



**Above:** Eagan leans on an antique — but workable — cash register, while customers inspect the wares in the gallery area of the shop. The design on the far wall was created by peeling away the cracked plaster and leaving the good plaster alone. **At Right:** He works on a creation that is designed to hold a candle suspended inside, with the light glowing through the portals.



# A POTTER IN THE VICTORIAN SPIRIT

Story and Photographs by Mike O'Brien

Gary Eagan is a Missourian turned Arkansan who currently is involved in a business boom in Little Switzerland. It isn't as geographically far-flung as it at first might seem.

Eagan, a 29-year-old potter who holds bachelor's, '65, and master's, '69, degrees in art from the University, is a leader among young businessmen who are attempting to revive the Victorian spirit of Eureka Springs. A health spa of the 1880s, the town nestles in the craggy hill country of northwest Arkansas, and was once claimed as "The Little Switzerland of the Ozarks."

A native of Springfield, Missouri, Eagan grew up in nearby Republic. Long a lover of the surrounding Ozarks hills, he nevertheless failed to discover Eureka Springs until little more than two years ago. "I knew Eureka was around here somewhere, because I'd heard vaguely about it," he recalls. "But the first time I actually saw it was when I came down in the spring of 1970 to participate in their annual Sidewalk Art Show."

What Eagan found was a quaint little community which seemed to have been forgotten by the 20th Century. Trouble was the supposedly health-giving springs fell from the favor of the country's social elite who used to frequent the numerous bathhouses and massage parlors. Much of the quaintness seemed in danger of falling to ruin through disuse.

But Eagan also found several other artists and businessmen who were interested in preserving and promoting the uniqueness of Eureka Springs. So, he decided to stay, and sought a spot to set up shop. He settled upon a sagging two-story stone structure on Spring Street in the heart of the tightly winding, steeply inclined downtown district. "We really didn't have much choice, there was little else available in the center of town," he recalls of his search for a site for his studio and gallery with his business partner, Woody Kane. "The building was built in 1885, and it burned a couple of times in its history. The major problem we faced when we took ownership was that it was caving in in the middle."

Eagan staked out the lower level of the structure for his Spring Street Pottery Shop. Floors were rebraced and adjustable steel columns were inserted to shore up buckling beams. The dirt and cobwebs of years of neglect were swept away and replaced with a pottery wheel, a kiln and Victorian furniture for the display area. "We've invested many, many dollars, and equal amounts of time and effort," Eagan admits, "but I believe it is all worth preserving. I can hardly wait until 1985, when we'll celebrate the building's 100th anniversary."

By then, Eagan hopes, Eureka Springs will be firmly established as a distinguished art colony. He and his fellow local entrepreneurs hope their investments will be successful. But not too successful.

"I think the town is invaluable mainly as an American antique," Eagan explains. "We have a great fear of overcommercialization — we've seen how it has ruined other

places. But, fortunately, Eureka Springs is listed in the National Register. It's considered a national treasure. This will keep the 'tourist traps' out — unless they want to spend the money to build a nice Victorian building in the center of town."

Eagan and others have formed the Historical District Merchants Association to help preserve the town's heritage. One of the group's next projects, he notes, is to "take out after the billboards" which have begun to spring up along the rough hillside roads in the area.

Still, despite their improvements and high hopes for the future, the efforts and ambitions of Eagan and other young investors have not been received favorably by all of Eureka Springs' 1500 residents.

Until the drive to emphasize the artistic and cultural possibilities of the community, the chief attraction of the town in recent years had been the "Christ of the Ozarks" statue, a seven-story-tall concrete creation and its attendant "Great Passion Play" and "Christ Only Art Gallery" atop nearby Magnetic Mountain.

The man behind these projects is Gerald L. K. Smith, a fiery promoter who has stirred religious and racial controversy since his days as a confidant of the late Gov. Huey (Kingfish) Long of Louisiana in the 1930s. Smith has been supported in his efforts to transform Eureka Springs into a Christian mecca (he currently is starting construction on "The New Holy Land," a sprawling scale model of spots Christ walked 2000 years ago) by the local newspaper, *The Times-Echo*. The newspaper has spoken out editorially against the influx of young artist-businessmen. "30 "Hippies," the newspaper has called the newcomers, "who have formed divergent philosophies, who want to take over the city's government." Most, suggests *The Times-Echo*, "should be given a quick ticket out." Eagan only smiles when the intra-city "feud" is mentioned. The situation is mellowing, he assures, as older residents see the long-range intent of the new investors.

"Obviously," Eagan says, looking about his studio-gallery, "with this much at stake, I intend to stay. I want to make Eureka Springs my permanent home. I'm not here to make a fast buck and disappear. I'm buying a home here. There's room for everybody."

And so Eagan continues his work through the winter, readying his shelves for the summer season. His pottery, a visitor notes, seems a curious blend of the old and the new. "I like to think I'm somewhere in between the Victorian Age and today in my work," he agrees. "Some of my work is modern, and some is reminiscent of Victorian pottery. I sometimes hope I'm doing what a Victorian potter would do if he had today's tools and techniques."

The gallery door opens to admit a customer, and Eagan washes the clay from his hands to tend to business. "Come back again," he smiles, as the customer departs after a tour of several minutes and a purchase. "We'll be here." □