

# AYLMER EXPRESS

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## Business FOCUS

2023



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## Pinecroft Pottery said to be longest continually-operated studio in Canada

*Pinecroft Pottery of the Springwater area, founded by Jimmie and Selma (Caverly) in 1948 and later joined by the Green Frog Tea Room, a restaurant and, combined, a huge tourist landmark for the East Elgin area, is celebrating its 75th anniversary this year.*

by Rob Perry  
of The Aylmer Express

It's now owned by Jimmy and Selma's niece, Brenda (Caverly) Smith, and her husband Paul, with a third generation, their daughter Sarah and son Chad, having taken over responsibility for most of the business, with Brenda still the primary potter for Pinecroft.

#### Its origin

Pinecroft originally was Brenda's grandfather Arthur Caverly's farm. He was a butcher and, because of the lack of refrigeration at the time, had to lay off his employees each summer.

He was constantly losing employees to farm work because of that, and decided on a make-work program to keep workers busy during the summer.

He decided to transform 54 acres of the farm into an environment similar to Muskoka,

where he loved to go on fishing and hunting trips.

Workers would eventually plant 85,000 pine trees from a nursery in St. Williams, in trenches filled with slaughterhouse entrails to nourish them, and a cabin that's now a bed-and-breakfast rental, closed during COVID but potentially re-opening soon.

A second cabin on the site is now part of the main tearoom and gift shop for Pinecroft.

The "Cabin-in-the-Pines," as Pinecroft was known at the time, because a popular spot for club dinners and other celebrations. The second cabin was originally built for the St. Thomas Rotary Club, which used it for many parties.

During the Second Great War, that cabin was used as a recreation centre for airmen from the Commonwealth Air Training base northeast of Aylmer (and now the Ontario Police College).

#### Jimmie and Selma

Jimmie and Selma, both veterans of that war, founded the pottery on what would come to be known as Pinecroft Pottery.

Jimmie was English, and his father had died in the First Great War. Jimmy was an orphan who started working in coal mine in England at 14, an experience that left him with a lasting concern for the working man.

When his grandmother died, Jimmy, now 15, and his younger brother James came to Medicine Hat, Alberta, to reside with an aunt. Jimmie started working in a pottery, a job he would hold for the next 13 years, during his last three working with a pottery engineer, experimenting with Canadian clays and compiling beautiful matte and gloss glazes to complement them.

When the Second Great War started, Jimmy wanted to join the British army, and set off to

do so. He got as far as Hamilton when he was turned back and told if he wanted to serve, it should be in the Canadian army.

He returned to Alberta and, in Galetin, signed up with the 22nd Battery of the Canadian 3rd Division, which was being trained for beachhead landings.

He landed on the beaches of Normandy and his division fought its way across Western Europe.

Selma Caverly had also enlisted during the Second Great War, after a career as a schoolteacher. As a Wren, she worked for Canadian Naval Intelligence for three years at HMCS Bytown.

Wrens had a tradition of addressing each other by surname, and hers got shortened to "Cavvy," which she adored and adopted for the rest of her life.

She and Jimmy met in a pottery class being offered to veterans in January of 1946,

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Sarah Smith, left, Paul Smith, Brenda Smith and Chad Smith are the owners and operators of Pinecroft Pottery and Green Frog Tearoom, on Rogers Road just east of Springwater. The business, celebrating its 75th anniversary this year, was founded in 1948 by two Second Great War veterans, Jimmy and Selma "Cavvy" Clennell. Brenda is their niece. (AE/Rob Perry)



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## Pinecroft Pottery said to be longest

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at St. Anne de Bellevue. Their passion for art and history drew them together.

Working together at the college where the pottery program was offered, they developed the clay they would use at Pinecroft, as well as four glazes, Rockingham brown, sage green, buff and yellow.

But Ontario, when they moved here, was an industrial and agricultural province where crafts such as pottery were little-understood, unlike Quebec and the Maritimes, where potteries were great tourist attractions supported by provincial governments.

**Opening the pottery**  
Jimmie and Cavy accepted Arthur Caverly's offer of a cabin as a studio and moved in. After one season, they realized it was too small and moved to the larger "Cabin-in-the-Pines."

They combined pine, for the many trees on the property, with croft, an English word for a small rural property, to arrive at their business's new name, "Pinecroft."

