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Independent Spirit

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Declan Haun, a noted journalistic photographer, was a friend of Don Lewis and Bennie Lee Sinclair. He snapped this shot of the couple in the early 1960s.

Independent Spirit

By Ron Wagner

Don Lewis has spent most of his 75 years trying to get away from it all. At least that's what most of society would say. The problem is, not everybody has the same definition of the word "all."



All he ever wanted could be found in the forest, in the company of his wife and animals, or in the solitude of a pottery studio he built himself, nail by nail. So that's where he went, and that's what he did.

You'd be hard-pressed to find a man today, in this culture lathered with objects and excess, who has more completely constructed his life on his own terms. It hasn't always been easy, and it hasn't always been perfect. It has, however, been unique. And good for you if you can end a visit with Lewis on his 122 heavily wooded, gently rolling acres in northern Greenville County without a little twinge of envy.

"The down side of living in the woods like this is that trees die and they start falling," Lewis says, chuckling as he points up a hill. "That oak tree up there is jeopardizing my studio."

As Lewis walks gingerly along a path, slowed by a painful case of sciatica, dogs McDuff and Squirt bound joyfully alongside, while Sweetie walks quietly behind, more cautious of a visitor. They are three of the dozens of homeless critters that Lewis and his late wife, Bennie Lee Sinclair, have taken in over the last five decades.

"She was a little stray out on the road for about a year, and the neighbors and I fed her but she didn't come near anybody," he says about Sweetie, a flat-faced, black pug mix with white whiskers that give away her age, and a stubby tail that wags when she hears her name. "I locked her in a pen for a few days and got her used to being here. She was a house dog, and probably what the situation was was Granny has a dog, Granny dies, and the kids don't want to fool with it and throw her out." Lewis goes on to introduce other members of his "family," which includes another dog named Dogg and cats Blossom Dearie, who lives in the studio, and Moto, who lives in the house.



Even before graduating from Furman in 1961, Don and Bennie Lee found sanctuary in the forests of the Upstate.

Ah, the house. Lewis built it, starting in 1975 after he and Bennie Lee moved from their two acres in Little Chicago, near Campobello, where they'd lived for 17 years, since they were Furman students in the late 1950s.

There, they had no electricity or running water. But Lewis no longer shuns modern conveniences. He has a car and a phone, even the Internet. Call them the well-earned fruits of his labor. "When we'd get a hundred bucks, we'd go buy a hundred bucks worth of materials and come back and build some more," he remembers.

And where did those hundred bucks come from? Almost always from the sale of Bennie Lee's poetry or Don's pottery.

There's a reason you don't hear about many people making a living writing poetry and selling pottery — there aren't many who do. But talent and passion can take you almost anywhere you want to go. "Can you imagine making a living selling pottery and poems?" Lewis says with a smile. "But we did a lot of other things, too."

Overcoming adversity

A Greenville native, Lewis talks about his childhood matter-of-factly. There is no bitterness in his voice. There also isn't any whitewashing.

His father abandoned his mother when he and his brother were young, and things were tough for a long time. "I was raised in a single-parent household before it became fashionable. Back then, it was quite a stigma for a woman," he says. "My mother had a nervous breakdown after our father left, and I ended up in an orphanage. While I was there, I contracted polio. At the time, polio was a dreaded disease. It was greatly feared."

He lost the use of his right arm, and it took extensive physical therapy to regain movement. Then life landed another blow. "After I got over the polio, I contracted rheumatic fever. I'm not sure where I was or how old I was. That stuff has blanked out," Lewis says. "I was bedridden for eight months. There's a picture of me. My mother could close her thumb and middle finger around my leg right above the knee. I was a skeleton with skin on it."

But he recovered again and was healthy by his 12th birthday. Shortly thereafter, he and his brother were reunited with their mother, and Lewis went on to graduate from high school and join the Marines.

Nobody in his family had ever earned a high school degree, but he liked education. So after his enlistment was up, Lewis, armed with the G.I. Bill, decided to give Furman a try. "I knew nothing about college, and the only college I knew of was Furman." His life would never be the same.

