LAKESIDE, OHIO'S

Ogontz Pottery

By James L. Murphy

Begun as a religious camp in 1873 and soon purchased by the Central Ohio Conference of the Methodist Church, Lakeside, Ohio, is a gated, traditional Chautauqua-type community and a popular summer resort on Marblehead Peninsula, which separates Sandusky Bay from Lake Erie. Ogontz was a Wyandot Indian chief who lived in the Marblehead area and gave his name to the future city of Sandusky. His name is little known today outside northwestern Ohio, with the exception of Philadelphia, where Civil War financier Jay Cooke (1821-1905), a Sandusky native, named his opulent mansion for Ogontz, whom he purportedly knew in his youth. Albert C. Armstrong (1873-1957) was the son of a Philadelphia shoemaker and grocer, who spent most of his life in Detroit, where he taught art, including ceramics, and served as an assistant supervisor at Eastern High School. In the 1920s and 1930s these three elements combined to produce some interesting but virtually unknown art pottery at Armstrong's Ogontz Pottery.

Armstrong was born in Zelienople, Pennsylvania, in 1873 but the family lived in Philadelphia, where his father, Samuel, had been a shoemaker and later a grocer. Following Samuel's death, his widow, Emma, worked as a shoe dealer to rear the seven children. Growing up in Philadelphia only a few miles from the Ogontz School for Young Ladies, which had been developed on the former Jay Cooke estate, Armstrong was surely familiar with the story of Chief Ogontz well before his first visit to Lakeside and the Marblehead (Ohio) Lighthouse. By 1902, Armstrong had moved to Detroit, where he spent the rest of his life, for the most part teaching art at Eastern High School, although in 1920 he is listed as an assistant superintendent in the public schools. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to learn more about his widow, Florence A. Armstrong, or his two daughters, Emma Theresa or Dorothy.

A. C. Armstrong's connection with Lakeside is not very well documented. The earliest available reference occurs in the Sandusky Star Journal of June 29, 1921: "Mr. & Mrs. A.C. Armstrong and daughter of Detroit are at Lakeside." Florence A. Armstrong was born in Ohio, and it is possible that her family had ties with the Marblehead region. It is certain that by 1927 he was operating a small pottery located at the intersection of Columbus Avenue and Lake Boulevard, just south of the dance pavilion at Erie Beach Park, as shown on the February, 1927 Sanborn Insurance Map. Actually, the pottery was in a small attachment to a drug store and variety store that, like the dance pavilion, was operated only during the summers.

In a 1992 oral interview conducted by David T. Glick, Lakeside native Lyle MacKenzie, then 88 years old, did not recall the pottery but did remember that A.C. Armstrong was
from Detroit and was a partner of "Doc" Crowe in the operation of the dance hall and drugstore. MacKenzie recalled that Armstrong "was a short man and had two daughters, one of whom married a local by the name of Parks" (Glick, pers. comm., 13 Nov. 1992).

This may actually be a case of misremembering, for it is known that "Doc" Crowe's first wife was Norma Parkes, a Lakeside native, and no record of an Armstrong-Park(e)s marriage has been found in local county records.

Additional references to Armstrong and Crowe have been recently provided by Glick and Janet Armstrong, Lakeside archivist. The partnership between Armstrong and Dr. Robert L. Crowe (1889-1953) began as early as 1917, and the dance hall at Erie Beach was a going concern for many years. Crowe was a Memphis, Tennessee, native who had put himself through Ohio State University and the University of Tennessee on football scholarships, and for nearly twenty years was dean of the University of Tennessee's College of Pharmacy. Much of the popularity of the Erie Beach dance hall was due to the African-American talent Crowe imported from his home town, including such jazz notables as Scanman Carruthers and Jimmie Lunceford and his orchestra.

