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TEPCOWARE

The Technical Porcelain and China Ware Company is now a part of California history, but at its height John Pagliero's "pottery" could produce 30,000 dishes a day.

A pile of shards is a reminder of Tepco, the once flourishing company in El Cerrito, California. Their chance discovery by West Coast ceramist Nancy Selvin led her to collect the ware shown on these pages. She says, "It's hard to explain exactly why this clunky ware is so appealing. To me, it has a basic, anonymous designer quality combined with a backhanded compliment to the idea of form following function."

At Point Isabel, a peninsula on the eastern shore of San Francisco Bay, I climbed over the seawall at low tide onto a narrow strip of rocky sand strewn with broken pieces of china. When I pulled a red candy-striped plate from the mud, inch-long black crabs ran a sidestep sprint into another dark niche. I spent the afternoon rummaging through the shards and took home a bucketful.

Later, scrubbed clean, the shards showed their bright airbrushed colors. White, tan, blue and pink clay displayed palm fronds, pinecones, roses, wagon trains and Chinese temples. Some bore the name, "Tepco China USA."

I first learned about the Point Isabel cache from the Berkeley ceramist Nancy Selvin, who discovered it in 1979. It was the last vestige of the Technical Porcelain and China Ware Company founded in 1918 by John Battista Pagliero in El Cerrito, California. The ware was universally known by the company's nickname and trademark, "Tepco."

The factory was demolished 13 years ago. Its site has been covered with a state office building and a parking lot. Many people who live nearby now don't know it existed, and in a book of local history there are only two paragraphs on Pagliero.

I was lucky to find several men whose recollections recreated Tepco's half-century span. Eddie Pagliero, "the old man's" nephew, was production superintendent. Phil Eckman worked there for 27 years, many of them in the decorating shop. And the production room provided Butch Pagliero, John's grandson, with a playground—he played Frisbee with the dinner platters—and his first job, as a tool and diemaker. Later he became foreman.

They all described John Pagliero as an energetic, good natured, "hands-on" potter with a strong back and sure hands. He spent his workday on the production line and left the paperwork to his family. "The old man could do any job," Eckman told me, "and do it right." Eddie agreed. "He came from a time when a potter did everything by hand from start to finish."

Pagliero was born in 1883 in the Piedmont countryside north of Turin, Italy. Fourteen years old when his father died, he and his brother went to work in a Faenza-style pottery near their home. As a journeyman potter, John went to France and stayed to work as a "faiencier." In

RIGHT: Aerial view of the Tepco factory built in 1947 after a fire destroyed the original plant. Note the clay-filled train pulling up to the Tepco spur. BELOW: The batter-out (right) and the jiggerman at Tepco, ca. 1947. Each team "threw" about 200 dozen pieces a day.

1908 the brothers emigrated to California, where they both found work at Carnegie Brick and Faience in Livermore. The building supply trades were booming during the restoration of San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake.

In 1918 John Pagliero, who by this time was the superintendent of a porcelain casting plant, established Tepco in his backyard. He hired a two-man crew to dry-press porcelain in a hand-operated screw press. The ware was fired in two round 20-foot-high brick "bottle" kilns. The placer climbed a ladder with the ware balanced on his head to stack porcelain in the kiln's upper reaches. These bottle-shaped kilns were gas-fueled; air for combustion entered from below and vented upward in a strong draft which heated the ware evenly, then passed through a central bottleneck-shaped chimney stack.

By 1925, Pagliero had left his superintendent's job and moved Tepco to a site alongside the Santa Fe Railroad track. (When this first factory burned down in 1947, it was replaced by a 200- by 500-foot structure consisting of a low brick building for offices and a barrel-vaulted, reinforced-concrete production room.) He converted the existing building to a plaster shop for making molds and installed Pasquale Rosatti as master. Rosatti's early molds and the corresponding metal jigger tools produced exceedingly heavy, wide-rimmed china; when jiggered and dry, the ware had walls three-eighths of an inch thick. Later Rosatti made molds that turned out thinner, lighter ware with scalloped edges and narrow rims, as well as coupes (rimless plates and bowls). The quarter-inch walls were semitranslucent.

