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~ The *Kannenbäckerland* ~

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The Westerwald - east of the Rhine valley between the Sieg and the Lahn - has not exactly got the best reputation amongst Germany's low mountain ranges. In the past people said of this inhospitable region that the cherries need two years to ripen, that Heaven in its anger had let stones rain on the pastures and that "the pigs fought over the sunshine". The locals, of course, think a lot differently. This area abounds in woods and they find it beautiful and relaxing. In an attempt to promote tourism they not only offer neat and tidy hotels and guest houses but have also opened up Germany's newest tourist route: the *Kannenbäcker Strasse*.



On the Lahn in the village of Bad Ems.

German children learn about the *Kannenbäckerland* even when they are at school. This southern region of the Westerwald takes its name from the fact that for centuries now pitchers and jugs, vases and bowls have been baked in kilns here at temperatures of up to 1300° C. Too often, though, tourists passed by the Westerwald without actually visiting the area.

That is why the "Kannenbäcker Route" was developed as a new tourist attraction. Not only does this route take people through a delightfully scenic region of hills, woods and lakes, it also introduces them to a branch of industry which really is rooted in the soil of the Westerwald and whose products have once again become extremely popular.

A jug made of greyish blue Westerwald stoneware indicates the route on which 45 pottery and ceramic works are located. Visitors are welcome at all of them and can buy anything that takes their fancy. Three museums bear testimony to the development of ceramic art down the ages. The route passes through friendly towns and villages with charming half-timbered buildings and there are lots of wooded hills with enchanting views and romantic valleys that are well worth a visit.

In getting to know the Kannerbäckerland the visitor becomes familiar with an ancient cultural region in which life has been determined for thousands of years by the "white gold of the Westerwald", by clay. This area, in fact, contains the richest and most high-grade deposits of clay in Europe. They have made the Kannenbäckerland the biggest self-contained pottery center in the world.

The clay found throughout this region was formed between 70 and 100 million years ago. That was during the Tertiary period in the Earth's development when what is now the Westerwald was covered by a vast prehistoric sea. Today the clay is located



between 20 and 60 meters below the surface and is excavated both through open-cast and underground mining.

It is probable that even the first settlers in this region, Celtic tribes, knew how to use a potter's wheel.

The first finds date back to around 800 B.C. Later the high-quality clay of the Westerwald was used by the Romans and the Franks. In the 13th and 14th centuries the potters of the Westerwald succeeded in developing high-fired stoneware. For hundreds of years now the typical pottery of this region which has earned the Kannenbäckerland a world-wide reputation has been salt-glazed, greyish blue stoneware.

In the pottery town of Höhr-Grenzhausen there are a good 100 firms which are involved in some way in the ceramics industry, and there are another hundred in the surrounding towns and villages. In addition the region also contains some 50 clay pits and mines. Firms of all sizes are found here - from one-man potteries to big ceramic factories. They manufacture a wide range of products: decorative ceramic articles and those for everyday use, blue and brown stoneware, Roman pots and clinkers, colorful majolica and architectural ceramics, plantpots, garden ceramics and stoneware mosaics.

Even tobacco pipes made of clay are still manufactured. So, too, are traditional clay Nativity figures.

Ancient patterns are still copied and traditional motifs are still used but well-known porcelain and ceramic designers are encouraged time and again to design new pottery collections that are based on traditional forms and patterns.

The local authorities and the pottery industry support this development by staging ceramic competitions that are becoming more and more popular. A "Westerwald Ceramics Prize" is even awarded. Today the Westerwald Ceramics Prize is one of the major pottery awards in Europe.

For many years now great attention has been paid to training young people to become potters. Last year the College of Ceramotechnology and the College of Ceramic Design in Höhr-Grenzhausen celebrated their hundredth anniversary. The State Technical College of the Rhineland-Palatinate has also opened a special ceramics department for training ceramics engineers.

The Westerwald and the Kannenbäckerland constitute a region that is decidedly rural in character, a region of farmers and craftsmen. Not even the Romans and the Franks established large settlements here. But this part of the world does contain a large number of aristocratic residences.

It was the local princes who built the many castles and other fortifications in the Westerwald which add a touch of romanticism to this potter's paradise.