They married in 1949 and worked and lived together for the next 46 years, until Cavy's death in 1994.

The pottery would take time to establish, and most of their business involved wholesaling to 200 gift shops across

Canada, but more and more visitors came to Pinecroft each year and, by 1975, everything made there was also sold there.

In addition to producing pottery, they also taught many students how to do so over the years and gave talks to interested groups such as service clubs and Women's Institutes.

Brenda, Jimmie and Selma's niece, meanwhile, grew up in Toronto, the daughter of David Caverly, a former Deputy Minister of the Environment in the provincial government and Tressa who, after her husband's retirement in 1971, helped out for many years at Pinecroft, becoming a fixture there for visitors.

Jimmie and Selma had a nephew, Tony, who was very interested in ceramics and remains a potter to this day, but at about that time he was a newlywed with a burgeoning career in teaching, which left Brenda as the choice to take over Pinecroft.

She'd been an English and psychology major at Western University, and had then worked for the City of London, which she didn't like.

She was also sentimental about Pinecroft, and so she took a year's sabbatical to return to

Aylmer.

"I literally had no idea what I was getting into," she admitted in a history she wrote for the 64th anniversary of Pinecroft (Actually for the 60th, but completing the book took much longer than expected.)

*We've been lucky, we've been able to do what we wanted to do. It was a lot of really, really hard work.*

Meanwhile, Brenda met her husband Paul while they were both active in saving the Old Town Hall in Aylmer from proposed demolition in the late 1970s.

**Green Frog tearoom**  
In 1978, a decision was made to open a tearoom at Pinecroft, as an adjunct to the pottery, by Tressa.

Visiting groups always seemed to want tea while there, Brenda said, and "She needed something to do."

They offered, in addition to tea, muffins and homemade bread to start. "We didn't even

serve coffee."

They still offered "a lovely selection" of teas, Chad added.

The tearoom was in the north side of the pottery cabin, a small, enclosed patio where washrooms were now situated, along with a small washroom.

An outhouse was used for a bathroom.

The kitchen was later moved into a cabin alcove, and the pottery production studio was relocated to the other side of Pinecroft's pond, freeing space for more diners and a gift shop.

Paul, who in the late 1970s was a leather worker with a small store in Aylmer, came out when the tearoom opened to have tea and a muffin.

He saw Brenda working on pottery in a back room. "And six years later we were married."

Brenda said the tearoom was "slow at first, but it got busy. Mostly word of mouth to begin with, same with the pottery student."

People took a long time to realize where Pinecroft was, she said, and many locals still didn't really know about it, though many visitors came from about an hour to 75-minute drive away to go there.

### Fresh food

Paul said he wasn't sure when he started making the bread served in the tearoom. It was a very simple white bread, but popular, perhaps because it came out of the oven at 11 a.m. and as still warm when served at 12 noon.

"It doesn't get any fresher than that."

Brenda noted that the menu was gradually expanded over time, starting with a tomato soup and an egg-salad sandwich.

"Everything's fresh," and no more food was made than the expected number of diners on any particular day.

The tearoom became so popular that it now accounts for up to 80 percent of the business's revenue.

Chad said even if someone was coming just to buy pottery, they were still very likely to take in lunch as well.

Brenda said that, despite the popularity of the tearoom, the pottery has also grown over time. Teaching students started with Pinecroft, and the teaching studio has been expanded with more turning wheels and a lot brighter illumination, much of it natural.

While the number of pottery employees hasn't grown, the number of kilns used to fire pottery has, including two very large ones, one of them wood-fired, which was rare.

The ceramics made at Pinecroft were all expected to be practical, not just decorative. "Stuff people can use."

All the pottery produced there was safe for food use, as well as for dishwashers, freezers, ovens and microwaves, she noted.

Paul noted that didn't keep some customers from hanging platters on the wall.

Pinecroft used to close around the end of October and re-open in March, but due to growing popularity, it now



Gift shop worker Olivia Fehr holds a Pinecroft Pottery platter, one of many such pieces produced and sold there each year. Every product is meant to be used and is food-safe and well as safe for ovens, freezers, microwaves and dishwashers. (AE/Rob Perry)



This is the dining room at Green Frog Tearoom, with an expansive view through one glass wall of some of the 85,000 pine trees planted on the property by Arthur Caverly, starting in 1921. (AE/Rob Perry)

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# continually-operated studio in Canada

closes after Christmas, and re-opens just before the school break in March.

