

CELEBRATING 60 YEARS OF CANADIAN ACHIEVEMENT

# Pinecroft Pottery

1948-2008



Elgin County Museum

August 2 - December 20, 2008

"To make useful or decorative items from a lump of clay is most satisfying. Earth, air, water and fire must be in harmony to create form and shape - and retain a beauty all its own."

Selma Clennell, 1985

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# Pincroft Pottery

## 1948-2008

Pincroft is Canada's oldest family run studio pottery. Founded in 1948 by Jimmie and Selma Clennell in Aylmer, Ontario, it is now operated by their niece Brenda Smith and her husband Paul. To celebrate Pincroft's 60th anniversary, a retrospective was mounted at the Dufferin County Museum in 2007. This expanded and reorganized exhibition is now presented in Pincroft's home county of Elgin.

The story of Pincroft is one where scientific accomplishment, inspired artistry and heartfelt dedication have all combined to produce pottery that is hard to resist.



Commemorative bowl for the 30th anniversary of Pincroft Pottery in 1978. Turned by Jimmie Clennell, it shows the Pincroft studio painted by student Sally Martyn.

### Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Brenda and Paul Smith of Pincroft Pottery for generously sharing their knowledge, archives and personal collection. Additional pieces are from Conrad Biernacki and Brian Musselwhite, Tressa Caverly, Marg Vanhoucke, and Alva White.

Conrad Biernacki, Curator

**Cover:** Jimmie and Selma Clennell unloading the kiln at Pincroft Pottery, 1960 (with later hand colouring).

**Colour photography:** Brian Cundle, Aylmer.  
**Vintage photography:** Pincroft Pottery archives.

James (Jimmie) Proctor Cowie Clennell (1912-1996) was born in Gateshead, Durham, England. Orphaned by the age of six, he was raised by his grandmother, and at 14, he began working in the local coal pits. When his grandmother died in 1928, Jimmie went to live with his uncle in Medicine Hat, Alberta, and began working at Medalta Potteries where it took eight years to master every job in the factory. He then spent four years making glazes and working in the lab doing experimental work with clay bodies and glazes.

In 1940, Jimmie joined Medicine Hat Potteries where he worked with glaze chemist Karl Baumber. With the outbreak of World War II, Jimmie joined the Royal Canadian Army and was part of the first landing on the beaches of Normandy.

After the war, he had no intention of returning to pottery. However the superintendent at Medalta encouraged Jimmie to expand his extensive knowledge of pottery and take courses in the Ceramic Design Department of McGill's Macdonald College in Ste-Anne-de-Bellevue, Quebec. Various training programs were offered at the college especially for war veterans and Jimmie enrolled in 1946.



Jimmie Clennell glazing a jug, 1949.



Selma Clennell loading the kiln, 1960.

Jimmie's future wife, Selma Maria Caverly Clennell (1900-1994) was also at Macdonald College in 1946. Born in Aylmer, Ontario, she was a teacher for 13 years, taking summer courses at the Ontario Agricultural College in Guelph, the Ontario College of Art in Toronto, and Western University in London. When the war started, she joined the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service and was stationed in their Ottawa headquarters.

After completing courses in weaving, leatherwork and painting, Selma thought she'd like to teach in a technical high school after the war so she registered in various craft courses, including pottery, at Macdonald College. Soon after meeting Jimmie, they decided to work together as potters back in Selma's hometown.

To bring attention to their wares, Jimmie and Selma decided that they must have a distinctive name for their pottery. Their choice was Pinecroft. "Pine" came from the pine forest that surrounded the cabin Selma's father, Arthur Caverly, offered them for their studio. And the word "croft" came to Jimmie's mind, which, in his native England, meant a small holding of land.

When Pinecroft began in May 1948, there was an immediate market for Jimmie and Selma's pottery. Donald Heasley, a friend who was a salesman for an office supply company, took pieces to gift shops in Ontario, Quebec and the Maritimes. Dornbusch Studio, a lighting fixture store in Kingston, Ontario, was one of the pottery's first wholesale customers. (Today, 50 years later, Pinecroft makes hundreds of lamp bases for them each year.) By the late 1950s, their pottery was available in 200 gift shops.

