



Interiorscape Hall of Fame



Jean Youmans

2002 Allied Trade Professional

Jean Youmans was born to Henry and Almitia Gray on February 23, 1924, the 10th child in a family of 13. The family farm was outside Batesville, in the lush hills of Arkansas. 16 months after her birth the family moved from Arkansas to a small farm in Phoenix, Arizona. There, the older boys and Henry built and sold houses and on a small plot of land grew a variety of fruit and vegetables to help feed the large family. With so many mouths to feed, the Great Depression hit the family very hard. Jean was too young to remember the hardships but she remembers the fun on the small Phoenix farm, where her older brother Neal, taught her how to use a shovel. According Jean, Neal told her "there is a knack to its use". Jean quips "it's almost 70 years since that first lesson and I am still using a shovel – and it is part of what I enjoy doing the most. I will always have a garden with flowers, plants and vegetables."

A salesman named Bob Youmans arrived in Phoenix in 1959 after selling his pottery business in Ohio. He and Jean met at a social, married in 1960 and moved to San Jose, CA. In 1962 Pottery Sales was opened for business, "on about half of a shoestring", according to Jean. At that time, wonderful pottery was available from the natural clay of the Ohio hills. Bob hooked a trailer to the family station wagon and drove to Ohio. With the wagon and trailer filled with pottery from "Zainsville Stoneware", Bob returned to San Jose stopping to sell pottery along the way, and thus generating the cash needed to pay for the 'boxcar load' he had ordered on credit. Back in San Jose, there were a few small obstacles; the bank did not want to honor out-of-state checks until they cleared, so the business began in the family garage. Shortly thereafter, Jean and Bob rented a warehouse on the railroad siding from Southern Pacific Railroad and they waited for the first pottery order to arrive. Unloading that first order was such a thrill! All of the pottery was packed loose in straw- this was new to Jean- and it was love at first sight! Pottery Sales soon outgrew this warehouse and moved into one big enough spot six railroad cars along side, store the containers they held and house a large office.

All was going well until one windy afternoon, the deserted warehouse across from Pottery Sales caught on fire and quickly engulfed Jean's big warehouse as well. The files were saved but all of the beautiful pottery was lost. It was heartbreaking loss, but life went on, a new warehouse was rented and soon suppliers sent replacement pottery.

For the next 33 years the business grew. Jean ran the general business operations while Bob continued selling and delivering. He spent most of his time on the road and very little at the warehouse. This left to Jean the task of hiring employees, something she had never done before. But like a duck to water, she discovered that she was very good with people

and loved working along side her workers unloading, organizing and cleaning the beautiful pottery that arrived by the box carloads. Learning to speak Spanish became necessary and although she never felt she spoke it well – she spoke well enough to make buying trips to Mexico. These trips allowed Jean add to the growing line of pottery and to visit the hometowns of many of her employees.

In the beginning her primary customers were the flower and plant shops. Pottery Sales first introduction to the interior plantscape industry was when Decorative Plant Service, a large San Francisco based firm, came into the warehouse to order pottery. The relationship thrived and over the years, Pottery Sales sold many carloads of containers to Decorative Plant Service.

Jean's product lines, coupled with her service to her customers, were influential in setting industry standards for quality in Northern California. The interior plantscape industry was just beginning to take off. Pottery Sales opened many credit accounts for the new 'start up' companies, Mom & Pop businesses, partnerships and sole proprietors, many of which were owned by women. Some of these companies were started on a shoestring and Jean was always there when any of them needed help. Her financial and technical support was vital to the success of many. She took pleasure in working with the 'start ups', watching them grow in knowledge and expertise. Jean believed that people who care for plants were a very special breed. She became involved with NORCAL, the northern California interiorscape association, supporting their special events, tradeshow and educational programs as well as involving herself in the more mundane aspects of the association, thereby assuring the forward momentum of the organization. She spoke on panels, sharing her knowledge on the uses of containers as well as her enthusiasm for the industry and was a fixture at the trade shows and other events of the time, always ready to lend a helping hand and provide a beautiful container when needed.

About 1975, a new pottery manufacturer, Gainey Ceramics from LaVerne, California was looking for distributors and Pottery Sales took on their line of beautiful containers, becoming the first and largest Gainey distributor in northern California. It now became necessary to open more warehouses to serve other areas in order to meet the growing needs of the interiorscape industry. Expansion began, with warehouses in San Francisco, and Portland, Oregon, as well as Seattle, Washington. This kept Bob doing what he liked best - traveling and 'peddling pots'.

Bob passed away in 1985 and Jean continued with Pottery Sales until 1995 when she closed the business and semi-retired to become a manufacture's representative and a jobber. Still in love with pottery and the interiorscape industry, she never wants to lose the connections and friendships she has built over the years.

Jean's big heart is still very evident, her caring, loving attitude toward people will always be her greatest gift to this young and emerging industry.

