

Salmon Falls Stoneware

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HED: Salmon Falls Stoneware closing at the end of the year

DEK: The business and building in Dover are for sale as founder and owner Andy Cochran is retiring.

Salmon Falls Stoneware in Dover is closing as Andy Cochran, 68, founder and owner, is retiring on December 31.

Cochran has made and sold the iconic salt glazed pottery at the former railroad roundhouse on Oak Street for the past 34 years.

Both the business and the building are for sale, as is the equipment. Instructions on making the pottery go with the company, Cochran said.

“The business is available for sale,” Cochran said. “I’m willing to help as a consultant.”

The highly recognizable pottery with its hand-drawn blue designs includes, crocks and jugs, hurricane and electric lamps, pie plates, mugs, dinnerware, bird baths and more. Salmon Falls Stoneware has sold thousands of pieces a year, all hand-painted and signed by one of the numerous artists employed in the business.

“It’s true production pottery craftsmanship,” Cochran said. “It’s a collective effort of artists, craftsmen, production workers, and sales staff that make Salmon Falls Stoneware, and it has been since the beginning.”

Thousands of pieces of pottery remain for sale at the retail store at 75 Oak Street, with holiday sales on now. Customers with gift cards are urged to redeem them by December 31.

Cochran has notified his eight employees of his retirement. Some of the potters and designers are expected to move on to their own studios, he said, if the business isn't sold.

For Cochran, it's time to spend more time with his family and on his lobster boat, the Ann Margaret out of Great Bay.

"Since 1988, 34 years, I've had the business," Cochran said. "I love making pots."

He's also loved all sides of the business, from production and promotion to sales. But running a business and lifting heavy loads of clay requires the energy of the 33-year old he was when he began the business.

"It's difficult to admit," Cochran said, "I got old."

However, the first thing he's going to do in retirement, he said, is, "Take my wife, Charlotte, dancing."

Taking dancing lessons is something the couple has been wanting to do for years.

Cochran grew up in Dover until his family moved to Durham, where he graduated from Oyster River High School in 1972. Cochran's love of making and glazing pots began in high school. When he was still in high school he participated in an independent study in ceramics at the University of New Hampshire. After graduating, he worked as a potter out of a farm in Lee.

"I peddled pots in Durham on Main Street, out of a 1935 Ford truck," Cochran said. "I mostly made hanging planters."

He eventually returned to Dover, a city that has been great to him and his business, he said.

"We always talked about our hometown pride," Cochran said. "It's a great place to start a business."

In the 1980s, when Cochran was getting started, folk art, Americana and reproduction pottery pieces from the 1800s were big business. Cochran went through the Small Business Administration to create a business plan. He learned that salt glazed pottery was the growing trend. The process, which has

its roots in the 1500s in Germany, involves adding salt to the kiln during the final stage of firing to create a glazed finish.

The business grew after decorator Helen Berg joined Salmon Falls Stoneware and popularized a teddy bear line and the blueberry basket motif. Cochran had been making his own designs of cats, cows and birds and doing well, but gift shop buyers bought all they could get of Berg's designs.

Salmon Falls Stoneware began getting local, and then national, attention.

The business produced tabloids that were inserted into newspapers and mailed another 60,000 that advertised "Traditional New England Salt-Glazed Stoneware" from the "Engine House on Oak Street."

"Overnight it was booming," Cochran said of the business. "It got so big, so fast."

In two years, the business went from two employees to 42 potters, decorators and processors. The business employed 54 employees year-round.

Cochran earned SBA Businessman of the Year in New England in 1993.

Through the years he has donated pots to public television stations to sell at auction and has made holiday gift pots for such companies as Cabot Cheese in Vermont.

Individuals in the Dover region and nationwide have been collecting Salmon Falls Stoneware pieces for years.

"It's hard to find a home that doesn't have a piece of pottery in it," Cochran said.

Salmon Falls Stoneware is open 7 days a week, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., except on Thanksgiving and Christmas day, at 75 Oak Street, Dover.