

Bybee, Kentucky

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YOU NEVER KNOW WHAT YOU'LL FIND when you're not looking for anything. This held true recently for my husband, Rusty, and me during a long road trip. On a meandering drive in eastern Kentucky, I had one of my impulses to travel the back roads and stop anywhere that seemed promising. My instincts have led us to some fantastic finds, some weird ones and sometimes some rather dangerous places.

There was the time we snuck into a forgotten 1950's roadside zoo in rural Georgia. The long, concrete building was covered with weeds, but we could still make out fading lions roaring across the façade above the old entrance. A Ford station wagon from the 70's had been parked in front of the main door many years before and was now so embedded into the earth that it was a permanent part of the landscape. We were quiet as we tiptoed around the side of the building, amid overgrown cages and lots of bottles, boxes and bones. I wanted to see what secrets had been left behind, so I led Rusty toward the back to find another way in. He was reluctant and half-heartedly tried to convince me to return to the safety of our truck. Rusty knew from my enthusiasm that I was on a mission and his protestations were for naught. I was thrilled to find a heavy wooden door that creaked open easily to let us into the abandoned building. We knew we were the only people around — likely for years, but we whispered anyway. Among the vast mounds of junk, I found an old lion skull and a plastic kid's toy and decided they would make good souvenirs. After a while we relaxed and chatted a bit more normally, and then, all of a sudden, we heard a loud squawk as something flew in the window. My heart stopped until I saw it was only a huge chicken that had found his way in. That was when we noticed the power cord snaking in the open window.

“Why would an old building like this need power?” Rusty asked, as I wondered the same.

I gathered my courage and followed the chicken’s trail to see where he had gone. Rusty hung back as I made my way around the piles of trash and dusty furniture towards the back of the building. There was just enough sunlight sneaking in through the broken glass and boarded up windowpanes for me to make out what appeared to be some surprisingly new cages. The tall pens filled with sweet-smelling sawdust were full of more chickens. The roosters were the biggest I had ever seen and had sharp and pointy spurs on their legs. It was then I realized these were no ordinary chickens but were actually illegal fighting gamecocks! I spun around to find a big burly guy who was about to flatten my head in, and seeing no one, I grabbed Rusty’s hand and wasted no time in finding my way back to the truck! The back roads’ culture of rural Georgia lived up to its reputation that day!

Then there was the time we stopped at the bottle man’s house. He had tables full of glass bottles of every size and color in the front yard of a timeworn wooden house. Being an antique bottle aficionado, I had to stop! The guy was likely a lot younger than he looked and not yet an old man. He was tall, very thin and had long scraggly hair and a beard to match. I didn’t get close enough to be able to smell him, but from his appearance, I knew he hadn’t seen soap for a while. He seemed harmless enough though, and when he said he had a big stash of blue cobalt bottles in the back, I felt obliged to follow him. Rusty dutifully came along, but I sensed this adventure wasn’t too thrilling for him. I really thought we’d enter from the back of the house, but no, we went right onto the cluttered front porch, into the living room and through the house’s innards.

By the time we got to the back, I knew that he was a serial killer and we were toast. The poor lighting was just enough for us to have seen the most horrid conditions in someone’s home you could imagine. Food that had changed form completely, many days before, was resting in various places. There were bags of trash and soiled clothing strewn about. Nothing white or clean was in this house. I tried not to breathe for fear of contamination, and I knew I was in big trouble with Rusty for this one. Surprisingly, we actually arrived alive to a small room with — can you believe it — blue cobalt bottles! As much as I knew the guy needed cash, and the bottles were a great price too, I fibbed our way to freedom by claims of a vast cobalt collection, which contained nearly every one of the

types he had. We then swam back through the human waste to the beautiful air and front yard where I quickly purchased a few clear bottles in thanks for his not adding us to his list of victims.

