

Pinecroft History

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. He began working at Medalta Potteries where it took eight years to master every job in the factory. Jimmie 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 craft training programs were offered at the college especially for war veterans. Jimmie enrolled in 1946.

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.

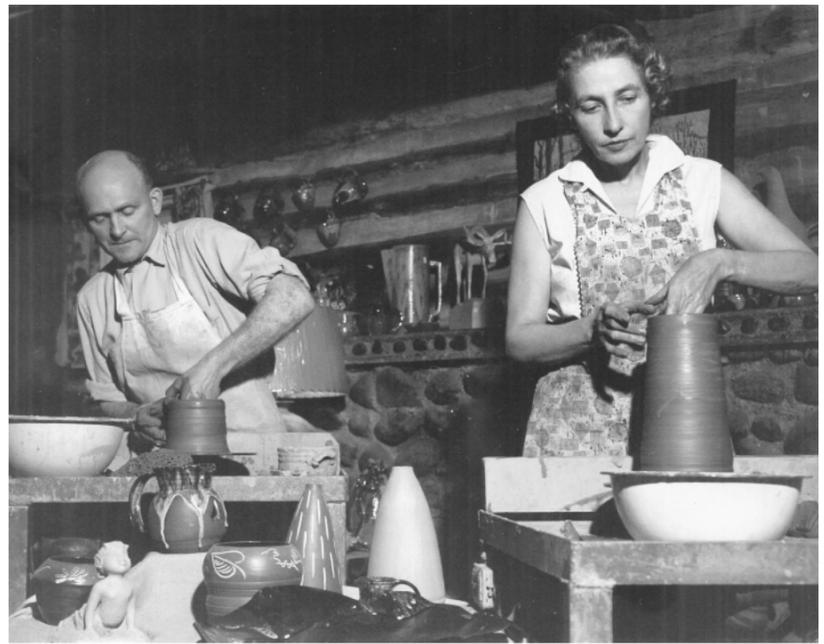
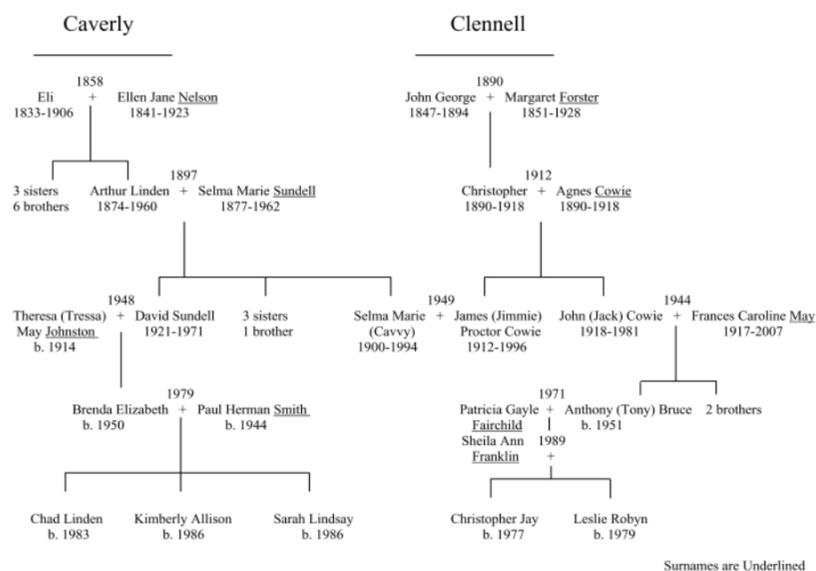
To bring attention to their wares, Jimmie and Selma decided that they must have a distinctive name for their pottery. Their choice was Pinecroft. "Pine" came from the pine forest that surrounded the cabin Selma's father, Arthur Caverly, offered them for their studio. And the word "croft" came to Jimmie's 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, Pinecroft makes 100 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.

"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."

Caverly - Clennell Family Tree



Jimmie and Selma are throwing pots in what was called "The Cabin-in-the-Pines" in the late 1950s. Today, this log cabin is the Pinecroft Pottery gift shop. Notice examples of their finished work in the foreground, including the Drippy glaze jug and figure of Pan. Look for similar examples in this exhibition.