In the early years, Jimmie and Selma did pottery throwing demonstrations at many local fairs, as well as the Canadian National Exhibition, the Western Fair in London (here, they presented an impressive display of 1,000 jugs!), and prestigious shops like Birks jewellery store in London, Andersons department store in St. Thomas, and the Fundy National Park Gift Shop in New Brunswick. These events widened the public's awareness of Pinecroft Pottery and greatly expanded its market.



Inspired by Chinese ceramics, this "Squirrel" vase was made by Selma Caverly while at Macdonald College, 1946.



**Left:** A symbol of wisdom, Zhang Guotao, one of the Eight Immortals of the Taoist religion, is portrayed as an old man sitting backwards on his donkey - his commentary on the decay of human moral values, Selma Clennell, 1949.



**Right:** Jug with spiral rat tail, Selma Clennell, 1950.



Pincroft display at the Western Fair, London, Ontario, 1952.



Pincroft Christmas exhibit, 1953. Selma Clennell is second from the left and Jimmie Clennell is second from the right.

“What determined the style we were going to do in the beginning was the fact that we had to make a living and utilitarian ware was more suitable for us at the time. Also we could not make anything too large or too high because of the height of the electric kilns we had - quite small. We had to be very practical about the whole thing and just do things that were going to sell... The knowledge I had gained in Medalta Pottery gave me sufficient knowledge to know what was needed on the market at that particular time. My wife and I were avid readers and we did go through many, many books which I'm quite sure influenced our minds as to what we eventually wanted to do.”

Today, the legacy of Jimmie and Selma continues, due in large part to a series of pottery courses that were offered by the couple. Among their best students were nephew Tony Clennell (b 1951, who with his wife Sheila, b 1948, now operates Sour Cherry Pottery in Beamsville, Ontario) and niece Brenda Caverly (b 1950) who joined Pincroft in 1972 and is the current owner along with her husband Paul Smith (b 1944).

To celebrate their 30th anniversary in 1978, Pincroft Pottery opened the Green Frog Tearoom, attached to their gift shop. Visitors enjoy home-cooked country cuisine at tables set with a mixed variety of Pincroft pottery. Vintage and new pieces are displayed throughout four dining areas. The Pincroft Pottery Studio is open to the public, and guests can stay overnight in Selma's Cabin.

When deciding on a career, Brenda Smith had no aspirations of being a potter. She completed a Psychology and English degree at the University of Western Ontario and took a job for the City of London. But after she realized that there was no one to carry on the Pincroft tradition once her aunt and uncle were gone, she began to think that becoming a potter would be an exciting adventure.

“I could never have foreseen the turn my life would take, the knowledge I would attain, or the lessons of life I would learn. It was nothing like what I expected, and then again it was so much more than what I expected,” explains Brenda. She flourished during the summer of 1976 at the Banff School of Fine Arts with instructors F. Carlton Ball and Les Manning, returning to Pincroft with new ideas and boundless energy.

Today, Brenda and Paul remain true to the founding philosophy of Pincroft - that everyone should be able to afford a handmade piece of pottery.



Selma Clennell's signature stacking cream and sugar sets, 1950 and 1970.

## Clays, Glazes and Kilns

In the beginning, materials and equipment had to be improvised or made by hand. There weren't any supply houses for glazes, clays, tools or kilns, and very few instruction manuals. Potters had to build their own kilns, prepare their own clay, and grind their own glazes.

Pincroft first used clay from the Musquodoboit River in Nova Scotia blended with complementary clay from the Foster Pottery (a flowerpot manufacturer) in Hamilton. (Prepared clay only became available to potters in the 1960s.) Mixed with water in a 40-gallon steel drum, the clay slurry was then passed through a copper screen to catch roots and stones. The excess water was removed by allowing the mixture to freeze in large shallow vats during winter. In spring, the ice would melt and the water would run off, leaving the clay easy to handle.