As unpleasant as those excursions might have been, we survived and even brought home well-earned souvenirs. Places like those can't be found on major highways, so our trip planning always contains less traveled routes of adventure. Sometimes we get lucky and find the most surprising jewels and meet amazing people. This was the case when we were on our way to hike Kentucky's Red River Gorge and stumbled upon Bybee Pottery.

Rusty and I discovered a few years ago that Kentucky is a wonderland of nature-based opportunities and has a unique cultural history to share. We have been thrilled many times by the botanical richness of the Bluegrass state, the impressive geologic formations and the abundance of wild rivers and streams. Native Kentuckians live close to the earth and have a deep understanding of their land.

One Tuesday afternoon in early fall Rusty and I were headed to the gorge by way of Irvine and State Highway 52. We had just passed the town of Waco, which was named after Waco, Texas for some inexplicable reason. I noticed a little town on the map called "Bybee" and told Rusty we should check it out. He kind of grunted but followed my directions to Bybee. The tiny hamlet was very simply laid out, and we saw only a handful of buildings. I immediately noticed a weathered clapboard building with a plain sign that read "Bybee Pottery, Est. 1809." Rusty, being an aspiring pot spinner, was as excited as I this time! We parked and ran up to the door only to find that they were closed. By the hours posted on their door, it seemed that they were closed most of the time. Their hours were 8:00 — 11:00 and 12 — 3:00, and they did not open on Saturday or Sunday. The handwritten sign also said, "We close for lunch." I was disappointed but decided we should at least peek in the windows to see what we were missing. The main room was as spartan as the town itself. Long wooden shelves held various types of functional pottery. There was an endless array of pitchers, plates, bowls, and mugs in various colors and patterns. The check out counter held a shiny brass cash register — no computer versions here! Other than a calendar, window box fans and a few chairs, there was not much else to see. I walked around to the other side of the building and noticed that a door was propped open at the back end. I called to Rusty, who was still analyzing the shelved pottery, and we edged our way towards the door. What we found inside was more than I could have hoped for.

We leaned in the open doorway and saw the workings of the pottery. Immediately to the left was a short, rounded and balding man who was at that very moment throwing a pot on the wheel. He smiled broadly as he kept his hands on the growing pitcher and welcomed us inside.

“Don’t be afraid; step inside. Quickly now, and you can watch me finish this!” our greeter exclaimed.

The friendly man wore a bright pink t-shirt that contrasted with the pale clay color of literally everything else I could see. I asked him if I could take pictures, and he insisted that I hurry to get shots of his pitcher in progress. Not to worry, though, as the entire time we were there he never stopped making his creations. As Rusty chatted with the potter about his work, I soaked in my surroundings. Even though it was a fairly warm day outside, the air in the pottery was cool and moist. The ceiling was low, or maybe it was the floor that was high. The irregular ground was made of thick clay, and the main paths were well worn. Everything in the pottery had a purpose and everything, including the potter, was splattered with clay. The clipboard by the clay-coated telephone was crusty; the Madison County map would need to be wiped before it was read. There were handprints of clay on the overhead beams, and even the ceiling was spotted with little clay bits. I noticed that the thick ceiling planks and the solid wooden walls appeared strong even though they were not aligned evenly. This type of construction wouldn’t pass inspection today. The potter told me that the building we were in was built in 1845 and was the second location of Bybee Pottery. He insisted I visit the room behind him to see where his clay was kept. The storage chamber was even cooler than the main section, to keep the clay pliable. Large bricks of pale muddy clay were stacked along heavy wooden shelves that were eight inches thick. The ancient walls were made of huge and uneven granite blocks and had been laid by hand over 150 years ago.

Rusty continued to chat with the potter and asked about the machinations that ran the wheel. There was a wide belt running in front of the spinning table that ran vertically and up into the ceiling.

“That goes upstairs where a motor runs it now. Used to be they used a steam engine to run the wheel. I can fill this tray with four pitchers in four minutes. I take my clay, weigh it on the balance scales and throw it. It takes exactly two pounds to make one pitcher,” our host told us.

