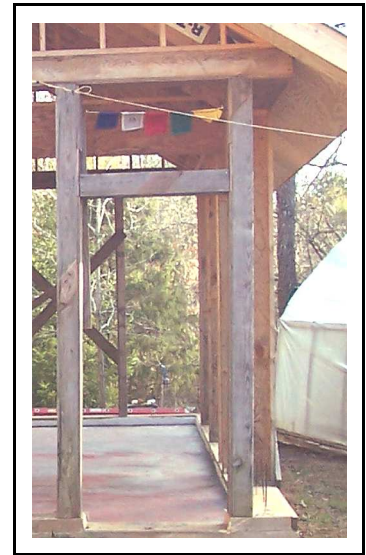


February 06

Okay, it's already February but it's early February, so Happy New Year!

I phoned my sister Virginia after Christmas to thank her for the Tibetan prayer flags she sent. "I'm going to hang them in the house" I told her "to see if they'll help us get something done." "But, Becca, I think they're supposed to be outside" she said. "Jenna, the inside of the house is still outside" I replied. "Oh, that's right."

It's true. Our little straw bale house is not finished. It is more finished than it was a year ago so I can claim that we are making progress. The building currently consists of a concrete floor, roof supports and a roof. We also have a flat bed trailer loaded with straw bales that will soon be stacked into walls, and last September we took a big leap forward when we had the septic system installed. But, we began construction more than five years ago and the term 'a bit behind schedule' just doesn't fit anymore.



The building is such a long way from being a house that we refer to it as the pavilion. As a pavilion, it is fantastic. When it is too hot to eat lunch at the picnic table or on the dock at the pond, we retreat to the cool shade of the pavilion. We are ready for the pavilion to be a house, though, and the desire to live more conventionally is not the only factor motivating us.

The makeshift quarters we now reside in are beginning to crumble.

The 15' camper trailer we use as a kitchen is at least thirty years old. We've made this small space cozy and liveable with artwork, a bigger refrigerator, and some interior remodeling to make it feel more spacious. We also turned the nonfunctional bathroom into a great pantry. A camper trailer is designed to be occupied once a year during a two-week long fishing trip, but not lived in continuously for seven years, and our's is beginning to suffer.

Last year a spongy spot in the floor led us to discover that the roof leaked - a lot! The water was running unseen down between the walls and soaking the floor under the linoleum. As we began to probe behind drawers and in the back of cabinets, we discovered extensive damage, places where the wall no longer existed due to rot. Three gallons of roofing tar combined with Billy's best effort was not enough to stop the leaking. We were forced to resort to the universal roofing material of choice . . . a blue tarp.

The greenhouse that serves less as a greenhouse and more as our bedroom, shower room, laundry room, workshop, and general storage area needs attention, too. According to the manufacturer of the greenhouse, it is time to replace the plastic that covers the steel frame. We've faced this chore before. It's expensive and quite labor intensive. We're just going to keep an eye on the plastic and hope the manufacturer was being very conservative.

Unlike work on the house, work in the studio perks along at a fairly steady pace, and we are gearing up for our first show of the season in Albuquerque, NM in March. With the shows come the customers, the comments, and the questions. The questions are not always simple to answer.

"So, who's the artist?" is a question we are asked several times during a show. Without hesitation Billy answers "My wife is." He understands the customer's desire to give the pottery an identity, to have a better grasp of the creation by knowing the creator. I understand this desire, too. I experience it myself, but when I am asked "So, who's the artist?" I reply "I make and trim the pieces on the potter's wheel, but from then on, my husband and I work together." I know I shouldn't say that. I can see by the person's reaction that my answer is confusing and unsatisfactory, but I also know that the piece of pottery they are admiring would not be what it is without Billy's efforts, too.

True, I decide what size and shape a piece will be and I have the skill to sit down at the potter's wheel with a chunk of clay and in time a mug or bowl or plate is in front of me, but this process is just the beginning. There are many more steps to be taken before that lump of clay is a finished piece of pottery, and Billy is responsible for a good portion of these steps.

Six years ago, Billy and I faced his decision to give up his job as a lineman and join me as a partner in Livingston Pottery with both excitement and trepidation. Billy knew absolutely nothing about making and selling handmade pottery. With time, and a great deal of frustration, he not only mastered but improved upon the techniques I taught him. He is now much better at those jobs than I ever was. The care Billy takes in unloading a bisque kiln is a great example of such improvement.

Unfired pottery, called greenware, is loaded into an electric kiln and fired to 1800°F. This firing dries and hardens the pieces, now referred to as bisqueware, so they can be immersed in a bucket of liquid glaze and not dissolve. I learned that if I took a little extra time as I unloaded the bisqueware, to sand off any rough spots or sharp edges, my finished glazed pieces were much smoother. When I taught Billy how to unload bisque kilns the task took about twenty minutes. Now, Billy may spend two hours unloading and cleaning bisqueware, and it's not because he's gotten old and slow. He has developed his own methods of improving the quality of our finished pieces by spending more time on the bisqueware. Applying base glazes is another job Billy has elevated to an art form.

Glaze is applied to bisqueware in the following steps: liquid glaze is poured inside the piece, rolled around and poured out, then the rim is dipped. Finally, glaze is applied to the exterior, and then the pieces are decorated.

When Billy and I began working together, I let him know that I liked the glaze lines to be level and that I wanted very little overlap, if any, between different colored glazes. The techniques I taught him to achieve my goals are laughable compared to the methods Billy has developed. Even more impressive to me is the improvement in glaze application he has achieved simply by being patient.



When the liquid glaze is poured inside a piece of bisqueware, the entire piece becomes damp due to the water absorbed from the glaze. The outside glaze cannot be applied until the piece is dry again. If it's applied too soon, the glaze will be thin and I really dislike the look of a glaze that is too thin. The time it takes for a piece to dry depends upon the temperature and humidity level in the studio and upon the particular glaze.

Most pieces can have the second glaze applied within an hour but sometimes all of the mitigating factors come together and we're forced to let pieces sit as long as overnight. I get impatient. Left to my own devices, I'll start putting second glazes on much too soon. Billy is patient. He orchestrates the entire glazing process, which lasts for several days, to ensure that I always have work in front of me to decorate, but no piece gets the final glaze until it is ready.

There are many other ways that Billy's skill, experience, and pride makes my pottery more refined, more finished, and better than it would be if he didn't work with me. I want to explain all of this to the person who asks "So, who's the artist?" I want them to understand that if Billy didn't grind the antler for a custom fit on the big antler platters or wrap rims for the urns in copper wire, those spectacular pieces wouldn't be in the booth because I don't know how to grind antler or wrap rims. The venue of an art show, however, doesn't allow for such detailed discourse, and I have decided when I'm asked "So who's the artist?" I'll say "I am." I don't think Billy understands how important his efforts are to the success of Livingston Pottery. I certainly do.

We are anticipating our shows this year and we look forward to seeing you.

Rebecca and Billy