Today, the clays come from Kentucky and Georgia and are purchased from The Pottery Supply House in Oakville, Ontario. A special formula, developed by Jimmie and Brenda in 1988, results in a buff to grey stoneware body. Paul mixes the clays with water and processes it in a pug mill to make it ready for Brenda to throw.

Jimmie built the first kick wheel, but it was soon replaced with up to 13 electric wheels to increase production and facilitate pottery classes. There are 10 variable speed wheels in the studio today.

Glaze formulas had been perfected while Jimmie and Selma were students at Macdonald College. The raw materials for each glaze were weighed out and mixed with water in a ball mill. In the early years, glaze ingredients were purchased from Ferro Enamels in Oakville, Ontario. Now, they come from The Pottery Supply House. Each glaze is mixed according to a unique Pincroft formula. No pre-prepared glazes are used.

Pincroft's two original octagonal electric kilns soon proved inadequate, so four more were built by Jimmie and Selma. These could be stacked for firing larger pieces. Later, a huge gas kiln was added. Today, the bisque (first) firing is done in one of five electric kilns, and the glaze (second) firing is done in a gas kiln.

## Marks

A typical Pincroft Pottery mark reads: Pincroft, handmade, Aylmer, Canada. These words are incised with a sharp pointed tool into the unfired clay by the potter who made the piece. With a little practice, you will be able to identify the unique handwriting styles of Jimmie, Selma and Brenda. Occasionally, early pieces will be dated. These are important examples to collect since they document what type of clay, shapes and glazes were used at a particular time. During anniversary decades, a double set of years appear. For example, when Pincroft Pottery celebrated its 50th year, pieces were marked 1948-1998. After 1988, all pieces are dated.

As your knowledge of Pincroft Pottery increases over time, your satisfaction with each additional piece will grow substantially. When you hold an example in your hands, your knowledge of Jimmie, Selma and Brenda will give you a deep and satisfying feeling that is so unique, so personal and so rewarding that you will be glad you explored this area of Canada's heritage.

## Tips for Collectors

Check pieces carefully for chips and cracks. A visual inspection is never enough. Use your fingers to feel the edges of rims and spouts. Run your nails across the surface since they can often detect almost invisible cracks. Tap the piece with your nails or knuckle - a sharp, clear ring usually means that it is crack free, while a dull tone indicates a crack.

Professional repairs can be very deceiving. Under bright lighting, rock the piece back and forth and look for variations in glaze colour and sheen. Run your fingertips across the surface - repaired areas have a warm plastic, less slippery feel.

Only buy damaged or repaired pieces if they are rare or strongly appeal to you - otherwise, look for perfect examples. Look for pieces where the potter has incised the year on the bottom. They are rarer and the only examples assuredly known to be made in a particular year.

These "documentary" examples are important since they record exactly when certain shapes and glazes were used. Consistent dating began in 1988 when Pincroft celebrated its 50th anniversary.

Most early cream and sugar sets were meant to be stackable. Make sure the cream jug sits securely and evenly on top of the sugar bowl. Check to see that the clay and glaze colours match - otherwise you will have bought a married (mismatched) set.

Commemorative or commissioned examples made for special events or organizations were made in limited editions and are collectible for their relative uniqueness.



**Above:** Covered bowl by Jimmie Clennell with finial modelled by Selma Clennell as a youthful Pan, the Greek god of shepherds, forests and wildlife, 1955. **Below:** Whimsical flower holder, Jimmie Clennell, 1960.





Small bowl with applied moulded fish, Selma Clennell, 1960.



"Half Apple" bean pot,  
Jimmie Clennell, 1970.

## Books

Studio Ceramics in Canada, Gail Crawford, Goose Lane Editions, 2005.

A Fine Line: Studio Crafts in Ontario from 1930 to the Present, Gail Crawford, Dundurn Press, 1998.

Pinecroft: Let the Story be Told, Early 1800s-1985, Selma Maria Caverly Clennell, privately published, 1985.

## Articles

"Pinecroft Pottery: 60 Years of Canadian Achievement," Conrad Biernacki, Antique & Collectibles Showcase, January/February 2007, pp 30-33.

