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hand-built
fired in an open pit
a tribal art centuries old
from the Catawba Indians
Rock Hill South Carolina



CATAWBA
POCKET

Her hands,
like the hands of a musician,
know where they are going.

As the pale lump of clay
rotates between them,
a bowl is hollowed out in its soft center.

She lifts this to the light
to judge balance and proportion,
then lays it aside.

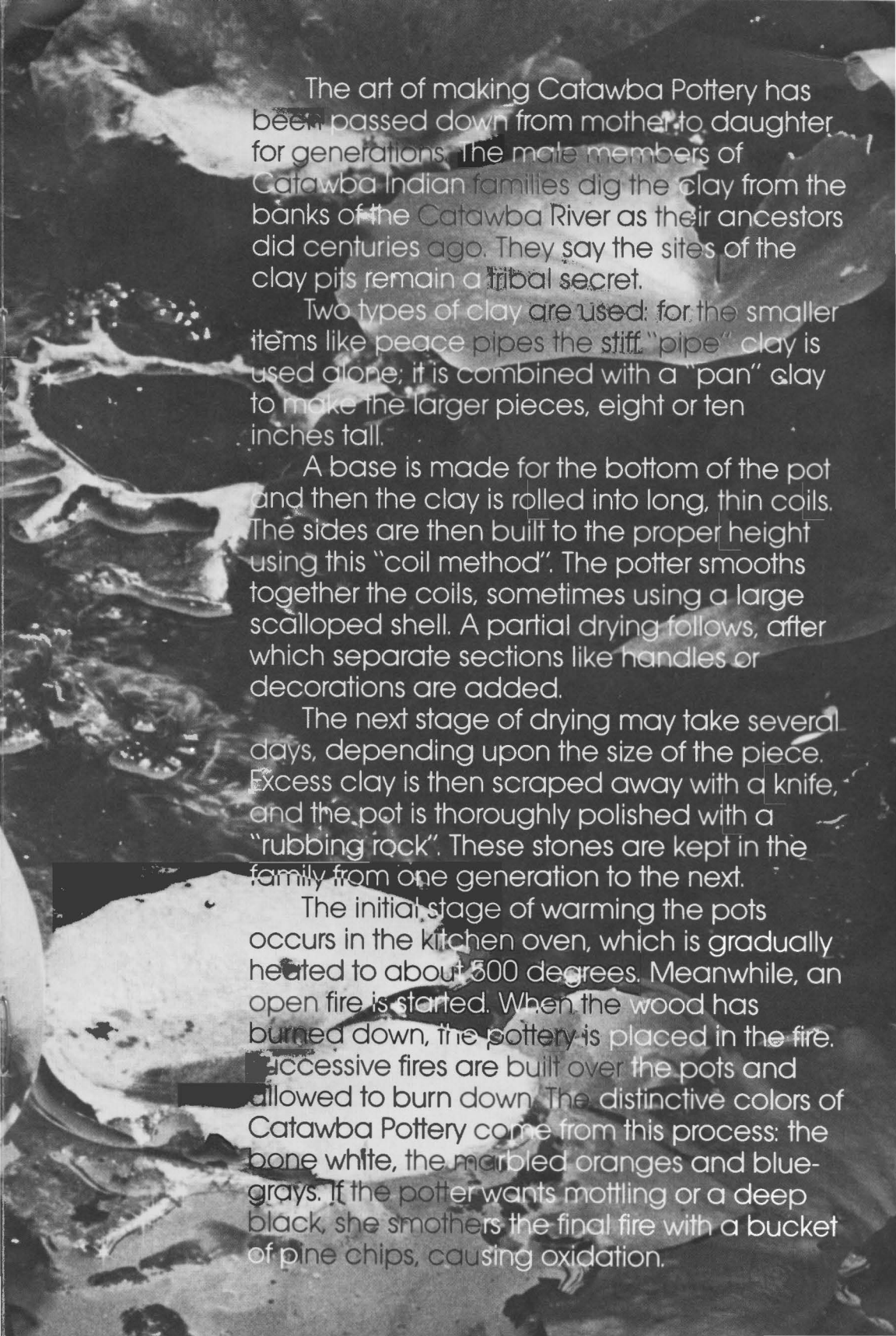
She takes fresh clay
and begins to roll the first coil
to build the sides.



Doris Blue, member of the Catawba Pottery cooperative, smooths and shapes the coils of clay.



Pottery by Nola Campbell



The art of making Catawba Pottery has been passed down from mother to daughter for generations. The male members of Catawba Indian families dig the clay from the banks of the Catawba River as their ancestors did centuries ago. They say the sites of the clay pits remain a tribal secret.

Two types of clay are used: for the smaller items like peace pipes the stiff "pipe" clay is used alone; it is combined with a "pan" clay to make the larger pieces, eight or ten inches tall.

A base is made for the bottom of the pot and then the clay is rolled into long, thin coils. The sides are then built to the proper height using this "coil method". The potter smooths together the coils, sometimes using a large scalloped shell. A partial drying follows, after which separate sections like handles or decorations are added.

