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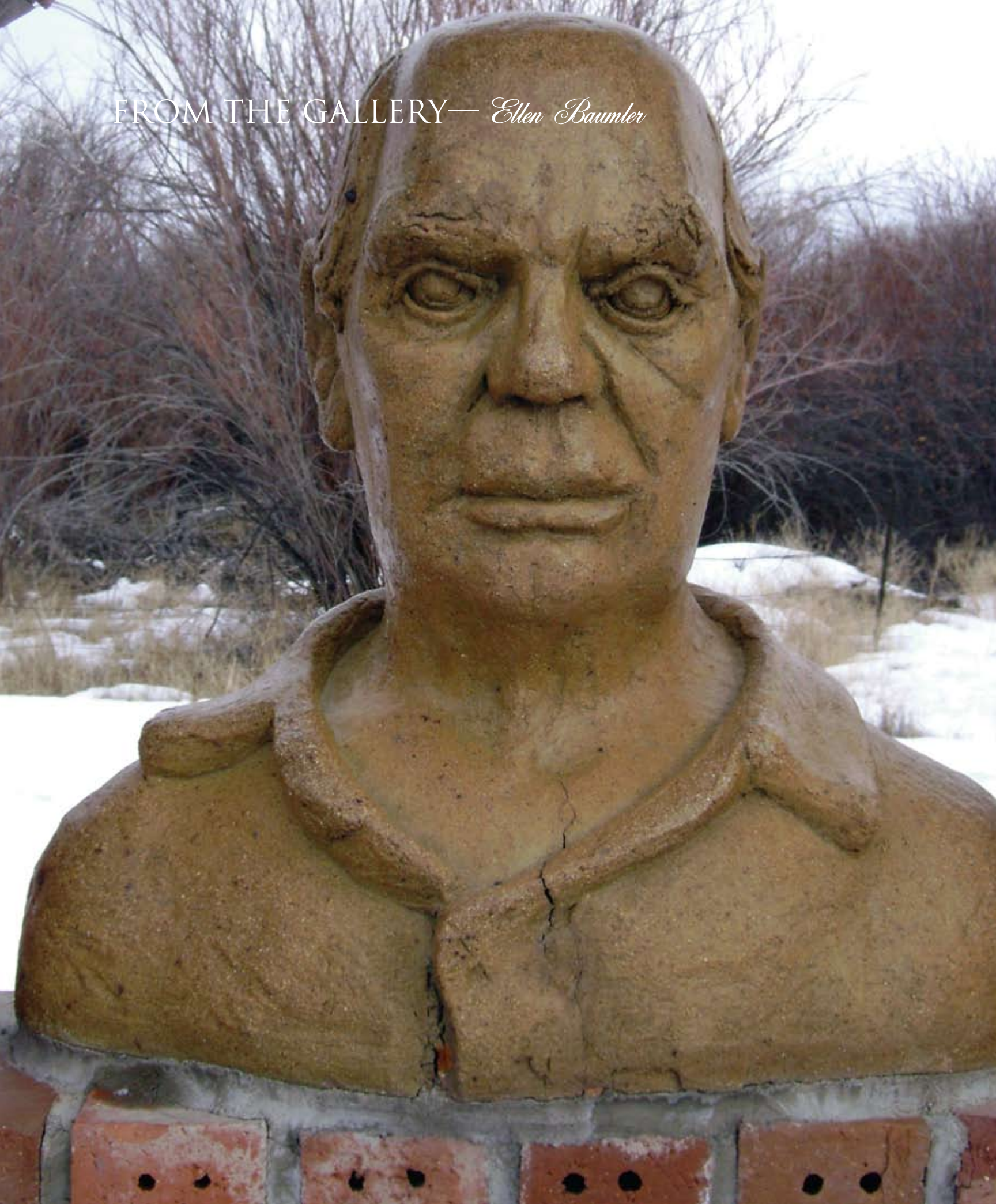
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FROM THE GALLERY— *Ellen Baumbler*



LOTS OF BRICK TO LAY: BUILDING THE ARCHIE BRAY FOUNDATION

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ELLEN BAUMLER

Well off the beaten path, tucked along Ten Mile Creek west of Helena, a sprawling industrial landscape lies nearly hidden from view. This internationally known haven for ceramic artists sprang from rude beginnings when C. C. Thurston began making construction brick on the site in 1883.

Thurston's was not the first local brickyard. Nicholas Kessler's Helena brick operations stretched back to 1866. Kessler made his hand-shaped and molded bricks in a yard near the still-standing brewery for which he was famous. The soft, orange and reddish bricks built many of Helena's earliest fireproof buildings. But Kessler's clay pits were depleted by the mid-1880s. Kessler bought Thurston out and moved his brick making to the site along Ten Mile Creek. Thurston's manager, Charles Bray, stayed on to work under the new owner.