With these design changes, the dishes had a larger surface for the growing number of decorative patterns on the shop's palette. At one point Pagliero offered 25 airbrushed patterns and over 30 tissue transfers; underglaze decals with custom logos were also available. Many of the standard patterns were western in theme: Branding Iron, Wagon Wheel, Ox-Head and Western Traveler. An Early California series commemorated scenes of state history from the Spanish missions to the forty-niners. Keeping the spirit of Mark Twain alive, a Calaveras County hotel ordered custom tableware for the Celebrated Jumping Frog festivals, including a slip-cast frog whose gaping mouth held toothpicks. It is possible that Pagliero, a naturalized Westerner, was unaware of the tongue-in-cheek humor of some designs. For example, a guest at the White Log Tavern, finishing his plate of rare roast beef, might find himself staring down into a wagon train scene with the caption "Donner Party 1846."

Tepco outfitted Victor Bergeron with the original ware for his Polynesian-theme Trader Vic restaurants: the Samoan Fog Cutter, the Tiki, Scorpion and Hula bowls, the Kamaaina coconut cup and a Death's Head mug for hot rum.

Restaurants in the West are still serving on Tepcoware. Shelves at lunch counters and coffee shops are stacked with the thick, clunky white or tan dishes. The Tijuana Cafe in East Oakland has a complete Branding Iron set (brands on the rim spell out T-E-P-C-O), including a spectacular 16-inch, 3-compartment chuck wagon plate in which chiles rellenos, enchiladas, quesadillas and frijoles refritos are customarily served. And the funky-chic Royal Cafe, a few blocks from the original Tepco site, uses a colorful eclectic set. Local residents and former employees of the company have had Tepcoware in daily use for over 20 years. Others keep "working collections" of colorful plates on display until dinner time, when they earn their keep. A recent meal at the Selvins' included Zuni stew on Western Traveler plates, salad in Early California bowls and coffee in Oregonian Rose or Belfast Root Beer mugs.

Throughout World War II, Pagliero supplied china to ships' galleys of the United States Pacific fleet sailing from San Francisco. Each day 30,000 pieces emblazoned with blue ropes, flags and anchors, packed with redwood shavings in oak barrels, rolled down wooden ramps into Navy trucks.

By this time Pagliero owned two California clay mines—in Ione and in Livermore—a gold mine, a cattle ranch, a vineyard and a deposit of Nevada andalusite. The latter was used by Eddie and Tony (John's oldest son) in Pyramid Alloy,

LEFT: **Plate with Confucius pattern, airbrush and stencil.** BELOW: **Squaw Valley mug, blue clay body, underglaze decal.** BOTTOM: **Donner Party 1846, platter from the Early California series, tissue transfer.**

their experimental stove-top clay body with which they tried, unsuccessfully, to make frying pans and casseroles that could take direct flame.

But most of the raw ingredients for their standard clay body came from the East. Railroad cars of Georgia kaolin, Old Hickory Kentucky ball clay, North Carolina feldspar and West Virginia silica were uncoupled on the Tepco spur and the contents emptied into crushers. Suction conveyors vacuumed materials into silolike tanks which held 35 carloads.

Raw ingredients measured according to a master recipe were carried in batch cars to 3000-gallon buhrstone-lined ball mills. These mills were like enclosed cement mixers filled with smooth stones; they ensured an intimate mixture of finely ground materials suspended in a 50 percent water solution. After a two-day grind, the slip was drained through 300-mesh electromagnetic lawns or screens—which removed lumps and iron—into underground agitator sumps where it was aged to make it more workable. Sump pumps sent slip at high pressure through canvas filters that dewatered the clay and left it in cakes. Peeled from the filter press, the clay was tossed into a ten-ton-capacity pug mill, whose rotating knives and vacuum chambers removed all trapped air. A continuous eight-inch square column of jigger-ready clay was pushed through the tapered extruding end of the mill. Three-foot lengths were cut and stacked on zinc-covered carts.

The batter-out and the jiggerman, Butch Pagliero told me, were pieceworkers; they wasted no time in attacking the clay columns. Armed with a piano wire garrote, the batter-out cut the columns into stacks of one-half inch blanks. He slapped each blank onto a flat plaster bat, "stomped" it with a felt-covered cast-iron maul, then passed the "pancake" to his partner at the jigger.

The jiggerman—during the war there were two jiggerwomen—centered the pancake on a whirling Rosatti mold whose top surface gave shape to the face of the plate. He lowered a lever mounted with a steel template, cutting bottom and edge in sharp profile. Ovals were thrown on eccentric jiggers. Cups, deep bowls and other holloware were jiggered in concave molds whose inner walls shaped the item's outer surface. Each of the 16 jiggermen, with his batter-out partner, threw about 200 dozen pieces a day. For decades after Eastern innovators had introduced completely automatic 12-head jiggers, Tepco methods remained "hands-on"; later, a semiautomatic 2-head jigger was used.

