for us please?

W: That early kiln is what has been called beehive kiln. It was round, self-fired; each kiln had ports and in each port a coal fire was maintained. Some of the larger kilns that measured as much as thirty feet across would have an undertunnel in which fire was maintained. This would put heat up through the middle. It's important in the kiln that the entire kiln have approximately the same heat for the same length of time about the same stage of burning. It's not any different whether it's your first heat or your second heat.

- H: You mentioned a couple of times a first heat and a second heat in the kiln, mentioning that after the kiln was loaded and heated once the ware had to be drawn and then replaced and heated a second time. What's the purpose of this second heat? What is accomplished there?
- W: In the first heat, the raw clay is dried or baked to a consistency to which the clays can be glazed. The glaze is put on by dipping and then the dipped ware, after it has been allowed to drip dry to a certain extent, is replaced in the saggars and reloaded back into the kiln. The second heat is put on to accomplish the glaze. In the very, very early kilns, the one-burn kilns, glazing was accomplished simply by putting some raw salt into the kiln at the time that the heat reached the appropriate stage. The disintegration of this salt as it melted, adhering on the ware, would put the glaze on the ware. However, very few operations are single heat operations anymore. Even in our tunnel kilns they are two-heat operations.
- H: You've told us about the beehive kiln now. How about telling us something then about this newer type, or this tunnel kiln that you mentioned?
- W: A tunnel kiln is just that, it is a brick tunnel. The ware is loaded on carts, anywhere from eight to twelve feet long in the saggars, and it is pushed in one end of the tunnel. The heat in the tunnel gradually increases toward the middle of the tunnel. One cart is pushed in after another cart, and that keeps the ware moving on toward the middle of the tunnel where it is the highest temperature. Then as more carts are added the ware is gradually cooled as it moved away from the high temperature toward the end of the kiln, where it will come out. Then it will be dipped, preparing it for the glaze process, and then put back into a glazing tunnel for the same gradual heat up and cool off process while in the tunnel. There are several companies building these tunnel kilns now. With gas firing of these kilns, since we don't have to use coal as we did in the old kilns, it is much easier, much more exacting, to maintain the temperature that you want at different stages, to gradually heat the ware, to maintain the peak temperature, and to gradually cool the ware, which is all necessary to keep the ware from melting and cracking and warping.
- H: You mentioned Mr. Wells that the labor is so much a part of your industry. Is the labor organized unions?

- W: Our company has a history of working with the labor organizations. It goes back to the 1890's. There is one problem, pottery industry is organized on a craft union basis, the old AFL (American Federation of Labor) craft system. Instead of dealing with one, or at the most two, unions for our company, it is possible for us to have to deal with a dozen different craft unions whenever we are negotiating new contracts. We have a long history of good labor relations, few strikes. We are proud of our over eighty years of negotiating and working with the union.
- H: This union you're referring to, what is it called?
- W: It's the International Brotherhood of Potters and Allied Workers.
- H: This is the union with its headquarters in East Liverpool?
- W: Right.
- H: Is there anything else you can tell me, Mr. Wells, about the Homer Laughlin China Company that might be interesting to us?
- W: When the company built plants four, five, and six here in Newell, this was just a farm. The company built housing for its workers. Most of them lived in East Liverpool because there was no town here then, and we built a bridge across the river. There was a streetcar that went across the bridge to bring our workers back and forth. The companies sold the homes, long-term contracts, to our workers. We've had a good relationship with our workers over a long period of time.
- H: Mr. Wells, I would like to ask you one more question. Could you take a mixture of the clay and the other ingredients and make it into a plate of some other piece of china?
- W: That's a long process. There are fifty-two steps in the making of a cup alone. I think you better ask someone else who is more up-to-date on that production business.
- H: Thank you Mr. Wells, you've been very helpful. We appreciate the information that you've given us.

END OF INTERVIEW