"Collecting Canada: Pinecroft Pottery," Conrad Biernacki, Antique & Collectibles Trader, Spring 2007, pp 12-31.

"Pinecroft: Canadian Studio Pottery to Collect and Use," Conrad Biernacki, The Upper Canadian, March/April 2007, pp 22-23.

"Collecting Pinecroft: Canada's Oldest Studio Pottery," Conrad Biernacki, Wayback Times, May/June 2007, pp 14-15.

"The Joy of Throwing a Good Pot: Pinecroft, Canada's Oldest Studio Pottery," Conrad Biernacki, Fusion, Summer 2007, pp 14-15.

"Pinecroft Pottery: 60 Years of Creativity," Conrad Biernacki, Sideroads of Dufferin County, Summer 2007, pp 42-44.

Quotes by Jimmie Clennell are from a home interview with craft historian Gail Crawford, February 6, 1996.

Conrad Biernacki is the programs manager at the Royal Ontario Museum. He has curated exhibitions at the Gardiner Museum, Dufferin County Museum, Toronto Reference Library, and several historic houses. His book on Blue Mountain Pottery will be published by the Royal Ontario Museum in 2009, and his exhibition on West German pottery will open at the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery in September 2010.

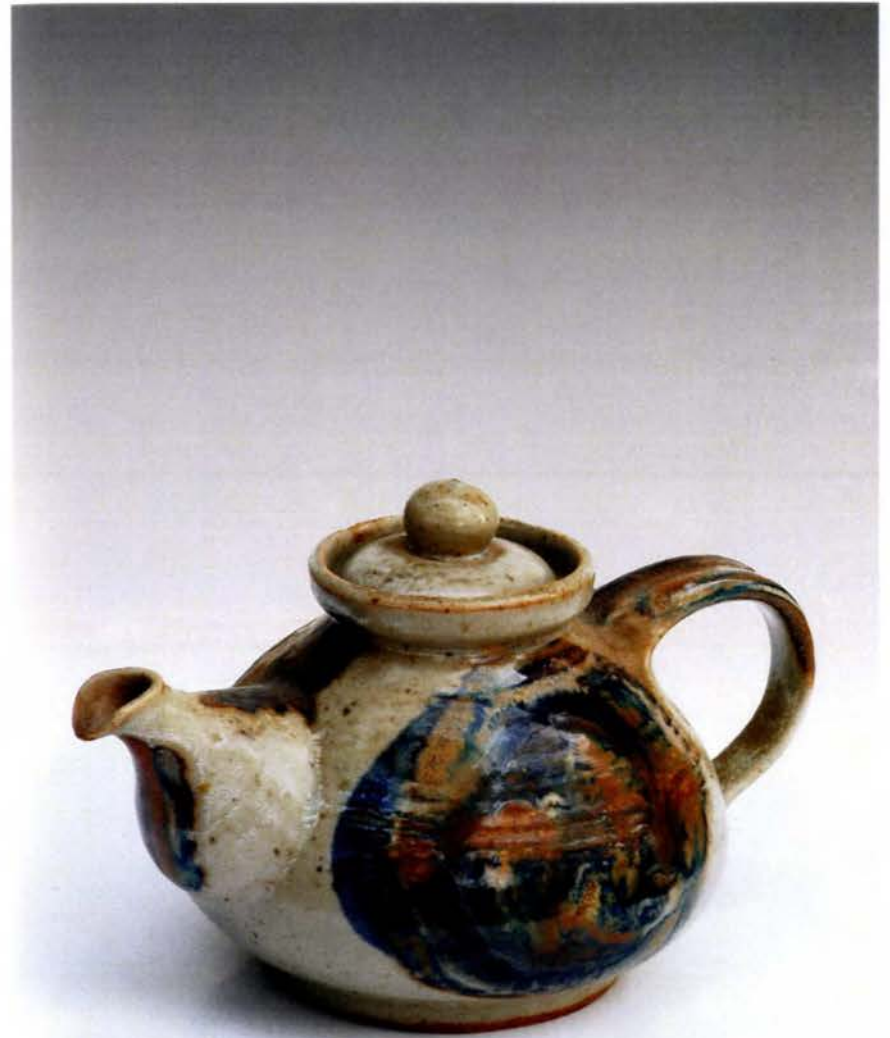




Fish plate, Selma Clennell, 1970. Label on back reads: In appreciation of your participation in the 17th Ontario Industrial Waste Conference June 1970, Niagara Falls.



