

Campfire Pottery

John Richey, The Leader, April 1991

For two years now, campfire pottery making has been a popular hit at Interior B.C.'s annual Scouting family weekend, better known as FAMSCOWEE! (Mar '90). Try the activity at your camp this summer.

"It's easier than you think and a natural outlet for a lot of creative and physical energy," says Stephen Plant of The Pottery Plant in Revelstoke. "Earth, air, fire, water, and imagination are the ingredients, and you can almost always find them anywhere."

What you do, simply, is shape a clay mix, let it dry, then fire it to red heat in an outdoor fire. The technique dates back to the last Ice Age, almost 100,000 years ago. Like your prehistoric ancestors, you will probably turn out some pretty crude pots and sculptures the first time, but you'll learn with experience.

"The whole process has an endless number of variables and ways of doing things," Stephen says. "There is no 'right' way, and often the results are unexpectedly amazing!"

Earth

The earth you use is a mixture of clay and filler (sand or mica). By opening the pores of the clay to let moisture escape, the coarse filler "tempers" it so that pottery dries and fires more successfully. Without it, pots can warp, shrink, crack, or explode in the fire.

If you are lucky, you may have a local outcrop of clay nearby. To check if the clay is suitable for pottery-making, roll a small lump into a coil about 18 mm in diameter, then bend the coil into a ring about 5 cm in diameter. If you have good clay, it will not split and the ring will be firm enough to set on an edge without sagging.

If you don't have a natural source of clay, you can buy it from a ceramic supply house

or through a local potter, generally in 25 kg or 55 kg packages. The best kind for campfire pottery is red earthenware for hand building.

Dampen filler before adding to clay and mix in well, almost as if you were kneading bread. Slowly add filler and keep moistening until the clay is easily workable and plastic. If it starts to crumble, you've added too much filler. "You'll know when it's right," Stephen says. A good guideline is 1/2 to 1/3 cup filler to 10 kg clay.

The simplest form of pot to make is a "pinch pot". You start with a ball of clay you can comfortably hold in your hand. Push the thumb of the other hand gently into the centre of the ball, then squeeze the clay between thumb on the inside and the fingers on the outside. Continue to squeeze the clay and turn the pot to hollow it out and thin the walls.

If the weather is hot while you are working, the top of your pot might start to crack. Dampen it slightly from time to time, but try not to get it soggy or it will not be very workable.

Some of your members might want to try making a pot by "coiling", another traditional method. Start by squeezing clay into a sausage shape, then putting it on a flat clean surface and rolling back and forth to make a long round "snake" or rope. The number of coils you need will depend on the size of pot you want to make. The first time, try a small pot to get used to the technique.

When you've made four or five ropes, make a flat clay disc to be the bottom of the pot. Coil the first rope around the outside of the disc and firmly thumb the clay of the two parts together. Build each coil on the one below, firmly pushing the clay together to join them each time. The clay must be the right dampness for the coils to merge.

Support the pot on the outside with the other hand as you shape it

Stephen offers a few tips to make your pottery more successful.

1. Avoid leaving air pockets in the piece.
2. Try not to make pieces too thick or too thin. If they are too thick, they are difficult to dry and fire. If they are too thin (less than 6 mm), they will likely crack or break. The ideal thickness is about 12 mm. Stephen uses a "rule of thumb": if a piece is thicker than your thumb, hollow it out more or thin it down.
3. If you join pieces of clay, moisten and scratch together the surfaces you want to join.

Air & Fire

Before firing the pots, let them air dry completely. A day in the hot sun might be enough, but since they can't get too dry, you might want to leave them longer. You can also dry them near the campfire, but be careful not to set them too close and remember to turn them frequently.

During the drying process, you can burnish the pots to make them waterproof. They need to be at the "leather hard" stage: still damp and dark in colour, but no longer pliable. Carefully rub a pebble or the back of a spoon over the pot to put on a shiny finish. Maybe you want to shine up some parts of the pot and leave others unpolished.

When the pots are dry, it's a good idea to preheat them a bit before firing them. That removes more moisture from the clay, cutting down further the chance of explosions in your pottery fire. Heat them by standing them by the fire and turning them often.

Make a fire pit about 25 cm deep and 75 cm in diameter. Have plenty of fuel close by: cow dung, sticks, dry grass, shavings,

briquettes, pine cones, and dry firewood. Fill the pit with straw and pile in the dry pots, open ends down. Build up fuel around the pots in a tipi, and light the straw and the fire lay. You need to avoid drafts on the pots, so keep piling on fuel so that you don't expose the sides to the air. If a wind starts blowing, set up a windbreak to protect the fire.

Stephen says you can also start by placing the dried pots on a bed of coals, but only if you have preheated them hot enough that you can't touch them with your bare hands. If you heat the pots too suddenly, they will burst, he explains.

When the pots are glowing red hot, the fire has done its job. Let the fire burn down, then bank it by throwing lawn clippings or damp hay over the pots. It's best to let both fire and pots cool down slowly, then to remove the pots with tongs or sticks.

The whole firing process will take about three hours. And, with luck, your pots will be an interesting and attractive blend of orange, red, black, and grey.

You've already used a little water to mix and shape your clay and you've kept a good supply close by during firing for safety. You've probably used more to clean up after shaping your pots. And, as Stephen points out, water is good to drink - in your new pots.

As for imagination, you'll find lots of this around wherever there are Beavers, Cubs, Scouts, Venturers, Rovers, or Scouters.

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Program Links

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