Kenyon’s Craft Center is a haven for potters and putterers alike

At the north end of campus, opposite Bexley Hall and across from the Health Center, stands one of those white clapboard houses, not exactly colonial and not quite Victorian, that are ubiquitous in Gambier. It’s easy to miss it altogether, but for those who have lived and worked at the Craft Center, it is a remarkable house with a rich and wonderful past—and present.

Like so many other campus buildings, the Craft Center was originally located elsewhere, in this case across the street from the old Alumni House. It was moved to its present site in 1885 and has seen several renovations over the years.

Before the building was the Craft Center, it was the home of a number of Kenyon faculty members, including John Crowe Ransom, founding editor of the Kenyon Review. He and his wife, Robb, lived there from 1943 until his retirement in 1958. Before the Ransoms moved in, Professor of Economics Emeritus Paul M. Titus and his wife, Catherine, occupied the house.

In 1972 the building became the Craft Center. Since its earliest days, pottery has been at the heart of the Center’s activities. For the last eight years Susan Balboni, an artist who has shown her work nationally, has taught interested Kenyon students and members of the faculty, staff, and community everything from how to throw their first pots to the fine points of raku, a glazing technique. Both a beginning and an advanced workshop are taught each week by Balboni. She also teaches a mixed-media workshop and yoga.

In 1982, Joyce Parr, a former member of the art faculty, introduced the first quilting class at the Craft Center. Today Elaine Hartley, one of Parr’s original students, continues the tradition. Stained glass workshops have been conducted in the former living room by local artist Carol Mason for four years now, and a darkroom continues to be available for student photographers.

“The College is very fortunate to have exceptional local artists who give much more to the Craft Center than they’re paid for,” says Cheryl L. Steele, assistant dean of students.

Janice N. Gossman ’89 of Princeton, New Jersey, a coordinator of the Ceramics Club for the last three years, notes that working with clay is more popular than ever this year. She has seen a huge jump in the students’ technical skill and an increase in the number of students coming to use the ceramics studio.

Originally, student coordinators lived in a second-floor apartment and managed the Center in exchange for reduced room and board. For the last two years, the coordinator has lived in regular student housing and maintained an office in the Craft Center. This year’s coordinator, John C. DeMarchi ’90 of Cleveland, Ohio, is a potter who has made a particular effort to involve children from the Gambier Cooperative Nursery School in Craft Center activities. Indeed, sharing with the community is part of the spirit of the Craft Center.

Melissa “Missy” Siders ’84 learned to throw pots and work with clay at the Craft Center. She was also the Center’s coordinator for two years. When she joined the Peace Corps and went to Senegal, she worked with villagers to construct wood-fired clay stoves. She also visited African clay workers to learn more about the different techniques used in Northern Africa.

Siders adds, “My skills developed as coordinator really helped in writing proposals for grants to meet village needs.”

Shelley Terry ’88 took what she learned from stained glass workshops at the Center and, as part of Kenyon’s participation in the Appalachian People’s Service Organization,
Three generations called it home

Many people have wondered about the curious square depression in the Craft Center's backyard. Helen Forman and Elizabeth R. Forman '73, Gambier residents and daughter and granddaughter, respectively, of John Crowe Ransom, are happy to clear up the mystery.

Famous gamesters, the Ransoms held croquet in especially high esteem. As residents of what is now the Craft Center, they put in a croquet court. Friends from the early days of the Kenyon Review, including writers Robert Lowell '40, Peter Taylor '40, and Robert Penn Warren, would often join them for a game. Players divided into teams, everyone hoping Lowell, who was a terrible croquet player, would be on the other side. Then they would play on into and even past dusk. Helen Forman remembers that "on long summer evenings everyone would move their cars to ring the court and turn on their headlights so they could continue into the night and finish the game."

She also recalls her mother, Robb, commenting that "the worst thing about being married to a professor is that they come home for lunch." Robb and the kids, engaged in a midday croquet game, would look up to see a figure on the back porch eating a tomato and studying the playing field. Slowly but surely, Ransom would wander down toward them and, once on the court, would proceed to give mostly unwelcome advice. Apparently it was hard for anyone to resist joining in. "Once, when the house was being painted, the crew got interested in a game and started refereeing," remembers Helen.

Croquet was not the only use for the playing field. Robb was prone to sitting backwards on her bicycle and pedaling around and around the court, which Helen says "was very impressive."

In addition to croquet, bridge games were a feature of the household (with a running tally kept on the door of what is now the Craft Center's glass room), along with hangman, word games, all-night sessions of Monopoly, and poker games, which were referred to as "Wednesday prayer meetings." Indeed, for the Ransoms and their literary friends, play and literature often merged. They could and did pursue games as ardently as they discussed literature.

The Ransoms were also baseball "nuts," as Helen puts it. She remembers that the family used to sit out on the side porch (it has since been removed) and listen to multiple radios so they could follow several baseball games at once. They kept track of the scores on a chalkboard set on an easel. While the Ransoms wanted to hear all the action, they were partial to the Cleveland Indians.

Although Helen was already married by the time her parents moved into what is now the Craft Center, in keeping with Southern tradition she and her young children would spend the occasional summer with her parents. She remembers hanging diapers out on a line in the backyard once when her younger brother was whirling around a frog-gig, a long pole with a barb on the end. The barb went flying, just missing her, and stuck into the house and stayed there for years.

Elizabeth Forman, who is acting registrar at Kenyon this year, has her own fond memories. She recalls coming downstairs one fine morning for one of the breakfasts her grandfather used to fix and stopping to peer through the staircase spindles. She remembers having to sit there an awfully long time, missing breakfast to boot, because she was too embarrassed to admit she had disobeyed warnings to the contrary and gotten her head stuck between the spindles.

—K.A.