Bray introduced steam-powered brick-making machines that allowed the firing of enormous numbers of brick and tile in beehive kilns. The firing process took eight days

and produced millions of Kessler brick. Montana's university system campuses at Missoula, Bozeman, Dillon and Havre; the state hospital buildings at Galen; and the Black Eagle smelter at Great Falls were all built with Kessler brick.

In 1905, Kessler merged with Jacob Switzer whose brick and tile-making operation over the Mullan Pass at Blossberg offered a deep deposit of clay. The company became the Western Clay Manufacturing Company. Under secretary and manager Charles Bray, by 1915 it was Montana's largest manufacturer of clay products. The company made not only building brick, but also sewer pipe, clay pots, brick for chimneys and paving, decorative brick, and ornamental tile. The Moorish style Algeria Shrine Temple in Helena, now the Civic Center, built with Western Clay's brick and tile in 1920, showcases the company's products.

Charles Bray's sons, Archie and Ray, worked under their father. Archie especially knew nineteenth century brick-making techniques very well. But the brick business was not



LEFT: Rudy Autio created this bust of Archie Bray (c. 1952) which adorns a niche in the Potter's Shrine.

ABOVE: Kessler bricks built many early Montana buildings.

RIGHT: The abandoned buildings and equipment of the historic brickyard, listed in the National Register of Historic Places, blend into the newer landscape at the Archie Bray.



really Archie's chosen career path; he had wanted to become a doctor. Only at his father's insistence did he attend college at Ohio State University, graduating from the university's nationally renowned ceramics engineering program in 1911. Archie became assistant manager and shop supervisor while his brother served as bookkeeper. Charles died in 1931 and Western Clay continued to prosper under Archie's management until, in the wake of World War II, new materials began to replace clay products.

Archie seized this opportunity to begin planning a deep-seated dream. The prominent Bray family had been unsympathetic to Archie's love for the arts during his formative



The Bray welcomes both professional and amateur artists. Here, a student potter concentrates on the wheel.

years; piano lessons for Archie were his parents' one concession. Music fueled his great artistic passion and love for the performing arts that followed him throughout his business career. Archie became one of Helena's greatest patrons. He often took funds from his own pockets to bring diverse and famous artists like ballerina Marina Svetlova and musician Nelson Eddy to Montana's small and relatively obscure capital city. Archie brought the artists into his own home and delighted in squiring them around.

As the brick business slowed, Archie's dream of building a pottery next to the historic brickyard

and providing a good workplace for artists took shape. He was drawn to others interested in ceramic arts like brothers Hank and Peter Meloy, who dabbled in the medium. Hank, a gifted artist, taught painting most of the year at Columbia University; Peter, also artistically talented, was a longtime Helena attorney and judge. In their spare time, the brothers had discovered a clay deposit on the family ranch near Townsend. When their experimental firing of pots in the ranch's blacksmith forge failed, the brothers cast about for a better venue. Peter built a

pottery in his backyard where he fired pots in Montana's first electric kiln. The Meloy's purchase of blue clay for sculpting at the Western Clay yard brought them in contact with Archie Bray. Mutual interest in the ceramic arts subsequently drew the three together and they became close friends.

Three more key players soon entered the scene. One was artist, inventor, and potter Branson Stevenson of Great Falls. As sales representative of what later became Mobil Oil, Western Clay was a regular client of Stevenson's industrial supplies. Stevenson contributed his technical knowledge to Archie's dream planning. And finally, in the summer of 1951 Rudy Autio and Pete Voukos, students of the ceramic arts from Montana State College in Bozeman, came to work in the brickyard by day and sculpt pottery by night. They, along with third student Kelly Wong, agreed to help Archie build his pottery.

Construction that summer was a labor of love. Amateurs came out to lay rows of bricks and Archie's theme song in his letters to Stevenson became, "Lots of Brick to Lay, Stevenson, Lots of Brick." The Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts was born, and the pottery opened on Archie's birthday in October. In 1952, world-renowned potters Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada visited the Bray to conduct the first guest workshop, thereby introducing the Bray to the inner circle of world-class artists.

Archie Bray enjoyed his dream only briefly. He passed away in 1953 and his son, Archie Bray, Jr., took over management of Western Clay until its closure in 1960. According to his father's wishes, Archie, Jr., saw to it that the Foundation and its historic site survived a rocky road paved with financial difficulties and artistic differences. In 1984, the Foundation purchased the dormant brickyard. Today the grounds incorporate the industrial history with a legacy intrinsically conducive to creative energy. Artists come from all over the world to this diamond in the rough to work, to teach, and to perpetuate Archie Bray's longtime dream. **AM**

Visit the Foundation at www.archiebray.org or at 2915 Country Club Avenue in Helena, MT 59602, phone 406-443-3502.



~Ellen Baumler is the interpretive historian at the Montana Historical Society. She is an author of the popular new Montana Place Names from Alzada to Zortman. Watch for her next book, Montana Moments: History on the Go, forthcoming in summer 2010.