

## **ONCE UPON A TIME IN NORTH PARK THERE COULD BE (CRAFTSMAN) GOLD IN YOUR FIREPLACE BY KATHERINE HON**

Do you think those muted brown and green square tiles on your fireplace façade are boring? Are you considering painting over the funky rabbit relief tile that's lost its shine? Wish the covered wagon relief under the mantle was marble instead? Resist the urge to "modernize" your fireplace! That tile may be one of the most valuable features in your bungalow.

In 1910, as North Park began residential development in earnest, California's Golden Era in tile making was dawning. Tile manufacturers in the eastern United States and Europe had been sending their products westward to enhance residences and public buildings since the mid-1870s. But the regional, distinctively Californian industry was launched with increased demand from a growing state population after the turn of the century.

The earthy, subdued style that can be traced to the Arts and Crafts movement, and ultimately to tiles of the European medieval period, is best represented by the work of Ernest A. Batchelder, who produced his first tiles in a shack behind his Pasadena home. Batchelder studied to become a teacher of drawing and manual training at the Massachusetts Normal Art Institute in Boston, graduating in 1899, but moved to Pasadena in 1901, where he taught for eight years at the Throop Polytechnic Institute (which later became Caltech). He wrote articles on design for Gustav Stickley's *The Craftsman*, among other journals, and wrote two books. Around 1910 his workshop became a center for the production of decorative tile, eventually becoming a business employing 175 workers creating his distinctive luminous brown tiles, and relief designs with animals, medieval castles, Viking ships, and Mayan abstractions. The subtle colors and hand-made appearance of the tiles were a classic reflection of the Arts and Crafts call for simpler materials and connection with the earth. In a 1920s catalog, Batchelder noted his fireplace "has strength of character without constantly challenging one's attention." Robert Winter, an architectural historian and Batchelder scholar who in 1972 bought the Pasadena home built by Batchelder, said the symbol Batchelder used for himself was often a rabbit, or hare, possibly because he was shy. The symbol for his wife, a musician, was a harp.

Another tile company with similar style also frequently seen in North Park living rooms is Claycraft Potteries. Established in 1921 and operating in Los Angeles, the company produced more than 500 different design tiles. Fred Robertson, who won Gold Medals for his work with crystalline glazes at the San Diego Exposition in 1915, was the general superintendent. The Claycraft style for fireplaces was typified by a single-fired tile with an irregular, buffed and sanded surface. Relief tiles presented idealized visions of California natural landscapes, such as waterfalls in Yosemite National Park; a Sequoia forest with a bear cub; and scenes featuring an oak, sycamore, palm, or Torrey pine tree. A covered wagon drawn by three pair of oxen traversing a desert expanse is tile No. 1056 in the Claycraft Potteries catalog, and a Spanish Mission scene is No. 1022.

Production of these decorative tiles peaked in the mid-1920s, and most of the businesses failed during the Great Depression triggered by the stock market crash of 1929. Batchelder's factory closed in 1932, and the last mention of Claycraft Potteries in the Los Angeles city directory is in 1939. But the style and beauty of the Arts and Crafts tile is alive and well in Craftsman communities like North Park.

For restoration tips, a gallery of photos, and a directory of experts, try a website like [www.revivaltileworks.com](http://www.revivaltileworks.com). The beautifully illustrated book that was the main source for this article is [California Tile: The Golden Era 1910-1940, Acme to Handcraft](#), a Schiffer Book produced by the California Heritage Museum and edited by Joseph A. Taylor.