Keeping their parking lot clear of snow during the entire winter would be tough, she admitted as one reason for the January and February closing, and “You need a break.”

**The kitchen**

Sarah, who’s taken charge in the kitchen, now a modern facility, said the most popular item on the menu now was a chicken-and-broccoli crepe, followed by chicken and dumplings and then a lasagna served as a special.

She estimated about 200 diners in the tearoom on an average day during their peak season and, following a complimentary social media post, went up to 250 for a time. “That was insane,” in part because an emergency financial relief program offered by the federal government during the COVID pandemic made finding kitchen staff to prepare all those meals challenging.

When summer hit each year, “We can’t slow down” in the kitchen, she added. Even on a recent September weekend, they served 400 diners over the course of weekend.

Chad said they had found they could double the number of reservations for the following day to estimate how many diners would come through the tearoom.

If 70 were booked by the night before, about 130 to 140 would turn up the next day.

Last year, Brenda said, a total of 36,000 customers were served, despite the tearoom offering only lunch from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., and no breakfast or dinner.

“That’s almost back to pre-COVID numbers,” she stated.

Jimmie’s nephew Tony, now an Aylmer resident, had worked

part-time in the Pinecroft pottery for the last seven or eight years, in addition to travelling extensively (he was in Montana at the time of the interview).

fired and the other wood-fired, the only one of its design in Ontario if not Canada.

A concerned neighbour came over one day, seeing flames belching out the top of the wood-fired kiln chimney, but Brenda assured him that was normal.

**Classes always full**

Pinecroft hosted workshops for potters’ guilds from Ottawa, Toronto, Hamilton and Windsor, giving a course in firing a wood kiln, and had guest potters from the USA doing specialty workshops.

She taught one-day classes two days a week, “and it’s always full.”

Chad said Pinecroft currently had 600 prospective students on a waiting list. “We’re whittling them down.”

Brenda said she’d had a whole class of students one recent Saturday who had been waiting since before COVID for the opportunity. Classes were limited to eight students at a time.

Chad, who’s in charge of bookkeeping, said when Pinecroft re-opened, “We were busy again, right from the get-go.”

Paul blamed “cabin fever,” adding, “It’s been a great year.”

**The future**

What’s in the future for the family business?

“Just keep doing what we do,” Chad answered.

Sarah repeated that finding staffing was tough, and that limited the potential for growth.

Brenda noted they used to host weddings and specialty dinners, but Sarah added, “We can only do what we can do.”

Chad said re-opening the one cabin for bed-and-breakfast stays was an option.

As for Brenda, she’s happy to stay in her studio and let here children run the business.

“They do a great job.”

“For me, it’s golf,” Paul added. “that’s in my future.”

Brenda did lament, however, that “COVID kind of stole our retirement from us.”

Otherwise, Paul said, they

“I literally had no idea what I was getting into.”

## Surviving COVID

Chad allowed that trying to operate a business like theirs through COVID “was tough.” At one point, they couldn’t open at all for six months straight.

And when they could open, Paul added, tables had to be at least six feet away from each other, and they were only allowed to operate at 40 percent of their maximum capacity.

One lifesaver, Chad said, was that when they could open but only for outdoor dining, they could readily double the size of their patio, and probably did better than most restaurants.

The popular patio remains in an enlarged state, but Chad said he got rid of three or four tables.

“It was too much when you have the inside full and the outside full.” They’ve now returned to a number they can handle.

Brenda said one bonus about the patio was that many customers who’d never tried dining outdoors got a taste for it, “And now want to do nothing else.”

Surprising, Sarah observed, insects turned out to not be a problem, except for one week this spring when the deerflies were bad.

