

# The Family of Silversmiths & Designers

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*By Roxanne Hughes Packham*

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I want to take you back to a place in time. A time when the pace was slower and people were fully present. A time where people used their sterling silver flatware. A time when there was no “family time” but all time was family related. A glimpse into the family of Allan Adler, not as a documentarian, but as an insider who knew why they were masters at their craft, why they loved it, and what drove their commitment to excellence—making Allan a “California Living Treasure” (according to the Smithsonian Institute). I am his granddaughter and this is our story.

Let's begin with the Allan Adler showroom on the Sunset Strip; I remember it as vividly as if it were yesterday. From the little bells jangling on the front door of “The Shop” to the black velvet-lined display cases showcasing, in my opinion, the most beautiful sterling flatware ever made. The Allan Adler Shop was the epitome of style and class. It wasn't just that the design work was striking in its simplicity—contemporary and elegant. Nor was it the fact that stones were set to enhance the beauty of the stone or the fact that this came from the sixth generation of craftsman. It was the embodiment of class and style because all who entered that shop were treated with kindness, grace, and dignity. These are the perfect pictures in my mind of

when Grandpa took me to work with him and they were magical.

It wasn't only the showroom that was magical; it was the workshop too. As I would begin the walk down the narrow, rickety, cement steps from the glamorous showroom, the smell of burning metal signified that I was entering the workshop. I can remember the tiny narrow pathways which led like a maze to the individual stalls of the silversmiths and metalworkers where one would have to turn sideways to fit through the small spaces. I knew I was deep in the workshop of Allan Adler by the hum of the spinning, the open flames for soldering, and the scraps of metal crunching under foot. Grandpa stopped to check out what each craftsman was up to and always gave

them a pat on the back and some kind words.

The men behind the protective goggles, covered in metal dust, and hunched over an open flame, weren't just any craftsman...these men were my family: Allan, Kenny, Lewis, Mike, Troy, Ralph, and Marty. Uncle Mike (Michael Parsel, Allan's son-in-law for a time), Uncle Kenny (Kenneth Adler, Grandpa Allan's brother), Uncle Lewie (Lewis Wise, Grandpa Allan's brother-in-law, married to Alice), and sometimes our cousin Troy, Ralph, or Marty might be there too. Eventually, my cousin Danny would join those ranks.

Grandpa (Allan) was trained in silversmithing by Porter George Blanchard, his father-in-law, who came to California in 1923 with my



great-grandmother Elizabeth Flood Blanchard. He described his love of California in his 1925 advertising as, “Sunshine and flowers surround our shop; scented breezes, tempered by the Pacific, blow through it. It has expanded wonderfully under this influence; its products have won fame again in the ‘West.’”<sup>1</sup> Another thing our family loves is California. My great-grandfather Porter, alongside his brother Richard, was trained by his father George Porter Blanchard in 1909 in Gardner, Massachusetts.

To give a comprehensive picture of our design heritage, the collective history of the family is as crucial as the singular story of each. The excellence did not come from the isolated experience of one, but the shared information and experience of all—skill, art form, and craft. Craftsmanship passing through generations is as essential as the role my grandma Becca and Auntie Alice (Porter’s two daughters) played in introducing silversmithing to their husbands.

I’m not sure which came first our

love of design, or the family’s love for each other, but I know we love design. It has always been all about design—we simply love the process. It is so full of joy and blessings for us. The legacy of a family business/trade/craft is no less an integral part of our country’s heritage, in some ways may be more so as most Americans can relate to family business more than they can to celebrity. I believe we are in danger of losing these crafts if we don’t begin to celebrate and highlight them more, as I have shared when I have spoken around the country about family legacy and table settings. This is the legacy of my family.

The men of the family loved things that moved and were mesmerized by the moving parts of the machinery. They also loved transportation. The Wise men loved flying. The Adler men (Allan, Danny, and now my son, Justin) loved sailing, cars, or yachting. They were fascinated by the way things worked, as well as why and how they could improve the process. It caused them to always search for a better way to make things more efficient, more economical,

