
*It is thought
that this area
is actually the
seedbed that
reseeded the
whole continent
after the last
ice age.¹*





Gertrude Graham Smith, also known as Gay, single-fires porcelain ware in her soda kiln near Penland, North Carolina. She has taught at Penland, Haystack, Harvard, and abroad. Widely exhibited, her work is in numerous collections in the United States and around the world.

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by Gertrude Graham Smith

Can qualities such as generosity be indigenous to a place? How long does a species, a culture, an individual have to be in a particular geographical location to be considered indigenous? Our species is migratory, adaptable, so who or what is truly indigenous? Here where I live, it seems possibly to do with a culture's becoming.

Attracted by the area's affordability, my experiences at Penland School, and a few pottery buddies, I landed and rooted in western North Carolina in 1994. The southwestern Appalachian Mountains are both remarkably beautiful and biologically important: "The Central Appalachian forest is globally significant, hosting some of the highest environmental diversity in North America ... As northern species retreated before the glaciers' advance of the last ice age, they found suitable habitat in the Southern Appalachians, leaving one of the most diverse forest ecosystems in the world."² Somehow this ancient tale feels connected with the present, as I find myself on ground teeming with variety and nourishment for creative, artistic, and professional development.

Central to the formation of this community of artists is Penland School. Founded in 1929, the school propagated a value system and lifestyle that seeded this area with a diverse group of artists practicing their craft. The school also nourished the growth of a new community, and what might be considered a new culture, in this rural county. Penland grew out of an Episcopalian mission school, where director Lucy Morgan was committed to helping the people of the community through the revival of the craft of weaving. That original school evolved into a community cooperative called Penland Weavers and Potters, which operated until 1967. In 1962, Penland's second director, Bill Brown, created residential programs and brought in talented young studio artists to teach. The school joined the emerging studio crafts movement.

In the seventies, before there was a local supermarket and when road bridges were one lane wide, crafts artists moved here after having been students, teachers, or resident artists at the school. Natural beauty, affordability of land and housing, and the lack of zoning laws encouraged artists to put down roots and build fiery furnaces for pots and glass. Pioneers Cynthia Bringle, Jane and Mark Peiser, Norm and Gloria Schulman, and Paulus Berensohn settled here, and their students and colleagues followed. Potters cite a seminal 1974 clay class that Cynthia Bringle taught at Penland that was attended by Jon Ellenbogen, Becky Plummer, and Douglass Rankin. All built homes and studios in the area, and their students and friends followed. Jon and Becky married and generously shared their freshly built studio with their friend Nick Joerling during his first foray to this area.

Classes at the school bring in a variety of artists from around the world as teachers and students. Biologists say genetic diversity is necessary for species survival and adaptability. Like the creatures of our landscape, the artists moving through bring diversity and innovation. They are fresh genetic material that cross-fertilizes and produces a deep and rich environment for creative activity.

Penland School, with its historic roots in charity, community development, cooperation, and excellence, has served as a nutrient supporting the growth of a culture with these values. Artists here look to find ways to work together. Such qualities as generosity and collaboration dominate our relationships, provide the foundation of our community values, and seem to be creating a

Seeding the Continent



culture or subculture within our region. Imagine living where neighbors actually know what a cone is, will loan you suchlike, and will help solve firing, clay, and glaze puzzles. Moreover, they will arrive on the scene instantly and at night to help shovel out kiln disaster remains (thank you, Michael Kline), then immediately repair said kiln because you're on a deadline (thank you, Tracy Dotson).

Our artists' enclave exists within a larger mountain culture, one established by earlier European immigrants. Traditional means of support have included subsistence farming, tobacco growing, hunting, fishing, working in factories and mines, and church going. It seems currently that most "locals" consider me and other artists as outsiders, yet we share a respect for hard work, independence, and self-reliance.

Like flowers bringing in the bees, we artists are evolving attractants that entice crafts enthusiasts to visit and experience our work. Examples of collective events include guilds (a term also used in the ecological design system called permaculture to describe a grouping of animals, plants, and insects that work in synergy to ensure the survival of all), home sales, and most recently, a cooperative gallery. As vital as the economic benefit of being in business together is, we acknowledge equally the value in co-operation and in benefiting our wider community. Our willingness to share skills, resources, and labor enhances our livelihoods and our ability to survive and thrive.

