

# Red Wing Pottery returns to roots

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*Scott Gillmer and his son Scotty represent the third and fourth generations of the Gillmer family to be involved in the pottery business in Red Wing. Scott Gillmer brought the pottery back to a hand-made, hand-turned, hand-painted product.*

As the third-generation Gillmer family member to run Red Wing Pottery, Scott Gillmer finds it rewarding that not only has he been able to keep the business going - but he's keeping it going by returning to its roots.

Hand-made, handturned, hand-painted pottery is made once again on Old West Main Street, taking the industry full circle in the town whose name is synonymous with pottery all over the country and beyond.

The family's pottery story is one of triumphs and tragedies as the business struggled to maintain a foothold in the American marketplace.

His grandfather, Richard A. Gillmer, was a lead salesman for the Potteries back in the 1940s, working through the Chicago Merchandise Mart.

The Red Wing business had successfully shifted its production from agrarian or farm-based products to home products and decor including dinnerware, lamps and vases, Scott Gillmer said.

But in the mid-1950s, it again struggled to find a niche in the marketplace.

"There was a feeling, even in the '50s, that we were not doing all we could to take care of that market," he said. It was decided that the business needed a leader who knew and understood the market from a sales perspective - someone like Gillmer.

He moved to Red Wing in the mid-1950s to serve as president of Red Wing Potteries, and his wife, Adabelle, got involved in running the salesroom.

The second generation of Gillmers grew up in the business.

"My Mom, Kay Volkmann, worked as a clerk in the salesroom" during summers while

attending college, Scott Gillmer said. At the same time his father, Richard S. Gillmer, worked summers in the garden shop. They met, married and started the third generation - Scott and three siblings - in the Twin Cities.

"My roots really are here," Scott said. He grew up in Minneapolis, but always had close ties to Red Wing, where all of his grandparents lived.

"We would come back to Red Wing and visit the salesroom, get candy in the candy shop like every other kid. I did that, too, as part of my growing up," he said.

They moved back to Red Wing in 1967 to see if Gillmer - who had a degree in industrial psychology - could help save the company, and moved back to the Twin Cities after the Potteries closed.

Potteries workers went on strike June 1, 1967. The parties were unable to resolve a new contract, and on Aug. 24, the stockholders voted to liquidate the company. The Gillmer family purchased the salesroom, remaining inventory and wholesale business. In 1969 the name was changed to Red Wing Pottery Sales Inc.

For about 14 years, starting in the late 1970s, Scott Gillmer's aunt, Susan Gillmer, ran the Pottery Salesroom.

She found a new marketplace niche: dinnerware.

"During her era we were the largest salesroom for dinnerware in the Upper Midwest," Scott said. It became a huge tourist draw, and a primary destination for people looking for dinnerware - including Mikasa and Noritake.

"Isn't that ironic," Scott Gillmer said, acknowledging that those lines were part of the competition that affected the business in the mid-1960s. "But that is survival in business. You have to move forward to keep the business going into the future."

He firmly believes, "Every generation, it's their responsibility to look at the market and come up with their niche to keep the business going. You can't rely on what made you successful in the first generation."

He got his master's degree in business administration about the time Susan Gillmer decided to retire. She and his parents approached him, asking if he wanted the opportunity to run the family business.

"Of course, being a young man right out of business school, I jumped at the opportunity.

"I knew it didn't mean I could rest on what my parents and my aunt had done. The market had changed."

The Mall of America has opened. Big-box retailers and department stores had entered into the dinnerware business.

"We needed to make a shift," he said.

When he took over in 1991, Gillmer knew it was up to him to put his imprint on the business.

He thought about the types of things he and his family enjoyed while traveling around the U.S., and realized they especially enjoyed discovering history, and exploring what made a town unique.

"The greatest asset of the business is the name: Red Wing Pottery," Gillmer decided, "and the link to the history of Red Wing. We know tourists like, and want to experience, a place's history."

In this case, pottery and Red Wing are almost synonymous, since pottery started about the same time as the town did.

To him, the answer was a natural: Start manufacturing again.

He realized they could not compete in the dinnerware field.

"I thought, 'Let's go back to our roots,'" Gillmer said - to the salt glaze era when production totally relied on craftsmen. "We decided to make hand-turned, handpainted pottery" that is different from anything being mass-produced by machines, in factories. The first firing was in 1996.

Three potters see their work through the entire process.

"They wedge the clay, turn it on the wheel, create a pot, hand-decorate the pot, load and stack it in the salt-glaze kiln and fire the kiln, just like craftsmen did in the very early era," Gillmer said.

The difference between these pieces and other pottery are clear to see, he said. "Each piece is unique, and you can interact with the potters while you are in the salesroom. They answer questions" and show how pottery is made.

"It places that much more value on the product."

The salesroom offers mass-produced pieces, too. Gillmer is more than a little pleased to report, "The U.S. made Red Wing Pottery outsells the foreignmade product by quite a bit."

Top sellers are 1. the new Red Wing pottery; 2. Red Wing Stoneware, also made locally; and 3. Fiesta Ware, made in the United States.

The fourth generation of Gillmers has stepped into place.

Hannah, now studying nursing, worked at the potteries during high school, and Richard Scott "Scotty" Gillmer Jr., still in high school, is on staff this summer. Charlie's just entering high school.

They are exploring their own paths.

"There is no succession plan in place," said Gillmer, whose wife, Nancy, helps run the retail store.

The newest addition to the business operation is Smokey Row Cafe, featuring Jenny Lind Bakery. It's named for the nearby neighborhood where people working at the pottery once lived.

Right now, Gillmer 's biggest struggle is trying to decide whether to resume dinnerware manufacturing. "I'd love to figure out a way to get back in the market niche," but he he hasn't come up with a plan ... yet.

