

## The Old Pottery Shop

Just a block off of the main street in present day Cedar Falls there stands a tiny, gray, weather-beaten shop, a strange contrast to the modern buildings which surround it. Quaint terra cotta letters above the low doorway read, "'Raabs Stoneware & Terra Cotta Works". The small-paned front windows are filled with pottery, vases, plates, teapots, cups, and saucers — a colorful contrast to the drab exterior. As one enters the shop he is intrigued by the antique appearance of the low ceilings and the faded flowered carpeting on the floor, and curiosity may make him ask, "What is the history of this shop?"

In 1859, when Cedar Falls was still little more than a village, Martin White opened his terra cotta manufactory, the first pottery works in Cedar Falls, and probably the first in the valley of the Cedar River. White operated his shop alone for sixteen years. In 1875 he formed a partnership with John Raab, an Austrian immigrant, and for a few years the two men manufactured pottery together. Finally Martin White sold out to John Raab & Son, and Raab's Stoneware & Terra Cotta Works came into being.



Long before this the name of Raab in pottery had been established throughout Silesia, Austria, where at least five generations of John Raab's ancestors had been pottery artists. In the early 1870's, John Raab, his wife, Johanna, and their children decided to leave their beautiful Austrian home and emigrate to the United States. They located first in Philadelphia where they lived for nearly a year. Their original plan was to remain in Philadelphia, but some friends told them of greater opportunities in the West and they came to Iowa. In 1875, when they arrived in Cedar Falls by train, the city had a population of 3,000 persons, and milling was one of the main industries.

After the Raabs purchased and moved into Martin White's terra cotta works on Water Street (now State Street), they set things in readiness for their manufacturing. At the rear of the house they established their workshop with kilns in which to bake the clay, a potter's wheel constructed almost in miniature to fit the work-stooped body of John Raab, and terra cotta forms about the chimney and cornice. Remains of these may still be seen in the back of the shop.

At the front of the house they built a small one-story salesroom which is still being used for that purpose. On the facade above the low front door



they placed their terra cotta sign — Raab's Stoneware & Terra Cotta Works. Years later a painter removed these letters before painting the building and, in replacing them, forgot where to put the apostrophe. Amusingly enough, he placed it before the name Raab, where it remains to this day. John Raab also made terra cotta rosettes to be set in the foundation blocks and along the frieze board under the eaves. These, too, are part of the decoration on the present shop.

Between the salesroom and the workshop were the rooms in which the Raabs lived. These serve as additional salesrooms today, but originally no one was permitted to enter them unless he was a close friend of the Raab family.

At first John Raab devoted most of his time to the making of drain tiles and sewer pipes, stone jars and crocks, for these were much in demand. But John Raab had been trained to be an artist and these utilitarian articles gave him little chance to express himself creatively. He worried lest his customers should think of him only as a maker of sewer pipes and stone jars and he was happy indeed when, after a few years, time permitted him to devote himself to the manufacture of his beloved majolica and terra cotta pieces. Some of his lovely sand-colored vases, decorated with dainty flowers, are still in the possession of the



owners of the shop. Mr. Raab first used local clay for his pottery, but it was too porous to be practical, so he soon turned to clays shipped from western Iowa, Michigan, or Illinois. A picture, probably taken in the 1890's, shows John and Johanna Raab standing beside their shop. The windows are filled with pieces made by John's hand — crocks and jars and the daintier vases, jugs, and animal figurines.

William Raab, John's dreamer-inventor son, was part owner of the pottery for a time. In 1881 he invented a terra cotta double and triple flue chimney to be used in baking the clay. This chimney was much advertised in its day and agents throughout the Middle West took orders for it. Peter Melendy, in his *Historical Record of Cedar Falls* (1893), lists seven other inventions by William Raab, including clay cuts to be used for printing, an automatic railway signal, and a typewriter. A foot-warmer which was patented by William Raab is now owned by the museum at Iowa State Teachers College. An interesting example of William's artistic genius is a tiny replica of Rebecca's jug which he made from clay imported from Palestine. On it he engraved the Lord's Prayer with a very fine needle.