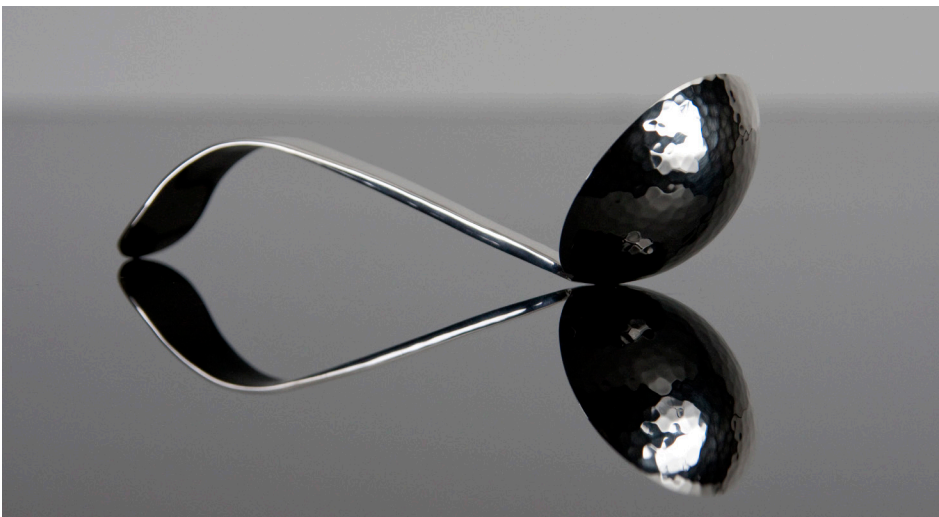
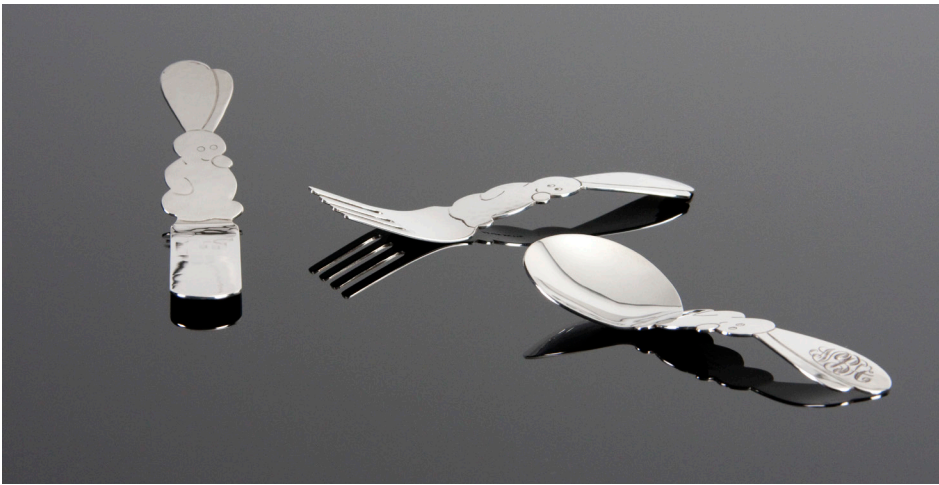
or sometimes just to do it their own way. The men were as intense on their weekends as they were during their work week. They all showed a tremendous aptitude in high school working with their hands. Grandpa won a model airplane building contest in school, and the others all trained in their fathers silver shops in high school as well.

Design, family, family design, family time, travel...all ways to say the same thing in our family, where we are concerned. One favorite occasion for of all us was the February Gem show in Tucson, Arizona. My mother Linda Adler Hughes recalls, “We (Becca, Linda, Michele and all kinds of other combinations) watched Allan in action, his inspiration, how he put metals together, the colors harmonizing, and creating eye appeal - all these components made each trip very special.” As Grandpa would say and do: “Keep the lines clean and don’t goop-it up,” “Less is more,” and all his flatware, hollowware, jewelry designs followed suit.

The history is important because







there are so many silversmithing men in the family that it can be confusing and things are often attributed incorrectly. According to my Uncle Troy, son of Lewis Wise, "I've seen many pieces of Porter Blanchard flatware offered on the (online) antique market place. The description often says that the piece was made by Porter in his Calabasas shop. In fact, Porter never worked in the Calabasas shop, and he didn't make any of the flatware bearing his name after 1955. The Calabasas shop was always billed as Lewis A. Wise Silversmiths, makers of Porter Blanchard Silverware."

Troy continued, "Dad had rheumatoid arthritis in his hands and wrists, and took steroids and gold salt injections for as long as I can remember. My brother and I grew up next to the shop, learning the trade when we weren't in school. I saw the toll inflicted by long days forging, filling, and all the other physically demanding tasks, and resolved not to end up in the same state. I encouraged Dad to sell the business while he was healthy enough to train new journeymen and provide consulting services for the new owner. I worked on and off for my uncle, Allan Adler in his Sunset Blvd. basement shop. I mostly did polishing for Allan, but managed to spend as much time as possible making jewelry. Both my brother and I never really worked at silver after the Vietnam War. We both flew for the military and found that flying was much more fun. Ralph got into design and manufacturing small aircraft and still has hangar space in Mojave. I currently work for the FAA in Kenai, Alaska."

