NOT JUST STONEWARE:
EARLY RANSBOTTOM CUSPIDOR IDENTIFIED

By James L. Murphy

The bare facts of the genesis of the Ransbottom Brothers Pottery Company are well known: at the urging of F.M. Ransbottom, his brothers C.W., E.M., and M.C. Ransbottom joined him in 1900 to purchase John H. Beem's Oval Ware and Brick Company at Beem City, a mile north of Roseville, pottery production beginning the following year. (Beem City did not become Ironspot until 1905.) By 1906 the company was noted as a leading manufacturer of stoneware, producing (variously reported) 6,000 to 12,000 gallons a year.

What is less known is that in the earliest years, Ransbottom Brothers, like many potteries in the region, produced lower-fired earthenware. As late as 1906, their products were described as "strictly high grade, consisting of stoneware, flower pots, cuspidors, and jardinières," and both their stationary and the side of their building proclaimed as much. The fact is that none of these early earthenware products was marked or signed, so that it has been impossible to identify any. Ransbottom Brothers soon developed their production of more highly fired, harder stoneware and went in a different direction—crockets, jugs, and kitchenware, to begin with, later adding garden ware, cookie jars, and even industrial art ware. A fortunate decision, as tobacco chewing became unacceptable socially and the lowly cuspidor became a thing of the past, replaced largely by the ubiquitous ashtray.

The recent discovery of the accompanying advertisement, which ran in Glass and Pottery World for three months in 1903, changes that, however, as there now seems to be an example of one of the Ransbottom Brothers' early cuspidors. According to the ad, this is the "best possible 10 cent cuspidor on the market," available in three colors with bronze finish. The one example known to fit the illustration is made of a light reddish-orange earthenware, is just about 7 ½ inches in diameter, has brown, shiny remnants of what must have been the original "bronze" finish, and closely matches the molded oak leaf design shown in the advertisement. Disposition of the small rounded protuberances intended to simulate gnarls or topped off branches in the wood background do not quite match their distribution in the illustration but this can very likely be attributed to artistic license on the part of the draftsman.

Very similar unglazed redware sherds of cuspidors have been recovered from the site of the Weller warehouse along the Muskingum River in Putnam, but these display different motifs. Like Ransbottom, Weller began by making red earthenware flowerpots, cuspidors, jardinières, and umbrella stands, as did Owens, before concentrating on art pottery. Regardless of the pottery, such early, unmarked examples are not only extremely rare but are nearly impossible to identify without illustrated catalogs, advertisements or archaeological examples.