

## A life lived with fond eye for antiquity

Family members mourn renowned teacher, antique collector who died on Saturday

Article by Ron Devlin, *Reading Eagle*

Photo by Bill Uhrich, *Reading Eagle*

Originally Published: 12/6/2011

Lester Breininger, who has amassed one of the largest and most significant collections of Berks County artifacts, examines one of his redware pots in his Robesonia mansion recently. Breininger died Saturday.

In a dining room adorned with 200-year-old Pennsylvania Dutch antiques, Barbara Breininger chatted Monday about her late husband's legacy.

Lester Breininger, 76, a renowned antique collector, teacher and potter, died Saturday in his Robesonia home. He had been under hospice care for complications due to Alzheimer's disease, family members said.

"Lester's spirit lives on in the things he's preserved and the lives of the people he touched," said Barbara, 76, his wife of 54 years.

Over more than six decades, Lester amassed one of the largest collections of Berks County antiques and artifacts ever assembled.

The collection, much of which reflected the county's German roots, filled the family's 20-room Victorian mansion. The Breingers lived in the house, built by iron foundry magnate George Taylor in 1886, for 51 years.

Much of the Breininger collection was recently sold in a two-day auction at Pook & Pook gallery in Downingtown, Chester County.

Born in Tilden Township, Lester was the son of Lester and Mamie (Hunsicker) Breininger of Shartlesville.

He graduated from Hamburg High School and attended Kutztown University, where he earned a degree in science in 1957.

Lester and Barbara were married in 1957, the year she graduated from the Reading Hospital School of Nursing.

A teacher by profession, Lester taught biology in the Conrad Weiser School District for 33 years before retiring in 1991.

"We had a wonderful life together," Barbara said.

The Breingers achieved national recognition for their redware pottery decorated with tulips, distelfink and other Pennsylvania Dutch motifs.

Their annual front porch sale of pottery, made in an outbuilding on the property, drew collectors from around the country. The 42nd, and last, porch sale was held in August.

Lisa Randolph, the Breingers' daughter, marveled at her father's many interests.

"He was a teacher, a potter, an antique collector and a patriot," said Randolph, 50, of Washington. "All those things were deeply ingrained in him."

After her husband died, Barbara got out his red-and-white Patriotic Order Sons of America sash and placed it on the dining room table. Lester was a former state and national president of the order. POSofA Bernville Camp No. 113 met in the Robesonia Foundry paymaster's building on the Breingers' property.

Scott Shultz, who followed Lester as POSofA state president, said the order is planning a memorial service for Lester. A Conrad Weiser teacher and a former student of Lester's, Shultz hopes to have the service at Conrad Weiser Middle School, where Lester once taught.

"He was very proud when one of his students became a teacher," said Shultz, 55, a former Conrad Weiser athletic director.

The Breininger family said there will be no funeral service because Lester's body has been donated to science.

Contact Ron Devlin: 610-371-5030 or [rdevlin@readingeagle.com](mailto:rdevlin@readingeagle.com).



## On the Porch with Lester Breininger: The Pennsylvania German Pottery Tradition

Written by John Robinson in the Features category and the Spring 2004 issue

It happens every year about mid-August – the annual porch sale in Robesonia, Berks County, at the Victorian--era mansion of Lester and Barbara Breininger. For more than thirty years, the porch show has drawn diehard pottery collectors – and the merely curious – from throughout the country.

At 6:00 a.m. the front door of the house opens and the pot-ter, dressed comfortably and with a prominent beard familiar to Pennsylvania Germans, steps into the early light of dawn. A smattering of applause rises as he greets the throng, and then the crowd surges forward in search of Breininger's newest treasures of Pennsylvania German-style redware pottery.

Lester Breininger has garnered remarkable acclaim from museum curators, serious collectors, and pottery traditionalists. The porch show and sole is the best opportunity to see the greatest variety and array of Breininger's latest work. Despite working as a potter in contemporary times, his pieces are timeless, reflecting centuries of Pennsylvania German tradition, design, and technique.

