



PHOTOS BY HOLLY POTTS

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Carl Sheehan recalls famed Montana potter, mentor and friend Frances Senska offering him advice about choosing a career. At the time, Sheehan had graduated with an art degree from Montana State University, worked as an elementary school teacher in Lander, Wyoming, a middle school teacher in Bozeman, and a part-time teacher at an art center.

His pots were on display at the Bozeman Holiday Festival of the Arts when a Yellowstone National Park concessionaire asked if he would like to sell them in the park. "When I was on the cusp of trying to decide whether to be a potter or teach full time, I talked to Frances Senska," Sheehan said. "I asked, is this wise? I have a family. She said, 'Pottery will afford you a certain lifestyle. You're not going to get rich, but you may enjoy your life more.' I took her advice, and it worked out pretty well."

Sheehan drew up plans for a kiln and the space he needed to throw clay in Yellowstone. In the late spring of 1980, Sheehan, his wife, Becky, and their newborn baby headed down to live at Old Faithful. If ever there was a job to have, Sheehan had it.

As the first (and only) Potter-in-Residence in a national park, Sheehan was surrounded by inspiration. Mountains had been an ever-present influence in his work, but now, with a studio encircled by free roaming wildlife and the world's most famous geyser, he found his groove. One animal in particular seemed to embody Yellowstone. "To me, the bison is the quintessential Yellowstone animal. Such a powerful image. And luckily, it doesn't like eating people."

The wheel-thrown, hand-carved bison vases are the craftsman's most popular pieces. Becky blended the formulas to create the Obsidian Black glaze Sheehan uses on his bison and Moon Over Montana series. Visitors could watch him at work in the Old Faithful gift shop, where he sold thousands of mugs, vases, bowls and dishes, all hand-crafted and reminiscent of Yellowstone's glorious scenery.

"I had a call from a gentleman outside of London yesterday. He said, 'I wanted to let you know I just bought one of your pieces here in town, and I thought you'd like to know it was in Britain.' That was nice of him. You meet people and they become good customers or friends or both."

Due to a gift shop remodel, the Sheehans moved their studio and gallery home to Belgrade in 2008. The gallery resembles Yellowstone construction to remind Sheehan of his favorite place. He still visits the park for week long stays about once a month in summer, bringing along wet bison jars he assembles as park visitors watch. His pottery is available for purchase at Montana Gift Corral, a few shops in Big Sky and West Yellowstone and through his website (fireholepottery.com), but Yellowstone remains his biggest vendor.

Thirty-eight years on, Sheehan still enjoys these park visits. "I have old friends there, and old and new customers are always great to see when I'm there for my week. I look forward to my time doing Tai Chi along the Firehole River and, of course, the Geyser Basin in the evenings. It's such a special place."

Fire Hole Pottery is open Monday-Saturday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m., at 4069 Linney Rd. Sheehan will be at Old Faithful Inn June 19-22, August 21-24 and September 18-21.

