



In 1979, Stephen Driver unsuccessfully tried his hand at a wood-fired kiln. Earlier this year he tried again.

# BRICK

BY

BRICK

*"I dream about laying bricks at night.  
Last night, I laid the arch of the kiln in my sleep."*  
—Stephen Driver

WRITTEN BY ALICE DRIVER  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ARSHIA KHAN

# S

## PART I:

**Summer in the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas at dusk is lightning bugs rising out of fields of unbaled hay. To my child eyes, the fireflies, when they rose high enough, were indistinguishable from stars.**

When we were young, my brother, Ian, and I often fell asleep under the stars tucked into sleeping bags in the back of my dad's old blue Datsun truck. Our parents, a potter and a weaver, stoked the wood-fired salt kiln every 10 to 15 minutes for 12 to 16 hours, their faces glistening as they approached the firebox with handfuls of kindling. As the kiln gets hotter, the amount of wood and the frequency of stoking increases, and at 2,350-2,380 F, the pots inside would be fired. According to my dad, "The kiln tells you when it needs to be fed." I remember the warmth of the flames and the expanse of stars above me. What I didn't know as a child was how much failure my dad had experienced as he learned to build a kiln by himself.

He built his first wood-fired kiln in 1976 and fired it in 1979. It required hundreds of hours of labor and guesswork because at that time, there were no manuals for such things. Before the first firing, he had a party, and all the neighbors came to celebrate him finishing the kiln. After the party, he fired the kiln, but it didn't fire properly, and he was forced to admit that he was a bit naïve about the science and physics of kiln building. When I went home for a visit to Arkansas in October 2016, my dad and I sat in the kitchen sharing a bottle of his home-brewed beer. He explained, "I did a pretty good imitation, and it looked good, but it didn't fire right. And I probably could have made it fire right if I had the resources to do it, but I didn't have the resources. There were other problems with my clay and glazes. We were flat broke, and Louise had just gotten hepatitis." Then he added, "That's the first time I went out of business."

When I was home, I spent a lot of time in my dad's ceramics studio, peppering him with questions. "I was never trained as an artist. I just loved working in clay, and I didn't think you needed to go to school," he told me as I sat on the cement floor of his pottery studio and watched him clean a pile of hundreds of used bricks. When I asked him how he got into kiln building, he told a story of how, as an undergraduate, he saw a poster advertising a kiln-building workshop with a picture of a big chimney stack with smoke coming out of it that said, "come to northern California and build a six-chambered wood-fired kiln."



My dad signed up for the workshop, drove to California and built the kiln in 1971. He explained, "I fell in love with wood firing at that point. I decided that that's what I wanted to do with my life. I didn't think about making a living; I just felt compelled to do it."

At the time of my visit, he was two years into making his fourth kiln, one that would live beside the studio and house he had built in rural Oark. He told me, "I started building my first wood kiln in 1976. I built the foundation of it when I built the foundation of the house. The summer before I met your mom, all I did for three months was build the foundation." He and my momma met for the first time in Georgia at an art conference, and a few months later, they moved to Arkansas to live in a tent on the banks of the Little Mulberry River. They walked through the field barefoot down to the tent every night until my dad had partially finished his ceramics studio; then they started living there.

In October, I kneeled in the garden and pulled weeds with my mom. She told me that when she met my dad, she had assumed that he knew what he was doing when it came to building the house and the kiln. "I knew nothing, and I thought knowing nothing was a hindrance," she explained. "I didn't know that knowing nothing was how you became somebody who knew something and just moved forward." I could envision my mom in her 20s, her wildly wavy hair already streaked with white, a city girl who had joined the Back-to-the-Land movement with my dad and who realized that she, too, could learn how to garden and build a house.

"How did you deal with failure?" I asked my dad as I watched him throw pots on a potter's wheel in his studio. Over the course of the week I was home, my parents and I had ongoing conversations about failure and making art. As a writer, 99 percent of my life involves rejection and failure, and I constantly questioned how I could best learn from failure and continue writing. "It was emotionally devastating to build a 3,000-brick kiln, fire it and get nothing out of it," my dad said. "I went down to the creek and cried. But I



**"It was emotionally devastating to build a 3,000-brick kiln, fire it and get nothing out of it."**



got up. Who could explain—for some people, things crush them, and it did crush me, but it didn't stop me.” Persistence—I had inherited that.

My parents were in debt at the time the kiln failed, and they remember having \$5 to their name. “It was sad, and it was a beautiful kiln, too,” remembered my mom. “That was a setback, but nothing sets him back for very long.” And then, as if reading my mind, she added, “You and Ian were babies at that time, and that is when you would sleep in the back of the truck.”

My dad joined a government program to train workers at a machine shop in Clarksville, which was a 45-minute drive down the mountain from our house in Oark. Between the money he made there and some he borrowed from his Aunt Alice—I’m her namesake—he built a gas kiln so he could start making pots to sell. He made blue and white cups and plates that had brushwork flowers on them—things he thought would sell. They sold well, but he realized that aesthetically, he didn’t find the work interesting, so he stopped making them. “If I had a sales chart, the graph would have gone straight down. And then when I started doing the work that I wanted to make—it did not sell as well, but it made me happier.”

My mom, who initially knew little about firing, became my dad’s partner in that physically challenging process. “Wood firing continued the romance—fire, nighttime, stars,” my mom said as we stood in the kitchen surrounded by hundreds of ceramic vessels and preparing chiles rellenos with chiles from the garden.

