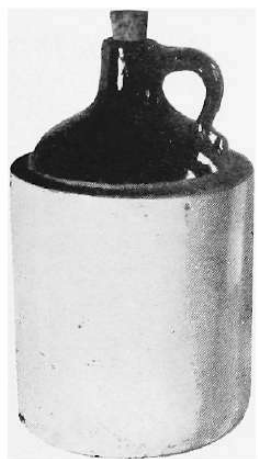


# Minnesota Potteries

*From PIONEER CRAFT to MODERN FACTORY*

G. HUBERT SMITH



TRAVELERS passing through Red Wing in 1953 are reminded that this year marks the seventy-fifth anniversary of an important local industry—the Red Wing Potteries. The sprawling buildings of the present plant on Highway 61 house a business organization that began operations on the banks of the Mississippi in 1878. By that time, however, the art of the potter had flourished in various Minnesota localities for more than two decades as workers in clay supplied the state's pioneers with the products of their craft.

The earliest Minnesota earthenware plant doubtless was the St. Anthony Pottery established by Louis Kampff in August, 1857, only three years after he emigrated from Germany. His workshop was located near the river in what is now northeast Minneapolis just outside the limits of old St. Anthony. Kampff began to make pottery in a log shanty back of which was a clay pit

where he obtained his raw material. In 1860 he erected for his plant a two-story stone building. Somewhat altered, this building, on Marshall Street Northeast, was still being used as a residence by one of his sons as recently as 1947.<sup>1</sup>

The extent of Kampff's early venture is reflected in the manuscript federal census records for 1860. They indicate that in 1859–60 Kampff used glazing supplies valued at two hundred dollars as well as forty cords of wood costing eighty dollars. During the same year he paid three employees a total of six hundred dollars in wages, and his plant produced twenty thousand gallons of earthenware valued at a thousand dollars.<sup>2</sup>

In the course of the decade that followed, the business of the St. Anthony Pottery grew to such an extent that by 1870 Kampff was producing three thousand dollars worth of pottery annually. His capital investment for the same year was placed at two thousand dollars. In 1876, Kampff sold the business to Jonas G. Swahn. With his son

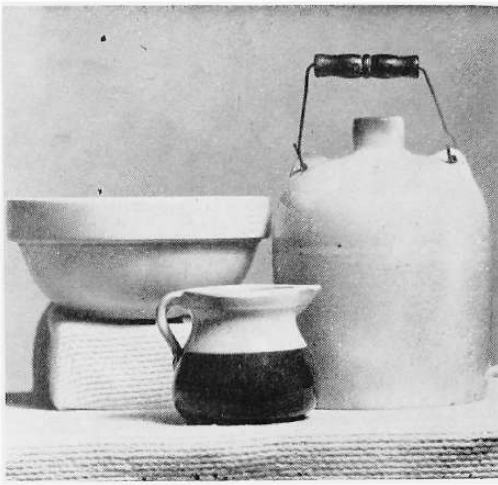
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<sup>1</sup> George E. Warner, *History of Hennepin County*, 355 (Minneapolis, 1881); obituary notices of Kampff, in *Minneapolis Tribune*, April 25, 26, 1903; William Kampff to the writer, May 5, 1947; manuscript schedules of the United States census, Hennepin County, 1857, p. 1, 1860, p. 377. All manuscript schedules cited are in the custody of the Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>2</sup> United States census, *Products of Industry*, Hennepin County, 1860, p. 411; *United States Census, Manufactures*, 1860, p. 279, 284 (1865).



MOLDED ware made at Red Wing

Charles, who joined the firm in 1883, the latter manufactured "flower pots, garden vases, hanging baskets," and terra cotta work "to order." After the elder Swahn died, the business was continued until 1904 as J. G. Swahn's Sons.

