

2013 Emmett Merritt

The 2013 inductee into the Crawford County Potters' Hall of Fame is Emmett Merritt. Emmett was a third generation Crawford County potter, the grandson of William Riley Merritt and son of Elbert Jackson Merritt. Emmett was also an offspring of three separate potter families. His grandmother was Nancy Becham Merritt, sister of the well known potter Washington Becham. Emmett's mother was Annie Averett Merritt, another well known potter family.

Emmett was born in Crawford County July 23, 1877 and married first to Mattie Gordon, Aug 2, 1896. They had two daughters, Claudie and Mamie, who survived infancy and several other children that did not. There are seven small unmarked graves next to Mattie in Dixon United Methodist Church cemetery. Mattie died June 13, 1903. Emmett was both a farmer and potter. He began purchasing land in 1904 with 34 acres in Crawford County Land Lot 100 of the third land district. He continued buying the remaining acreage of land lot 100 and that is where his home was. He went on to purchase lots 126, 125, 99, 98 and also parts of Lots 73 and 72. Lot 98 was the original property of his grandfather, Riley Merritt. There is no record of Riley selling the property, but Emmett purchased a section at a time from J. H. Long until he had purchased the last remaining acreage in 1927. Land Lot 98 was "the chalk bed" containing a good bit of kaolin that was mixed with the other clay to enable firing it at a higher temperature.

Around 1906 Emmett married second to Julia Hamlin. She gave birth to ten children, but only four survived. Julia raised Emmett's two children from his first marriage plus her own four children. They were Jewel, Lois, Effie Mae, and Lessie.

There are six small unmarked graves next to Julia in Dixon United Methodist Church cemetery. Julia died Jun 2, 1927.

On August 12, 1928, Emmett married his third wife, Mollie Williams, and they produced one child William Emmett Merritt, known by everyone as "Bill," the last living child of Emmett Merritt.

The Merritts had a pottery back of the old house, but around 1920, Emmett built the large pottery facing Pottery Road. This became known as The Middle Georgia Pottery and is still standing today, but no longer in operation. The pottery was made by hand on a potter's wheel to start with, "throwing" jugs, churns and crocks. At a time when other potteries were going out of business due to prohibition reducing the need for liquor jugs and the increased use of glass wares, Middle Georgia Pottery survived. Their survival was due in part by making more churns, pitchers, and jiggered shallow bowls known as "peddling wares." The shallow dough bowls and such were made on a jiggering machine. A jiggered bowl is an intermediate product between a hand thrown jug and a machine made flower pot. A jigger was a spinning table that used a mold and hand operated template arms to shape the clay by a less skilled craftsman. Another device Emmett built was a ball splitter. This was an arm over a spinning wheel used to "open up" a ball of clay to form the larger churns and decorative pots.

Before 1929, Emmett had incorporated the use of Bard pot machines having a spinning inside mold and a stationary outside mold to speed the process. The skill required to operate these machines were different from the old method of

“throwing mud.” The clay for the flower pots was a mixture of swamp clay and kaolin that was an iron stained reddish color. The mud was run through a pug-mill which mixed and ground the mud to a fine consistency and then through a brick machine having round dies. The mud was cut into small plugs to feed the Bard pot machines. The shaped product was left to air dry for two weeks then fired to cone 07 and 08 temperature in a round down draft kiln for anywhere from 45 to 60 hours. There were two downdraft kilns, one 12 foot round and the other 16 foot. Emmett was a direct descendant of the primitive “Jug Factory” and was the first potter in Crawford County to utilize the pot machines and change pottery from a hand craft to a mechanized industry.

Even though they were using the Bard pot machines, jugs and churns were still made to augment production and satisfy customer needs. They were thrown by hand on a potter’s wheel from equal parts swamp clay and white somewhat sandy kaolin, they were given an Albany slip glaze, or were salt glazed at the end of the firing. Each year the plant produced 6,000 to 7,000 gallons of jugs and churns and about 700,000 flower-pots per year.

In Emmett’s will dated April 1937, he gave one-half of Middle Georgia Pottery to his son Jewel and the other half to Bill. At the time Bill was only seven years old and Jewel was to run the pottery until Bill turned 21.

Emmett was 59 years old when he died, Jun 29 1937. He is buried in Dixon United Methodist Church cemetery, located on the Southern end of Sandy Point Road.

By Russell Jones