In 1957, the winter of his freshman year, Don met Bennie Lee. They were married six months later. In 1960 he was introduced to his second love — the pottery wheel. Potter Charles Counts was giving a two-week workshop at Furman, and an intrigued Lewis, who had seen an exhibit of Counts' work, decided to enroll. "I made a little pot the first time I tried," he says, still unmistakably proud of the accomplishment. "They couldn't believe it. I had a natural talent for it."

Ironically, he thinks some of that gift came from the awful virus that paralyzed him as a child. "For a while, I wrote left-handed. I think that little experience gave me a certain dexterity in each of my hands."

Lewis suddenly knew exactly what he wanted to do and, immediately upon graduation in 1961, he headed to California, where he trained under Marguerite Wildenhain at her Pond Farm artists' colony north of San Francisco (now part of the California state parks system).

Wildenhain had fled to America to escape the Nazis, but in her youth she had attained the status of master potter at the legendary Bauhaus School in Germany, which attracted artists from all over Europe in the 1920s and '30s. When Lewis left her tutelage three months later, he was ready to call himself a professional.



GLENN GOULD

Mutual devotion and support

Once you pass the Cleveland post office off of U.S. 276 coming from Greenville, start looking for the sign pointing you to Wildwood Gallery. Take a left, and keep following the signs to 120 Ryan Drive, where you'll turn right onto a one-lane gravel drive that winds its way through the forest to Lewis' studio. He's usually around, but if he's not he requests that you use the honor system to pay for anything you pick out from his display of pots.

"The last couple of years there have not been many [visitors], with the economic situation," he says. "Pottery is not by any means a necessity. Before that, I'd get sometimes a couple of dozen people on the weekends just from my signs out on the road."

Lewis long ago lost count of how many pieces he has sold. As a young man he and Bennie Lee, who also graduated in 1961, would travel all over the Carolinas, Tennessee and Georgia peddling his creations. There was never a ton of money, but there was enough. "We thought

of ourselves as being gypsy potters," he says. He also built a reputation; his work was featured at the Smithsonian and at the Faenza International Pottery Exposition in Italy. In 1970, Furman presented him its Distinguished Alumni Award.

Jeff Greene, a 1970 Furman graduate, met Don in 1969 at an exhibit at Furman. They've been friends ever since.

"At that time Don and Bennie Lee were very secluded and very work-minded, and they were extremely nice to my wife Donna and me," says Greene, longtime owner of The Potters House in Greenville. "In retrospect, he was probably my biggest mentor. There are a lot of people making pots, but there are very few full-time potters that live their lives that way. That was a tremendous influence on me that people did that and didn't do it just for fun."

While Don reveled in the hours spent with clay between his fingers, Bennie Lee did the same with words and paper. Her dream of becoming a writer took a little longer to reach fruition, but the same year Don was honored by his alma mater, she published her first book of poetry. Sixteen years later, she was named South Carolina's poet laureate.

As artists, Don and Bennie Lee pushed each other. He says, "There's a certain joy in doing creative things that you can't really put a dollar value on. When she would write a poem that she was pleased with, or I would make a pot that I was pleased with, it was quite a feeling. There's nothing like it."

Not that they used the same methods. "She and I had two different thought processes. Her thoughts were sort of like in vignettes, still pictures. And mine are always moving," Lewis says. "She enjoyed the creative process of writing, and she really had no affinity for doing things with her hands except on a keyboard."

Greene was continually amazed by the strength of Don and Bennie Lee's relationship. "Both of them had totally individual lives in terms of profession, but in terms of support I don't think I've ever known of anyone that had the support that they gave each other," he said.