Another Minneapolis pottery firm which continued until after the turn of the century was established in the 1870s by John C. Malchow. Like his competitor, he specialized in flower pots and terra cotta vases. It was said that he produced a hundred thousand flower pots a year in the early 1880s. Still a third Minneapolis potter was Jules or Julius Gobeaux, who operated a plant from 1895 to 1901.<sup>3</sup>

ALTHOUGH the St. Anthony factory seems to have been the only Minnesota pottery in 1860, a number of individuals living in other parts of the state are listed as potters in the census of that year. Among them were Cyrus and Charles C. Cornell, a father and son living at Rochester. They migrated westward from New York State, where they probably learned their craft. It was not long before Charles moved to Owatonna, where for many years he advertised in the local newspapers as a "Manufacturer and dealer in all kinds of Earthen ware, such as Churns, Jars of all sizes, and everything

usually found at a Pottery." Cornell added to his advertisements a statement that he would accept "All kinds of produce" in exchange for his wares, thus indicating that barter was in common use by the country merchant and manufacturer. In 1870 his factory, which was located at the east end of the bridge across the Straight River, produced ten thousand gallons of stoneware valued at a thousand dollars.<sup>4</sup>

Two German settlers, Henry B. Kauffer and Theodore Fittler, were making pottery in Blue Earth County as early as 1860. It seems likely that they supplemented the income from their farms in Mankato Township by selling their wares to their neighbors. Early in the decade, they built a small plant near Fourth and Warren Streets in Mankato. A short time later, Fittler sold his share to his partner, who continued to manufacture pottery until the late 1870s.<sup>5</sup>

Another Mankato factory was established by Andrew Gapter, who is said to have been an expert potter. He seems to have needed financial assistance in the early 1880s, when John A. Sanborn purchased an interest in the pottery. Thereafter Gapter continued his connection with the plant as foreman. In 1882 John A. and Myron G. Willard each purchased a fourth interest in the company, and the following year Sanborn sold his interest to the latter. The business grew, and its stoneware was sold in many surrounding towns. A block of land at the junction of two railroads in West Mankato was purchased for the erection of a large plant, but after investigating available raw materials and markets, the part-

<sup>3</sup> United States census, Products of Industry, Hennepin County, 1870, p. 983; Warner, *Hennepin County*, 418; *Minneapolis City Directory*, 1873-1904.

<sup>4</sup> United States census, Population, Olmsted County, 1860, p. 2; Steele County, 1870, p. 21; Products of Industry, p. 1; *Owatonna Plaindealer*, October 1, 1863, to November 30, 1865; *Owatonna Journal*, January 9, 1868, to October 5, 1871.

<sup>5</sup> United States census, Population, 1860, Blue Earth County, p. 23; Myron G. Willard, "Manufactures," in *Mankato: Its First Fifty Years*, 102 (Mankato, 1903); *Mankato Record*, July 13, 1867.

ners concluded that suitable clay could not be found near Mankato in sufficient quantities to warrant a large outlay, and the business was discontinued.<sup>6</sup>

There is evidence that pottery was made on a small scale in the late 1860s and early 1870s in such widely scattered Minnesota communities as Alexandria, Lake City, and New Ulm, and villages in rural Hennepin County. It was at Elmwood in Eden Prairie Township of Hennepin County that Charles Rees manufactured flower pots and hanging baskets, to the satisfaction of a newspaper editor who hoped the local product would soon replace that shipped in from "Ohio and other points east." He pointed out that "the nature of the goods make the freight to this point a heavy tribute . . . to pay."<sup>7</sup>

New Ulm was the site of still another productive stoneware plant in 1870. As might be expected, it was operated by three German settlers, Christian Dauffenbach, John Steckert, and Franklin Friedmann. The manuscript schedules of the Brown County census for 1870 reveal that their capital came to thirty-three hundred dollars and that they paid seven hundred dollars in wages to three employees. Among the materials used during the year 1869-70 were a hundred tons of clay and a hundred and eighty cords of wood. The plant produced twenty-eight thousand gallons of stoneware valued at \$3,450.