Breininger is ninth-generation Pennsylvania German, a descendant of settlers who arrived in Berks County in the early eighteenth century. He was born in the county seat of Reading in 1935 and raised on a farm near Shartlesville. After high school he studied biology, chemistry and math at Kutztown State College, working on fruit and dairy farms during the summer and graduating with a degree in biology in 1957. Breininger taught general science and biology at Robesonia's Conrad Weiser High School instructing two generations of students. By 1964, he had attended the University of Rhode Island and Lehigh University and had earned a master's degree from the Pennsylvania State University. Breininger married Barbara Jean Cloy in 1957, and they are the parents of three children.

Breininger is quick to note that the golden age of Pennsylvania German pottery peaked around 1840, after which the number of potters dramatically declined. Fortunately, among potters such as Breininger, fine hand craftsmanship and the Pennsylvania German redware tradition has not been lost. Today, collectors value Breininger pottery for its artistic merit rather than for its practicality. They appreciate the colorful lead-free glazing and the trademark Pennsylvania German sgraffito designs, some early pieces of which were decorated by Barbara Breininger. Lester Breininger creates some of his designs by applying slurry of different clay composition onto redware, a technique known as slip-trailing. He is also known for his whimsical redware animals. Not only is his work featured in the traditional porch sale, but items can also be found at museum shops. Breininger's work has been featured on the Home and Garden Television network, which showcased a redware goldfinch that had hung on the White House Christmas tree.

In 1960, Lester and Barbara Breininger purchased the 1882 Taylor Mansion in Robesonia, the residence of George Taylor, superintendent of Robesonia Furnace which was in operation from 1794 to 1927. The Breingers have filled their twenty-room house with an extensive and eclectic collection of Victorian-era furniture, quilts, ironstone, glassware, redware pottery, folk art, deeds and documents, books, fraktur, and works of art.

Breininger has written books, articles, and essays on the Pennsylvania Germans and their arts. He has been the subject of countless articles in books and magazines. He is described as a "Renaissance Man," devoted to telling the story of his ancestors through writing and lectures. He's an ardent collector, advocate for historic preservation, historian, environmentalist and avid gardener. He's a patriot with a particular reverence for George Washington. He has won awards, recognition, and accolades for his efforts to preserve and promote an appreciation of Pennsylvania German culture. The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission honored him several years ago as a Penn Ambassador.

This Pennsylvania German teacher-turned-potter recently took time from his myriad activities to discuss – surrounded by his works and the works of others at his home in Robesonia – what drives him.

The annual porch sale is a famous event. Where did you get the idea for it?

I had picked up a book at the library, and it said if you do crafty things, it could be fun to have a little gathering and serve cookies or something. We have a big porch out here and we could do this, and -this was planned to be once and done. My wife made some cookies and some tea and she had a pile of magazines. She sat on the porch, on the swing, and she [was] going to look at magazines because hardly anybody [was] going to come. Well, somehow or other, the newspaper picked it up just a little, and we had quite a number of people. All the pottery we had for sale at that first show I could carry like this on a tray I think. And we thought, "Gee that's fun. We could do that one more time!"

It seems to have caught on!

Once somebody brought an Australian writer here and I showed him stuff and told him what we do. And he starts spelling out in his magazine why a porch show would be a good thing in Australia. You can see a bigger quantity of the potter's work, you can get to the people involved in the process of making it, and at the end he says in his article, "Why not porch shows here?" Someone sent me a copy of the article, and I got a big kick out of that because he thought that the Australian potters should do something like that.

What makes the porch sale such a special event?

I call it a happening, and it's hard to describe to someone who hasn't been here. There are people everywhere – on the porch, in

the yard, in the house, in the shop, in the shed, over the garage, just everywhere. One year we handed out a thousand three-by-five cards for a drawing for a number of pieces of pottery, and we ran out. So we scraped other cards together here and there. Somebody ran home and got some more cards.

We were overwhelmed. But there was a big write-up in several papers the same year. I mean, by one o'clock on Saturday, I think we had precious little to sell. Normally at four o'clock we lock the door and fall over. But somehow or other we couldn't and people came late, and I couldn't not deal with them. The mailing list grows and grows and grows. We had people who were flying from Texas to come to the show. They come every other year and order in between.