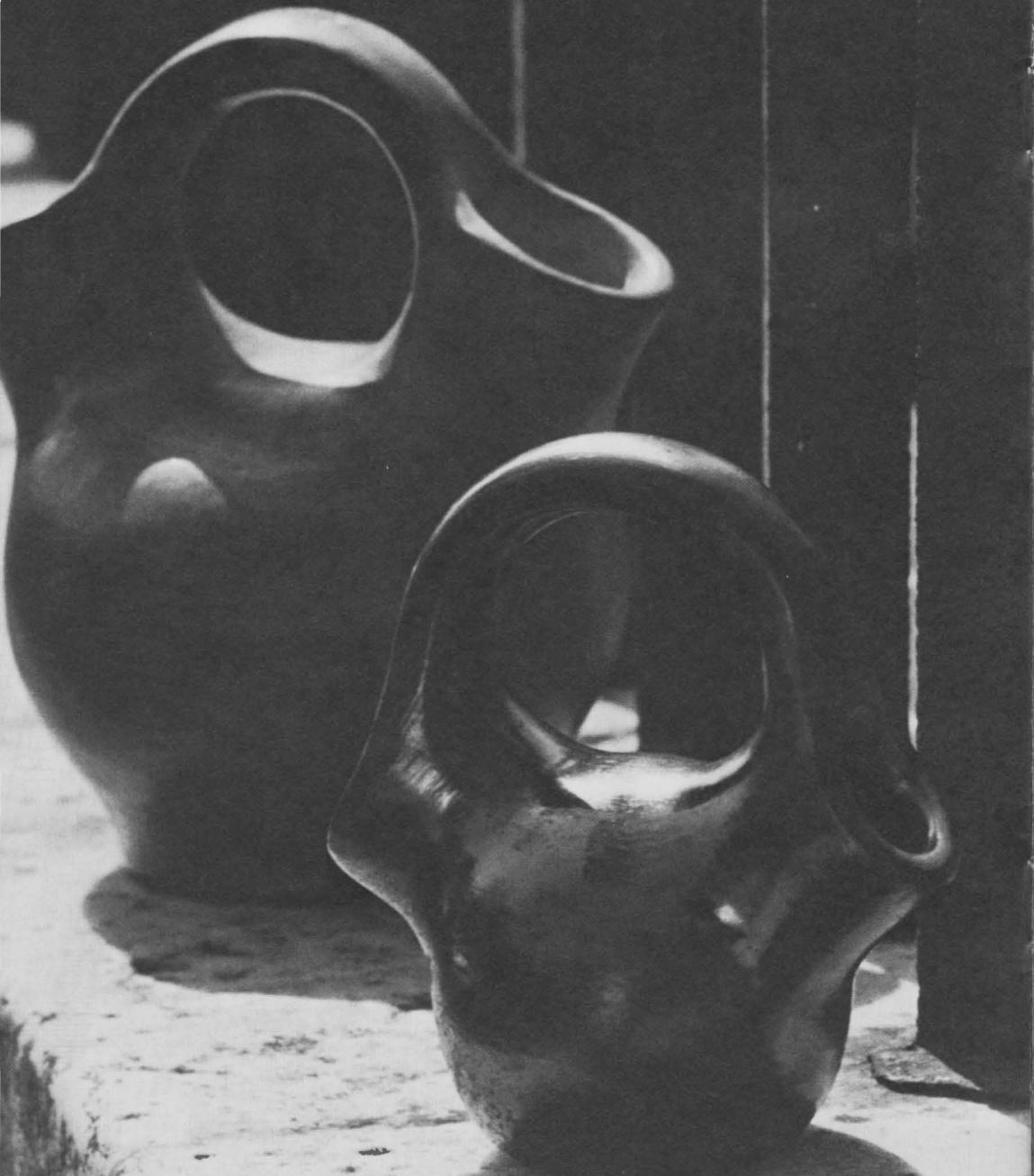
The next stage of drying may take several days, depending upon the size of the piece. Excess clay is then scraped away with a knife, and the pot is thoroughly polished with a "rubbing rock". These stones are kept in the family from one generation to the next.

The initial stage of warming the pots occurs in the kitchen oven, which is gradually heated to about 500 degrees. Meanwhile, an open fire is started. When the wood has burned down, the pottery is placed in the fire. Successive fires are built over the pots and allowed to burn down. The distinctive colors of Catawba Pottery come from this process: the bone white, the marbled oranges and blue-grays. If the potter wants mottling or a deep black, she smothers the final fire with a bucket of pine chips, causing oxidation.

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This process is centuries old. The ancestors of the Catawbas made pottery for cooking and carrying water. After the arrival of the white settlers, Catawba Pottery became an article of trade.

Theories about the tribe's origins vary: it's believed at one time their homeland may have stretched from Canada southward to the Carolinas, that they may have spoken a dialect of the Sioux language or been one of the "Hill Tribes" whose neighbors were the Cherokee and Creek Indians.

Catawba history after the arrival of the English and Europeans in North America recorded many tragedies: smallpox epidemics which drastically reduced the population, the ravages of alcoholism, loss of land, the dying out of the language and racial discrimination. The art of making pottery kept alive the tribal heritage.

Representative pieces of Catawba Pottery are: the wedding jug, the three-legged gypsy pot, the four-stemmed peace pipe and the delicate Rebekkah pitcher. Some of these are forms which have evolved over the past several centuries of contact with the white culture (in particular, the Mormon church) and other Indian tribes. Yet despite a significant degree of acculturation, the Catawbas have preserved their original methods of production, as well as traditions in decoration and design. A typical Catawba pot may bear the serpent decoration or the Indian head with feathered bonnet. The clay molds for these decorations are usually passed down through the generations of a family. Animal effigies—little frogs and turtles—are also traditional Catawba pieces.

For a listing of sales outlets where Catawba Pottery is available, as well as for other information about South Carolina crafts and craftspeople, contact:



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