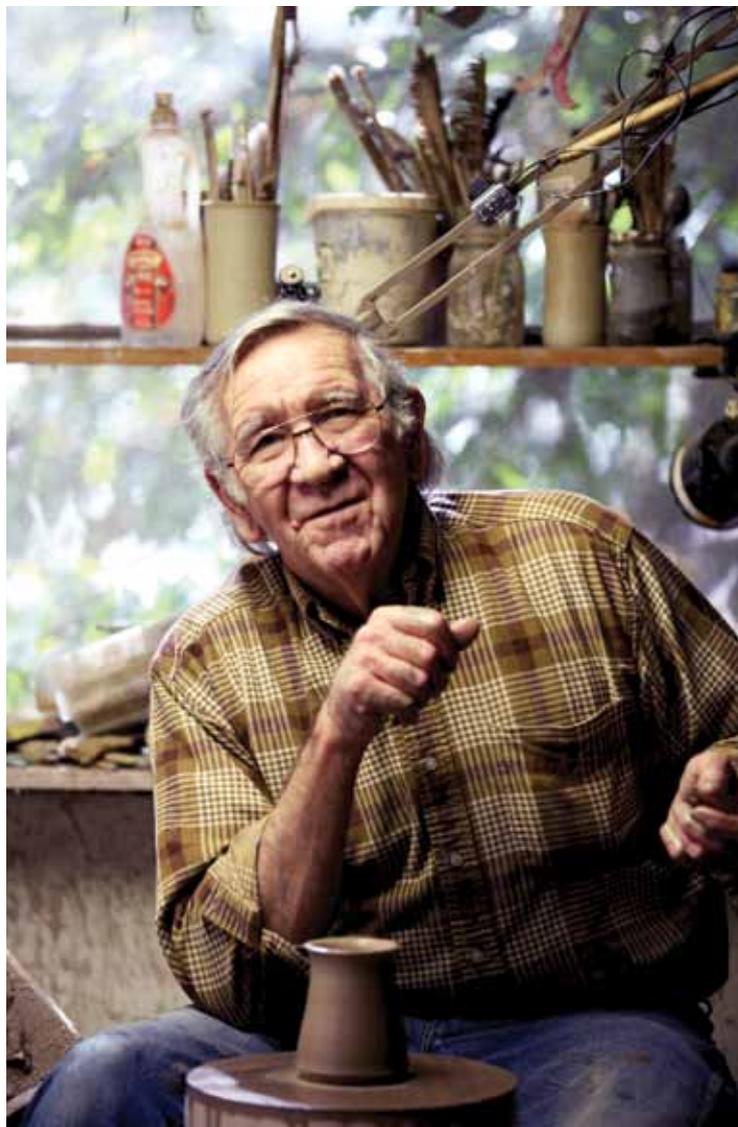
Yet their work was only a small part of their bond. Bennie Lee also came from a difficult childhood. The couple had no children and no other family to speak of, and from the day they met they knew that their time together would likely be cut short by the slow ravages of Bennie Lee's Type 1 diabetes. It was.

"Her death wasn't really hard to anticipate. She had diabetes from a young age," Lewis says. "I've got lots of pictures of her in that wheelchair. She was still going to writers' conferences and things like that. It was a long process of seeing her go downhill, from being a relatively healthy person to someone who was pretty much completely disabled."

As they always had, the couple made do, even when Bennie Lee lost her sight. "She had something around 20 surgeries on her eyes, but still her eyesight would deteriorate a little bit and she'd go back for more laser surgery. Each time, they knew they were destroying her peripheral vision, but it was necessary to keep her having some vision," Lewis says. "She was really determined. For myself, I could not have tolerated one-tenth of the pain she went through."

Lewis goes silent for a moment, and the look on his face suggests that Bennie Lee has been gone for only a while instead of 10 years.

Like all of their friends, Greene wondered how Lewis would cope without his companion. "Don was her only caregiver. They had no family support whatsoever for any of that. Quite frankly, I wondered what was



going to happen to Don. He hadn't been making pots for a while because he was taking care of her. So it was very, very difficult.

"Bennie Lee, as sick as she was, would tell us, 'I just want Don to get back on the wheel again.' And he did. I remember the first firing he had after her passing. It was a real treat."

The fire still burns

Lewis says he's explored nearly every inch of his property, but not lately. With winter approaching, he worries that for the first time he won't be able to cut his own firewood. "I am highly displeased with my leg," he says. "I've always done everything, and I can't do it now."