And Sunday, all I did, besides getting a few things out of the kiln in the morning, I spent most of the day saying, "Honestly, we had pottery here sometime." I got out broken pieces and stuff and set them around to show them what we did do in the past. You know, they were cracked or chipped or ordered or whatever. That's all we had to show them. We ran for extra cookies because we ran out. We had to buy store tea, which I never wanted to do, but we wanted to please them as much as possible. So I had kept a couple of things in the case to use as show and tell. People kept saying "Can we buy them?" I had to say, "No, they are my show pieces." But towards the end I pulled them out and in about ten minutes they were all gone.

Can you describe a typical Breininger pottery collector?

I don't know that there is a typical collector. I have such an interesting range of people, and luckily a number of young collectors. Some of the long-time collectors just do not know where to go with it anymore. They have piles under their beds. They build an extra room. They redecorate their house and sell all their china. There are people that are addicted.

Once, Barbara and I went to visit a mother and daughter who live together nearby. Their house is so full of collectibles, including Breininger pottery, that there is virtually little room for them to live. It's on the dining room table. It's on the kitchen table. It's on all the windowsills. It's on all the shelves. It's piled on top of each other. They have bowls filled with redware Easter eggs and every year they buy a dozen new ones. They have so much pottery that my wife told me, "Now you don't take any more of her money. Why, that's awful."

So, once when they came up here again, the mother said, "Oh, I like that pitcher." I said, "You have one very much like it. I know you do because two times ago when you were here you got one."

"Yeah, well this is different," she said, "and the design was worked differently." "Well, I don't think you need that," I said, and this went on and on. On the way home she said to her daughter, "I don't know what's wrong, but he won't sell me anything." So the daughter asked me, "Is there something we did wrong?" I said, "No, but my wife is upset that you are spending so much money here." Well, when they came again, she said, "We don't go to the bar on a Saturday night, we don't do this, I don't do that, and this brings me a lot of joy." I said, "Okay."

How did you become interested in making pottery?

I had started buying a few pieces of old pottery, and I had a chance to buy a pottery dog. Now, pottery animal figures today are really, really pricey. So I asked the art teacher where I was teaching, "Would you make me one like this?" and he said, "No!" I thought, you're my friend? "But," he said, "I'll show you how."

You were teaching science at that time?

I taught biology mostly. General science and biology in the beginning, until the classes got too big. So anyway, I went to the art classroom and my friend said, "Now you do this. Now you do that. Here's how you roll the clay to do this." Then he showed me how you take a piece of clay and pinch it like an ear and press it on and all that, and before I went home I made a pottery dog with a basket of apples in his mouth. Now it's pathetic, okay.

Do you still have it?

Yeah. I'll show you just for laughs. It's just around the corner. Well, that was so much fun and so intriguing, so I got a little more clay and I made a rooster. I made a bird sitting on a nest and something else. Well, then we got busy toward the end of school and I just dropped it.

At that time, around 1965, I signed up for an adult education class in pottery making. For Christmas I decided to make a little plate, and I put on my three kids' names and gave it to them. But in the meantime, I had a big project at school and I really couldn't deal with playing in the mud at the time. The instructor said, "Why don't you have your wife come down and she can fill in for you?" So Barbara made me a candleholder, and that was my Christmas present. So then she got involved in it!

After I made those plates for my kids, the neighbors wanted some for theirs and in my spare time I would do it and give it to them. I didn't have a kiln at the time, so I'd take it over to the lady in Newmans-town, and she'd fire it. Then I'd bring it home and glaze it and take it back to her, and she'd fire it again. And then I'd give these away. It didn't occur to me right away, but then I thought, you know what, this is costing me money and well, I started teaching at under \$20 a day. And so I'd charge a dollar or something for them.

You must have been pretty good at it by then.

Well, Barb and I both signed up for pottery class over at the Landis Valley Museum and would go over there once a week for like eight weeks or something. Of course, I was going to make a vase about this high and curves in it, and I came home with mud in my face and decided I might as well hang myself because I'm not any good, you know.