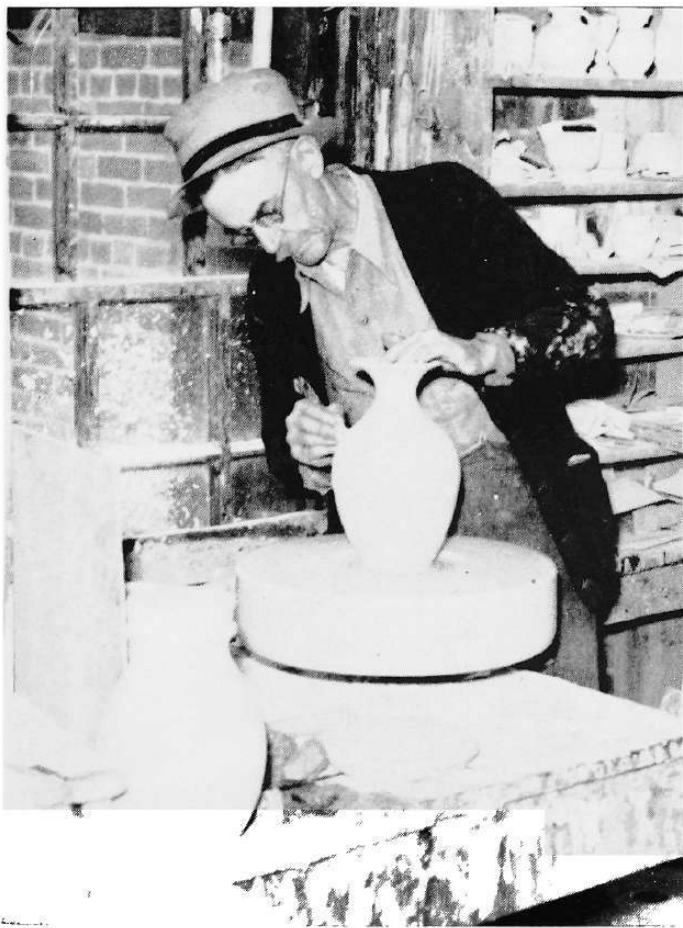
The industry represented by these scattered plants increased greatly in value between 1860 and the turn of the century. When Kampff opened his modest plant at St. Anthony, he initiated a business that was to produce pottery valued at \$9,379 in 1870, at \$31,000 in 1880, at \$110,000 in 1890, and at \$445,435 in 1900. The census for the latter year lists eight factories that

were manufacturing pottery, architectural terra cotta, and other clay products—the largest number ever recorded in the state.<sup>8</sup>

OF THE EIGHT, two were in the Red Wing area of Goodhue County, where much of the growth reflected in these figures took place. There a German immigrant named Joseph Pohl began to use local clay in making pottery in the 1860s, and there at least five manufacturing plants were established in the decades that followed. In this area alone pottery making has persisted continuously to the present. The only large-scale commercial pottery in Minnesota today is the Red Wing factory which this year is marking the completion of three-quarters of a century of continuous production. Thus pottery making in Goodhue County met with a permanent success unknown elsewhere in the state.

Like several other Minnesota potters, Pohl learned the rudiments of his craft in Germany, and like a number of others he combined the making of pottery with farm-

*A pioneer potter at his wheel*



<sup>6</sup> Willard, in *Mankato: Its First Fifty Years*, 102.

<sup>7</sup> *Minneapolis Tribune*, July 1, 7, 1869, April 1, 1870.