Coffee pot and mug, Selma Clennell, 1978.



Wood-fired teapot, Jimmie Clennell, 1980.



Left: Teapot with "Ferguson" glaze, Brenda Smith, 2006.



French butter keepers with "Pinecroft Blue" glaze, Brenda Smith, 2007.



Left: Recent pieces by Brenda Smith: "Pinecroft Blue" goblets, "Ferguson" cheese platter, and "White Waxy Matte" ginger jar.

Below: To commemorate Pinecroft's 60th anniversary and its first retrospective exhibition at the Dufferin County Museum, Brenda Smith developed a new glaze called "Dufferin." One of the glaze ingredients is a clay found only in Dufferin County.



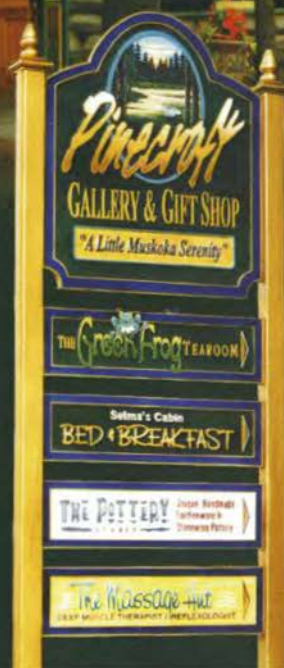


Brenda Smith turning a vase, 2006.



**Top row:** Selma Clennell, 1953; St. Thomas Pilots Club, Jimmie Clennell, 1974. **Middle row:** 30th anniversary, 1948-1978, Selma Clennell; commemorating Selma who died in 1994, Jimmie Clennell, 1996. **Bottom row:** Brenda Smith, 2004; 60th anniversary, 1948-2008, Brenda Smith.

On A Road Less Travelled... Visit Pinecroft Today!



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# Elgin County Museum celebrates 60 Years of Pinecroft

Pinecroft, located near Aylmer, Ontario, the oldest family-run studio pottery in Canada, is celebrating its 60th anniversary in 2008. It was founded in 1948 by Selma Caverly and her future husband Jimmie Clennell who had met at McGill's Macdonald College in Ste-Anne-de-Belleville, Quebec. By the late 1950s Pinecroft pottery was available in over 200 gift shops.

To honour Pinecroft's first 60 years, Elgin County Museum is presenting Pinecroft Pottery 1948-2008 - Celebrating 60 Years of Canadian Achievement, an in-depth retrospective from August 2 to December 20.



More than 300 pieces will be on display, organized in vignettes that will lead you through Pinecroft's fascinating history and numerous accomplishments. Highlights will include many one-of-a-kind pieces from the earliest days, ranging from small pottery brooches to gargantuan vases.

In addition to a wide variety of pottery shapes and colourful glazes, are vintage photographs, sketch books and letters. An early clay plunger, ball mill, and original moulds will also be on view. A video documentary especially assembled for the exhibition will feature the history of the site and interviews with the potters.

The curator of Pinecroft Pottery 1948-2008 is Conrad Biernacki, the programs manager at the Royal Ontario Museum. His book on Blue Mountain Pottery will be published by the Royal Ontario Museum in 2009, and his exhibition on West German pottery will open at the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery in Waterloo in September, 2010.



Cousins Tony Clennell, left, and Brenda Smith join curator Conrad Biernacki at the opening Sunday at Elgin County Museum of a retrospective exhibition of Pinecroft Pottery near Aylmer. Clennell is a potter, Smith, an owner with her husband, Paul, of the oldest family-run studio pottery in Canada. The exhibition continues to Dec. 20. (T-J photo by Eric Bunnell)

*Sept 23/2008*

