

Her clay creations were fit for a queen, museums

The award-winning Catawba potter crafted just about anything

Sarah Ayers, who died Nov. 25 in West Columbia, was one of the greatest of Catawba potters.

Sarah was honored as the 1980 American Indian Artist of the Year at the Kennedy Center in Washington. She was given the S.C. Folk Heritage Award in 1989 and won the 2002 Governor's Commission on Women of Achievement Award.

Her pottery found its way to the great museums of the world. Among the museums that display her pottery are the Native American Museum, the Heye Foundation in New York City and Smithsonian's Renwick Galleries in Washington, D.C. She conducted workshops at the Museum of American Indians, High Foundation, New York.

Closer to home, Sarah's pottery is on display at Museum of York County, the McKissick Museum

NEARBY HISTORY

Louise Pettus



in Columbia and the Schiele Museum of Natural History in Gastonia.

Her pottery has also been presented to the queen of England. When Lancaster County celebrated its centennial in 1985, Oliver Nisbet of Van Wyck presented pieces of her pottery to the mayors of Lancaster, England, and Lancaster, Pa., when they came to Lancaster, S.C.

The lifelong potter was born on the Catawba reservation in 1919, the daughter of Chief David "Toad" Harris and Dorothy Minerva Price Harris.

Sarah's apprenticeship into the special techniques of molding and shaping clay began when she was 4 or 5 years old. The Catawba way of making pottery goes back at least 4,500 years, according to archaeologists. Sarah learned the art form, as had generations before her, by imitation. That is, im-

itation in handling and firing the clay but freedom in the subject matter with leeway to choose the adornments.

As Sarah grew older, she not only improved her skills but also taught others and served as a role model. It was said that old Mrs. Blue, wife of Chief Sam Blue, could finish a pot but not create it. Sarah would do the hard work of shaping and firing and give the result to Mrs. Blue to finish it.

By the age of 9, Sarah was selling her pots in gift shops on the Cherokee reservation in the N.C. mountains. When she was 18 or 19, she and several other potters would spend their summers in a gift shop in Pennsylvania.

Sarah also joined potters on the Winthrop campus before holidays and commencement with their pots. In good weather they would spread out their wares at the gates in front of main building. In bad weather they came inside and displayed their wares in areas outside McBride dining room. They sold the pots for as little as 25 or 50 cents each.

Pottery didn't bring enough money to support anyone in

those days. Sarah worked in textile mills from 1942 to 1957. In 1962, Sarah and her husband, Foxx Ayers, whom she married in 1946, moved to West Columbia. Foxx was also a potter and shared the work of digging the special clay that was mostly found in the Kings Bottoms of Lancaster County. Two distinctively different clays, called "pipe clay" and "blue clay," were needed. The mix ratio was two-thirds pipe clay and one-third blue clay.

'Sarah Ayers' work pretty much covered the whole range of Catawba pottery from small objects such as pipes to large pieces: bowls in perfect symmetry, wedding pitchers, vases and water jugs.

She did snake pots with the crawling reptiles wrapped around the top; or the snake's body might loop to form the handles. Especially prized are her pots with head effigies of King Hagler, the greatest of the Catawba chiefs, who lived in the 18th century.

Louise Pettus is a retired Winthrop University history professor. Her column appears Sundays.