While it is possible that Armstrong potted at Lakeside as early as 1917, the first mention found in local newspapers is the July 21, 1928, Lakeside News, advertising Ogontz Pottery. By this time (1928) Armstrong had sold his interest in the dance hall to Crowe. A year later (June 29, 1929) there is mention of a pottery showroom and classes held at the Armstrong cottage at 230 Oak Avenue. In 1930 Armstrong demonstrated how he made pottery to the members of the Lakeside Women's Club, and according to Lakeside historian Sally Sue Witten, pieces of Ogontz pottery were displayed at club flower shows in the 1930s. Armstrong also taught ceramics at Lakeside for at least the summers of 1929 to 1932, advertisements for 1930 and 1931 indicating that classes were held from 10:00 to 12:00 daily except Saturdays, at a cost of $3.50 per week or $15 for a five week course. The advertisements also indicate that pottery was for sale. (One example of the Marblehead Lighthouse trivet is unsigned but has a paper label identifying it, suggesting an effort to make production more commercial.)

One piece believed to have been made by a student of Armstrong is known (see photo next page). While the dozen or so other pieces known are neatly and uniformly marked with a stylus Ogontz/Lakeside/OHIO, the presumed student piece is crudely incised in thin letters and is unique in utilizing a capital "G" and "N" in Ogontz, as well as a lower case "d" in Lakeside and "h" in Ohio. Although having an attractive brown over orange drip glaze, the rim is not well-executed and the shape is hardly original, being a copy of a 19th C. ear-handled stoneware crock.

The pieces attributed to Armstrong (only one is artist signed "A.C.A.") for the most part are better executed and more original in design. Perhaps the most outstanding pieces are the Marblehead Lighthouse tile or trivet, known in polychrome and in a slight variant...
in cobalt blue, and the ringed or ribbed pitcher in a semi-matte plum glaze, somewhat reminiscent of ribbed pieces by Cowan and in Roseville's Futura. Armstrong's apparent delight in flambe or drip glazes is also reminiscent of Cowan.

While he may have been influenced by Cowan, there is no known association with that pottery. Nor, for that matter, have any ties been found between Armstrong and Cranbrook Institute or the Detroit Society of Arts and Crafts. Thus far it remains a mystery where Armstrong received his training.

Armstrong clearly preferred matte or semi-matte glazes and particularly liked drip and blended glaze effects; some, such as the student piece, are reminiscent of Peters and Reed's Shadow Ware, while others resemble Cowan's flambe wares. Other than the student piece, only one is known with a high gloss glaze—the blue drip trumpet-shaped vase donated to the Western Reserve Historical Society.

With production limited to the summer months at Lakeside, the rarity of Armstrong's pieces today is understandable. There are no known references to the Ogontz Pottery after the summer school of 1932, so that documented production of Ogontz pottery extends only from 1928 to 1932, although it may have begun earlier. Armstrong purchased his cottage on Oak Street in 1923 and sold it in 1930. He also owned a property at 503 Park Row, purchased in 1924 and sold in 1933, which probably dates the end of his tenure at Lakeside. He would have been sixty years old at the time, and perhaps this corresponds to his retirement. If so, it is curious that he and his wife did not retire to Lakeside—but there remain many questions about his career in ceramics.

Acknowledgements.

David T. Glick initially provided information available at the Lakeside Heritage Society in 1992. More recently, he and Lakeside archivist Janet Stephenson shared much additional information with me in a very enjoyable visit to Lakeside and the Heritage Hall archives. Mark Bowden, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, kindly checked available Eastern High School yearbooks. Norma Bruce, retired Ohio State University librarian and seasonal Lakeside resident, also provided a number of useful leads and sources.
Ogontz Pottery
MARKS & LABEL

Ogontz cream with light blue flambe drip, 5 1/4 inches high.

Ogontz green three handled vase, 5 1/4 inches high.

Ogontz blue glaze pentagonal vase with black drip, 7 inches high.

Usual Ogontz mark, without the A.C.A. initials.

Ogontz mark with A.C.A. signature.

Ogontz blue and green flowerpot-grabbed vase, 6 inches high.

Ogontz paper label.