<sup>8</sup> *Ninth Census of the United States*, 3:477, 821 (1872); *Tenth Census*, 3:76, 140, 274 (1883); *Eleventh Census*, 3:521 (1895); *Twelfth Census, Manufactures*, part 2, p. 452 (1902).

ing. "To while away the dreary months of the pioneer winters," it is said that he decided to "experiment with the clay underlying his farm," which was located in Section 4 of Featherstone Township, near the city limits of Red Wing. According to one account, he worked in "a little factory covered with turf, where he made crocks for packing butter, and flower pots for the ladies who cultivated plants through the winter. He shaped his wares on a wheel propelled by a treadle, and disposed of the largest share among his neighbors." Although Pohl was in business only a short time, it is believed that he was the first in the Red Wing area to manufacture stoneware from local clay.<sup>9</sup>

Not long after Pohl began his project, what was probably the first pottery in Red Wing proper was built by William M. Philleo, who is listed in the census of 1870 as a manufacturer of terra cotta and pottery. As early as 1866 a Red Wing newspaper reported that Philleo owned land in the city on which there was a large bed of excellent pottery clay. "It is his intention to work it next season," reads the account, "and if

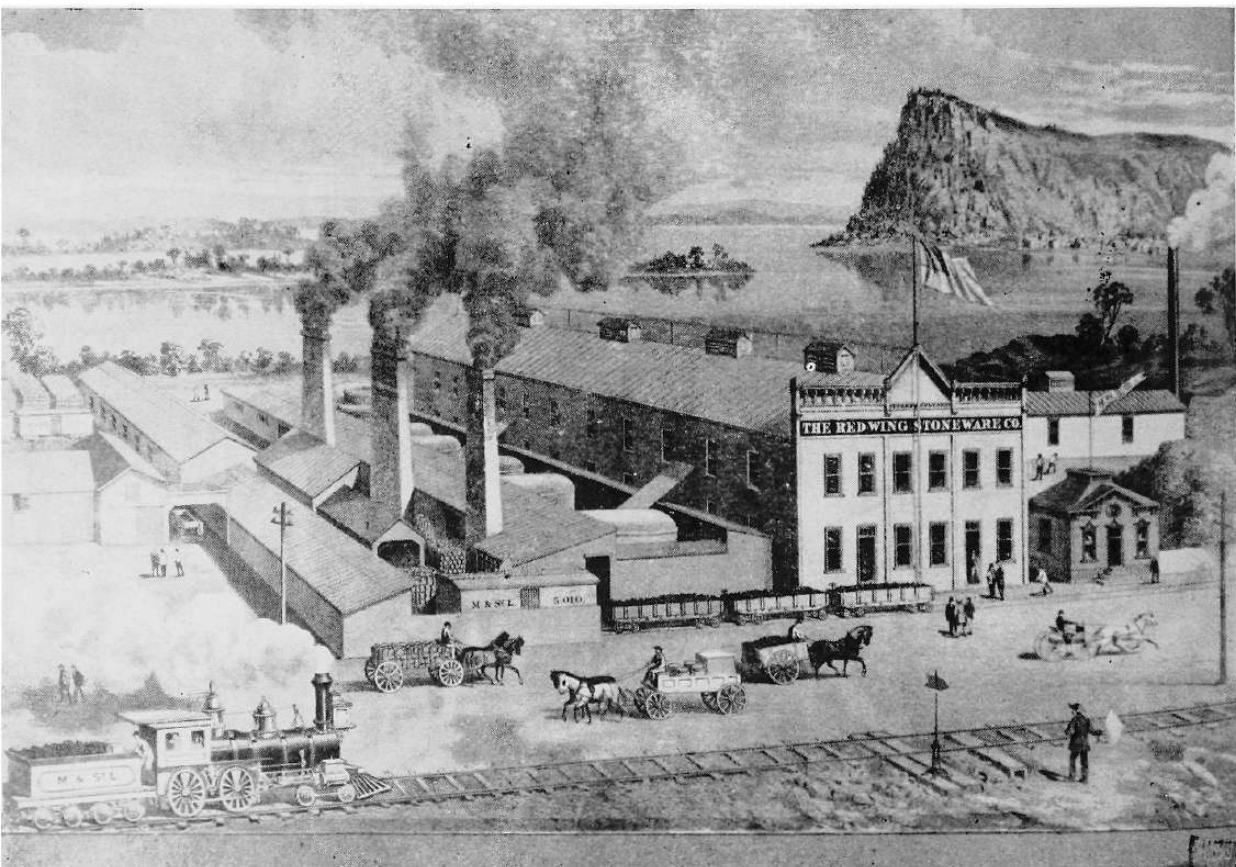
possible, secure a factory there for the manufactory of earthenware." Apparently, however, he did not build his plant until 1868. Two years later it burned, and in the following year he rebuilt it. His products, which were made largely of unglazed terra cotta, included crocks, jars, and hanging baskets. As late as 1877, with a partner named Philander Sprague, Philleo was still operating his factory in Red Wing.<sup>10</sup>

