

## Sand Mountain Pottery –Now Collector’s Items

By Michelle Michaud

When they started making storage vessels in the late 1800's, the Belchers had no idea their simple pots would someday become collector's items. But it has happened, and now museums, like the Houston Museum in Chattanooga, are adding their works of art to their collections and collectors are searching flea markets for the valuable wares.

Edmond T and Polly Belcher lead the migration from Randolph County to Sand Mountain. They had two daughters that married two potters. “We don't know if Edmond T was a pottery maker. We've never seen a piece signed Edmond T Belcher,” said Danny Maltbie, collector and expert on Sand Mountain Pottery. “Our friend Ron says before he goes to his great reward, he would like to know if Edmond T Belcher made pottery.”

Danny Maltbie led a discussion recently at the Houston Museum about Sand Mountain Pottery. Dozens of people showed up to hear about this simple family that quietly built a thriving pottery business after the Civil War.

“Ron got a lot of people interested in this because he wrote the history of Sand Mountain. There are probably 200 people out there today looking for this pottery,” said Maltbie.

In the 1860 census Edmond T Belcher is listed as a teamster and a pottery maker. “Why if I were starting a business would I move out in the middle of Talladega National Forest to start a business? The old Georgia Road, county Road 4, went right by that potter. Everyone going into north Alabama went right by that potter. It's as simple as that,” said Maltbie.

And clay, good clay, was plentiful on Sand Mountain. “This is extremely fine clay and there is nothing like it anywhere else especially in the south, I'd say,” said Joey Brackner, director, [Alabama Center for Traditional Culture](#). “They used a two glaze process,” he said. “Firing pottery even with modern technology can be tricky. But back in the day firing with wood there were lots of variables. What kind of moisture was in the air, the fire was smoky, all these things would affect if it was this shade of green or this shade of brown.”

“They would have loved everything to look exactly the same, but if it was high fired, impervious to liquids they could sell it to people for food prep, canning, for chamber pots, smoking pipes, fermenting pots for beer, all of these things from clay from Sand Mountain,” said Brackner.

“Now, y'all know what a fermentation jar is... what they probably made these jars for was to make beer. And the way this worked, you would start off with your mash and

while it was working they would put the lid on that would allow it to bubble over into this rim area, then they'd place an overturned bowl on top of it to keep out the bugs and dust," said Brackner.

Syrup jugs were very important and Syrup was an important agricultural product Brackner said, "You turned part of your crop into syrup, or whiskey, and so if you had a potter that could make these things, like the Belcher, for you and you were close enough to buy a whole wagon load of it-- that's what kept these men in business."

As for women, Brackner says they were too busy to throw pottery, "Women were too busy to leave the house to make pottery. Women had a kitchen garden, cleaning, health care system of the household, they had lots of kids," said Brackner. "They didn't have time to farm cotton or make pottery in the shop. Later on, as technology made their lives easier, women would help glaze it, decorate it, and market it."

The Houston Museum of decorative Arts has a few of the Sand Mountain pots on display. The Houston Museum is located at 201 High St. Chattanooga, TN 37403