But then we pursued it and my wife took some lessons with a potter out in the country and she was making pots there for a while. They weren't decorated much then. She made some paper cuttings, and I did some woodcarving in the style of [nineteenth-century Pennsylvania itinerant artist Wilhelm Shimmel.]

And all the time you were teaching here in Robesonia?

Yes, for thirty-three years. And I really, really got a kick out of that. I really liked it.

When did you retire?

I retired from there in 1991.

So you were making pottery at the same time?

Summers we did pottery. I was painting the house by myself back in those days and when it got real hot, I'd go in the cellar and make animals. Animals were my first love, and then we got into plates, and then I could hardly get out of them. And I said, "Dam it, I like this animal business. I'm going to work on animals." So now we do a lot of them.

Do you consider your pieces to be reproductions of early redware pottery?

Our pieces are inspired by traditional forms, but we're not copying them to the millimeter.

I've noticed you don't attempt to make yours look old like some others do.

They chip them and crack them and scrape them and all that. They ask me why I don't do that, and I say, "In the old days, the potters made new pottery. So do I." But, there's a guy in Ohio who does remarkable things to make his pieces look aged.

Are your pieces in any museum collections?

Well, there are a number of museums with pieces of Breininger pottery. There's the Philadelphia Museum of Art, for one.

Any in the Smithsonian?

Yeah, there's a bunch of stuff there. Winterthur [the former Delaware estate of Henry Francis du Pont] has some in its study collection. In fact, I was down there for a fancy shmancy talk and they put on their high heels and all that business, and I just come in there and say, "We are going to talk about pottery today."

It's like a breath of fresh air. It's fun. And there [are] a number of times that I was asked to go to Winterthur to give a lecture. One guy used to bring the docents up here. Every couple of years they would come up with a different batch of docents. I'd give everyone a chance to scratch a little plate so they could explain it and tell what they're talking about. I mean, they have seventy pieces of sgraffito; they must have a third of all there is. And they want their people to know about it. So I've done that for a number of museum groups.

You are said to be the person to see for Pennsylvania German arts.

Yeah. "You must go and talk to Breininger," or "Go see Breininger." So people from very different levels of society call about stuff. I like helping people with their research into artifacts, documents, and genealogy.

People have asked why you write the date and describe the weather on the back on your plates.

Okay, very few potters did that, but the Stahls [of Powder Valley in Lehigh County] started doing that when they went back in business again. A member of the Stahl family started making pottery in the 1850-1860 period. And then his sons helped, but most of them dropped away, and in 1902 they quit because the pottery business was poor. He was still selling flower pots, of course, and a few things like that.

In 1932, when another potter, Jacob Mettinger, died – he's a rather well known character because he died having his clothing catch on fire when he was firing the kiln – the newspapers all called him "the last of the Pennsylvania German potters." The Stahls were like, "Hey! We're Pennsylvania Germans, and we're still potters." So they decided to go back in business, and by 1934 they had built another kiln. They started writing all that stuff on so it wouldn't be confused with the stuff they made before. So I must admit it is pretty much a copy of the Stahl family.

What are your other interests?

I'm really interested in Pennsylvania German culture and promoting it in lots of ways.

How far back have you traced your family?

Well, pretty far, but I didn't go to Europe to do it. My first branch came to what is now Berks County, actually in 1712. But most of them came in the 1730s, 1740s maybe, 1750s some branches. I didn't track them all completely yet, but there are quite a lot of them. Bar-bara's family is the same pretty much. They came in the late 1730s and 1740s.

And you have always been aware of that?

Yes, somehow or other I've always been aware of this. My parents were busy trying to make a living. There was the Depression and all, although I missed some of that myself, but my father said, "I am so glad my ancestors settled here because I wouldn't want to live anywhere else." But he never really got into it as much as I. My mother had a very rough life in the beginning, with her parents' separation – back then separations were terrible, terrible things. And she was living with an aunt who was very difficult. So she did not have at times a whole lot to say about the past, because it wasn't very pleasant. But she was quite proud of my interest in it and talked about my great--grandmother and what she knew about them. I try to be protector of the Pennsylvania German culture.

