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## **Golden ceramics**

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Sally Ruth Bourrie

When 20-year-old secretary Helen Atkins first saw the colorful dishes with the art deco flowers at a department store in 1937, she thought they were the most beautiful things she'd ever seen.

"My mother had never owned anything as pretty in her life so I bought them for her," Atkins said - on layaway. The 28 pieces cost almost a half-month's salary. The pattern was called Rosebud and each dish was stamped COORS ROSEBUD U.S.A. Coors? The beer people?

Today Coors Ceramics is the only U.S. producer of high-tech ceramic components. But its original products were more suited to the kitchen than the computer. When Colorado instituted Prohibition in 1916, four years before the 18th Amendment banned alcohol nationwide, it shut down the Coors brewery. Adolph Coors survived and kept Goldenites employed by making ceramics, cement and malted-milk products.

In the past 15 years, prices for antique "Coorsware," as it's known, have skyrocketed. Rosebud remains the most popular, with prices ranging from \$20 for a dinner plate to more than \$300 for rare pieces.

At its christening as Coors Porcelain Co. in 1920, the pottery already was 10 years old. In 1910, Adolph Coors Jr. offered Ohio potter John J. Herold his long-defunct glassworks to manufacture fireproof china and vases, but Herold soon ran into financial troubles. Coors stepped in as an investor and eventually became the major stockholder. The company expanded, and with World War I's embargo against German goods, Coors became the world's leader in industrial and scientific porcelain almost overnight.

By 1930, Coors had consolidated its high-fire Glencoe and Thermo-Porcelain Hotel Ware lines under the "Thermo-Porcelain" name, producing dinnerware and serving pieces in three standard colors: white, dark brown and dark green. This forerunner of CorningWare was made and fired like Coors scientific ware.

Two years later, the line was redesigned for the household market. Thermo-Porcelain Cooking China offered hand-painted gold or silver florals, or decal decorations in five patterns: Garden (or Open Window), Tulip, Floree, Chrysanthemum and Hawthorne. A rare black and white pattern (Gazebo) and the even rarer spongeware pottery - a ceramic made with an unusual glazing technique - were also produced.

Soon after, Coors expanded into low-fire dinnerware: cheaper and lesser-quality ceramics fired more quickly and at a lower temperature. But it was more than adequate for home use. Golden Ivory, Golden Rainbow, Rosebud Cook-N-Serve, Coorado, Rock-Mount and Mello-Tone were manufactured between 1933 and 1941. The value of these other lines doesn't approach Rosebud, says Brad Baker of Golden, who may well have the world's largest collection of Coors memorabilia.

Introduced in 1934, Rosebud was the most popular. The original colors were green, yellow, rose and blue; orange and ivory were added later. Coors was probably the first American company to make high-gloss colored glazes standard, predating even Homer Laughlin's Fiesta ware, writes Robert Schneider in "Coors Rosebud Pottery"

Colors varied. The rose hues range from a dark maroon to a rich pink. The greens fluctuate from deep turquoise to pale green. Ivory and yellow, the most fragile glazes, are the hardest to find.

The first Rosebud line consisted of 49 cooking, baking, serving and dining pieces; at least 22 other pieces were added by 1941. Because handles and stems are so fragile, cups and tumblers are among the rarest pieces today. So are honey pots with intact spoons, which can cost \$300.

With company records virtually nonexistent, glaze and clay formulas have been lost. No trace of designers exists, either, though some Thermo-Porcelain molds were simply restyled with rosebud decoration. Bill Coors claims that Adolph Coors Jr. created Thermo-Porcelain's most distinctive piece: the two-part drip coffeemaker.

"They still make better coffee than anything else I'm familiar with," said Coors, who owns three of them.

In the early 1930s, Coors also was making vases, hand-painted cookie jars, novelties and advertising items. Initially, vases were glazed in matte colors with contrasting interiors. By the late 1930s, the high-gloss dinnerware glazes were added.

"It was not uncommon for artists to sell their molds to other companies when they went out of business," said Carol Carlton, a collector of Coors ceramics who lives in Englewood.

According to Schneider's "Coors Rosebud Pottery," Coors made several vases much like those of Arkansas' Camark pottery, possibly through the influence of a former Camark mold maker who worked in Golden in the early 1930s.

With Prohibition's repeal in 1933, the brewery was reopened and the pottery started making tavern items: beer mugs, ashtrays and salt shakers. Among the most sought-after are Laughing and Crying Monks, whose original purpose remains uncertain. The Laughing Monk carries a mug of beer; the Crying Monk's hands are empty.

Bill Coors said low-fire ware was created "for the express purpose of providing employment ... The two everyday dinner lines, Rosebud and Mello-Tone, and the assorted pitchers, vases, etc. that went with them were always losing propositions," in part because of foreign competition.

Thermo-Porcelain was only "marginally profitable."

Denverite Nevin Carson of Carson Crockery Co. distributed Coorsware through stores, gift shops and restaurant-supply houses, assuring the family that they would eventually make a profit.