Apprenticing at the side of their elder was common. Becca describes Allan's apprenticeship at Porter's (his father-in-law's) side as educational and frustrating. "While loving learning the craft, Allan often saw a way he thought would make it better and would want to try something different. He always had his own ideas, wanted to do his own thing, to modernize, still making them by hand while improving the technique." Grandma told me, "Allan did see eye to eye with Porter on the fineness of line, wanting to simplify, with no embellishment. He found joy

in simple, classical lines. He loved Paul Revere, as did Porter, and admired his pioneering style to simplify the lines in silversmithing design."

When my cousin Danny Parsel apprenticed with Allan, he described to me the same experience that Grandpa had felt with Porter. I found it fascinating that Danny said this, "First, it was very educational. I immediately knew I had a talent for it (silversmithing). I had my own ideas immediately. He showed me how to do it, but my mind was thinking there had to be a better way. I always had to know *why*. He wouldn't say *why*, he would just say *'DO IT.'* I had to do it trial and error. I learned the hard way, why he didn't take the short cuts. He'd get aggravated that I wouldn't do it the way he liked. We butted heads, we were stubborn, and we both had our own ideas. He taught me how to make things exactly like his. I loved it. It was totally a treasure to learn from him, I realized later. I had an awesome time...so cool to work side by side...go to lunch with him. He'd introduce me as the next generation of Allan Adler—talk about pressure. I was only sixteen years old, and twenty-two when I stopped the apprenticeship and worked for Penhall Racing Company and built race cars for them." He raced in the Baja 500 and Baja 1000, taking second in the 500.

The women designed as well (including Porter's sister), but it was the way these women entertained that I think gave my Grandpa Allan an advantage, and his charm was rather legendary. My darling mom (Linda Adler Hughes) had worked for a few years as the PR director of the Sunset Shop and my grandma (Becca Blanchard Adler, daughter of Porter Blanchard) was everything from bookkeeper, to designer, to salesgirl. She was always the devoted wife to Allan, which made him always available to design and run his business. My Aunt Cindy (Cynthia Adler) also had various roles over the years, including manager and designer.

Both my sister (Michele Hughes Hayes) and I are interior designers (ASID). Michele and I both got degrees from the Fashion Institute of Design &

Merchandising in Los Angeles, as well as University of the Pacific, and University of Southern California respectively. I also studied fashion design in Paris and worked in Europe on designing handbags. Michele has been a featured designer at the Pasadena Showcase House of Design, on HGTV, in several magazines including *Better Homes and Gardens* and *California Homes*. I wrote the book *Inspired Design* with my daughter Hannah, have set tables on the 700 Club using Allan Adler flatware, and my work has appeared in magazines including *Family Circle*, *Cowboys & Indians*, *California Homes*, *Cottages & Bungalows*, and *Life Beautiful*. I also have a regular design column in *WHOA* magazine.

"Grandpa Allan was mesmerized with that process of designing," his grandson Danny Parsel shared with me, "definitely (scatterbrained) not super focused, his mind going million directions. He'd talk about crafting maybe a tray, a new way to lift die's up and make it easier to load machines, or a new way to stamp machine. He was never 100% focused... so typical of artist type personality. He'd have a stack of papers that had ideas. His crumpled up pocket of paper was his file folder." I cannot tell you how many times he took out a napkin and drew a set of silver on it.

As I said earlier, my grandfather's advantage in the business came from his incredible warmth and charm and from the way he and my grandma entertained. I have seen it written that he was a savvy businessman; however the truth is that it was not his strength. His gift was his charm and his craft. Danny described it like this, "He always had these amazing ideas. But it was his personality that was his magic, as people would come into the shop, you'd think he'd have known them for years. He was friendly to everyone. One thing that stands out to me is he was always excited about explaining it (silversmithing)..."

Since silver flatware, tea and coffee services, and hollowware were the cornerstone of his business, it only makes sense that showing these pieces being used in all of their splendor on the tabletop would end up selling them better than anything else. The goal of





my grandparents' entertaining was never to sell, but in the end it certainly had a profound effect on people desiring to purchase Allan Adler Silver. My grandparents hosted a wide variety of people from all walks of life, but each was treated with the same warmth and respect. From movie producer and friend Arthur Lubin, to Eleanor Roosevelt, to their next door neighbors, and metal workers from the shop, all people were treated with dignity and kindness—one of the treasured examples from my grandparents.

Mary Rourke, a *Los Angeles Times* staff writer, said in his obituary, "After his name became associated with Hollywood glamour in the early 1940s, he was commissioned to design mini-Oscars for Academy Award winners and crowns for Miss Universe and Miss U.S.A. as well as silver bowls, candlesticks and goblets for his celebrity clients. In the 1950s, he began to attract political leaders and socialites. One special commission he was most proud of came during John F. Kennedy's presidential campaign. Adler crafted a silver coffee urn to be used at a fund-raising event for Kennedy, who was elected in 1960. Soon afterward, he designed flatware for California Gov. Pat Brown and a silver hairbrush for Winston Churchill."