How do you promote an appreciation of the culture?

I've worked with several museums. One museum curator picked some things out that he thought were the right things, but they were so far from Pennsylvania German culture that they had no bearing whatsoever. I was hesitant to get involved at first but I ended up lending a hand with the exhibit.

For the display we put up a sign that said, "Pennsylvania German is being spoken here." Mother lined up some of her cronies and all the time we were open some of them were in a rocking chair. We put grandmother's picture on the wall. We had a rag carpet on the floor. We had a kerosene light on the table. We had pink lozenges, a family Bible opened to the fancy writing inside. Very Victorian cloth on the table. We hung coverlets and quilts. I picked out some of the most spectacular colors we had. They were all local. By local, I mean from within ten miles of where I am sitting. And people would come there and want to know how you saved this or that, or hear what Pennsylvania German sounds like. That gave them so much fun, and they enjoyed talking to people. It turned out very well.

This is what a museum is supposed to be, I think. Educational but fun.

I saw your eyes light up when talking about the coverlets. Were they from your own collection?

Yes, I love coverlets. I've got quite a few.

Are all your collections Pennsylvania German?

I try. Most things are. I have some odds and ends. Barbara's ancestors made some frakturs. Her great-great-great-great grandfather made one of my family member's in 1804.

Do you have helpers in the pottery these days?

Besides myself, two full-time. In the summer I have some part-time help.

Are these people you have taught, or do they come to you with experience?

Greg – the fellow that works on the wheel – came here with some experience because he did pottery in high school. He loved playing in the mud when he came here at age eighteen. So he's been with me since 1982.

Of course it's been years since my wife and I did everything. I never claimed that I do everything, but it's really great that we can work together like that. I'll say, "I really like that, but maybe if we did this to it, it would be better." And it turns out it is better. Those two young men are just a treasure. The one said to his mother, "I'm so lucky that I can do things I want to do and get a nice pay for it." I have to say I feel the same way.

Do you have any final thoughts on your work?

Once a guy – was he from England, maybe? – was writing a book and included some American redware, but it was really modern. You know, square, off-center pieces like pitchers that you don't know how to pour because you have no idea where the spout is. In his book, he wrote that there are a few people who think they are working in the tradition and they feel compelled to stick in there, and that's not a good thing for them. They should be developing their work and this kind of thing. And he sort of felt sorry for people like me, that we are locked in.

I don't feel locked in at all. I am standing on a foundation. I can reach out there pretty far. Sometimes people say, "I don't know if I want one of those. It doesn't look like you." Later they call and say, "Well, we'll take one anyway." Isn't that just grand?

Lester P. Breininger, Jr.  
May 19, 1935—December 3, 2011



A Celebration of Life  
January 8, 2012

For Further Reading

Breininger, Lester P. *Celebrating the Pennsylvania Germans: The Kunkel Family Frakturs*. Reading, Pa.: Friends of the Reading Museum, 1997.

Barber, Edwin Atlee. *Tulip Ware of tire Pennsylvania-German Potters: An Historical Sketch of the Art of Slip-Decoration in the United States*. New York: Dover Publications, 1970.

Evans, Paul. *Art Pottery of the United States*. New York: Feingold & Lewis Publishing Corp., 1990.

Fox, Eleanor J. and Edward G. Fox. *Gaudy Dutch*. Pottsville, Pa.: Privately printed, 1968.

Stout, John Joseph. *Early Pennsylvania Arts and Crafts*. New York: Bonanza Books, 1964.

John K. Robinson is a Harrisburg native and, like his subject, a graduate of Kutztown State College (now Kutztown University of Pennsylvania). After fourteen years of teaching, he joined the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC) as a historic site manager. He recently served as PHMC press secretary and now directs its state historical marker program. He has a large collection of modern Pennsylvania German-style redware and readily admits to falling victim to “Lestermania” each year, right around porch sale time.