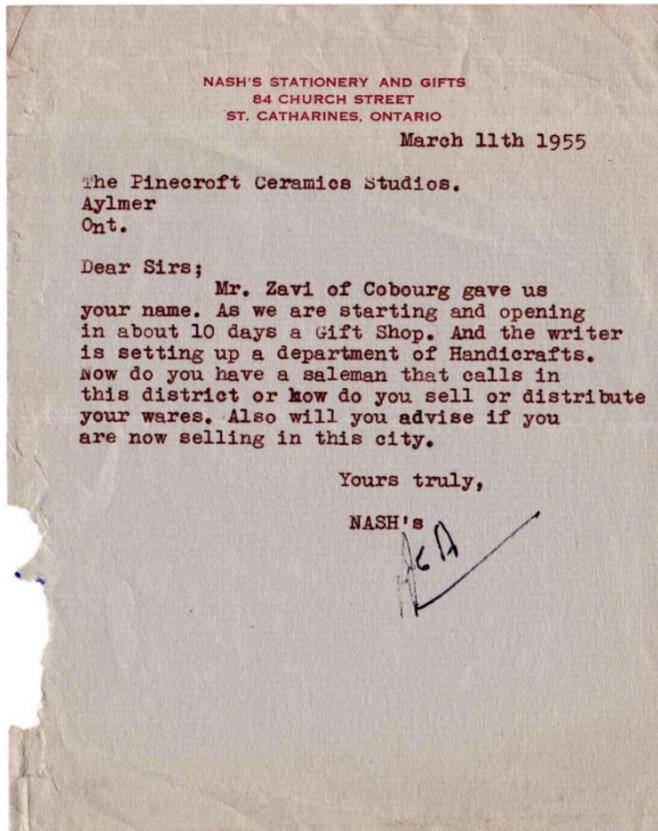


After pieces have been fired, they are dipped in glaze (powdered glass suspended in water), left to dry, and fired a second time. In this 1949 photograph, Jimmie has just immersed a jug and is patiently holding it to make sure all the excess glaze has run out. Notice the salt and pepper shakers on the table that are shaped like little jugs. You will see some of these in the long case behind you.
Photo Stollery Photographic Service, St. Thomas, Ontario



After pieces have been either turned or moulded, they are dried before firing in the kiln. Selma is loading a kiln in this 1960 photograph. Notice the Cowboy Hat ashtrays.

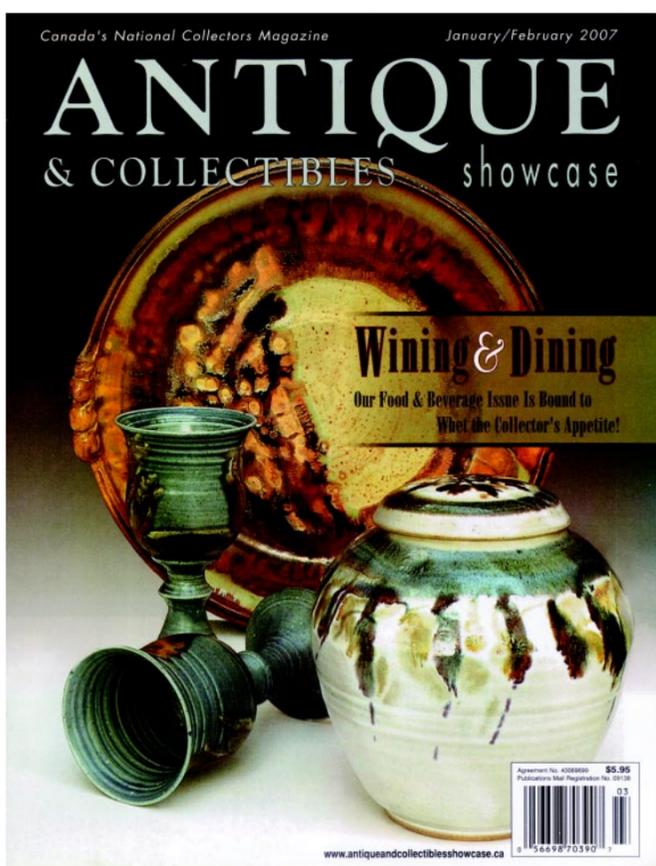
All the archival material shown on this wall is courtesy of Pinecroft Pottery.



Beginning in its earliest years, Pincroft pottery was available in 200 gift shops from Windsor, Ontario, to Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island. This remarkable achievement was possible because one of Selma's Navy friends, Mary Heasley, had a husband, Don, who was a travelling salesman for a stationery supplier. His territory was central and eastern Canada. Don had an interest in pottery and gladly took on this commissioned opportunity. But personal referrals also expanded the network of shops that sold Pincroft pottery. Shown here is a letter from Nash's Stationery and Gifts in St. Catharines, Ontario, inquiring about adding Pincroft to their "department of Handicrafts." The letter says that a Mr. Zavi of Cobourg, Ontario, suggested that Nash's contact Pincroft. This is Jarko Zavi (1909-1989), a well known potter during his career whose work is much appreciated by collectors today. This letter shows the esteem that an established fellow potter had for Jimmie and Selma.



Today, Pincroft Pottery is operated by Jimmie and Selma's niece Brenda and her husband Paul. In this 2006 photograph, Paul is using a pug mill to prepare the clay for Brenda to use on the wheel.
Photo Brian Cundle



Pincroft pottery was featured on the cover of the January/February 2007 issue of *Antique & Collectibles Showcase* magazine. This was Pincroft's first cover story in a national Canadian publication.

Pincroft 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 Pincroft 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.



Brenda is turning a large vase in this 2006 photograph. She joined her aunt and uncle at Pincroft in 1972, and today runs the pottery with her husband Paul whom she married in 1979.

Photo Brian Cundle