It's More than Pot Luck at LA ARENA

AN ART practiced milleniums ago in the storied lands of Egypt, Chaldea and Crete is opening new horizons for the village of La Arena, some 250 kilometers southwest of Panama City.

Work in ceramics has been known in La Arena, a community of less than 3,000 population, from time immemorial.

Most of the residents now engage in cattle raising, which is the main occupation in the Azuero Peninsula in southwestern Panama, or in agriculture. But even before the time of the conquistadores, what is now known as La Arena was the place where first the Indians and then the settlers supplied themselves with clay utensils: bulging tinas to keep the water cool on warm days; round pots to cook the daily meals, and a variety of other utensils all made in La Arena. Of course, the baking and the finishing were primitive, but customers in those days were not as exacting as now.

From the very beginning, women took over pottery work in La Arena for reasons no one can explain. Their primitive ovens can still be seen in the outskirts of the village.

During the thirties, a young woman from the nearby, progressive city of Chitré, Miss Diana Julia Chiari, was appointed a schoolteacher in the village. She quickly became enthusiastic over ceramics, which she learned from the village women. Every day after school, she studied books on pottery and ceramics, and soon she became more adept than her instructors. She turned the tables—teaching the residents how to improve their techniques, how to apply decorations with clays of various colors and artificial coloring, the method for building indirect heat ovens and generally improving the quality of their ceramics. The glazing process, in its primitive form, was another forward method taught by the young teacher to the people of La Arena.

Miss Chiari, by then a key community leader, turned her energies to having a pottery school established in La Arena. One of Panama's presidents, Dr. Juan Demóstenes Arosemena, turned the young teacher's dream into reality by founding the National Pottery School in La Arena. Miss Chiari was the first principal.

Diana Julia Chiari was married years later to Victor Gruber, an American, and moved to the Panama Canal Zone. But she never forgot the village of La Arena. She took friends from Panama and the Canal Zone on weekend trips to La Arena to see the work done there.

Another Canal Zone resident, Mrs. Theresa Lutz, visited La Arena, accompanied by an official of the Canal Zone schools. They were amazed at the work turned out from the little pottery school despite the lack of modern facilities and with only a firewood oven. On her return to Balboa, Mrs. Lutz aroused the interest of Mrs. Emily C. Bolton, then president of the Balboa Women's Club, in La Arena's pottery school. The result was that the Club donated to...
the school a fine ceramics electric oven. The only condition stipulated by the Balboa women was that the oven should be used exclusively for the benefit of the community. Even today, the oven donated by the Canal Zone ladies is still the best piece of equipment in the oven room of the ceramics center in La Arena.

A little over three years ago, the Ministry of Agriculture of Panama, with United Nations assistance, established in neighboring Chitré the National Handicraft and Small Industries Service—SENAPI—for the purpose of encouraging the development of small industries in various communities of the central provinces of the Republic. It has become a large organization, directed by Pedro Bolaños of the Ministry of Agriculture, Commerce and Industries of Panama, and Jean Barroux of the International Labor Organization.

From the outset, SENAPI centered its attention on La Arena. Panamanian and United Nations experts were assigned to the town to help the National Pottery School progress scientifically and to serve as a model for other communities which might develop ceramics as a small industry. The National Pottery School became the La Arena Center under SENAPI in Chitré.

The project is supervised by Panamanian and United Nations experts: Ivan Zachrison, a Panamanian artist who has specialized in ceramics, and George Cuielle, a French expert in ceramics who also is with the United Nations. They taught the first 16 students who reported to the Center. Currently they are training more than 30 other apprentices. The ceramic pieces are designed by Alberto Chan and Rene Díaz, both Panamanians, and Malcolm Benjamin, another U.N. expert from the United States.

One of the most important phases of the project was to develop the La Arena Center as a cooperative. This was the job of Franz Helm, a German-born authority on cooperatives from the United Nations.

Cuielle points out that top-quality clay is abundant in Panama, especially in the central region. "It is a good industry for the inhabitants of the region," he remarks. "The raw material is quite available and costs them nothing. They have only to manufacture a variety of utensils for which there is a

Fifteen-year-old Luis Calderón, the youngest of the workers at La Arena, utilizing a tiny hand-lathe.
La Arena now stopping point for travelers

demand, and they have a means of livelihood assured."

The La Arena ceramics shop is on a par with the best, thanks to the help of Panamanian and United Nations experts and the equipment furnished by the world organization. It is supplied with indirect heat ovens, including the first one using wood, others employing gas, and the electric oven donated by the Balboa Women's Club. An air compressor facilitates the enameling process which precedes the baking. In a finishing room, residents create bright adornments along the lines of the Indian designs found in the Conte Site in Cocle province.

All types of fine vessels, dishes, and decorative pieces are turned out in a lathe room. Everything from simple dishes to amphoras of pre-Columbian design are produced in this room. Several of the amphoras which are replicas of those found in the Conte Site, complete with designs, have been displayed by SENAPI in the Panama Pavilion at Hemisfair in San Antonio, Tex. They have attracted considerable attention and already European and United States importers are showing an interest in the ceramics from La Arena.

The impact of the La Arena Center (the official designation of the cooperative project in SENAPI is "La Arena Ceramics Industries") has been tremendous in the three short years since its establishment. Its direct sales in 1967 amounted to $16,000. These are handled in the Center offices in La Arena and through SENAPI in Panama City and Colon, the Canal Zone and other areas of the Republic.

The Center’s influence touches most residents of the town. Brothers Victor and Ernesto Murillo are typical examples. The former lives in the center of town and spends his spare time decorating and turning on a lathe vessels and pots. Ernesto owns an indirect heat, firewood oven on the outskirts of town.

He built it under the direction of a Peace Corps volunteer. Both brothers learned the art in the La Arena Center and in a few months after striking out on their own, Ernesto had saved enough to buy a small $1,000 delivery truck.

The annual impact on the town from the ceramics industry is estimated at more than $20,000, since other families besides the Murillos work at it during their spare time.

The results at La Arena have been so encouraging that SENAPI officials have organized another ceramics shop in Chitré under instructor Toribio Ruiz Avila, a native of La Arena. Ruiz already is training the first five of a group of 20 young men from La Peña, Veraguas Province, 254 kilometers west of Panama City.

"The talent for ceramics of these young people is marvelous," Ruiz says. "After two weeks training, they were fashioning delicate clay figures." The young men will form the nucleus of the La Peña Center.

Ruiz was a student under Mrs. Gruver, whom he recalls affectionately. "All I know, I owe to her," he said, recalling his school days.

The La Peña Center is being equipped with a $16,000 donation from the Panama National Lottery. Labor for the building is being furnished by residents of the town. The Center will specialize in fine ceramics, copying the pre-Columbian gold huacas. Because of their small size, there will be no difficulty in shipping these items to principal markets in the United States and Europe.

Thanks to the dedication of a young teacher imbued with the ambition to help others, a small town in Panama—aided by the Government and by the United Nations—is now pulling itself up by its own bootstraps. La Arena has become a stopping point for travelers and visitors, most of who come away carrying a fine ceramics piece decorated with Indian motifs and labeled, Made in La Arena—Panama.