"At the time," said Coors, "the labor cost of applying glaze to a Rosebud salad plate was greater than the price we were getting for the plate."

Betty Weaver's father, Lloyd Selby, worked on the kiln gang from 1934 to 1937. Selby remembers that when Adolph Coors had to reorganize quickly after Prohibition, he didn't look outside Golden.

"He took my graduating class and the class ahead of mine and filled all the supervisor positions with them - and he stuck with them," Selby said. Many eventually became executives. Selby was asked to recommend people. As a result, his wife, sister and brother all got jobs. Art Nelson, a pottery employee for more than 40 years, remembers earning 32 cents an hour in 1935, and his wife, Ruth, made slightly less.

By 1934, the plant had three levels: the cellar where they mixed the clay; the first floor with the big tunnel kiln; and the second floor, with two 25-foot round kilns and the jigger line, where wet clay was poured into molds and pieces were hand-formed, usually by women.

Like most potteries of the day, working conditions were sometimes dangerous. Colors were lead-based. Local clays, uranium oxide and coal were used. Many finishers got lead poisoning.

High-fire cookware required up to four days in a tunnel kiln. Pottery was loaded onto flats called "saggers," then onto carts, which men pushed onto a hydraulic chain that led inside the kiln.

When a piece of porcelain fell off a cart, a two-man team in asbestos suits had to retrieve it. "It was 2,000 degrees inside," said Selby. "You'd hold your breath and the last 20 feet or so, you ran in and grabbed a sagger or brick on the tracks and then you ran out and the other man stayed with you to make sure you got out."

Once, when Selby was showing a new hire how to grease the shaft that ran multiple belts, "It caught him and cut his legs off right at the hips."

Dale Trujillo of Arvada may have collected Coorsware longer than anyone else, ever since he started working at the brewery in 1962. Most pieces came from garage sales and flea markets; in 1963 he bought an entire box of china for \$10.

"People thought my wife and I were crazy," he said. With no guide available, Trujillo learned Coors patterns by checking for plate marks. "You look under every piece," he said. Their collection now numbers in the thousands. "Collecting gets in your blood."

About 15 years ago, a group of Denver-area collectors - unknown to one another - discovered Rosebud.

"We were obsessed," said Arvada collector Jo Ellen Winther.

Winther may have more Rosebud than anybody. Her love affair began with a pudding bowl. She paid \$8 for it; today it would retail for about \$30.

"Early on, I'd find people who said they had an old set of dishes that they didn't want or their kids didn't want," said Winther, who built her collection by placing classified ads.

Colorado Pottery authors Carol and Jim Carlton became "possessed" after collecting Colorado's Broadmoor and Van Briggle lines. Even though Carol was not initially impressed with Rosebud, Jim liked the orange so they put together an eight-piece place setting. Soon they were buying rare pieces in all colors. Then, entire collections. The Carltons now own 295 vases, in addition to china and novelties.

World War II meant the end for Coors' pretty dishes. Production ceased in 1941. Not only was consumer dinnerware deemed nonessential to the war effort, but federal regulations also drained away workers.

"A wage freeze froze our wage rate for these lines at 25 cents per hour," Bill Coors said. "Concurrently, the Remington Arms Plant began to hire thousands of workers - minimum scale, 96 cents per hour. Our work force shrank to almost nothing.

"Following the war, the decision was made to focus strictly on industrial and scientific applications for porcelain and other ceramic products. There was no enthusiasm nor financial incentive for re-establishing the consumer ware lines."

But for my mother, Helen Atkins Bourrie, enthusiasm never waned for Coors Rosebud dinnerware. After 40 years of continuous use, the Rosebud set she bought for her mother remains on display. For her, the family Rosebud collection is more than just beautiful china. Rosebud is memories.

Sally Ruth Bourrie is a freelancer who lives in Aurora. She holds a master's degree in art history and collects various types of pottery.

Coorsware exhibits Two Colorado museums have Coorsware on exhibit. The most unusual pieces can be found at the Golden DAR Pioneer Museum, 911 10th St. in Golden, 1-303-278-7151. The Hiwan Homestead Museum also has a display, 4208 Timbervale Drive, Evergreen, 1-303-674-6262.

**Caption:** PHOTOS: The Denver Post/Brian Brainerd Above, Coors' high-fire decalomania Thermo-Porcelain was a forerunner of Corning Ware. Right, Jim and Carol

Carlton's collection includes a honey-pot with intact spoon, which can fetch up to \$300. Above, "Colorado Pottery" authors Jim and Carol Carlton own entire collections of Rosebud, including 295 vases and other novelties. PHOTOS: Photo courtesy of Jo Ellen Winther Left, workers shelve ceramics at the Coors Porcelain Co., which operated from 1910 until 1941. The factory helped Coors survive during Prohibition. A workman shovels coal into a kiln at Coors ceramics factory in this undated photo.

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