Less directly obvious are ways we support, influence, and incite excellence in each other's work. How does one describe the mix of competition, adaptation, and survival of the fittest in this community? Rumor has it that there are more fine contemporary craftspeople per square mile here than anywhere else in the world, so keeping up with the neighbors (in my world these are other potters) is about making better work. Is curiosity about my neighbors' creative processes and results competitive? Certainly – if that sense of competition keeps me on a creative edge, willing to take the risks necessary to making better work. Is it collaborative? Perhaps – in the sense that it may be possible one day to look back on this area and this time as a "school," a connected group of artists with roots in a particular place and time.

With "suitable habitat" established, the arts community and the beautiful landscape are now the dominant draw for migratory artists settling here. Almost incidentally, the area is also literally rich ground for ceramicists, as many of our raw materials – kaolin, feldspar, silica – are mined nearby. Our niche is rife with possibilities, if viewed as the bounty of ideas and techniques we're afloat in. Murky bogs, or wetlands, are the richest in ecological diversity; we're an artistic

OPENING PAGE: *Azaleas on Jane Bald. Photograph by Joy Tanner.*

ABOVE LEFT: *Mica Members, 2013. L to r: Jon Ellenbogen, Lisa Joerling, Suze Lindsay, Pam Brewer, Cynthia Bringle (front row), Claudia Dunaway, David Ross, Chuck Young, Jenny Lou Sherburne, Jacquie Allen, Kent McLaughlin, Becky Plummer, Deana Blanchard, Gay Smith, Joy Tanner. Missing: Will Baker.*

Photograph by Edwina Bringle.

ABOVE RIGHT: *Lucy Morgan with Penland weaver Minnie Hoppes, 1930s. Photograph by Bayard Wootten. Courtesy of Penland School.*



ABOVE: Penland clay, 1974:
 Front l to r: Bibiana, Nina Gelardi,
 Annie Hoffman, Douglass Rankin,
 Chaffe McIlhenny. Middle l to r:
 Cynthia Bringle, Becky Plummer,
 Janis Farley, Eliza Kelly, Pam
 Hoss. Back l to r: Jill Ruhlman,
 Andrea Bodet, Jon Ellenbogen,
 Chester Old, Martha Keeney,
 Ron Dale. Photographer unknown

here means the pie slice is shrinking for each, but always we come around to celebrate “the more the merrier,” to see that we *are* the pie, and jointly we create more to go around.

According to Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, *indigenous* means “produced, growing, or living naturally in a particular region or environment.” For eight years, I lived at Findhorn, an intentional spiritual community in Scotland. We practiced working in harmony and co-creation with nature. In this belief system, I am like the plants and animals in my world; my life and work grow from the soil – the landscape that is my home. From this perspective, perhaps our ecosystem influences our capacity and our values, and it could be considered a seedbed of indigenous culture. Here in the western part of North Carolina, we’re blessed to be living within a geographical ecosystem that’s one of the richest, most diverse on the planet. If species indigenous to our area reseeded a continent, could a metaphorical ecosystem of artists, of potters, be considered generative, as tiny seeds are? Could a germ of generosity escape from this rich mountain land and infect the world?

FOOTNOTES

1 Our Forest, Mountain Association for Community Economic Development.
www.maced.org/foj/our-forests.htm (2011)

2 Land-of-Sky Regional Council, “Marketing Local Forest Products: Building Rural Community Vitality and Landowner Prosperity,” prepared for USDA Forest Service.
www.srs.fs.usda.gov/news/SAWG%20Final%20Report.pdf (March 1, 2008)

COLLECTIVE VENTURES

Findhorn Foundation www.findhorn.org

Mica (a cooperative gallery) www.micagallerync.com

Soda Chicks and Chet Pottery Home Sale www.sodachicks.com

Spruce Pine Potters Market sprucepinepottersmarket.com

Potters of the Roan www.pottersoftheroan.com

Penland Potters penlandpottery.com/pages/home.php

Penland School of Crafts www.penland.org

Toe River Arts Council www.toeriverarts.org

pool with enough variety to generate a rich and strong inheritance – a lovely petri dish.

Potters are a generous breed; the unpredictability of the process has traditionally inspired us to share the load. And the notion of “survival of the friendliest,” as stated in *The Genius of Dogs*, by Brian Hare and Vanessa Woods, is now gaining scientific credibility. An article in *Science Daily*, (July 28, 2010) states: “Social connections – friends, family, neighbors or colleagues – improve our odds of survival by 50 percent.” At times, we worry that too many potters