ANOTHER local partnership engaged in a similar undertaking was that of David Hallem, or Hallum, and Henry Mitchell, who manufactured pottery in Hallem's home on Third Street. One writer contends that they were forced to discontinue their business by the "Akron folks" from Ohio, who cut

<sup>9</sup> Joseph W. Hancock, *Goodhue County, Past and Present*, 221 (Red Wing, 1893); Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge, *History of Dakota and Goodhue Counties*, 2:619 (Chicago, 1910); A. T. Andreas, *Illustrated Historical Atlas of Minnesota*, 93 (Chicago, 1874).

<sup>10</sup> *Red Wing Argus*, quoted in *St. Paul Daily Press*, November 18, 1866; Sara Schouweiler, *The History of Red Wing Pottery*, 1, 2 (Red Wing, 1953); *Red Wing Directory*, 1876-77, p. 111.

THE Red Wing Stoneware Company's plant, about 1883



FLIP jar, at the left,  
and other examples  
of Red Wing stoneware



their prices for Red Wing dealers. It is more likely, however, that the opportunity to sell the business at a profit led Hallem to close the small factory.<sup>11</sup> Such an opportunity presented itself in 1877, when a group of local businessmen organized the Red Wing Stoneware Company.

This firm, from which the present Red Wing Potteries eventually developed, can trace its origin to a meeting in the office of C. C. Webster, a local business leader, on February 1, 1877. A stock company for the manufacture of stoneware was proposed, and it was suggested that the new company take over Hallem's plant. Samples of the ware he produced were displayed, and people present who were qualified to judge, declared it "equal to the best Ohio made ware and superior to any made west of that State." A committee was appointed to inquire into the feasibility of the project, and within two weeks articles of incorporation for the Red Wing Stoneware Company,

dated February 9 and signed by a number of local businessmen, were published. The company was capitalized at ten thousand dollars, with two hundred shares of stock at fifty dollars each. Among those supporting the new company was a local merchant named John Hack, who had successfully marketed the ware made earlier by Pohl.<sup>12</sup>

The venture stimulated a Red Wing newspaperman to comment editorially that the undertaking was in no sense an experiment, for two local companies had been successfully manufacturing stoneware and terra cotta on a small scale for some years. He believed it unfortunate that their capital had been "insufficient to enable them to compete with more wealthy establishments elsewhere." Since the new company would be managed by "some of the best business talent of this city," its success was assured, in the opinion of this local booster. He felt that the project would benefit the entire community by advertising the superior quality of local clay. At the same time it would make available to Minnesotans stoneware that could be sold more cheaply than that shipped from other states.<sup>13</sup>

After the company was organized, six months were devoted to experimenting with

<sup>11</sup> *Red Wing Directory*, 1876-77, p. 110; Newton H. Winchell and Warren Upham, *The Geology of Minnesota*, 2:55n. (St. Paul, 1888).

<sup>12</sup> *Grange Advance* (Red Wing), February 7, 14, 1877; *Red Wing Year Book*, 1902, p. 16.