My mom remembers, "One day Paul Newman called to set up an appointment with Grandpa to purchase a wine tasting cup. As they sat in the showroom talking, people would stare in the window as they realized it was Paul. Grandpa was always so humbled to think his expertise in silversmithing would lead people to his shop for his designs. Paul and Grandpa became friends as Grandpa explained how they together could come up with a unique piece for his family and friends that no one else had...Paul took great joy in knowing each of his gifts were one of a kind and truly original."

Danny remembers during the apprenticeship, "He was never a name dropper, but he could have been. We were working on the Michael Jackson stuff, a huge belt with angels and babies on it (we still have molds for that),



and never talk about the person. He just focused on the best way to make it. He was more focused on getting as much of the business into my head as he could. He never talked about sales. To Grandpa it was never about that. It was always the craftsmanship part of it. Getting the casting done...seeing the diamond guy....or the silver guy as Grandpa always put it.”

My grandmother was the consummate hostess; warm, gracious, and kind. She could throw together an elegant table in five minutes and I’m not exaggerating. While I was going to USC, I would often pop over Laurel Canyon to their home and show up unannounced. Grandpa was so excited to see me and would offer me a seat next to him while Grandma would whip up a fabulous table. Now, I will admit that with all that Allan Adler and Porter Blanchard flatware and hollowware at her fingertips, it was easy to snip a rose from her garden, or pick some fruit from Grandpa’s garden which he was as passionate about as his silver, and have a gorgeous table.

Allan was always genuinely interested in people and was infectiously passionate about silver. My mom continued, “When I was doing Allan Adler’s public relations and advertising in 1963, I had planned an exhibition at the V.C. Morris Gift Store in San Francisco. We were giving a demonstration on how to make a spoon, as each person watched Grandpa work his magic with a blank (a rectangular piece of silver), he would interact with potential customers, patiently explaining the process and educating them on the art of silversmithing. As he worked on these pieces he would peak their interest about how special it would be to own a handmade spoon or place setting.”

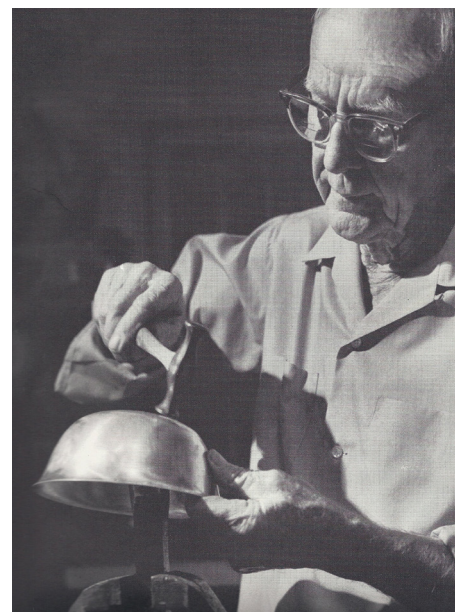
“Many times the person would make an appointment at the store on Sunset to go on a tour. I usually took them through the workshop. After seeing and appreciating the painstaking way handmade sterling silver is made they would want to purchase a piece or two for themselves. For Grandpa, this journey of making a friend and selling his craft was what it was all about. I











would always be amazed at how many customers and friends would just stop by to pay him a visit, usually unannounced. He always made time for them and often he would bring them into the workshop to show what he was working on, or take them to lunch.” She explained that Allan was an American who was proud of his craft and wanted to share his expertise.

Uncle Lewie was proud of the craft, as Troy described, “He was always giving demonstrations to customers or friends at the shop. He would usually

make a teaspoon from scratch, adding their initials to the stamp on the back and then give it to them as a memento of their visit. I never saw anyone that was not amazed at the process; they all came away with a healthy respect for the skill involved. It didn’t hurt as a sales tactic either. Most went away to reorder their priorities to include an heirloom silver set.” The time these men took to share their work and be fully present was an integral part of the success of their business and their craft. Danny

recalls about Allan, “Definitely it was his personality, his way with people. Even if you weren’t interested in it, he’d make you interested in it.”

Today, Dan Parsel has purchased the business and is keeping up the family silversmithing legacy. The molds, forms, and equipment are the same as was used thirty plus years ago, as are the methods used to craft the silver.

## NOTES

1. Leslie Greene Bowman, *Silver in the Golden State* (Oakland, CA: The Oakland Museum History Dept., 1986), 48.