William Raab, however, was a dreamer and not always reliable. An amusing story is told in con-



nection with his duties in the shop. John Raab was apparently a stern taskmaster, and, as this story would indicate, also a shrewd one. Since it was often necessary to bake the clay for forty-eight or fifty hours at a time, it fell to some member of the Raab family to stay up all night and keep the kilns fired. It was quite natural that this duty should frequently be assigned to William, the only son. But William sometimes fell asleep and let the fire get low, so his father devised a method of checking up on him. Before going to bed Mr. Raab would carefully count out the number of pieces of wood required to keep the kiln burning all night. If any of the sticks of wood remained the following morning, William suffered the consequences of his father's judgment.

Johanna Raab was a loyal helper to her husband. She assisted in tinting and glazing the pottery, took her turn at watching the kilns during long baking periods, and had a good head for business. She must have been a hospitable homemaker, for it is said that often at night the Raabs had so many visitors that the floors were covered with beds. Many times these were immigrants who were passing through. Due to the confusion of names these people often got off, or were put off, at Cedar Falls when they wanted to go to Cedar Rapids. In such cases, the station master,



who had difficulty in understanding the foreigners, would direct them to the Raab house on State Street where he knew they would be sure of a hospitable welcome.

In November, 1908, John Raab, then nearing eighty, died. An incident connected with his death serves as an example of this immigrant's interest in the government of his adopted land. Both Mr. and Mrs. Raab had taken a keen interest in American politics following their arrival in this country. Mr. Raab, a staunch Democrat even on his deathbed, anxiously awaited the outcome of the presidential election of 1908. William Jennings Bryan, Democrat, was opposing William Howard Taft, Republican. It is reported that John Raab died twenty minutes after Taft's election was announced.

Following her husband's death, Johanna Raab, assisted by her daughter, Pauline, became the operator of the pottery shop. The seventy-eight-year-old widow was a clever businesswoman, and the shop prospered under her hand even though she was forced to use pottery from other kilns. Mrs. Raab died in 1930 at the age of one hundred. Although she never learned to speak English, Mrs. Raab was admired and loved by those who knew her in the Cedar Falls community.

Pauline Raab, who loved the little pottery shop



and all the traditions connected with it, continued to manage the business until 1940 when she, too, died. And thus after sixty years the Raab Pottery Shop passed into strangers' hands.

Yet Mrs. John Lemmer, one of the present owners, could scarcely be called a stranger. The Lemmers had been close friends of the Raab family for over fifty years, and had come to appreciate them and their work. As the new proprietor of the shop, following Pauline Raab's death, Mrs. Lemmer tried to keep everything just as it had been under the Raabs. Today she is assisted in the shop by Mrs. James McKillup. Although they have filled the shelves with modern pottery, china-ware, and glassware, some of the original vases and pitchers made by the gnarled hands of John Raab still remain in the shop to pay mute tribute to the artistic genius of their maker. The name has been changed to The Old Pottery Shop, but many customers still refer to it as the Raab Pottery Shop.

In recent years the shop has been quite widely publicized. The *Crockery and Glass Journal* for August, 1942, and the *Gift and Art Buyer* for October, 1942, published articles on it. It is credited with being the oldest shop of its kind in the United States. Last year the Cedar Falls branch of the American Association of University Women chose



the shop as their project, compiling an interesting booklet with pictures and comments. Many visitors from all parts of the country come annually to the little shop, now nearly ninety years old. They linger awhile to admire its quaint charm and to purchase the fine quality wares there displayed — imported pottery from England, Bavaria, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Italy, Mexico, and Brazil, or domestic pottery from well-known American factories.

Artists, too, have been frequent visitors at The Old Pottery Shop and they have been eager to reproduce its unique exterior in oils, charcoal, or water colors. Even Grant Wood, shortly before his death in 1942, asked permission to portray the shop on his canvas. Unfortunately, he did not live to accomplish this work.

Today The Old Pottery Shop stands as a monument to the industry and craftsmanship of an Austrian immigrant and his family. As such, it is one of Black Hawk County's interesting historical sites.

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