He can still spin the wheel, however, and fire up the kiln when the mood strikes him. He can also show you what may be his favorite creation — if you ask to see it.

No, it's not in some shiny glass case above the fireplace.

Try the corner of a dusty shelf in a cramped storage closet. "I'm not real sure," he says when asked why the bowl impresses him so. "But it just all came together, the idea that I had. I can't tell you why. It just strikes me as being a pretty good pot."

That's always the goal, although for an artist it's an elusive one. "I'm still trying to make a perfect pot. I haven't done it yet. Or, I should say a nearly perfect pot," he says. "To me, it's a matter of form. Clay is absolutely the most expressive raw material. A little touch here can change the character of something altogether. You can draw a pot outline and make it exactly like that, but it's not going to be very good. It's a matter of letting your hands do what they've been trained to do."

Lewis learned many techniques while he studied under Wildenhain, and over the years he took her German traditions and melded them with Spanish influences and his own Southern roots. Salt glazing, the traditional German way of glazing beer steins, has become his trademark.

Bob Chance, a Furman art professor and accomplished potter, says that Lewis has achieved the rare distinction of taking ownership of a craft. "Salt glazing is not hard to learn. It's difficult to master. Don has his own unique style and unique way of working which became well known to others as his kind of pot."

Nothing was more difficult to master than Lewis' own creative process, though. He freely admits that it mystifies him. "I'll do whatever it is, a vase, maybe six, seven, eight on a board. The progression from the first to the last, the ones in the middle are the best," he says. "The first ones are tentative. By the end, you've overthought them a little bit. I can't do a lot of thinking about it. I've got to do it and go on. It's accidental Zen." Zen: The state of total focus and togetherness between the mind and body.

"When I first ran into this, it was the most independent thing I could do," he says. "I had a talent for it, and I was greatly taken by it. You're in complete control of the process, from start to finish. You have nobody to blame if it turns out bad, but it also means that you take the credit if it succeeds. If you will, there's a little bit of omnipotence."

But just a little. The failures outnumber the successes, and there's the occasional disaster to keep the creator humble — as when a shelf collapses and costs him three months of work, or a sleeping cat falls from the ceiling and into his clay.

"Ultimately everything is confined to the fire, and all sorts of things can happen there. Sometimes happy accidents, and more often than not unhappy accidents," Lewis says with a laugh. "It's quite a nice feeling.

The hackneyed phrase is that opening a kiln is like Christmas morning, but it's pretty much true. For myself, I suppose, most of the pots that I make, once I get 'em out of the kiln and get a good look at 'em, I'm through with it."

Greene knows the feeling. "I'm probably asked about once a month if you make a good living at this, and I say no, but you can make a good life. I learned a long time ago you have to make a choice to do the things you feel a calling to do. It's what the old-timers call a fire in the belly. And I've still got it. I've slowed up, but I'm still working. I'll work until I die, I hope, and Don's the same way."

Lewis has been asked about a thousand times why he chose this life of solitude and self-reliance. Chances are if you don't know the answer already, you won't understand his. But he tries to oblige.

"For whatever reason, I have a need for peace and quiet, and the best way to do that is to be back in a hole in a wall," he said. "There are certain things to enjoy here. Sometimes I'll go out and listen to some great horned owls up on that hillside there. In a busier environment, just the typical noises that you find in an urban situation would drown those things out. It makes me feel good."

With that, McDuff and the gang start making it known that it's dinner time. Lewis has buried more members of his family than he cares to recall, but he knows that one day they'll outlive him. "They're my friends, so they deserve to be taken care of. And if I'm not here to do it, I'll make arrangements for it," he says, and then pauses. "It's strange to talk about."

Is Lewis proud of the life he's chosen?

"Proud may not be the right word, but I'm content. It seems like I've had responsibilities since I can remember, since I was a little kid," he says. "I think I've pretty much met all of them, and that's a good feeling." [F]

Visit www.thewildwoodgallery.com to find out more about Lewis' work.

Color photos by Jeremy Fleming.

To learn about another unusual aspect of Lewis' life, turn the page. —>

