

(Left to right) Communion flagon, creamer with an unusual touch (about half the size of the accepted mark, with only "Sellew & Co." — no "Cincinnati"), castor frame, covered water pitcher, rare eight-inch plate with wide rim and two tablespoons. (Sellew flatware is exceedingly rare). All are marked pieces from the collection of Paul and Alma Brunner of Dayton, Ohio.



Sellew & Co. Cincinnati Pewter

by Betty Lacey

TO Ohio collectors of pewter, a piece marked "Sellew & Co., Cincinnati" is an exciting find. The Sellew brothers, Enos, Osman and William, produced some of the Midwest's finest pewter and Britannia wares in the years from 1830 to 1860.

Enos and Osman were the original founders of the firm of Sellew & Co. in 1832. They had migrated to Cincinnati from the Philadelphia area after learning the craft of pewter and Britannia making in Connecticut. About 1836, they were joined in partnership by a third brother, William.

The first wares produced by the firm were manufactured in forms common to pewter of earlier date. There were beakers, eight-inch plates with a wide rim, grease lamps, candlesticks and tea sets. Later, about 1850, the firm advertised such items as castors, candel molds, pitchers, cups, tumblers, lamps, coffee and tea sets, and candlesticks of several designs.

Sellew wares were noted for fine quality of craftsmanship and pleasing form. In 1839, the firm was awarded a certificate of merit by the Ohio Mechanics Institute, a trades and crafts organization of contemporary importance.

In 1844, the firm branched out into the tin-ware business, as well, manufacturing urns, canisters, boxes and trays in block tin and japanned ware.

Sellew went out of business about 1860. Several theories have been

advanced as reasons for their final decline. Most popular is the belief that competition from the Homan Company forced Sellew out of business.

The Homan Manufacturing Company was established in Cincinnati in 1847 as manufacturers of pewter and later branched into electroplate and gold plated wares. In addition to its regular trade items, the Homan Company flourished from substantial orders of dining and bar equipment for use on the Ohio-Mississippi river boats and in the inns and taverns of Ohio, Kentucky and Indiana. Ecclesiastical vessels were another important category of the firm's output. Homan's popularity must have resulted in serious competition for Sellew and all other of their contemporaries.

A number of Ohio businesses collapsed in the difficult years of the Civil War, however, when an unsettled economy played havoc with the worlds of craft and trade. This may have been the reason for Sellew's collapse.

Probably the most unlikely, but certainly the most interesting, theory is that the firm's downfall resulted from destruction of its raw materials and finished products by gigantic Ohio River rats. The Sellew warehouse was situated on the riverfront. The over-size rats that so ravaged the waterfront were brought into the Cincinnati area by flatboats plying the Ohio from other ports. The rodents

were true terrorists of the time and were said even to have killed infants.

Regardless of the reason for Sellew's final curtain (all these theories may be correct, at least in part), the firm ceased production of pewter about 1860.

There followed a long quiet period before the first notice of Sellew pewter by scholars and collectors. And when that first mention finally came, Sellew was forced to bow to incorrect interpretation of its name. In the Spring of 1923, the Wadsworth Athenaeum, in its museum bulletin, published a list of American pewterers. Among the names appeared that of "Sellers and Company of Cincinnati".

It wasn't until the following year, 1924, when Kerfoot's book, *American Pewter*, was published, that the collecting world learned the true name of the Cincinnati firm. Following the lead established by the Wadsworth Athenaeum, Kerfoot had researched the subject and devoted a page of his book to "Sellew & Co.," including photographs of a lamp and plate, as well as a close-up of the firm's mark.

Sellew climbed to a position of still greater importance when Rhea Mansfield Knittle's study, *Early Ohio Silversmiths and Pewterers 1787-1847*, was published in 1943 as one of the Ohio Frontier Series. From that time on, Sellew pewter has been highly collectible and eagerly sought by an increasing number of enthusiasts of regional antiques.

Teapots and coffeepots seem to be the pieces most often available. Price is a widely fluctuating matter. Because so many are still unfamiliar with the mark of Sellew, some real sleepers may be found on occasion, particularly in areas outside the Midwest. Few bargains are to be enjoyed in the Ohio valley.

In the past two years, Sellew teapots have sold at auction in Ohio for \$110, \$150, and \$75. The latter was of late form and badly dented. A pair of unmarked 9½-inch candlesticks with bobèches, attributed to Sellew, sold for \$100 at a Cincinnati show last fall.

As with prices of all good antiques, Sellew prices reflect an upward trend in recent years. In December of 1955, a Dayton, Ohio,

dealer sold a 7½-inch teapot that was one of the firm's earliest pieces for \$32.50. At that time, there was still such widespread confusion about the name of the manufacturer that the aforementioned teapot was advertised as being by "SellOw & Co., Cincinnati pewterers."

Despite the somewhat ominous beginnings of its "claim to fame", there are few serious collectors of pewter anywhere in the Midwest who today are not as familiar with the name of Sellew as with those of Danforth, Boardman, Will and Bassett.

Because of its merit as well-made, well-finished ware of fine metal quality, Sellew pewter is worthy of the attention of all collectors and students of antiques, regardless of locality. It is one of the Midwest's most important regional collectibles, and as such lends interest to any collection.



See this month's NAR feature on how to photograph antiques — "Pewter Photography — A Challenge in Lighting", page 20.

Matched tea and coffee pots made by Sellew of Cincinnati about 1850. A flash does produce shadows behind the object. In this case, the repetition of the handle design is an interesting addition to the portrait of pewter. Note the economical use of the identical mold for the base. The photograph on page 21 of the same tea and coffee pots was taken with photofloods, eliminating shadows produced by the flash. (Photo courtesy of the Eastman Kodak Company)