<sup>13</sup> *Grange Advance*, February 14, 1877.

the small kiln and other equipment purchased from Hallem. A site with adjoining trackage was obtained on the river, and early in August grading and building operations began for the new plant. By January 1, 1878, "the buildings, kilns and machinery were ready to commence the manufacture of ware on an extensive scale," according to a contemporary Goodhue County historian.<sup>14</sup> E. T. Howard became superintendent of the plant, "with a splendid corps of skillful workmen under him." The building itself measured about forty by seventy feet, with a clay pit about twenty feet square in one corner. Power and steam for grinding clay, turning, and drying was generated by a twenty-four horse-power engine and boiler "manufactured by the Red Wing Iron Works, Densmore Bros., proprietors."

In addition to the clay pit and engine room, the main building contained a "jigger room" where milk pans were made in molds, a "room for 'slip[pl]ing' the ware, a long drying room for jars, jugs and other ware," a superintendent's office, a long row of "wheels or lathes" at which the "turners" worked, drying frames, and two large kilns in which the stoneware was "burned" for some thirty-three hours. Adjoining the kilns was a two-story warehouse, where the pottery was stored after it had been fired. The main track of the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railroad ran in front of this building, and from it the factory's products could be "carried directly into the cars" for shipment "all over Minnesota, West Wisconsin, and Northern Iowa." It is said that when a train came in, the factory would shut down, and all hands, including office workers, would rush out to load shipments on the waiting cars. Although most of the Red Wing Stoneware Company's products were shipped by rail, some were peddled through country areas in wagons.<sup>15</sup>

From the pliant Red Wing clay, skilled workmen turned out wares that appealed to both country and city dwellers. Among them were items ranging in size and usefulness "from the tiny brown jug, fit for

the fine lady's toilet table, to the mammoth butter jar or water refrigerator."<sup>16</sup> Kitchen utensils of glass, enamel ware, and aluminum had not yet come into use, and housewives were largely dependent upon utensils and containers of sturdy stoneware. They bought molasses and vinegar in pottery jugs, made butter in stoneware churns, cooled milk in heavy crocks, and stored winter supplies of pickles, preserves, salt pork, and sauerkraut in five, ten, and twenty-gallon jars. Commercially, stoneware was widely used for chemical containers.

Although the pioneer Red Wing craftsmen rarely attempted to make art objects, many of the hand-turned items they produced for everyday use are excellent examples of American folk art. Some were made for special purposes or for particular groups. For example, in the 1890s flip jars were made for the Mennonite colonists in the Dakotas. Designed after a traditional pattern long used in Europe, they were intended for storing milk. The thick cream rose to the top and accumulated in the necks of the pitchers, from which the Mennonites flipped it into other containers. A ceramic gravestone of gray and blue ware made by the potteries still stands in a local cemetery. Most famous of all Red Wing stoneware products is the "little brown jug" that has symbolized the rivalry of the Minnesota and Michigan football teams for half a century. Among other early Red Wing products were cuspidors, pudding molds, roasting pans, mugs, mustard pots, pipkins, bean pots, churns, water jugs, and small stone liqueur bottles used especially for curaçao and benedictine.<sup>17</sup>

The company's business increased rapidly. By midsummer of 1878, the plant was producing six thousand gallons of stone-

<sup>14</sup> Much of the following account of the Red Wing Stoneware Company's plant is based upon this anonymous writer's *History of Goodhue County*, 386-388 (Red Wing, 1878).

<sup>15</sup> Schouweiler, *Red Wing Pottery*, 3.