“Wow,” Rusty was impressed and exclaimed, “You’re just mass-producing this stuff!”

Well, that was the wrong thing to say! The potter puffed up a little bit taller and brusquely replied, “Boy, ain’t nothing here mass-produced! We make everything by hand. Always have! We heat the pots up to 2200 degrees in those kilns back there, then we hand-glaze all of our pottery. We put our “BB” stamp on the bottom of everything we make, so you’ll know it’s authentic. Bybee Blue is our most requested.”

“So, why is the pottery here, in this part of Kentucky?” Rusty asked next.

“Well, boy, if you’re gonna have a coal mine, you put it where the coal is, don’tcha?” our host answered. “You see, the Kentucky River is just three miles down that-a way,” he nodded his head towards the doorway as he deftly turned a new clump of clay on the shiny twirling wheel. “We go down to our clay mine with a backhoe every week or two and get us a load. Then it goes to our old pug mill for grinding; that’s just over yonder, down that road there.”

The potter was a native Bybeeian who had worked at the pottery his whole life since he was a teenager. In his singsong voice, he told us about the town of Bybee as he continued to churn out more pitchers. We looked out the doorway as he explained that the empty, white brick building on the left corner was the old general store and had been a stagecoach stop and gas station over the years. I noted that even though there was no longer any business there, the grass was freshly mowed and the building was tidy. To our right, we saw what had been the town’s post office. The potter told us that “Carter closed the post office,” and it’s been idle since. Our knowledgeable host had an obvious passion for the history of the area and told us about the beginnings of the town of Bybee. Settlers discovered the clay deposits as early as the 18th century, during the time when Daniel Boone’s namesake settlement, Boonesborough, was established nearby. They used the clay to make crude plates and drinking vessels. The current day pottery is mined from the same deposits that the settlers used! By the time the Civil War began, there were many potters in the town of Bybee. The town was named after the Bybee family who ran the stagecoach stop there. However, no one with the pottery’s namesake has ever been employed there, and the same family, the Comelisons, has owned the pottery since the very beginning. Bybee Pottery is the oldest working pottery west of the Allegheny Mountains and is the second oldest in the nation!

When the potter found out that we were headed towards the Red River Gorge, he advised us on the most scenic routes to take. He went on to tell us about the geologic history of the area and its relation to the clay he held in his

hands. The natural stone arches in the area are second in number only to Arches National Park in Utah. With waning daylight coming we knew we had better be on our way, so we could enjoy the views as we approached our destination. It was difficult to leave the engaging gentleman whom we had gained so much from in such a short time. The mystique of the pottery and the little town of Bybee were captivating. We said our good-byes and thanked him profusely for letting us intrude on his workday. Leaving Bybee and getting back onto Highway 52 was jolting; it felt as if we had morphed into another era.

Since our visit to Bybee, I have found out much more about Bybee Pottery, and what I learned has reconfirmed my positive impressions of the potter and his town. Of all the information he shared with us, he never mentioned that the pottery is famous throughout the world, even though the government took away its post office. He didn't brag about the fact that Bybee Pottery has been written up in such publications as *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Southern Living*, *Smithsonian* and the *New York Times*. He didn't tell us that even though the state of Kentucky considers Bybee a "no longer populated community... that was absorbed by nearby towns," when they are open for sales, you had better come early because there is usually a line out the door. Some folks have described the buying crowd as a "madhouse." The artisan didn't boast that his pottery is considered collectible and is found on many Internet auction sites. He wasn't conceited that even though Bybee Pottery doesn't make deliveries, doesn't ship their pottery anywhere and doesn't have a web site, they are always busy filling vast numbers of orders. The productive potter didn't tell us that when the local elementary school kids stop by, he makes them little clay animals to take home with them.

You never know what you will find when you're not looking. Rusty and I can't wait to see what treasures we will find next! It might be another wacky bottle man or irate law-breaker, but then again, it might be a humble, world-famous potter with stories he loves to share!