The jiggered ware was dried to "chalk white" in rooms heated by open-front gas heaters. Finishers sponged and fettled plates in stacks, then passed them on a vibrating conveyor belt under cascades of sand, which worked itself between each piece. Covered with setting sand to minimize warping, placed in refractory saggers and onto kiln cars, the ware was fired to

vitrification at 2400 degrees Fahrenheit. The doughnut-shaped bisque kiln, a 180-foot continuous circular tunnel, had an open segment (a bite out of the doughnut) that allowed four men in two hours to remove bisque from the moving car and replace it with greenware before it reentered the tunnel.

The car completed the circle in 56 hours, unless there was an accident. Eddie Pagliero remembers being awakened at home in the early morning hours, and having to shut down and enter the dark, hot tunnel to clean up spilled saggers. The closer to the heat zone, the longer the downtime as the kiln cooled and reheated. "I lost a lot of hair that way," Eddie laughs. His hands and arms, like those of the kiln placers, became so callous he could pick up blistering hot china without pain.

After bisque firing, the ware was no longer fragile, and the workers tossed it about with practiced abandon. Plates that had cracked in firing were quickly eliminated from the production line, in a sort of industrial Darwinism.

Setting sand which stuck to the ware during the bisque was removed by sandblasting. Conveyor belts carried smooth ware past the stampers, who applied underglaze-inked rubber stamps spelling Tepco. A woman who had stamped for nine years told me that they used a variety of other trademarks; these included Pa-Ce-Co, Pamco, Solano, Genesee and a single gothic P. This assortment purportedly was a sales ploy.

Eckman, once foreman of the decorating shop, recalled the different decorating processes. The early china was undecorated white or tan, or at most it had a few brushed-on bands of brown, blue, red or green underglaze. Later, transfer printing, airbrush and stencil, and underglaze decals were used. Bill Hoyt, the chief of the art shop, began each process with a drawing according to Pagliero's or a customer's specifications. For an airbrushed pattern, the drawing was cut into a flexible sheet of lead; this could be cut into parts, since each size and type of item required a different modular stencil assembly, which was bound with wire and soldered. The upstairs decorating shop included 12 spray booths.

In the tissue transfer process, a Hoyt drawing was engraved on a copper cylinder, which was then chrome-plated. The cylinder, mounted on a printing press and inked with underglaze colorant dissolved in pine tar oil, printed patterns onto lengths of sheer, strong tissue. The tissue was dried on clotheslines, cut, laid in place and pasted down on the ware with a film of soft lye soap. Decorators

BELOW: Group of Tepco plates employing a variety of decorating processes. BOTTOM: Mugs, pitcher with tissue transfer Palm pattern and plate with airbrush and stencil pattern.

tossed the china into a tub of water, and when the tissue soaked free, it left the design clearly registered. The ware was ready for the glaze dippers.

"When I dipped piecework," Eckman recalled, "I liked to start at dawn and get out by noon, and I could make a good wage." He did it by dipping up to four plates in one hand, extending his reach and grip with several taped-on copper-wire "fingers." With several plates wedged firmly on hooks, he would swing his hand in an arc into and out of a tub of glaze, touching up any unglazed areas with the fingers of his free hand.

The two glost kilns, 160- and 250-feet long respectively, were straight tunnels reaching 2100 degrees Fahrenheit. Kiln cars passed through them in 36 hours. The glazed ware was unloaded, inspected and sent to distribution warehouses in Houston, Seattle, Los Angeles and San Francisco. The culls, or rejects, were trucked for dumping to Point Isabel, where I was to find them decades later.

After Tepco's flush war years, Pagliero turned business operations over to his two sons. Arthur, the younger, remained in El Cerrito while Antone (Tony) traveled to make major sales and to set up branch offices in Houston, Seattle and Los Angeles. Tony's wife, Delores, kept the books. Eddie Pagliero remembered her as "the brains of the operation." The 1936 ledger, salvaged during the factory's demolition, shows Tepco's rapid growth in sales as it produced more chinaware and phased out electrical and technical porcelain, such as insulators and bathroom accessories that it had produced in the 1920's. Meticulous handwritten columns, possibly in Delores's hand, record monthly sales to a single San Francisco distributor totaling $25,000.

Tony and Delores retired in the early 1960's leaving Arthur to preside over Tepco's dissolution. Almost to the end of his 85 years, John Pagliero put on his knee-length brown cotton coat and walked the production line.

Tepco shut down in 1968, the year John died. The demolition company hired to raze it two years later went out of business while trying to destroy the steel-reinforced concrete building. □

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