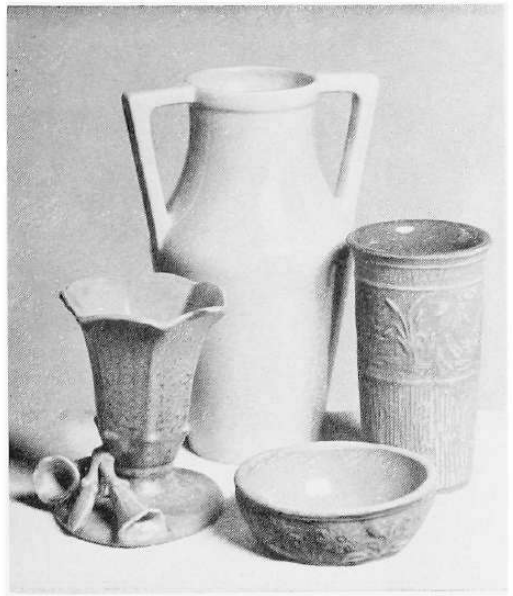
<sup>16</sup> *History of Goodhue County*, 387.

<sup>17</sup> *Red Wing Year Book*, 1902, p. 17; Schouweiler, *Red Wing Pottery*, 3, 4.

ware each week, and since the quality was excellent, the demand grew constantly. Early in 1879, it was reported that the company's receipts for its first year in business totaled more than forty thousand dollars, and that it had produced 270,000 gallons of ware in the same period. A local newspaper reported in November, 1880, that the company had recently taken an order from a single firm for fifty carloads of stoneware for delivery the next year.<sup>18</sup>

The company's success stimulated competition. The Minnesota Stoneware Company, organized in 1883, built a plant on the site of the present potteries. A third firm, known as the North Star Stoneware Company, opened in 1892 in a building still used by a local malting company. Shortly after 1900, the Red Wing and Minnesota Stoneware Companies combined to form the Red Wing Union Stoneware Company, and it was not long before the new organization absorbed the North Star concern and took the name Red Wing Potteries.<sup>19</sup>

Many pioneer business leaders contributed to the founding and progress of these firms. Among them were John H. and H. S. Rich, brothers who reorganized the Red Wing Stoneware Company in 1882, and T. B. Sheldon and F. M. Hoyt of the Minnesota concern. E. S. Hoyt was largely responsible for the fact that this industry, geared to the needs of frontier living, was in time adapted to modern conditions. After



SOME early Red Wing art ware

Hoyt became manager of the Red Wing Stoneware Company in 1891, he insisted that the company build up and maintain a large financial reserve. This enabled the firm to shift its attention to other products when the farm market for stoneware began to dwindle.<sup>20</sup>

Among the items produced in large quantities by the Red Wing Potteries during this transitional period were flower pots for use in greenhouses. The next step was the making of art ware in the form of vases. Then the firm turned its attention to the making of dinner ware — a type of pottery for which Goodhue County clay is not suitable. Since the early 1930s, this Minnesota industry has obtained much of its raw material from Tennessee, Kentucky, North Carolina, and Georgia. The manufacture of stoneware from local clay was finally discontinued in 1947.<sup>21</sup>

It is a far cry from the crude handmade earthenware shaped by Louis Kampff to the sophisticated dinner services produced by a Red Wing factory in its seventy-fifth year. Nevertheless the development of this Minnesota industry parallels on a small scale the transition of a frontier territory into a modern commonwealth.

<sup>18</sup> *St. Paul Daily Globe*, August 3, 1878; *Pioneer Press* (St. Paul), February 15, 1879; *Republican* (Red Wing), November 20, 1880.

<sup>19</sup> Schouweiler, *Red Wing Pottery*, 3, 4; Helen G. Flesher, "Clay Potteries of Red Wing," in *Minneapolis Journal*, November 2, 1901.

<sup>20</sup> Schouweiler, *Red Wing Pottery*, 8, 9; *Red Wing Year Book*, 1902, p. 16.

<sup>21</sup> The possibility of using various types of Minnesota clays for ceramic purposes is now being studied by Mrs. Ruth Lawrence of the University of Minnesota art gallery. *Ed.*

THE VIEW on page 232 is reproduced from a lithograph owned by the Red Wing Potteries. The groups of pottery pictured were assembled for the firm's anniversary exhibit by the Red Wing Art Association and were photographed by the Hodge Studio.



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