

June 7, 2000

## OFF THE BEATEN PATH

## A Wary Welcome for the Net From Kentucky Artisans

**Slide Show**

- [A Wary Welcome for the Net From Kentucky Artisans](#) (6 photos)

By EMILY YELLIN

**B**EREA, Ky. -- Sometimes Sarah Culbreth and her husband, Jeff Enge, can go days without seeing a single client at their ceramics studio in the foothills of the Cumberland Mountains here.

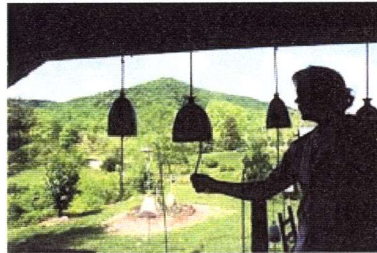
Then there are other days when a stream of clients and even a busload of 50 tourists will visit Tater Knob Pottery and Farm to see the potters work and buy their ceramics.

That pace is just right, and is in fact the balance they envisioned when they moved in 1992 to the 30-acre farm outside of Berea, a small college town renowned for its arts and crafts in rural Kentucky, about 90 miles southeast of Louisville.

But lately, e-commerce is making its way into their lives. They have a Web site ([www.taterknob.com](http://www.taterknob.com)), and get orders by e-mail messages. But they do not accept credit cards yet. "I have all the work I can think of ever wanting to do," Ms. Culbreth said. "We see the Web site as, 'O.K., what are we going to put on there and make it worth our while to check our e-mail every day?'"

As an out-of-the-way center of specialized products -- antiques and artisans working in the Appalachian traditions -- Berea would seem an ideal laboratory for the transforming powers of the Internet. And commerce here is moving online -- but slowly, fitfully, in ways as individual as the craftspeople themselves. Many of the artisans are trying to figure out whether the technology will help them maintain the lives they have created or force them from the traditions they cherish.

Not surprisingly, young people are most comfortable with the change. At Berea College, which charges no tuition, students work in various campus jobs to pay their way, including in a thriving furniture and crafts operation. For more than 50 years, the college has produced a mail-order catalog with items ranging from beds to brooms. In many ways, e-commerce was a natural addition because



Suzanne DeChillo/ The New York Times

Jeff Enge, who makes ceramics with his wife, Sarah Culbreth, at Tater Knob Pottery and Farm near Berea, Ky. They have a Web site and take orders by e-mail but are worried that the site's demands may disrupt the tranquility they covet. [Slide Show](#) (6 photos)

the operations for order-taking and distribution were in place.

The college introduced its secure-order site in August 1999, and now

[www.bereacollegecrafts.com](http://www.bereacollegecrafts.com) offers about 50 items. Steve Fain, the director of Berea College Crafts, said the college had processed about 600 orders from the site since August, taking in about \$20,000 in revenue.

Bill Snapp, a computer consultant, worked with the Berea Chamber of Commerce to create [Berea.com](http://Berea.com), which links Berea College Crafts and some of the other craftspeople in town. He is trying to move more local artisans toward e-commerce.

"Most artists and craftspeople are nontechnical," Mr. Snapp said. "So we start out slowly, by looking at just getting their names on the Web. Then, when they see a real success, like Berea College Crafts, they start to come around to e-commerce."

One of the first craftspeople to set up a site in Berea was Charles Harvey

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([www.charlesharveywoodwork.com](http://www.charlesharveywoodwork.com)), who makes Shaker-style chairs and boxes but does not sell them online. "My strategy about the Web was not to encourage people to press a button, and it will arrive on their doorstep three days later," he said. "My work takes time. Instead, my site is where people can go to get information

about my work and about Shaker furniture."

Virginia Petty, who makes one-of-a-kind baskets, goes further, but not much.

"I put the pictures up, and if anybody wants to buy them, they can," she said. "I'm not into marketing."

For Bereans who are dealers in antiques and other rare items, the Internet can provide a lifeline. Del Martin has been selling Mission-style antique furniture and high-end rugs from his living room since 1995. He uses his Web site, [www.jaxrugs.com](http://www.jaxrugs.com), to show his customers new designs and to link to eBay, where he auctions his antiques.

"Jax Rugs could survive without the Internet," Mr. Martin said, "but I'd have to stop buying and selling the antiques, which I love doing."

But there are others who adamantly reject the Web, like Mr. Harvey's girlfriend, Teresa Cole, a potter who shares a storefront with him in Berea. "I absolutely hate the time I have to spend at the computer," she said. "It's so frustrating to use so few of my senses at one time."

That kind of fierce defense of the slower pace of Berea against a high-speed modem invasion prevails among many traditional craftspeople. But some are softening.

Take Warren May, who handcrafts traditional dulcimers, stringed musical instruments. He sells about 500 a year in his shop, but only two or three through a site at a gallery in town. Mr. May said he did not have a computer in his home or in his shop because he thought that time spent on computers was wasted.

But even he has come to recognize the benefits of e-commerce.

"Craftspeople are usually so isolated," Mr. May said. "Computers give us tremendous outreach, not just to customers but to other craftspeople. With computers you can reach people all the way from Podunk Holler to New York City."

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#### **Related Sites**

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- [www.taterknob.com](http://www.taterknob.com)
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