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NAMPEYO, FAMOUS HOPI POTTER⁽¹⁾

(1859(?) to 1942)

By EDMUND NEQUATEWA

IN THE year of 1859 or 1860,⁽²⁾ a baby girl was born on First Mesa in the Village of Hano, to Qots-vema and Qotca-ka-o. Qots-vema was a member of the Snake Clan, so according to Hopi Indian customs, the grandmother of the child, the father's mother, named the little baby Tcu-mana (Snake Girl), but instead, her own people of Hano called her Nampeyo in their Tewa language, which means the same thing.

Qots-vema was so proud of his baby girl, that he would often take her to his mother's house at Walpi. When the girl was old enough to go to see her grandmother by herself, she would watch her grandma making pottery. When she got a little older, she started to mold miniature pots of her own, and her kind grandma just let her go on with pottery making, and as she grew her work improved and the grandmother was very much pleased. When she became a young maiden she was as good a potter as any in Walpi, and she did all the decorating for the old lady as she had become a good pottery designer. She was not only fair, but was considered to be one of the prettiest girls on First Mesa.

Her first marriage was to a man by the name of Kwi-vio-ya and took place in about 1879, but Kwi-vio-ya would not live with her, because she was so pretty, he was afraid that sooner or later, some other boy might take her away from him. Two years later she married Lesou, a Walpi man, and by him she had several children; of these children, there are living today the following: Kwe-tca-we (Mrs. Willie Healing), Ta-wee (Mrs. Nellie Douglas), Po-pong-mana (Mrs. Fanny Supla), Tu-hi-kya (Wesley Lesou). Her oldest son, Qoo-ma-lets-tewa died in the year 1918 with flu.

When the stores were established on the reservation by the white traders, she was doing a good deal of pottery work, so that when the stores began to trade for pottery, her work was among the best, and she was getting good prices. With high hopes she decided to do her best and to improve her work. Of course at that time, she was still using the old Hopi or Walpi designs, which she had learned from her grandmother.

When the Tewa people first came to the Hopi country and settled there, they had their own art of pottery making, and they made only the cook pots, water carriers and the

(1) In the fall of 1942 Edmund Nequatewa made a special trip to Hano to gather data on the life of Nampeyo. He saw members of her family and many of her old friends like Mrs. Lucy Harvey, Poli and Sadie Adams. The information that he gathered is incorporated in this article.—Ed.

(2) This date is confirmed by F. H. Douglas from documentary evidence, "Masterkey," Vol. XVI, No. 6, Nov. 1942, p. 223. She was 82 or 83 years old at the time of her death.

wide mouthed roasting bowls. But at this time, the Walpi people were making decorated jars also, bowls and other types, but the cook pots and the water carriers that the Tewa people made were the best of that type, that is to say, at that time.⁽³⁾

When Dr. Fewkes came to the Hopi Reservation in 1895 to excavate the Sikyatki Ruin, he asked the Hopis for help, to work on this job, and Lesou, the husband of Nampeyo, was among the group of Hopi men that came. While helping there, excavating, Lesou became very much interested in the designs, and also in the types of pottery that were being excavated. He thought that his wife surely would be interested too, so he saved some potsherds, or pieces of broken pottery, with some attractive designs on them and took them home to show her; sure enough his wife was very much interested, and she copied and used these designs on her pottery. This new type of design, of course, appealed to the traders very much. However, the designs would not do so well on the old forms of pottery that she was making at that time, so she started making the Sikyatki forms. In a few years time she had greatly improved her pottery making and was really producing fine work. By this time, the traders were buying more pottery from the Hopis.

At that time Nampeyo was the only potter in Hano who made Hopi-type pottery and this made the women very jealous, for they saw that she was making good money on her work. Then all the women in Hano started making the Hopi-type of pottery and stopped making their own Hano wares which were still in demand by the other villages where they were traded, for to get money for their work was much more tempting than to trade their cook pots and water carriers among the other villagers.

At first the work of the Hano women who were then making the Hopi-type pottery seemed very poor in the sight of the Walpi people, who criticized their efforts.

Lesou thought that if his wife used a different design on each jar that she made she might get more money for her pottery, so he used to go to Awatovi looking for more different kinds of designs, and he also made some trips to Tsuku-vi, Pa-yup-ki and to many other ruins on the reservation.

(3) This statement is borne out by the fact that Stephen, in 1892, recorded the types of vessels made at Hano and Walpi as follows:

(p. 1021. Made by Walpi and Sichomovi Women): Decorated meal jar, water jar, cooking vessels, pots, caldrons, decorated water bottle, decorated pilgrim bottle, food basin, small food basin, crenellated ceremonial vessel, ladle, spoons, etc., clay figurines.

Made by Tewa Women: Water bottle glazed with pinyon gum, undecorated cooking vessels.

They make some of the other vessels, but are not adept, and they do not understand the art of making clay figurines.

p. 1190. The Tewa women say they well understand how to make water casks, also water bottles and cooking pots, and that the Walpi women know best how to make decorated vessels such as water jars. (Stephen, A. M., "Hopi Journal." Edited by Elsie C. Parsons, Columbia Univ. Press. N. Y. 1936.)

And it was in this way that her designs and technique developed. Her designs are not all Sikyatki, as so many people have thought but were from many different ruins, here and there, and thus gave her many ideas. Today the Hano people are considered to be the best pottery makers on the Hopi reservation. This pottery making and designs used today are the revivals of the Sikyatki and prehistoric pottery which was started through the effort and influence of Nampeyo. Though most everyone has used this type of design since then, it was Nampeyo and her husband Lesou who started this work.

In 1898 through the efforts of Dr. G. A. Dorsey, then Curator of Anthropology at the Field Museum, and a missionary, H. R. Voth, the Santa Fe Railroad brought Nampeyo and her husband Lesou to Chicago, to make pottery at a Santa Fe Railway Exhibition held in the Coliseum.⁽⁴⁾

In the year 1904, Don Lorenzo Hubbell recommended Nampeyo to Fred Harvey to work at Grand Canyon, so she went there and demonstrated pottery making for one year. In 1907 she returned to work there again. By this time her reputation was established and she was very well known to the outside public. In 1910 Nampeyo and part of her family again traveled to Chicago to demonstrate pottery making.

Today one of her daughters, Fanny, is actively following her mother's art, and she signs her name on the bottom of every piece that she makes, as "Fanny Nampeyo."

When Nampeyo's eyes had gone bad, her husband Lesou used to paint the designs on her pots, and he really was as good as his wife in decorating pottery, so that he should be rightly given credit for helping his wife to make her reputation. He had worked hard, as he knew that this was the means of getting revenue for his family. Lesou was pretty well up in age, when he died in the spring of 1932.

For many years Nampeyo's sight was completely gone, due to her hard work and to so much strain on her eyes, though even in that condition she was always active in molding pottery, even to her last days. When finally old age took her, it was noticed by her children that she played like a child on her bed. Her last day was on July 20, 1942, and that evening she passed away at 6 o'clock. Although she was very old, everyone felt that she was a great loss to the Hano people, and she will always be remembered by her people and by her many white friends.

(4) Letter to Harold S. Colton from Herman Schweizer dated Oct. 31, 1942.