He did eventually go to graduate school, which is where he met potter Ron Meyers, my dad’s teacher and mentor, who is known for making wood-fired ceramics painted with fanciful beasts. (Imagine a charmingly drawn rat gracing the side of a cup—because, yes, even his rats are irresistible!) My dad was inspired to make the fourth kiln based on a kiln built by Meyers. It would be capable of firing some 500 pots and is made entirely of recycled materials. It took 18 months for my dad to mine and transport the bricks. “This is by far the most challenging project I’ve ever done. It’s a beast,” he told me. “I am pretty certain that it will fire.” He got some of the bricks from Camark Pottery, a commercial kiln in Camden, Arkansas, built in the 1930s. In the end, he mined and cleaned 4,000 bricks. “Each one weighs 8 pounds,” he explained. “If you calculate the total—it’s almost 40,000 pounds of bricks. I’ve made some great progress, but I’m exhausted. I want a break. But the thing is, I have to keep the momentum, and I have to keep working.”

**“What happens with wood firing is that when you get it right, you get a pot that could change your life.”**



## PART II:

**I**n May 2017, 35 years after my birth at home in the Ozarks, I worked the 6 p.m.-to-midnight shift on the last night of the firing of my dad's new kiln, which was roughly the size of two VW vans parked back to back. It was the first time that I, the daughter of a potter, had fired a kiln. I put on thick work gloves and started sorting kindling to make a pile of pieces of the appropriate size. I was stationed on one side of the kiln that had a round opening the size of two fists. Each time I took hold of the wire knob to open the small hole in the kiln, I looked directly into a pile of flames and ashes. Adrian Leffingwell, a potter and a farmer who met my dad at a farmers market in Fayetteville, oversaw the shift. He shouted “stoke!” every few minutes. If I didn't push the pieces of kindling through the opening in the kiln at the right angle, they got stuck and immediately caught on fire, causing flames to burst out toward me. After six hours of managing the fire, I was physically reminded of the amount of work and lifeblood that my dad put into making ceramics. It had taken him 2 1/2 years to build his fourth and largest kiln, which he designed, by hand. He did not know

if the maiden voyage of the kiln would be a success, and I could see the worry written on his face.

Because of the size of the kiln and his physical, financial and emotional investment in it, he was apprehensive that the first firing would not go well. A team of 20 volunteers, including my dad's twin brother, Larry Driver, several Arkansas potters and a group of his former ceramics students, joined us to participate in the inaugural firing of the kiln. As the volunteers set up tents in the neglected fruit orchard and rolled out sleeping bags on the screened porch my dad had built specifically to host people at kiln firings, he filled the kiln shelves with pots, both his own and those made by volunteers. Night was falling, and he still needed to construct and weld together a door for the kiln, but luckily, Michael Warrick, a sculptor, had welding skills and offered to help.

The volunteers signed up for six-hour shifts in which three to four people would work together. Three people would stoke the kiln—throw wood into the fire—every three minutes in order to achieve a steady increase in temperature to 2,400 F over three days. Another volunteer would monitor the temperature of the different sections of the kiln and coordinate the stoking. Around 11 p.m. Friday, the first piece of wood was thrown on the fire, but the door still wasn't welded together. It started to rain and lightning, and the sky was filled with flashes that illuminated the house, the kiln and my parents' dog, Ernesto, who liked curling up next to the kiln. Hannah May and Logan Hunter, a young couple whom I called my dad's “pottery children” because they had been

driving to Oark for the past six years to work in his ceramics studio, were on the first kiln shift. The constant rain caused the area around the kiln to flood, so everyone tried to build barriers to keep the water away from the kiln. By dawn, the lightning storm had knocked the electricity out, the volunteers were drenched, and nobody had gotten good sleep.

Everyone ate breakfast by candlelight since the skies were still full of darkened clouds.

The greater challenge posed by the lack of electricity was how to weld the kiln door together. Michael, the sculptor, visited five houses in the neighborhood over a period of hours as he searched for someone with a generator that would provide enough power for him to do the job. First, he went down the dirt road to our neighbor and longtime friend Susan Gately's house, and since her generator wasn't working, he helped her fix it. Four houses and half a day later, Michael found a place to weld and put together the door.

That evening, everyone gathered around the kiln, handmade ceramic cups in hand, to toast the first firing with bourbon. “What happens with wood firing is that when you get it right, you get a pot that could change your life,” my dad said. Then he asked everyone to make a half bow, clap three times, and drink in honor of teachers and mentors. For good measure, he poured a bit more bourbon into everyone's cups and said, “It doesn't hurt to toast the gods a little bit more.”

That night, those of us who weren't on the kiln-firing team dug into a two-layer carrot cake made by Tony Bockhold, one of dad's students. Everyone took a shift cooking over the three days, and dear friends Elizabeth Black and Marie Sandusky made peppermint ice cream.

On our last morning together, my dad told the ultimate kiln-firing story. It was 1983, and he was in the middle of a kiln firing when our neighbor Susan came over and asked, “Can I borrow your scale?” When he asked why, she replied, “to weigh the baby.” Another

neighbor, Diane, had been driving down the dirt road when her water broke, and she pulled over at my Aunt Karen's house, which is across the street from ours. Susan, who is a nurse, had helped Diane give birth; then she weighed baby Vidal on the clay scale.

“This is the last stage for me,” my dad declared on the final day of the firing, “I want to make a community, to bring people together. That is what I want to do with this kiln.” He let the kiln cool for a week; then a group of volunteers returned to Oark to help him unload it. As my dad opened the kiln brick by brick, he peered into the abyss and faced his fear of failure. Every firing is a surprise because the pots inside never come out the same. To his relief, many pots were heavily specked with ash, a desired outcome, and members of the firing crew were excited to see their work. My dad, in typical fashion, evaluated the good pots and the bad ones; then he proposed firing the kiln again in November. **AL**