Brenda said a fellow came from Minnesota in 2013 who built two big kilns, one gas-



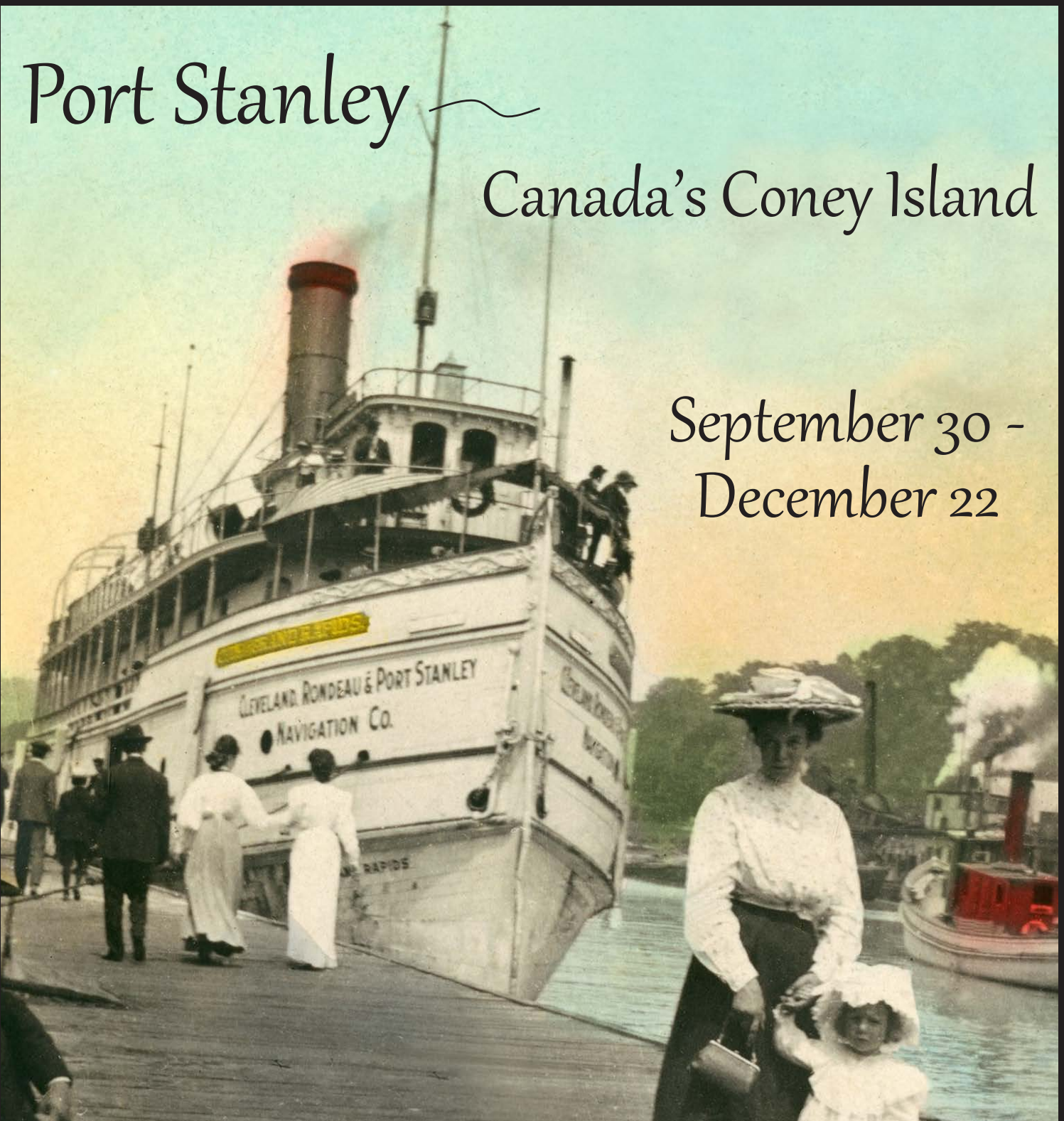
Brenda Smith, the principal potter at Pinecroft, shapes a pot on a wheel at her studio overlooking the pond at Pinecroft. A teaching studio nearby, big enough for eight students, is full each of the two days a week she gives classes. (AE/Rob Perry)



The pond at Pinecroft reflects some of the 85,000 pine trees planted on 54 acres starting over a century ago by Arthur Caverly, the owner of the property then. Anyone is welcome to visit Pinecroft just to walk around and tour the sights. (AE/Rob Perry)



Sarah Smith takes a tray of homemade bread out of the oven in the kitchen at Pinecroft Pottery and Green Frog Tearoom. The restaurant is known for its bread, which comes out of the oven just before food service begins each day. (AE/Rob Perry)



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